

# **MINDFULNESS AND ITS PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATION IN BUSINESS EDUCATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Mindfulness has gained significant attention and momentum in business and popular culture in the US, Europe, and Australia. There is, however, a paucity of literature on how business students make sense of mindfulness and its practices. Based on our experiences of adopting mindfulness and mindfulness meditation in our teachings of management courses, we have explored how business students make sense of mindfulness and meditation. From a phenomenological perspective, we have examined our students' meditation journals, essays, and their own research on the topic of mindfulness. Based on the findings of previous empirical studies on the positive effects of mindfulness practices and our reflections on the pedagogical potential of mindfulness meditation for business education, we have emphasized that the practice of presence through mindfulness tends to enhance the business students' self-awareness and emotional skills. The implications of adopting mindfulness research and brief and deliberate practices into the business curriculum to develop embodied wisdom are also discussed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Historically, business education has put greater emphasis on the concepts of rationality and logical analysis, while other mental faculties such as intuition, emotions, and personal reflections have been largely ignored (Drucker, 2005; Jordan, Ashkanasy, & Härtel, 2003; Weick, 2007). A well-cultivated self-awareness through contemplative practices has only recently begun to attract serious attention as a core skill that should be developed in schools of business, even though mindfulness and contemplative practice are of utmost importance in business and leadership (Achor & Gielan, 2015; Hansen, 2012; Hougaard & Carter, 2016; Hunter, 2013; Hyland, 2015; Kelly, 2012; Meister, 2015; Pinkster, 2015; Schachtman, 2013; Seppala, 2015; Shumpeter, 2013; Smith, 2014; Tuleja, 2014; Vich, 2015).

We perceive that, in general, business education has been negligent in developing a well-balanced "whole person" by ignoring the cultivation of students' inner qualities for self-awareness, empathy, and compassion toward others (Roeser & Peck, 2009). In fact, wisdom has just recently appeared in management and leadership literature (McKenna, Rooney, &

Kenworthy, 2013). Furthermore, the “doing” mentality has been overpowering in business education while the “being” mode of existence, which emphasizes contemplation and reflection in the “here and now,” has been under-researched. As a consequence, business students have been offered very few chances to develop their contemplative mindset and soft skills, which can be roughly translated into intrapersonal and interpersonal emotional, social, and communitive skills. In other words, business educators have been somewhat reluctant to offer opportunities for mindful learning, through which students reflect upon their inner experiences and integrate them into meaningful insights and personal knowledge about themselves to enhance sound decision making capabilities. Hence, apparently there exist gaps in the business curriculum in terms of promoting self-awareness, focus, and mindfulness in future business leaders. In leadership development, for instance, few researchers, except a minority group of scholars (e.g., Senge, Jaworski, Scharmer, & Flowers, 2005), have paid attention to the importance of presence through being aware of what is going on in the moment for effective leadership.

Paying attention to the present moment enables us to observe how our preconceptions and biases from our past experiences affect the way we make decisions in the present. This is also why managing one’s own mind or guarding one’s own consciousness is perceived to be a critically important skill for effective leadership (Drucker, 2005). Overemphasis on taking action and the lack of pedagogical emphasis on “presence” may be the possible reason why business students are not particularly well-trained for wisdom (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Kessler & Bailey, 2007). According to Siegel (2007), presence is defined as “the bare awareness of the receptive spaciousness of our mind” (p. 160). Hence, “presencing” as “the *embodied* habitualized practice” (Küpers & Pauleen, 2015, p. 496, italics in original) of presence can be cultivated through the conscientious practice of being still and becoming attentively aware of what is happening in the moment.

The primary goal of this paper is thus to explore how business students make sense of mindfulness and meditation and how they make meaning out of their own mindfulness practices by investigating the first person narrative accounts from the students’ meditation journals, essays, and their own research on mindfulness. Specifically, by analyzing the qualitative data from our students’, in the case of the first author – first person reports described in their meditation journals and reflective essays, and in the case of the second author – research on mindfulness and subsequent student papers on how mindfulness affects their lives and how human resource managers could effectively integrate mindfulness into an organization, we examine how mindfulness, as a foundational concept in contemplative epistemology, can play a pivotal role, not only having positive instrumental value (e.g., stress reduction), but also helping business educators reconsider and reshape the value of business education in a larger social context.

