

Leadership & Mindfulness: Definitions and Applications

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The human experience is one that is complex on variety of levels. We are perpetually being stimulated by our environment and our thoughts. Throughout every moment of consciousness we are analyzing and evaluating factors that have, currently are, or will affect us in some way. Thinking and evaluating at such a profound level is what makes humans unique from other species. It something we often take for granted, and in some cases, over-utilize to our demise. Experiencing the world has become more instrumental then experiential in many cases.

Although every human is unique, we all have common mentalities that speak to our basic needs as human beings. Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs serves as a basis for describing a large portion of our thought processes (Maslow, 1968). Much of our behaviors are in response to meeting the needs that are inherent to surviving in a complex world. We perceive ourselves as constantly deficient in regard to certain needs that have not been met or that could better met. We compete for employment opportunities that can provide ourselves better living conditions. Our biological needs for fair living conditions, fresh air, nourishing food and beverages, sleep, and sex are many of the driving factors that keep us performing. We then strive for higher senses of security and stability so that we can fulfill the needs that we believe to be more important for a hospitable human experience. Seeking love and belongings follows as we develop relationships with others, and following this is our desire for esteem, personal worth, respect from others and prestige. The category placed at the apex of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs involves coming to realizations of our personal potential and becoming self-fulfilled. As we struggle to meet the needs at lower hierarchical levels we become less cognizant of our ultimate goals of attaining self-actualization needs. Maslow's pyramid, in many senses, accurately reflects the proportion of consciousness that we offer to our human needs. This is unfortunate because what results is very little time dedicated for developing a more fulfilling human experience. Our competitive nature

to flood each hierarchical level so that sequential hierarchical needs can be fulfilled implies that self-actualization is a need that may under-occupied. Maslow's investigation of human needs and motivation sought to better understand the nature of how we can transcend doing by being. The practice of mindfulness meditation can serve as a wrinkle in time, where one can have the capacity to tap into one's highest needs in the midst of attempting to meet others.

The Essence of Mindfulness

Re-prioritizing our human needs as delineated by Abraham Maslow can change the quality of our lives. Moments in which subtle or extreme appreciation for the human experience can leave one with a sigh that is anything but negative. Mindfulness is a practice that experientially and empirically has been noted to catalyze these affections for the way that things are in our respective worlds. With foundations in Buddhist meditation, mindfulness entails that thinking and behaving can be more insightful after a bit of reflection. The aim is to bring fresh awareness into what we do and how we experience. Calmness is encouraged, yet is often inhibited by various distractions and restlessness (Batchelor, 1997). The fundamental challenge of practicing mindfulness seeks to suppress our feelings of restlessness and notice mental distractions as they enter our awareness. This all occurs through noticing and allowing, two skills that develop as mindful practice is exercised.

Empirical studies have examined the construct of mindfulness for almost forty years and conceptual definitions of mindfulness have been continuously generated, revised, and clarified over this period (Black, 2011). Mindfulness is a construct that can be perceptually understood in a variety of ways, supporting the notion that mindfulness has no correct definition. Pioneer in the study of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Jon Kabat-Zinn, defines mindful

awareness as something “cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 2012). This can be performed by regulating one's attention so that the quality of present-moment experiences can be enhanced. This serves to aggrandize our capacity to be compassionate human beings and develop positive relationships with others. Christopher Germer, a Harvard University psychology instructor, defines mindfulness as “a skill that allows us to be less reactive to what is happening in the moment... a way of relating to all experience- positive, negative, and neutral- such that our overall suffering is reduced and our sense of well-being increases” (Germer, 2004). A comparison of both Kabat-Zinn and Germer's definition illuminates the importance of recognizing what is occurring in the present moment. This emphasis on present moment experience is shared among many definitions yet may be described differently through diction. Ruth Baer, Clinical Psychologist operating out of the University of Kentucky, delineates mindfulness as “the non-judgmental observation of the ongoing stream of internal and external stimuli as they arise” (Baer, 2003). Acceptance is an additional theme that is presented in definitions of mindfulness, where recognizing things as they are can allow for a more healthy psyche.

