

Kindness in Los Angeles City Hall

How Elected Officials Approach Mindfulness, Leadership, Emotions, and Conflicts

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Introduction

It comes as no surprise that the “ugly” world of politics has negative impacts on mental health and emotional well-being. Between 2017 and 2020, 40% of Americans “consistently identify politics as a significant source of stress in their lives,” reporting sleepless nights and chronic stress, and 5% reported they had considered suicide after following political developments.¹ Additionally, a 2023 study from the American Psychological Association found following current politics can cause chronic stress and negative emotions, as well as a notable trade-off between well-being and political action.²

Current studies on the impact of politics on personal well-being have often come from the perspective of constituents. However, recent news headlines have made clear the need for additional research on the role of mental health and mindfulness for public servants. In 2023, popular New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern cited burnout as her reason for stepping down. While mental health is being more commonly discussed and researched in academic spaces, little study has been offered to address the issues of burnout and depression in elected office.

City Hall is the place that connects us all — government officials, elected leaders, city employees, LA City residents, community organizations, businesses, etc. City Hall should be a place where we seek justice, fight for justice, and find justice. It should be the central location where we come together to engage in public discourse, brainstorm ideas, debate, agree and disagree, and find solutions. The recent scandals in Los Angeles’ city hall spotlighted a growing trend of hostility and lack of trust in our local elected leaders.

While conversations regarding burnout and “self-care” are becoming more common in the workplace, few resources are available for our elected leaders. We argue that in order to practice sustainability and be more effective and compassionate public servants, our leaders need more tools to withstand the many stressors of holding elected office. Our methodology



Photo courtesy of Levi Meir Clancy.

focused on interviews with a number of current and former Los Angeles elected officials that identified as “progressive.” Each interview length ranged from 30 minutes to an hour, depending on their availability, and all of our interviews took place within a three-month time span. During this interviewing process, we prioritized trust, honesty, and vulnerability in our conversations. Finally, this project was not a quantitative or qualitative analysis of this topic. The product is a gathering of collected reflections and insights worth sharing to provide guidance and encourage public discourse about this important topic.



From left to right: Los Angeles Councilmember Eunisses Hernandez, City Controller Kenneth Mejia, Councilmember Nithya Raman, Councilmember Hugo Soto-Martínez, and former Councilmember Mike Bonin. Photos courtesy of elected officials’ websites.

Mindfulness in City Hall

The term *mindfulness* is used in many ways. Many use this term when referring to meditation, breathing, focusing, and letting go. Mindfulness almost cannot be concretely defined because it becomes so personal and individualized for many. My grounding in mindfulness is rooted in the teachings of the late Zen Buddhist teacher, Thích Nhất Hạnh (“Thay”). For Thay, to be mindful is to be fully alive and present with the people around you. He teaches us that mindfulness should be practiced during all of your activities throughout the day, whether you’re working, driving, walking, eating, or interacting with others.³ This teaching becomes especially important when experiencing negative emotions or dealing with a difficult situation. The average person will typically have 6,200 thoughts in a single day. Of those, approximately 95% will connect to repetitive thoughts from days before and about 80% of them will be negative.⁴ In essence, our brain functions on autopilot. When this process is repeatedly faced with difficult situations or conflicts, it can quickly lead to “overidentification” of negative situations and essentially allows our “inner critic” to creep in and harm us emotionally.

In order to be in the present moment with a deep awareness of our emotions and the situation we find ourselves in, it becomes necessary to create a space for us to tap into compassion and understanding. Of course, this is a lifelong practice that is never-ending. Thay teaches us how to utilize focused breathing meditation and techniques like active listening. For Thay, what is most important is to stay engaged in the practice, in the striving towards mindfulness. With daily practice, we will begin to engage in our daily routine — from waking up, meeting with constituents, attending council meetings, drafting policy, etc. — in a contemplative process where we are fully present.

On any day at City Hall, out in district areas, or even during electoral campaigns, elected leaders or candidates running for office can engage in meditation or contemplative processes with their daily activities and routines, especially during Council meetings or communicating and engaging with constituents or community organizations.

