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Prepare for being unprepared

Learning About Collective Leadership, Change Readiness, and Mindful Organizing From an Extreme Case Study of Rowing Across the Atlantic

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1. Introduction

Leadership is a complex, multifaceted concept. Like a diamond that shines in different ways, dependent on which angle you look at it, leadership can be defined in a myriad of ways.

In this chapter, we explore leadership as a collective phenomenon that arises when individuals and teams interact in specific goal-oriented ways (Gronn, 2002) and define leadership as persuading the collective to take responsibility for collective problems (Grint, 2010b) Ours is therefore an exploration of "leadership in the plural" (Denis et al., 2012, p. 211), investigating how leadership emerges and wanes as a collective capability shaped by multiple agents – multiple *leaders* – in organizational situations. Leadership is needed especially when teams face unknown problems, and we need leadership to reduce the anxiety felt in the team when facing the unknown (Grint, 2010a).

This is a case study of leadership *in extremis* – empirical research in an extreme setting that may provide particularly rich insights for management, often overlooked or less clearly discernible in more ordinary settings (Riesman & Becker, 2009). Important management and leadership insights can sometimes be seen more clearly in extreme case research than in ordinary work life (Stinchcombe, 2005).

In particular, we investigate how mindful organizing (MO), a team's collective capacity to detect and correct problems and to adapt to unexpected challenges (Sutcliffe et al., 2016) may inform a critical link between leadership and change. We do this by examining evidence from a case study of extreme collective leadership in action: Four courageous men who rowed more than 3,000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean in a charity competition over the course of 37 days. Scholars have long argued that MO is not a static capacity in a team or organization. Instead, it "varies over time and people, and requires ongoing effort to sustain and rebuild it" (Rerup, 2005, p. 452).

As our data shows, MO is indeed dynamic: it ebbs and flows, just like the Atlantic that these four brave men crossed for this extreme challenge, with minimal support from the outside world. Our data furthermore indicates that MO arises in particular when team members focus their attention in strategic, interpersonal ways, aware of the drivers and needs of each team member. This strategic, *people focused* awareness is more subtle and necessitates a more advanced level of collective leadership than a more conventional or *task focused* mode of operating in the face of unexpected stressors. When this advanced level of collective leadership is present, the team can respond resiliently to unexpected challenges. Conversely, stressors and conflicts remain unresolved when the team's awareness remains focused at task level.

We situate our case study at the theoretical intersection between leadership and change, linked through the MO literature. We then provide an outline of the case study, its setting and its main protagonists, followed by a discussion of the study's key findings, before outlining the theoretical and practical contribution of this work.

2. Change and MO

Change is at the heart of leadership, both individually and collectively. We therefore conceptualise leadership as capacity to generate change at individual and collective levels – for what purpose? To generate change that improves the status quo.

What makes people ready for change? Readiness for change is about emotional agreement with any proposed change in status quo, at individual, interpersonal, and collective levels (Holt et al., 2007). Holt et al. (2007) define readiness for change as a comprehensive attitude shaped not only by individuals' characteristics, judgments, and opinions, but also by the content of what is to be changed, the process of how the change is implemented, and the context in which the change occurs.

The multi-level nature of change readiness is often ignored in the change debate, which is unfortunate as both individually-generated cues (e.g., personal perceptions) and situational cues (perceptions about what others' attitudes and behaviours mean) impact the readiness that a person or group experience towards any proposed change (Rafferty et al., 2013). Every reader will have experienced the emotional contagion (Barsade, 2002) that can dramatically influence thoughts, feelings, and actions in work teams, and that can change agreement with a proposal or initiative into disagreement, sometimes in an instant.

Change readiness is inextricably linked to culture, and the old adage "culture eats strategy for breakfast" is of central importance here: *any* change strategy that ignores the culture shaping individual, interpersonal, and collective behaviours will not be around for long.

The multi-level nature of a related workplace construct is also often ignored by scientists and practitioners alike: mindfulness in organizations. Management scientists have shown that mindfulness in organizations is a cross-level concept that includes not only intrapsychic processes of individual mindfulness but also social processes related to collective mindfulness, and that mindfulness is induced through meditative as well as non-meditative processes (Sutcliffe et al., 2016). Examples of non-meditative, social, or contextual mindfulness processes are reflective dialog between individuals and work groups, workplace redesign, and other structural initiatives. While many workplace mindfulness experts generally conflate mindfulness with meditation, Sutcliffe et al., (2016) argue that mindfulness at work is embedded predominantly in interpersonal interactions and relationships.

Awareness is at the heart of mindfulness, both individually and collectively. We therefore conceptualise mindfulness in organizations as capacity to generate awareness at individual and collective levels – for what purpose? To change our relationship with the status quo.

