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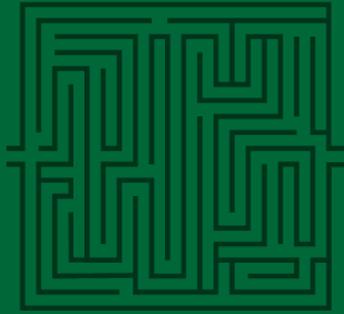
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PART FOUR

Moving Forward: Journey into the Age of Virtual Reality

Contemplative Leadership Coaching: A Buddhist Phenomenological Approach to Embodied Leadership in the Age of Virtual Reality

Eric Le Gal

The Starting Point

In the past decade, the rise of artificial intelligence and big data has dramatically changed the business world and its relationship with decision-making. This ongoing revolution prompts us to rethink the role of a human leader in a virtual world and calls for a renovation of coaching techniques based on a more philosophical or spiritual ground.

Idea in Brief

In recent publications and discourses on leadership coaching, many scholars and professionals have called for leadership and professional development that addresses the “deeper” or “higher” aspects of human existence instead of focusing on learning behavioural or technical skills or attaining preset standards. Since the 1970s, Contemplative Psychotherapy has developed as the meeting of the wisdom traditions of Buddhism and the clinical traditions of psychotherapy, building a bridge between personal contemplative practice and the clinical practice of psychology. In parallel, neuroscience research has demonstrated the benefits of mindfulness practice for health improvement and reduction of psychological disorders.

This paper examines the main challenges leaders currently face in a world that is becoming virtual and how the Buddhist spiritual and philosophical theory of the mind can be a foundation for a more holistic and humanistic leadership coaching method. I describe the phenomenological and psychological theories of Buddhism, which can be called a contemplative

science, and how they can be a theoretical ground for an innovative approach to embodied leadership coaching. I also draw a parallel between the psychodynamic and phenomenological approaches to coaching, reviewing the literature on both approaches.

Idea in Practice

Four principles regarding application to leadership are detailed:

- **Mindful leadership:** Mindfulness develops focus, clarity and empathy. Through development of vigilant and panoramic awareness capabilities, clients can not only reflect on their behaviours, tendencies, thoughts or prejudices, but also deconstruct the subjectivity of their points of view and directly see their modes of functioning in an embodied way.
- **Brilliant leadership:** The recognition of the self and other's brilliant sanity is the first step to building deep empathy and to the possibility of altruism and true collaboration. Leaders no longer see problems to solve, but rather opportunities through which they can develop their abilities and organisations.
- **Wisdom within emotions:** Buddhist psychology considers that conflictual emotions have a root in brilliant sanity. These five emotions can be transmuted into five wisdoms.
- **Embodied leadership:** Embodied leadership is an integrated approach to leadership development that incorporates intentional body awareness and mind training as a foundation for fully embodied mindful action.

Introduction

“When you meet a person who has inner authentic presence, you find he has an overwhelming genuineness, which might be somewhat frightening because it is so true and honest and real. You experience a sense of command radiating from that person of inner authentic presence. Although that person might be a garbage collector or a taxi driver, still he or she has an uplifted quality, which magnetizes you and commands your attention.”

Chögyam Trungpa, 1988

In the last decade, as a result of major developments in robotics, artificial intelligence, big data and neuroscience, we have entered a technological era that, despite being anticipated by many science-fiction authors, seemed very unlikely to develop so rapidly at the turn of the 21st century. Thus, this era is deeply shaking our beliefs regarding intelligence, human experience and nature. As stated by Yuval Noah Harari in his book *Homo Deus* (2016), this revolution and its post-humanistic corollary can transform and even call into question what mankind is.¹

At the level of organisations, particularly in the labour and economic sectors, this revolution begins to have considerable effects. The substitution of human actors by robots and artificial intelligence will dehumanize organisations and create even more complex organisational relationships. While an organisation used to be considered a system of interrelationships between humans, it will be necessary to consider them as cybernetic systems of interactions between humans, robots and computers with a quick withdrawal of all human interventions in most of the production and management sectors. The cybernetic dream to create “governing machines”² – with the word cybernetics coming from the Greek κυβερνήτης (kubernêtês), meaning “pilot, governor” – is within our grasp and forces us to question what it means to be a human leader of an increasingly virtual organisation.

