

# The Importance of Creating a “Mindful Intelligent Leadership” Course and Integrating Mindfulness into the Sustainability Business Curriculum: A Literature Review

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## Keywords

Mindfulness, Mindful Intelligence, Sustainability, Business Leadership, Ethics, Compassion, Emotional Intelligence, Social Intelligence, Ecological Intelligence, COOE

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## Abstract

As companies strive to integrate aspects of sustainability into their operations, the literature suggests that the managers who will be tasked with implementing those sustainable initiatives should possess not only the skillset of a business acumen but also the ethos of mindfulness. While the literature indicates the importance of business managers having the trait of mindfulness, there is scarce literature regarding how business students are taught mindfulness. This article bridges that gap by outlining how business students may be better prepared to carry out their future employer's sustainability initiatives by completing a Mindful Intelligent Leadership course. This paper is novel as it introduces the importance of educating business students on mindful intelligence, while highlighting and integrating the four categories of emotional intelligence; social intelligence; ecological intelligence; and compassion for oneself, others, and the environment.

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## Introduction and Literature Review

Companies are implementing various sustainability initiatives into their business operations because there is increasing awareness and concern from shoppers about what happens along a product's supply chain and lifecycle (Musa & Gopalakrishna, 2021). The managers who will be responsible for overseeing those initiatives may achieve their goals more efficiently if they function as mindful intelligent leaders. In this paper, mindful intelligence is defined as an individual's knowledge and aptitude of emotional intelligence (EI); social intelligence (SI); ecological intelligence

(ECO I); and compassion for oneself, others, and the environment (COOE).

Møller et al. (2019) define mindfulness as an awareness that results from purposefully focusing one's attention with both inquisitiveness and caring. Shapiro et al. (2006), advise that “mindfulness has its roots in Eastern contemplative traditions and is most often associated with the formal practice of mindfulness meditation” (p. 374). Porter et al. (2017) further elaborate by explaining that mindfulness originates from Buddhist epistemology and is cultivated by forms of meditation “which aim to bring a greater

awareness of thinking, feeling and behavior patterns, and to foster compassion” (p. 200).

With regards to mindfulness in business, Aviles & Dent (2015), describe “mindfulness as a powerful tool in management as it pertains to ethics, diversity or decision making. [For example], the research on individual performance supports the position that mindfulness can result in more informed decision making, problem solving and influence performance based on environments, expertise, and gender. [Also], the literature is clear as to the benefits of mindfulness in improving individual health and well-being” (p. 48). In addition, Alston et al. (2010) found a correlation between Emotional Intelligence and effective leadership while Higgs (2004) advises that the attributes of EI can lead to improved performance within organizations. Also, Badura et al. (2022) support the idea that Social Intelligence is a critical aspect of leadership. Furthermore, inferring a positive correlation between business leadership and mindfulness, Aviles & Dent (2015) suggest that in order to increase mindfulness in an organization, education is vital to build mindfulness among employees.

Therefore, as supported by the above-reference literature, it would be prudent for individuals to enter the workforce already having the ethos of mindfulness. For instance, the literature supports the notion that individuals who will be working in a capacity involving sustainable business should be mindful of social intelligence (Goleman, 2006); emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1994); ecological intelligence (Goleman, 2009); and compassion for oneself, others and the environment (Musa, 2015), (Musa & Gopalakrishna, 2021) and (Musa & Gopalakrishna, 2022). Thus, this paper introduces the idea that recent graduates could acquire this ethos by completing a course such as the one proposed in this article titled Mindful Intelligent Leadership.

The next sections of the paper will focus on a) the four criteria for mindful intelligent leadership, b) sustainable business curricula, and c) examples of mindfulness courses currently offered in higher education.

## **A – The Four Criteria for Mindful Intelligent Leadership**

This section will focus on the four criteria for Mindful Intelligent Leadership, including SI, EI, ECO I, and COOE.

To start, leadership is a social communication method by which results are influenced primarily by the leader’s capacity to affect the performance of their followers (Alston et al., 2010). The three common leadership styles include transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-faire leadership. “Transformational leaders are described as leaders who improve followers’ accomplishments and success by influencing their values and needs [while guiding] their followers towards self-development and higher levels of success” (Bass, 1997, as cited in Alston et al., 2010, p. 61-62). “Transactional leaders provide the follower rewards and benefits for obeying the leader and complying with the leader’s requests” (Bass, 1990, as cited in Alston et al., p. 62). According to Alston et al. (2010), “leaders that exhibit laissez-faire leadership traits allow team members to make their own decisions, to be free from the leader’s intervention. Laissez-faire leaders only answer direct questions from their subordinates, they do not regularly participate nor give evaluative remarks to team members” (p. 62).

