



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Published on *Up Close* (<http://www.upclose.unimelb.edu.au>)

Episode 27: Mindful Leadership

Mindful Leadership

VOICEOVER

Welcome to Melbourne University Up Close, a fortnightly podcast of research, personalities, and cultural offerings of the University of Melbourne, Australia. Up Close is available on the web at upclose.unimelb.edu.au That's upclose.u-n-i-m-e-l-b.edu.au.

SIAN PRIOR

Hello and welcome to Up Close, coming to you from Melbourne University, Australia. I'm Sian Prior.

Well here's a great question for you, what makes a great leader? Is it the ability to make hard decisions, even if they have negative consequences for the people around you? Is it the vision thing? The ability to look into the future, set ambitious goals, and head straight towards them without being distracted? Or is it about being a good juggler, coping with a multitude of tasks and demands without dropping the ball. These days big businesses spend millions of dollars employing the best leaders they can find. But do you become the best leader you can be? To answer that question, we're joined today in Melbourne University Up Close by Professor Amanda Sinclair, Foundation Professor of Management, Diversity and Change at the Melbourne Business School, here at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Amanda is an academic, consultant and researcher with particular expertise in the areas of leadership and ethics, organisational culture and change, gender and diversity. Her work's been widely published and her sometimes controversial conclusions have generated significant popular as well as academic debate. Her latest book, *Leadership for the Disillusioned: Beyond Myths and Heroes to Leading that Liberates*, suggests leadership should be directed towards new purposes of promoting freedom and wellbeing. Amanda Sinclair believes the best kind of leadership is what she calls mindful leadership. And we'll find out exactly what she means by that today on Melbourne University Up Close. Professor Sinclair, welcome.

AMANDA SINCLAIR

Thank you very much, Sian.

SIAN PRIOR

Well, in the business world as I mentioned, good leadership can be worth huge amounts of money, both to the businesses wise enough to employ good leaders, and to the leaders themselves as they increase their value in the employment market. So the economy knows what leadership is worth but I think we find it harder to define what good leadership is. What makes a great leader in your view.

AMANDA SINCLAIR

I think all of the ideas that you mentioned in your introduction about good leaders being bold and visionary and decisive and focused, all of those templates if you like are widely out there in the market place and in the leadership texts and discussed among management development people and consultants and so on. But I actually think, and I argue in my book that a lot of those templates really do get in the way of what I would regard as more effective leadership. So that, I think, as a society we're often very attached to a particular template of leadership and we're seeing it being played out in our own political environment, where there is a sort of appetite in the electorate and in the community for leaders who seem to be absolutely certain, who seem to be invulnerable, who seem to be visionary in their actions. And yet, the evidence that we have suggests that sometimes those very people don't make the best leaders. But there is a problem within a sense our appetite for people to solve difficult problems when in fact really good leadership sort of summons us to face and to work with, collaboratively, those very problems.

SIAN PRIOR

That brings up an interesting point. Is good leadership the leadership that makes us feel good, or is it something else, because as you say you know leaders who seem to have all the answers make us feel safe inside.

AMANDA SINCLAIR

They do and in fact some leaders are very seductive. There is quite a lot of research around these questions, about how leaders can in a sense have a romance with their followers, that is that followers actually just surrender to those very charismatic powerful leaders. But again the evidence is that when that seduction is going on, there's actually not effective leadership going on. There is a kind of a process of seduction where followers simply abdicate their capacity and their responsibilities to actually work through the issues.

SIAN PRIOR

So if it's not about providing all the answers or perhaps pretending that you can provide all the answers, what is the essence of good leadership? What are some of those ingredients that you've brought together in your model of mindful leadership?

AMANDA SINCLAIR

One of the things that I think is being powerfully overlooked again in a lot of the leadership literature is the capacity to come into the moment and be fully present to the circumstances that one is facing or the relationship that one is engaged in right here and right now. In fact an enormous amount of the literature and some of the pressures on leaders are all about the future. They're all about planning, they're all

about targets, they're all about goals, and increasingly sort of short term goals, you know the next three months in terms of the share price and so on. And my view and the evidence that I've looked at suggests that often those pressures actually mean that leaders are distracted, they're full of thoughts about what's been happening in the last few days, what's happening in the next couple of months. And what that means is that they're not focused on what's going on at the moment. The result of that is then the sort of ethical crises that we've seen over the last probably five or six years, where companies like Enron on the international stage or Parmalat, there's lots of examples we could draw on, where there was a real failure to pay attention to what was going on. And so instead, leaders get sort of captured by their illusions of vulnerability, about you know what's going on in the media, about all sorts of other issues, rather than what's !V what's going on right now.