However, artificial intelligence and neuroscience are not devoid of epistemological flaws. Conscious, sensible experience of the world cannot ultimately be reduced to a simple neurological process, nor intelligence to a computational process or an algorithm. Computational artificial intelligence certainly can calculate a factual probability using its exceptional calculation capacity, but it still seems incapable of drawing thoughtful conclusions or generating effective syntheses that could be compared to the highest levels of human intelligence.

Concerning leadership in particular, the qualities of a leader are rooted in

intuitive, emotional and inspirational capabilities rather than in decision-making precision, and people are more keen to trust an authentic human being than a hyper-rational, flawless decision-making machine. Therefore, we are convinced that no computer or algorithm will ever replace entrepreneurs or economic, thought or political leaders. And yet, in the past few years, we have been witnessing the rise of coaching and self-development techniques aiming at creating executives and leaders able to compete with computers and algorithms by developing their reasoning capacities and faster decision-making abilities.

We consider this approach an isolated backwater, because humans, on one hand, will never be able to be better computing machines than super-fast artificial intelligence, but computers or robots, on the other hand, have not yet developed the human capacities of synthesis, creativity, sensibility, inspiration, empathy or ethical thought. Even if the rise of artificial intelligence is inescapable, there is a great need to develop human, embodied leadership. To this end, it is necessary to rethink leadership coaching and education in a more global and holistic way that includes all levels of human experience.

This paper focuses on how Buddhism can introduce innovative aspects to coaching, by considering an extended practice of mindfulness for its transformative action-oriented power. In recent years, mindfulness has gained popularity in the business world. However, most of these programs do not transcend leaders' uncomfortable situations in a challenging economic world; they only treat the effects, such as stress and anxiety. In introducing the practice of contemplative leadership, we aim to return to the heart of mindfulness, which is the development of insight and wisdom rather than the release of painful states.

Method

This paper explores how Buddhism, which is often called a contemplative science, can inspire radical change of perspective concerning the science of the mind and the wider human experience.

On this basis, I present Buddhist phenomenology and psychology principles and how they can complement Western psychodynamic approaches.

I also present and develop the four intervention axes of Buddhist-inspired contemplative leadership coaching: mindful leadership, brilliant leadership, wisdom in emotions and embodied leadership.

For more information, please refer to my EMCCC thesis (Le Gal, 2018).

Key Findings & Discussion

A Change in Perspective: Contemplative science

Science and philosophy are typically seen as separate thought systems in the Western world. In Eastern philosophy, the difference between the external object of science and the personal experience of those objects has never been separate paradigms. There are several reasons for this. First, the philosophical attitude towards “nature” is completely different from the Western concept of “nature”. Because of the “non-privileged” status of humans in the cosmos, humans are not considered distinct from nature, which is ultimately mysterious and incomprehensible.³ Second, for the Eastern world, the ultimate goal of knowledge is not to understand an “external world”, but to enhance the harmony of “nature” through mastering the mind and building a behavioral ethic.

Buddhism is often seen as a religion or a philosophy. However, because of its methods of inquiry and its pragmatic approach to human experience, it can also be seen as a contemplative science, or a phenomenology that can transform our overall perception of science in general and serve as an interesting base for understanding consciousness and human experience.

