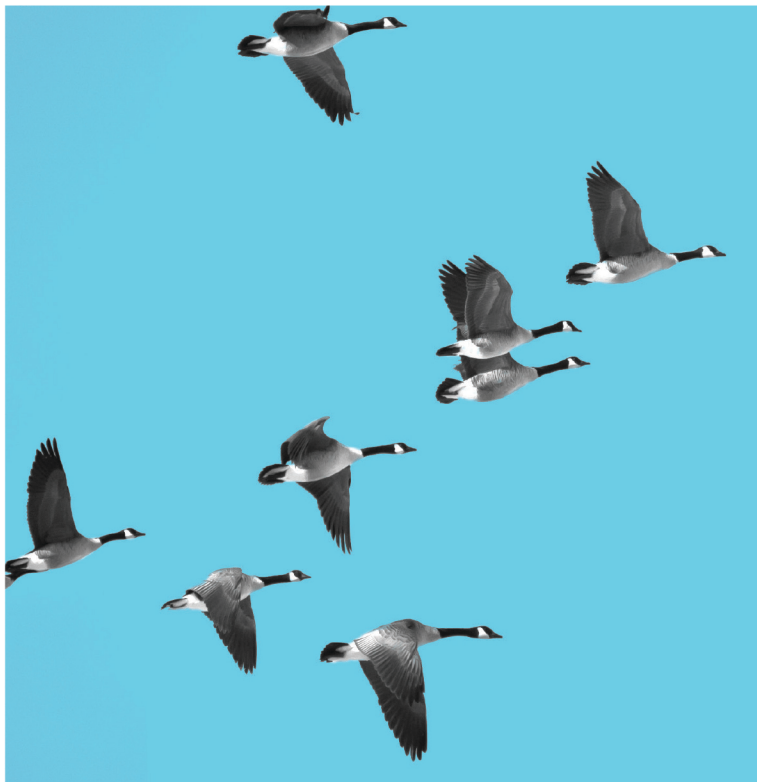


# THE AUTHORITY GUIDE TO MINDFUL LEADERSHIP



Simple techniques and exercises to manage yourself, manage others and effect change

**PALMA MICHEL**

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## **The Authority Guide to Mindful Leadership**

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# Part I

## My journey with meditation

I first got connected with meditation at the end of a yoga class in 1994. Like most people, I fell asleep during the meditation, as I was just so exhausted from attending law school during the day and working part-time in a blue-chip, strategy consulting firm in the evenings. However, something resonated with me and from that moment I knew that I would go much deeper into meditation at some later stage in my life. That time came when I moved to Hong Kong in 2006 and started practising yoga and meditation on a daily basis. The first time I noticed that I behaved somewhat differently from my colleagues was after the financial crisis. I had just been promoted to junior partner in a global executive search firm and had my first revenue responsibility. The external environment was uncertain, very volatile and there was pressure to bring in revenue for the firm, while at the same time our company was going through redundancy rounds. Clients were hesitant in making new hires and even if they had verbally agreed to sign a contract it often took weeks, if not months, for them to receive the internal approval. During this time I noticed that I remained very calm despite juggling a hectic, global 24/7 schedule with financial pressure and lots

of uncertainty. I was able to put my head down and focus on the work that had to be done instead of worrying about the future or getting worked up about contracts that did not materialise. I was able to maintain equanimity and balance. One morning after a meditation class, in which I had experimented with courage and trust, I was sitting in my office, overlooking Pacific Place in Hong Kong, when I had a light-bulb moment. It was crystal clear to me that the experiential learning when I was sitting in meditation was closing the gap between intellectually knowing something and wanting to change and actually experiencing it in my body and mind and transforming my way of being. I was inspired to create a business that combines coaching and meditative wisdom and techniques to empower CEOs, founders, emerging leaders and high-potentials to access their full potential even, or particularly when, under pressure. I subsequently did all the necessary tuition including a two-year yoga and meditation teacher training (while I was still working as a headhunter), a teacher training in mindfulness-based stress reduction, courses in positive psychology and neuroscience and a professional training as a coach. Over the past three years I have introduced mindfulness to start-ups, global multinationals, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and creative businesses. In addition, I have used mindfulness and meditation to help c-suite individuals and start-up founders to access more of their leadership potential and creative genius.

