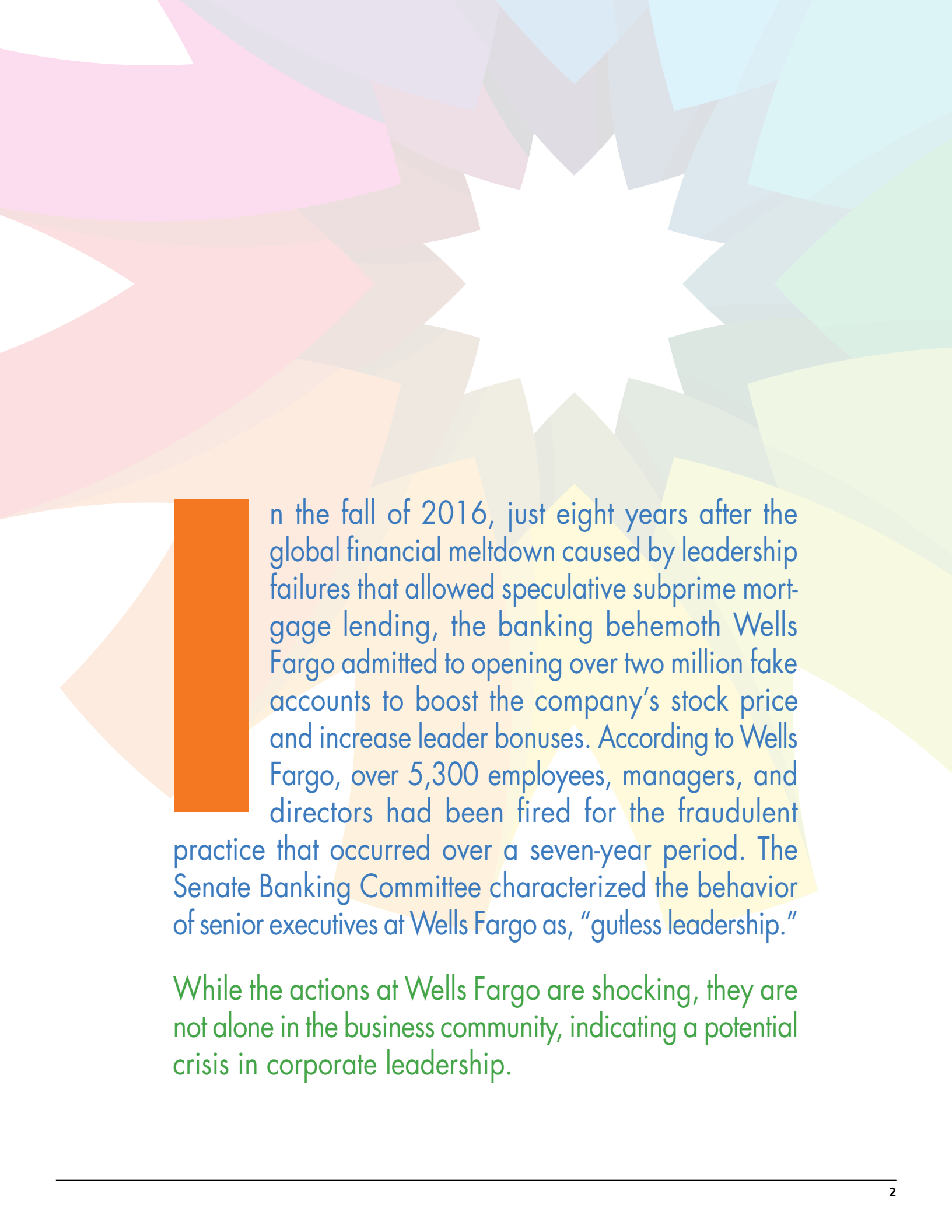




BRAIN By Dutch Franz, Ph.D. **TRAINING**

**Mindful Self-Awareness
and Leader Performance**



In the fall of 2016, just eight years after the global financial meltdown caused by leadership failures that allowed speculative subprime mortgage lending, the banking behemoth Wells Fargo admitted to opening over two million fake accounts to boost the company's stock price and increase leader bonuses. According to Wells Fargo, over 5,300 employees, managers, and directors had been fired for the fraudulent practice that occurred over a seven-year period. The Senate Banking Committee characterized the behavior of senior executives at Wells Fargo as, "gutless leadership."

