

The value of mindfulness at work and play

The concept of mindfulness, whilst rooted in eastern Buddhist philosophies, has undertaken something of a renaissance in the West in recent years. Incorporating traditional Eastern yogic practices of the awareness of bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings, tai chi and meditation, the modern western world has embraced traditional mindfulness practices and ideologies. Taking the best of this traditional wisdom, organisations are now keen to explore how to apply mindfulness in the workplace.

In today's world, technology and speed of communication facilitates a fast-paced lifestyle, where we are constantly 'on-the-go' and less able to 'switch off'. In the workplace, these technological advancements provide endless distractions, encourage juggling of numerous priorities and increasingly blur the lines between our work and home life. This, combined with the increased organisational pressure to do more with fewer resources, is contributing to a variety of employee problems, such as stress and anxiety, illness and absenteeism, burnout, workplace conflict and lack of creativity; all of which detract from the bottom line.

Indeed we are seeing evidence of this pressure to perform right across industry; for example the World Health Organisation states that stress is estimated to cost American businesses 300 billion dollars each year in absenteeism, staff turnover, lower productivity and other stress-related expenses (Smith, 2012). Furthermore, a recent survey conducted by the APA suggests that out of 1,714 adults, 41% said they "feel tense or stressed out during the workday," and cited common causes such as low salaries, lack of opportunities for growth or advancement, too heavy a workload, long hours and unclear job expectations (APA, 2012). To address this growing concern, there has been an "exploding awareness of mindfulness" amongst business leaders and increased interest in the effectiveness of it in the workplace. (Scharmer, 2014).

This white paper aims to:

- Explain the concept of mindfulness
- Review the research alluding to health benefits of mindfulness
- Explain how this could transfer into the workplace by reviewing the evidence for enhanced work-related factors
- Examine the relationship between mindfulness and transformational leadership theory
- Touch upon existing (though limited) mindfulness and personality research
- Demonstrate examples of organisations using mindfulness-based programmes and their reported impact

What is mindfulness?

The term mindfulness can be used to describe a dynamic psychological state of awareness, or a psychological trait, whereby an individual presents a cross-situational and stable tendency to be in a state of mindful awareness (Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007; Glomb, Duffy, Bono, & Yang, 2011). Alternatively, it can be conceived as a psychological process or a practice through which mindfulness is learnt, such as meditation, or tai chi (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2005). From a Buddhist philosophy, it is deemed necessary for attaining liberation from suffering through the constant reflection of Buddha's teachings as well as the quiet observation of the internal physical and psychological state (Keng, Smoski & Robins, 2011). The recent emergence of this in the West, however, is independent of a system of practice and is cultivated as a meditative method of multi-sensory awareness of one's internal and external experiences (Keng, Smoski & Robins, 2011). In simple terms we might describe mindfulness as "a way of reprogramming your mind to think in healthier, less stressful, ways." (Hansen, 2012, pg. 1). In addition, we might look to the definitive work of Professor Ellen Langer, known as 'the mother of mindfulness' (Grohol, 2010), in which it is conceptualised as a "cognitive process of drawing novel distinctions" (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000, pg. 1) and therefore is viewed as a process of avoiding habitual rules and routines. Through this process, a more differentiated interpretation of environmental stimuli evolves (Carson & Langer, 2004; Langer, 1989).

Opposing this, Langer developed the notion of mindlessness, which includes behaviours such as ruminating about the past, daydreaming, acting on auto-pilot, and worrying about the future (Brown & Ryan, 2003). When we are mindless our thoughts are dictated by rules and routines, so much so that we become insensitive to context or perspective. This single-perspective, rigid thinking stems from

the mindless acceptance of information from authority figures as well as the exposure to absolute language when learning new concepts (Carson & Langer, 2004). Langer (1989) explains that fear of negative evaluation and mistakes fuels this mindless behaviour and in order to break free from it, we should use mistakes as an indicator to be mindful and allow the mistakes to guide our thinking and the new more creative outcome.

