



Mindfulness

Exercising conscious presence
for a better life

Mindfulness is a healthy combination of ancient Eastern meditation and Western cognitive sciences which has become a mainstream tool in leadership development and practice. It helps you forge a path to conscious presence and improves leadership and personal life immensely, as we have already experienced in our trainings.

by Hans Bodingbauer and Imre Sivó

Mindfulness may initially be associated with spirituality, religion, meditation, Buddhism, etc. As traditional managers we may thus be inclined to disregard it: What place do these concepts have in business? However, how has mindfulness become such a strong trend nowadays?

Modern mindfulness was developed by Jon Kabat Zinn. In 1979 he developed a trademarked process called MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) and introduced it into the healthcare industry to help people cope with chronic diseases, stress, anxiety and pain. Nowadays, mindfulness techniques are applied in all areas of modern life, including the workplace, management, leadership, as well as coaching and consultancy.

It starts with a monkey mind

Neuroscience has shed some light on how mindfulness affects the brain. All mindfulness trainings use forms of meditation as a means of developing mindfulness. Meditation is known to be a method of instilling a state of rest to the otherwise very active mind. Contrary to expectations, the brain, when it is in this restful state, is most active. Several systems become active simultaneously, producing the kind of thoughts and, sometimes massive, inner chatter (Zen Buddhists call this monkey mind), which everyone who has ever tried meditating has probably experienced. Neuroscientists call this the »default state.«

Try this exercise right now: Stop reading, close your eyes and just do nothing for one minute. What did you experience? You probably had many thoughts running through your mind. This is what our brain does when we are not focusing on anything specific.

In the default state, four types of mental activities are usually happening at the same time:

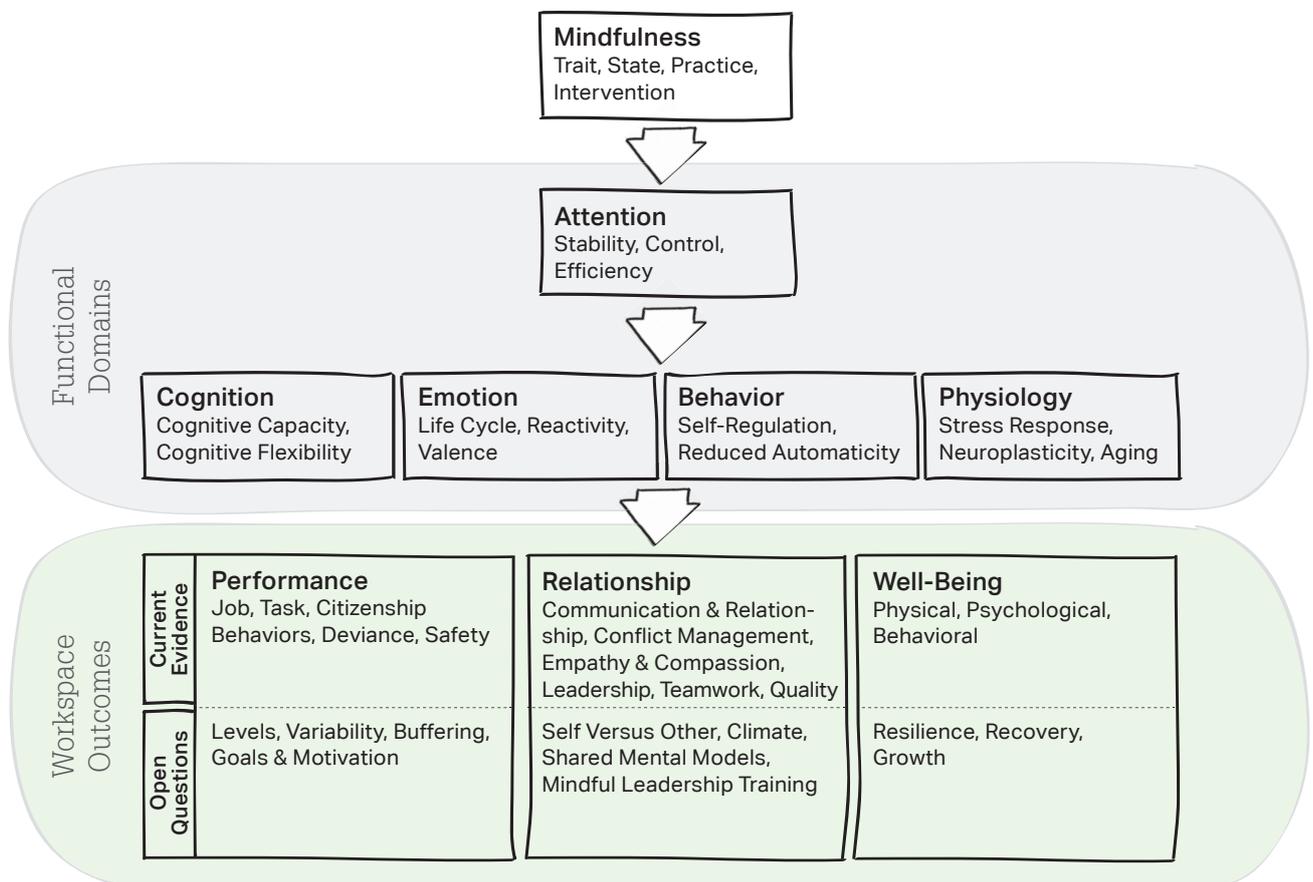
1. **Commentating**, which means we are criticizing or judging what we are currently doing, feeling, or sensing.
2. **Time travel**, which means we are thinking about and/or judging the past or thinking about and planning for or worrying about the future.
3. **Self-referencing-processing**, which refers to the process of putting all of this in relation to who we are.
4. **Social cognition**, meaning that we are thinking about other people, putting them into categories and thinking about how we relate to them.