Contemplative epistemology is a way of “knowing from within” through engaging in self-reflection and meditation (Zajonc, 2009). Hence, the conventional business curriculum could be strengthened if it is complemented by more contemplative and mindful pedagogical methods. We have further explored how mindfulness meditation can enhance the embodied practical wisdom of business students. In this paper, we have defined practical wisdom as our *embodied* knowledge and *habitualized* practice of being present to (a) our body (i.e., bodily sensations), (b) our feelings, emotions and thoughts, and (c) our action, which can be learned through deliberate practice of mindfulness and/or mindful meditation. Therefore, it is our hope that this reflective

paper provides some insights for revising the current management curriculum in order to fill the aforementioned gaps, and thus contributes to the literature of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in a small, but meaningful way.

We examined the students' meditation journals, essays, and research papers from the theoretical perspective of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is "a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences," and is mostly "concerned with exploring experience in its own terms" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). Given that the purpose of this paper is to explore how business students make sense of mindfulness and their experiences of meditation, IPA is a very useful theoretical lens to analyze the intention (i.e., underlying motivations for engaging in meditation besides the completion of the course requirement), attitudes (i.e., emotional, cognitive, and behavioral evaluations of mindfulness and meditation), and meanings (i.e., perceived significance of mindfulness and meditation in one's life) that the students often derive from their practice of mindfulness more deeply.

## **MINDFULNESS AND ITS APPLICATION IN THE BUSINESS CLASSROOM**

The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention,  
over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will.

No one is *compos sui* [master of one's self] if he have it not.

An education which should improve this faculty would be *the education par excellence*.

(James, 1890/1950, p. 424, italics in original)

Mindfulness is an English translation of the Pali word, "sati," which literally means "recollection, memory, recalling to mind" (Sangharakshita, 2003, p. 9). Mindfulness, as the keen attention to one's present experience, sounds deceptively simple: essentially it refers to paying undivided attention to the present moment. It refers to a state of being that facilitates the moment-to-moment awareness of one's bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts in a constantly changing environment (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindful meditation (hereafter meditation) is one of the practical methods of cultivating one's awareness. Meditation is a disciplined mental practice that enables us to become more attentive to our bodily sensations and passing thoughts and emotions "from a center of awareness that is separate from them and therefore able to witness them as discrete events" (Flowers, 2011, p. 169).

When we experientially know that mindfulness and/or meditation works for us, we feel a sense of freedom, which enables us to act as more neutral observers, less disturbed by tumultuous and disruptive external events. Metaphorically speaking, mindfulness and meditation are like a mental retreat, which has no specific goal or expectation in mind, but simply allows one to be present in the here and now, while distancing oneself from disturbing emotional reactions. In this respect, mindfulness and meditation are not about controlling our emotions or thoughts, but more about observing them neutrally and more clearly in order to be familiar with the recurring inner phenomena. The beneficial effects of various mindfulness practices have been well documented (Good et al., 2016; Siegel, 2011; Hölzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago, & Ott, 2011).

Particularly, meditation (a) enhanced the sense of well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008), (b) strengthened attention (Jha, Stanley, Kiyonaga, Wong, & Gelfand, 2010), and helped individuals be more emphatic in interpersonal relationships (Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011). It has been also reported that mindfulness training reduces mind wandering (Mrazek, Franklin, Phillips, Baird, & Schooler, 2013), prevented mindless impulses (Papies, Barsalou, & Custers, 2012), and increased compassion, empathy, and a sense of community (Haynes, 2011).