To summarise, despite the cultural differences discussed, mindfulness is commonly accepted as a present-moment awareness of internal and external phenomena (Dane, 2011, pg. 1000), through which one adopts an observing, non-judgemental stance (Bishop et al, 2004; Brown et al, 2007; Keng et al. 2011).

"We become such experts at seeing what we expect to see that we become blind."
– Ellen Langer



What are the benefits of being mindful?

Individual differences in the ability to be mindful exist due to exposure or training in mindfulness behaviours. For example a group-based intervention programme, known as Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 1982,1990), aims to enable individuals to become less reactive and judgemental towards experiences through repeated training in meditation, yoga postures, and mindfulness during stressful situations. Research suggests that mindfulness training programmes are associated with various benefits such as reduced chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, & Burney, 1985), increased immunity (Davidson et al. 2003), decreased general anxiety (Kabat-Zinn et al, 1992), and increased compassion for others (Jazaieri et al. 2012). Similarly, research indicates that trait mindfulness is positively associated with extensive health benefits such as increased general physiological and psychological well-being (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007), enhanced levels of life satisfaction (Brown & Ryan, 2003), optimism (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and self-esteem (Rasmussen & Pidgeon, 2011), to name a few.

Why does being mindful, either through meditation or the process of present moment awareness lead to these benefits?

The underlying mechanisms affecting physical and psychological outcomes of being mindful appear to be widespread; research points in several directions. For example, some authors suggest that mindfulness training leads to enhanced metacognitive awareness (the ability to remain de-centred from thoughts), which is hypothesised to result in decreased rumination, i.e. the repetitive thinking of one's symptoms of distress (Jain et al. 2007; Ramel, Goldin, Carmona, & McQuaid, 2004) and therefore increased well-being. Other possible reasons include increased attentional control (Chambers et al. 2008), the enhanced ability to

control and communicate emotions (Wachs & Cordova, 2007), increased self-regulation, specifically autonomy and competence (Brown & Ryan, 2003), enhanced cognitive flexibility (Moore and Malinowski, 2009) and executive functioning (Zeidan et al. 2010).



Neuroscience

Neuroimaging research demonstrates that during mindful meditation, increased activation occurs within areas of the brain responsible for emotion regulation, attentional focus, and awareness of bodily sensations (Cahn & Polich, 2006; Chiesa & Serretti, 2010; Treadway & Lazar, 2009). Furthermore, MBSR results in increased quantities of grey matter, an area of the brain which is involved in learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, perspective taking and self-referential processing (Holzel et al. 2011). In addition, prolonged exposure to meditation results in structural alterations to areas responsible for positive affect, such as the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (Cahn & Polich, 2006).

How does this transfer into the workplace? Reviewing the evidence for enhanced work productivity and other work-related factors

Employee well-being

Despite the extensive health benefits of mindfulness evidenced within clinical and non-clinical populations, empirical research within organisational psychology is limited. However, correlational research exists as a useful starting point and infers positive associations between various sub-components of well-being and mindfulness (Reb, Narayana, & Ho, 2013). For example a study by Taylor, Marjorie and Milliar (2015) demonstrated that mindfulness was associated with lower levels of burnout, as well as higher levels of optimism and general self-efficacy within employees from a range of industries. The authors concluded that a programme including mindful practice may be useful to buffer against emotional exhaustion by creating a less reactive and judgemental state of mind. Further studies have examined the association between mindfulness and employee performance finding a positive association between the two (Dane & Brummel, 2013), with support for emotional exhaustion partially mediating this relationship (Narayanan, Chaturvedi, Reb, & Srinivas, 2011). In simple terms this infers, but does not causally imply, that individuals who are more mindful appear to have lower emotional exhaustion levels which may result in enhanced performance.

Employee performance

As previously stated, research which asserts empirical evidence is lacking. However, based on research demonstrating the positive effects of mindfulness on attention (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Cahn & Polich, 2006), self-control and effective goal attainment (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2007), Glomb et al. (2011) suggest several mediators through which mindfulness may influence different dimensions of employee performance.

