

“Moments of Waking Up”: A Doorway to Mindfulness and Presence*

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Abstract

The context for this article and the research project that it describes is the potential importance of being awake and present for leaders. This 2-year collaborative action research project was designed to explore whether simply intending to be present could make a difference in participants' quality of experience at work and also to find out whether this would impact people with whom they worked. The study included a phenomenological analysis of contemporaneous notes taken several times a week for 4 weeks by two groups of 12-15 people from North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America. The study also explored the possibility that this approach to mindfulness might be useful for leadership development and education on a broad scale. The results suggest that sustaining ongoing awareness practices supports leaders in attaining the steadiness and flexibility needed for addressing the adaptive problems of our world.

Keywords

mindfulness, presence, action research, leadership development, awareness, first-person reflection

I maintain that there is an irreducible core to the quality of experience that needs to be explored with a method. In other words, the problem is not that we don't know enough about the brain or about biology, the problem is that we don't know enough about experience. ... We have had a blind spot in the West for that kind of methodical approach. ... this notion implies a going back to work with experience, the importance of taking seriously first-person experience....
Francisco Varela (In conversation with Otto Scharmer, January 12, 2000, Paris)

People have tried for centuries to develop practices that bring them into the present moment in order to experience the fullness of life in a richly meaningful way. Many spiritual traditions have called this experience *waking up*. Inspired by Francisco Varela's comment on blind spots in research, in this article we focus on individual experience from the first person perspective to illuminate and explore the experience of waking up. Our goal is to understand this phenomenon, learn more about its dynamics, and to discern whether it is something that occurs naturally or if it requires extensive training. Most important, we wish to see what impact having this experience has on people's lives.

The broader context for this article and the research project that it describes is our interest in the value of inner development as applied to leadership. Increasingly researchers, theorists, and practitioners argue that good leadership depends upon being self-aware and acting with a sense of responsibility to one's constituencies and to the planet (Carroll, 2007; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004). We wished to hear the first person "voice of practice and experience" (Boal & Trank, 2011, p. 343) with regard to this relatively unexamined aspect of human awareness that many regard as critical for leadership and even for simple well-being in the workplace.

Recent books and research support the belief that leaders benefit from being self-aware, present to those whom they lead, and awake to the emerging situation (Carroll, 2007; Good et al., 2016; Gunnlaugson, Baron, & Cayer, 2014; Rakoff, 2010; Romano, 2014; Weick & Putnam, 2006). Our study was designed to learn about this from the perspective of practitioners interested in reflecting intentionally on such an experience. In a two-year participatory action research project we chose not to pre-define waking up, but instead to invite people to bring their own experiences of this phenomenon to life. Had we defined it and made our views explicit, we were at risk that participants would try to achieve or meet some externally imposed standard. Our intention was for them to explore

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and describe their own experiences, providing a rich foundation for understanding this long-acknowledged yet little-studied phenomenon.

We developed the project to explore the possibility that such an approach may be useful for leadership development and education. We are not arguing that waking up is all that leaders need in order to be effective: MBA programs largely agree on a core set of skills useful in leadership, and we acknowledge the need for specific skills pertinent to the job at hand. There was also no intention to link the process of waking up with any one specific spiritual tradition; readers may be familiar with how the notion of being awake appears in Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, or other religions. However, given Boyatzis' (2006) conclusion that "there are few models or theories of how individuals change and develop in sustainable ways, and most programs and the research on them focus on single characteristics, rather than on transformational shifts in a leader's way of being and leading" (p. 610), it seems useful to explore the potential contributions of mindfulness and awareness to leadership development, as these ways of training one's mind have been argued to have the power to evoke such transformational shifts (Senge, et al., 2004). As Senge (2012) commented about the importance of such training for leaders,

Until you can stop the habitual thought flow of your mind, you cannot see what's around you. If you're going to be in a position of authority, you'd better have a high level of awareness of what's going on. Otherwise all you can do is project your inner dynamics on the outer world. ... You look at our world today, and we've got a lot of people in positions of authority who don't know anything except how to project their own world-view on the larger world, so we have lots of problems. (pp. 326-327)

Given the increasingly tight interdependencies of action across companies and nations, a healthy world requires leaders who can distinguish between their own projections and what is actually being said or done by people from another cultural context.

The Context

By *waking up* we mean something distinct from *mindfulness*—a term originally derived from Buddhism which describes a focused state of mind that can contribute to reduced stress and increased work performance (eg, Dane & Brummel, 2014; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). We use the term waking up to refer to the fleeting moments when people notice they are more aware and present to what is happening within or around them. These moments can be seen as an entryway to mindfulness: They are transient experiences where one senses a transition from one state to another. Mindfulness, on the other hand, has been defined as "the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 291). This definition highlights the emphasis on sustaining focus which can be discerned in mindfulness as the term is most commonly used in contemporary scientific research and practice. Note that this is not what mindfulness has meant historically in all meditative traditions, but for simplicity, since our work is intended to communicate within the world of social science, we are using this widely used definition. We could have contextualized our practice as one of "open awareness," a term that describes another longstanding approach to meditative mind training (see for example, Mingyur Rinpoche & Tworkov, 2014), but because this notion is unfamiliar to Western social scientists, it would not have provided a meaningful reference point.

We chose to differentiate mindfulness from the term "waking up" for various reasons. First, waking up has a rich history across many spiritual traditions, and it allows participants to engage in this experience without linking it to a particular conceptual framework. We wish neither to encourage nor argue with those who use the term mindfulness in a utilitarian way, although our interest is in the way that such practices build on Eastern wisdom traditions. Kabat-Zinn (2011) himself has alluded to his widely-quoted definition as merely an operational one. In a journal article, he said that mindfulness

... is not one more cognitive-behavioural technique to be deployed in a behaviour change paradigm, but a way of being and a way of seeing that has profound implications for understanding the nature of our own minds and bodies, and for living life as if it really mattered. It is primarily what Francisco Varela termed a first-person experience. (p. 284)

Second, a radical shift is needed for most people to develop a conscious, sustained effort toward being mindful in the context of work, as compared with doing so within a formal mindfulness practice outside of a work context. Weick and Putnam's (2006) groundbreaking article, which introduced many social scientists to Eastern perspectives on mindfulness, began to suggest the value of such ways of thinking. In pointing out how Weick and Putnam (2006) take "the reader beyond a Western emphasis on exteriority to an Eastern emphasis on interiority, intensity, and being mindful in the moment," Glynn (2006, p. 274) highlighted the importance of this possibility.