Changing our relationship with the status quo means managing especially stressful situations differently. There is considerable evidence indicating that 'intrapsychic' mindfulness training[1] helps individuals manage stress better, especially in clinical and mental health settings (Brown et al., 2007; Creswell, 2017). This evidence is largely based on the well-known Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program developed by (Kabat-zinn, 1990).

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[1] i.e., focused on individuals' inner world, rather than on social or interpersonal processes

It is perhaps less well-known that there is also substantial evidence suggesting that collective mindfulness helps organizations manage especially unexpected – stressful – challenges better (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2012; Weick et al., 1999; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006). Collective mindfulness is defined as the "'capacity of groups and individuals to be acutely aware of significant details, to notice errors in the making, and to have the shared expertise and freedom to act on what they notice" (Weick et al., 2000, p. 32). In other words, employees acting mindfully on a collective scale is beneficial for organizations because they are able to anticipate, detect, and appropriately respond to unexpected, stressful problems (Vogus et al., 2014; Weick et al., 1999). Putting individual and collective mindfulness together, this means that the ultimate aim of becoming mindfully aware of the status quo which individuals and teams find themselves in is individual and collective stress management.

This, in turn, is an enabler for leadership and change because if the ultimate aim of leadership is to generate change that improves the status quo, then the awareness generated through individual and collective mindfulness enables us to change our relationship with the status quo, in order to ultimately improve it.

Importantly, collective mindfulness is not the same as the sum of several individuals' personal levels of mindfulness. In contrast to individual mindfulness, collective mindfulness is not viewed as an intrapsychic process or even an aggregation of intrapsychic processes. Instead, collective mindfulness arises out of specific social practices, actions, and communication patterns that liken the "collective mind" of a group of individuals who organize mindfully to a flock of birds flying in unison, constantly paying attention not only to their own direction, but also to every other member of the flock, and constantly aligning individual action with the overall direction of the collective (Weick & Roberts, 1993). Because collective mindfulness is enacted through a dynamic process of social action and interaction, it is also referred to as *mindful organizing* (MO; Sutcliffe et al., 2016), to emphasize its non-static, ever-evolving nature.

Originally, the concept of MO was developed to explain how High-Reliability Organizations (HROs) develop capacity to avoid catastrophic failure and perform in nearly error-free ways despite operating in extreme, stressful conditions, however, its scope has expanded to also apply to teams and organizations that are capable of being aware of the status quo in order to improve it, refusing to operate on "auto pilot" (Fiol & O'Connor, 2003; Sutcliffe et al., 2016).

While MO may appear to align closely with standard management practice, Weick et al. emphasise that "interpersonal skills are just as important in HROs as are technical skills" (Weick et al., 1999; p. 59). In addition, scholars argue that MO enables collective capability and organizational learning in a paradigm that starkly differs from traditional management practice (Gebauer, 2013), mediating for example lower turnover rates (Vogus et al., 2014). This is achieved by an interpersonal mind-set of 'other-orientation': teams who organize mindfully "are motivated to work for the benefit of others and are more receptive to others' perspectives and incorporate those perspectives into their work" (Vogus et al., 2014, p. 592). The origin of this interpersonal mind-set stems from a prosocial motivation on the one hand, i.e. "the desire to expend effort to benefit others" (Grant, 2008, as cited in Vogus et al., 2014, p.592) – and the capacity to be emotionally ambivalent – that is, capable of experiencing positive and negative emotions at the same time, for example feeling hope as well as doubt (Vogus et al., 2014). As Weick and Roberts argued in their (1993) study, the result of such MO is that team members adapt their actions to the demands of the team context – in the same way as when one bird falls behind in a flock of geese flying South, the rest of the flock slows down too, so that no one is left behind.

Benefits of MO include greater innovation (Vogus & Welbourne, 2003) improved quality, safety, and reliability (e.g., Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2007), more effective resource allocation (Wilson et al., 2011), and quantifiable hospital cost savings of between $169,000-$1,000,000 per year (Vogus et al., 2014).

Five hallmark routines constitute MO, collectively generating a HRO: 1) Sensitivity to Operations; 2) Preoccupation with Failure; 3) Reluctance to Simplify; 4) Commitment to Resilience; and 5) Deference to Expertise (Weick et al., 2000).

2.1 Sensitivity to Operations (Situational Awareness)

Sensitivity to Operations is a defining principle of MO which refers to situational awareness and ability to see the 'bigger picture' of operations (Enya et al., 2019). As described by Weick et al. (1999, p.44) "Situation awareness dimensions depends on the sharing of information and interpretations between individuals". A capacity to collectively pay attention to emerging events and be empowered to act accordingly (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2012; Weick et al., 1999). In successful HROs, front-line staff are sought out for their opinions and insights to maintain a thorough operational understanding. Communicating and sharing of information, providing everyone with a heightened sensitivity to changes and abnormalities in daily routines (Endsley, 1995; Klockner, 2017). These daily, or even moment-to-moment, changes in operational routines include information about events and situations as well as the thoughts, feelings, and shifting moods of team members.

