

The Mindful Workplace: Developing Resilient Individuals and Resonant Organisations with MBSR

By Michael Chaskalson

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Introduction

The author, Michael Chaskalson, is an honorary lecturer at Bangor University at the Centre of Mindfulness Research and Practice in the School of Psychology. He is a strong advocate for the implementation of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training in the workplace. His premise is that if people are more aware of their thoughts and feelings they are in a better position to manage them and be more effective at work. He argues that we do not have to choose between economic prosperity and human well-being, since mindfulness training for staff can improve an organisation's productivity and give them an advantage over their competitors.

Chaskalson predicts that individuals in a 'mindful workplace' would experience higher levels of employee well-being and resilience. He cites advantages such as: lower levels of stress and illness-related absenteeism; more employee engagement; greater productivity; less conflict; higher levels of job satisfaction; lower levels of employee turnover; and higher levels of creativity and innovation.

In her Foreword to the book, Lynda Gratton, Professor of Management

Practice at the London Business School, suggests that many of us live our working lives on 'automatic pilot', subject to the forces of technology, globalisation and connectivity. She argues that the practice of mindfulness techniques can enable individuals to develop resilience to the challenges of the modern world.

Structure of the Book

In his introduction, Chaskalson presents the business case for the application of MBSR training in the workplace. Throughout the book he presents research evidence to support his claims about the value of mindfulness training and its relevance to business organisations.

The book comprises manageable chapters, each with useful practical exercises and interesting references.

The first two Chapters cover the basics of mindfulness and mindfulness practice. In Chapter 3, the author refers to the Yerkes-Dodson Law (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908) to explain the relationship between stress and performance. The work of Jeffrey Gray (1981), on two general motivation systems (Approach and Avoidance) that influence behaviour is cited in

Chapter 4: Chaskalson posits mindfulness practice can encourage people to become more approach-oriented and therefore, more creative and better at problem solving.

In Chapter 5, Chaskalson explains the concept of metacognition and proposes that by learning to recognise our thoughts for what they are i.e. 'thoughts' rather than a reflection of reality or 'truths', we can change our relationship to them and thereby make a conscious choice about how to react. This enables us to view situations in a detached, objective fashion, conducive to constructive problem solving. He argues that in a working environment, this 'mindful' perspective is preferable to an automatic, emotional 'knee-jerk' reaction to unconscious thoughts, which may be flawed. Following on with this theme, Chapter 6 explores the benefits of being able to respond rather than react to a situation, Chaskalson suggests that mindfulness training reduces reactivity, inefficiency and error.

Goleman's (1998) model of Emotional Intelligence (EI) proposes that a greater degree of self-awareness and the ability to empathise effectively with others is an important attribute in the business environment. In Chapter 7 Chaskalson explains, citing real-life examples, how mindfulness training can help workers develop their EI capacity.

Chapters 8 and 9 are devoted to two important types of workplace interpersonal relationship: leadership and coaching. Chaskalson argues that emotions are transmittable and just as anxious, weary leaders can spread dissonance throughout the organisation, mindfully-trained resonant leaders, who are in tune with themselves and their environment, can

engender resilience in their teams. He cites a study by Gordon Spence (2008), which revealed participants on a coaching course were more receptive to instruction if they received mindfulness training beforehand.

"Living Mindfully" is the topic of Chapter 10, in which Chaskalson stresses the importance of incorporating mindfulness practice into an employee's daily routine. He recommends daily practice to improve one's overall quality of life, including during the working day. Chapter 11 of this book gives an account of the eight-week MBSR programme, initially developed in the 1970s by Jon Kabat-Zinn, at the University of Massachusetts, to help people manage stress and chronic pain.

What is Mindfulness Training?

Mindfulness has been described as:

"paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally"
(Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

Meditation has been an important part of Buddhist culture for centuries and religious people through the ages have enjoyed the benefits of spiritual retreat in maintaining health and well-being. Yoga practitioners have extolled the virtues of developing a heightened awareness of mind and body through deliberate contemplation and physical exercise. Kabat-Zinn's MBSR programme made these practices accessible to the wider, secular community with positive outcomes (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

Mindfulness practice can be effective in reducing anxiety by encouraging relaxation. There are many examples of practical relaxation exercises

throughout the book. By way of illustration, one is described here below.