When leadership is mentioned in this article, the transformational leadership style is what is being referenced, as transformational leadership is more aligned with the spirit of mindfulness than transactional or laissez-faire leadership styles; examples will be discussed in the following sections.

## **Emotional Intelligence (EI)**

EI is identified as the first attribute of a Mindful Intelligent Leadership course and it was studied by Daniel Goleman in the book titled Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ (Goleman, 1995). Analyzing brain and behavioral studies, Goleman reviewed the elements at work when individuals of modest IQ do well while individuals of high IQ stumble. According to Goleman et al. (2012), “those factors included five critical aspects of emotional intelligence that could be nurtured in schools: the abilities to know one’s emotions, manage those emotions, motivate oneself, recognize emotions in others, and develop successful relationships” (p. 5). In addition, Alston et al. (2010) conducted empirical research and found “that higher levels of individual EI translate into more effective leadership” (p. 61). Furthermore, Alston et al. (2010) cite several studies, which show evidence of the successful application of emotional intelligence on

transformational leadership via providing employees with inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and charismatic leadership. Also, building upon Goleman's EI foundation, "[Higgs, 2004] provides exploratory evidence suggesting organizations can achieve overall improved performance if the emotional intelligence elements: self-awareness, interpersonal sensitivity, motivation, emotional resilience, and conscientiousness are included in their selection criteria" (Higgs, 2004, as cited in Alston et al., 2010, p.65). Moreover, (Alston et al., 2010) advise that EI can be taught and improved through training and development, which would support and advance the transformational style of leadership. Therefore, due to the supporting literature, EI has been included as the first criterion of a Mindful Intelligent Leadership course.

### Social Intelligence (SI)

The second attribute of a Mindful Intelligent Leadership course is SI and it was researched by Daniel Goleman in his book titled *Social Intelligence: The Revolutionary New Science of Human Relationships* (Goleman, 2006). In this book, he promoted a form of intelligence, which affects interpersonal relationships. "He reported on research demonstrating that our brains make us 'wired to connect,' and showed how this, too, is a key ingredient for success in life – and a 'neural key to learning'" (Goleman, 2012, p. 6). For example, Goleman (2006) documents that SI includes the categories of social awareness and social facility, stating "social awareness refers to a spectrum that runs from instantaneously sensing another's inner state, to understanding her feelings and thoughts, to 'getting' complicated social situations. It includes a) primal empathy: feeling with others; sensing non-verbal emotional signals; b) attunement: listening with full receptivity; attuning to a person; c) empathic accuracy: understanding another person's thoughts, feelings, and intentions; and d) social cognition: knowing how the social world works" (p. 84). Defining social facility, Goleman (2006) states that "simply sensing how another feels, or knowing what they think or intend, does not guarantee fruitful interactions. Social facility builds on social awareness to allow smooth, effective interactions. The spectrum of social facility includes: a) synchrony: interacting smoothing at the nonverbal level, b) self-presentation: presenting ourselves effectively; c) influence: shaping the outcome of social interactions; and, d) concern: caring about other's needs and acting accordingly" (p. 84). For example, (Badura et

al., 2022) advise that the literature has documented the advantages of social intelligence "as a competence-related attribute [and SI] can offer opportunities for leadership emergence that otherwise might not be possible without this critical competency" (p. 2077). Thus, SI has been identified as a second component of a Mindful Intelligent Leadership course.

### Ecological Intelligence (ECO I)

Building on his SI and EI work, Goleman brought forth a third intelligence in his 2009 book, *Ecological Intelligence: The Hidden Impacts of What We Buy*. Goleman et al. (2012), state that "while social and emotional intelligence extend students' abilities to see from another's perspective, empathize, and show concern, ecological intelligence applies these capacities to an understanding of natural systems and melds cognitive skills with empathy for all life" (p. 6).