Embracing our emotions in difficult situations becomes instrumental in the work of a public servant. I am often reminded of the quote by Holocaust survivor, psychiatrist and peace activist Viktor Frankl: “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”⁵ Being fully present in mindfulness during these moments enables us to respond with understanding and compassion. Mindfulness is showing up fully present and making time to stop and reflect. It is an approach that helps you avoid getting caught up in the storm, and instead see your way through it with compassion and understanding.

Politicians as servants of the public, as those who voice the will of the people, are especially inclined to be present and open to the feelings and presence of the moment they occupy.

Councilmember Nithya Raman stated, *“At the end of the day, I’m human too. I got into this work because I was a concerned community member myself, so I understand the need to feel heard and be seen in government — especially when it comes to issues that matter so deeply to us. That’s why I make an effort to understand my constituents’ concerns, because I know it comes from a place of care for their community.”*

Our breathing becomes a pathway to bring us into the present moment. An adult breathes about 17,000 to 23,000 times a day at 12 to 16 breaths per minute. Your lungs take in more than 3,000 gallons of air each day.⁶ When you think about it, there are plenty of opportunities to focus on our breathing to help us find grounding and calmness. With this approach, breathing is medicine that you can take at any time when facing conflict, stress, and difficult situations, medicine that we can carry with us at all times. It is medicine with no expiration date — it is a lifetime prescription.

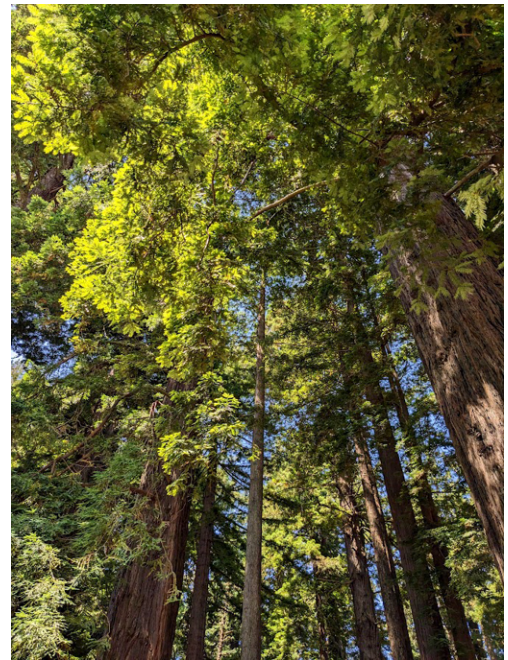


Photo courtesy of Victor Narro.

Of particular importance for public servants is how mindfulness encompasses coming back to your body. Being a public servant or a candidate running for office can be physically and emotionally demanding in one’s daily life. The important thing is to strive for a place of harmony where one feels a sense of calmness, if even for a brief moment, when facing a difficult situation. The elected leaders we interviewed found themselves in the midst of an often stressful and overworked schedule, such that they struggled to find ways to practice self-compassion. As former City Councilmember Mike Bonin stated, *“Politics can be the opposite of mindfulness because you are often overwhelmed.”*

Mindfulness requires vulnerability. It helps you to embrace yourself at any given moment and tap into love and compassion. You become open and honest with your emotions, which enables you to come back and connect with your body. This is the body wisdom that we are able to tap into when we look at a situation beyond the intellectual analysis. Public servants and political leaders need to practice looking at a situation from that wider perspective.

Active Listening in City Hall

“Active listening is very important in this work. Mindful speech is very important. I try to sit with and observe my negative emotions, like anger, when they arise. I try to find a deeper understanding and strive to understand where the other person is coming from. I try to understand their fears. This helps me to develop compassion for them. We don’t talk enough at City Hall. We are not used to sharing and talking.” — Councilmember Hugo Soto-Martínez

The practice of active listening is indispensable for any public servant. Listening and being fully present is highly important, and often easier said than done. Human beings are highly judgmental and our ego-centeredness compels us to use our defensive posture or “protective shield” when engaging in a difficult conversation or addressing conflict. Active listening, often referred to as “heart listening,” enables you to bring compassion and understanding into this process. It enables you to shift from your ego-centeredness, drop down the protective shield, and be less judgmental. You become “fully present” for the other person or group. You are then able to avoid formulating judgmental responses or thoughts in your head. You listen to understand first, and your response comes later. You become an active listener. Thích Nhất Hạnh teaches us: *“The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence.”⁷*

Triggers often come up in the process of addressing a conflict or engaging in a difficult dialogue. Triggers are landmines of old wounds or past experiences. A conflict is often the result of triggers and the parties creating their own narrative of a situation. Knowing your triggers and creating a plan to manage them when they arise are effective tools for any public

servant. Knowing and dealing with your triggers helps you to tap into self-compassion and establish your boundaries. You can then end a difficult conversation and come back to it at another time.