Brief summary of “The Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation”

(This exercise might be done with the aid of a recorded tape, particularly for those new to the practice).

Settling: the individual is invited to find a comfortable, private place to sit, where they will not be disturbed for about 15 mins. They are asked to close their eyes or let their gaze fall, unfocussed and bring their attention to the body. The next step is to gently explore the sensations as they come into conscious awareness, e.g., hot or cold, or the sense of touch where their body is in contact with the chair. Once ‘settled’, the individual is invited to ‘follow the breath’: i.e., gradually bringing awareness of the breath and notice to how the body breathes. The individual is encouraged to follow the breath, in and out, noticing the sensations associated with the activity of breathing, e.g., the feeling in the nose and the rise and fall of the belly. Inevitably the mind will wander. When this happens the person is advised not to self-criticise but simply to notice that their mind has wandered and then bring the focus of their attention back gently to the breath. After a few minutes, when it feels right, they will be asked to open the eyes and gently bring attention back to the usual day-to-day consciousness. (A full description of this exercise is on p.37):

In the reviewer’s opinion, this is a useful exercise to do when feeling fraught. In the course of the working day it is not uncommon to get caught up in preoccupations with the past or concerns about the future. When this happens it can be helpful to bring your attention back to the here-and-now by focusing on the breath and the

sensations associated with it. Once learned, it’s a simple technique to apply; your breath is always with you and so there’s no problem about accessing suitable resources. Typically, people report feeling refreshed and more relaxed after a few minutes of this practice.

Chaskalson explains that the original eight-week programme can be adapted in a number of ways to address different issues. Participants will learn a range of mindfulness skills they can apply in the work environment. The author suggests that anyone designing a workplace intervention will need to consider the desired outcomes. For example:

- stress reduction;
- development of resilience;
- increasing emotional intelligence;
- enhancing communication skills; and
- improving general well-being.

The detrimental effect that sustained periods of stressful activity can have on an individual’s ability to cope with physical illness is well documented (Sapolsky, 1994). This reviewer believes that Chaskalson’s claim that mindfulness practice could lead to lower levels of stress and illness related absenteeism is entirely feasible. Indeed Davidson (2003) discovered that eight weeks of mindfulness training in the workplace produced a more robust immune system in participants and also significantly increased their prefrontal-cortex activation, making them happier and less stressed.

Mindfulness has also been shown to reduce depressive relapse (Williams *et al*, 2007). People become more aware of themselves, others and their

environment and are better able to identify and deal with issues that could lead to stress. Currently, the UK National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommends Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) as an effective treatment to prevent relapse into depression (Mental Health Foundation, 2010).

Limitations

A criticism I have of the book is that, in his enthusiasm to 'sell' the idea of mindfulness to the business community, Chaskalson does not pay sufficient attention to its limitations. The practice is not suitable for everyone; some people do not feel comfortable with meditation, which could present problems if training were presented as a requirement rather than an option. If an organisation were thinking of implementing a mindfulness training programme they would need to take account of potential risks and perhaps select participants for suitability or allow them to volunteer.

Mindfulness practice may be more challenging for some people depending on what is happening in their life. At times, focusing on troubling thoughts can be unhelpful and mindfulness is not usually recommended for people who are recently bereaved, or who have experienced major trauma in the past twelve months. The practice could potentially interfere with the healthy processing of grief or loss and increase levels of distress. Anyone who is experiencing thought disorder, e.g. dissociative disorders, psychosis, schizophrenia, PTSD, severe self-harm or suicidal ideation, might find mindfulness practice intensifies their level of discomfort. Therefore, they may be advised to wait until this has

settled or is being successfully managed with medication. (Living Mindfully, www.livingmindfully.co.uk)

Medication practice requires a level of self-discipline that many people find difficult to maintain. Chaskalson acknowledges the home practice element of mindfulness training requires commitment that people do not always succeed in achieving. He explains that the relationship between home practice requirements and course outcomes is still unclear and the issue of how much home practice is needed remains unresolved. He recognises that the 45 minutes a day required in therapeutic environments, may be too great an obligation for healthy people in the workplace.

