

# CHANGING THE GAME

## BEYOND MINDFULNESS TO BEING CONSCIOUS

*Emma-Kate Swann & Bob Rosen*

What would you rather have—a mindful, calm, happy staff or a conscious staff who thrives when faced with disruption, uncertainty, and change? Ideally, you want both. The concept of mindfulness refers to the ability to maintain a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, body, and surrounding environment. It is often seen as the antidote to stress.

It has been more than 10 years since Google paved the way for mindfulness in the workplace with its training program. This program has become the torchbearer for similar programs throughout the corporate world. Today, the market is awash with mindfulness apps, podcasts, and books, such that a self-help start-up like Headspace is valued by *Forbes* at \$250 million. Yet, in spite of the proliferation of mindfulness, only 13 percent of employees are engaged at work, according to Gallup's most recent global research; McKinsey

reports that 70 percent of all transformations fail; and talent retention is as difficult as ever. While personally beneficial, mindfulness training has yet to solve business's thorny leadership problems. Mindfulness is good, yet it's not enough. The reason is that our world is changing faster than we can adapt. For the most part, we are woefully unskilled to cope with the speed, uncertainty, complexity, and disruption we confront each day. The solution is that we must think and act in new ways. We need to be able to transform ourselves, abandon the traps we make for ourselves, and let go of our own limited philosophies regarding change. We need to open up our conscious minds and get unstuck.

Reflection helps individuals, but organizations need that translated into positive action. The name of the game is awareness and introspection, which drive action and results. Herein lies the persistent tension: to get the results we need today, we first have to use

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awareness and introspection to see opportunity; then we need to transcend impulsive or instinctual responses (put our ego in check) so we can take deliberate action. It's imperative that today's leaders take a step beyond mindfulness and become more conscious.

### **Conscious=Awareness in Action**

Our culture seduces us into thinking that chasing goals, producing, and making money is always the best course of action. We believe a life of action is more valuable than a reflective one. We are constantly busy and find it hard to go deep and do the inner work of personal development. Indeed, action is often the path of least resistance. It is harder to stop, pause, and reflect from a crazy life than it is to continue to cruise unaware on autopilot.

Using your conscious mind as an asset is a sea change in thinking about personal development. By becoming more conscious of how our mind works, we can stop getting hijacked by our irrational fears and biases enabling us to respond more effectively when things are too fast, too complex, too demanding, or too disruptive.

With just enough urgency, resilience, and curiosity, you can activate your mind to adapt. The most effective people in the world today are transformational leaders at all levels—executives and managers, politicians and civil servants, parents and principals, coaches and entrepreneurs. They are all masters of personal and organizational transformation. They have honed their ability to learn faster, create smarter, and collaborate deeper, making them masters of adaptation. Now more than ever, being conscious is the antidote to disruption.

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However, becoming more conscious is a journey of choices. We have the capacity to wake up and live consciously—to see ourselves clearly, think with an open mind, feel positive emotions, and act constructively with others. Indeed, we have a choice every day to be joyous, curious, hopeful, and productive. But this takes courage. Yet, like water flowing downhill, it is only natural for us to take the easy way. Often that means clinging to stability or running away from discomfort and hardship. Yet being conscious looks at reality for what it is, not what we hope it to be. It lives in the present moment, not in the past or the future. And it pierces through our facades to befriend the good and bad, our strengths and vulnerabilities, and our celebrations and disappointments.

### **The Path to Being Conscious**

Organizations are feeling the brunt of our lack of awareness. There's a growing gap between the leaders we have and the leaders we need. Executives are being questioned about their ability to lead change in the future. And executives are deeply worried about the talent gap in society. As a consequence, many organizations are shackled by slow execution, lack of growth, unhealthy cultures, and underperformance.

Whether we admit it or not, change is the only reliable constant. Change is the rule. Adaptation is survival. Being conscious is how you thrive.

According to an oft-repeated maxim, "Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work." There is no easy button that

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makes people more conscious. You need to make the decision to lift your gaze outside yourself while looking inward to remove the roots of resistance you may be stuck in. Only then can you awaken your mind to possibilities, opportunities, and wider thinking. With just enough urgency, resilience, and curiosity, you can activate your mind to adapt, to become more conscious.