In his teaching of a special topic undergraduate course, “Mindful Leadership,” the first author of this paper used multiple mindfulness practices, including sitting meditation, at the public university where he is currently teaching. Prior to his creation of the special topic course on mindful leadership, he has been actively using various mindfulness practices such as meditation, journaling, art and music appreciation in his teaching of Organizational Behavior/Human Resource Management for the past several years (Yang & Durnin, 2013). The purpose of the newly designed course was to cultivate business students’ self-awareness and to develop their soft skills (i.e., emotional, interpersonal, communication skills). The primary learning goal of this experiential class, the first one of its kind being offered at the institution, was to enhance business students’ emotional awareness, empathy/compassion and capabilities for paying undivided attention. The notion of presence, as defined above as practicing an open, receptive, and bare awareness, was particularly emphasized as the guiding principle of the in-class and at-home practice of meditation. The students were encouraged to observe, reflect upon, and describe their inner experiences of meditation and were required to submit their meditation journals at the end of the semester as a course assignment. Below is the instruction for the meditation journal:

Following a completion of each assigned practice of ten to fifteen-minute sitting meditation, take some time to jot down your reflections on your observation of your inner experience during the meditation session. Yet, do not actively think about your passing thoughts and emotions during your meditation, but rather, try to stay fully attentive to your breath. The key point to remember is not to try to inhibit any bodily sensations, sensory experiences, thoughts or feelings that may arise, but acknowledge these and each time gently return attention to your breath.

After completing the designated sitting meditation practice, write a brief report, describing your observation of recurring thoughts, emotions, or bodily reactions. You are expected to describe your reflections on at least ten episodes of your sitting meditation and your embodied understanding (i.e., knowing through your own bodily awareness in addition to your cognitive and emotional learning) of “being awake” or “being mindful.”

In addition to their meditation journals, the students were expected to respond to a set of four open-ended questions during the fourth week and again at the end of the semester. The first four questions included: (a) to what extent were you familiar with the notion of mindfulness before taking this course? (b) what was your first impression of mindfulness? (c) what is your current understanding of mindfulness? and (d) what changes have you noticed in your life for the past four weeks? The second four questions were: (a) upon having almost completed a course on mindfulness, what is your most current understanding of mindfulness? (b) what has been the

most difficult aspect for you in understanding the concept of mindfulness? (c) what has been the most difficult aspect for you in practicing mindfulness meditation? and (d) what changes have you noticed in your life for the past fifteen weeks?

The second author of this paper introduced mindfulness to graduate students at a private university in her teaching of a seven-week online MBA special topic course entitled “Strategic Human Resource Management.” Students were to take one week to research mindfulness on their own by finding articles from various sources and/or videos on YouTube about mindfulness. The culmination of their research was to result in a paper which would describe how they could incorporate mindfulness into their own personal life and into their business life, or for full-time students, into their academic life. In addition, students needed to include in their paper how they would incorporate mindfulness into an organization’s employee development program as a human resource manager. Students were allowed to discuss the topic of mindfulness with their team members online, but it was not mandatory.

We read our students’ journals, essays, and research papers very carefully in order to understand the recurring themes. Some verbatim first person narratives from the data are presented below as they are the very clues for us to interpret how the students made sense of mindfulness and their practices of meditation. For the first author, students seemed to possess a relatively fixed notion of appropriate content materials that should be taught and practiced in the business classroom. In other words, they looked for a certain kind of “knowledge and practice” that just appeared to be relevant to their ideas of the real world of business. For a majority of students, at least in the beginning of the semester, mindfulness and meditation (i.e., “sitting still while doing nothing but inhaling and exhaling attentively”) were not something that they would eagerly accept and practice with enthusiasm. Hence, it is not surprising that, the two most frequently mentioned themes regarding their first impression of mindfulness, were (a) “something weird, foreign, and silly,” and (b) the irrelevancy of the practice. In the words of one student:

The mindfulness meditation piece is interesting but honestly still foreign to me. It’s still very difficult for me to engulf myself into the meditation and to focus. My first impression of mindfulness meditation was that it would be something that I would never do. The thought of doing yoga or even meditating seemed silly to me. I thought that if you wanted to reduce the stress in your life, you will have to make necessary changes and adjust to get in the right mindset. The whole concept was crazy and I honestly thought meditation was for females and a religious thing.

Upon closely analyzing the content of their meditation journals, it also became clear that at least initially, most of the students faced specific difficulties in making sense of mindfulness as a concept and meditation as a practice. One of the most challenging aspects of mindfulness concerned dealing with the two conflicting mindsets, the “doing versus being” modes (Williams & Penman, 2011). Given the greater emphasis put on the “driven and goal-oriented” mindset of a successful business leader – often tacit and widely cherished – at business schools, the students at first felt quite confused with the notion of “being mindfully present” and maintaining focused attention on their breathing and passing thoughts and emotions non-judgmentally.