Third, our research seeks to add to yet remain distinct from most recent research on mindfulness in the context of work. It is unique in its focus on the "moments" of becoming mindful, as contrasted with the state or trait

of mindfulness, which is more typically what has been studied. Furthermore, we approached the topic from the perspective of people's reflections on their own experiences—known as a “first-person” approach, which is central in the action research process. There are very few first-person research studies related to mindfulness or awareness (see Bradbury, 2013; Bruce & Davies, 2005; Torbert & Taylor, 2008), despite the acknowledged value of investigating people's experiences from their own perspectives in action research. In contrast, the norm in research on mindfulness in the business context is to consider it to be primarily a cognitive process that generates an internal state that can be assessed through scales and other measures (Good et al., 2016). Finally, studying such reflective practice as a value-adding component of leadership development is uncommon, despite the increasing numbers of quantitative studies about the value of being present or mindful in the workplace (Dane, 2013; Dane & Brummel, 2014; Good et al., 2016; Hülshager, Alberts, Feinholdt, & Lang, 2013; Rakoff, 2010; Romano, 2014), as well as considerable research on the value of mindfulness in clinical settings (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009).

As Varela affirmed, such a first-person foundation is fundamental for studying experiences relating to human awareness, as only the person who has such an experience knows what it is (Varela & Shear, 2000). Much contemporary mindfulness research presumes either that people know when they are mindful and can accurately label such experiences on a scale (Grossman, 2010, 2011) or else that what should be studied is the impact of training in mindfulness through measuring workplace performance or levels of stress before and after such training (eg, Good et al., 2016; Hülshager, et al., 2013). Instead we wished to understand what people actually experience when they wake up to the present moment, as well as the impact of such experiences. This led us to use a phenomenological approach within the broad context of action research. We were interested in deepening our understanding of the experience of moving from distraction or unawareness to awareness — the moments of transition between these states and what enables people to elicit them with more ease and frequency. In the initial analysis of the data, we sought to describe the structure that such moments have in common and to portray the themes we saw across the participants. We also began to consider the implications for leadership, stress reduction, organizational health, and people's approach to work.

By investigating the moments of transition from distraction or absence to presence in the first person, we hoped to create a lived understanding of the experience itself. We suspected that this is something that occurs naturally, yet can be encouraged and deepened through intention, so we introduced this notion in designing the project. Even with training in meditation or mindful-ness, people often find that they do not bring such presence into their daily life and work, but consider it to be a special experience that happens only when meditating. Because our interest is in exploring how people can be fully present to whatever is happening—be it chaotic change in a start-up organization, the highly analytical process of grading student papers, or the pressured interactions of leading a political campaign—we thought it would be valuable to observe systematically what might happen if people held a strong ongoing intention to notice when they were “awake” as they went through their ordinary work days.

When we designed our research project we were sensitive to Argyris' admonition to practitioners always to make research a part of practice, as well as his deep interest in the critical contribution of authentic behavior to organizational and management change. There are few research projects on spiritual practice from the perspective of practitioners, as many spiritual practitioners who also do research try to keep these two arenas separate in their lives. In contrast to the notion that the two ways of thinking and seeing might confound one another, we wished to see how such an approach might offer richer insight into the contributions of awareness practice in our own lives and those of others at work. The inner world is typically relegated to the margins of leadership discourse because of its ineffable nature. Although on the surface, this research appears to be about passing moments and internal awareness, the project begins to put in place an empirical foundation for affirming the value of awareness practice for leaders with regard to their interactions with others and thereby, their effectiveness as leaders (Cortés Urrutia, 2016; Goldman Schuyler, 2016). Unless they sustain an ongoing awareness practice, leaders are not likely to have the steadiness and flexibility needed for addressing the adaptive problems (Heifetz, 1998) of our world. We thought we might find such moments of waking up to be portals to the kind of presencing that Scharmer (2009) and Senge (Senge et al., 2004) see as essential for addressing complex societal issues that are so resistant to resolution within existing institutions and structures.

The Study

This 2-year participative action research project was designed to explore the nature of the waking up experience, to see whether simply intending to be present could make a difference in participants' quality of experience at work, and also to find out whether this would impact people with whom they worked. Because we knew of preliminary data showing that the practice of meditation affects not only the therapist's inner state in a positive way, but the progress of clients as well (Grepmaier, et al., 2007), we decided to address the impact on our

professional work, moving from first-person inquiry through second-person to third-person analysis (Reason & Torbert, 2001) in the larger program of research. This article focuses on the first question: the participants' quality of experience at work and the impact of this from the participants' own point of view. The impact on others is addressed more fully by another project that used this data plus focus groups and interviews (second-person inquiry) (Cortés Urrutia, 2016).

Project History and Design

The study grew out of Goldman Schuyler and Skjei's longtime focus on the importance of meditation practice and "presence" for leadership development (Goldman Schuyler, 2007, 2012), combined with Skjei's prior research on authentic leadership moments (Skjei, 2014). After working for decades training people in varied approaches to mindfulness and awareness, we became curious about what enables a person to become present. We began to wonder whether training in a technique was necessary or whether simply eliciting intention might be more useful. It began to seem plausible that being alert and paying attention might be intrinsic to being a human being. Babies and very young children seem to have a vivid kind of connection with life that fades for most people as they learn to talk, drive, think, and write. Rather than assuming that what people need is training, we became interested in questioning whether paying attention in a deliberate way might trigger a different way of approaching life and action (Goldman Schuyler, 2013).

Some awareness practices arrive, after extensive training, at inviting people simply to be present to their minds, people, and the space around them (see Gyatso (Dalai Lama) 2004 and Dowman, 1994). Such a capacity to intentionally bring oneself into the present moment is foundational for what we see as the most exciting change and organizational learning projects being undertaken aiming toward systemic, global change (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013; Senge et al, 2004). This can be regarded as the quintessence of awareness: the capacity to live and act from a way of being sometimes called "non-meditation" that is mindful rather than mindless (see for example Dowman, 1994).

Goldman Schuyler and Skjei designed the project to focus on *moments*, rather than presence or mindfulness as ongoing states of being, because as longtime practitioners, our experience suggested that although people may wish to be mindful or present in an ongoing way, for most people such states last usually for mere seconds and must be refreshed again and again. The study is grounded in our training and practice of meditation and other awareness practices for over 40 years, as well as in current mindfulness research. Our practice has been supported by study with major Tibetan wisdom teachers whose books are widely respected throughout the world and who are considered reliable authorities within their own traditions. Our main teachers include Chogyam Trungpa, (1973, 2003), Tenzin Gyatso (the Dalai Lama) (1999, 2004 and many other books); Mingyur Rinpoche, 2007, Sakyong Mipham (2003), Sogyal Rinpoche, (2009); Tsoknyi Rinpoche and Swanson (2012), and Lama Tharchin Rinpoche (Dudjom Lingpa, 2011). The way that the research project was designed (based on both our practice and on scholarly research) contributes to its nature as action research, as it involves contemplating current actions in order to refine future action.