On a personal level, the practice has given me more than I could have ever bargained for. While I was always quite a happy and optimistic person, there used to be a small background anxiety of something missing, of not being enough. It is through the dedicated practise of meditation and the methods from positive psychology that today the background anxiety has gone and has been replaced by a sense of fundamental wholeness, an

inner peace that is always there in the foreground or at least the background, no matter what happens.

During over a decade as a board-level headhunter for two of the top five executive search firms, I have observed many examples of great leaders and many examples of not so great leaders and the damaging effects they can have on their teams and organisations. This led me on a quest to study how our brain works and what it is that can trip us up. I have observed the power of mindset and also observed what happens when leaders with great values seemingly act 'out of character' when under pressure. Having seen the transformative power of mindfulness practice in my own life, my coachees and in the organisations I work with, I am very excited about being able to share these practices now with a much broader audience through this book.

### How to use this book

The book is split into four parts. There is this introduction, then managing yourself, followed by managing others and, finally, effecting broader change. Within Parts II to IV, each chapter contains guided reflections and exercises. You will gain the most value out of this book if you incorporate these exercises into your life and make them your own. It might be helpful to read one chapter and then pause to try out the exercises in your everyday life, before heading on to the next chapter. I will be sharing a lot of things with you in this book. Some of it will resonate with you and some maybe not so much. I encourage you to have an open mind, which is the first thing we practise in mindfulness, and to focus on the exercises that resonate with you and try them out for yourself. Ultimately it is one thing if they work for me or my clients and another one if they work for you. Some readers may find it helpful to write their thoughts down; for others that may be less helpful. Only you can judge what works for you.



Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.

**Benjamin Franklin**



# 1. Changing times require new leadership skills

We are living in pressure cooker times and the digital age can be overwhelming to us: individually and collectively. There is a growing recognition of challenges presented by the pace of change, uncertainty, complexity and turbulence of doing business in the 21st century.

My work as board-level headhunter and executive coach has allowed me to travel to many different countries and meet leaders from different cultures and various walks of life. Yet, when discussing with CEOs, entrepreneurs, start-up founders and other senior decision makers, there is one common denominator describing the current business environment: the new normal is that nothing is normal and the only thing that is certain is that nothing is certain.

When working with senior executives, I usually use the term VUCA to describe the world we are operating in. VUCA was originally coined as a term by the US Army War College after the end of the Cold War, but is nowadays used as an accepted term in leadership circles to describe the world leaders operate in: VUCA stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

It sounds like a cliché but we have experienced more change and volatility in the past eight years than in the past 30 years. Considering the latest advancements in technological innovation, the speed of change is not likely to slow down – if anything, it might accelerate even more drastically.

Most of my clients mention change as one of the key descriptors of the current business landscape. While a lot of uncertainty and change is related to the macro environment, the biggest change since the Industrial Revolution and the enormous speed undoubtedly comes from the pace of technological developments. This started with the invention of personal computers 30 years ago, and digital technology and smartphones have turned our private and working lives upside down. Today everyone carries a smartphone in their pocket, which is more powerful than our personal computers were just a few years ago, making knowledge readily available at our fingertips. Our children are learning coding in school, which is an entire new language and consequently a new way of seeing and understanding the world. In addition, artificial intelligence will soon replace some of our technical skills and roles. As a result, creativity and innovation are more than ever becoming distinguishing factors for success. In short, digital technologies have changed the world in ways that no one could have possibly predicted just a few years back.

Our modern work-life environment is dominated by information overload, 24/7 connectivity, continual interruptions and distractions through incoming email and various social media. This has made it increasingly difficult for leaders to focus and carve time out in their diaries to think and work strategically. Consequently, many leaders find themselves doing ‘busy work’ and reacting to what is urgent instead of strategic.

Today's world is complex and more interconnected and interdependent than ever before. The rise of the sharing economy, the 'Uberfication' of services and the shift of the power balance from companies to consumers have disrupted entire industries such as hospitality, mobility and financial services and put traditional business models under pressure. Future change will be dramatic on an economic and societal level. As a result, established businesses are required to take a critical look at their current business models. In order to thrive and not just merely survive, leaders and organisations need to fully embrace digitalisation and develop a more agile and entrepreneurial mindset and modus operandi. This means that leaders in the digital age are required to step out of their comfort zone and take bold risks.

