

Dattner Consulting, LLC

Mindfulness at work

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Definition

Mindlessness involves automatic, habitual thought:

- Treating information as though it is context-free and true regardless of circumstances
- Most common when people are distracted, hurried multitasking, and/or overloaded
- “The application of yesterday’s solutions to today’s problems”

Ellen Langer, *Mindfulness*

Definition

Mindfulness, the opposite of mindlessness, includes:

- Creation of new categories
- Openness to new information
- Awareness of more than one perspective
- “Attunement to today’s demands to avoid tomorrow’s difficulties”

Ellen Langer, *Mindfulness*

Mindfulness

History

Impact and examples

Causes and contexts

Components and assessment

Recommendations and strategies

Conclusion

History

➤ History

- Impact and examples
- Causes and contexts
- Components and assessment
- Recommendations and strategies
- Conclusion

1898 Stein and Solomons: Reading/writing experiments

1978 Langer, Blank & Chanowitz: The Xerox study

1989 Langer's *Mindfulness*

1997 Langer's *The Power of Mindful Learning*

Impact and examples

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Decision making

- May I use the Xerox machine?
- May I use the Xerox machine because I'm in a rush?
- May I use the Xerox machine because I want to make copies?

Langer, Blank & Chanowitz (1978)

Impact and examples

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Relationships and social judgments

- People have a natural tendency to stereotype, and this can affect employment interviews and performance appraisal
- The same traits can be described differently:
 - Spontaneous vs. impulsive
 - Consistent vs. rigid
 - Softhearted vs. weak
 - Intense vs. overly emotional

Ellen Langer, *Mindfulness*

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Communication

- Mindlessness can occur in both listener and speaker
- J. Edgar Hoover: “watch the borders”
- Winston Churchill: “bring me Berlin”

Impact and examples

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Conflict

- People often mindlessly assume that situations are win-lose when they could be win-win
- Conflict strategies often reflect past conflicts instead of present ones
- People who blame others for conflicts end up suffering longer

Causes and contexts

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Practice makes imperfect

- Practicing too much can lead to mindlessness
- In most cases, it is better to improvise a little instead of merely repeating what has been practiced
- Some pianists memorize pieces away from the piano

Causes and contexts

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Success breeds failure

- Many experiments have shown that people who succeed on tasks are less able to change their approach, even after circumstances change
- Individuals, groups and organizations often get “wrecked by success”

Causes and contexts

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The hammer and the nail

- Managers and executives tend to see business problems as residing in their respective domains of expertise
- People are tempted to view challenges as “technical” rather than “adaptive”

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Repetition

- 1982 Air Florida crash in Washington D.C.: the de-icer was “off” when it should have been on
- Humor relies on the shift from mindlessness to mindfulness
- Many children’s jokes and games rely on repetition and surprise

Causes and contexts

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Confirmatory biases

- People have a tendency to rush to judgment and then selectively gather and interpret information in order to confirm their initial impressions
- The study of the admitted “patients” in the mental hospital

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Misplaced confidence

- Individuals overestimate their abilities
- Groups overestimate their likelihood of success
- Confidence is helpful as long as it is accompanied by uncertainty and openness to new information

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Stress and anxiety

- Individuals, groups and organizations can suffer from “threat-rigidity” effects and escalate commitment to failing courses of action
- When stressed, people are more likely to rely on their habitual, “dominant” response, which may not be the most useful one
- Choking and panic can both lead to poor performance

Causes and contexts

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Groupthink

Poor and even catastrophic decisions can be made when groups are too cohesive and under pressure

- Negative outcomes occur when groups:
 - Rule out alternative explanations and responses
 - Do not challenge or criticize ideas and theories
 - Fail to gather additional information and/or expert opinion
 - Do not have or develop contingency plans

Causes and contexts

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Symptoms of groupthink include:

- An illusion of invulnerability
- Rationalizing poor decisions
- A belief in the group's morality
- Maintaining an illusion of unanimity
- Self-censorship and direct pressure on others to conform
- Sharing stereotypes of others which guide decisions
- Using “mindguards” to keep interpretations narrow

Causes and contexts

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Strategies to prevent or minimize groupthink:

- Having leaders remain impartial and above the group
- Using policy-forming breakout groups which report to the larger group
- Encouraging candor, debate and dissent
- Using outside experts and devil's advocates
- Holding a "second-chance meeting" before making a final decision

Components and assessment

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The mindfulness scale

- Novelty seeking
- Novelty producing
- Engagement
- Flexibility

Components and assessment

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FINAL FOLIOS SEEM TO RESULT FROM YEARS OF DUTIFUL STUDY OF TEXTS ALONG WITH YEARS OF SCIENTIFIC EXPERIENCE

Recommendations and strategies

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Celebrate mistakes

- Wernher Von Braun sent champagne to an engineer who admitted he might have short circuited a rocket before it exploded on launch
- Amy Edmondson's research found that higher performing medical teams were *more* likely to report errors

Recommendations and strategies

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Be definitely tentative

- Presenting facts unconditionally can lead to mindlessness
- Presenting facts as being contingent and context dependent can encourage mindfulness
- “This is a dog’s chew toy” vs. “this could be a dog’s chew toy”
- Mindfulness often involves reframing, seeing beyond black, white and grey

Recommendations and strategies

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Turn means into ends

- From an early age, people are rewarded for results, rather than processes
- It's often more helpful to focus on processes rather than outcomes
- Organizations should evaluate intermediate steps and not just final products

Recommendations and strategies

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Be less prejudiced by discriminating more

- Learning to make more, rather than fewer distinctions among people can help combat stereotypes
- Perceptions of other people should go beyond confirming initial impressions
- Mindfulness involves an awareness of individuality

Recommendations and strategies

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Turn work into play

- People usually are more mindful when playing than when working
- It's easier to notice variation and difference in play than in work
- Making work more like play can lead to greater creativity and enjoyment

Recommendations and strategies

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Characteristics of “high reliability organizations”

- Preoccupation with failure
- Reluctance to simplify interpretations
- Sensitivity to operations
- Commitment to resilience
- Deference to expertise

Recommendations and strategies

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Preoccupation with failure

- Even the smallest error or unexpected result is treated as symptomatic of system-wide issues
- Near misses should be treated as failures rather than as successes
- People are rewarded for sharing information about failures and are punished for concealing or distorting failures
- The organization tasks people with envisioning dangerous scenarios

Recommendations and strategies

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Reluctance to simplify interpretations

- Diverse perspectives are solicited and considered
- Active disconfirmation of assumptions leads theories to evolve over time
- Attention is paid to the subtle nuances that differentiate present challenges from situations in the past

Recommendations and strategies

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Sensitivity to operations

- People pay attention to the little picture and strive for continuous improvement
- Operational performance data is transparent and widely disseminated
- There are unannounced tests of the system's capacity to detect problems

Recommendations and strategies

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Commitment to resilience

- A consideration of unexpected events informs organizational structure and strategy
- There is some redundancy in resources and skills
- Inventiveness in confronting emerging challenges is celebrated and rewarded

Recommendations and strategies

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Deference to expertise

- Truth should be able to speak to power
- Leadership should be based on expertise rather than on experience or rank
- Experts should be consulted from different functional areas and departments

Recommendations and strategies

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Mindful Leadership

- The mindful leader makes people more mindful
- Mindful leaders take a holistic, rather than a mechanical approach
- Establish authority about the appropriate things
- Encourage people to speak up and find their own means to accomplishing specified ends

Conclusion

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Mindfulness will be increasingly important in a highly competitive, rapidly changing, team-based, global business environment

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