

Managers Utilizing Mindfulness and Flow to Maximize Job Performance and Satisfaction

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Abstract

Too frequently managers are viewed by staff and other stakeholders as simply “going through the same old motions” in meetings and other interactions such that the information being generated is not seriously considered for change. Managers utilizing mindfulness are the antithesis of the aforementioned because they are attentive 100 percent in-the-moment of discussions and other communications, noting the context and nuances of the information’s meaning, and utilizing it to make meaningful change. Mindfulness makes managers better decision-makers, staff members more meaningfully involved, and the work unit more productive. Flow engrosses a manager when working alone through challenges that stretch skill sets and create a process that is invigorating, self-satisfying, and productive in solving problems.

Keywords: mindfulness, flow, managers, job productivity and satisfaction

1.0 Introduction

Mindfulness is managers engaging their full attention, paying close consideration to what others are saying, grasping the context of interactions, and being 100 percent “in-the-moment” of what is transpiring (Bartz, 2017). Flow is managers utilizing maximum focus to the extent that time seems to slip away when working by themselves to achieve highly challenging tasks in a rewarding and self-engrossing process that stretches their skills (Bartz, 2018). Mindfulness and flow are two concepts from which managers can significantly benefit in enhancing job performance and satisfaction. Mindfulness is usually employed by managers interacting and working with others, while flow is utilized on an individual basis. Mindfulness and flow complement each other so that managers not only profit from each individually, but from the collective synergy of the two concepts resulting in enhanced productivity and improved job satisfaction.

2.0 Context for Mindfulness

Gallup’s (cited in Weiss, 2018) database on workforce research indicates that the majority of the American workforce does not perceive themselves being *engaged at work* (p. 2). Engagement at work means that individuals are purpose driven in accomplishing job responsibilities, working hard, and for the most part, enjoying what they are doing. Many managers have considerable room for growth in the areas of meaningful engagement and enjoyment from their jobs. Effective application of mindfulness enhances managers’ meaningful engagement in work, results in better work products, and makes work more enjoyable.

Langer (2014) initiated the mindfulness concept and movement in the 1970’s. Present-day writings and discussions of mindfulness often intertwine meditation with mindfulness. Regarding meditation, in 2014 Langer opined:

A vast literature about mindfulness has filled scholarly and popular journals since I began [in the 1970’s] this work. Much of the recent research is actually on various forms of meditation, and the focus is on preventing stress and negative emotions. Meditation is a tool to achieve post-meditative mindfulness. Regardless of how we get there, either through meditation or more directly by paying attention to novelty and questioning assumptions, to be mindful is to be in the present, noticing all the wonders that we didn’t realize were right in front of us (p. xxv).

As used here, effective application of mindfulness does not require the infusion of meditation.

2.1 Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we are doing [and saying], while not being overly reactive or overwhelmed by what is going on around us (Boyce, 2018, p. 6). Langer and Moldoveanu (2000) emphasize that mindfulness includes managers having a heightened state of involvement and *wakefulness* in the context of the present situation (p. 2). Understanding the perspective of others is crucial to managers effectively applying mindfulness (Fatemi, 2016). Mindfulness includes managers being astute to the intent of communications—verbal and nonverbal—to clearly understand their context. Through mindfulness, managers need to initially view their thoughts and feelings as *just that*—thoughts and feelings—rather than as something loaded with meaning that defines a situation (Weiss, 2018, p. 6).

Managers sometimes behave in a *mindlessness* mode in an almost automatic, trigger-like fashion without considering options and being largely oblivious to what is happening and the consequences of their actions. This is frequently due to previous experience, personal preferences, and/or a lack of willingness and effort to be meaningfully engaged. At other times, managers behave in a *mindfulness* manner through *conscious awareness* of what others are saying and feeling, reflecting on their own thoughts, acting with purpose, and being sensitive to all that is going on *in-the-moment* (Vallacher, Jarman, & Parkin, 2016, p. 129). Mindfulness includes managers practicing openness to new information and drilling in to truly understand the circumstances for applying such information (Langer, 1989).

The dichotomy between the previously described terms represents the automatic (*mindlessness*) vs. the controlled (*mindfulness*) processing of information and actions by a manager for a given situation (Vallacher, Jarman, & Parkin, 2016). Mindlessness can also be caused by “initial exposure to [the wrong] information” (Langer, 2014, p. xxiv). The mindlessness behaving manager is manifested in a reliance on behavioral scripts, habitual models, and thought; and a minimal (if any) use of talent and resources. However, the mindfulness driven manager intentionally pays close attention in a nonjudgmental manner to what is said and of nuances, while taking in all that is being communicated—verbally and nonverbally—in a given situation.