Goldman Schuyler and Skjei wanted to find a creative way to bring together research and personal practice while building community virtually among practitioners who shared these interests. We sought to extend the experience of awareness beyond workshop sessions at conferences and individual contemplative practices, in order to actively cultivate a collective shared process of year-round inquiry. The aim was to make visible and discuss the invisible, liminal moments that allow people to shift their attention and live with such open awareness.

Therefore, we planned a conference session as the launch for this research project and invited everyone present to participate in a project studying their own experience. Participants were asked to take written or recorded notes about moments that they regarded as "waking up" 2 to 3 times a week over a 4-week period. Participants would have access to the data generated, which would be used to write a paper together. People volunteered based on their interest in such a project, and during the first year, 12 completed a pre-and post-test, wrote their observations, and participated in follow-up focus groups reflecting on the impact of their participation in the project. (More began, but did not complete all phases of the project.) It was decided to continue for a second year, in order to allow for more people and depth of experience. During the second year 16 people from North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America completed all phases of the project, of whom nine were participating for a second time. There was no interaction among participants about their experiences. During the study period, many worked in countries outside of their birthplace. As shown in Table 1, we used three broad experience categories in the analysis of the data, to find out whether the experiences differed in ways we could perceive across levels of experience: 0 through 3 years of experience with any type of mindfulness or awareness practice; 4 through 9 years of such experience; and 10 or more years of experience. All participants appear in this paper with pseudonyms that have

been used consistently across publications based on this data. Because of the small size of the sample, to reveal additional data about specific participants would reduce the confidentiality.

Table 1. *List of participants*

Name	Participation	Extent of contemplative experience
Aaron	Year 1	0 – 3 years
Arielle	Both years	> 10 years
Cassandra	Year 2	4 – 9 years
Cynthia	Both years	0 – 3 years
Damian	Both years	0 – 3 years
Eliza	Both years	> 10 years
Elizabeth	Both years	0 – 3 years
Eva	Both years	> 10 years
Frank	Year 2	4 – 9 years
Georgia	Both years	> 10 years
Greta	Year 2	4 – 9 years
Larry	Year 2	> 10 years
Michelle	Year 2	4 – 9 years
Miriam	Both years	> 10 years
Rona	Both years	0 – 3 years
Simone	Year 2	4 – 9 years

We found it intriguing to do “action” research on a process that lives at the juncture between internal experience and visible action. Waking up is not something that others can necessarily perceive—which is usually what most people consider to be action. However, human action, in contrast with mere activities, begins in this liminal space. For the purposes of this article, we hold that mindful action is inseparable from awareness (Senge et al., 2004), so investigating awareness is a form of research on action. We also made this a collaborative, community-building project (second-person) because we sought to nourish the development of a global community of practice comprised of people interested in the interface between professional research and personal contemplative practice. Finally, the project had major third-person components, as we investigated the impact in the workplace. Without this last, the project cannot serve as intended: as a foundation for better understanding how being awake makes a difference for leaders and for everyone at work. The aim was to invite each participant, and ourselves as the designers of the project, to suspend the knowledge that we brought to the experiment, so we could be open to whatever might happen in such moments and to develop new ways to do research that would make visible such evanescent experiences which happen to people naturally all over the world across cultures and centuries, yet are much like bubbles that burst when one tries to hold onto them.

Data Analysis

The four of us analyzed the first-person reflections, working individually, in pairs, and as a team over a period of 8 months. We began by reading through the data and allowing ourselves to simply receive it. We noticed patterns and themes and wrote memos to ourselves. As we continued reading we realized that there were many different ways to determine themes; we noticed mental models that were familiar to us and tried to bracket these deliberately, resisting the urge to categorize things according to an existing model. For example, we realized that the data could be looked at thematically, sequentially, or developmentally, all of which were of interest, but these took us away from our wish to focus on the experience itself. We noticed that we were becoming overwhelmed by choices, but continued to resist the urge to categorize content, and instead, tried to stay present and attentive to providing a space or *clearing* in which patterns could be discerned. We each read through the participant data

multiple times, wrote memos that we shared with one another, and discussed the data and our memos through emails as well as in virtual meetings where we could see one another and feel like we were talking personally, despite being globally distant. This enabled us to look for the essential structure of the experience and also to identify the key themes that we perceived in the data. Once we agreed that the participants' variations on these themes were distributed across all levels of previous experience, we looked for quotes that would express such unique variations to readers. What follows is our perception of the essential structure of the experience followed by the themes.

What is waking up, as an experience? What the participants experienced as waking up is a shift in the quality of their awareness that happened either gradually or suddenly: (a) The gradual experience occurred when participants noticed that they had been preoccupied, and became aware of their momentary experience; (b) The sudden experience was often triggered by an external event or relationship that was unusual, surprising, disruptive, irritating, beautiful, or awe inspiring, or by noticing their own physical or emotional reactions to an event. In both cases, there was an interruption to the status quo, which generated a gap in their habitual way of being in the world. Sometimes they responded to these gaps with delight and humor. At other times, they reacted with defensiveness and stress. However, when they were able to embrace and suspend these reactions, they relaxed into the experience and opened to a deeper level of present moment awareness. This is what we called waking up: an intense sense of being present.

Many participants reached this state of intense presence primarily by focusing on sensory experience. This seems to have allowed them to shift from “thinking” (and removing themselves from the lived moment) to “sensing and feeling” (which brought them in touch with the moment). Sometimes just taking a few breaths was all that was necessary. Becoming present seemed more challenging when participants were experiencing painful sensations or emotions that they wished to avoid, but those who stayed with whatever feelings arose tended to discover that feelings of tension or claustrophobia would lift, so they then felt more space, both mentally and physically. This heightened awareness often generated a feeling of connectedness, accompanied by insights and feelings of gratitude. Such a state is not permanent once achieved—no human state is—but must be refreshed again and again. When awake, participants appreciated nature, people, and other beings, and felt that they had more choice about their actions.

As shown in Table 2, the phenomenological themes that we identified in the data were

- Waking up as either a gradual or sudden shift,
- Heightened experience of bodily sensations, feelings, and thoughts,
- Connectedness, safety, appreciation, and gratitude,
- Empathy, relationships, and meaning,
- Creativity, flow, and effectiveness.

Waking up as a gradual or sudden shift. The first theme that we identified in the data related to a shift in attention which initiated the moment of waking up. As we've said, this shift can be experienced as gradual or sudden and can be triggered by a variety of events, both internal or external. The gradual experience may be a feeling of “coming to” after being preoccupied. Cassandra found this could happen while driving to work.