While the actions at Wells Fargo are shocking, they are not alone in the business community, indicating a potential crisis in corporate leadership.

Emotional Intelligence and Leader Performance

Since the famous assertion made by Daniel Goleman in 1995 that emotional intelligence is a better predictor of leader performance than IQ, emotional intelligence and leadership outcomes have been studied in organizational settings. An early organizational study evaluating an emotional intelligence training program at American Express showed performance for sales staff increased 11% after emotional intelligence training. Emotional intelligence has also been used to predict transformational leadership. In a large study looking at how emotional intelligence combined with personality and intelligence to predict leader performance, researchers, reporting in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* in 2011, found that emotional intelligence explained 47% of the variance in job performance.

A foundational competency found in emotional intelligence research is self-awareness.



Decision-making is a fundamental leadership skill. Research has found that leaders with higher measurements of emotional intelligence were more skilled at identifying and regulating emotions that could cause anxiety and influence decision-making. As reported in *Psychological Science* in 2013, individuals who could recognize their own emotions in the moment were better able to identify anxiety caused by either outside circumstances or issues related to the

workplace. Researchers found that those who could identify these stressors were better able to control unrelated bias that influenced decision-making. A foundational competency found in emotional intelligence research is self-awareness. Next, we will look at how emotional self-awareness impacts leader performance.

Emotional Self-Awareness and Leader Performance

Self-awareness is the ability to understand how internal and external stimuli impact our emotions and effect our performance from moment to moment. There is a significant volume of research discussing the connection between self-awareness and leader performance, and awareness of emotions was found to help predict leader emergence in groups. Leader self-awareness has been identified as an important component of how strategic decisions are made as it strengthens the ability to track nuanced, constantly changing business inputs that often determine success or failure in fast-paced high stress industries. In addition, self-awareness has been found to be a critical leadership skill for working in diverse workgroups and recognizing cultural bias and power dynamics that could derail work teams and undermine organizational culture. While academic literature is full of research discussing the importance of self-awareness, little research has been conducted exploring how a leader might develop this critical performance skill. However, recent research in the field of mindfulness has offered a potential method for developing this important leadership competency.

The Link Between Mindfulness and Self-Awareness

Mindfulness training largely traces its roots to traditional methods of Buddhist practice. The Western concepts of mindfulness predominately are concerned with prolonged focused attention that can have individual and organizational benefits. However, within Buddhist traditions, there are several layered approaches to mindfulness practice. One method of practice, known as insight meditation, has the added aspects of recognizing, in the moment, the impermanence of thoughts and feelings, the phenomena of suffering, and the interrelatedness of people and events. A significant difference between Western and Eastern conceptualizations of awareness and mindfulness is the deliberate evaluative thought process and non-judgmental self-awareness practiced in Buddhist mindfulness traditions. An important feature of the Buddhist view of self-awareness is the acknowledgement of the impermanent nature of the ego and non-attachment to distorted mental storylines that attempt to protect the ego.

In recent years, the study of mindfulness has been conducted in many areas within the field of psychology and related scientific disciplines. The effect of mindfulness on awareness, memory, and brain plasticity has been studied in cognitive and neuropsychology. This research found that prolonged meditation practice can alter the nature of brain processing from moment to moment and increase brain plasticity. Supporting research also showed benefits in working memory, cognitive flexibility, resilience, and emotional regulation. With the Westernization of mindfulness concepts and more rigorous scientific study, there has emerged numerous definitions to describe the phenomenon of mindfulness. A common characteristic of these

mindfulness definitions is the act of awareness in the present moment. The definition of mindfulness used in my research comes from the work of Kirk Warren Brown and Richard M. Ryan who define mindfulness as, "an open or receptive attention to and awareness of ongoing events and experience."