One aspect of mindfulness is predicated on managers understanding they do not necessarily have to do things differently so much as examining differently what they are already doing (Weiss, 2018, p. 11). This necessitates managers welcoming new information, being open to differing viewpoints, and refraining from rigidly using a previous mindset to categorize information (Langer, 2014). Mindfulness helps managers to actively draw *novel distinctions* regarding what is taking place (Commons & Adhikari, 2016, p. 193). Novel distinctions are represented by managers having an open mind—and not categorizing information based on past experience—to understand the context and subtleties of information in order to identify actions likely to be successful. This is indicative of managers discarding possible fixed endpoints while seeking to expand solutions to a problem by being acutely aware of what is communicated in the present in order to develop creative solutions for the future.

The effective use of novel distinction prompts managers to have the flexibility to engage in *perspective-shifting* regarding how they view tasks to be accomplished and goals to be achieved, as well as working relationships with those they supervise and other stakeholders. Mindfulness also means managers truly comprehending their purpose while performing tasks and tracking where they place their attention. Focusing on the conversation, tasks and challenge at hand—without allowing their minds to wander—helps managers increase clarity and a sense of purpose in order to reduce stress (Weiss, 2018, p. 31).

The effective application of mindfulness by managers creates an acute sense of *presence*. Presence means that managers are attuned to a situation and comfortable, confident, and passionately enthusiastic “in-the-moment” regarding what is taking place and how they should behave and react (Cuddy, 2015). Presence is achieved through mindfulness by managers initially being *non-judgmental* (e.g., accepting things as they are) as they process input information before determining how to behave and deciding what actions to take (Greenville-Cleave, 2012; Watt, 2012). The effective application of mindfulness by managers results in: (1) better control of emotions—including increased positive emotions and decreased negative emotions, (2) enhanced *working memory*, (3) more flexible thinking, (4) enhanced self-awareness, and (5) better decision-making (Greenville-Cleave, 2012).

Mindfulness builds managers' ability to be resilient—overcome difficult and even “unfair” happenings over which they have minimal or no control. Mindfulness creates a mindset in managers that they can rebound from such happenings, overcome them, move on, and be positive and effective in the future. This *positivity* helps managers understand that whatever was the cause of the difficult or adverse situation was likely an isolated incident that was not their fault (Bartz & Bartz, 2017).

Managers questioning assumptions acquired through work experience and personal preferences is essential to the effective application of mindfulness. These previous assumptions prompt managers to *categorize* or *stereotype* what they think will happen from information for a given situation without allowing further thought, discussion, or trying a proposed alternative action (Langer, 2014). A manager's categorizing and stereotyping undermines and stifles the talent of staff members.

At a staff meeting, for example, a team member may begin to outline a new approach to marketing a product. The manager may automatically place that idea in a category of “it will not work” because resources are limited. This categorization is predicated on the manager's assumptions of what resources are needed without allowing the staff member to complete the explanation or encourage the person to, at least, put a brief proposal in writing. The manager may mistakenly use an experience and a context from the past to judge the present and future. How managers think and behave in given situations, such as meetings with staff members or their team, is often a function of past context. Present context means that the manager effectively integrates all that is transpiring in an accurate and applicable manner.

Meta-mindfulness—managers intentionally thinking how to be mindful and analyzing how well they are doing so in a given situation—is useful for maximizing mindfulness. Specifically, managers intentionally striving to use higher levels of thinking to more effectively make abstract information concrete and develop more meaningful novel distinction in a situation is extremely beneficial. Such actions by managers should result in an effective synergistic process which should translate into effective action decisions (Vallacher, Jarman, & Parkin, 2016).

Managers can enhance the productivity of their work unit by nurturing mindfulness in staff members. As Langer (2014) notes: “The successful leader may be the person who recognizes that we all have talents and who thus sees her or his main job as encouraging mindfulness in those being led” (p. xxi). Langer (2014) also insightfully observes: “We typically consider creativity and innovation, whether at work or in the arts, as the province of a few. Mindfulness can encourage creativity when the focus is on the process and not the product” (pp. xxi-xxii).

A culminating effect of managers effectively applying mindfulness is a sense of knowing they can usually perform effectively in a given situation. Mindset also gives managers confidence and a sense of acutely considering others' feelings, while enhancing decision-making. Mindfulness also greatly enhances *enjoyment from work* by managers and their staff members.

3.0 Flow¹

Flow is when people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it (Csikszentmihalyi, 2018, p. 1).

Experiencing flow is advantageous to managers because it causes them to stretch skills and talents, and even to develop new ones. Flow enhances job productivity and helps managers *be their best*. In the context of positive psychology, flow is essential to managers' overall well-being. Flow represents specific situations in which a manager's “attention, abilities, and interests are fully engaged and challenged” (Warren, 2017, p. 256). Flow's result for managers is *optimized performance* through a truly enjoyable and self-rewarding process (Baltzell & McCarthy, 2016, p. 162).

