



# Mindfulness

## for managers and leaders

*Mindfulness has become a hot topic. The much touted benefits of practising mindfulness include stress reduction, increased creativity, better productivity, higher energy and well-being, less anxiety... so it's little wonder that mindfulness has made its way to the workplace.*

*But what really is mindfulness, how does one practise it, and what are the risks and benefits for introducing mindfulness to the workplace?*

**By Fiona Powell.**

**ESSENTIALLY, MINDFULNESS IS** 'paying attention on purpose in the present moment without judgment.'

Stephen Archer, Mindfulness educator and trainer at Mindfulness Training Ltd, says Mindfulness is our natural ability to be fully present. "It's the quality of engagement necessary if we want to bring all of our capabilities to the moment. Mindfulness practice develops our capacity to participate in presence. As a concept this may sound straightforward and unremarkable, in reality it is most demanding, yet rewarding, to make life on the basis of this fundamental disposition."

"Mindfulness can be practised formally on a daily basis by deliberately sitting and focusing on the breath, body, feelings, or just resting in an undistracted way for a period of 15 minutes or more," says Karl Baker, trainer, founder and director of Mindfulness Works. "This then allows us to be more mindful (or present) during the day. When we encounter a stressful or difficult event (e.g. meeting a deadline at work, getting into a conflict situation with a co-worker, receiving a 'no' to a proposal) then we are less likely to react to the situation. By react I mean – take it personally, blame the other person, or get stressed out about not meeting a deadline. Mindfulness often gives us the ability to respond to a situation, rather than react. From a scientific point of view, we might say we disrupt our tendency to react in a difficult situation with fight or flight."

Individuals benefit from better health, less accidents and more effective relationships and organisations benefit from more informed and considered decision making. Executive Coach and Mindfulness Mentor, John Groom says in our overstimulated world we can all benefit from more mindfulness. "It is of greatest advantage however, to those of us struggling to achieve lifestyle balance with little time to ourselves. It is essential for those in leadership or other very responsible roles. I notice that coaching executives in mindfulness leads to much less stress, greater resilience and a greater sense of contentment."

Karl says the benefits are well documented in many scientific journals and one of the reasons mindfulness is growing in popularity. Companies such as Google, Intel and Yahoo have mindfulness based training and workshops in their organisations, as does the U.S. military.

Indeed feedback from attendees of a four-week mindfulness course Karl facilitated for staff at Rydges on the benefits gained were; "sleeping better (more productive)";

"not feeling overwhelmed", "have silenced my inner critic," and the "relief of taking time out for a breather," and "feeling more relaxed"; and lots more.

Stephen, along with Tim Roberts, facilitates a Mindfulness Action Learning Group, a ten month programme at the Leadership Development Centre, and here they're discovering that a mindful leader can be centered and grounded, even in a demanding, action orientated role. "As a leadership competency, mindfulness allows us to deepen into the power of presence. This brings many practical benefits that expand our mental capacities beyond our habitual point of view, while offering greater internal spaciousness and clarity. Mindfulness promotes enhanced self-awareness and increased resilience; these qualities combine to deepen integrity."

While there has been concern voiced in the media that mindfulness could be glossing over risk factors like a toxic workplace or unmanageable workloads, Karl believes one of the biggest risks is that individuals and managers see it as a 'quick fix'. "One session, video, book or course and the crew should all now be mindful, relaxed, happy and pliable!"

He says for mindfulness to make a difference to an individual and also to an organisation, it is essential that:

- The leaders and the managers of the organisation are committed to it and practise it themselves too.
- That all people who want to learn about mindfulness come to sessions, courses of their own free will, i.e. it is not compulsory.
- That mindfulness is formally practised on a daily basis. Just as you can't go for one run and think – that's it, I will be fit for the rest of my life, mental fitness requires daily exercise.
- The person learning is willing to look at themselves. Mindfulness creates awareness and a mirror whereby we start to see the things we are doing that are causing stress (to ourselves and others).

The popularisation of mindfulness as a 'commodity' has been criticised, being termed "McMindfulness" by some critics. And then there are those who say mindfulness is over-hyped and just another fad.

But Karl says the science is indisputable. "Genuine relaxation is good for us. If we define mindfulness as being relaxed, being present, then it can't be a fad, any more than being physically healthy or being

clean (ie taking a shower in the morning) is a fad. The form that mindfulness takes (the type of training) could definitely have aspects that are faddish, just like eating well is not a fad, but some diets are. Physical exercise is not a fad, but some systems are (step class, spin class)."

"One teacher says that actually, we don't learn mindfulness, we just unlearn our habits and way of life that have made us 'unmindful' or 'not relaxed' and 'not present'," says Karl. "I really like that way of looking at it; that mindfulness isn't something new, it's not even something we 'add to ourselves' as a skill or technique. It is actually something that is inherent in us, like breathing. We are naturally aware, relaxed and okay. It's just what we do to ourselves mentally and in how we live that then creates the stress and anxiety. Mindfulness shows us this."

John says he refers to mindfulness in terms of perspective, being wise, noticing, being simple, acceptance and eldership with his executive clients.

John believes that mindfulness is at the core of effective leadership development, as leadership is not just something to learn as a skill set. "More fundamentally, it is a way of being, perceiving and acting in the world that serves the greater good."

For some organisations, mindfulness training is part of Health and Safety to assist with stress prevention and promote well-being. Others include it in their wellness programmes or wellness week; others as part of a people capability and leadership development strategy, and others, like Rydges, the training was brought in at the request of staff as a four week course during their lunch hour.

When looking for a mindfulness trainer – what should organisations look for? "Someone who actually has a formal mindfulness practise (not just been 'trained' in it or learned about it), has years of experience, can speak from their own experience about the benefits and the challenges of mindfulness," says Karl. And importantly; "Someone who makes sure people understand mindfulness is not a 'quick fix'."

The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand has created a National Directory of mindfulness trainers along with professional practice guidelines: <http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/page/1220-mindfulness-activities+mindfulness-training-map>

References available upon request.

## The how of mindful living

### Pause

Just simply pause – pause before you move, pause before you speak, before you eat, before you rush from one activity to the next. Pause before you lay hands on your people, pause before you take your hands away. Just pause whenever you think of it.

### Where's your tongue?

Notice where your tongue is sitting in your mouth in this moment. There is some evidence that suggests that if your tongue is jammed against the roof of your mouth, it's a sign that your stress system is switched on. Notice where it is and just focus on releasing it and allowing it to sit gently behind your teeth – this practice will not only strengthen your mindfulness muscle and deepen your awareness and connection with your body, but may also cool your stress system down momentarily. And if your tongue is sitting behind your teeth, just pause and notice it there.

### Introduce novelty

Remember the novelty of first learning to drive, or driving on the opposite side of the road, or learning a new technique, or a new job. Novelty is a great way to increase our awareness and heighten our 'pay attention' focus. Introducing novelty to everyday routines are a really simple and effective way to strengthen your mindfulness muscle. Simple things like brushing your teeth with your opposite hand, getting out of bed on the opposite side, driving a new route to work, lengthening your stride when walking or my favorite, when you hug another person, hug 'left to left' or heart to heart. This practice, requires greater levels of awareness and therefore strengthens your capacity for mindfulness – the benefits of which we all now know. **M**

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