Our world is inexorably skidding towards a new economic and social era where the cost of unaware people is too high to pay. We need to wake up and become more conscious. The casual use of the word *conscious* belies its deeper, more profound meaning. To grasp the true scope of being more conscious, you are going to have to *go deep* and discover your inner world; *think big* to see a world of possibilities; *get real* to be more honest and intentional in leadership and life; and *step up* to your highest potential. To move past mindfulness to the next level, our research has found that the most successful people and leaders practice these four steps, which we lay out in our new book: *CONSCIOUS: The Power of Awareness in Business and Life*.

### **Go Deep: Harnessing the Power of Introspection**

People are like a Rubik's Cube. There are more than seven billion combinations. Every one of us wants to solve our own puzzle. We have amazing brains capable of being far more conscious than we know. Yet, think about this: When did you first start to self-reflect, to

focus on being self-aware? Chances are it was a random occurrence, because it is rare that we were taught about the importance of reflection. Yet today, self-awareness is the major reason why so many of us succeed while so many others fail.

The purpose of *going deep* is to take off your blinders and eliminate what is holding you back. It's about taking a deep look in the mirror and learning how you become you, how your genetics give you the raw materials to build experiences, how your childhood and family development created memories that shape your identity, how your life experiences create a unique footprint of moments influencing who you become, and how your personality development shapes your daily preferences and ways of being.

Learning to be more conscious is not about delving into your unconscious brain. That's the purview of psychoanalysts and neuroscientists. It goes beyond emotional intelligence, asking you to examine the broader capabilities needed to survive and thrive. It's about choosing to be the one with the headlights on, not the one driving in the dark.

### **Think Big: Getting Curious and Adaptive**

When you look through a peephole, your field of view is both limited and distorted. People with an unconscious bias or fixed mindsets see the world through a peephole. However, *thinking big* and expanding your mind is like throwing the door wide open to a world free of distortion. Learning to think big keeps you focused on what matters. It also inspires and energizes you. Everyone can think big. All it requires is opening the door of your mind.

Organizations today need people to see their jobs in more creative ways, far from the one-dimensional job description. People need to learn faster. To find opportunities they didn't know existed. To solve more complex problems. They are looking for leaders to take them into the future. They need everyone to rise above the din, to see the bigger picture, to hear the bigger story. This requires big thinking.

## Get Real: Being Honest and Intentional

Getting real means being simultaneously optimistic and realistic and, all the while, loosening the chains of resistance. Becoming real about the changes you want to make in the future will make you more honest with yourself and straightforward with others. To *get real* means to seek out personal transformation.

There is a famous announcement in the London Underground: “Mind the gap” is loudly and obnoxiously repeated until the train departs. It warns travelers to be conscious of the gap between the station platform and the train they are getting on.

Like riding the train, life entails minding the gap. It is the gap between your current reality (station platform) and your desired future (destination). We are pushed into the gap by our problems and challenges, or whenever we face something we want to fix or change. We are pulled into the gap whenever we seize an opportunity, set goals for ourselves, or dream of a better future. We are navigating the gap when we try to lose weight, learn to be more direct, or work to expand our customer base. The gap is where your anxiety, creativity, imagination, and energy sit. The gap is where you *get real*.

## Step Up: Acting Boldly and Responsibly

*Stepping up* is about leadership and action. For a leader, approaching the world too cautiously, too timidly, too small, will leave you vulnerable to being hijacked by your needs for safety and security. This is why having a higher purpose is such an integral part of being a healthy leader.

Aside from the sun, navigators believe the most important star in the sky is the North Star. It’s a humble star, not shining very brightly, but always there and reliable. If you find yourself lost on a clear night without a compass, the North Star can be your best friend. Metaphorically, the North Star represents our higher purpose, leading us to take action and make our own lives and the lives of those around us better. But if you are not keeping your purpose

consciously close to your mind and heart, it’s easy to wander off.

An irony of human life is that we all possess a higher purpose, yet many of us have no idea what it is. Our minds and bodies are intended for more than merely survival—they are vessels for deep social and emotional drives that give us meaning. For whatever reason, many people have never asked themselves, “What is my purpose here? Am I meant to do more with my life than take care of myself?” Purpose is the connection between what we do and why we do it. Conscious leaders use their purpose to step up and make change. When you step up to bat, you can embrace the opportunity to swing for the team or duck away from every pitch. It is a conscious choice.

## Your Roadmap to Being More Conscious

If you feel things are moving too fast, *go deep*.