2.2 Preoccupation with Failure (Welcoming Difficulty)

Vogus et al. (1999) describe this facet of MO as paying attention to and acting on specific hazards or problems. Successful, reliable organizations will do this by "articulating the mistakes you don't want to make" (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2012, p.725). In essence, this is a collective routine that demonstrates that difficulty is welcome in the team or organization. Rather than shying away from openly addressing problems in the making or thoroughly reflecting on past mistakes, team members deliberately focus on where things go wrong, which in turn increases their ability to control future hazards. Ignoring failures and mistakes often lead to the accumulation of smaller issues (Garvin, 1997), which eventually develop into larger-scale problems; hence successful HROs reframe what "failure" means to the organization and encourage the reporting of problems and mistakes (Vendelø & Rerup, 2020).

2.3 Reluctance to Simplify (Interpretations)

According to Chris Argyris's (1982) Ladder of Inference, it is human nature to make assumptions based on the data presented to us. It creates the foundation upon which we automatically make interpretations, draw conclusions, and which we eventually use to guide our decision making and action (McArthur, 2014). Simplified interpretations make teams liable to adopt solutions to problems that are not fit for purpose. It is common for organizations to simplify the conclusions they draw of situations, to more efficiently manage complicated tasks; one striking difference between traditional organizations and HROs is that the latter tend to have a general openness to renewal, revision and rejection of standard procedures (Vendelø & Rerup, 2020). Through continuous questioning and deliberate reflection, successful HROs avoid assumption making, which prevents individuals and teams from creating simplistic interpretations of previous and current challenging events (Enya et al., 2019).

2.4 Commitment to Resilience

Resilience is a highly topical issue in organizational behavioural research. It is a phenomenon concerned with the combination of adverse experiences followed by positive adaptation (Rutter, 2012). Positive adaptation refers to the individual and team's ability to bounce back following significant difficulty, either to a homeostatic state, or stronger than before the adverse event (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2003). Commitment to Resilience therefore is about how well the team or organization collectively manages expected and unexpected difficulties (Enya et al., 2019). It involves dedicating effort to plan for resource shortages, and a commitment to collectively 'make do' in any situational context. By being ready and proactively committed to resolving any issue that may occur, adversity is less likely to disable teams or organizations that enact this routine on a daily basis (Weick et al., 2000).

2.5 Deference to Expertise (Appropriate Empowerment)

The final factor of the framework is one of the main principles of MO, according to Weick et al. (1999). It refers to an ability to always apply the person with the highest expertise to solve a problem, regardless of their rank, or title (Hales & Chakravorty, 2016). One of the critical elements to HROs' high level of performance is their ability to renounce hierarchy or standard operating procedure when necessary (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2012). The decisions may have to be pushed down to the lowest level rank if this is where the actual expertise in the team or organization sits for the problem at hand. Therefore, by keeping a flexible mind-set and by empowering all members of a hierarchy to speak truth to power and have the final say in the appropriate setting, HROs have access to a broader range of expertise in contrast to an organization with a more fixed hierarchical structure. After they have resolved the problem, the "hierarchical anarchy" will dissolve, until it is needed again (Weick et al., 2000).

3. Our case study

This study is based on the experiences of four Royal Navy submariners who, along with over 30 other teams, had rowed more than 3000 miles across the Atlantic in a highly publicized competition, not only to challenge themselves physically and mentally but also to raise large sums of money for charity.

The rowers were in their late 20s to early 30s. All four were active-duty personnel, having served at least 7 years.

The team members' previous experiences as Royal Navy submariners had primed them for some of the challenges ahead, yet to adequately prepare for the physical and psychological strain experienced during an ocean row in which four team members are required to row together across a vast water expanse, day and night continuously for well over a month without outside help, is indeed a challenging feat. To then successfully manage this epic challenge is an impressive collective achievement, requiring adequate resources to deal with unexpected challenges, lack of sleep, and extreme physical strain (Alschuler et al., 2020).

The Atlantic crossing offers a unique opportunity for a case study investigating the factors driving MO, roughly following Weick et al.'s (1999) HRO framework. Similarly to an HRO, the team operated in a consistently challenging environment during the year-long planning and ambitious fundraising phase before the Atlantic crossing as well as throughout their 37 day row across the Atlantic. Their boat was 8.7m/28.5 ft long. The team had two small cabins to protect them from the weather when it was a rower's turn to rest (for two hours at a time during each 24 hour cycle), as well as space to row and store the most necessary equipment, but nothing more than that. While at sea during the rowing competition, each of the competing teams had to be self-sufficient (two supporting safety boats followed the teams across the Atlantic Ocean in case of severe emergencies).