When driving to work I almost would never notice how I arrive because I am in my own head all the time, in a trance. So, today, I decided I would be completely present. It was very difficult and I had to switch the radio off because it was making my mind drift away. ... I noticed the roads, the people, the scenery; I also noticed my body movements and breathing while driving. ... I arrived at the office having a less cluttered mind than usual; it felt as if I took a break.

For Aaron the experience of waking up was triggered by an external event.

Suddenly I came to full alertness when I saw a small bird walking in the middle of the road junction looking for food. It was an unusual sight because I don't expect a bird to look for food in the middle of the road. ... My full attention was on the bird. I felt concern for its safety.

For some the experience of the shift was pleasurable and intensely meaningful, as in this example from Cynthia.

My attention focus changed from my reading to me, to my experience of being there at that moment. I felt so lucky and had a true joy feeling being there. I felt healthy, fortunate. I listened to the rain, tasted the sweetness of my coffee, and observed other people around me and the rain in the window.

Waking up moments also occurred when a person asked simply, “Am I present?” as in this example from Georgia. “To bring myself present, first I am silent. Then I notice the first thing I do is look around and get my bare orientation in space. Then I take a few breaths and notice how I feel.”

Table 2. *Examples of Phenomenological Themes*

Theme	Types of Experience
Waking up as either a gradual or sudden shift	Gradual: a feeling of “coming to” after being preoccupied Sudden: triggered by an external event Pleasurable and intensely meaningful Person asks, “Am I present?” Becoming being aware through “negative” experiences
Heightened experience of sensations, feelings, and thoughts	Intense awareness Heightened emotions Becoming being aware of negative sensations Seeing the mind in action Helps with sense of overwhelm
Connectedness, safety, appreciation, and gratitude	Sense of the wholeness and integrity of self and the space around oneself Shift in awareness that leads to feeling of connection with nature Strong feeling of connectedness in urban environments as well
Empathy, relationships, and meaning	Relationships with others more workable and meaningful Sense of self-compassion, resulting in new way of engaging others Increasing trust of other Words listened to by others
Creativity, flow, and effectiveness	Freedom of expression Knowing what to do next Sense of “letting go” Being connected with larger whole, leading to increased sense of effectiveness and choice

For others, being aware of negative experiences sometimes triggered a moment of waking up, as in this observation from Larry. “To be awake is not just to awaken to the higher states but also awaken to the negative. It is much more challenging to observe what is stressing emotionally, mentally, and physically.” He went on to describe his physical sensations. “The sharp feeling that comes in the gut, the tension in the legs, tightening in the mind, contracting of the heart.” These sensations, painful as they were, stimulated a moment of waking up for him.

Heightened awareness of bodily sensations, feelings, and thoughts. The second theme involved a heightened awareness of bodily sensations, feelings, and thoughts during the moment itself. Rona had this comment: “By focusing my attention on identifying moments of waking up, I get a better sense of my bodily sensations and realize faster and more intensely when I get overwhelmed by choices or stimuli.” In this example, Eva described her heightened sensory experience in a meeting with her business partners.

As I listened, the colors in the room and her clothes seemed to brighten and come into a strong focus. Everything about her was deepening and brightening. I could hear every-thing she and others were saying, and I could also contribute minimally to the conversation while remaining aware of the colors in the room and particularly everyone’s clothes.

An example of heightened emotional feeling was described by Miriam.

When my consciousness started to be “here and now” I felt that my emotions started to move fast. Suddenly I noticed that the tears were running down my face, but I was not sad. It was a nice, grateful feeling to be alive, to be here and now, surrounded [by] all my stuff: papers, books, notes and pictures, surrounded [by] all that chaos. I felt I was middle of my life, middle of something important which is difficult to describe.

In each case, remembering that they had committed to writing about these experiences brought in a discipline of self-awareness that was in the background and allowed them to see the process of waking up, in addition to the mental content or physical experiences that were there upon waking up. Larry described it this way.

The mind feels like a pile of icy snow at times—translucent to the light but surrounded by a sea of impressions: the stereo streaming an old Beatle’s song, my left thumb pointing upward for no apparent reason, the taste of oatmeal and yogurt in my mouth, the thought of my guest coming today from IBM in Abu Dhabi to speak to my ... class, what mini-lectures do I add to his sharing of IBM strategy and leadership. The flux of thoughts, feelings, and sensations keep pouring through the mind.

For Cynthia, heightened physical awareness helped her experience the process of waking up.

I feel the freezing wind in my face. I like that cold wind, it made me feel my skin, almost never I feel it and now I can perceive my skin. The sun illuminates the street; I’m walking on the sunny side, but when I walk into the shadow, it feels different, cold. This seems so obvious to me, but realizing that hardly ever do I enjoy feeling the difference between walking in the shadow and on the sunny side of the street makes me feel that I’m enjoying a whole new experience. I take my time while walking in the shadow: I feel how my pants feel colder, and my body feels the wind. Walking in the sun feels warm, and the wind in my legs feels nice, refreshing.

Connectedness, safety, appreciation, and gratitude. The third theme was about the experience of connectedness, safety, appreciation, and gratitude that participants felt during the moments of waking up.

At one point Rona was sitting at her desk, working on a grant, when she looked up and noticed the snow reflecting in the bright sunlight and some deer right in front of my window. They look me straight in the eye, it is an honest look. The peace and the beauty of nature remind me why I am here.

Being connected with themselves helped participants feel connected with the larger world.

Many participants described a strong feeling of connectedness in urban environments as well and how this experience was related to their work. Here is an excerpt from Miriam.

Suddenly I’m realizing that “everything is connected to everything.” The beautiful sky with the dark colors of sun setting (which is almost over), fast clouds rushing through the horizon, the sounds of other passengers when they’re talking to their mobile phones and organizing [the] coming weekend with their friends and lovers.

Georgia described a heightened sense of clarity both external and internal. “In doing this process of paying attention to the moments, of noticing the relationship between my state and the environment, it helps me have a sense of the wholeness, the integrity of me and the space around me.” Often this extended to the workplace as well, as suggested by Michelle’s comment:

I am working on a strategy document, and suddenly I feel exactly the same as I did in yoga this morning. ... My body and my work has [sic] become the same. There is no difference. Just a feeling of wholeness.

Empathy, relationships, and meaning. Overall, participants reported that they were more empathic, and their relationships with others seemed more workable and meaningful during and after a moment of waking up. The shift often began with an experience of self-compassion that resulted in a different way of engaging others. Aaron described the impact of taking a deep breath and relaxing.

I then took another deep breath. This time I could sense that my body became less tense and I was more ready to read the email again. To my surprise, I found this time the email did not appear to be as antagonistic as the first reading, and I became more receptive to what my ... [student] was trying to tell me in the email.