A public servant or elected official comes in contact with so much of humanity on a daily basis that it becomes challenging on how you can be fully present, lean forward and connect with any one person or group in any moment. Finally, a quote commonly attributed to Maya Angelou provides us with a daily mantra that public servants should consider in their daily interactions with their colleagues, staff and community members: *“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”*⁸

Leadership in City Hall

What is a public servant? How does being a public servant fit within the definition of what we think of as “leadership”? What we learned from this project and the interviews is that there are no correct answers here. After all, leadership is a process of experience, personal growth and development. An elected official’s leadership process is shaped by their life and work experience before taking office and the process that comes afterwards. We learned from the interviews that in being of service to the public, there are two leadership processes taking place: addressing the needs and struggles of your constituents and servicing your own needs and struggles.

Being your genuine and vulnerable self is integral to leadership as a public servant. Many see public service in City Hall as vertical and hierarchical. The challenge becomes shifting this leadership framework to a collective and horizontal one. As City Controller Kenneth Mejia stated, *“It’s important to be authentic and be genuine. People know and feel when you are not being your authentic self. Be true to who you are. Hold on to your values and be who you are.”*

One theme that came across during the interviews was developing perspective. The Dalai Lama teaches us about the importance of developing a “wider perspective” for any given situation, especially the difficult moments of conflict. From the Dalai Lama’s standpoint, there are six angles from which to view a situation at any given moment: front, back, top, bottom and sideways from both left and right.⁹ This is where mindfulness practices, breathing meditation, and embracing emotions help develop this wider perspective. This is a lifetime goal, however, and it’s important to focus on the process and strive towards developing a wider perspective. Such an approach can help public servants see individuals in City Hall, City Council, and City Departments as human beings who show up daily and are trying to do their best to serve.

Developing a wider perspective approach also enables one to tap into what the Dalai Lama refers to as our “common humanity.” This is a concept of solidarity: knowing that you are not the only one struggling with a specific situation or emotional challenge. As Councilmember Eunisses Hernandez stated, *“Sometimes I am alone, but I am never lonely. I connect with other elected progressives in Los Angeles and from around the country. I find support with those who are going through similar struggles and challenges. We motivate and uplift one another.”* Developing a common humanity enables one to tap deeply into compassion for others and self-kindness, which are necessary ways to cope with difficult situations.

Emotions in City Hall

Empathy, both as an emotion and an experience, forms the core of effective public service. As Councilmember Nithya Raman stated, *“I strive to lead with empathy. As an elected official, I believe it is my duty to exemplify the compassion and understanding we need when holding space for constituents and their frustrations. Oftentimes, I share those frustrations with them. My job is about working together to channel those valid feelings into tangible solutions.”* Leaders who tap into empathy when dealing with frustration and impatience create understanding and connection. Acknowledging the pain and fear of constituents fosters a sense of unity and shared humanity.

Mindfulness involves being a witness to our emotions and understanding how they affect our decision making. Emotions and feelings that arise serve as messengers, offering us valuable wisdom and guidance. Being mindful of our emotions

allows us to self-regulate so that we are not overcome by what we are feeling. Sitting with our emotions, even uncomfortable ones, allows us to be less reactive and to see more clearly. Expressing care and emotions connects us to our humanity, even when we are at work.

