



Team Mindfulness: A Discipline for Performance Beyond Fashion and Fad

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Mindfulness – a way of paying attention with an attitude of open-hearted interest to what goes on with you, with others and in the world around you – has been around for at least 2,600 years. In recent years it has become a feature of contemporary culture – so much so to that it is in danger of being thought of either as a panacea or as merely a fad.

One reason why mindfulness work in organisations attracts criticism is that too often it has been turned into a kind of sticking plaster. “A team is stressed or over-worked? Let’s bring in some mindfulness instruction – that should fix it.”

The current tendency to view mindfulness practice as a panacea raises a serious moral question. It is simply not good enough to teach people to regulate their own emotions when they work in an emotionally toxic environment that takes no account of their humanity, or when their organisations think of them simply as cogs in a machine.

It is time to put the hype around mindfulness aside and dig deeper.

There is a more rigorous form of mindful work that can be done in workplace contexts, one that is more attuned to the heritage and intent of the ancient practice. It is a discipline dedicated to helping create healthy, humane workplaces whose outputs serve genuine human needs and enhance the living systems on which life depends. As our contribution to that field, we offer an approach to team working that we call Team Mindfulness.

The team is, after all, the primary working unit in most organisations. Just about everybody works in a team. And what happens in that team powerfully shapes outcomes at work. When teams are diverse, supportive, open and engaged – where they are felt to be psychologically safe – there is a much higher chance that outputs will correspondingly improve. Teams like that are more innovative, they will experience less churn, less health absence and greater productivity. There is a bottom-line case for creating flourishing teams – and there is a compelling moral case too.

What are teams experiencing?

Because teams are at the core of organisational fabric everywhere, we’ve been taking the pulse of how teams are doing as we track our work with teams across sectors. From healthcare (in the UK and Danish health services), government and public agencies, and a variety of corporate teams in hospitality, retail, food, and services, what we’ve found is that teams are very busy – and some are having a tough time.

Almost everyone we are working with is stretched. Some are finding energy from the necessity of reinvention, the rapid shift in systems that is currently going on everywhere: “more done in six months than in five years” has been a common message.

But there’s harder stuff too. Teams are talking about their exhaustion. Global digital working allows no down-time. There are new inequalities coming to the surface: problems of inclusion and exclusion in virtual working. Many are working hard to maintain the social fabric of teams, trying to build presence and engagement in virtual spaces. Some are finding it difficult to do the necessary creative and thinking work, finding it hard to balance their fast-moving mix of operational necessities and strategic shifts.

There is a demanding agenda. We are finding that the Team Mindfulness approach has an important contribution to make in helping to address these challenges.

How Team Mindfulness Works

Team Mindfulness is different to individual mindful practice. Individual practice helps

people learn practices that enhance their capacity to pay attention open-heartedly and on purpose, in the present moment, to the elements of their own experience. It is a powerful methodology, increasing your capacity to manage your own emotions, to focus, to empathise, to adopt new perspectives and to adapt better to changing circumstances. All of that is to the good and we advocate individual mindfulness and its practices for those who are interested.

With Team Mindfulness, however, the focus of attention shifts. With Team Mindfulness people learn to bring their attention to their teams. The team itself becomes the focus of attention – its goals, tasks and processes for sure, but also its inner weather – the team's ever changing internal dynamics.

In this practice team members discover a shared ability to raise and openly discuss matters that go beyond simply their tasks and goals. They find ways of beginning to discuss how they experience being in this team, right now. They learn to notice the patterns of what happens, or doesn't happen, between themselves. This discipline opens new ways of openly and appropriately talking about what matters to them personally with colleagues who are willing and able to hear and acknowledge that. It allows for real conversations that help to unlock team and organisational challenges – and that leads to better outcomes.

When team members feel that others in their team know, at least to some extent, what it's like to be them; when they feel that they're able to raise work or personal concerns with other team members and that these will be heard – then the team and its members are much more likely to flourish. What is being nourished here are the foundations of the psychological safety that make teams more effective.

This bedrock of psychological safety is key. When that fails, or when it is never built, the consequences for team members can be devastating. You can't leave that to chance, and it should never simply be a happy accident that it comes about.

Fortunately, there is robust evidence about how to build the practice. Building on earlier research discussed in an article by Michael Chaskalson and Megan Reitz, our work employs a 3 Foundations approach to Team Mindfulness. These foundations are Allowing, Inquiry and Meta-awareness.

Allowing is the practice of recognising reality for what it is. We all spend so much our time living in a "what if" world. But it's fruitless to spend time wishing the world were somehow different. "If only I had a different boss, a bigger apartment, a different partner. If only that person wasn't on my team... Then everything would be OK!"

This is nonsense and when we think about it for a few moments we know that. Yet we all do it. "If only things weren't somehow like this – then all our problems would be solved." There are two rather obvious points here. Firstly, solve one problem and then others occur. Always. There are always problems. Nothing is ever forever OK. But more than that and perhaps more importantly – things are as they actually are. Right now, in this very moment, it is like this. When we learn to allow that things are as they actually are in this very moment, then choice opens up for us.

Allowing asks questions more like these: "It's like this – now what?" and "What shall I do? What would be best for me? For others? For the situation I'm in? What would be kindest – best for everyone?"