These include:

- Increased working memory and ability to perform under stress
- Increased self-determination resulting in increased goal-directed behaviour
- Enhanced cognitive flexibility
- Enhanced self-regulation resulting in increased satisfaction and effectiveness in their roles

“Right where we are is where we have never been.” – Ellen Langer

Employee leadership

Whilst in its infancy in organisational research, business leaders are beginning to recognise and understand the importance of mindfulness in leadership. For example, mindfulness through meditative practice seems to have a calming effect on the mind which brings quality and focus to one's role (Gelles, 2012). Indeed, William George, a current Goldman Sachs board member and a former chief executive of the healthcare giant Medtronic, quite plainly states that:

“The main business case for meditation is that if you're fully present on the job, you will be more effective as a leader, you will make better decisions and you will work better with other people.” – William George taken from Gelles (2012)

This new generation of leaders transforming mindfulness into a “cutting edge leadership tool” Dhiman (2009, pg. 76) has resulted in the development of numerous books, institutions and training programmes. For example, Janice Marturano, founder of the Institute for Mindful Leadership, suggests that mindful leadership enhances present-moment awareness and the

ability to make conscious decisions by cultivating the following: focus, clarity, creativity and compassion to make conscious choices and bring the authentic self to the job (2015). Similarly, academics such as Jagannathan and Rodhain (2008) suggest there are four areas in which mindfulness may be beneficial for leadership effectiveness:

- Decision making
- Relationship management: increased empathy and compassion, interpersonal relationships strengthened, influencing conflict and crisis management
- Work-life balance: increased ability to cope with stress and enhance well-being
- Eco-centric leadership

Furthermore, whilst scarce, organisational research suggests that not only is leader mindfulness visible (Langer, Cohen & Djikic, 2012) but it is also positively related to various well-being measures such as employee work/life balance, performance, employee job satisfaction and psychological need satisfaction (Reb et al. 2014). Field-based research suggests that mindful leaders are perceived to be more charismatic and authentic compared to leaders adopting mindless behaviours in both male (Langer & Sviokla, 1988) and female populations (Kawakami, White & Langer, 2000). Professor Ellen Langer summarises her research through the following:

“The essence of effective leadership is mindfulness, which is also the essence of charisma. When you are mindful you are present. When you are present people notice it. When people experience you as mindful they then see you as authentic and trustworthy. We have done lots of studies on this, making people mindful and assessing one aspect or another of leadership.” – Bailey, 2015, Forbes interview

The charismatic leader has been studied in depth and is synonymous with transformational leadership. Whilst a review of transformational leadership is not the aim of this paper, a brief overview should enable the reader to understand the links between mindfulness and this particular leadership style. Originally developed by Bass (1985), it is conceptualised as a method of motivating and inspiring followers through the articulation of a compelling vision. It encompasses behaviours such as considering individuals’ needs, effective role modelling of values and ideals, as well as stimulating and challenging followers to think differently. Put simply, transformational leaders aim to motivate followers to see the inherent value of a task beyond the extrinsic reward (Vroom & Jago, 2007). Correlational research has demonstrated it positively impacts on follower motivation, predominantly through increased social contact (Grant, 2012), as well as employees’ feelings of cohesiveness, commitment and performance (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

Personality and mindfulness

A recent meta-analysis examined the relationship between the Eastern perspective of mindfulness and the big-five personality facets (Giluk, 2009). As the authors hypothesised, results demonstrated that openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were all positively related to mindfulness whilst neuroticism yielded a strong negative association with mindfulness. The authors suggest that whilst mindfulness is associated with enhanced self-regulation and well-being, neurotic individuals tend to be anxious and moody (Barrick et al. 2001), with an increased susceptibility to psychological distress (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Diener et al. 1999; Watson & Clark, 1984); therefore the two concepts appear incongruent.