Greta too focused on breath as a source of becoming present, both alone and with students. “Pausing to breathe for just a few short moments awakened in me my sense of calling and delight.” She explored various ways that breath helped her to feel connected with others and sense life as meaningful. Both the role of breathing and the importance

of being connected are apparent in her comments. “My awakening moments this month come from conversations with former students who expressed deep appreciation for my contribution to their lives and development...”

During a conversation with a client, Ariele had a sudden experience of waking up and a feeling of spaciousness in her interaction. She also perceived a feeling of trust developing between her client and herself.

Suddenly I felt that there was more space for me to hear what my client had to say. Instead of anticipating his comment, I was able to wait to hear what he would actually say. I noticed the tension in his face and shoulders and felt empathy for him and the difficulty he was experiencing at work . . . I felt that he was beginning to trust me and was opening up more in our conversation.

Michelle brought this into her teaching and found that her students too seemed to become more present.

I am teaching a class. I have prepared a two hour lecture, but halfway through, the students are becoming really engaged and asking amazing questions. I feel the energy in the room rising; I can see how they step out of the passive, listening mood, into the active, participative mood. Their eyes and postures are changing. . . . It is like a . . . dance in the classroom, something is happening. I decide to skip half my lecture and let the students discuss in groups instead. They seem very happy and engaged.

Creativity, flow, and effectiveness. Another frequently mentioned theme in the participants’ notes was a sense of returning to one’s creative self and inventive flow in a moment of waking up. This may be similar to Csikszentmihályi’s (1990/2008) flow state. Mind, body, and spirit were all in alignment: Participants described knowing just what to do next and feeling a freedom of expression and heightened sense of awareness. Eva gave a specific example of this occurring as she was giving a talk during a conference.

As I began to speak I felt connected with the audience, was able to speak primarily without my notes, and felt “in flow”. The words came, I ad-libbed and even told two jokes which were actually laughed at! . . . I shared from the heart and I could tell that the audience was with me.

Participants described their willingness to “let go and let come” so that something new could emerge. (This terminology comes from Theory U; see Scharmer, 2009 and the description in the Discussion Section.) The new came into being by letting go of old intentions and refocusing attention on an emerging future identity and purposes. As Eliza said, “In the process of sharing these past experiences, we had been able to let go of them . . . It made for a feeling of great cohesion and becoming part of a larger whole.” Elizabeth described her experience this way,

I felt so peaceful. I am in the middle of facing my fears. And there I am, all of a sudden. I feel how calm it is inside the storm. I regained trust in everything. Whatever will be, I will be here and face that.

Ariele described her experience of effectiveness and choice as she was able to see the bigger picture and not get caught up in personal concerns.

I was so grateful that I was awake to my feelings in the moment and was able to suspend actions until I could see the one that would actually help the situation instead of the one that would help me feel better about myself.

Discussion and Implications

Having described what we gleaned by a phenomenological reading of the participants’ comments, we now discuss the perceptions we had as a research team in considering the implications of the data for leadership and work, as well as for first-person research on awareness.

The Impact on Others and on Work

Participating in the waking up process led to distinct insights about oneself and one’s work. Many participants commented on the quality of interaction among people in their organizations. For example, Elizabeth wrote,

I have been in the middle of a conflict in our organization. . . . But how did we end up to this situation where we are not talking to our colleagues? I have just realized that when we said that everyone is equal and we will work together and find a common ground, we actually meant “it just takes a bit of time until they think like us. Because, you know, we know better.”

Frank commented on an interaction at work—a chance meeting with a co-worker whose actions had prevented him from obtaining a position he wanted. As they talked, he saw the personal side of her, and suddenly his sense of resentment and dislike evaporated.

People understood more deeply their typical attitudes and emotions in the challenging situations and encounters in their work fields. They “woke up” and saw a new point of view, new perceptions, ideas, and solutions for work. Many of them described these changes as a sudden, intuitive act like “knowing what to do.” Because we are interested in the relationship of such moments to the process of presencing, as developed by Scharmer in *Theory U* (Scharmer, 2009; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013), we found it helpful to notice the parallel between how participants described their new awareness, how it influenced their behavior, and the U curve, which is a framework for describing how people move through change. In both our research data and the U curve, people notice, pause deeply to reflect, and emerge with insights that lead to rapid action or changes in behavior.

Aware moments at work seemed to improve relationships and communication with colleagues, clients, and students. The impact was bidirectional. Many participants described how it was easier to feel empathy after the waking up moments and to build authentic encounters or real dialogues. For example, as Cassandra wrote,

I felt bad and went and sat with her and really was present listening to her with all my senses. I was feeling my whole self, being present, breathing normally and really being attuned to what was happening to me, to my colleague and to the dynamic between the two of us. She thanked me for devoting time to her, and I was not agitated anymore and felt much more relaxed.

As in the U process, the moments at work often connected to moments of accepting the current challenging situation or person and letting go of the old ways of thinking or acting. At that moment when the energy shifted—as is described by Theory U (Scharmer, 2009)—the energy increased, suddenly expanding the space for action. As Michelle wrote:

I am planning my work week, when suddenly a feeling of space appears. Instead of just writing long lists of things to do, I start writing them in my schedule. It is a concrete action, but also a very physical experience, as if something is opening up. I breathe more easily. It feels like my entire upper body opens up, as if my rib cage grows. I feel lighter.

Some of the participants described their “new space” and connection as kind of flow or unity. They were not separate from the other person; they felt they could deeply understand another’s point of view or a bigger picture of the whole situation. Such experiences were a relief for many, leading them to a better quality of collaborating and working with others. People enjoyed and felt gratitude for their work. They spoke of it being easier to relax, feel in a flow, and control reactions to stress. Most of the participants commented that experimenting with such moments at work helped them to approach work more holistically and connect better with people.

Relationship of Waking Up Moments to Traditional Buddhist Mindfulness Practice

Because there has been considerable discussion in the literature about the relationship between so-called “Western” mindfulness and more traditional Buddhist practices (see Purser & Milillo, 2014, as well as Grossman & Van Dam, 2011), we coded the first person comments to see how what participants described compared with traditional mindfulness practices.

Seeing oneself in the middle of action. Typically, mindfulness students are trained in a sequence of steps to pay attention to various aspects of experience. Often, they are taught to attend to their breathing in order to focus and calm their minds. They are taught various types of meditation (see good basic descriptions in Mingyur Rinpoche, 2007; Sogyal Rinpoche, 2009; Tsoknyi Rinpoche, 2012) or are talked through forms of practice, mostly sitting still for extended periods of time.

