



# Mindful police leadership: Opening essential new pathways to 21st-century police leadership and culture

Les Sylven\*

## ABSTRACT

Canadian police managers are facing a series of daunting new challenges that will require significant personal resources to address. Growing research suggests mindfulness training, meditation, and other related contemplative practices appear to benefit leaders in other professions; however, little is known about how these practices may, or may not, be helpful for police leaders. This article contributes to this understanding by sharing results from an exploratory qualitative study that asked senior police leaders who self-identified as regular meditators to discuss how their practices might influence their leadership. Guided by a reflective thematic analysis approach and utilizing NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software, data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 11 Commissioned Officers from a large Canadian police service were analyzed for themes. Broadly organized by influence on job performance, relationships, and well-being, eight distinct themes were developed: enhanced calmness and self-control; better clarity and decision making; improved focus and efficiency; enhanced presence with others; improved conflict resolution practices; greater compassion and empathy; reduced harmful stress; and enhanced resilience and work/life integration. These results begin to extend the literature on mindful leadership from other workplace contexts into the realm of police leadership and suggest that meditation and mindfulness are beneficial practices that may open new and essential pathways towards 21st century police leadership and culture.

**Key Words** Canadian police leadership challenges; meditation and contemplative practice; mindful leadership; reflexive thematic analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2023, Canadian police managers are facing a series of daunting new challenges. For example, no longer simply responsible for performing their traditional federal, provincial, and municipal law enforcement mandates, today's police leaders must ensure their organizations are also actively involved in meeting the evolving safety expectations of their communities. These expectations are high, even though the foundations of many of these safety needs are not directly related to traditional police work and are embedded in increasingly complex social and public health problems, such as people experiencing homelessness, drug addiction, and mental health crises (Griffiths & Dubord, 2023; Taylor et al., 2022).

Another new challenge for Canadian police managers is they are leading their organizations during a time of reduced positive perceptions of the police (Ruddell, 2022). This has been

attributed to high-profile police-involved deaths in the United States and Canada, the role of the police during the global pandemic, and the findings from public inquiries that continue to identify the failures of the justice system for women and for Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized communities. The result is that, for many Canadians, relationships with the police in the early 21st century are strained, and police leaders must ensure re-building trust is a high organizational priority (Roach, 2022; Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2022; Wood, 2022).

A further significant challenge facing police managers exists inside their own organizations. In the past 5 years, much more has become known about the depth and breadth of trauma and stress carried by police employees and other public safety professionals (Carleton et al., 2018; Carleton et al., 2020; Heber et al., 2023; Papazoglou et al., 2021). Canadian police leaders are being urged to make the mental well-being of individuals in their workplaces a constant high priority

**Correspondence to:** Les Sylven, PhD Candidate, Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies, University of Victoria, PO Box 1700, STN CSC, Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2, Canada. **E-mail:** lsylven@uvic.ca

**To cite:** Sylven, L. (2023). Mindful police leadership: Opening essential new pathways to 21st-century police leadership and culture. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 8(4), 157-165. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.338>

© Author(s) 2023. Open Access. This work is distributed under the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license. For commercial re-use, please contact sales@sgpublishing.ca.

SG PUBLISHING Published by SG Publishing Inc. **CSKA** Official publication of the Community Safety Knowledge Alliance.

(Edwards, 2023; Jackson & Theroux, 2023; Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2022; Thompson & Tam-Seto, 2023).

It follows that to effectively address these significant challenges, police managers must ensure they have the personal resources to perform their roles, foster positive relationships, and maintain their own well-being. Growing research suggests that engaging in mindfulness training, meditation, and other contemplative practices can benefit leaders in non-police workplaces (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2019; Urrila, 2022; Zhou et al., 2023). However, research that seeks to understand how these practices may, or may not, support Canadian police leaders has not been undertaken.

The purpose of this article is to add to this understanding by sharing results from an exploratory qualitative study that asked a cohort of Canadian police managers who self-identified as regular meditators to discuss their meditation and leadership practices. Specifically, the primary research question guiding this inquiry was, “How might the practice of meditation influence the practice of leadership for some Canadian commissioned police officers?”

This article begins by canvassing recent research on mindfulness and meditation for leaders in other workplace settings. This is followed by a description of the definitions and methodology used in this study and a presentation of the key thematic results, with supporting quotes. A discussion of how this study’s results compare with the cited literature on mindful leadership, and the implications of the results when viewed alongside the challenges facing Canadian police leaders, follows. The article concludes with the study’s potential limitations and suggestions for future research.

## Workplace Mindfulness and Mindful Leadership Research

Recognizing a surge occurring in mindfulness research, Good et al. (2016) set out to systematically integrate findings from previous empirical studies to create a framework for workplace mindfulness research. Defining mindfulness as “receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experiences” (p. 117), they analyzed studies that explored mindfulness as a temporary mental state, an enduring dispositional trait, a type of practice such as meditation, and a specific training intervention or program. From this, they highlighted published evidence that mindfulness appears to positively influence cognition, emotion, behaviour, and physiology, which in turn can enhance workplace outcomes such as job performance, relationships, and well-being. None of the studies in their review occurred specifically within the context of police leadership.