Given the natural tendency of our untrained, “rehearsing and rehashing” minds, it is not difficult to sympathize with the struggling students. For instance, the students confessed that they had difficulty in dealing with intruding thoughts during sitting meditation practice, mainly because they knew that they couldn’t “control” the disturbing thoughts and emotions without feelings of inadequacy. One of the first author’s students shared her difficulty by saying that:

I still haven’t been able to make mindfulness a habit. I am a mother and the things I worry about run through my mind like trains through a tunnel. I find that it’s very difficult for me to remember to apply mindfulness during moments where I lose control of my worries and I find my mind on the future or the past instead of the present. It’s very difficult when you have a million things to do to slow down and stop thinking about them, because I feel that I may forget something if I just stop thinking about all the things I have to take care of in my life.

Contrary to the initial indifference and somewhat negative attitudes toward mindfulness, after a month of reading, watching training videos on mindfulness and meditation, and their actual practicing of meditation, the students showed great improvements in terms of their affective regulation, a reduced level of stress, and an increased awareness of their bodies. They also experienced enhanced focus and attention, empathy, and compassion (“I am a little more understanding of others,” “I do forgive those that have hurt me or may not have my best interests at heart”) and improved social relationships.

For the second author of this paper, the reactions of students were similar to the first author in that some students had not practiced mindfulness in the past, however, other student reactions were very different from the first author. Since many students in the MBA course are already practicing business people, after their initial research, they practiced mindfulness and reflected on their reactions in their paper. One student stated:

The very fundamental principle of practicing mindfulness and meditation is acknowledgement of and awareness of breathing. In the practice of cardiac surgery, we are using fine motor skills on very small and delicate tissue, often arteries only 1mm in diameter, and using special magnifying lenses to see well enough to sew accurately. It takes deep concentration at times to accomplish what we do. One particular surgeon with whom I work often takes deep audible breaths during an operation where the concentration and attention level is high. He states they are cleansing breaths [that] allow him to enter a level of deeper concentration. I do the same as well. In addition to utilizing cleansing and focusing breathes in my professional life, I do find myself, probably unconsciously taking deep breaths ... to clear my thoughts and focus attention while at home.

Since some MBA students are five year students moving from their bachelor’s degree into the master’s program, they could identify the benefits of using mindfulness during their oftentimes extremely busy schedules. The most important aspect of mindfulness for them was silencing the inner chatter that goes on in their minds and concentrating on their breathing to relax. One student stated,

I can relate as a student to the stress of always being connected via technology, and how important mindfulness is to me personally. With constant access to email, Blackboard, and social media, school can be incredibly overwhelming.... I myself find the time before I fall asleep and when I first wake up in the morning to be the most stressful because in my mind I am running through all the things I need to do, what needs to be completed by when, and emails I need to send and respond to. This stress is no way to begin or end a day, and so to combat this at night I listen to guided sleep meditation so I can let go of the stress and focus solely on relaxation.

Overall, students found their research and incorporation of mindfulness into their daily lives to be beneficial and the majority of students could see the advantage of incorporating mindfulness into an organization. They believed that human resource managers would be the people most likely to present this incorporation of mindfulness to an organization's leadership and advanced ways in which to make it happen.

## **REFLECTIONS ON THE APPLICATIONS OF MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION IN OUR CLASSROOMS**

It's important to get away from frenzied goal-orientation.  
We should not only to *do*, but also simply to *be*.  
(André, 2014, pp. 150-151, italics in original)

Our interpretative phenomenological exploration, which emphasizes the students' "personally lived meanings and experiences" (Morley, 2012, p. 586), has also shown that the undergraduate students' initial meaning-making out of mindfulness and meditation was mainly focused on their immediate negative emotional reactions and their difficulty controlling intruding thoughts. Later, they seemed to incorporate their reflections on their *felt* experiences into a more meaningful personal narrative. Hence, it is very likely that the actual process of making sense of mindful meditation was a two stage process: immediate, non-conceptual, and intuitive sensing of emotional and bodily sensations, followed by a series of reflections on the felt experiences.