“Feelings like disappointment, embarrassment, irritation, resentment, anger, jealousy, and fear, instead of being bad news, are actually very clear moments that teach us where it is that we’re holding back. They teach us to perk up and lean in when we feel we’d rather collapse and back away. They’re like messengers that show us, with terrifying clarity, exactly where we’re stuck.” — Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart*¹⁰

Pema Chödrön’s wisdom reminds us that life is a cycle of things coming together and falling apart. Accepting this reality and leaning into our emotions can lead to deep empathy and compassion, both essential qualities in the world of politics. However, expressing and managing emotions can be daunting in the political world. While many leaders are initially drawn to elected office in part for their passion for policy or anger against injustice, those who are familiar with the culture inside City Hall shared that emotions were often treated as weaknesses or liabilities to be exploited. City Controller Kenneth Mejia stated, *“Politicians feel like they can show no emotions. They are in a position of power, and they feel like there is no room for emotions. Elected officials and staffers need to have a safe space and safe process to be honest and process their emotions.”*



Photo courtesy of Victor Narro.

Feeling overwhelmed at times is natural; it is a message that some needs are not being met at a given moment. Mindfulness does not solve the overwhelming feeling, but rather offers to accept the emotion and better understand it. Developing clarity and perspective can help move you through the overwhelmingness, by taking it one sentence at a time, considering one need at a time, and breathing deeply. Public servants must find a balance between empathy and self-care, ensuring they are not overwhelmed by the emotions that drive their work.

Mindfulness is about being aware of all of our emotions — and not just the positive ones. With this perspective, anger becomes an important emotion. As Audre Lorde explains, anger is not only a valid response to injustices such as racism or misogyny, *“Anger is loaded with information and energy.”*

“Anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies... This hatred and our anger are very different. Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change.” — Audre Lorde, *“The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism”*¹¹

Righteous anger in the face of oppression is a tool, and it is important to know when this can be helpful or hurtful in achieving our goals. To distinguish the differences, and to be more effective leaders, they must ask themselves: Where does my anger come from? Am I personally angry, or am I angry on behalf of my community/constituency? Is this a loving policy? Anger is also a heavy emotion to carry, while love is a light and restorative emotion.

Conflicts in City Hall

Conflicts come up almost daily in the work of a public servant. There is no way to avoid them. Oftentimes in a conflict, every side has a narrative, every side has erred and been harmed, and both sides ultimately share the desire to find some form of a resolution or peace. Our tendency to be judgmental about our narrative (we are right) and the other person (they are wrong) coupled with protecting our ego-centeredness become major challenges for elected officials dealing

with a conflict. It is essential for a public servant to center themselves with patience, compassion, and understanding when entering into the heart of a conflict. There is no other way to create a place that is sacred, hospitable, and healing on the other side of conflict. There is no better way to redirect something destructive or harmful back towards something productive and hopeful for those directly impacted by the conflict. As Councilmember Nithya Raman stated, *“Navigating conflict is challenging but necessary. It takes intentional vulnerability to engage in constructive dialogue, but it’s always for the best.”*

Too often, the fear and uncertainty of taking ownership over one’s mistake is the main impediment in adopting this more compassionate approach. This process of vulnerability requires a courageous shift in perspective. As we all know, it is ingrained in us to “stand up for ourselves” and for what’s right. Our posture is too often to defend ourselves before others, especially when it is justified as an action done “for the greater good.” The challenge in incentivizing vulnerability and honesty among public officials becomes centered on the culture and expectations created in those offices. Oftentimes, the environment does not facilitate kindness, mindfulness, or thoughtful deliberation. Adding to this is the challenge of maintaining an essence of “decorum politics” when addressing conflicts and difficult dialogue.

One interview participant talked about the gratefulness of engaging in the righteous fight for their progressive agenda and the solidarity and fortitude they found in the vulnerable communities they supported most. They relied on their staff and colleagues to be ready to “throw down” and be there for each other during moments of conflict and collaboration alike. Taking care to invest in both internal networks and external community support can help establish vital pillars of strength and solidarity when facing the challenges ahead.



Photo courtesy of Victor Narro.

Addressing conflict after conflict can also lead to emotional and physical burnout. Stress, anxiety and anger tend to dominate, and handling too many conflicts consecutively can create unhealthy outcomes. Much of the political process can be about navigating the strategy of when/where/how to address challenges to get to a successful outcome. The awareness of one’s emotions, however, can widen one’s perspective and prioritize compassion and empathy in one’s approach. I often use the analogy of wrapping my anger with my kindness blanket and that helps me to develop a better perspective on a response.

