



Leading thoughts

> Publications/Standards > Professional Safety > leading thoughts

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Leading Thoughts

Leading Practical Mindfulness

Part 2: Expanding Mindful Safety

By Robert Pater

Many leaders, from executive generalists to those with specific safety responsibilities, have long bemoaned the number of incidents they consider mindless in nature. Leaders often attribute these incidents to people's failure to think, pay attention, be aware of their surroundings or apply what they should know to their work.

Mindfulness comes close to the final frontier in safety for some organizations where leaders believe they have done their utmost to reduce reasonable risks (through discerning audits, cost-effective engineering controls, clear policies and procedures, basic training, and countless reminders, rewards and reinforcers). But these leaders note there are still risks they cannot cost-effectively reduce (e.g., weather exposure to outside workers, employees personal characteristics, habits and preexisting conditions). So, since human factors play a role in many injuries, why not try to directly affect those?

Mindfulness also particularly applies to aging workforces. Leaders can counterbalance the increased vulnerability of older bodies by strengthening workers' perceptions and decisions. Harvard professor Ellen Langer defines mindfulness as "the process of actively noticing new things, relinquishing preconceived mind-sets, and then acting on the new observations." She has reported, "The mindless following of routine and other automatic behaviors lead to much error, pain and a predetermined course of life." Her studies confirm that practicing mindfulness can reverse memory loss, lengthen lifespan, and enhance flexibility and joint health.

After trying, some leaders realize they cannot force what or how people think or react to surprise. Even when people value heightening awareness, they cannot always make it happen. It involves more than just closing one's eyes and being determined. In reality, strong emotional states, mental chatter, outside distractions, divided focus or conflicting messages all pull workers away from controlling their thoughts and attention.

Even so, it is possible for leaders to influence perceptions, judgment, alertness and actions. But small personal changes can have major positive impacts on personal safety performance and in turn organizational culture.

Why Physical Mindfulness?

Think of mindfulness as relaxed receptivity and readiness, as opposed to being on edge or on guard. It has both mental and physical components. Remember that the nervous system is spread throughout the body, not just in the brain. We have all likely experienced such moments of heightened awareness, for example, while running to catch a fly ball, reeling in a powerful fish, savoring a delicious meal, playing a musical instrument while "in the flow" or being swept away by an artist's live performance. The gateway is tuning in to the senses—feeling, rather than overthinking; the latter can lead to disengaging from the activity or enjoyment.

Most people associate mindfulness with a mental state. So their improvement approach is 1) appealing to sheer force of will: "Pay more attention," "think before you act," "work safe," "be aware of your surroundings" and other reminders to try harder; or 2) practicing a quieting exercise that often falls into what is typically termed meditation.

In contrast, Johnson (2000) says, "Mindfulness is not just an action of the mind. It begins with an awareness of the body."

Mindfulness practices go beyond any of the types of meditation. This author's experience is that the physical gateway to mindfulness is more practical for most, specifically for improving safety in the quickest way to develop mindfulness that is usable in the workplace. Emphasis is on activating the mind to better control it in a sustaining manner, what the Chinese call wu wei (effortless effort) to perform tasks more ably, safely, with greater focus and less stress.

A physical approach to mindfulness has many advantages.

- It is more tangible and therefore easier for many working people to relate to. For some, meditation carries a negative connotation.
- It is easier and quicker to learn. Physical methods for mindfulness are more outwardly active than sitting with eyes closed, trying to tame a skittering mind. Walking meditation methods exist, but can be more challenging to learn.
- It provides instant feedback and results that are self-reinforcing and self-motivating.
- It has immediate applications to both at-work tasks and at-home activities. Whereas even when mental methods produce mind-calming effects, many people may have difficulty porting these to a hectic work site.
- It is accomplished with eyes open, standing and moving, which again makes this more useful and easier to apply while working.
- It is similar to what workers are already accustomed to: sports. It is easier to expand on prior experiences than to adopt what seems like a totally new one. Anyone who has played sports knows the feeling of "being in the zone," totally attuned to one's surroundings, strongly sensing what is going on, recalibrating one's reactions on the move to adjust to the flight of a ball or a fish's sudden pull on the line.