We also noticed that, as students developed their attention and observation skills through mindfulness and maturity, it became clear that they acquired the attitude and the skill of disengagement: in other words, mindfulness helped them to maintain some psychological distance, which enabled them to be better attuned with their state of awareness more easily. They seemed to become more comfortable with the idea of "taking the time to ... observe and feel" (André, 2014, p. 141). In this respect, it is very probable that mindfulness meditation tends to enhance practical wisdom of business students, as the practice of mindfulness allows them to experience the felt consequences of their own lives, as well as, unexamined predispositions and biases learned from their past experiences.

The *embodied* practical wisdom that students have gradually gained from mindfulness practices including meditation is not a reified body of knowledge that can simply be conceptually covered and mechanically delivered in the classroom. As we suggested at the beginning of this paper,

practical wisdom, as defined in this paper, consists of insights and the new understanding of our almost hardwired emotional, cognitive, and behavioral predispositions of our untrained mindset. Through deliberate practice of mindfulness and meditation, we believe that our students could gradually develop their own practical wisdom.

More specifically, mindfulness apparently has taught some students about “how to secure the feelingful experience that *slowed perception makes possible*” (Eisner, 2002, p. 24, italics added). The brief, but persistent practice of mindfulness enables students to learn “how to savor qualities by taking the time to really look so that they can see” (Eisner, 2002, p. 21). Mindfulness practices gently stimulated the students to make use of the practical wisdom of “slowing down” within our culture that praises efficiency and endorses the myth of multitasking. It should also be underscored that we try to *allow* practical wisdom “to emerge from our body, not as a result of control, but through abandonment and observation” (André, 2014, p. 154).

It also became clear to us that mentally slowing down and becoming still have helped students to be aware of inner wisdom. As students became more aware and perceptive to their own emotions and their interactions with others in a more compassionate manner, the quality of their relationships with others also improved. Furthermore, mindfulness encouraged students to be more open to diverse ideas and to be more willing to connect those ideas from different domains creatively. A student of the first author reflected upon his mindfulness practices as follows:

Learning that we aren't our thoughts or even our body was a big eye-opener and has changed the way I see the outside world completely. It has also changed the way I see myself as well. Practicing mindfulness means to always be a witness to your actions, feelings, emotions, and thoughts. Being aware of your bodily sensations and not judging your thoughts or feelings, just simply being aware of them. In mindfulness meditations I am just being. Being is our true nature, not thinking, not forcing yourself not to think, but just letting go and being.

Although sitting meditation is like a lab which allows a special set of conditions to occur in which one's inner experiences can be observed closely (Case, 2013), we don't claim that meditation is the only way to cultivate mindfulness. One of the second author's students shared her insight on incorporating mindfulness into an organization as follows:

Mindfulness represents an opportunity for employees to combat workplace-related stress (Vich, 2015) and increase individual and team productivity. Also, “mindfulness is complementary to moral development” (Vich, 2015, p. 38) and can help to heighten ethical decision-making. *There is a belief that meditation is the only way to be mindful; this is not true.* Human resource personnel should work with management to educate employees on how they can use mindful strategies. The overarching premise of mindfulness is a focus on the present. (italics added)

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

We began this paper by suggesting that current business education has lost the wisdom of “looking within” through quietude and stillness, and consequently has become deficient in terms of cultivating practical wisdom in future business leaders (Dyllick, 2015). Given the current state of business education, there is an apparent lack of reflective and contemplative components (Wilson & Thomas, 2012). We claim that there should be more attention paid to mindfulness and mindful teaching and learning in business education in order to reflect the current awareness of mindfulness in business and leadership practices. It would be a good practice for us to recall the dual goals of doing-well-by-doing good mindset proposed by Benjamin Franklin from time to time: “the making [of] money and the promotion of virtue” (Isaacson, 2003, p. 94). Incorporating mindfulness is more than just filling a gap in the business curriculum. It is about rethinking the *raison d’être* of business schools and the larger purpose of a business education (Thomas, Lee, & Wilson, 2014).

