Mindful Leadership for Sustainability:
A Theoretical and Conceptual Path

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Abstract

The challenges of sustainability requires to deeply rethink the way in which social and economic organizations are conceived, governed, and managed with particular reference to the values and strong beliefs that inspire individuals' and organizations' behavior.

Believing that the mindfulness can play a relevant role to embed sustainability into individuals' and organizations' behavior, this paper explores the links between mindfulness and sustainability and identifies the Mindful Leadership as a key bridging concept. On the basis of qualitative literature review, we highlight a gap in sustainability research related to management about the potential role of mindfulness. Accordingly, adopting a systems perspective, we outline a theoretical and conceptual path that can contribute to cover the gap linking mindfulness and sustainability through leadership. In this way, we sketch the core of the Mindful Leadership for Sustainability.

Relevant implications indicate that mindfulness-based leadership programs for managers could help creating the appropriate context for embedding sustainability into individuals' and organizations' behavior, hence informing effective management strategies for sustainability.

Keywords: Mindfulness; Leadership; Mindful Leadership; Sustainability; Systems view.

1. Introduction

Sustainability is gaining growing attention in many context of people's life. Nevertheless, it still remains a challenging concept that requires appropriate interpretative models and approaches. In the field of management, in particular, the challenges of sustainability requires to deeply rethink the way in which social and economic organizations are conceived, governed, and managed with particular reference to the values and strong beliefs that inspire individuals' and organizations' behavior (Barile, 2013; Barile & Saviano, 2018; Tronvoll et al., 2017; Iandolo & Caputo, 2018).

Management's job is to help organizations to be productive, successful, profitable and sustainable. To accomplish these goals, organizations must be focused on the interdependent factors of organizational learning and continual improvement (Oliver, 2009). On the other hand, sustainability underlines the need of combining the multiple dimensions of the economic, environmental, and social world (Elkington, 1998; Kates et al., 2001; Komiyama & Takeuchi, 2006; Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010; Caputo et al., 2018; Scalia et al., 2018) improving the companies' ability to survive respecting environment and society (Oliver, 2009). In this paper, we discuss "mindfulness" as one possible contribution to embed sustainability into individuals' and organizations' behavior.

Mindfulness is a mental training technique that promotes awareness and a more mindful way of living. It has been subject to an increasing number of scientific studies, and we believe that the reported effects on individuals, such as increased well-being, value clarification, awareness, empathy, and compassion, could be helpful in supporting a transition toward sustainability. The rise of mindfulness is unquestionably a positive development. The practice is helping people manage stress and maximize creativity. Mindfulness, however, is much more than a mental fitness tool; it's an asset for leaders seeking to perceive and re-perceive the world and make better strategic choices. Hence, leadership plays a relevant role.

Straightforward definitions qualify leadership as "the ability to guide others, whether they are colleagues, peers, clients, or patients, toward desired outcomes" (Marshall, 2011, p.2). Leaders have been described as "people who have a clear idea of what they want to achieve and why" (Doyle and Smith, 2009, p.1) and leadership as an activity or the ability of leading people towards the achievement of a common goal (Gold et al., 2010). As the process or act of helping or initiating others toward a particular destination or place (Backer & Glascoff, 2014), organizational leadership requires inspiring people and creating an environment so everyone can contribute toward the success of the organization in pursuing its goals.

In this view, we believe that mindfulness, as a multi- and trans- disciplinary research stream that emphasizes the role of cognitive dimensions for increasing individual level of attention and ability in perceiving and understanding external phenomenon (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, 2005), can help embed sustainability into individuals' and organizations' behavior through leadership.

Accordingly, this paper explores the link between mindfulness and sustainability identifying the Mindful Leadership as a key bridging concept. More specifically, our goal is to study the research literature and the hypothesis that mindfulness and a more mindful way of living might encourage sustainability and reinforce leadership qualities.

In research on mindfulness, most of the focus has been on how it can be helpful for a range of well-being and health-related conditions (Kabat Zinn, 2003). A body of research has also focused on the ability of mindfulness to generate empathy and compassion (Goleman, 1995). At the same time, other studies that are not specifically concerned with mindfulness suggest that well-being, empathy/compassion, and intrinsic/non-materialistic values can lead to

sustainable behaviour and leadership (Goleman, 2000). Less attention, instead, has been paid to Mindfulness in the field sustainability (Amel et al., 2009) with particular reference to the managerial studies.