If life and work get too complex, *think big*.

If leading gets too demanding, *get real*.

If everything feels too disruptive, *step up*.

Too fast. Too complex. Too demanding. Too disruptive. This is modern life. Our external world is outpacing our ability to cope with uncertainty and change. As a response, our mind can feel as if it’s in a constant state of hyperventilation. You can’t be your best self if you can’t breathe. By using this model to focus on your most valuable asset, your conscious mind, you can finally catch a deep breath. Then, you can wisely commit to walking down the rocky road of personal adaptation and conscious transformation.

The four pillars to becoming more conscious (see Figure 1) bridge the gap between the positive effects of mindfulness and taking action in your daily life to move forward. Going deep is the antidote to being shallow; thinking big is the foil to being too narrow; getting real is the answer to playing it safe; stepping up is the solution to staying small.

LESS CONSCIOUS MORE CONSCIOUS

<b>Shallow</b> <i>Unaware &amp; Superficial</i>	<b>Go Deep</b> <i>Aware &amp; Introspective</i>
<b>Narrow</b> <i>Biased &amp; Closed-minded</i>	<b>Think Big</b> <i>Curious &amp; Adaptive</i>
<b>Safe</b> <i>Protective &amp; Reactive</i>	<b>Get Real</b> <i>Authentic &amp; Intentional</i>
<b>Small</b> <i>Cautious &amp; Self-centered</i>	<b>Step Up</b> <i>Bold &amp; Responsible</i>

**FIGURE 1. FOUR PILLARS TO BECOMING MORE CONSCIOUS**

## Step Up and Be the Leader the World Needs

Over the past 20 years, we have spent billions of dollars educating our leaders at all levels of society. The results have been mixed. We are not seeing leaders prepared for transformational change. Unfortunately, many of us—in business, government, the military, religion, sports, and politics—are not adapting fast enough. Some are too self-absorbed and self-interested. Others are too complacent or overwhelmed. Others have lost their moral compass. Still others don't think they are leaders in the first place.

The problem for many is a fundamentally flawed belief that their status and actions alone determine the quality of their leadership. They have been chasing profits, wealth, reputations, and accolades without realizing that conscious, healthy leadership stems not from what they do, but from who they are as human beings. Too often a leader is seduced by the need to solve

problems and take immediate action. Stepping back to examine flawed ways of thinking, personal biases and areas of ignorance, and assumptions about self-image and reputation can be difficult and painful. It's much easier to take quick-and-dirty, superficial approaches to leading and hope that things will work out.

Becoming a conscious leader is a lifelong adventure. Some of us mature into leadership smoothly, while others bleed into it through crisis. But leaders are always made in real time—through experience at work and in life. Most of us have teachable moments in our lives, moments when we leapt to a new level of understanding. For many of us, one of those moments was when we realized that we are not heroes or villains. Yet that's how so many of us think about leaders. We love them or hate them, idolize or demonize them. But humanizing is a tricky task. We expect both too much and too little from ourselves. As humans, we are learning to lead as we go, and we need to give ourselves permission to make mistakes and learn from each other.

The question isn't *why*, it's *why not* work on being more conscious? It's a roadmap to guide you through uncertainty and change. We need leaders from all walks of life. As we move from being preoccupied with tangible assets (land, labor, capital) to deploying the power of intangible ones (people, relationships, networks), it's people who are fluent in the language of the human experience that will make all the difference.

## Conclusion

Leadership success depends on tapping the hearts and minds of people at all levels of society. Today we have more knowledge and power at our fingertips than ever before. The Internet is available to nearly everyone, technology is the great equalizer, and our relationships provide the greatest advantage in business and life. How we inspire and energize others is at the heart of being successful. Developing your conscious mind will take you beyond mindfulness to real action and change.



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*Bob Rosen, PhD, is a trusted CEO advisor, organizational psychologist, and best-selling author of eight books including the New York Times bestseller Grounded: How Leaders Stay Rooted in an Uncertain World and the forthcoming CONSCIOUS: The Power of Awareness in Business and Life. His firm, Healthy Companies International, has worked with Motorola, Johnson & Johnson, Brinks, Northrop-Grumman, Citigroup, PepsiCo, ING, PricewaterhouseCoopers, New York Life, Medstar Health, and other major organizations. He has been featured in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and many other publications. He lives in Arlington, Virginia.*