SIAN PRIOR

But how do you filter and decide what are the most important factors of all the information and input and relationships that a leader is grappling with !V how do you prioritise that to know what is the most important thing to be considering at a particular time which might have an impact now, in three months time, in ten years time?

AMANDA SINCLAIR

It's a really good question and of course the research around mindfulness which is originally a Buddhist idea, suggests that most of us have huge difficulties focusing, quieting down our minds and reducing the clutter that's there, and as you suggest, it's really cluttered. I mean there's no sense of priority there, there's !V there's things about what you have to do, you know when you get home and what you're going to have for dinner, alongside all sorts of echoes from the past and you know we get haunted by all sorts of things. So, it is a real challenge to bring some sort of level of both stillness and a capacity then to focus to that clutter. And that's where I believe that habits of mindfulness come in, also habits which I explore in the book in quite a lot of depth around being reflective, but with less ego. And this is of course a very relevant concept in the area of leadership because leaders are prone and you know because of a whole lot of sort of personality issues and !V and what we know about them, to becoming, I guess, vulnerable to very inflated egos. You know there's a lot of pressure on them, they're lauded on the public stage.

SIAN PRIOR

There's a lot of subservience going on around them.

AMANDA SINCLAIR

Absolutely, enormous amount of subservience, obsequious behaviour that can mean that narcissistic tendencies, and tendencies to believe yourself to be invulnerable get magnified. So, part of mindfulness, I think, is !V is certainly the capacity to know as a leader when we are starting to get captured by certain sorts of thoughts and habits and tendencies, and about seeing how they play into our vulnerabilities if you like, and our appetites, and how to then use strategies to separate ourselves from that. There's lots of examples where leaders do not get the information they need

because of their subordination desire for the approval or for the love, really at very senior levels. So in boardrooms, you know quite primitive tendencies often being played out where board members really are desperate for the approval of the group, they're desperate for the approval of the leader, not to be seen as too different, not to be seen as a trouble maker. So what that means is that leaders don't get the information they need, they don't get the bad news, they don't get direct feedback, all of those sorts of things. What that means is that the leader themselves needs to develop the kind of self knowledge and the capacity to tune in when they feel themselves getting caught up in that very sycophantic behaviour, they need to develop the capacity to be able to say well, look guys, you know this feels to me like there might be something more going on here. You know I need to get a reading from you on how you really see this, and where there's some obstacles in me that are stopping you from telling me what I really need to hear.

SIAN PRIOR

I'm Sian Prior and my guest today in Melbourne University Up Close is Professor Amanda Sinclair, Foundation Professor of Management, Diversity and Change at the Melbourne Business School, here at the University of Melbourne, Australia. And we're discussing mindful leadership. Amanda I wonder what role if any, emotional intelligence plays in mindful leadership. Back in 1995 Daniel Goldman published what became a very influential book called *Emotional Intelligence*, why it can matter more than IQ, in which he argued that emotions play a much larger role in thought and decision making and individual success than we had had previously realised. Is part of mindful leadership about developing and employing emotional intelligence?

AMANDA SINCLAIR

Feelings are terribly important in leadership and a leader's capacity to get in touch with their feelings, and to be able to tune in and read what's going on with the feelings of others are really important and very far from the template that people often have. So, you know in the work that I do with executives and students, and these are MBA students, the position they're often starting with is that they have to deny their feelings, they have to suppress their feelings. That to be a good leader is to be absolutely impassive, phlegmatic, stoic.

SIAN PRIOR

Is that because feelings are still perceived as a sign of weakness?

AMANDA SINCLAIR

Indeed, they're seen as a sign of weakness, often leaders aren't all that comfortable with them, so they think that if they lift the lid of either their own or other people's feelings that it's going to be a Pandora's Box, and so their working assumption is often keep a lid on it, suppress it, that's the way you manage it. And so, I do a lot of, you know, difficult work often around going into that and helping people see that sometimes talking about your feelings, demonstrating your own feelings, working with feelings upfront is an enormously powerful, valuable leadership intervention. And of course we do see it occasionally where very effective leaders will share, you

know they will share some of what's really going on for them. That being said, the way in which the sort of template around emotional leadership has developed, for me, often takes a leader away from what we're actually wanting here. That is, that anything that gets turned into a manual and a template and a measure, you know risks taking us in the opposite direction, because leaders start to evaluate it. They say, "Well you're better at emotional intelligence than her, you know I give you a five and she only rates a three!" And all of that sort of stuff. And again, it doesn't actually help us I think to develop what some people have called emotional literacy. The other thing is that with feelings, and this goes to the mindfulness point, is that it's often about seeing those feelings and developing the capacity to if you like, sit above them slightly and get perspective on them, rather than having them capture one and take you down a whole path of reactions and reactivity and so on. So in a sense, I think what you need is perhaps the emotional intelligence plus literacy plus mindfulness to work with emotions effectively.