Several years later, Donaldson-Feilder et al. (2019) conducted a systematic literature review focused on mindfulness and meditation interventions for leaders. Analyzing 19 empirical studies published between 2000 and 2015, they reported that mindfulness and meditation interventions may improve some aspects of a leader’s own well-being, resilience, and leadership capability. As with the analysis conducted by Good et al. (2016), none of the studies they reviewed occurred specifically within the context of police leadership.

One of the authors referenced by Donaldson-Feilder et al. (2019) was Janice Marturano (2015). She is the founder and director of the Institute for Mindful Leadership, and an early

advocate for positioning mindfulness at the centre of effective leadership. Marturano has argued that regular meditation will develop mindful leaders who “embody leadership presence by cultivating focus, clarity, creativity, and compassion in the service of others” (p. 11).

A more recent systematic review of the literature on mindfulness and leadership was conducted by Urrila (2022) who analyzed 30 empirical studies published from 2009 to 2020. This review concluded that leader-specific mindfulness practice appeared to positively impact various leader developmental outcomes; some were considered essential, such as personal well-being and productivity, while others were considered transformative, such as positive relationships with others and inner growth. This review did not appear to include any studies specifically exploring leader-specific mindfulness practice for policing.

A final example comes from a meta-analysis of leader mindfulness research conducted by Zhou et al. (2023), who drew upon Good et al.’s (2016) framework of workplace mindfulness outcomes to quantitatively synthesize 46 articles published between 1998 and 2022. They concluded that evidence appeared to support the positive influence of leader mindfulness on leader performance, relationships, and well-being, as well as the performance and well-being of the leaders’ followers. As with the three other systematic review studies, policing did not appear to be the specific workplace context in any research.

## Study Definitions

Although mindfulness training, meditation, and other contemplative practices have existed as part of spiritual traditions for thousands of years, interest in the secular use of mindfulness for the workplace has grown exponentially in the past two decades (Bartlett et al., 2019; Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2019; Eby et al., 2019; Good et al., 2016; Urrila, 2022; Zhou et al., 2023). With this growth, researchers have identified the potential for misinformation due to the lack of definitional clarity in some mindfulness studies, and they recommend future researchers explicitly state which definitions are being relied upon (Shabaz & Parker, 2021; van Dam et al., 2018). Accordingly, the following conceptualizations of mindfulness, meditation, contemplative practice, and regular meditation practice were used in this study.

### *Mindfulness*

For the purposes of this study, mindfulness was defined as a state of consciousness characterized by “an enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality” (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 822). It is understood that everyone possesses a basic ability to be mindful, and that mindfulness as a temporary mental state, and an enduring dispositional trait, can be enhanced by regularly engaging in mindfulness training such as meditation and other related contemplative practices (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Jamieson & Tuckey, 2017).

### *Meditation*

From the multiple definitions of meditation, Walsh and Shapiro’s (2006) definition is often used in psychological research (Breedvelt et al., 2019; Ganesan et al., 2022; Matko & Sedlmeier, 2019) and was selected for this study. They stated that meditation

is “a family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control and thereby foster general mental well-being and development and/or specific capacities such as calm, clarity, and concentration” (pp. 228–229).

### *Regular Meditation Practice*

With respect to what constitutes regular meditation practice, the definition from a phenomenological study exploring the influence of meditation on the leadership development of several managers was adopted (Frizzel et al., 2016). Regular meditation practice is understood as training at least three times per week, for at least 3 months.

### *Contemplative Practice*

Contemplative practice is often characterized more broadly than meditation practice. In this study, we drew upon Edwards et al.'s (2017) understanding of contemplative practice as “any activity undertaken regularly with the intention of quieting the mind and developing deep concentration, calm, and awareness of the present moment” (p. 1). For the purposes of this article, mindfulness training, mindfulness practice, and meditation are used interchangeably.

## METHOD

As the aim of this study was to deeply explore the “how” and “why” of police leadership practice with a small number of participants, an exploratory qualitative methodology appeared to be a good fit (Yin, 2016; Klenke, 2016). More specifically, the methods of semi-structured interviewing, followed up with focus group discussions, were used to gather in-depth responses from participants. In this section, the details of this approach are outlined, including a description of the participant invitation, selection, and data collection processes. The specific data analysis method used in this study, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2022b), is also briefly described.

### *Participant Invitation and Selection*

On March 18, 2021, following written institutional approval from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board and the police service's Human Resources Research Board, an “Invitation to Participate” was emailed to all 605 Commissioned Officers in the police service. Email recipients were asked to contact the author if they regularly practiced meditation and wished to confidentially participate in semi-structured interviews and focus groups. A total of 13 individuals offered to participate. Eleven respondents met the study inclusion criteria of holding the rank of a Commissioned Officer and having a regular meditation practice of at least three times a week, for at least 3 months (Frizzel et al., 2016; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006) and were invited to participate in the study.