In contrast, the participants in this study were encouraged to seek moments when they noticed themselves to be more awake in the general context of work. Whereas typically Westerners begin meditating to calm themselves, our participants sought instead to experiment with themselves, which is a different mindset, and to focus on being *awake* as a sensitizing concept, as compared with being *mindful* or *calm*. How do these differ? By looking at the settings and moments, which were quite varied, and going back to the experience itself, as described above, it seems like mindfulness seems to bring a steadiness, whereas waking up is intentionally active—a transition from one state to another. The difference is perhaps the distinction between a state or trait and an action. Given that we and others are interested in applications of awareness for leaders in action, this distinction may be important.

Some chose to notice moments while driving and sensed the speed, danger, and the relationship between movement and stillness. As Georgia commented,

there's pressure, and there's cars going very fast around me and a situation that everybody is in everyday and is actually completely dangerous—but we all do it. And life is good and somehow all these things combined to a very very odd taste, that's why I compare it to coffee.

Whereas in traditional practice, one would be sitting *after* driving in a more formal practice, this approach invited participants to notice or wake up while engaged in everyday activities. This seems to provide a vivid picture of the array of types of experiences that people who are leaders or professionals may experience. Rather than focusing on trying to be calm or attend to breathing, they are simply “coming to” and paying attention to experiences in coffee shops, meetings, walking in cities, riding on trains or buses, and teaching. Sometimes there is a sense that what is usually considered ordinary is actually dangerous, like the speed at which cars and people intermix in cities. At other times some find themselves smiling as they see, while it is happening, how their beliefs about themselves are stirring up their own anxiety.

Many commented about feeling that life was good, despite things not working as they wished. Consciously noticing these moments seemed to aid in sensing a fundamental goodness in life and people, not as a generality or belief, but as something palpably present in experiences. For example, as Miriam said about a trip to work,

I stepped out from the train in [the city] ... and noticed the rhythm of the capital. It was fast. Everybody was walking much faster than me; they were going somewhere they have to hurry. I didn't. I was enjoying my private peace inside the hurrying crowd. I felt myself comfortable and large (in a mental way) opposite than usually when I arrive to [the city]....

Whether in classrooms, meetings, or public transport, many comments showed how the participants felt a sense of presence and proportion and of greater connection with those they were leading, teaching, or listening to.

Being aware of what the mind is actually doing. Rather than simply “doing” and then reflecting later or not at all, these participants noticed how their minds worked in the middle of the doing. They sensed how they were becoming anxious, how they were enacting tiredness, how they were tracking others' words. Often this came with a heightened acuity or capacity to notice small distinctions and differences.

As mentioned above, Larry referred to his mind feeling “like a pile of icy snow at times—translucent to the light but surrounded by a sea of impressions.” Damien said, “My mind is like an eel slipping all the time? How do you manage an eel?” Georgia saw her mind as feeling like a lively puppy, delighting in everything almost randomly at times, enjoying the moment-to-moment tastes and smells. She also described how her mind was when working, when it was grasping at things that do not exist – trying to “hold on” to concepts and use words to make them clear to others.

I'm grasping onto and holding something else and there was the sense of great delight in this grasping, almost as if the concepts were things, but with great clarity and directness, so a kind of alacrity and quickness and precision. It almost seems like... like what am I trying to say, I want to say like a martial art, but not a flowing one, one with kicks and grabs and that when I am simply sitting, my mind is trying to sense the space between things, the emptiness, the things that do not move. They're two very different modes....

In other words, she noticed three different modes of functioning in her mind: playful puppy, grasping and sharp kicks, and sensing space.

Although we cannot be sure, given the small number of people who self-selected into this action research project, it seems that those with more experience in meditation may have tended to more often describe waking up moments in the context of emotionally challenging situations and a busy work life. As previously mentioned, we divided the total group of participants into three categories: those with 0 through 3 years of experience with some type of awareness practices, those with 4 through 9 years of experience, and those with 10 or more years of experience. Although participants from all three groups described the moments similarly, those with longer experience in an awareness practice more often discussed seeing themselves in the middle of action, as compared with in stillness; being aware of what the mind was actually doing instead of just doing it, and the value of documenting these moments, as compared with simply experiencing them. They also seemed to be more articulate in describing the nature of open awareness: the process of letting thoughts come and go, whereas those with less experience more often focused on specific thoughts and concepts and reflected upon these, rather than on the process of awareness itself.

The value of documenting these moments. Finally, this practice intrinsically involved contemplating on experiences and documenting them, rather than simply having them and letting them go. Although the documenting was not done out of any intention to ask participants to hold onto their experience, documenting something holds it

in a different manner, simply by virtue of writing it down or speaking it—gives it a lasting quality, which of course is the opposite of what a moment of waking up is otherwise, as it is so transient or ephemeral.

This is quite distinct from meditative or mindfulness practice, which usually involves letting go of discursiveness and tuning into experience. We know of no traditional practices that involve documenting the process. Several participants commented explicitly about this. Simone wrote, “These ‘moments’ of awakening come and go, but unless we write them down and then assimilate them into our being, their transformative impact is lost.” Thus, this practice is both more open than traditional mindfulness, as it requires no training but instead encourages the mind to look in a certain way at itself and events, yet perhaps it has a more constraining aspect, as it requires the participants to write or speak, describing what they experience. Such writing or dictation of notes encourages reflection on the experience, so perhaps bridges open awareness and contemplative practices, yielding a novel kind of experience.

Effect on Burnout and Stress

Another important finding was the way in which participants reacted to feelings of stress when faced with a difficult task. For many, the experience of stress evoked a response of increased self-awareness: They noticed that their anxiety level was rising. When they accepted the feeling of stress, rather than resisting it, this prevented the level of stress from spinning out of control. Even when faced with physical danger, the same pattern of remaining calm and focused in a difficult situation was prevalent. Most participants expressed anxiety, but were able to accept it. They were awake to their resilience, their stamina to move beyond being “stuck” in the experience of feeling stressed.

This capacity to defuse anxiety has implications for burnout. Although most people experience burnout as resulting from stress that has been building up for long periods of time, and there is no reason that they would have had less pressures than others, our participants rarely mentioned burnout. There was one poignant exception, as expressed by one of the participants, who was not able to see the person she loved deteriorate in health and appearance without being affected. She wrote that she felt as though she had a “heavy blanket” on her shoulders that she could not move beyond. This remains an exception to the ways in which most participants experienced stress, but it is worth pointing out that not all stresses can be lifted, not all anxieties resolved.