How does one practice mindfulness? This seems to be contingent on individual differences and personal preferences. One's environment should be considered, where quiet, familiar places can be utilized as designated spaces for mindfulness. Sitting, standing, or lying down can all be ways to situate your body so that physical comfort can be attained. It might be helpful to set an intention for your mindful meditation, where you will pay special attention to body sensations, appreciation for emergent experiences, or give consideration to thoughts that permeate into one's consciousness. A mindful meditation can act as a personal catharsis of what

ever physical tightness may be inhibiting your ability to become at ease. Mindfulness meditations begin with some form of recognition of how you arrived to where you have arrived. Noticing follows as you evaluate your surroundings via the use of available senses. Body sensations are experienced in one constant flow of awareness. What comprises the rest of mindfulness practice is cultivating the ability to notice and allow. As Jon Kabat-Zinn notes, it doesn't require a lot of energy. You are merely attending to whatever life presents. Many times one can simply stumble upon places or moments that invite mindfulness. The mindfulness practice that I employ is similar to what I've just described, though I don't always rely on creating designated spaces and times to practice meditative mindfulness. Walking is an example of how mindfulness can be experienced in motion. Walking is performed primarily by our autonomic nervous system, which implies that the action of walking is not something that would distract one's ability to be entirely mindful. Traveling through the world through the use of our feet or other forms of transportation may allow for us to sense the world in more ways than what might be available if confined to one particular space.

My personal definition has been most influenced by my personal understanding of mindful experiences. It is undoubtedly an intimate relationship that develops on a moment-to-moment basis. It creates a genuine sense of being that seems to belittle my own ego, granting more consideration to the earth as the source of my well-being. Life of every different form is acknowledged and appreciated as providing a unique contribution to the overall experience. There is a profound sense of enriched spatial awareness that almost allows my mind, facilitated by my senses, to reach out and caress all that creates the environment that I am occupying. Entering a mindful state retracts much of the psychological barriers that I usually use as forms of

protection. My mind becomes more sponge-like, where every essence of my experience is absorbed and integrated into my awareness. In my definition of mindfulness, I describe it as, “the process of purposively noticing life’s offerings as they present themselves, in the moment, so that an environment can enrich ones lived experience and overall psyche”.

Mindfulness allows for the emergence of novel thoughts and affections. I understand that I have offered a definition of mindfulness that is unique to my own understanding of the practice. Nonetheless, I employed mindful consideration in the development of my definition. It required introspection and constructing of a sequence of words that best represented how I conceptually understand a practice that, I regard, as having primarily spatial characteristics. Had I been written this definition in a different place or time would have likely resulted in a different definition.

In *Mindfulness for Beginners*, Kabat-Zinn states that one may discover that the cultivation of mindfulness can work to give your life back to yourself. I don’t believe that I have ever come very separated from my essence, however, mindfulness has brought me ever more close to my essence and my understanding of the world. It is through the act of mindfulness that I have been able to acknowledge many often over-looked aspects of life. Acknowledgements of this type can have real and perceived healing effects on both the mind and the body. Acknowledging what is occurring in the present moment can empower us to respond to the world in a way that promotes self-care and care for others.

Literature on Mindfulness

Physiological Effects of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is broad concept that has implications on anatomic levels. Very few mental exercises have been found to alter the physiological composition of our brains. It is interesting

that studies of mindfulness' effect on the brain have been observed increases in brain activity when the practice is one that does not demand sophisticated thinking and processing.

Researchers from the United States and Germany collaborated on a clinical study that looked for differences in brain activity between individuals who practiced mindfulness and those who did not. Their longitudinal study used a group of eighteen mindfulness practicing individuals over an eight week period and looked for changes in grey matter concentration amidst the cerebral cortex. By comparing the grey matter concentration in the brain, researchers discovered that grey matter had been more concentrated in participants who had practiced mindfulness compared to those who had. This grey matter concentration was found in the hippocampus, a brain region known for storing and accessing long-term memories. Further brain analyses identified “increases in the posterior cingulate cortex, the temporo-parietal junction, and the cerebellum in the MBSR group compared with the controls”, (Holzel et al., 2011). Due to the brain areas where grey matter migrated towards, the results suggest that mindfulness, and mindfulness-based stress reduction specifically, is associated with brain areas that involve learning, memory, emotional regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction is now being utilized in the treatment of individuals suffering from tension and those in need of physiological catharsis. Researchers from Weill Cornell Medical College and the New Jersey Neuroscience Institute conducted a study that employed the use of mindful meditations to observe affects on generalized anxiety disorder and its physical symptoms. The results from their study indicated that mindfulness caused significant decreases in the amount of physical tension that participants experienced among other psychological factors (Evans et al., 2008). Further studies have attempted to find significant

changes in the amount of cortisol that the adrenal glands excrete. This is a hormone responsible for inducing physiological stress responses, however, no significant changes have been noted.