The neuroscientist and philosopher Francisco Varela defines the Buddha dharma as a contemplative science: “Buddhism stands as an outstanding

source of observations concerning human mind and experience, accumulated over centuries with great theoretical rigor. This treasure-trove of knowledge is an uncanny complement to science.” Therefore, Buddhism has given rise to a “first-person” approach to science and an interdisciplinary collaboration of experts in cognitive science, neurobiology and Buddhism developing the study of the mind as a scientific object with unprecedented rigor and precision.⁴

The Psychodynamic Approach: looking above and below the surface

Psychodynamics is an approach of psychology that emphasizes the study of the “non-conscious” forces. These forces, repressed and suppressed under the influence of groups, social interactions and social defenses, underlie human feelings, emotions and behaviours.⁵ Psychodynamics explores fields of tensions and fears in a relevant past and sense-making exploration. Its perspective of inquiry is an “above and below the surface” psychological approach to consciousness. Psychodynamics is a way of creating conditions conducive to a change of mindset in the patient’s psychological dynamics, with a reciprocal interaction between understanding and transformation: “Understanding to transform, transform to understand”.⁶

The Buddhist Approach: looking behind the curtain

Buddhist psychology is a more phenomenological approach that focuses not so much on the streams of the ālaya vijñāna, which are perceived as mind illusions, but on the understanding of the cognitive dynamic of the eight consciousness, the possibility of ālaya vijñāna returning to its original purity of ālaya jñāna and the concept of tathāgatagarbha, which means that the mind is essentially pure. In contrast to the psychodynamic approach, contemplative psychology does not focus on the dynamics but rather the interdependence or relationship between the patients and the contents of their mind, conscious or not. It is even an anti-dynamic approach, as the possibility of returning the storehouse consciousness is only possible by the action of calming the mind by the practice of Śamatha-Vipaśyanā.

- Śamatha is the contemplative practice of tranquility, or calming the mind and its formations, through the practice of mindfulness meditation. In the direct-approach Tibetan traditions, which are derived practice traditions from the Yogācāra school, one does not look for a state of tranquility but rather enters a state of neutral equanimity toward the mind dynamics.
- Vipaśyanā is the contemplative practice of clear vision, often translated

as “clear insight into the true nature of reality” (Gunaratana, 2011). Vipāśyanā arises from Śamatha, and the two practices are clearly linked.

Therefore, the “anti-dynamics” behind this approach will not be a transitional one, but a “bracketing” one, where it will be of utmost importance to create conditions of a slowdown and, if possible, a suspension of the dynamic of the psyche, enabling us to clearly see the phenomenological functioning of the mind. Any kind of psychic dynamic would cloud the vision of the practitioner, like the mud in the glass of water becoming re-suspended by any movement of the glass or the water.

A Clinical Method of Contemplative Psychotherapy

Since its creation in the 1970s by the Tibetan master Chögyam Trungpa, contemplative psychotherapy has evolved into a therapeutic clinical practice. Contemplative psychotherapy integrates aspects of Buddhism such as the concept of “brilliant sanity”, mindfulness meditation, the exploration of emotions, with a distinct language of mental health, and the exploration of embodiment and compassion.⁷

- **Brilliant sanity** is an expression of the tathāgatagarbha thought, is the ground for contemplative psychotherapy interventions. The approach is particularly interested in reconnecting patients with their natural wisdom.
- **Mindfulness** is a formal practice of cultivating awareness and becoming more gentle and appreciative of oneself by being present. Mindfulness has three dimensions that will develop with practice as manifestations of brilliant sanity: awareness, openness and empathy. Awareness is the mind’s capacity to stay focused, without tension on the present moment and without turmoil or diversion. Openness is a state of oceanic open mindedness, free of judgments or categorization of the experience. Empathy is a state of sensitivity and closeness with the experience. The conjunction of these three qualities is a state of immediate mindfulness, where the mind is at ease and develops true insight.
- Like the psychodynamic approach, contemplative psychotherapy emphasizes **emotions**, but “Tibetan Buddhist psychological teachings understand emotions to be part of our wealth and not something to be gotten rid of”.⁸ Contemplative psychotherapy proposes three ways of working with emotions: (1) boycotting emotions, (2) transforming emotions and (3) liberating emotions. The boycotting method consists

of using mindfulness to avoid entering the dynamics of the emotion. The transforming method allows one to appreciate the natural qualities of the energies and those of others. This practice also enhances empathy toward others through a deeper understanding of others' emotions. The liberating method consists of seeing the nature of emotions as they are. They learn to stay in an attitude of receptivity and open availability, and in doing so, enhance empathy and loving kindness toward the other and oneself.