SIAN PRIOR

And can you give us some practical examples of people who you have observed either behaving like mindful leaders or who you've seen learn mindful leadership and then start to employ it?

AMANDA SINCLAIR

I've certainly seen quite a lot of examples of leaders in the spiritual domain obviously who have some hallmarks of what I would call mindful leadership, so you know all of the leaders in the Buddhist Tradition, you know and the Dalai Lama is probably the best example, of people who are able to in a sense, set aside their enormous wisdom and their knowledge and are able to be in the moment with whoever they are with, they are able to deliver extraordinary value to the people they are with because of their presence and because of their humility. And you know on the world stage, of course, people like Nelson Mandela continue to demonstrate that quite stunning sort of capacity, you know. And it's Mandela, of course, who says that the greatest challenge in leadership is to change oneself. And, I also see that amongst some of our political leaders, some business leaders and some leaders that I've studied, one of the sources of inspiration for me is certainly some indigenous leaders in the Australian context who have also been subject to enormous pressures. You know they're expected to act as spokespeople for all indigenous people, they're expected to you know deliver great leadership and yet there's extraordinary difficulties facing them. And a couple of people you know spring to mind, Mick Dodson, Marcia Langton, people that I've worked with.

SIAN PRIOR

Who we should explain? Marcia Langton is an academic here at Melbourne University, Mick Dodson is trained as a lawyer, but also a highly influential political leader of Aboriginal Australia.

AMANDA SINCLAIR

But there's a whole range of people who I could cite here, who continue to inspire me for their capacity to pay attention to what matters now and to who they're dealing

with now. And that's really one of the working definitions I guess of mindfulness, is about paying attention in the present moment without judgement of self and others.

SIAN PRIOR

Well Amanda, final question: If I was an aspiring leader or indeed a leader who wanted to become a more mindful leader, what would be the first step you would advise me to take? Would it be take up yoga, learn the practice of mindfulness in that very essential physical spiritual physical sense.

AMANDA SINCLAIR

I think you could do a lot worse. There are whole lot of sort of ways to journey towards that state of mindfulness. And I think it is about physical practices, like yoga often very helpful because they do bring us into the present, because they do encourage us to pay attention to where we are, who we are right now. They connect us to our breath. All of the traditions of meditation aimed at the same kind of practice. At the same time, more cognitive activities like trying to become more reflective, trying to get help around our own habits, our own patterns, just having different kinds of conversations with people who we have a hunch will be helpful to us, who will talk a different kind of truth to us, support us to find that more mindful state of being. All of those things are possibilities.

SIAN PRIOR

Well many thanks for joining us today Amanda.

AMANDA SINCLAIR

Thanks Sian.

I'm Sian Prior and my guest today in Melbourne University Up Close has been Professor Amanda Sinclair, Foundation Professor of Management, Diversity and Change at the Melbourne Business School here at the University of Melbourne, Australia and the author of her most recent book, *Leadership for the Disillusioned*.

Melbourne University Up Close is brought to you by the Marketing and Communications Division in association with Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. Relevant links, a full transcript and more information on this episode can be found on our website at upclose.unimelb.edu.au

We also invite you to leave your comments or feedback on this or any episode of Up Close. You just simply click on the Add New Comment Link at the bottom of the episode page. This program was produced by Kelvin Param, Eric Van Bommel and myself Sian Prior. Audio recording is by Craig McArthur, and the theme music is performed by Sergio Ercole. Melbourne University Up Close is created by Eric Van Bommel and Kelvin Param. Until next time thanks for joining us, goodbye.

VOICEOVER

You've been listening to Melbourne University Up Close, a fortnightly podcast of research, personalities and cultural offerings of the University of Melbourne,

Australia. Up Close is available on the web at upclose.unimelb.edu.au, that!|s
upclose.u-n-i-m-e-l-b.edu.au. Copyright 2007 University of Melbourne.

© The University of Melbourne, 2007. All Rights Reserved.

Source URL: <http://www.upclose.unimelb.edu.au/episode/27-mindful-leadership>