»Mindfulness is the aware, balanced acceptance of the present experience.«

Silvia Boorstein

All of these brain activities occur without any effort and without anyone having asked us to perform them. ►

The effects of mindfulness



»Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally.«

Jon Kabat-Zinn

If we follow this inner talk we spend a lot of time thinking about the past, possibly worrying about the future and categorizing people. This means we are not fully aware of what's really going on in our environment. We are running on auto-pilot and missing out on the real world.

Out of the default state

However, there is another state of being. It is one in which we are fully immersed and focused. This state is often described as »being in the flow,« or being fully in the present. As such, it is the state of mindfulness versus the state of »mindlessness.«

Mindfulness activates mainly those regions of the brain that process sensory input. Therefore, meditation exercises focus on both sharpening the awareness of our sensory system and on recognizing when we slip into the »default state.«

How does all this relate to leadership? A leader who spends too much time in the »default state« or running on autopilot is impeded in his ability to think clearly, communicate properly, manage emotions, and guide and coach others.

How to practice mindfulness

Many definitions of mindfulness show a strong relationship between attention and awareness. There are hundreds of mindful exercises you can find in relevant literature. They can be either meditative or non-meditative ones, and they all help you focus your attention on the present experience and also become much more aware (with all your senses, your cognition, and feelings) of what you are experiencing at the moment.

Mindfulness can be used in two very enriching ways: In a stabilizing, curing way, as it is used widely and successfully in the healthcare industry, and also to reduce stress, the risk of burnout or to enhance your life and increase your ability towards more awareness.

For a better organization

The illustration on the previous page shows an integrated view of the possible effects of mindfulness. It affects our individual attention and increases awareness (cognition, emotion, behavior as well as physiology) and therefore also has an impact on teams and entire organizations. If people are more mindful, organizational performance, relationships with superiors as well as colleagues and ultimately the culture of the organization improve. Empirical research suggests that individual task performance increases and meditators tend to have reduced performance variability and a higher ability to maintain high performance even in disruptive and threatening contexts.

In our trainings we have also experienced that mindfulness improves the quality of communication which relates to better relationships, better problem-solving and more creativity. It also helps people develop a balanced life. Employees and leaders with a good work-life balance are the important building blocks for a positive, trustful corporate culture.

Life and work-changing

Each of us has got a miraculous, individual mind and if we understand how it works and even master it, we have a greater chance of growing towards a fulfilled life. ●