Practical Implications

The contemplative leadership presented in this paper is not limited to the idea of bringing “spirituality” or “peace of mind” to leaders and the workplace, but is rather intended to be a consistent and complete approach to leadership coaching and executive development.

In the inspiration for contemplative psychotherapy, the four pillars of contemplative leadership coaching are relevant: mindful leadership, brilliant leadership, wisdom in emotions and embodied leadership.

Mindfulness practice as a transformative approach

In the context of the proposed contemplative leadership coaching, mindfulness practice is a transformative phenomenological approach. Mindfulness is key for the practice of both the coach and the client and is the most important method for helping an executive achieve a true and profound change in a leadership approach.

Contrary to many commonplace beliefs about meditation, mindfulness is not against intellectual reflection, but is rather a prerequisite for a right reflection. This is why we name this approach contemplative leadership.

Through development of their vigilant and panoramic awareness capabilities, clients not only reflect on their behaviours, tendencies, thoughts or prejudices, but also deconstruct the subjectivity of their points of view and directly see their modes of functioning in an embodied way. Mindfulness is embodied in the way that it directly develops focus, clarity and empathy in a non-conceptual way.

Clients can gradually train themselves to develop the four types of mindfulness: (1) mindfulness of the body, (2) mindfulness of feelings or sensations, (3) mindfulness of the mind or consciousness and (4) mindfulness

of phenomena. Mindfulness practice is therefore an integrative practice that questions the totality of the human experience.

Here, mindfulness practice is not only the basis for recognizing brilliant sanity, working with emotions or generating an embodied leadership, but is also the central transformational method that encompasses all others. It also has many other benefits, such as the development of focus capacity, creativity and prosocial behaviours.

Brilliant leadership

The second pillar of contemplative leadership has two types of aspects and applications: the recognition of the self and other's brilliant sanity as a base for empathy and altruism, and the same recognition as a foundation for unconditional confidence and trust.

The recognition of the self and other's brilliant sanity is the first step to building deep empathy and to the possibility of altruism and true collaboration. The leaders no longer see problems to solve, but rather opportunities through which they can develop their abilities and organisations. By recognising brilliant sanity as a foundation, contemplative leadership coaching proposes a complete change or transformation of the mindset. Management can be based on an opportunity-growth paradigm instead of a problem-solution one.

The recognition of brilliant sanity is also a basis for building self-confidence and trust in the organisation. Many people in leadership positions must manage their lack of self-esteem or self-confidence on a daily basis. Problems such as imposter syndrome are rooted in this problem.⁹ Starting a coaching intervention by recognising one's own brilliant sanity can help overcome this issue and progressively build unconditional confidence.

Wisdom in emotions

Buddhist psychology considers that conflictual emotions have a root in brilliant sanity and are the craving experience of an inherent wisdom. It recognises five emotional families that can be transmuted into five wisdoms.¹⁰

- **Openness and respect for immediate experience:** This quality is the capacity to recognize our direct perceptions of the present moment, with the ability to stand in ambiguity, uncertainty, chaos and confusion,

both in oneself and in the environment. It involves a clarification of our relationship to the experience, with accuracy, openness, awareness and curiosity.

- **Intellect and insight:** This refers to passion for learning and curiosity, critical thinking, analysis and insight. It is a clarity of understanding about experience, principles, structure, logic and relationships and an ability to synthesize with creativity and precision, with the willingness to maintain a larger view and regard situations beyond our own self-interest, including the ability to take other persons' perspectives.
- **Resourcefulness:** This quality is the ability to recognize and appreciate the world in its diversity, including the many modes of human experiences, expressions and cultural backgrounds, and to take advantage of present resources and recognize hidden inner talents – intellectual, emotional and pragmatic.
- **Interpersonal communication skills:** This quality values others' experiences, allowing them to teach us about themselves. It is the capacity to build relationships and to connect and communicate empathically with people. It includes the various modes of interpersonal communication: effective reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, and also non-verbal artistic media. It is also an interest in and curiosity about other people's lives and the ability to give and receive feedback skilfully.
- **Effective action:** This quality involves the capacity to apply our learning and insight effectively to the world and transform it into action with structure, allowing to respond effectively to demands, sustain interest and commit to carrying projects through to completion.