There was also a lot of conversation around conflict and social media, especially Twitter (or X). With online engagement, it is easy to get distracted by negativity or be pulled into the reactionary. Every person we spoke to was at some stage of controversy or conflict online. As City Controller Kenneth Mejia commented, *“Twitter is full of conflicts today. It is not a good space to address conflicts and tensions. There is a strong need for active dialogue. We need to actually talk with one another and have courageous conversations whenever we have conflict. We need more conversations.”*

Final Thoughts

We hope you have enjoyed this piece and our journey through it together. We need awareness of love at all times, especially during moments of chaos and crisis. We can easily forget that we are interconnected and we lose our compass. We fail to see beyond the idiosyncrasies. The way of peacemaking is expressing love and compassion in action in daily work. This is especially the case for public servants. Every present moment can be a pathway to deepen your five senses

to be fully present in love, understanding, and compassion. Love, understanding, and compassion can be fluid in the work of a public servant. Giving love and compassion to others must also include yourself. Loving and being kind to yourself for the sake of loving and being kind to others must never be compromised. Finally, we leave you with a poem for reflection:

Clearing

by Mary Postlethwaite²

*Do not try to save
the whole world
or do anything grandiose.
Instead, create
a clearing
in the dense forest
of your life
and wait there
patiently,
until the song
that is your life
falls into your own cupped hands
and you recognize and greet it.
Only then will you know
how to give yourself
to this world
so worth of rescue.*

Resources about Self-Kindness, Mindfulness and Compassion

California Women's List Report: "Her Stories on the Campaign Trail"

<https://www.californiawomenslist.org/recent-news>

Deer Park Monastery

<https://deerparkmonastery.org/>

Esalen Institute

<https://www.esalen.org/>

Grateful Living

<https://grateful.org/>

Mary and Joseph Retreat Center

<https://maryjoseph.org/>

Plum Village

<https://plumvillage.org/#filter=.region-na>

The Revolutionary Love Project

<https://valariekaur.com/revolutionary-love-project/>

Self-Compassion/Dr. Kristen Neff

<https://self-compassion.org/>

Spirit Rock Meditation Center
<https://www.spiritrock.org/>

Spirituality and Practice: Resources for Spiritual Journeys
<https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/>

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC)
<https://www.uclahealth.org/programs/marc>

UC Berkeley Greater Good Science Center
<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/>

Footnotes

¹ Kevin B. Smith, “Politics Is Making Us Sick: The Negative Impact of Political Engagement on Public Health during the Trump Administration,” *PLOS ONE* 17, no. 1 (January 14, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0262022>

² Brett Q. Ford, Matthew Feinberg, Bethany Lassetter, Sabrina Thai, and Arasteh Gatchpazian, “The Political Is Personal: The Costs of Daily Politics,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Attitudes and Social Cognition* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000335>

³ Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992).

⁴ “New Study: You Have 6,200 Thoughts A Day... Don’t Make Yours Negative,” NeuroGym, <https://blog.myneurogym.com/new-study-you-have-6900-thoughts-a-day-dont-make-yours-negative/>

⁵ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962).

⁶ “How Many Breaths Do You Take Each Day?,” Wonderopolis, <https://wonderopolis.org/wonder/how-many-breaths-do-you-take-each-day/>

⁷ Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992).

⁸ This is a quote often attributable to Maya Angelou. See <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/04/06/they-feel/>

⁹ The Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (New York: Avery, 2016).

¹⁰ Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2016).

¹¹ Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” (1981) <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1981-audre-lorde-uses-anger-women-responding-racism/>

¹² Martha Postlethwaite, “Clearing,” in Mindfulness Association, accessed November 7, 2023, <https://www.mindfulnessassociation.net/words-of-wonder/clearing-martha-postlethwaite/>

Authors

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Laura Edwards recently graduated with her Master of Public Policy from UCLA. Alongside her studies, she worked as a teaching assistant and researcher at the UCLA Labor Center. With nearly a decade of experience in political psychology and campaigns, she now serves as a legislative aide in the California State Assembly, where she continues to advocate for mindfulness in government.