The research question driving our case study was, what helps or hinders MO in this extreme HRO, in order to help us develop a better understanding of the drivers of highly reliable and resilient team performance in today's world of work where many of us find ourselves in the face of unexpected and sometimes extreme pressure.

We were privileged to conduct qualitative semi-structured interviews with each of the Royal Navy submariners who had successfully crossed the Atlantic in this charity rowing competition. We also conducted personal interviews with nine of their close family members, charity rowing team associates, and colleagues. The interviews were conducted 5-6 months after the actual race took place.

A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was applied against three critical incidents that occurred during the Atlantic crossing. All of these were unexpected, significant challenges for the entire team. These three significant events were the capsize of the boat at night in the ocean, a

breakthrough argument after three weeks at sea, and a conflict of interest towards the end of the rowing competition.

Because we were able to obtain different accounts of these same events from each of our interview participants – rowers as well as family members, friends, and associates – we were able to "step into the shoes" of the participants, recognising that one participants' understanding of an event may not reflect the reality for all involved (Willig, 2011). This enabled us to bring out the different perspectives experienced by different team members, and discern different facets of the collective reality that these courageous individuals co-created throughout their time rowing across the Atlantic. These different facets of reality form the basis of our data analysis.

4. Findings

Two 'levels' of awareness became apparent when we analysed our interview data against the five hallmarks of MO: first, a basic, *task focused* level of awareness in the face of a stressful event. At this level, the team did indeed demonstrate certain elements of MO in responding to unexpected challenges. However, our data indicate that when team members demonstrated a more advanced, strategic, *people focused* level of awareness in response to an emergency, the team became~~omes~~ fully able to respond resiliently in the face of such stressful challenges. This is an important insight, illuminating our understanding of the link between collective leadership and change readiness: only when this advanced level of awareness is present in the team, stressful situations and their adverse effects on team functioning can genuinely be overcome.

In the section that follows, we have categorised our interview data into these two levels, drawing on relevant hallmarks from the MO framework, to illustrate our analysis of the three critical incidents that tested the team's resilient responding in the face of unexpected adversity.

4.1 Task focused awareness

4.1.1 The capsize

At one point during the Atlantic crossing, the rowers experienced a life-threatening challenge. After a period of stillness on the Ocean, the weather had suddenly changed into what would have been described as bad in most other situations. However, the rowers were feeling optimistic: big waves and strong winds meant that the boat was moving fast and they were gaining on their competitors.

> "It's [the speed] was just getting higher and higher, I could see this little panel, and it hit 19 knots. I was excited, and I felt the balance going off as we were going to capsize, yet we were going 19 knots. It was amazing and scary."

It was night-time when the boat capsized. The two members by the oars were thrown straight into the dark ocean, whilst the other two rowers, asleep in their cabins, were immediately woken up by the tumbling boat. With two rowers and vital equipment overboard, this was indeed an emergency, dangerous for everyone involved: they all had to work together to prevent everyone from drowning, they had to turn the boat back over in the dark and recover equipment from the sea as best they could.

While unexpected, this was certainly an event the team was prepared for. The rowers were quick to manage the situation, as the team had anticipated that they might capsize during their Atlantic crossing and had trained for this situation in preparation of the rowing competition.

> "Your brain suddenly realises what's happened because of the muscle memory. You don't really have the time to go, 'what's happening to me, am I in danger?'. You just get on with it, because that's what you've trained and trained and trained."

Thanks to their thorough preparation, the team assumed previously defined roles, based on their rank as serving Royal Navy personnel.

"I started shouting around giving orders which is very much like work usually, in a position where I need to take charge and lead. 'You do this, you do that'. And luckily, they went straight into a 'right this needs to happen'. There was no arguments or confusions around that."

The team managed the crisis efficiently without any significant losses. They were indeed committed to resilience, an important hallmark of MO, by focusing on the task at hand without question or quarrels. Appropriately responding to the challenge at hand was not only effective, it was also a major boost for team morale.

"It was a big, shared experience for one, and it also highlighted how, well, we'd prepared"

However, it is one thing to have the shared expertise to respond to unexpected stressors, a characteristic that many efficient teams share. Beyond expertise, mindful teams also need to have shared *freedom* to respond in appropriate ways to unanticipated problems. A standard, hierarchical way of organizing does not prepare teams for this flexibility.

As the rowers reflected on the challenges they faced during their Atlantic crossing, they spoke about different types of unexpected challenges, and the need for more subtle, people-focused awareness, enabling them to collectively address different types of challenges.