Embodied leadership

The fourth pillar of “contemplative leadership coaching” proposes an integrated approach to leadership development that incorporates intentional body awareness and mind training as a foundation for embodied mindful action.

The embodied leadership coaching practice begins with mindfulness practice. The coach presents mindfulness exercises and asks for feedback in a descriptive rather than interpretative way. It is very important to stick to this descriptive approach of the contemplative experience. This aspect can be very challenging for both coaches and clients who are accustomed to analysing, categorizing and interpreting behaviours. The descriptive approach allows the development of an intuitive spacious awareness. For example, to

be able to transmute and liberate emotions, the practitioner will not focus on “why” emotions are here, but on “how” they are lived in one’s body and “what” impact the emotions have on one’s mind, breath, speech and behaviours.¹¹

The descriptive approach gradually helps practitioners leave the centeredness of their experiences, which can be caused by introspection, and enter a naturally empathic relationship with the world and others. Therefore, the embodiment practice aims to feel “at home” in the body rather than to transcend it.¹² It does so through deep insight of the interdependence of mind, body and breath in the way one experiments with the world and through the deep acceptance of feelings, emotions and conditions as they are without judgment or wishes to be different. This deep acceptance is a prerequisite for real embodied empathy and altruism and helps cultivate integrity. This embodiment of self-awareness generates appropriate actions linked to the awareness of oneself in motion.¹³

Contemplative Leadership coaching in action: Case 1 (Robert)

Robert was a very successful and assertive sales and marketing director of an electronic company. Robert was also trapped in constant negative thoughts about himself and others and had many difficulties expressing his feelings and emotions. He felt increasingly exiled in his mental virtual world. For several years, he had been living in a state of deep questioning about himself and the meaning of his work, almost losing taste for everything he was doing professionally, which deeply affected his family life.

At that time, he discovered mindfulness meditation, which helped relieve some stress and anxiety and helped him feel more comfortable with his emotions and thoughts. However, mindfulness did not provide him any answers to his difficulties. With the primary wish of completely changing his life, he began a coaching to discover his possible new life project, as he was deeply considering quitting his job. After a few contemplative leadership coaching sessions, he began to have a clearer view of the struggles he was going through.

His first struggle was a lack of alignment of his personal ethics in his job and a fear of speaking up when he was disagreeing with strategic choices. The second was the impression of not fulfilling what was making sense to his life, a feeling of unworthiness and lack of recognition of what he was bringing to the company. His emotions were a mixture of the Vajra and Padma families, with an underlying strong fear of being perceived as an overly negative person and always seeing problems and a strong wish to express his artistic

talents.

Through his daily mindfulness practice, he built stronger self-confidence in his brilliant sanity and even found courage to talk about ethical problems in board meetings with creative solutions. He also established more authentic and empathic relationships with his team members and peers and gained responsibilities where he could express his ethical know-hows and creativity.

After a few months, the idea of leaving the business world faded, and he was offered a new position where he was responsible for long-term strategy, fulfilling his need for creative expression and corporate social responsibility that capitalized on his ethical insight.

Contemplative Leadership coaching in action: Case 2 (Francesca and Patrick)

Francesca and Patrick worked for an e-commerce website that had offered the practice of mindfulness for employees since its foundation. Francesca was the artistic and communication manager and Patrick was the sales and procurement manager. Their relationship had been difficult since the beginning and began to threaten the future of the website, as conflicts were escalating into everyday wariness and demonstrations of anger.