### *Data Collection*

The semi-structured interviews occurred between April 9, 2021, and June 24, 2021. All interviews were conducted and recorded on the Microsoft Teams video conferencing platform. The interviews were conversational in tone and often became deeply personal. The average interview length was 2 hours and 22 minutes. Participants were later invited to join online follow-up focus group interviews to discuss the full study's

preliminary findings. In total, three focus groups, which included eight of the eleven study participants, were hosted between June 15, 2022, and July 5, 2022.

### *Data Analysis Process*

#### *Reflexive Thematic Analysis*

Each transcript was reviewed in detail, denaturalized (Oliver et al., 2005), and loaded on NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software. Data analysis was then guided by a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2022a). A hallmark of this approach is the premise that a researcher's subjectivity is a valuable analytic resource to be highlighted and used, not diminished or eliminated (Gough & Madill, 2012).

## RESULTS

One of the most significant overarching results was that every participant (n=11) perceived that meditation positively influenced their practice of leadership in several ways. Drawing again on Good et al.'s (2016) conceptualization of the potential workplace outcomes of mindfulness, these perceptions were broadly organized into three categories: influence on job performance; influence on relationships; and influence on well-being. In total, eight themes were developed. In the following section, each theme is described and illustrated by selected quotes from the dataset.

### *Influence on Job Performance*

Participants in this study were assigned to a wide variety of roles and responsibilities in this large Canadian police service. Regardless of their assignment, the belief in the positive impact of meditation practice on their day-to-day job performance was held by all. Within this first broad category, three significant performance-related themes were developed: enhanced calmness and emotional self-control; better clarity and decision making; and improved focus and efficiency.

#### *Enhanced Calmness and Emotional Self-Control*

The ability to remain calm and maintain emotional self-control was identified by several participants as a significant performance-related challenge for Commissioned Officers, and they credited their meditation with enhancing this skill. One participant, using the metaphor of a circus performer, explained:

I find management is putting yourself constantly on a very tight rope, in difficult situations. There's going to be an emotional component. There's going to be anxiety, but you're also doing it, like most acrobats in a circus, in front of a very large crowd. And the higher you are in management and leadership, the more exposed you are. So that tight rope could lead to some very disastrous results if you're not perfectly balanced. So, to me, meditation has influenced my leadership by keeping me balanced on that tight rope.

Enhanced calmness due to meditation practice was also reported by those who felt they already possessed strong

emotional control. One participant, who attributed this high level of self-control to a lengthy assignment as a member of a high-risk Emergency Response Team (ERT) explained:

My hair is never on fire. You know? I don't lose control. As ERT members, [...] we've been through the fires, and you're able to deal with things calmly and never panic, but with meditation also comes that acceptance of what is. Something's happened? Okay, well, let's deal with it in a practical, sort of calm way.

### *Better Clarity and Decision Making*

A second performance-related challenge raised by some participants was the ability to make clear and correct decisions. Several officers credited meditation with improving this critical skill. As one participant explained:

When I'm meditating is when I get those thoughts of "Wow! What about this?" As you know with meditation, sometimes your mind takes over, but it brings me down rabbit holes that I find I'm most creative, and I'm most accurate in my assessment of things.

The influence of meditation on decision making was particularly clear to one participant, who concluded, "I think at the end of the day, it comes down to [...] you have a better ability to either make decisions, or to work through problems." Linking directly to the practice of police leadership he added:

So, it will help you stay focused, and then it will help you make decisions. When all seems lost and you have to make those hard decisions, it helps focus you and you'll find that clarity a little bit easier by doing it. Oh, and by the way, when you're a leader, that's what you need to be able to do, is find that clarity.

### *Improved Focus and Efficiency*

A third performance-related challenge was the ability to maintain focus and efficiency while engaged in the many tasks required of Commissioned Officers. Meditation practice reportedly improved this critical skill for several participants. As one participant explained about her yoga practice:

And as you know, being an Officer, there's so much, there's so much stuff going on in the head, at any given time [...] So, if I can be efficient in my yoga practice, knowing that it is going to make me more efficient during my day and give me that clarity of mind, for me, it's an investment of time that is well worth it.

This perception of enhanced efficiency was also echoed by another participant, who said, "So the fact that my meditation practice and the yoga I do calms me, helps me be in the moment and not think too much about everything all the time, that helps me act more efficiently at work."

### *Influence on Relationships*

Participants often mentioned how meditation enhanced the quality of their workplace relationships. Three themes developed in this broad category were: enhanced presence

for others; improved conflict resolution practices; and greater compassion and empathy.

### *Enhanced Presence for Others*

As described by participants, the workloads and demands placed on Commissioned Officers are significant. Yet, the importance of being fully present in the moment and undistracted for others was also identified as a critically important relationship skill by some participants. As one participant stressed, "I remember a Police Chaplain telling me once that it's about presence. Sometimes it's not about words, it's about presence. And being deliberately present. So, I think that's one of the biggest challenges in police leadership these days."