In my own practice, I did once come across a customer who rejected the idea of mindfulness on the basis of his religious beliefs and I would suggest that mindfulness (as with any other technique or practice) is not for everyone. Some fundamentalist Christian denominations would argue that meditation is a pagan practice that might allow evil thoughts to enter the mind. However, there are others of the Christian faith who embrace Mindfulness despite its Buddhist roots (Searle, 2010).

Another difficulty I had when reading this book was the frequent reference to the monetary value of Mindfulness; the potential for significant financial returns on investment and even (at the end of Chapter 3) the spurious claim that Mindfulness can 'make you rich'! Although I appreciate this latter remark may have been made with tongue in cheek, I felt uncomfortable with this emphasis. I have assumed that Chaskalson is attempting to appeal to the entrepreneurial instincts of successful business people and

therefore presents his arguments in a context he hopes they will appreciate, i.e. that of profit making and wealth creation. However, this seems to be in direct conflict with the philosophy of Mindfulness, which is to be engaged in the practice for its own sake; without expectation, free from the pressures of measurable outcomes and target driven behaviour.

The author openly sets out a 'business case' in his introduction and thereafter the book presents evidence in support of this case – as if Chaskalson has entered TV's 'Dragon's Den' and is hoping to convince the investors to support his endeavour. I understand and appreciate the necessity for commercial enterprise to consider the prospective financial benefits of any investment. However, I worry that if mindfulness is employed as a means to enhance profit margins and pursue economic gain; the process may potentially become 'corrupted' and ineffective.

Brown *et al* (2009) suggested that one of the reasons mindfulness may help to promote well-being is that the 'mindful' individual is better able to accept things as they are; particularly that mindfulness may enable people to achieve a smaller financial desire discrepancy (i.e. the gap between current and desired states).

Acceptance of one's circumstances; reducing the gap between what one has and what one desires, is associated with higher levels of subjective well-being, regardless of actual financial status. In fact the researchers posit that the enhancement of mindfulness is a means of *moderating* people's financial desires. This discovery would seem to be at odds with Chaskalson's

claims and would perhaps deter entrepreneurial interest.

Furthermore, if one accepts the tenets of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the idea that the true benefits of mindfulness are derived from its intrinsic value, then perhaps an overt emphasis on the extrinsic motivations and economic gain might undermine the effects of the practice. It would, of course, be possible to take account of this potential difficulty, but I felt that Chaskalson neglected to address the issue adequately.

Conclusion

I enjoyed the book. I like the author's style of writing and his real-life examples. His explanations of the underlying theory were clear and enlightening. The anecdotes were easy to relate to and should appeal to a wide audience.

I anticipate using this book for inspiration when exploring workplace solutions for customers and I am personally convinced by Chaskalson's arguments for the integration of mindfulness into daily working life. Chapter 10: 'Living Mindfully' contains some helpful advice for building informal practice into the working day. For example; 'Check-in' with your posture from time to time when driving or working on computer. Are you sitting comfortably? Or feeling tense? It is suggested that by being more aware of bodily sensations, the worker is in a better position to take action to prevent unnecessary physical discomfort and mitigate against the potential long-term effects of poor posture or inadequate workspace design: i.e. if they are aware of the issue they are better placed to address it. Another recommendation to refresh and revive individuals is to incorporate effective comfort breaks into the

working day, e.g. move away from your workspace, go for a mindful walk, or engage in a short mindful meditation practice.

Chaskalson's assertion that the practice might develop: 'resilient individuals' and 'resonant organisations' is well founded. However, in his enthusiasm to persuade the reader of his proposal I'm not convinced that he gives enough consideration to the potential difficulties that might arise. One of the difficulties I have encountered in my own endeavours with the practice of mindfulness is that I find it more challenging to be mindful at times when I need it most, e.g. when my work schedule is particularly demanding or hectic. Successful implementation of mindfulness would, in my view, require a sea change in workplace culture for many organisations.

Nevertheless, for those who would willingly embrace innovation with an open mind, there is much to be gained from approaching the world with an accepting attitude and a clear head. I urge the reader to try out some of the exercises described in the book and find out if it works for you.

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