Patrick criticised Francesca's artistic choices concerning the range of products and her interferences in the relationship he was establishing with suppliers. He also had many concerns about her seductive relationship with clients and the way she was interacting with subordinates.

Francesca, on the other hand, found Patrick very arrogant and raised concerns about his wish for control, claiming he was not the boss and that his communication was very rude and authoritarian.

The coaching intervention began when the conflict escalated to a point where they no longer wanted to work together and began to run two businesses in parallel inside the e-commerce website. The general manager called for a coaching and mediation intervention, as he valued both employees' competencies and did not want to lose their skills by dismissing one of the two to settle the dispute.

The coaching began with long individual interviews of each person, with times of mindfulness exercises, during which they were asked to avoid any interpretation of their emotions and stick to the description of their feelings.

From these interviews, it appeared that Francesca was a mixture of Padma and Karma families, with traits of seduction, a need for recognition and feelings of insecurity as well as significant anxiety and jealousy toward Patrick. On the other hand, Patrick had traits of the *Vajra* and *Ratna* families, encompassing aggression, authoritarianism, difficulty expressing his emotions and an arrogant tendency to see himself as much more concerned and skillful than others. Through mindfulness and *tonglen* practice with their emotions to feel their own brilliant sanity, both began to work on their respective roles. More importantly, they began to “exchange themselves with the other”, being able to discover the good qualities behind the conflictual emotions of their colleague.

Francesca discovered that Patrick had a much clearer view of the challenges of dealing with some suppliers and that he could offer her a lot of security where she was uncomfortable. Patrick discovered, on the other hand, that Francesca had much more developed empathic communication skills that were appreciated by all and that she had much to teach him. He also discovered that she had a much clearer view of the general strategy when he was feeling lost and too concerned with details.

In a second part of the coaching intervention, the two participated in a dialogue in which each was asked to listen empathically to the concerns and needs of the other, define the other’s qualities and identify where they could support each other in a more collaborative, altruistic and supporting way. They built new rules of cooperation and support in a transparent and trusted mode.

This has enabled them to participate in the development of the website. Their collaboration was fruitful until Francesca left the company, following a wish to fulfil other life projects that emerged during the coaching sessions.

Conclusion

Contemplative exercises such as mindfulness meditation are revolutionizing leadership, but their richness goes beyond the benefits generally exposed in the economic press or management science research. Mindfulness can be considered a real art of living and a mode of being for leaders and executives, deconstructing soaring tendencies such as over-intellectualization, egoism and fears that stem from the overall disembodiment of human experience paired with dreams of superpowers’ acquisition. Making better leaders would mean making wise, insightful and humanistic leaders that consider experience as a whole, transcending self and concepts.

In the study of economics, ethics, psychology and organisations, Buddhism can provide a rich and vast insight because of its precision and associated transformational techniques. We are convinced that the study of Buddhism can revolutionize economics, management and leadership in the same way that behavioural economics, psychodynamic and systemic approaches did several years ago. Particularly in the field of leadership development, contemplative leadership based on the Buddhist embodied approach of human experience can be one of the most accurate approaches to creating the embodied and authentic leaders the world desperately needs.

About the Author

Eric Le Gal has a broad professional experience and expertise in international finance and marketing. In 2009, he decided to redirect his life in order to regain serenity and fulfillment by settling in a Tibetan Buddhist center in the French Alps where he has achieved a traditional three-year meditation retreat.

Now lama (Buddhist teacher) in a Tibetan lineage, he transmits the essence of mindfulness meditation with clarity and precision in a lay context. Furthermore, after several years of Eastern philosophies studies, he gives lectures of Buddhist philosophy and phenomenology at the Buddha University.