Interestingly, as alluded to by the authors, what remains unclear is whether neuroticism interferes with the ability to be mindful or being mindful lowers neurotic tendencies (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Thompson & Waltz, 2007). In their concluding comments, the authors refer to the lack of research regarding conscientiousness and mindfulness. Individuals displaying high levels of conscientiousness are epitomised as dependable, responsible, rule-abiding, achievement-oriented (Barrick et al. 2001) and self-disciplined (Costa & McCrae, 1992). It is also characterised, as is mindfulness, as responding effectively, not reactively, to a situation (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). They suggest it warrants further research, especially given the importance of conscientiousness in predicting job performance, training performance and counterproductive work behaviour (Barrick et al. 2001; Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007).

Examples of organisations using mindfulness-based programmes and their reported impact

General Mills

Since 2006 General Mills, a food company based in Minneapolis, has been implementing a mindfulness leadership programme. The programme consists of a mixture of sitting meditation based on Buddhist practice, yoga and dialogue to settle the mind, with the aim being to reduce stress, enhance productivity and leadership.

“It’s about training our minds to be more focused, to see with clarity, to have spaciousness for creativity and to feel connected.” – Janice Marturano, General Mills’ deputy general counsel, who founded the programme (In Gelles, 2012)

Research provides some evidence for the efficacy of their programme; results show that after a seven week course:

- 89% of senior executives reported that they had become better listeners
- 80% of senior executives reported a positive change in their ability to make better decisions
- 83% reported they were “taking time each day to optimise their personal productivity” (an improvement from 23% prior to the course)
- 82% reported that they subsequently made time to eliminate tasks with limited productivity value (an improvement from 32% prior to the course)

Google: Search Inside Yourself (SIY)

First introduced by Chade-Meng Tan in 2007, the programme aims to enhance emotional intelligence and leadership within its employees. The seven-week course begins with an emphasis on learning whereby individuals attend workshops to explore the neuroscientific research behind the effects of training emotion and attention. Contemplative practices are also encouraged to bring non-judgemental awareness to conscious thinking, such as journal writing, walking, mindful listening and mindful emailing. The course also emphasises the need for empathy through loving-kindness meditation and social skills development such as the ability to pursue difficult conversations (Chade-Meng Tan, 2012). Individuals who have completed the programme suggest benefits such as increased resilience, listening skills and an increased emotional buffer to stressful situations (Kelly, 2012).

Conclusion

Having reviewed both the academic and industry focused literature around mindfulness, it's clear that implementing mindful practices, in their most basic format, i.e. becoming more situationally aware in that moment, and basing judgements, behaviours and actions on these more informed (arguably less biased or rigid) perceptions, can have a positive impact on an individual's ability to interact positively. Whether it be at play (in their home or personal lives), or in the workplace, it is widely acknowledged that, whilst empirical evidence is lacking, there is growing support for the notion that employee well-being (i.e. stress levels and emotional state) and general performance can be positively improved by increasing mindfulness behaviours.

This is particularly true in the area of mindfulness and leadership, where in recent years there have been reasonably large investments in global corporations such as Google and General Mills. These reportedly improve a variety of factors, not least stress reduction, enhanced productivity and communication. Furthermore according to field based studies, leaders seem to be perceived as more charismatic and authentic (Langer & Sviokla, 1988), which in turn points to their greater effectiveness in inspiring improvement in their team members' performance.

Our Insights Discovery based programmes and solutions help individuals to explore who they are within a simplified Jungian framework of personality. The results of Giluk (2009) and others in the field, imply there is potentially fruitful future research to be done on the relationship between the conception of mindfulness and how this may apply to different personality preferences. For now we might suggest being mindful is being both able to recognise the nuance of a situation or interaction,

and also to successfully implement a response which garners the required effect for that individual (i.e. to get the most positive result in that situation). Thus, we can posit that being more self-aware, developing the skill to understand others in a mutually identifiable framework of personality, and using this ability to communicate in ways that are seen as open and authentic might enable us as individuals to respond to situations in more mindful ways.

"What you resist persists." – Carl Gustav Jung

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