Simone offered an illuminating reflection for ways in which people may prevent burnout:

Most people I know are trying to do too much. Why do we take on too much? I think I take on too much as the opportunities feed my ego. If that is true for me, then becoming less ego-driven may be key to finding balance. There is always work that we have to do ... that for which we have “contracted” for at work, with family, or with friends... If we want to do things well, and stay “well,” i.e. healthy, then we need to do less.

Such reflections, connected with moments of waking up, suggested to us that the traditional Buddhist connection of awareness practices with what is called sustaining the “view”—a sense of larger perspectives, almost like going up to the highest place one can find within one’s self and then observing life—emerged for many participants through this practice. Such a learning about how to find such higher ground within oneself hints at the kinds of thoughtful wisdom that these moments produced for the participants.

Implications for Leadership, Research, and Practice

Many comments throughout the data shed light on the implications for leadership. Although we began the study believing that being awake might matter for leaders, we tried to bracket this belief and look concretely into the participants’ actual circumstances, to discern what *they* saw about leadership and waking up.

Leadership, Pain, and Humility

The study suggested that the waking up practice might help leaders become more aware of the pain in their organizations in a positive way, so as to acknowledge its reality rather than pretend it doesn’t exist. Beyond this, it may help leaders release what is often called “old baggage” in leadership development sessions, which tends to be difficult to do. It may help leaders operate more out of what is actually happening in the present in their organization, rather than being shadowed by demons of the past:

Ariele experienced what she described as “an incredible wake-up call.” She saw that there was much more pain involved on all sides of a conflict than she had realized.

For me it was an incredible wake-up call about the importance of making it OK for people to reveal their personal feelings about things and not to just be stoic and “leaderly.” The conversation went much better after that and we came up with some good solutions for how to present the issues and make requests and offers rather than just trying to control or punish the people involved.

Another observation about pain came from Eliza, who discovered that by allowing herself to feel the pain of the past and talk about with colleagues who were part of it – it dissolved. “In the process of sharing these past experiences, we had been able to let go of them. Our present became more open, less shadowed by past difficulties. It was a very special experience.”

This connected with observations from Cynthia, Georgia, Miriam, Eva, and Aaron that they saw how they were the “same”—that there was no gap between themselves and those they were leading or teaching in these moments, in a very positive way. It reminded us of the way a noted spiritual leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, often opens his public talks: “We same.” As his main English translator Thupten Jinpa (2012) wrote, when asked to describe the Dalai Lama as a leader, his humility and his belief that all people are fundamentally equal stand out above all other characteristics. “This belief in the absolute equality of beings when it comes to our fundamental human nature is a very important part of his leadership and who he is” (Jinpa, 2012, pp. 40-41). If this practice can bring people to sense their interconnectedness with others similarly to the way the Dalai Lama does, it seems worth exploring further.

A Powerful Sense of Connectedness and Time

Time pressures diminished when the participants made space for waking up moments. The sense of having to operate at the same speed as those around one diminished, as was mentioned by Miriam (above). Cynthia commented that she simply lost any sense of time pressure, while Eva commented that she felt a greater feeling of safety and freedom to take action without feeling pressured to act. She had to let go of her desire to attain a particular leadership position. In doing so, she found that she felt at ease and more connected with the universe.

Gradually the most incredible sense of relief filled me and I felt as if I was being held, literally held, and lulled and kept safe. It was almost overwhelming and I felt tearful with the grace and loveliness of it. I felt exquisitely safe and held and a knowing arose that despite all my attempts to gain this role, it was not meant to be and that I just needed to trust and to slow and to accept that it was OK.

These pauses helped some to sense that they had a purpose and that they were able to connect with it, something very important for leaders.

They gained a sense of rootedness, with two comparing themselves to trees. Miriam saw that leaders needed “the attitude of a tree”:

I looked at the trees, long firs, understanding my place on the Earth. Same time I could understand what is a tree, what is the “attitude of a tree”. The Attitude of a Tree is just breathing the universe and light, giving away “my best” through the roots, leaves, and fruits....spreading my strength and calmness and flexibility...

Eliza found that by connecting with a tree when she was overtired from hard mental work, her focus and energy returned.

While I was grading class finals, I was particularly tired from the amount of work that I was caught up in during the semester. Suddenly, I looked out through my study window, and saw a gorgeous tree, decked out in flaming autumn colors: red, orange, gold. The tree just stood there, splendid, adorned. My spirit was deeply refreshed, and I completed my grading, energy renewed. Suddenly, the work I was focused on spoke meaningfully to me, and my spirit was restored.

Eva has a role that often involves speaking before hundreds of people. She felt that using the waking up approach within meetings let her have more influence, while being at ease, both to not speak too much, not be pushy, and also to give public talks that magnetized listeners. She found that she was more able to listen to herself, in the middle of speaking with constituents, and respond with what was more helpful in the situation.

In the middle of a conversation with a key stakeholder ... I suddenly became aware of myself and what I was saying. It was as if I was witnessing myself from outside. I could “see” my negativity in the conversation, and as I spoke I felt “wrong” as if I had woken up to something which was now staring me in the face, but a moment earlier I had been unaware of. ... I returned to the conversation very differently. On reflection I can see that I was reading her body language and responding to that, but it was the suddenness of the seeing and sense of witnessing myself that struck me most. ... It left me feeling more relaxed and

less burdened by the ongoing situation, and I could see that the other person felt more comfortable and responsive to me.

These comments raise a possibility that by focusing on waking up, leaders may feel more connected with people, reduce the sense of time pressure which tends to be acute for most leaders today, and be able both to root themselves more deeply and listen to the pain that is inevitable in all organizations.

Implications for Research and Practice

It became clear to us that people responded in a variety of ways to the experiment of being asked to notice waking up, which suggests that it is a process that may be more useful for some leaders than others. From the start, participants responded differently from one another to our initial guidelines for the study. For many of them, the mere invitation to be present and “wake up” was sufficient, but for a few it was not. Most of those who completed the process immediately began noticing and reflecting on experience, but two opted instead to buy and read books on mindfulness, and some asked for more detailed instructions. For a few, the practice made painfully apparent the gap between how they wanted their lives to be and how they were. For example, although many participants noticed that stress and pressure could lead to moments of waking up, a few saw the practice as something that could only be done in nature or when not under stress. Some in the former group are long-time practitioners, but some are not, so that is not the differentiating factor. In a study of the interview data, Cortés Urrutia (2016) independently concluded that the variations in response did not appear to be related to differences in length of experience in meditation or awareness practices. While the participants come from and work in different parts of the world, Cortés Urrutia (2016) looked carefully at the data in this regard and concluded that national culture did not play a deciding role in this group, although of course the numbers are too small to generalize.