Unlike leaders in traditional industries, start-up founders on the other hand are usually quite used to getting out of their comfort zone and to taking risks. Many follow the Silicon Valley motto, 'Move Fast and Break Things', and their entire business model is often built on venturing into something that has not been done before. The biggest challenges in start-ups are usually the pressure from investors, paired with the enormous volatility in growing a business, and often start-ups are faced with daily ups and downs, which can make it really hard to be decisive and take the right decisions amidst the emotional turmoil of building a business.

Even though the financial crisis happened over eight years ago, we are still dealing with some of its repercussions and today's world economic climate remains challenging and unpredictable. The Eurozone's struggle for stability including the uncertainty caused by Brexit, the European refugee crisis, the US elections and the slowing of the Chinese economy all impact the global economy.



Consequently, leaders are faced with uncertainty, and even outcomes from familiar actions are less predictable these days. The haziness of reality and the potential for misreading situations can cause confusion, often resulting in a freeze reaction for leaders. Today's challenges are new and different and, as such, require a different response.

In the workplace, this often translates into increased pressure on the individual. Leaders are required to do more with less in shorter time frames or to come up with creative ideas 'yesterday'. If they don't, they often feel that their head is on the line.

There is also a growing recognition among leaders that they can no longer leave the sole responsibility for global challenges that impact humankind to governments. The impact of climate change, deforestation and a potential water shortage require collaboration across different sectors, disciplines and geographies. The need to look at sustainability is partially driven by commercial considerations as leaders recognise that they might not have a supply chain if they don't tackle environmental issues. It is also partially driven by the change in consumer power, with consumers valuing sustainability, and partially by a new and more conscious brand of leaders. In addition, millennials are a different kind of 'breed' to manage. Having grown up with uncertainty, they are no longer looking for a secure lifetime career but often an inspiring workplace with a mission and a purpose that they can identify with.

In an environment where shareholders, customers and employees lose trust quickly, there is also increasing demand for strong corporate cultures based on purpose and a robust ethical compass.

## Leaders recognise that new rules of engagement are needed

The old ways of operating no longer work and leaders need new rules of engagement to master current challenges. External forces mean that organisations and leadership teams need to change and adapt as quickly as possible. Leaders are often required to find solutions off the beaten track. Today's leadership challenges are complex and complex challenges require different leadership strategies. The change we are currently facing cannot be solved by just technical expertise but is adaptive in nature, which requires us to do something different. In today's VUCA world, leaders cannot just rely on what they think they know but have to be comfortable in the space of 'not knowing'. They have to remain open and be agile learners in every situation in order to stay connected, engaged and relevant to the people they are leading.

The problem is that whenever there is uncertainty or pressure, such as in the current business environment, there is a tendency to jump to conclusions, to react unconsciously, to procrastinate or to collapse the creative rollercoaster prematurely – in short, a tendency to get out of the unknown or uncertainty as quickly as possible, without being aware of the possible long-term consequences of the actions taken. What tends to trip us up is our very own nervous system: we evolved in circumstances that did not change as quickly and as drastically as the current environment. According to neuroscientist Rick Hanson (n.d.), our 'nervous system has been evolving for 600 million years, from ancient jellyfish to modern humans'. Back many tens of thousands of years ago, the brains of our hunter-gatherer ancestors were continuously screening the environment for danger and put them into a fight-flight-freeze reaction whenever they heard the slightest sound in the bushes. At the time this was

very useful, as it could have been a tiger wanting to eat them for lunch. Even though we evolved as humans and are no longer living in the bush, our brains have unfortunately not evolved as much and we still have this ancient part of the brain, called the amygdala. Assuming that you are not managing a wildlife camp in Africa or are a commander in a war zone, it is unlikely that your life is actually in danger – even though it might feel that way when you are facing challenges at work.

However, your amygdala is still on the alert and will likely, in the case of dealing with uncertainty, the unknown or when you feel under pressure, hijack your executive brain (Goleman, 2006). The executive brain is responsible for focus, long-term thinking, strategic thinking, impulse control and positive outlook. In the 21st century, the cause of this hijack could be a look at your full inbox, a thought about the next board meeting, the budget meeting or being questioned by your chairman.