To cover this gap, by adopting a systems perspective that helps identify connections among key concepts, we outline a theoretical and conceptual path that links mindfulness and sustainability evidencing the bridging role of leadership. Findings reveal the potential role of mindfulness as an organizational strategy for change management and innovation that can effectively support the transition toward sustainability by informing *Mindful Leadership*. In this way, we sketch the core of the Mindful Leadership for Sustainability.

Subsequent to this introduction, the paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the theoretical path that links Mindfulness and Sustainability, Mindfulness and Leadership, Mindfulness and Emotional Intelligence in research; Section 3 summarizes key theoretical and conceptual findings that link these concepts into a unitary framework for developing Mindful Leadership for Sustainability; Section 4 presents final remarks, limits, implications, and future directions of the study.

2. Theoretical path to Mindful Leadership for sustainability

In the following sub-sections, Mindful Leadership for sustainability is analysed at three levels. The first one shows that Mindfulness can contribute to facilitating Sustainability, not only at the individual level, but at all scales. The second explores how Mindfulness, through the practice of meditation, can enhance leadership qualities. Finally, the last one highlights key emotional components of leadership, which include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management from a Mindfulness perspective.

2.1 Mindfulness and Sustainability

According to Kjell (2011) and Kajikawa (2008), sustainability and well-being research are two separate fields. In research on mindfulness, most of the focus has been on how it can be helpful for a range of well-being and health-related conditions (Brown at al., 2007). A body of research has also focused on the ability of mindfulness to generate empathy and compassion (Davinson et al., 2003). Less research has focused the attention on the relationship between mindfulness and sustainability (Ericson et al., 2014). At the same time, other studies that are not specifically concerned with mindfulness suggest that well-being, empathy/compassion, and intrinsic/non-materialistic values can lead to sustainable behavior. Hence, taking all these findings into account, there appear to be possible links between mindfulness and sustainability that are interesting to explore.

Large part of research in the field of sustainability focuses the attention on the objective interactions between natural, social, and human systems, while less interest is shown for the subjective aspects of human beings (Sumi, 2007). Few studies can be identified with reference to the human-nature connection and native ways of knowing (Lockhart, 2011; Anthony, 2013), social justice and social activism (Brown et al. 2007; Jacob et al., 2009; Doetsch-Kidder, 2012), and more recently to sustainability-oriented innovations (Siqueira & Pitassi; 2016).

Other scholars, such as Rinne et al. (2013) and Fabbrizzi et al. (2016), have also highlighted the lack of research at the intersection of societal sustainability and individual well-being. This gap can be illustrated by research into sustainable consumption and behaviour. Kajikawa (2008)

shows that studies on the topic generally focus on the impact of people's consumption, rather than the impact of aspects that lead to unsustainable consumption, such as lifestyles, well-being, or mindfulness (Rogerson and Kim 2005).

On the other hand, mindfulness research is rapidly growing (AMRA, 2016). Since 2009, there has been a 30% annual increase in the frequency of references to mindfulness in peer-reviewed science, art-, and humanities-based articles (Ericson et al., 2014). The momentum is coming from fields such as psychology and medicine, which until recently have received minimal attention from sustainability practitioners and academics (Jones, 2015). These studies focus the attention on a range of well-being and health-related conditions (psychological and physical) (Davidson et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2007; Ericson et al., 2014) and the activation of (intrinsic/non-materialistic) core values (Sheth et al., 2010). Although research into mindfulness and related attributes has not explicitly addressed the relationship between mindfulness and sustainability (Ericson et al., 2014), it has highlighted the complex linkages with sustainable development, from the individual to the global level (Brown et al., 2007) and it has recognized the adaptive value of bringing consciousness to bear not only on subjective experience, but also on behaviour and the environment (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Carver & Scheier 1981; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Brown et al., 2007; Amel et al., 2009; Jacob et al., 2009).