8 Strategies for Heightening Practical Mindfulness

1) Set a consistent organizational tone. Organizations must fuel mindfulness. Make sure that leaders' calls for increased mindfulness are more than code for "Don't think, just do what we say" or "follow policies and procedures verbatim." And do not allow mindfulness to just become a trendy buzzword. Miscommunicating mindfulness can torpedo efforts to boost awareness and alertness.

Leaders who aim to encourage enhanced alertness and perception undercut their own efforts by propagating or allowing mindless activities. Because we all become better at what we actually practice, including tuning out or working like an automaton, the leader might ask him/herself, "To what degree does my company drill in mindless rather than mindful actions? Are we actually practicing what we want to see in our culture?"

So, remove antimindfulness messages (e.g., "just do it," "do as I say," "your job is to work, not think") whether expressed directly or between the lines. Instead, consistently communicate about becoming more attuned, perceiving and sensing like a skilled martial artist or master angler.

Encourage seeing, scanning, noticing or sensing. Especially reduce any go-through-the-motions, proforma, check-off-the-box activities such as repetitive lecture-based safety training, check-off incident reviews and safety investigations, quick and dirty performance appraisals, photocopied-in-advance behavioral audits or stamp-ticket speeches. Shake things up. Try something new, even if this is as small as rescheduling a safety dinner for a different month. Eliminate lecturing or pleading from safety communications. Invite creative disagreement about better ways to perform a job as safely and productively as possible. Unearth answers to "To what are we typically oblivious?"

2) Plan for practicality. Practical mindfulness entails checking in, not checking out. For safety and work applications, approach mindfulness with eyes open, not as something to engage in only as a time-out while sitting cross-legged.

Practical mindfulness has to be down-to-earth and relatively easy to do. Concepts that seem far-fetched rarely stick long term and usually become the flavor of the month. Ironically, this approach is inherently contradictory to the objectives of mindfulness, which entails developing an ongoing state of relaxed receptivity and readiness, not a one-shot hypervigilance, attempting to maintain an impossible on-guard stance (which is typically scouting one direction, when danger can come from anywhere). Wherever possible, look for methods that are close to what people have already experienced. It works.

The experience transfer is critical. Think of incremental changes, akin to slowly brightening a dimmed light rather than as a light switch to flip full on.

3) Transfer skills for better directing attention. Attention control is a cornerstone of mindfulness. We have found there are nine "S" attention controls: style identification, sensing inner cues, scanning, selecting, switching, sustaining, sequencing, self-monitoring and small adjustments, all of which can be trained, learned and improved on with the right practice. (See "9 Keys for Directing Attention to Safety," available on PS Extra.)

Self-monitoring, in particular, is the key that opens the physical door to enhancing mindfulness. Begin by checking in occasionally and eventually more regularly regarding the location and level of tensions, pain, emotional pulls and energy level.

People can readily learn to discern forces loading and changing within their own body; this is essential for developing high-level soft-tissue safety.

4) Encourage engagement and participation in as many activities and arenas as possible. Mindfulness, like worker engagement, is based on participation, rather than sitting back bored or judgmental. In general, the more involved people are, the more their senses activate and the more mindful they become. (For more on this topic, read "Secrets of Involvement" parts 1 and 2, and "Strategies for Leading Engagement," parts 1 and 2, available on PS Extra.)

Practical mindfulness must become an enhanced state of raising baseline/autopilot awareness at work and home, not just switched on during work. It is like cardiovascular exercise that raises a metabolism level, helping better burn calories throughout the day even when not specifically engaged in vigorous activity. The same applies to mindfulness activities, which also have

numerous benefits beyond injury prevention; rightly done, this potentially lowers stress and fatigue, heightens usable mental and physical energy reserves; and positively elevates efficiency, productivity and communications, as well as readiness and receptivity to change.