"I'm sure we all resented each other at various stages, and we know there were a few arguments. But we were generally very good at getting back to being a team. It doesn't have to be a traumatic experience, an emergency or a life-or-death thing. It is also how you emotionally get back to being a team."

It appears that this more people-focused level of awareness was a critical enabler of MO and ultimately resilient team performance, when present. When it was absent from the team's awareness, complex unexpected challenges proved more difficult to overcome, as the section that follows illustrates.

4.2 People focused awareness

Undoubtedly, the team constantly faced extreme task challenges throughout the Atlantic crossing.

It was striking that the rowers as well as the interviewed family members and associates spoke about unexpected interpersonal challenges as the most significant ones that the team experienced during their epic Atlantic crossing.

Inevitably, when four human beings spend time in close physical proximity, exhausting themselves rowing in the deep sea for two hours in pairs, then eat, rest, and sleep for the next two hours, 24 hours, day after day for over a month, moods and motivation levels vary between team members.

"I think trying to be a bit forgiving and trying not to resent each other for that was really the other challenge"

Every human being can understand how challenging this is at an interpersonal level.

In particular, misaligned expectations and lack of honest communication during conflicts of interest appeared to be the most significant examples of such interpersonal challenges for the rowing team.

"We had all agreed on a shared vision, these are our goals, and this is what we are going to do, but when things really got put to the test, this is where we fell apart slightly."

As mentioned above, HRO scholars emphasize the importance of interpersonal skills in MO, suggesting that these are at least as critical for a team's capability to manage unexpected challenges resiliently as technical skills (Weick et al., 1999).

A key hallmark of MO, Preoccupation with Failure, is about staying present to emerging difficulty and proactively embracing it. An example of this hallmark is the capacity to hold difficult conversations during conflicts of interest. The reader will not be surprised to find out that the rowers, like many work teams under stress, tended to avoid this.

> *"If he said something that annoyed me, I just slammed the door. I'd be in the in the cabin and I slammed the cabin shaft."*

When asked how the team managed difficulty on the boat, another rower suggested that:

> *"Everyone seemed to handle it on the surface anyway*."

4.2.1 The breakthrough argument

However, the team experienced a significant breakthrough after three weeks on the boat. Welcoming difficulty catalyses MO because it prompts more honest and effective communication. For the rowers, this occurred after tension between team members had been building up continuously. When the participants confronted their issues, genuine progress in working together could be made.

One rower described how he initiated the Breakthrough Argument,

> *"I was like 'no, I'm not going away. We're doing this now even if you don't like it'"*.

The argument quickly developed into a catalytic, constructive exchange, "*we were screaming at each other, 'you don't do this, and you don't do that', and then it turned very quickly into, 'but you do this really well.'"* This exchange paved the way for a new climate of openness.

This allowed for a positive attitudinal and motivational change on the boat, as stated below, "*it really brought us together and dealt with those issues."*

As a result, the team experienced a period of ease and open-mindedness during the row. They had learned that when they actively attended to difficult conversations, rather than avoiding them, they could understand operational challenges as well as each other better. During this time, one rower commented on another:

> *"He was more open about a lot of stuff, just in general about life and other things. And if you were stressed out, he would try to talk about it".*

4.2.2 The conflict of interest

Nonetheless, we indicated above that mindful awareness in teams and organizations ebbs and flows, varying from context to context.

Towards the end of the row, the change in weather forced the team to push themselves hard to maintain their current place in the competition.

> *"It was flat calm, we spent two days killing ourselves trying to keep up with everyone else."*

The team received information from mainland suggesting that their projected arrival date was sooner than anticipated because of the weather changes and their high effort.

Simultaneously, the team found out that one of the rower's family might not arrive at the arrival location on time to see them row into the marina where the competition ended. This realisation

created a dilemma on the boat. The team members had to choose between two unfavourable options, slow down, or finish without his family waiting. Neither of the solutions was ideal.

One interviewee summarised this incident as follows:

> *"One member of the boat didn't want to get in on that day because they didn't think his family could make it then. And instead of it being communicated properly, this is this is where a lot of the conflict came from."*

Lack of sleep and extreme tiredness led to difficulty to commit to finding the best possible solution for the whole team. One rower commented on the dilemma they were facing, and the resulting argument:

> *"We spent six hours trying to help each other and arguing. That does show how exhaustion and stress will distort everything, communication, and how you deal with each other".*

The complexity of the situation was evident. Performing at their best now no longer seemed to be the shared highest priority for the entire team, although this was certainly what the team had agreed before starting the race.

Another rower commented, "*obviously, we wanted to row the Atlantic Ocean, and we wanted to do it as quickly as we could, in fact, we wanted to win that race.*"

They decided to continue pushing on with the race with only a few days left to go, although this time with unresolved conflict adding weight to their boat.