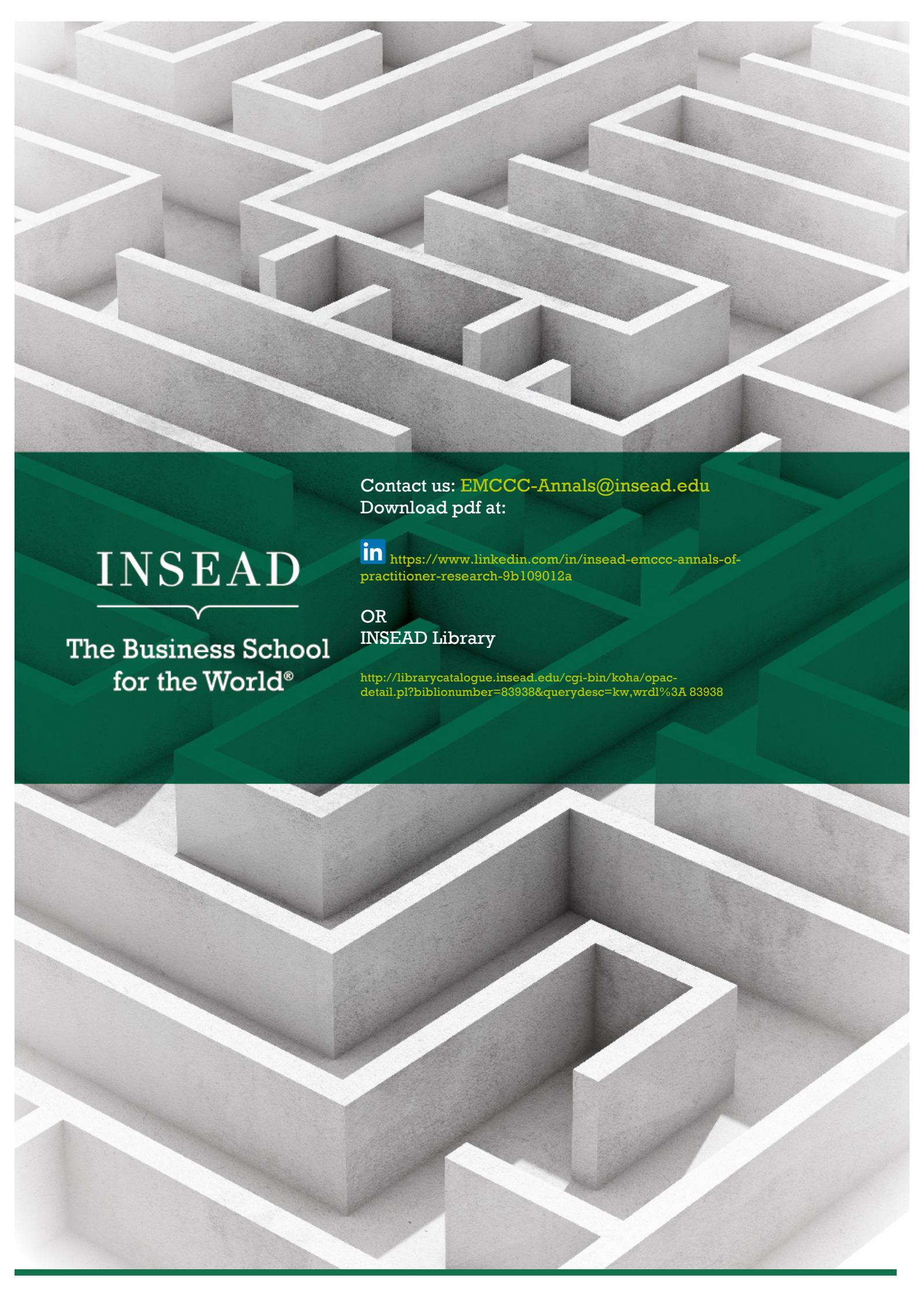
In 2016, he started Ekwanim Management, a consulting and coaching firm that promotes humanistic and contemplative leadership, happiness at work and economic peace. His INSEAD Master thesis, 'Contemplative leadership coaching', received with distinction describes the heart of his leadership coaching practice in our complex modern world.

Since 2017, he lectures at ESSEC Business School, in Paris, a course named "Conscious and Mindful Leadership".

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