The benefit of meditation practice for developing enhanced presence was shared by another participant, who explained, "The first thing that I would point to is [...] the fact that if you have a practice of meditation, you have more of an awareness of self, and you're more in the present." Another participant placed similar importance on the connection between presence, relationships, and the practice of meditation when he said, "So, I would tell you that's probably where it helps me most with my leadership. Being as present as I can, in every moment, to ensure that I give my best to the people around me."

### *Improved Conflict Resolution Practices*

An additional relationship challenge mentioned by several participants was the ability to manage workplace conflict effectively. One participant noted that greater mindfulness derived from his meditation practice resulted in a shift in his approach to conflict resolution. He shared:

I'm finding now as a manager, particularly where I used to hate conflict, I was conflict avoidant, etc., I didn't want to get into difficult conversations. Whereas now it's like ... I don't want to say fun, it's not fun. But it's interesting. I use the mindfulness component of this as a practice, I'm curious about it. I'm curious about where the people are, and what they're feeling, and why they're feeling it.

Another participant described an incident that occurred during a recent external assignment to illustrate the role meditation plays for her in managing workplace conflict. She explained:

I practiced meditation every day while I was there, but also working with the [police agency], they asked [...] "Where did you learn to get people together and have those hard conversations?" because unfortunately we had a situation that happened there. I said, "It's just part of meditation, and being who you are." And I truly believe that. They listened to me, and they said, "Can we bring you back?"

### *Greater Compassion and Empathy*

A third way participants perceived that meditation influenced their workplace relationships was by increasing their compassion and empathy. This compassion was for themselves, the people they are leading, and the community at large. For example, understanding the need for self-compassion was described by one participant in this way:

You know, it's all well and good to stay on the diet when everything's calm! (laughs) Whether it's the diet, or contemplation, or meditation, it gets challenging when the pressures are on [...] and that's when you need it the most. So, just being kind to myself during those times, but also going "Hey, this would be a good time to do a walk or a meditation."

One participant shared that he felt increased mindfulness and compassion is critical to regaining the public's trust and to justly serve the most vulnerable in society:

I think in a time where public trust [in the police] is wavering, in many ways... I think that the more mindful our officers are, the more compassionate[ly] they present to people, the more we will build and re-build trust, especially with our most vulnerable communities.

### Influence on Well-Being

The final broad category drawn from the experiences of participants was how meditation influenced well-being. For several participants, this was the most important category, as they believed well-being was foundational to more than their careers. As one participant explained, "This is actually a technical skill that can be honed, that can be developed and [that] has a broad effect on every aspect of your life." This broad category can be viewed through two themes: reduced harmful stress on the one hand and enhanced trauma resiliency and work/life integration on the other.

### Reduced Harmful Stress

Study participants frequently shared that operational and organizational workplace stress was significant in their workplace and was an important reason for practicing meditation. As one Officer explained:

Every employee, of every rank, and every category within the [police service], is faced with tremendous pressure. Whether it be stress or emotional control, I think providing our employees with useful tools like meditation will allow us to be the best person we can be in those moments when the communities really need us.

The same participant went on to comment on the organizational benefits of reducing stress through meditation, including reducing the amount of employees off-duty sick (ODS) and decreasing the frequency of poor leadership caused by excessive stress:

I think it's going to have an impact [on] stress management when it comes to ODS prevention, but also preventing regrettable incidents where our members get overstressed... or even when leaders get overwhelmed by pressures and by stress, and probably [don't] react the way they would have wanted to in a difficult situation.

### Enhanced Trauma Resiliency and Work/Life Integration

The need to develop and enhance personal resilience was also frequently raised by participants. As one participant explained:

This is all intertwined with resiliency and looking after yourself, self-maintenance, all the rest of it. We give our people a huge amount of tools to do their job, but if we introduced meditation at an entry-level stage, we would have one resilient population in terms of dealing with stress, not only with police work but the rest of the things that we deal with in society, right?

The need for resiliency was also viewed as essential for successful work/life integration. One participant explained the importance of this by rhetorically framing a series of questions to other police officers:

Another thing I would say as a selling point to members is this, "Hey, do you want to stay married? Do you want a successful relationship? Do you want your kids to like you? Do you want to have friends? You know, do you want to get along well with people? Do you want to be able to sleep at night? Well, this is part of what you're going to need to do. Start building your resiliency practices so that you don't wind up being another story."

## DISCUSSION

In this section, the study results are compared with the previously described literature on meditation and mindfulness practice for leaders in other workplaces. The study results are then examined alongside the three real-world challenges facing Canadian police managers introduced at the beginning of this paper. The section concludes with the potential limitations of this study and suggestions for future research.

### Reviewed Literature and the Study Results

When compared with the reviewed mindful leadership literature (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2019; Marturano, 2015; Urrila, 2022; Zhou et al., 2023), the eight themes developed in this study are consistent with many of the previous findings (see Table I). For example, Donaldson-Feilder et al. concluded that mindfulness and meditation interventions may improve some aspects of leader well-being, resilience, and leadership capability. In this study, the themes of reduced harmful stress, enhanced trauma resilience and work/life integration, enhanced calmness and self-control, and improved conflict resolution practices align with Donaldson-Feilder et al.'s findings from non-police workplaces.