The team members did what most teams do in such situations, and what many readers will recognise as a common response to a complex conflict of interest: stay silent. One rower related:

> *"It had been 24 hours that he had been avoiding me and didn't want to talk, and I was happy to ignore him."*

Ultimately, the rower's family bought an earlier flight and managed to get to the arrival destination on time. On the face of it, this had displaced the need to resolve the dilemma between the team's ambition to perform at the highest possible level and the value they placed on ensuring that every team member's personal needs are met.

Yet at a deeper level, this was not the case. In the words of one of the rowers:

> *"But it did for a while ruin the idea of coming, finishing and coming back alongside because there was a point where I didn't want to talk to him. It was fine after that point, but it hasn't been the same since then."*

This conflict was raised by most interviewees as the most significant, and most lingering challenge for the team. Family members of the rowers noted that some of the team members appeared "*very upset*" about the incident, despite an excellent final race result in the competition.

Unfortunately, exhaustion, frustration and a need for closure among team members are the opposite of another hallmark of MO: a reluctance to simplify interpretations during complex challenges. Most readers will have experienced this. Yet the subtle but important difference between preparing for challenge in a task-focused way and being open to complex people issues is evident here.

It appears that the vision and goals that had been agreed by the team before the rowing challenge were no longer fit for purpose, and needed to be revisited. However, by shutting off communication and by stopping to create options and strive to find a way forward that addresses this complex

challenge in the best possible way, the team ultimately failed to overcome this final interpersonal challenge. In the words of one interviewee:

> *"I think they all probably bottled it more than they thought they were going to bottle it."*

This is evident in the accounts of how the rowers felt after completing the rowing challenge, despite arriving at their destination as one of the top-performing teams.

> *"I was in a very funny place mentally when we finished the race because I felt like I'd failed. And we hadn't you know; we achieved a lot. So, it was unusual, a very weird feeling."*

4.3 Summary

Ours is an extreme, unusual case study: a team facing an extreme challenge, with a clear goal and a finite ending. The protagonists who shared their reflections with us may, or may not, continue working together in future. Teams in more ordinary settings may not have this luxury; they often need to continue 'rowing on', despite an unresolved interpersonal issue that risks damaging the prospect of ongoing collective leadership and change readiness in the team. While most leaders (fortunately) and team members face less dramatic collective challenges at work than our four courageous Atlantic rowers, their accounts help us clearly distinguish between task and people focused awareness and its relative contribution to sustained excellence under stress.

Based on these data, we argue that both levels of awareness are necessary for teams to genuinely organize in a mindful manner and to operate as a HRO. Moreover, our analyses indicate that it is a team's collective preparedness to paying attention not only to the task at hand, but also to each other's changing needs and priorities that enables team members overcome the biggest threat to sustainable team performance under pressure: unresolved interpersonal conflict.

We discuss these key insights against relevant literature in our Discussion below.

5. Discussion

We change when we are stressed. Every reader knows this intuitively. Our behavioural standards drop especially when we are exposed to sustained pressure in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world (VUCA; Bowers et al., 2017; Sarkar, 2016). In other words, we act in ways that do not resemble "the better angels of our nature", to use Abraham Lincoln's famous words. Learning from extreme experiences is rare in most traditional organizations, hence the *in extremis* case research presented here offers valuable insights for general management theory and practice (Hällgren et al., 2018; Weick et al., 1999).

5.1 Implications for theory

We know that MO is linked to collective leadership and change readiness because it facilitates open-minded, authentic, and task-focused way of operating in the face of unexpected challenges (Weick et al., 1999). Scholars have long argued that MO means collectively "managing the unexpected" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015) and being "comfortable with the uncomfortable" (Fraher et al., 2017). These are paradoxes. How can anyone manage something that is unexpected, and be comfortable with what is inherently uncomfortable? What exactly does "comfortable with the uncomfortable" mean for work teams, including those operating in more conventional settings than our four Atlantic rowers?

The answer lies in accepting that any team is likely to feel unprepared in the face of unexpected task or people challenges. But while we cannot plan for any future *task* challenge (in the same vein as

many of us have not been able to foresee the global pandemic of 2020), we can indeed proactively prepare teams for becoming more comfortable with uncomfortable, unexpected, *people* challenges such as conflicts of interest or divergent values or motivations.

The main contribution of this work is that MO arises when teams are aware not only of the needs of the task at hand, but also of the more subtle interpersonal *people* aspects of working together in the face of complex, unexpected challenges. This interpersonal awareness is a key ingredient in generating "mindfulness in action" in work teams that are genuinely "comfortable with the uncomfortable", as a recent study into the drivers of sustained performance among US Navy Seals has revealed (Fraher et al., 2017).