5) Elevate personal control. These include doable stress control methods (e.g., focusing on breathing, mind calming, realigning). Just as chronic pain siphons attention, mental over-tension leads to injury-contributing tunnel vision, and physical over-tension blocks awareness of internal and external states, all of which are the bane of mindfulness.

Companies that realize and sustain the highest levels of safety performance and culture by providing workers with the skills for becoming more in control of their own safety and lives. There are tangible and readily transferred mental and physical skill sets for this, all of which lead to greater mindfulness. (Read my articles "Developing a Gung Fu Work and Lifestyle," "Nine 'Secret' Keys to Unlock Breakthrough Results" and "The Martial Art of Stress Management," available on PS Extra.)

Mindfulness requires ongoing training and practice. For example, skid control training helps drivers react better accelerating rather than braking, steering with rather than against the direction of the skid, directing their attention to first stare, not steer into the turn.

6) Solidify physical balance. Roger Sperry, winner of a Noble Prize in Medicine for his pioneering work in brain research, revealed that 90% of the brain's output is used to maintain physical balance and that only 10% has to do with thinking, metabolism and healing. Balance requires continuous adjusting to slight movement shifts, down to just reaching out empty-handed.

Almost everyone can quickly discover how dramatically boosting their balance improves personal safety (positively affecting slips/trips/falls, soft-tissue and finger-hand-wrist-arm injuries); additionally, boosting balance simultaneously elevates internal locus of control (i.e., greater personal responsibility). The process of solidifying balance, whether standing or on the move, necessitates self-monitoring and ongoing adjustment, which are critical components of mindfulness.

7) Emphasize focus on now. Words set expectations. Now is the one word that best describes mindfulness.

Mindfulness means overcoming continuous frantic mental chatter to not obscure awareness of what is happening and changing now. It means to be able to direct the mind toward the present, rather than dwelling on past issues or lost in future worries or possibilities. Applied to safety, mindfulness means piercing through the clouds of preconceived thoughts to see risks and changes that are actually occurring now.

Questions lead attention. In this light, ask of yourself and others, "How are we doing now in safety (vs. the last few years)?" "What changes at work have you been seeing now?"; "What would help us move to another level of safety now?"

This, of course, does not mean eschewing planning, or not seeing potential future consequences of decisions or actions. It means not getting trapped into living mostly in the past or the future. When these traps occur, it is important to refocus on what is happening now. Many disciplines bring focus back to now and increase mindfulness by noticing the inflow and outgo of the breath.

8) Increase receptivity with all senses. While vision may be the default awareness sense for most people, it is not enough. For example, in wintry road conditions, a driver cannot see black ice but can feel the reduced traction. And an unusual sound often signals that a machine is breaking down.

Leaders should continue to attune their senses to discern ever-smaller forces, notice budding problems at ever-lower levels, and better read even the small print that worker satisfaction may be waning. Learn to distinguish between a tense silence and a more mindful one that is relaxed, comfortable and receptive. Go beyond vision to extend hearing (e.g., forklifts approaching). Check in to know precisely where the nondominant hand is positioned. Sniff out unusual odors. This is merely the tip of the iceberg. Printed words can convey only so much.

Leaders should also keep in mind that the price of greater worker mindfulness is that they will be thinking and observing more. This may be uncomfortable for command-and-control leaders who just want workers to know their place and do as they are told. However, greater mindfulness helps elevate an organization toward much higher safety and overall performance and culture.

Leaders do not have to be perfect but if they truly want better results, they can lead the way by practicing some of these methods for enhancing their own mindfulness. Even utilizing some of these practices to a small degree can help improve leadership and set the company on a path to greater mindfulness and safety.

References

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