Csikszentmihalyi (cited in Weiten, Dunn, & Hammer, 2012) describes flow as the holistic sensation of managers when they try to act with total involvement. Managers feel in control of their actions when they are “in flow,” and there is little distinction between themselves and the challenging work at hand. When they engage in flow, managers are intrinsically rewarded from moment-to-moment and are completely immersed in what they are doing. When this totally engaged state of focus evolves, time seems to slip away, and distractors dissipate. When managers engage in flow, they are totally and enjoyably absorbed in the challenges at hand (Charan, 2017, p. 165). Most importantly, this also enables managers to be extremely productive and experience maximum job satisfaction.

Flow represents the “sweet spot” of where the challenge at hand is on the outer edge of, or perhaps just beyond, a manager’s skill level (Stulberg & Magness, 2017, p. 50). This is called the *challenge-skill balance* because the skills stretch to meet the challenge. An overwhelming challenge usually brings a major frustration, while too little challenge brings boredom (Tse, Fung, Nakamura, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2018, p. 284). The challenge-skill balance causes managers to “be their best.” This controlled stress causes managers’ adrenaline to “kick-in” and requires them to stretch their skills and apply creativity and innovation to solving problems. In such situations, while some doubt and uncertainty may be present in managers’ minds, they are not deterred but rather motivated inspired to successfully achieve the tasks before them.

Work is an excellent environment for managers to experience flow if they craft the environment to accentuate: (1) clear goals, (2) specifically-defined performance roles for themselves and staff members, (3) frequent feedback for themselves and staff members (formal and informal), (4) minimal distractions, (5) high expectation for concentrating on producing work, and (6) congruency of the work’s difficulty with managers’ and staff members’ talents and strengths (Seligman, 2002, p. 175). Seligman (2002) offers these ingredients for a manager to establish more flow experiences in the work environment: (1) identify your signature strengths, (2) choose work that lets you use them every day, (3) recraft your personality to use your signature strengths more, and (4) make room to allow staff members to recraft work within the bounds of your goals to maximize enriching their skill levels or strengths for challenges (p. 176).

Craig (2018) purports that managers *leading from purpose* spend “a good deal of time experiencing a sense of flow” (p. 264). More specifically, managers experiencing this sense of flow love what they are doing more frequently than those who do not (Goleman, 2013). Managers maximizing flow is often best attained by integrating *focus* with being physically and mentally *relaxed* (Weiss, 2018).

Boredom is the enemy of managers who are striving for the flow experience. Hence, it may be beneficial for managers to *bundle together* the mundane tasks that they do on a daily basis within a common time period, thereby allowing a more conducive environment for flow to happen outside of this time frame. Most managers have a *peak performance time* in the workday in which they are more motivated and produce their best work (Pink, 2018). This is an excellent time for managers to eliminate—or minimize to the extent possible—distractions and completely focus on a job challenge that will prompt the “flow state” (Hemmings, 2018).

4.0 Distractions

Gazzaley and Rosen (2016) note that managers are challenged on a daily basis to make sure that the high-tech world in which they work does not interfere with their efforts to make use of mindfulness and flow. Distractions and interruptions are major enemies of managers striving to effectively apply mindfulness and flow. “Persistent interruptions become especially insidious when we are unaware of the peripheral role our surroundings play in shaping our thoughts, moods, and choices” (Grenny, 2017, p. 106). Managers can greatly enhance mindfulness and flow by structuring their work environment to intentionally minimize interruptions and other forms of distractions. The temptation or perceived need to multitask when practicing mindfulness must be avoided in most instances. When managers are truly in flow, multitasking urges do not exist because of their single-minded focus on the challenges at hand.

5.0 Concluding Thoughts

Managers who effectively apply mindfulness enhance their sense of accomplishment and improve job satisfaction. Mindfulness is a process that prompts managers to be completely “tuned in” to what is being communicated, the context of the information, and a laser-like focus on identifying novel distinctions—perspectives that result in new ways to solve problems. Staff members who are supervised by a manager applying mindfulness feel enhanced involvement and their ideas are likely to be considered more frequently. Effective application of flow by a manager results in an invigorating feeling and elating sense of satisfaction from the process that is motivational. As Duckworth (2016) observes “The flow state is intrinsically pleasurable. When you are in flow, everything feels effortless” (p. 132). Flow also results in enhanced work production.

6.0 Footnote

1 Based in part on Bartz, D.E. (2018). Managers effectively using positive psychology and its attributes of flow, mindfulness, mindset, optimism, and happiness. *International Journal of Education and Human Developments*, 4(4).

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