2.2 Mindfulness and leadership

The term "Mindful Leadership" is gaining ground in the West and there are a number of recent studies on this subject.
Bill George (2010, 2012) argues that the practice of mindful leadership teaches leaders to pay attention to the present moment, recognizing their feelings and emotions and keeping them under control. He further suggests that among several ways to practice mindfulness, meditation is the most introspective way.
A different view is proposed by Dunoon and Langer, who looked at dynamic quality of mindfulness toward leadership (2011). They argue that mindfulness enables leaders to see new or different things in the particular context, whether in the external environment or in their own reactions. They listed three aspects of mindfulness and used them as lenses for considering leadership while focusing on actions to make headway with several contentious problems. The first is the alertness to multiple perspectives, which allows leaders to notice without immediately judging. The second is the active self-reappraisal, which prepares leaders to step out of a particular framing and take a second look at their own thinking. The last one is the attentiveness to the use of language, e.g., use descriptive rather than judgmental languages, as well as conditional rather than absolute languages.
Note that the above studies did not specifically study how mindfulness can enhance leadership qualities at a more detailed level beyond self-awareness.

Another relevant research stream is about the meditation's impact to business organizations as well as their leaders. There is extensive research on meditation as effective method for reducing work stress (Frey, 1974; Bruning & Frew, 1985), and as powerful tool to trigger increasing change assimilation and conflict management capability development (Warshal, 1980).

A study provided by Arias (2008) demonstrates a relationship between meditation practice and stress reduction, change assimilation, conflict management, and leadership performance. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) refer to the concept of 'resonant leadership', where leaders are inspirational, creating hope in the organization, being open and compassionate with the

workers, and mindful where the leader is acting authentically, in touch with self and others. The resonant leader displays emotional intelligence, able to be self-aware and self-manage (Goleman, 2000). The resonant leader also displays social competence and social awareness that includes empathy, organizational awareness, and service (Boyatzis & McKee 2005).

Boyatzis and McKee (2005) referred to some of the challenges that leaders face, describing a form of dissonance known as the sacrifice syndrome to explain what occurs when leaders are deeply impacted by stress and not engaged in a cycle of renewal and they pointed to mindfulness, hope, and compassion as solutions for leaders who are dealing with the sacrifice syndrome. As summarized in the following Table 1, Boyatzis and McKee (2005) also introduce four concepts for defining the in resonant leaders that can be easily linked to some key assumptions of Mindfulness.

Table 1: Elements of Resonant Leadership and the Relation to Mindfulness Constructs

Competencies of Emotional Intelligence	Qualities of Mindfulness that serve all competencies of Resonant Leadership
Inspirational Awareness	Awareness, letting go, listening, non-reactivity, on-judgment, trust
Positive emotional tone	Patience, non-judgment, non-reactivity, letting go, listening, compassion
Compassion	Compassion, self-compassion, non-judgment, being fully present, listening, equanimity, patience, trust
Mindful- aware of the environment, in tune with self or others	Awareness, being fully present, equanimity, nonreactivity, on-judgment, patience, trust, compassion, self-compassion

Source: Authors' elaboration from Boyatzis and McKee (2005: 22)

Resonant leadership is aligned with the constructs of mindfulness, presents help for these leaders to improve the practice of leading, and offers assistance for them to renew their practice. By renewing practice, the hope is that school leaders will opt to stay in the profession they have chosen and thrive, instead of leaving it or just coping day to day. More specifically, leadership theory has largely been described by the behavioural or trait characteristics of leaders (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Northouse, 2013). These descriptions focus on the activities or the *doing* of the leaders where what often defines leaders is what they *have* or *do* (Fry & Kriger, 2009). Mindfulness departs from those approaches by suggesting a way of *being* as opposed to a way of *doing*.

The dimensions of mindfulness such as being fully present, aware, accepting, and non-judgmental embody this way of being. As opposed to emphasis on an act of *doing*, mindfulness allows for a sense of spaciousness that enacts patience, listening, and compassion, all qualities important for leaders. Although classic leadership theory defines leaders by traits (Northouse, 2013), Mindful Leadership offers a description of presence, a subtlety of describing how leaders enact these traits by *ways of being*. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) called for a different type of leadership, one that they refer to as resonant leadership, where leaders are mindful and emotionally intelligent, inspiring hope and offering compassion for all they serve and lead. By being in touch with the concerns and issues of the workers, the leaders demonstrate empathy and compassion (Goleman, 1998; Goleman et al., 2002).

