Organisational mindfulness

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A discussion

The Mindfulness Movement has been instrumental in bringing the practice of mindfulness into everyday life, helping to create a ‘way of life’ based on the mind being in the present moment, paying attention to the present and being non-judgmental. It is neither positive nor negative thinking, but a neutral absorption and concentration on the present.

The history of mindfulness is fascinating, and seems to have origins in Buddhism. Used as a form of meditation, its’ secular applications now permeate throughout clinical practice as approaches to alleviating anxiety, stress, and some forms of mental ill health.

Mindfulness is gaining in popularity, although with this comes scepticism. It is a widely used term, although the meaning may be variable, and its application broad.

The question for me is ‘how different are the uses of mindfulness to the aims of, and processes for, achieving a psychologically healthy organisation?’.

We know that the ingredients of a psychologically healthy organisation, and the outcome from achieving such a state, improve individual and corporate performance by enhancing the capability of people to intentionally concentrate on their immediate tasks and complete them successfully.

The Wellbeing and Performance Agenda is about achieving peak performance and productivity by providing the organisational environment that provokes individuals to feel psychologically well, be motivated by the purpose of the organisation, and feel socially engaged with the organisation and work it creates.

In its meditation form, mindfulness is effectively encouraging neutral thought, focusing on concentrating on the present – the sounds, smells, textures, colours, feelings, sensations of the moment. In its more directional application, the individual is encouraged to think in a particular direction for a particular purpose, such as being part of a cognitive behaviour therapy programme that encourages the individual, for example, to become aware of their feelings but not react to them.

Mindfulness is predominantly about being mindful of oneself. On the surface, therefore, its application to an organisational setting seems completely inappropriate. Psychological health in organisations is largely based on the concept of reciprocity – put crudely, if the organisation is good to you, you reciprocate by being good to the organisation. This is an interaction between (at least) two people and not an exclusive focus on oneself.
The query I have is based on the fundamental reality that we live, constantly, in the context of organisations to survive. We do not survive on our own; we have to interact with others, and the processes of interacting with others creates an organisation, albeit one that might disband quickly as the interaction terminates. Mindfulness doesn’t fit with the notion of organisation, and can be perceived as the antithesis of organisation – encouraging a withdrawal from organisation and a focus on the individual. Mindfulness is an approach for the individual to adopt to regain mental control in the face of challenging events and behaviours that arise because of the existence of organisations.

But does mindfulness have to be solely concerned with the focus on the individual?

The brilliant initiative – Mindful Employer- suggests that being mindful isn’t confined to the individual focusing on oneself, but on others.

My own initiative – Psychological Responsibility – is about the individual taking responsibility for their own psychological wellbeing as well as ensuring the individual does no psychological harm to anyone else. This is aimed at both the individual and the interaction with others, and is a foundation principle of The WellBeing and Performance Agenda.

Mindfulness is part of the various approaches to securing individual psychological health and wellbeing. Can it, also, be part of the approaches of one person seeking to secure the psychological health and wellbeing of another person?

Organisational mindfulness could, reasonably, be a description of an organisation that adopts Psychological Responsibility, with an emphasis on the key behaviour of attentiveness – being attentive to oneself as well as everyone else.

Instead of only being attentive to oneself in the present, organisational mindfulness could be being attentive to others; being focused on the psychological health and wellbeing of others in the present moment – the moment of interaction.

Attentiveness requires a significant degree of concentration on others to demonstrate to the other person that they are of value to you. If the other person feels this, it is virtually impossible for that person not to reciprocate and be attentive back to you. Successfully executed and intentional attentiveness is almost always without any distress in normal circumstances. This changes, of course, in the context of the classroom or the military exercise grounds where intentional attentiveness might have the purpose of creating pressure and tension to encourage action, but, hopefully, does not cause distress.

My proposition is that it is reasonable to describe organisational mindfulness as an organisation that adopts Psychological Responsibility as a cultural component, where the individual is mindful of themselves, and mindful of their interaction with others.
Comment
A key challenge for those of us engaged in helping others improve working lives is the use of language.

Over the past several years words such as stress and resilience have come into fashion, and are widely used words without, in many situations, being fully understood. We now have a growing use of the term mindfulness, with a body of opinion that is sceptical of its value.

I would like to hear some views about the use of the term organisational mindfulness as a means of sending a message to managers and employees about adopting Psychological Responsibility within the workplace.

Email Derek with your thoughts to derek.mowbray@mas.org.uk
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Derek Mowbray is a Chartered Psychologist and Chartered Scientist with experience as a Chief Executive in the public, private and voluntary sectors, and top management experience in the education sector.

His specialties are building organisation-wide Positive Work Cultures, adaptive leaders, effective managers together with performance related behaviour of leaders in relation to their employees. He is a specialist in personal resilience and developed a programme that has been delivered throughout the UK, Ireland, USA and mainland Europe. He has a unique combination of management and academic credentials with a special interest in organisation health psychology which aims to harmonise the relationship between organisations and their workforce.

He is visiting Professor of Psychology at Northumbria University.

About MAS

Our purpose is to help organisations achieve peak performance and productivity; to strengthen corporate and personal resilience and to prevent stress from occurring in the first place;

Our approach is to help organisations establish psychologically healthy workplaces by facilitating the implementation of our WellBeing and Performance Agenda framework.

Our services include consultancy; applied organisation health psychology; facilitation; assessments; cultural change; leadership and team development, tailored interventions.

Our programmes include topics such as:
Manager’s Role in Resilience,
Personal Resilience,
Adaptive Leadership and
the WellBeing and Performance Agenda.

Our products – The Resilience Assessment Questionnaire (RAQ40); Adaptive Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ); The Cultural Assessment Questionnaire and many others, and …. 

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