Urrila (2022) identified that leader-specific mindfulness practice appeared to positively impact essential leader development outcomes, such as personal well-being and productivity, and transformative leader development outcomes, such as forging positive relationships and inner growth. Themes developed in the current study that aligned with essential leader development outcomes included enhanced trauma resilience and improved focus and efficiency. Study themes associated with transformative leader development outcomes included enhanced presence for others, improved conflict resolution practices, greater work/life integration, and greater compassion and empathy.

Zhou et al. (2023) concluded that leader mindfulness appears to have a positive influence on leader performance, relationships, and well-being as well as the performance and well-being of the leader's followers. In this study, the themes

of enhanced calmness and emotional self-control, better clarity and decision making, improved conflict resolution practices, and reduced harmful stress align with the findings of Zhou et al.—although data on how these practices directly influenced followers’ performance and well-being was not collected in the present study.

It is in the writing of Marturano (2015), however, that the closest connections can be made with many of the findings of this study. Her definition of a mindful leader as someone who “embodies leadership presence by cultivating focus, clarity, creativity, and compassion in the service of others” (p. 11) is closely aligned with the study’s themes of enhanced presence for others, improved focus and efficiency, better clarity and decision making, and greater compassion and empathy.

In summary, the mindful leadership literature referenced from outside of policing suggested that mindfulness and meditation practice may have a positive influence on the practice of leadership. In this study, the themes developed indicated this may also be the case for some Canadian commissioned police officers. Therefore, it is argued that this study begins to extend the findings from the referenced literature into the context of mindful police leadership.

**Police Leadership Challenges and the Study Results**

When viewed alongside the policing challenges described at the outset of this article—specifically, meeting community safety needs and traditional law enforcement, strengthening public trust in policing, and prioritizing the well-being of police professionals—the themes developed in this study suggest practicing meditation and mindfulness will benefit Canadian police leaders as they address these new responsibilities (see Table II).

**TABLE I** Comparison of study themes with cited mindful leadership literature

Study Themes	Mindful Leadership Literature
<b>Job Performance</b>	
Enhanced calmness and emotional self-control	Donaldson-Fielder et al. (2019)
Better clarity and decision making	Zhou et al. (2022), Marturano (2015)
Improved focus and efficiency	Urrila (2022), Marturano (2015)
<b>Relationships</b>	
Enhanced presence for others	Urrila (2022), Marturano (2015)
Improved conflict resolution practices	Donaldson-Fielder et al. (2019), Zhou et al. (2022)
Greater compassion and empathy	Urrila (2022), Marturano (2015)
<b>Well-Being</b>	
Reduced harmful stress	Donaldson-Fielder et al. (2019), Zhou et al. (2022)
Enhanced trauma resiliency and work/life integration	Donaldson-Fielder et al. (2019), Urrila (2022)

**Meeting Community Safety Needs and Traditional Law Enforcement**

In 2023, Canadian police leaders are expected to ensure that their organizations are focused as much on meeting community safety needs as they are on meeting their traditional law enforcement mandates. This has not always been the case, as Griffiths and Dubord (2023) write:

In Canada, there has been a significant shift in the role of police influenced by the changing public safety, social, health and economic landscape. Current discourse suggests that police have a more prominent role in the context of broader community safety and well-being. This is especially true, with much of the day-to-day policing activities revolving around social and public health problems—or those committing “social crimes” due to health and social reasons. (p. 19)

At the heart of this challenge is the need for current and future police officers to embrace even greater collaboration with others working in social and public health organizations and to hold a new vision of what it means to be a police leader. As Taylor et al. (2022) explain:

Policing today and in the years ahead must be as much about public health as it is about enforcing the law. And with this change in mission, also changed are the requisite character, skills, knowledge, and attitudes for those who are to be invested with unique powers and state authorities and to effectively lead a police organization today. (p. 102)

Many of the themes developed in the present study support the necessary character, skills, and attitudes needed

**TABLE II** Comparison of study themes with identified police leadership challenges

Study Themes	Canadian Police Leadership Challenges
<b>Job Performance</b>	
Enhanced calmness and emotional self-control	Community safety, workplace well-being
Better clarity and decision making	Community safety, strengthening public trust
Improved focus and efficiency	Community safety
<b>Relationships</b>	
Enhanced presence for others	Community safety, strengthening public trust, workplace well-being
Improved conflict resolution practices	Rebuilding public trust, workplace well-being
Greater compassion and empathy	Community safety, strengthening public trust, workplace well-being
<b>Well-Being</b>	
Reduced harmful stress	Workplace well-being
Enhanced trauma resiliency and work/life integration	Workplace well-being

in this new vision of a Canadian police leader. Even further, it is argued that the reported outcomes of meditation and mindfulness practice appear to open new and essential pathways to 21st century police leadership and culture. For example, enhanced calmness, emotional self-control, and being present for others are essential characteristics for collaboration. Similarly, clarity in decision making, maintaining focus, and working efficiently are vital skills for police leaders when managing competing law enforcement and community safety demands. Enhanced compassion and empathy for the community is also an attitude that is foundational to the vision of a modern collaborative police leader held by Taylor et al. (2022) and was specifically highlighted by study participants. Taken together, these themes suggest that the practice of mindfulness and meditation will benefit Canadian leaders as they work to ensure their organizations meet community safety needs and traditional law enforcement mandates.