A further review of the data when sorted by practice categories suggests that some people, regardless of their background or lack of it in awareness practice, are able to immediately let their minds rest in open awareness, whereas others tend to describe the activities they are involved in or write a contemplation on a theme—in other words, they do not just let their minds rest and be present to experience, which was the intention. We do not know what makes for such differences in the way that people are able to let their minds rest in the present without actively thinking. Because one intention of this action research project is to see whether this may be a useful way to develop leaders’ awareness and presence in assorted work settings and populations, some of the authors are exploring this question through further action research studies.

It does seem that the process of noticing waking up moments only works for those willing to engage with it. The task, as approached in this project, requires a certain willingness to face ambiguity and create one’s own process. Not everyone wishes to do this. Because the observations had to be sustained over several weeks, those who completed it seemed able to handle both a certain amount of ambiguity and the need to apply self-discipline: This combination of underlying skills may be a factor in determining those for whom the process will have most impact. Finally, since all of the note-taking and interviews were done in English even though this was an international project, perhaps we’d discover different patterns if future iterations encouraged people to record their observations in their native language. It may be that although the participants came from 10 countries on four continents, cultural differences may be less among people who are well-enough versed in English to conduct such activities in English, whereas if there were a larger sample and they used any language they wished, there might perhaps be more culturally-rooted differences.

With regard to practice implications, major growth has been taking place over the last 10 years in including contemplative practice as part of education in many fields. This is shown by the creation of The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) in 2008 and its new (2013) peer-reviewed journal, *The Journal of Contemplative Inquiry* and the journal *Mindfulness*, launched in 2010. In this context, we see potential for building on this project in a variety of settings. We continue to believe that the notion of focusing on the intention to wake up and be present holds promise for a secular practice that is easy to incorporate into an active life without extensive time set aside for trainings or involvement in a particular spiritual tradition. Since some of those who participated did so at the invitation of one participant who decided to incorporate it into her teaching, we have reason to suspect that others can use the approach relatively easily in their teaching or consulting.

Despite increasing discussion among consultants, scholars, and leaders of the potential outcomes of being more mindful or aware at work, as recently as 2013, mindfulness researchers continued to state that empirical research in this area remained limited (Dane, 2013; Dane & Brummel, 2013; Hülshager, et al., 2013). While Waddock and Steckler’s (2009, 2013) intriguing study of “difference makers” that was presented at the Academy of Management Annual Meeting in 2009 showed the importance for successful entrepreneurs of “some combination of *practices* integrating *mind, body, spirit and heart,*” few have followed up on their line of research. Having

conducted the research described in this article, it seems evident that the cultivation of moment-to-moment awareness has the power to evoke transformational shifts in certain types of people under some circumstances. This leaves us with the intriguing questions: “With which people? And under what circumstances?”

One way to begin to answer these questions is suggested by two studies that sought to develop paths of practice for mindful or contemplative leaders. Rakoff (2010) studied the impact of daily somatic awareness practices on three abilities that he considered to be intrinsic to leadership: the capacity to focus, to maintain authentic relationships, and to minimize stress. His focus on this came both from his experience and from a thorough review of various somatic practices that led him to conclude that few systems of leader development practices addressed “habitual tendencies of the body and mind relating to attention, connection, and tension/stress” (p. 57). The sole practice system that did what he sought had been developed by a student of the founder of *aikido*. Based on Tohei’s aikido-based system, Rakoff trained five participants in seven practices for developing *ki* energy, meeting weekly with each and monitoring their progress over a period of 12 weeks. The results showed improvement in 360 degree ratings and in their self-assessment of their capability as leaders (p. 107). Similar in design, Romano (2014) trained six study participants to pay attention to breath, observe their own and others’ behaviors, suspend judgments, and practice “opening” for 10 to 12 weeks in order to address the themes of stillness, movement, and relational practices. He too met weekly with all participants as a coach. Both studies included detailed measures for the participants to monitor their own participation and for tracking this by the researcher. Both generated measurable positive results.

Romano (2014) noted, as we have, that while there is considerable research on formal mindfulness or meditation practice and its impact, “few studies show the efficacy of how mindfulness can be practiced outside of structured bounds” (p. 14). Both researchers commented, as we have, on the relative lack of qualitative research on mindfulness. These studies contrast with ours, in that we did not provide training, instead seeking to explore what is possible when people are invited to rely on their own ability to be mindful or attentive and simply remind them to do so. Ours was inherently collaborative, whereas these two studies situated the researcher in a central role of content or process authority as well as researcher. Finally, although both researchers gathered some qualitative data, they were more interested in the impact of the practices on pre-determined measures, whereas we were more interested in the quality of the process that we called *waking up*, so focused on the way that the participants conceptualized and spoke or wrote about their experiences. We were intrigued by the nature of people’s awareness of themselves and how being invited to wake up might influence this, rather than aiming for a pre-determined result that could be measured and tracked from outside.

Nonetheless, having seen their thorough reports of their studies and results, it might be interesting to combine some minimal focused practice on breath and somatic awareness into our design, as this might make it easier for those who want more direction and guidance to remain with the practice. We are interested in retaining a design that leaves choice to the participants, rather than one that trains them and measures the impact of the practices, yet by introducing the project with discussion and experience of breath and its impact on thinking and action, we might support more participants in making greater discoveries about waking up to the moment. Traditional mindfulness practices assume that the meditator has already been trained in calming his or her mind through focusing on the breath, so incorporating such a preliminary practice into our design might be useful for future research. Finally, it is intriguing to note that of three suggestions that Romano (2014) developed as a starting place for people wishing to develop as mindful leaders, while the first related to breathing and the second to asking “powerful questions” (p. 311), the third was to “uncover everyday moments” (p. 315)—which is surprisingly similar to our aim.

Conclusion

Exploring how to increase people’s focus on being present at work, both alone and with others, seems to have promise, based on our study. Although increasing research is being conducted on mindfulness training and its impact (see Reams, Gunnlaugson, & Reams, 2014), longtime meditators do not necessarily act mindfully as leaders. Mindfulness practice does not inevitably lead to becoming more mindful in the way one interacts with people or leads them, so our thought was that if professors, consultants, and leaders were invited to experiment with remembering to *wake up* in the context of their work, such an experiment might support them in actively bringing awareness into their work. An experiment conducted by Goldman Schuyler in a graduate course with a variant on the process used here was quite impactful as assessed by student reflection papers: Many of the students were able to describe quite vivid experiences of becoming present and subsequently experienced meaningful shifts in their behavior.

We hope that this analysis suggests how easy and practical it may be to introduce such practices into the workplace, without a need for extensive and expensive training or deep personal commitment to a contemplative tradition. As Varela suggested, bringing people’s attention to their experience, in the moment, may indeed be a key

to being less blind to the quality of our lives and, in the spirit of action research, to then acting from new perspectives.

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