Once your amygdala is on, your body produces the stress hormone cortisol, your immune system, reproductive organs and digestive system shut down and your muscles tense up, which causes you to feel stressed and often act in ways that you later regret. The other problem is that functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans show that what mostly switches on our amygdala are not even external circumstances but our very own thoughts about and appraisal of a situation. As such, a tendency to worry about the future, ruminate about the past or project a negative outcome of a meeting has direct implications on our leadership ability in the present moment. In addition, our brain also has a tendency for creating worst-case scenarios. Maybe the following situation sounds familiar to you: you are stuck in traffic and your thoughts are ‘I am going to be late for a meeting, I am going to lose this client, I am going to lose my job.’ From my experience, worst-case scenarios hardly ever

happen, and even if they do, we tend to largely underestimate our ability to deal with them in the moment. Yet thoughts can put us into a negative downward spiral. Daniel Goleman, the ‘father’ of emotional intelligence (EQ), says a high IQ is not worth much if you are spending most of your days in the more primitive parts of your brain.

A leader’s shadow is very long and wherever they put their attention, the organisation follows. When leaders are stuck in a reactive fight–flight–freeze cycle, this usually affects direct reports and cascades down through the organisation.

In order to initiate or guide skilful change, leaders need to be present to (or aware of) what is here, not what they thought would be here, could be here, should be here or to what was here yesterday. Leaders also need to be able to hold ambiguity and be comfortable with the unknown. They do not only need tools to manage the outer landscape and what is happening around them, but they also need tools to manage their inner landscape. In many ways, the ‘inside job’ determines the success of the ‘outside job’.

## Reflection on change

What is your relationship to change (do you embrace it, resist it or are you neutral towards it)?

## Reflection on uncertainty

When faced with uncertainty, what is your habitual course of action?

## How do you implement mindfulness in the workplace?

Today's leaders and organisations need to develop an agile mindset and take bold risks. This *Authority Guide* shows you how to link mindfulness directly to leadership and business challenges and offers practical and accessible tools for change. Written by an expert on leadership, meditation and mindfulness, the book teaches you how to manage your inner landscape of thoughts, emotions and interruptions so that you can create a compassionate, innovative and sustainable working culture.



**“Palma Michel’s book is masterful. It is an easy read yet full of profound insights on how to apply simple mindfulness techniques to great effect at work. Palma’s wisdom and calm presence shines through on every page.”**

Dr Jutta Tobias, Innovation and Process Management, Cranfield School of Management

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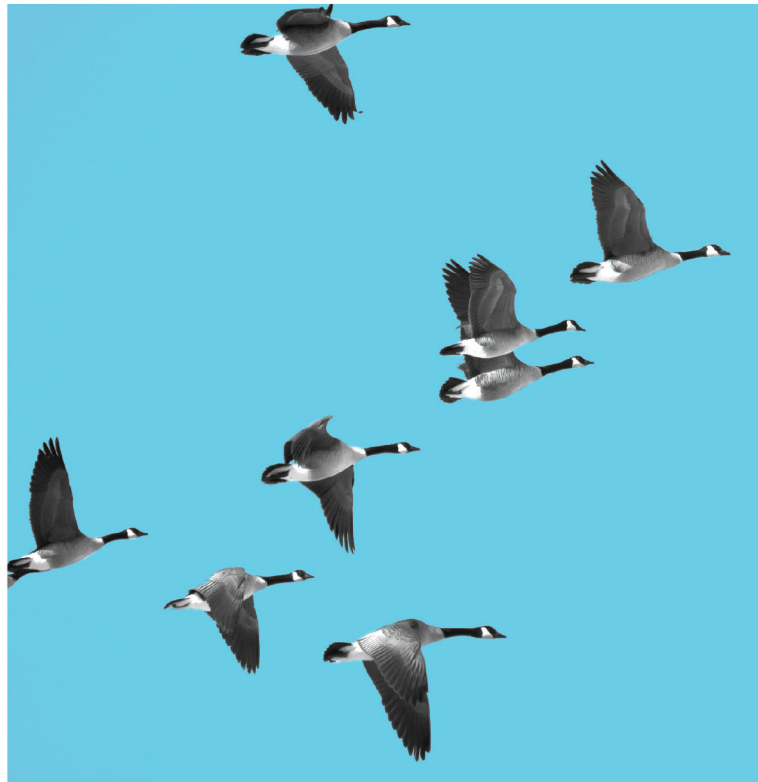
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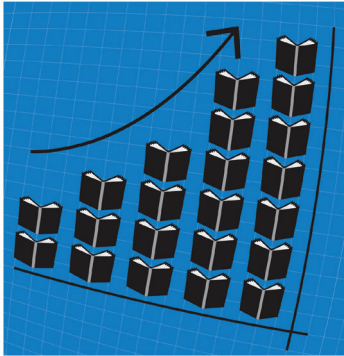


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