Given that this paper is based on our exploration on how business students make sense of mindfulness and meditation from our own teachings of management courses, more rigorous and systematic empirical studies on the students’ perception of mindfulness and meditation should follow in the future. However, based on our reflections of our own experiences of adopting mindfulness and meditation in our own teaching of management courses, we cautiously claim that mindfulness is an intellectually understandable way for cultivating *phrónêsis* (Greek term for practical wisdom), through which students can gradually enhance their self-awareness and applied wisdom. In other words, mindfulness can help students “to become intimate with the vast wisdom of feelings” (Kozak, 2016, p. 6) and it helps them to transform maladaptive habits of their minds (Küpers & Pauleen, 2015; Yang, Colarelli, & Holston, 2011).

From a pedagogical perspective, we understand from our own personal experiences that mindfulness and meditation are effective tools that help practitioners maintain their ongoing personal renewal and sustain their psychological well-being under rapidly changing environmental pressures. In terms of filling the gaps in the business curriculum, we became convinced that, through becoming familiar with mindfulness and mindfulness practices, business students can learn to deal with increasing demands for a disciplined way of seeing reality and cultivating their capacity for sustaining attention and “focus” (Goleman, 2015). Through mindful teaching, business educators can also encourage and facilitate the student to learn some practical wisdom emerging from their own heart and minds through their own experiences.

We have also realized that mindful learning, which emphasizes “being in the present moment,” can enrich the current business curriculum. The practice of mindfulness is designed to encourage students to look within themselves and observe their minds more attentively and non-judgmentally. Students are expected to reflect upon their own inner experiences while they practice mindfulness. Hence, from our readings of the students’ journals, research, essays, and observations, we have concluded that (a) practical wisdom can gradually emerge from experiencing authentic presence, and (b) enhancing practical wisdom through developing business students’ contemplative capacity can also *empower* them (Thurman, 1998). Given the increasing demand by employers for business graduates with soft skills, and the deficiency in the

business curriculum in terms of enhancing them (Boone, 2013; Boyatzis, Stubbs, & Taylor, 2002; Navarro, 2008; Robles, 2012), the idea of educating “mindful practitioners” should be more seriously taken into account to fill the gap and to cultivate business students’ reflective mindset (Mintzberg, 2005).

As admitted earlier, the nature of this essay is based on our analysis and reflections on our own students’ artifacts. Hence, we acknowledge that there should be more rigorous and systematic studies on the applications of mindfulness in the business curriculum. However, practically speaking, we believe that pedagogical innovations can be initiated by taking some small steps to change the routine of a class session, such as having a three-minute breathing practice. Professors teaching various subject areas in business disciplines can actually adopt and adjust the S.T.O.P Principle (i.e., Stop – Take a deep breath – Observe your changing physiological and psychological responses – Proceed) to meet their unique learning goals and outcomes. Individual professors can improve their own pedagogical tools by incorporating contemplative and mindful components into their curricula (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

It is our realistic expectation that the diffusion process of mindfulness practices in schools of business won’t be as straightforward as observing one’s breath. However, it is fortunate that contemplative learning and teaching in business education have recently received more attention in academia (Chaskalson, 2011; Davis, 2015; Holland, 2015; Hunter & Chaskalson, 2013; Hyland, 2015; Küpers & Pauleen, 2013; Marques, 2014, 2015; Saltzman, n.d.; Schaufenbuel, 2014). The mindful approach to the cultivation of practical wisdom of business students will make their learning more meaningful as well. As the notion of embodied practical wisdom should not be understood as merely a beautiful idea, we hope that there will be more constructive discussion on how embodied practical wisdom cultivated in business schools could be strategically transferred to 21st century organizations for the purpose of achieving more meaningful and abundant work experiences (e.g., Talbot-Zorn & Edgette, 2016).

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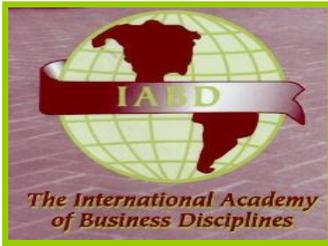
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