According to Goleman (2009) ecological connotes having knowledge of not only various organisms but also their ecosystems while intelligence refers to the ability of individuals to be educated and interact positively with the environment. Ecological Intelligence (Eco I) allows individuals to use the knowledge acquired about society's impacts on the environment in order to be mindful of sustainable decisions going forward (Goleman, 2009). Current environmental challenges require the development of a new sensibility, in which individuals are able to identify the linkages between the ecosystem and human livelihood (Goleman, 2009). "This awakening to new possibilities must result in a collective eye opening, a shift in our most basic assumptions and perceptions, one that will drive changes in commerce and industry as well as in our individual actions and behaviors" (p. 43). He states that "just as social and emotional intelligence build on the abilities to take other people's perspective, feel with them, and show our concern, ecological intelligence extends this capacity to all natural systems" (p. 44).

For example, Goleman (2009) suggests that "Ecological Intelligence maps one route forward to a more promising future, an alternative to the predicted planetary disasters due to our present slow-motion depletion and pollution of our world" (p. xiv). He believes that Eco I paired with business transparency results in benefits for society and the

environment, declaring that “our inability to instinctively recognize the connections between our actions and the problems that result from them leaves us wide open to creating the dangers we decry” (p.32). Goleman (2009) believes that individuals are not aware of the concealed environmental and societal costs of the products and services that are manufactured and consumed from the free market. He believes “the intelligence that might save us from ourselves requires a shared awareness by the coordinated efforts from all of us – as shoppers, as businesspeople, as citizens” (p. 39).

Moreover, Goleman (2009) advises that people can enhance their collective ecological intelligence by familiarizing themselves with a variety of paths to understand the environmental impact of various products. He states, “Ideally, we want to understand an item’s adverse consequences in three interlocking realms: 1) the geosphere (including soil, air, water, and of course, climate); 2) the biosphere (our bodies, those of other species, and plant life); and 3) the sociosphere (human concerns such as conditions for workers)” (p. 57).

In 2012, Goleman et al. published the book *Ecoliteracy*, which outlined and promoted a structure of education that integrates social, emotional, and ecological intelligence. The authors believe that the fusion of SI, EI, and ECO I provide vital benefits for not only academia but also society and the environment as a whole by cultivating the knowledge and compassion needed to maintain sustainable lifestyles. The authors believe that doing so should mitigate “the complexity of the web connections that characterized our global society [which] has created a vast collective blind spot about the effects of human behavior on natural systems, [as] our use of resources and the ensuing ecological impacts are dispersed across the entire planet – often seeming invisible or too far away for us to fully recognize.” (p. 5). Hence, ECO I is considered a third element of a Mindful Intelligent Leadership course.

### **Compassion for Oneself, Others and the Environment (COOE)**

Aligned with Goldmans’ work, Musa (2015), Musa & Gopalakrishna (2021), and Musa & Gopalakrishna (2022) introduce and test the compassion for oneself,

others and the environment (COOE) construct. Musa & Gopalakrishna (2021) defined the COOE construct “as the extent to which a person is caring, patient and respectful towards themselves, others and the environment” (p. 35) and it was applied to the research of Fair Trade consumer attributes (Musa & Gopalakrishna, 2021). “Fair Trade is a form of sustainable business and among the highest forms of [Corporate Social Responsibility] CSR” (Musa & Gopalakrishna, 2021, p. 34). In addition, Musa & Gopalakrishna (2022) conducted empirical research and found a correlation between COOE and Fair Trade consumption. Since Fair Trade supports economic independence among marginalized communities through the mindful manufacturing of products with not only a fair wage but also a fair ecological impact, it was found that Fair Trade consumers hold the attribute of COOE. These consumers care not only about themselves but also others and the environment; they support societal and environmental stewardship. Holding the COOE trait also supports Goleman’s work as he and his colleagues (2012) “posit emotional, social, and ecological intelligence as essential dimensions of our universal human intelligence that simply expand outward in their focus: from self, to others, to all living systems” (p. 7).

## **B- Sustainable Business Curricula**

This section will discuss examples of courses found in a typical sustainable business curriculum and how students can benefit from a Mindful Intelligent Leadership course.

Sustainability in business is linked to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). For example, McWilliams and Siegel (2001) define CSR as the “actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law” (p. 117). Because it is common for many Sustainable Business Curricula to include courses covering Sourcing, Marketing, and Management, adding a course on Mindful Intelligence Leadership would complement those subjects, as a foundation to sustainable thinking. This is not surprising as business managers have many tasks including but not limited to a) supervising, inspiring, and mentoring colleagues from different cultures, b) partnering and negotiating with peers, and c) supporting the manufacturing, sales, and marketing of products and services. If an individual holds the

skills of EI, SI, ECO I, and COOE, they may be better equipped to carry out those functions.

