



leading thoughts

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Leading Thoughts

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Leading Practical Mindfulness

Part 1: Minding What to Watch & What to Avoid

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Isn't it be great if everyone were continually alert and paid attention even to the smallest changes in the work environment, and then were instantly able to act at the least sign of anything going awry? Think how safety, productivity and quality would improve.

This is the lure of mindfulness, which has lately captured many leaders' attention and hopes. After all, the ultimate mission of leadership is change, helping people improve how they work, both individually and together, and thereby operate with greater safety, quality, creativity, efficiency and morale.

Given this, how can leaders reach this next frontier of upgrading workers' personal abilities and efficiencies to perform with greater awareness, decision making, cohesiveness and consistency?

Is this more than wishful thinking? Not if you bear in mind that practical mindfulness is more than an airy concept of "unplugging" (Evgeny Morozov's term) or being blissed out, which would have limited application. In fact, the right mental state is critical to all high-level physical performance.

Basketball and soccer players must be able to sense and appropriately vary the power and angle of their shots to accommodate their changing distance from the goal while simultaneously evading opponents' flexing defense. Hockey great Wayne Gretzky said that his success was not based on skating to where the puck is, but to where it will be. Martial artists must read and respond to an attack in the right way and at the precise moment to protect themselves. Drivers must assess, then modify how much space they have to avoid getting clipped by a swerving car.

On another level, enhancing leadership mindfulness can significantly potentiate communications. The powerful but intangible quality of presence—being able to fully listen, make seamless contact with and best influence others—is a product of mindfulness and an incredibly potent personal and leadership attribute.

Safety Mindfulness

Many multiple-fatality disasters have been attributed to mental distraction, from the burning of the Piper Alpha oil production platform in the North Sea to the crash of Eastern Airlines Flight 401 to many others less infamous. And everyone must better self-monitor signals of soreness, tension or weakness and make adjustments to perform as comfortably, effectively and safely as possible.

It seems as if the recent call for mindfulness has become especially popular in organizations that have established safety basics and are looking to move toward the highest levels of performance and culture. This is particularly true where competition is fierce or companies have seemingly tried everything to rocket above the gravitational pull of ingrained human habits.

Through enlisting mindfulness, some leaders seek to find something that breaks through grooved-in semifunctional actions. Specifically, many hope to:

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1) Engender 24/7 awareness of changing conditions, so that people can first see, then effectively react to slowly building risks before they become traumatic hazards (e.g., a winch makes a slightly unusual squeaking sound, or indicators begin to hover at the higher end of the still-normal range).

2) Heighten alertness and readiness to respond to sudden, out-of-the-blue dangers (e.g., belts break, car brakes suddenly fail, chemicals spill). In these cases, it is critical to notice changes quickly and respond at the earliest stage.

The Missing Mindful Link

Even reaching those two objectives is not enough for practical safety and injury prevention. Yes, they would improve process safety, which prevents the large events that would otherwise result in massive harm and negative press, but only if implemented effectively.

An example of one well-funded case: In an attempt to heighten process safety, one international company created a video to persuade workers to develop a state of "chronic unease." This is a well-meaning but ill-conceived strategy. First, few would be motivated to become continuously uneasy. To enlist workers to become more mindful, it would be better to cast it as positive and easy to accomplish. Second, it is doubtful that anyone can sustain a steady state of chronic unease; complacency will happen unless attention is renewed. Third, the chronic unease campaign offered no skills; it merely urged workers to adopt this state by somehow exercising their will.

Overall, this is an unrealistic approach to developing mindfulness. While the Hawthorne effect may account for short-term change, it would not likely be sustained. For mindfulness to be practical, it must become more than living on the edge, trying to be continually hyper-vigilant.

There are realistic ways to encourage higher-level alertness. What is missing from the two examples is the critical application to personal safety, whose daily incidents continually drain organizations' resources. A state that predominantly focuses on alertness to the external environment will always be limited. The third objective needed is internal mindfulness: the ability to self-monitor critical building blocks of personal safety such as balance (to prevent slips/trips/falls, hand injuries, soft-tissue problems) and awareness of forces accumulating, especially in highly vulnerable areas (to prevent lower-back strains/sprains, knees problems, etc.). For example, when a worker can internally self-monitor forces within his/her body, s/he now has the practical potential to redirect them to significantly reduce soft-tissue wear, a pervasive safety problem.

Here is one view of mindfulness: Being aware of one's internal/proprioceptive/personal state while simultaneously sensing changing forces in tasks and the near environment, like circles rippling out from the center of a pond. It means balancing internal and external alertness, a concrete and learnable skill. Of course, learnable does not necessarily mean instant, easy or likely to be transferred simply by instructing people what to do or think, writing policies/procedures, showing a video or exhorting people to want it to happen.

The sobering fact is that while laudable to try to induce all workers to achieve Zen-like awareness, it is easier said than done. The ability to control attention is the foundation of becoming more mindful. Even the pioneering psychologist William James admitted that he was only able to direct his own attention for a maximum of 6 seconds at a time.

Effective leaders know that creating change begins with setting objectives while mindfully considering their challenges. It is a challenge to promote mindfulness in these fiercely competitive digital times. People are distracted by ongoing attempts to grab their attention, or entrained by computer and Internet-driven flicks of continually click-jumping views, stressed (which narrows attention span), pressured and often fearful of uncertainty. Nonwork distractions, fears and concerns pull at their attention as well.