### *Strengthening Public Trust in Policing*

For many Canadians, trust, confidence, and support for their local police organizations were consistently positive between the years 2000 and 2019. After 2020, however, positive perceptions of the police dropped sharply in Canada, as well as in the United States and the United Kingdom (Ruddell, 2022). Based on an analysis of Canadian public safety surveys, Ruddell concluded:

The death of George Floyd in police custody appears to be the primary driver in this loss of the public's trust and confidence. A secondary reason for this decrease may be a growing antipathy towards all government institutions after the onset of the pandemic and making the police responsible for enforcing regulations that a significant proportion of the public perceives as illegitimate. (p. 51)

A deeper view of this change, however, is that Canada's colonial and patriarchal past cemented a systemically racist justice system that has overpoliced and under-protected women, Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized communities for decades (Roach, 2022). Strengthening public trust will not be a quick fix. The outcomes of regular meditation practice identified in this study are critical for leaders to possess if they hope to build greater public trust with their communities in the 21st century.

### *Prioritizing the Well-Being of Police Professionals*

It is within the challenge of prioritizing the well-being of individuals inside police organizations that mindfulness practice may have the most to offer. It has been argued that the profession of policing is experiencing a global mental health and wellness crisis (Edwards, 2023). Although police work has always been understood as stressful, dangerous, and likely traumatizing, when coupled with a stoic organizational culture that can devalue seeking help, the frequency of post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental illnesses inside police agencies and other Canadian public safety professions has become staggering (Carleton et al., 2018; Carleton et al., 2020; Heber et al., 2023; Papazoglou et al., 2021).

It is not an exaggeration to say that addressing the well-being challenge is critical to the future of Canadian policing and community safety. As Jackson and Theroux (2023) explain:

The mental health and wellness of the workforce is not a sector-specific issue; it is a human issue—one facing every single police service in Canada and, indeed, globally [...] We recognize that you cannot have safe, healthy, and resilient communities without a safe, healthy, and resilient police workforce. Full stop. (p. S4)

The attitudes and behaviours that police leaders demonstrate inside their organizations has been highlighted as essential to resolving this challenge. As Edwards (2023) argues:

Police leaders can no longer afford to be passive participants in the declining mental health of those men and women who put service before self [...] consciously or not, they play a pivotal role in creating the type of environment that either promotes or erodes mental and emotional safety. (pp. S50–S51)

Based on this study, engaging in meditation and mindfulness practices may benefit police leaders as they work to create psychologically safer police organizations. For example, enhanced leader presence would increase an employee's sense of being heard and valued. Similarly, improved conflict resolution practices could result in employees feeling less stress when workplace disagreements arise.

The experiences of study participants also indicated that leaders who engage in mindfulness practice will support their own well-being. All police leaders begin as frontline police officers. When they are eventually assigned leadership responsibilities, they will be influenced by their own history of traumatic and difficult experiences. Having the ability to enhance their own calmness and emotional self-control, reduce their harmful stress, and enhance their trauma resiliency and work/life integration through mindfulness practice is vital for police leaders' own well-being and is essential if they are to play a role in the well-being of others.

### *Study Limitations and Suggested Areas for Future Research*

This study extends the referenced literature on mindful leadership into the realm of police leadership. It also suggests that mindfulness and meditation practice will benefit Canadian police leaders as they address their most significant leadership challenges. There are, however, several study limitations and areas for future research that require highlighting.

Most notably, only Commissioned Officers who believed meditation positively influenced their practice of police leadership participated in this study. It is possible that other Commissioned Officers, who have practiced meditation and found it had no influence on their leadership practice, chose not to participate in the study. Even further, several studies have concluded that the practice of meditation and mindfulness may be challenging, difficult, and even distressing for some individuals (Lindahl et al., 2017; Britton et al., 2021). However, these perceptions did not appear in this study.

A suggestion for future research, then, is a brief confidential online survey that explores this study's results with all Commissioned Officers from this police agency. This survey would require significantly less investment of participant time and could provide an opportunity for individuals who practice meditation but do not feel it positively influences their

leadership practice, or who have had adverse experiences with the practice of meditation, to add their voices to the discussion.

Further, the participant inclusion criteria for this study were Commissioned Officers with a regular practice of meditation (Frizzell et al., 2016; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). As the percentage of Commissioned Officers in this police agency accounts for approximately 10% of all police officers in formal leadership roles, expanding the study to include Non-Commissioned Officers and other non-sworn police leaders would deepen the understanding of how meditation practice may influence the practice of leadership at different ranks in the police organization.