Importantly, this study shows that MO is not a stable property of any team, no matter how courageous, hard-working, or intelligent its members are. No one individual is permanently *mindful* in any situation they are presented with. By the same token, a mindful team or organization is not permanently mindful, independent of the challenge it may face. Instead, collective mindfulness rises and falls *in the space between* individuals and teams (Roberts et al., 2005). It rises because of thoughtful, innovative, prosocial leadership; it falls because the drivers or motivations of leaders or key stakeholders revert back to being focused on short-term goals, competition or individually oriented performance and reward indicators (ibid.).

Being comfortable with uncomfortable situations is about psychological safety, in other words, feeling safe to speak up and share what is authentic and real, without fear of recrimination (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Psychological safety is vital for 21st century organizations and teams because it facilitates learning – learning from failure, learning to prevent future mistakes, learning to innovate. As psychological safety scholar Amy Edmondson aptly put it; "interpersonal fear cripples learning" (Edmondson, 2011).

Our data supports prior research indicating that psychological safety is the most significant driver of team effectiveness, more important even than team members being able to count on each other, or a clear team structure and division of labour.[2] This is because humans have a strong need for certainty and control. However, in a VUCA world, it is impossible to create certainty in relation to external challenges, let alone genuinely manage or even control these VUCA challenges. In the same way as the Atlantic Ocean was not to be dominated by our four courageous rowers, no matter how hard they might have tried, external challenges in today's world of work cannot be turned into something 'comfortable' or 'safe'. In contrast, team relationships can most certainly develop into trust-based, psychologically safe spaces, marked by high-quality connections (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). This high-quality team connection can provide the *interpersonal* sense of safety and comfort that may well be more strategic than clarity over task and organization.

In order to understand this phenomenon fully, we need to further unpack the people focused awareness that was apparent when our rowing team operated mindfully as a HRO. Our data suggest that interpersonal conflicts, and especially unresolved conflicts of interest, leave the biggest scars in work teams, even if they achieve extraordinary task-based results. This is a key barrier to sustained performance over the long term. We speculate that this is because our automatic, unconscious need for social connection and engagement trumps all other automatic responses to stressful events, including the impulse to *fight or flight* (Porges, 2011). Conversely, when we are deprived of the soothing effect of social engagement during times of stress, and interpersonal ruptures remain

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[2] This insight is based on Google's Project Aristotle research programme (see
https://rework.withgoogle.com/guides/understanding-team-effectiveness/steps/introduction/).

unresolved, we are much less able to withstand pressure and challenge (ibid.). As our data shows, unresolved team conflicts linger comparatively longer in our memory than the adrenaline rush associated with achieving a coveted prize. They are liable to poison collective leadership, change readiness, and adaptive performance in the face of the next significant challenge that the team faces in future.

Scientific research bears this out. In a recent study of drivers of "team mindfulness", defined as a team's shared focus on the task at hand and on interacting without interpersonal judgment (Yu & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018) mindful teams were able to manage task conflicts without allowing these conflicts to escalate into personal conflicts.

The scientific foundation for resilient team relationships is high-quality connections (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003) and a sense of interpersonal closeness (Aron et al., 1997) between individual team members. These serve as the interpersonal buffer that prevents conflicts from escalating into interpersonal undermining (Yu & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018).

How to generate high-quality connection and interpersonal closeness? By proactively becoming aware of the human being behind the role that individual team members represent, and in particular by understanding the (often unspoken) motivations, assumptions, and values that drive action, and inaction, in teamwork. Anybody who has a solid relationship with an old friend will know that one does not need to share the same drivers, motivation, or values with another person, to experience care, concern, and acceptance towards them even during moments of conflict or disagreements. But what is essential for resilient relationships and feeling psychologically safe with one another is an *awareness* of each other's drivers, motivations, and values – essentially, once we genuinely know *who somebody is* can we remain friendly and caring even in the face of disagreements or conflict.

Essentially, becoming aware of the personal and interpersonal drivers of team members means getting to know each other at a more personal level than by focusing on task relationships alone. By investing in productive, authentic communication to build resilient relationships, team members are able to avoid the four key factors destroying any healthy interpersonal relationships: undue criticism, defensiveness, withdrawing from discussions, and feeling contempt for the other (Gottman, 2011).

5.2 Practical recommendations

The following practical recommendations have been compiled to help readers foster high-quality team awareness in their work teams, to serve as the afore-mentioned relational buffer between individuals and teams facing sustained unexpected stressful challenges.

We have broken these recommendations down into two parts; developing self-awareness and developing interpersonal awareness.