Stanford Mindful Leader Study

The purpose of the present research was to determine if a mindfulness training program would improve the self-awareness of organizational leaders. The outcome of this research could provide an inexpensive and sustainable method for improving a leader's emotional intelligence and workplace performance. The mindfulness program chosen for the study was an eight-week insight meditation program developed at Stanford University. The research incorporated an experimental and control group and measured participants self-awareness and

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Group	Sex	Age	Leadership Experience (In years)
Experimental Group (n = 33)	8M	4 (25 -29)	4 (< 3)
	25F	5 (30-39)	3 (3-5)
		9 (40-49)	7 (6-10)
		9 (50-59)	18 (> 10)
		6 (60-65)	
Control Group n = 34	17M	2 (20-29)	5 (< 3)
	17F	7 (30-39)	5 (3-5)
		5 (40-49)	8 (6-10)
		13 (50-59)	16 (> 10)
		7 (60-65)	

Note. This table shows the descriptive statistics for the demographic information collected that was relevant to the research question and the ability to generalize the results to organizational leaders in many fields. One participant from the experimental group did not answer the leadership experience question.

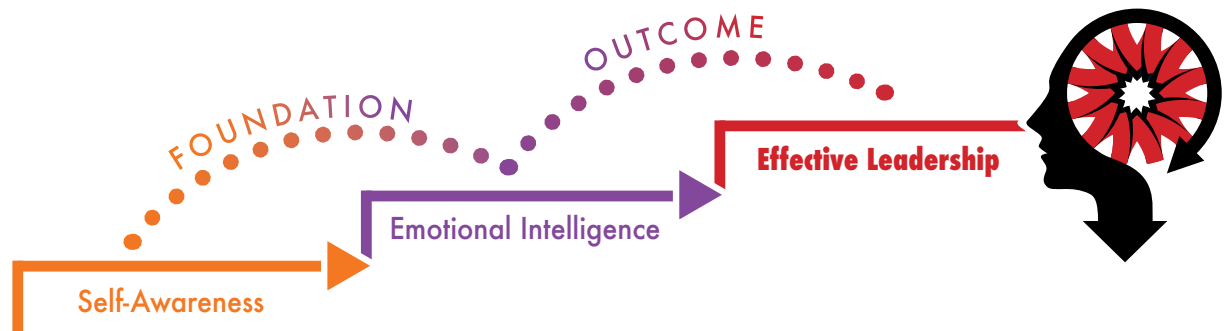
emotional intelligence before and after the mindfulness training program. Participants were organizational leaders recruited from Palo Alto, California; the business incubators in Bend, Oregon; and Fortune 500 companies in Seattle, Washington. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the demographic descriptive statistics for the participants in the study. The Emotional Social Competence Inventory (ESCI) was used to measure before and after self-awareness of the experimental and control groups. The ESCI is a 68-item online self-assessment that takes 20-30 minutes to complete, and is grounded in emotional intelligence theory and based on Richard Boyatzis and Daniel Goleman's competency model of emotional intelligence. The inventory questions identify frequency of occurrence based on a 5-point Likert scale. The responses provide data for assessing the 12 competencies identified in the competency-based emotional intelligence model, and generate a mean score for each of the measured competencies.

Can Self-Awareness Be Improved?

Statistical analysis was used to determine the effect of the insight meditation training on self-awareness. The eight-week, insight meditation training program was found to significantly increase self-awareness in the experimental group. The analysis of mean

scores between the control group and the experimental group also had a significant finding. Analysis of the control groups' self-awareness scores revealed no significant increase over the eight-week period. The importance of these findings to business leaders and organizations rests on two perspectives: the leader's perception of the self and the observed behaviors of the leader. It is possible that by improving self-awareness, leaders can begin to perceive their world with greater clarity and focus, resulting in better leadership outcomes. Had this research included a 360-degree evaluation that included coworkers and close others, it might have been possible to assess the value of the increase in self-awareness in observable leader behavior across the organization.

This research sought to understand how a mindfulness-based training program impacted self-awareness in a sample of organizational leaders. The outcomes observed were not unexpected. The insight meditation used in the training stressed the observance and contemplation of thoughts and feelings that arise during meditation. It is reasonable that this process could result in increased self-awareness as participants experienced more practice noticing internal and external stimuli and contemplated how these events impacted emotions. This research also supported the theory that emotional intelligence is not static, but can be trained and improved.