Finally, this study sought to understand how meditation and mindfulness practice might influence the practice of leadership from the perspective of the leaders. As Zhou et al. (2023) report, leader mindfulness appears to also influence the performance and well-being of the leaders' followers. Future research within the context of policing that examines the perceptions of the peers, followers, supervisors, and community members who regularly engage with a police leader who regularly practices meditation is a necessary next step.

## CONCLUSION

The challenges facing Canadian police managers in the early 21st century will require them to possess significant personal resources. Research into mindfulness training and meditation has suggested that these practices can benefit leaders in other workplace contexts; however, until this study, little was known about how these mental practices might benefit police leaders. Results from this study begin to extend the cited literature on mindful leadership from other workplace contexts into the realm of police leadership.

Further, based on the discussions that occurred with these police leaders, adopting a mindfulness or meditation practice may benefit Canadian police leaders as they address the challenges of meeting community safety needs, strengthening public trust, and prioritizing the well-being of police professionals. By doing so, it is possible that meditation and mindfulness practice may open new and essential pathways to 21st century police leadership. Although this study has limitations and further research is warranted, it does suggest that developing a regular meditation practice is something that all current and future Canadian police leaders should begin to contemplate.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

\*University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada.

## REFERENCES

- Bartlett, L., Martin, A., Neil, A., Memish, K., Otahal, P., Kilpatrick, M., & Sanderson, K. (2019). A systematic review and meta-analysis of workplace mindfulness training randomized controlled trials. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 24*(1), 108–126. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000146.supp>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11*(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Hayfield, N. (2022a). "A starting point for your journey, not a map": Nikki Hayfield in conversation with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke about thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 19*(2), 424–445. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2019.1670765>
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., Davey, L., & Jenkinson, E. (2022b). Doing reflexive thematic analysis. In S. Bager-Charleson & A. McBeath (Eds.), *Supporting Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (pp. 19–38). Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13942-0\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13942-0_2)
- Breedvelt, J. J. F., Amanvermez, Y., Harrer, M., Karyotaki, E., Gilbody, S., Bockting, C. L. H., Cuijpers, P., & Ebert, D. D. (2019). The effects of meditation, yoga, and mindfulness on depression, anxiety, and stress in tertiary education students: A meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychiatry, 10*, Article 193. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00193>
- Britton, W. B., Lindahl, J. R., Cooper, D. J., Canby, N. K., & Paliitsky, R. (2021). Defining and measuring meditation-related adverse effects in mindfulness-based programs. *Clinical Psychological Science, 9*(6), 1185–1204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702621996340>
- Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*(4), 822–848. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.4.822>
- Carleton, R. N., Afifi, T. O., Turner, S., Taillieu, T., Duranceau, S., LeBouthillier, D. M., Sareen, J., Ricciardelli, R., MacPhee, R. S., Groll, D., Hozempa, K., Brunet, A., Weekes, J. R., Griffiths, C. T., Abrams, K. J., Jones, N. A., Beshai, S., Cramm, H. A., Dobson, K. S., ... Asmundson, G. J. G. (2018). Mental disorder symptoms among public safety personnel in Canada. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 63*(1), 54–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0706743717723825>
- Carleton, R. N., Afifi, T. O., Taillieu, T., Turner, S., Mason, J. E., Ricciardelli, R., McCreary, D.R., Vaughan, A. D., Anderson, G.S., Krakauer, R. L., Donnelly, E. A., Camp, R. D., Groll, D., Cramm, H. A., & Griffiths, C. T. (2020). Assessing the relative impact of diverse stressors among public safety personnel. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17*(4), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17041234>
- Donaldson-Feilder, E., Lewis, R., & Yarker, J. (2019). What outcomes have mindfulness and meditation interventions for managers and leaders achieved? A systematic review. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 28*(1), 11–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2018.1542379>
- Eby, L. T., Allen, T. D., Conley, K. M., Williamson, R. L., Henderson, T. G., & Mancini, V. S. (2019). Mindfulness-based training interventions for employees: A qualitative review of the literature. *Human Resource Management Review, 29*(2), 156–178. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2017.03.004>
- Edwards, D., Bush, M., Maceo Vega-Frey, J., Duerr, M., Horwitz, C., Sackey-Milligan, R., Bergman, C., Akey, J., & Rice, S. A. (2017). *The activist's ally: Contemplative tools for social change*. [www.contemplativemind.org](http://www.contemplativemind.org)
- Edwards, G. (2023). I'm not faking being sick, I'm faking being well: The need for leadership in mental health for policing. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being, 8*(Suppl\_1), S50–S56. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.294>
- Frizzell, D. A., Hoon, S., & Banner, D. K. (2016). A phenomenological investigation of leader development and mindfulness meditation. *Journal of Social Change, 8*(1), 14–25. <https://doi.org/10.5590/JOSC.2016.08.1.02>
- Ganesan, S., Beyer, E., Moffat, B., Van Dam, N. T., Lorenzetti, V., & Zalesky, A. (2022). Focused attention meditation in healthy adults: A systematic review and meta-analysis of cross-sectional functional MRI studies. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews, 141*, Article 104846. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2022.104846>
- Good, D. J., Lyddy, C. J., Glomb, T. M., Bono, J. E., Brown, K. W., Duffy, M. K., Baer, R. A., Brewer, J. A., & Lazar, S. W. (2016). Contemplating