5.2.1 Developing self-awareness among team members

There are two ways in which individuals can learn to develop higher self-awareness: self-disclosure (to oneself and to others) on the one hand, and inviting feedback on the other.

1. Structured reflection and mindfulness practice has been shown to develop management competency and high performance among leaders (DeRue & Ashford, 2013). Team leaders should make space for regular, structured team sessions during which team members are invited

to reflect on their experience, become aware of their thoughts and assumptions driving judgment and action, and share appropriate elements of this with their team members.

2. A particularly popular graphic leadership and team awareness tool is Luft and Ingham's (1955) *Johari Window*, a 2 by 2 matrix for unearthing two different dimensions of self- and other-awareness: information known by self vs. unknown by self, and information known by others vs. unknown by others. Individuals can complete this matrix tool by themselves, or alternatively work in pairs, to become more self-aware.

5.2.2 Developing other-awareness

Other-awareness is about creating a work environment where individuals feel safe and comfortable to engage in questioning and continuous reflection about what is real, important, and meaningful for other team members. Leaders should actively engage with their teams on this. Previous research has found that employees of organizations are often conditioned to ignore the same things; for example, avoiding talking about the stress they may all be experiencing (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2003).

1. An evidence-based method to help team members gain insight into their own and others' values as drivers for attitudes and action is to engage in values sharing among team members, for example by prompting individuals to reflect on their personal values at work, and share what they feel appropriate about this with their team members. The act of sharing these values increases awareness of how team members make sense of their work reality. Awareness of values has been shown to raise performance (Chase et al., 2013).

2. An enjoyable and light-hearted method for developing other-awareness in teams is having team members create "user manuals" for themselves, and share these with their team members. A user manual to develop other-awareness in team work consists of insights that team members share about what makes them tick and how others should handle them, especially when something unexpected goes wrong. Example elements of such a user manual are statements like "what is most important for me at work"; "how colleagues might misunderstand me"; or "how I'd like to be treated when I'm feeling stressed" (Bryant, 2013).[3]

3. Human beings draw conclusions and make assumptions quickly, often based on a subset of the available data, especially during conflict; this insight was distilled by leading management thinker Chris Argyris into an elegant model called the Ladder of Inference (Argyris, 1982). This model can be used to help individuals and teams parse out the assumptions that drive the judgments and conclusions we all make about other people (McArthur, 2014). The Ladder of inference is a simple, visual tool that prompts reflection and insight, namely to follow a structured process of separating out the conclusions we draw (about other people, their actions, etc.) from the assumptions that these conclusions are based on, and of separating out the assumptions we draw (about other people, their actions, etc.) from the actual observations that these assumptions are based on. In this way, individuals and groups can become aware of the steps involved in their judgment-making, by stepping down the metaphorical *ladder* of inferences they (often unconsciously) make in making sense of challenging situations.

In sum, the main practical contribution of this work is to prompt leaders and teams to proactively invest in interpersonal skills training, and in developing high-quality relationships among team members, *before* teams face adversity and the need to change course in the face of such challenges. This will enable them to collectively manage VUCA challenges, and generate the change readiness and collective leadership required to thrive in 21st century organizations. This will also develop every

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[3] The "user manual" idea was coined by Ivar Kroghrud, co-founder and C.E.O. of QuestBack, in Bryant's (2013) interview.

team member's potential to be their proverbial brother's keeper, independent of the adversity they may face in future.

If we fail to develop the necessary self- and other awareness in today's work teams, extreme experiences can, and will, negatively impact the basic nature of relationship quality. Leaders – ignore this at your own peril.

Chapter Takeaways

- Collective leadership and change readiness is not a permanent team quality. It ebbs and flows like the ocean, dependent of the team's level of awareness.
- Two levels of awareness are needed for a resilient collective response to unexpected challenges; a conventional task focused awareness, as well as a more people focused awareness.
- A team's collective preparedness to paying attention to each other's changing needs and priorities enables team members overcome the biggest threat to sustainable team performance under pressure: unresolved interpersonal conflict.
- While we cannot plan for any and all future *task* challenges ahead, we can proactively prepare teams for becoming more comfortable with uncomfortable, unexpected, *people* challenges such as conflicts of interest or divergent values or motivations.
- Leaders should invest in self-awareness, other awareness, and interpersonal skills training, *before* teams face VUCA challenges, in order to develop every team member's potential to become their proverbial brother's keeper in the face of *anything*.

Reflection Questions

- What does *people* focused awareness look and sound like in your work life?
- What might be the main hindrances of *people* focused awareness in your organization?
- What type of intervention might already be in place in your organization to help develop self- and other awareness?
- What is the role of the leader in the development of self- and other awareness?
- Think of a time when your team was responding in a resilient way to a significant challenge at work. How were the two levels of awareness demonstrated then? What can you learn from this?

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