So, how can a person be both internally and externally aware at the same time, and also be able to sense changing forces all around while still concentrating on a task? In *The Alchemist*, Pablo Coelho describes the balance needed for practical mindfulness. He tells of a sage instructing a youth to walk around a visually inspiring (and distracting) area while holding a spoon carrying two drops of olive oil. At first, the young man retained all the oil, but was so intent on the task that he was oblivious to the beauty around. On his second attempt, he came back enthralled and stimulated but having spilled the oil (and without realizing when). The sage's advice: The youth will have accomplished a great deal when he is able to both clearly see around him and maintain the filled spoon.

This fable has significant importance to safety mindfulness both conceptually and practically. At the root of all mindfulness is the ability to control one's own attention. Think of attention having two dimensions, direction and width. So attention may be aimed internally or externally, narrow or wide. (For more on this concept, read "Paying Attention Leads to Better Safety, Productivity," by Robert Pater, PS, January 2001.)

To best apply this approach to safety, combine directed awareness (concentration, focus, ability to narrow attention toward critical task) with broad, generalized awareness that is diffuse. This must be both internal and external. External includes seeing where others and moving equipment are in space; internal includes current state of mind, emotions, awareness of weak areas, pain and balance.

Further, a mindful state enlists all five senses to continually track changing information; it is not just visually based and certainly not just mental. Also, remember that being practically mindful does not mean being only internally aware of thoughts and feelings to the exclusion of surroundings (eyes open, please).

Directionally, mindfulness best comes concentrically, from the inside out. For example, if you were to sit at center court of a championship tennis match, your head would quickly swivel left-right-left to follow the action. While looking left, you miss what the player on the right side of the court is doing (e.g., approaching the net, stumbling), even if you, unlike many people, were able to repeatedly and rapidly switch attention. Compare that to positioning yourself directly behind a player at a far end of the court. Now, you would be more able to switch near and far focus between players, see full volleys and be less likely to miss any critical movement. Of course, you would not see the far court in as much detail. Understanding that everything has strengths and

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limitations is also a form of mindfulness.

This is a metaphor for developing the third objective: Internal mindfulness that expands to external awareness. For example, on one level, when standing and talking with another, internal mindfulness means sensing the percentage of weight shifting from one foot to the other while still listening. More advanced, when working at a machine press, sensing how forces move through the body while seeing materials and, feeling connections between hands/product/controls, and hearing sounds from the machine and around. This is a simultaneous state, not one of mentally moving from one sense to another. It is developed step by step from practicing the right mindfulness skills.

Minding Practical Mindfulness: What to Avoid

If leaders have felt stymied or frustrated by their inability to stimulate ongoing worker attentiveness and alertness, will anything be different with a newly labeled push for mindfulness? Possibly. But only if it is not approached in the same old ways that previously did not work. Watch for and avoid these mindless and impractical traps:

- Harboring unrealistic expectations of instant or effortless change. Leaders attempt to shift people from their grooved-in mental and physical habits. This does not happen without multiple inputs of energy and reinforcement. Becoming more mindful is not like flipping a switch; it happens by degrees over time. Remember that people typically change by taking two steps forward and one back; this is still progress, as long as the leader does not solely focus on the frustration of backsliding.
- Communicating that mindfulness is only for front-line workers, implying that leaders are okay and workers are deficient (i.e., "Do as I say, not as I do"). As noted, leaders can also significantly benefit from the fruits of greater mindfulness.
- Assuming that everyone knows what you mean by mindfulness, awareness or alertness. Words are important; labels foster mind-set and expectations. Without defining practical mindfulness and providing a range of examples, this can just revert to code for bringing up old frustrations.
- Thinking or communicating that practical mindfulness is only mental or visual. Concentric mindfulness is first based on internal/physical monitoring skills that enlist the range of senses, directed inside and out.
- Limiting approach that portrays practical mindfulness as only arising from meditation, breathing or any other singular technique. Many methods exist for building mindfulness. (Part 2 of this article will discuss some.)
- Motivating mindfulness by pressuring, creating guilt or punishing. Safety motivation will most likely stick when it is positive, where people recognize the personal benefits and want to develop mindfulness skills, not because someone is hammering on them.
- Believing that will alone is the way to develop practical mindfulness. The world is full of examples that wanting to is not enough to change (as well as with some pressuring others to "bear up," "just do it," "think before you act," etc.). Sustaining mindfulness must be based on skills that become part of a person's default way of working and living.
- Focusing only at work. One advantage of practical mindfulness is that it helps in a wide range of personal activities, from hobbies to relationships to stress control. And, as noted, it cannot readily be switched on and off.

I have seen how effective it can be to fully enlist mental faculties to direct attention, perceive what is going on internally and in the environment at the lowest possible level, to not allow the tail of strong emotions to dominate the body of actions and reactions. I have been actively practicing mindfulness-related disciplines for more than 40 years (e.g., internal martial arts, myriad meditation styles, breathing techniques, Qigong). Along with this, I have been training others how to increase personal control for safety for more than 30 years.

Practical mindfulness and enhanced mental control can significantly help workers and leaders on many levels and are based on simple skills that can be developed. Part 2 will focus on key strategies and methods for encouraging a more mindful approach to safety, work and life.

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