- mindfulness at work. *Journal of Management*, 42(1), 114–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206315617003>
- Gough, B., & Madill, A. (2012). Subjectivity in psychological science: From problem to prospect. *Psychological Methods*, 17(3), 374–384. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029313>
- Griffiths, C. T., & Dubord, N. (2023). How do we recognize police leader-thinkers? In A. Verma & D. K. Das (Eds.), *Police Leaders as Thinkers*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-19700-0>
- Heber, A., Schick, A., & Bose, E. (2023). Addressing the mental health impacts of COVID-19 on Canada's frontline workers. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 8(Suppl\_1), S9–S11. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.300>
- Jackson, L., & Theroux, M. (2023). Police need wellness checks too: Embedding a culture of wellness and resilience in policing. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 8(Suppl\_1), S4–S6. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.311>
- Jamieson, S. D., & Tuckey, M. R. (2017). Mindfulness interventions in the workplace: A critique of the current state of the literature. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 22(2), 180–193. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000048>
- Klenke, K. (2016). *Qualitative Research in the Study of Leadership* (2nd ed.). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Lindahl, J. R., Fisher, N. E., Cooper, D. J., Rosen, R. K., & Britton, W. B. (2017). The varieties of contemplative experience: A mixed-methods study of meditation-related challenges in Western Buddhists. *PLOS One*, 12(5), Article e0176239. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176239>
- Marturano, J. (2015). *Finding the space to lead: A practical guide to mindful leadership*. Bloomsbury Press.
- Matko, K., & Sedlmeier, P. (2019). What is meditation? Proposing an empirically derived classification system. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, Article 2276. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02276>
- Oliver, D. G., Serovich, J. M., & Mason, T. L. (2005). Constraints and opportunities with interview transcription: Towards reflection in qualitative research. *Social Forces*, 84(2), 1273–1289. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2006.0023>
- Papazoglou, K., Milliard, B., Neofytou, E., Davis, J., Bellon, S., & Thompson, J. (2021). To tell or not to tell: Systematic and organizational stigma of police officers seeking mental health support. *Crisis, Stress, and Human Resilience: An International Journal*, 3(3), 85–103. <https://www.crisisjournal.org/article/30787-to-tell-or-not-to-tell-systemic-and-organizational-stigma-of-police-officers-seeking-mental-health-support>
- Roach, K. (2022). *Canadian Policing: Why and how it must change*. Delve Books.
- Royal Canadian Mounted Police, (2022, May 27). *Commissioner's mandate letter*. <https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/commissioners-mandate-letter>
- Ruddell, R. (2022). The changing context of Canadian policing: An examination of the public's perceptions after 2020. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 7(2), 47–52. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.260>
- Shahbaz, W., & Parker, J. (2021). Workplace mindfulness: fundamental issues for research and practice. *Labour & Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work*, 31(2), 172–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10301763.2021.1878572>
- Taylor, N., Corley, C., McFee, D., & Torigian, M. (2022). Law enforcement and public health. In I. Bartkowiak-Théron, J. Clover, D. Martin, R. F. Southby, & N. Crofts (Eds.), *Law Enforcement and Public Health*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83913-0>
- Thompson, J., & Tam-Seto, L. (2023). Resetting and informing a new baseline for wellness in policing. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 8(Suppl\_1), S2–S3. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.309>
- Urrila, L. I. (2022). From personal well-being to relationships: A systematic review on the impact of mindfulness interventions and practices on leaders. *Human Resource Management Review*, 32(3), Article 100837. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2021.100837>
- van Dam, N. T., van Vugt, M. K., Vago, D. R., Schmalzl, L., Saron, C. D., Olendzki, A., Meissner, T., Lazar, S. W., Kerr, C. E., Gorchov, J., Fox, K. C. R., Field, B. A., Britton, W. B., Brefczynski-Lewis, J. A., & Meyer, D. E. (2018). Mind the hype: A critical evaluation and prescriptive agenda for research on mindfulness and meditation. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 13(1), 36–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617709589>
- Walsh, R., & Shapiro, S. L. (2006). The meeting of meditative disciplines and western psychology: A mutually enriching dialogue. *American Psychologist*, 61(3), 227–239. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.61.3.227>
- Wood, M. (2022, September 28). Leadership matters: Improving trust in the police by building better leaders. *Blue Line Magazine*. <https://www.blueline.ca/leadership-matters-improving-trust-in-the-police-by-building-better-leaders/>
- Yin, R. K. (2016). *Qualitative research from start to finish* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Zhou, Y., Wang, C., & Sin, H.-P. (2023). Being “there and aware”: A meta-analysis of the literature on leader mindfulness. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 32(3), 299–316. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2022.2150170>