2.3 Mindfulness and Emotional intelligence

Inspired by Buddhism, Goleman (1995) first brought the term "Emotional Intelligence" to a wide audience in his book "Emotional Intelligence". In their book "Primal Leadership", Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) further elaborated the importance of emotional intelligence to leadership. There they highlighted key emotional components of leadership, which include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

The above studies argued that emotional intelligence relates to personal, professional, and political arenas of leaders, with personal and social competencies that include self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 1998, 2000). These competencies are qualities that influence an organization by their affiliation with people (Goleman, 2011). Specifically, Heifetz and Linsky (2002:75) wrote that "one of the distinguishing qualities of successful people who lead in any field is the emphasis they place on personal relationships" while Boyatzis and McKee (2005: 29) related that relationship management included "inspirational leadership, influence, developing others, change catalyst, conflict management, building bonds, and teamwork and collaboration" as the factors that matter. Emotional intelligence was found to account for 85 to 90 per cent of the difference in the success of superior leaders from that of those reviewed as average, in the compilation of over 500 competence models from companies in the United States and international sites (Goleman et al., 2001, 2002). Accordingly, the following Table 2 shows several links between competencies of Emotional Intelligence and Mindfulness.

Table 2: *Competencies of Emotional Intelligence that are Aligned with Mindfulness*

Competencies of Emotional Intelligence	Qualities of Mindfulness that serve all competencies of Emotional Intelligence
Self-awareness- Awareness of emotions and their effect on others; self-confidence Self-management- Flexibility, emotional self-control, optimism, achievement, initiative, transparency, and achievement.	Being in present moment for all that arrives at the door Mindful awareness; listen in stillness.
Social Awareness- Empathy, service, organizational awareness.	Observing and listening.
Relationship Management- Inspiring and developing others; resolving disputes, influencing, creating shared vision and energy, team building, and bolstering change.	Listening without judgment Patience and trust. Compassion and self-compassion Acceptance, Non-reaction.

Source: Authors' elaboration from Goleman et al. (2002)

3. Embedding sustainability into organizations trough Mindful Leadership: a systems view

Systems thinking, as suggested by the Viable Systems Approach (Barile & Saviano, 2013, 2018), supports a perspective that helps to see and manage the connections among parts within a whole so that synergistic outcomes can be developed. In an organizational al context, planned and emergent interactions among individuals should be effectively directed to the achievement

of the desired goals. A systems view can help understand how educational leaders can respond to their current work demands, take care of themselves, and contribute to work environments where empathy, compassion and non-reactivity are present. Based on the three couples of connections described in Section 2, we develop here an integrated view in which they show their potential to create an organizational environment oriented to sustainability. Starting from the notion of Mindfulness, we highlight how Mindful Leadership, which integrates Mindfulness and Leadership through Emotional Intelligence, can lead to embed Sustainability into organizations.

As we have shown, researches indicate that mindfulness has positive effects on both well-being and empathy, and it can promote leadership and awareness of an individual's 'true' values (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Brown & Ryan 2003; Brown & Kasser 2005; Brown et al., 2007; Amel et al. 2009; Goleman 2009; Jacob et al. 2009; Sheth et al. 2010; Ericson et al. 2014). Well-being, empathy, leadership, and awareness of values are fundamental to develop more sustainable behaviours. Sustainability, in fact, implies that individuals' behaviours shift from an Ego to an Eco-systems view of the context in which they act (Barile et al., 2013; Polese et al., 2016) recognizing the necessity to enlarge the engagement for survival from the local organization to the wider social and environmental context in which it lives (Barile &Saviano, 2017). As suggested by the VSA, decision makers should *lead* organizations creating a collective consciousness of shared values that directs behaviours toward the achievement of shared goals.

Mindfulness is a powerful endowment for leaders engaged in the challenge of sustainability. It is indeed the missing elements to promote and realize the transition toward sustainability in business organizations. This missing point has been highlighted in the VSA study of management, especially with reference to the engagement for sustainability, when the role of categorical values is clarified (Barile, 2009, 2013). What was still missing, however, is clarifying how a shared values environment can be created and directed toward behaviours 'culturally' oriented to sustainability.

According to the VSA, effective systems management of organizations, necessary in particular when complex dynamics are to be governed, must be directed to the creation of conditions of consonance both internally and externally to the organization. The creation of conditions of consonance can only rely upon the 'soft' elements of human components of organization, i.e. their values, strong beliefs, filings and their capability to be open-mind (Del Giudice et al., 2017a, 2017b; Barile & Saviano, 2018; Calabrese et al., 2018).

Following the Barile's thought (2009; Barile et al., 2016) a 'field force' should be generated within the organization by cumulating consonant individuals' behaviours into a collective consciousness dimension that creates a unitary whole synergistically oriented to the achievement of shared goals, i.e. to co-create value leveraging on the recursion scheme that characterizes the representation and functioning of viable systems (Barile et al., 2016).