For example, a typical Sourcing course will introduce students to the elements of selecting a country and a factory to produce products that will be shipped globally. These steps include being mindful of the country selection, including negotiating and engaging with country representatives; thus, having EI and SI skills could assist the manager in that task. Also, when picking a manufacturing site, the sourcing manager may visit the factory to assess the location and the local labor force. Thus, possessing the additional skills of ECO I and COOE could assist the manager with being mindful when reviewing the factory's working conditions and the environmental impact that the facility has on the local population. These four attributes of mindful intelligence could also support various elements and learning outcomes of other subjects in the sustainable business curricula including but not limited to Management and Marketing.

Therefore, based on the above-referenced literature and empirical research, students who take a Mindful Intelligent Leadership course within their Sustainable Business curricula will be exposed to knowledge that may help them become not only mindful business leaders but also mindful consumers. Thus, it could be advantageous if the units of SI, EI, ECO I, and COOE are included in a Mindful Intelligent Leadership course in a sustainable business program. Doing so may support students in their post-degree roles to accomplish managerial tasks in a way that supports societal and environmental stewardship.

The next section will highlight some examples of mindful courses currently offered in higher education.

### C - Examples of Mindfulness Courses Currently Offered in Higher Education

Many universities are leading the way in pioneering the development of mindful leadership courses. For example, the University of Southern California (USC) Marshall has developed a course titled "Mindfulness Towards Humanistic Leadership." This course is promoted to individuals seeking "greater clarity and balance for problem-solving, decision-making, and improved business relationships.

In the program, [students] will learn to enhance [their] performance with improved emotional intelligence, motivation, and social skills" (USC-Marshall, 2022).

In addition, George Mason University offers a course in "Executive Mindful Leadership." They justify the need for this program, stating that "common pitfalls of leaders include treating people like machines, micromanaging, underestimating the importance of communication, listing and emotional intelligence" (GMU, 2022). The college also supports implementing "democratic vs. command and control approach" (GMU, 2022) to management. They state that "companies in the U.S. and abroad are adopting Mindfulness [and in some cases Mindful meditation] practices to drive their success, such as Google, Goldman Sachs, General Mills, T. Rowe Price, Nike, and HBO" (GMU, 2022). Included in the course is a focus not only on leadership and social capital but also on environmental stewardship.

Furthermore, New York University (NYU) offers two mindfulness courses: the first is called "Transformational Leadership through Mindful Practice" and is promoted as "the best leaders inspire others through the power of their example" (NYU, 2022a). The second course is titled "Mindfulness: Science, Practice, and Application" and it is promoted as a course "designed to foster critical thinking about the science behind one of the fastest growing education, workplace and therapeutic interventions" (NYU, 2022b).

As highlighted in the above quote from NYU, Mindfulness is fast growing and it might be prudent for colleges to follow the lead of NYU, George Mason, and USC by developing Mindful Intelligent Leadership courses so their students can be better equipped to manage and thrive as holistic business leaders, possessing not only a business acumen but also an ethos of mindfulness.

## Conclusion

This section will address the paper's contributions to academia and to the practice in several ways.

First, while the literature indicates the importance of business managers possessing the trait of mindfulness (Aviles & Dent, 2015; Alston et al., 2010; and Badura et

al., 2022), there is scarce literature regarding how business students are taught mindfulness. This article contributes to the literature by bridging that gap. Second, the paper is novel as it highlights the importance of educating business students on mindful intelligence, while introducing and incorporating the categories of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1994); social intelligence (Goleman, 2006); ecological intelligence (Goleman, 2009); and compassion for oneself, others and the environment (Musa, 2015; Musa & Gopalakrishna, 2021 and 2022) into a Mindful Intelligent Leadership course. Third, the paper encourages faculty interested in creating their own Mindful Intelligent Leadership course to develop and integrate the four

units of EI, SI, ECO I, and COOE into a course that is compatible with the unique program objectives and student learning outcomes specific to their institution and degree program. Fourth, having completed a Mindful Intelligent Leadership course, business students may be better prepared to carry out their future employer's sustainability initiatives. Fifth, as for the practice, this article may assist in inspiring and encouraging sustainable-focused businesses to seek out and hire employees who have completed a Mindful Intelligent Leadership course, as this would likely support not only the employee's job functions but also the organization's corporate culture.

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