When you're able to allow things to be as they actually then possibilities emerge. When we are stuck in an attitude of wishing things weren't like this or an attitude of denial, there is very little choice available to us.

In the Team Mindfulness context, allowing is about acknowledging that this is how this team is, right now. This is not about passivity. It's about recognising that only once we grasp what actually is, can we decide what to do about it. Allowing is a solid foundation

for purposeful action.

Inquiry is the practice of disciplined interest in opening things up. When a team grasps inquiry its members become more interested. Interested in other team members. Interested in the team and its purpose and function. Interested in the patterns and connection, the flows and stories that make up the life of work in this team. Interested in what can and cannot be discussed. Interested in the world view of others – in the team and beyond. Becoming better able to appreciate other positions, team members become more flexible, more creative in their responses.

So much of creating the future involves moving beyond the ways of seeing and acting that have brought us to the problem we're in. The ability to address that problem creatively demands that we see the world another way. We can only see another way if we are willing to look through fresh lenses. This is where nurturing a team's ability to inquire really matters.

You increase a team's ability to inquire every time you ask a fresh question. The team becomes aware of the ways of looking at the world that have become so common that the view looks like the only view. We are all prisoners of our lenses and frames, myths and metaphors. Learning to ask a question that causes us to see the world from a different angle, to hear different view and different voices, this is the richness that flows from opening the door to richer inquiry.

Meta-awareness is the ability to look at the team from an 'outsider' perspective and see the behaviour of the team as it is happening, like looking down at the swirling patterns of people moving around a busy railway station from a high up balcony. The team learns to see itself in action. It sees what is going on its own collective behaviour. It sees its own patterns – what it is doing while it is actually doing it.

As a result, the team becomes aware of its own dynamics and more able to change its dynamics in the way it works. What this means in practice is that the team starts to see things about itself that might otherwise be hidden in plain sight.

All teams are political, and all teams involve power. People rarely like to talk about it. Understanding how power and politics work in your team is vital to creating psychological safety and to improving genuine collaboration. Which voices are heard, which voices are silenced? Very little of this will be deliberate abuse of power. Mostly problems occur simply because the power does its work unseen.

There will be patterns of other kinds. Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing something. The team will have patterns around preferences in perception: what sort of data does this team notice, what sort of evidence is absent? Who gets to be part of the team, and who gets to influence the team? Patterns of participation, inclusion and exclusion will become more apparent, and the more the team develops meta-awareness the more the team will be able to shift in the moment to address any adverse consequences caused by its own ways of working.

The three foundations of AIM – allowing, inquiry and meta-awareness – can all be learned and nourished. They are the essential fabric of the Mindful Team. Investing in them pays dividends in what you get as a result.

The outcomes you'll get and why they count.

By focusing on AIM in your Mindful Team you will develop team's ability to do three specific things better. Each of these impacts team effectiveness.

Firstly, Purpose – you team will work with a much sharper clarity of purpose. We've noticed that Mindful Teams have a better grip on purposeful effort at all levels: applying the

purpose of the organisation, developing the specific purpose of this team, and the purpose of the task we are doing right now, an ability to examine how the work we are doing right now addresses purpose most effectively.

Commonly, a great deal of team effort is dissipated in activities that are at odds with what the organisation is trying to do. We all have a limited amount of energy to offer and squandering it on tasks that are off-track can be a violation of the agreed focus that not only wastes resource now, but also breeds dissatisfaction in tomorrow's efforts. AIM helps focus effort on the activities that matter most to the strategic intention.

Second, Participation – Mindful Teams get smarter at working out who does what. They inquire with rigour into questions like these:

- Which tasks are individual tasks rather than team tasks? Have we got enough trust to leave team members to their job, to report in or ask for help genuinely when needed? So much team time gets wasted on unnecessary updates as a security blanket to disguise a lack of trust in each other.
- Which tasks really need to be shared? Being forensic about cooperation is useful: there are some tasks where cooperation is vital to get the job done. Mindful Teams are better able to select these tasks and identify which team members to be involved to get task done well.
- Which tasks demand to be handled in collaboration? Some issues have to be explored and decided by thinking together. AIM helps support this genuine shared thinking through nurturing the ground of creative collaboration. Mindful Teams think together better because they've learned to create the psychological safety on which this depends.

All of these factors are also vital in the pursuit of inclusion and diversity. Effective teams need diversity of all kinds and building the AIM foundation helps to bring this into reality. Mindful Teams make more of the diversity they have got and provide a more open embrace of the increased difference most organisations now need to secure.

The combination of these outcomes leads to the final result, which is better Performance. The team becomes better able to hold itself to account, with a clearer eye on the outcomes of its action, and the ability to be more discerning and more frank about what is on track and what is not. Mindful Teams are less liable to hide bad news, more able to share "what is", and to have the fierce but compassionate conversations on which rigorous shared accountability depends.

We're in no doubt, Mindful Teams have the advantage in today's world. The foundational shared practices of AIM deliver alert, more diverse and healthier teams, with their minds more open to the practical exploration and learning demanded by a shifting world. They are equipped to focus their efforts better, allocate their resources with more prudence and discernment, and to allocate the right people to a task with higher levels of trust and rigour.

This is what the world needs from us all right now as we ask organisations to redefine themselves to adapt to very new ways of working. It is also what people are increasingly demanding from their work and workplace.