In Fig. 1 we outline a representation of synthesis in which each of the proposed concepts are integrated to show how mindfulness can be the core of organizations change toward sustainability.

Our view emphases the emotional elements that affect leaders' actions and decisions in tracing organizations' strategies and paths (Barile & Saviano, 2013).

Fig. 1. Mindfulness at the core of Leadership for Sustainability
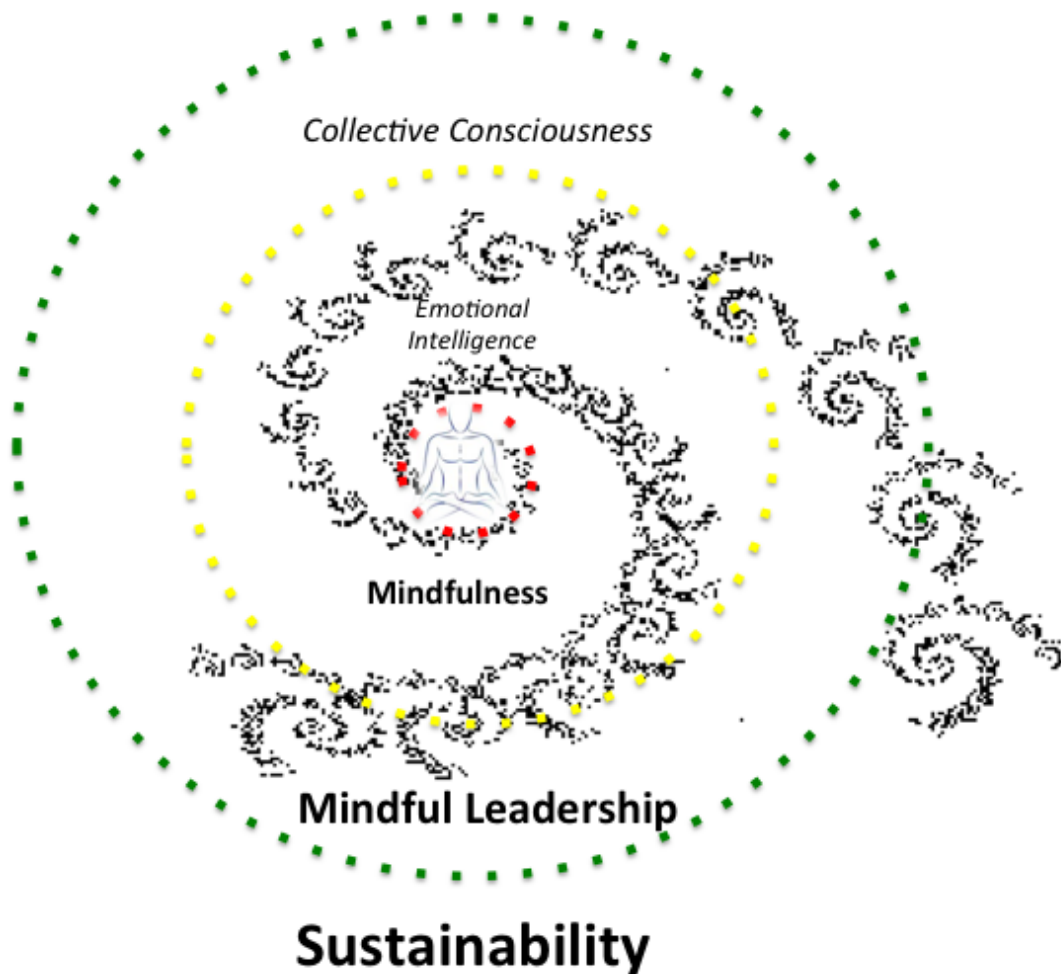
Source: Authors' elaboration. www.asvsa.org.

Mindfuness acts on Emotional Intelligence and Emotional Intelligence affects Leadership (Palmer et al., 2001). In turn, Mindful Leadership can be the path to Sustainability by enlightening and giving soundness to the leaders' vision and decision making capabilities to engage the organization in the multiple challenges of sustainability (Fiksel, 2006).

Mindful Leaders could support social and economic organizations in creating the appropriate context to concretely promote the sustainability principles (Caputo et al., 2016). This could be considered the big challenge for managerial education in the current sustainability-oriented era (Saviano et al., 2017b).