Interpretation of the Findings

A key benefit of self-awareness is the recognition of the transient nature of the ego and the concept of non-attachment to distorted mental narratives that attempt to shield the ego. A lack of self-awareness can lead to blind spots in accurate perception that could result in poor decision-making and a distorted view of the organizational environment. Mindfulness practice may increase self-knowledge by improving the amount and fidelity of information that practitioners have about themselves, and by reducing the ego-saving behavior that impacts how practitioners seek and process information. Previous research, reported in *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, has suggested that processing bias likely prevented accurate self-awareness and perception of events. Mindfulness practice may reduce habitual biases and increase accurate perception of the self and environment. David Vago, a researcher at the Harvard Medical School, asserts that mindfulness-based training could impact self-awareness by isolating specific experiences in the moment and allowing one to recognize distorted habitual thinking patterns. Recognizing distorted self-talk and views of the world that create bias can allow the leader to develop new and adaptive perspectives that could improve self-awareness and performance. Research in neurobiology provides support for this view of the effect of mindfulness on cognitive processes that can impact leader performance. Brain scans of eight-week mindfulness-based training practitioners showed an increase in gray matter in areas associated with self-referential systems and executive functioning, and better connectivity in the neural network associated with attention.

Intervening on Bias and Distorted Thinking

A leader is responsible for providing vision, making sound decisions, and motivating others to accomplish organizational goals. Self-awareness serves as a lens through which a leader interprets the internal and external world. The inability to accurately interpret emotions and understand how emotions influence perception can result in poor decision-making in organizational leaders. The research presented here suggests a method to help clear a leader's lens and make perception more accurate. It is possible that increased self-awareness can help a leader identify aspects of the internal and external environment that bias perception. Noticing this bias, and being aware of habitual thinking patterns, gives the leader the option to behave differently and make better decisions based on a more accurate view of the operational environment. While this research is an important first step, future research could study this phenomenon and its impact on leader performance in an organizational setting.



Stanford Football coaches and players learn mindfulness techniques before conducting an intense distress tolerance pool training session. Distress tolerance training is designed to increase poise and mental toughness in high-stress time sensitive performance situations.

Averting a Leadership Crisis

This article began with a story about widespread fraud in one of the county's largest banks and a reflection on the state of organizational leadership after a decade of reported corporate and government misbehavior. One of the central concepts of mindfulness and emotional intelligence is developing self-awareness. Self-awareness helps the leader identify

"The training provided by Dr. Dutch and TierOne helped me to become a more proficient coach not only because of the ability to implement the training, but also because I better understand the intrinsic barriers to learning and performance my players encounter. I use what I have learned on the field and in meetings. As a bonus, I'm now able to evaluate myself as a coach in regards to focus and in-game performance. Using this training, I have become a more attentive, calmer, and fulfilled leader."

— JOE ASHFIELD
Football Coach, Stanford and Rice University



emotional hijacking and remove biases and ego protecting habitual thinking from the perception of reality. This clarity of perception leads to better decision-making and awareness of the interconnectedness of the world around us. When leaders are aware and do not see themselves as separate from their customers or those they lead, there is hope that decisions will be based on more strategic and altruistic motivations, and in turn, result in more ethical and effective organizations.

Research Into Practice

Since completing his research into the emotional intelligence and performance benefits of mindfulness-based training, Dr. Dutch has been applying this research to help improve the cognitive performance and emotional regulation of elite athletes and organizations. His company, TierOne Performance Consulting, has worked with NCAA Division I athletic programs, the NFL, Olympic hopefuls, and athletes preparing for the NFL combine. He specializes in high-tempo distress tolerance training that helps build poise and improve decision-making in high-stress situations. In addition to his work with elite athletes, he has provided emotional intelligence and leader training to Fortune 500 companies like ATT&T and Nintendo. He is currently working on implementing a mindfulness-based training system to optimize the performance of elite quarterbacks at Stanford University using virtual reality technology.



Dutch Franz PhD has a doctorate in Industrial and Organizational Psychology and is the Chief Performance Officer of TierOne Performance Consulting. Dutch and his company help elite athletes and organizations optimize performance using a systems approach and the latest in evidence-based techniques.

Prior to earning his PhD, Dutch was an officer in the Army Special Forces. Dutch currently resides in Seattle, Washington and when not coaching elite athletes or executives, he can be found climbing one of the areas many mountains or swimming the chilly waters of Puget Sound. Find out more about his work at tierone360.com.