Psychological Implications

Mindfulness, from my experience, has cleansed my mind in one way or another. I feel as though I can handle challenging decisions more skillfully and have a more consistently positive outlook on the world. A great number of empirical studies have discovered the psychological benefits of mindfulness practice compared to the limited findings that support physical well-being. Researchers Soysa and Wilcomb studied psychological facets of mindfulness (describing, awareness, non-judging, and non-reactivity) and their relationship with dimensions of negative self-compassion self-efficacy, and gender. These variables were hypothesized to effect factors surrounding psychological well-being, such as, depression, anxiety, and stress. Only mindful non-judging and non-reactivity were found to have a negative relationship with anxiety. Non-judging, awareness, and non-reactivity (inversely) were found to predict stress (Soysa & Wilcomb, 2015). It seems obvious to avoid thoughts characterized by judgment and reactivity If one is attempting to reduce their experience of anxiety and stress. I think the underlying implication suggests that these sentiments can be more effectively avoided if mindfulness is used to promote awareness of thought processes so that less reactive behaviors will ensue.

Coping with pain is often done by using sedatives and other analgesics that have been chemically composed to defer the messaging neurons from reaching the brain. Mindfulness can manipulate the brain in a highly similar way with less adverse effects. Researchers have noted emotional intelligence and self-efficacy as greatly beneficial skills in reducing ones subjective perceptions of pain. Wright and Schutte (2014) discover a complex relationship of variables that

positively influence one's ability to cope with chronic pain through the use of mindful practices. Greater mindfulness was associated with less subjective experience of pain, greater pain management self-efficacy, and more emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence and pain management self-efficacy significantly mediated the relationship between mindfulness and pain (Wright & Schutte, 2014). This sheds some factual light on the perceptions that Westerners have of Buddhist monks as having some supernatural ability to cope with, and refrain from exhibiting, pain.

The idea of self-efficacy can further provide support for mindfulness practitioners' exceptional levels of determination and tolerance. What is more impressive is the fact that one does not need to be an experienced Buddhist monk to reap the rewards that mindfulness meditation can offer. Many of the studies conducted on mindfulness use participants that have never practiced mindfulness before. Researchers offer participants' mindfulness training for short periods of time, usually just eight weeks. In a study on the effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction on psychological well-being, participants' levels of stress, self-efficacy and positive states of mind were measured before and after an eight-week mindfulness program. Post-intervention levels of stress were significantly lower than pre-intervention levels, while mindfulness self-efficacy and positive states of mind were at significantly higher levels (Chang et al., 2004). Because many studies have shown a relationship between stress and negative health outcomes, this study demonstrates how mindfulness meditations can promote superior health (Burns, Drayson, Ring, & Carroll, 2003).

Mindfulness, if consistently practiced, can affect our disposition and major aspects of our personality. Through my personal practice of mindfulness I have noticed a stabilization of different aspects of my personality. Someone that might want to reduce their level of neuroticism

may consider practicing mindfulness so that their awareness can inform them of behavioral propensities. Francis Galton, pioneer in the field of psychology, attempted to create a taxonomy of human personality traits in the year of 1884. Since his bold attempts to categorize personality traits, other researchers have collaborated to develop a most well known taxonomy of personality, the Big Five Personality Traits. Openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism all have individual relationships with mindfulness and have been hypothesized to be positively and negatively correlated with mindfulness practice. Tamara Giluk, from the Department of Management and Organizations, University of Iowa, employed a complex meta-analysis to observe the relationships between personality factors and mindfulness. Multiple mindfulness questionnaires, the Big Five Inventory (BFI), and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) were administered to participants. A significant positive relationship was found between both conscientiousness and mindfulness and positive affect and mindfulness. These results imply that individuals that were rated as mindful individuals were dependable, responsible, achievement-oriented, and generally optimistic persons (Giluk, 2009). Conversely, significant negative relationships were found between mindfulness and neuroticism, as well as mindfulness and negative affect (Giluk, 2009). Negative affect implies that individuals are more prone to experiencing negative moods and pessimism. Neuroticism is synonymous with negative affect, yet is further characterized by anxiousness and insecurity. This study does not conclude whether or not practicing mindfulness would decrease ones levels of negative affect or neuroticism, nor does it discourage individuals with these traits to avoid mindfulness practice due to incompatibilities.

Conclusion

By purposively attending to our lives we can do more good than harm. As mindfulness proponents such as Jon Kabat-Zinn have noted, mindfulness provides opportunities to develop ones interior resources for learning, growing, and healing. This review illuminates many of the ways that simply increasing your awareness can result in less reactive decision making and more reflective consideration. The studies mentioned in this review point out the many ways in which physical and psychological well being can be protected. Most physical health conditions can be treated by surgery and medication, however, the fate of ones psychological well-being is determined by the amount of self-care that the individuals willing to employ. Mindfulness is ultimately an exercise, that utilizes equipment that is already attached to you, that is, your mind and body. If there were as many people practicing mindfulness as there are people physically exercising then we would likely be a more enlightened and compassionate society.

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