The role of Mindful Leaders in promoting sustainability could be relevant for organizations to integrate sustainability into their strategy (e.g., Brown and Ryan 2003; Brown and Kasser 2005; Brown et al. 2007; Amel et al. 2009; Goleman 2009; Jacob et al. 2009; Sheth et al. 2010; Ericson et al. 2014).

4. Final remarks, implications, limits and future directions for research

This paper is essentially about the change required to organizations to make concrete, trustable and effective their engagement toward sustainability. The role of leader is fundamental for collective engagement. However, engagement to sustainability is not a matter of traditional business management approaches and leaders are not only required to be deeply involved in the challenge of sustainability but also to effectively involve others leveraging their leading role. To be really successful in this challenge, they need to be *mindful*.

When leaders are mindful, they notice what is new or different in the context, whether in the external environment or in their own reactions and responses. The accent is on perceiving directly, without immediately analysing, categorizing, or judging. Ideally, Mindful Leaders are able to just notice and hold an observation and to stay with uncertainty as to its meaning and significance. Noticing is not only characteristic of a mindful orientation; noticing begets mindfulness.

Much of leadership literature has been concerned with the identification of the list of skills that are thought to be foundational elements that enable an individual to demonstrate effective leadership. Mindfulness can be another one of the *meta-capabilities* they should be endowed with, that is, capabilities which are involved in the organisation of other capabilities and without which, other capabilities cannot thrive. Expressed differently, they are capabilities that enable or amplify the other inherent capabilities (Ambrosini et al., 2009). We take the view that mindfulness is a foundational and enabling ingredient for leadership, and can be construed as a meta-capability. This is chiefly because if mindfulness is the "art of paying attention" (Caudron, 2001, p. 44), and attention informs how we process and act upon our experiences, then it must surely be instrumental to how we apply our faculties and capabilities to influence the world around us.

Mindfulness shows all its relevance as education domain of the next leaders. Becoming mindful, leaders, also beyond the scope of business, become key social and organizational actors through which the sustainability principles can be effectively embedded within all context of life.

Our interpretative proposal, however, is at an early stage and several limits affects the work that aims to be more an attempt to share our thoughts rather than a rigorous study. Nevertheless, we believe that our proposal opens up more extensive research directed to identify a new area of study in a multi and trans-disciplinary effort to embed sustainability into organizations especially leveraging education. Mindfulness as multi- and trans- disciplinary research stream can offer relevant advancements in knowledge for the definition of leaders educational paths especially directed to 'enlarge' their perspectives (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Brown & Ryan 2003; Brown & Kasser 2005; Brown et al., 2007; Amel et al. 2009; Goleman 2009; Jacob et al. 2009; Sheth et al. 2010; Ericson et al. 2014).

More straightforward study is, however, necessary to develop our proposal rigorously analysing its applicability and implementation in the managerial studies of leadership and sustainability.

This study has also several practical implications. First, our results suggest that by developing mindfulness, managers will be better able to adapt their leadership style to implement sustainability into organizational strategy. To that end, interventions based on mindfulness are worthwhile options for use within organizations, particularly in the context of leadership development programs. Increasingly popular over the last ten years (Marturano, 2014), programs intended to foster the development of mindfulness in the workplace use

Excellence in Services
21th International Conference
Conference Proceedings ISBN 9788890432781

Le Cnam
Paris (France)
30 and 31 August 2018

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training and coaching to develop specific skills (e.g., attention, clarity, empathy) and mindful leadership. On the other hand, programs intended specifically for managers have been the subjects of very few studies, so our scientific understanding of them is still quite limited.

Accordingly, future research is required for identify the levers to act upon which act for promoting the sustainability through Mindful Leadership. Furthermore, the possible leavers for Mindful Leadership require to be measured and their relationship with sustainability-oriented behaviours should be verified using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Finally, the effect of Mindfulness based educational approaches for Leadership could be tested trough the definition of specific protocols and the longitudinal evaluation of their effects on the organizations' behaviours in the transition toward the sustainability.

We conclude that mindful leadership can contribute to understanding and facilitating not only individual, but also societal sustainability at all scales. It should, therefore, be considered as a core concept in research and teaching related to sustainability and in sustainability research in general. We end with a call for more research about sustainability that acknowledges positive emotional connections, spirituality, and Mindful Leadership, in particular, recognizing that the micro and macro, like the parts and the whole, are always mirrored and interrelated.

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