

A NEW ERA PERSPECTIVE

# Mindfulness for Influence and Impact

By Zoe McMahon

I am a leader and coach intent on using my energy and passion to positively impact our shared world.

I have spent nearly 30 years in the technology industry leading change in environmental, social, and corporate governance.

I am curious about the way organizations work, how change happens, and how people can be more effective and fulfilled.

I share this **New Era Perspective** in the hope that it inspires you as a leader and human being.

*Enjoy!*



I believe that people are more effective, influential, and impactful when they are more aware of and connected to their work and relationships. Developing a regular mindfulness practice that can help train the mind to be more conscious can be a great tool to support professional fulfillment.

## - So, why a perspective on mindfulness?

I have always had a healthy curiosity about the workings of the mind and growing up I was surrounded by family members and friends who meditated. Until fairly recently, the concept of mindfulness seemed synonymous with meditation, and I thought of it as something you could apply to start your morning well, a way to end your evening, something to pursue at a yoga class, or perhaps as a stress reduction method. I am not the only one that thinks this way, the terms meditation and mindfulness are often used interchangeably. Elizabeth Perry<sup>1</sup>, a writer and coach at BetterUp.com, provides a useful summary of the important distinctions between the two and how both have their benefits.

In the last decade, according to leading meditation and mindfulness scholar Jon Kabat-Zinn<sup>ii</sup>, mindfulness has improbably gone mainstream in a big way. I started to see the concept appear in the workplace around five years ago when I attended a leadership workshop. The facilitators included some mindful minutes and breathing exercises in the class. From the reaction, it seemed like this was the first time many participants had experienced mindfulness or meditation at all, let alone in a room full of other leaders in a professional setting, although I do remember being inspired by one peer who reported having used meditation as a significant source of transformation in his life. Since then, especially since COVID, employers have been providing more and more wellness resources such as subscriptions to meditation apps that make mindfulness more easily accessible to a wider audience than in the past. There are also more books and research results available that explore the neuroscience of meditation and advocate regular practice for many health and psychological benefits.

Despite this, I would say that mindfulness is still not recognized as an integral part of business education and professional skills development. This lack of integration feels like a hangover from an era when work and other facets of life were considered separate. But times have changed, and our work habits and locations are increasingly blended into the rest of our lives. A study sponsored by HP Inc. called the Work Relationship Index<sup>iii</sup>, explores our evolving work patterns and is startling in its findings with just 27% of knowledge workers reporting a healthy relationship with work. Digging into this finding some more, the study reports that, in the United States, 55% of workers surveyed feel the negative impacts of this unhealthy work relationship on their mental well-being. I think there is potential for greater mindfulness to improve people's relationship with work and their mental well-being in a mutually reinforcing way. So, let's dig into some examples, starting with some definitions.

## - What does it mean to be mindful?


According to Ellen Langer<sup>iv</sup>, a Harvard psychology professor sometimes referred to as the "mother of mindfulness", mindfulness is the process of actively noticing new things. When you do that, it puts you in the present. It makes you more sensitive to context and perspective. According to Google (Oxford Languages), mindfulness is the quality or state of being conscious or aware of something. Although the goals of meditation may be wider than enhancing our day-to-day mindfulness, it is certainly one practice that we can use to help train our minds to notice more and be more conscious of what is occurring around us.

When applied in a day-to-day setting, this ability to be present helps remove you psychologically from challenging circumstances. This can help you regulate your emotions and reactions more effectively. As a leader, I have found it particularly helpful when coaching employees on their relationship challenges to explore their emotional regulation in this way. A further value of mindfulness beyond emotional regulation is that it enhances our ability to be aware of what is true for us in each moment. This can help us to recognize the activities in life (and work) that bring us enjoyment which can help us to purposefully pursue those activities for an improved sense of contribution, meaning, or happiness. Let's look at each of these in a bit more detail.


## - Building habits of presence and curiosity

Being mindful puts you in the present moment. Many traditions reinforce the value of being present in what is occurring "now" to reduce mental pain and suffering. Being present as a leader is more than just showing up to work. It is about paying attention to what is real in this moment. That stretches from active (or mindfully) listening to your employees' concerns to having a more agile mindset about changes occurring in your business, sector, or the global economy. Paying attention guides appropriate action that will lead to successful outcomes.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that "Change is the only constant in life". This constancy of change has been a reality in corporations for some time and is certainly true right now. There are significant drivers of change in our world from technological advancements, geo-political pressures, environmental disruptions, as well as demographic and generational differences that businesses and their employees need to contend with. What is true for a business one year, may not be the next, and this creates the need for a mindset that is capable and resilient to the effects of change. Several spiritual traditions that practice meditation, particularly forms of Buddhism, invite the same recognition that everything changes, always. As things change, mindfulness makes it easier to recognize the impermanence of everything and to help people release fixed attachments to outcomes that may no longer be relevant.



**Change is the only  
constant.**



Stay curious.  
There is always  
more to know.

A common strategy that I have found helpful in managing and coaching others to resolve challenges or changes at work, or to accelerate their impact, is to invite them to get curious. Through mindfulness, it becomes a habit to actively notice new things and hence to take a wide view. Being curious is an extension of this. As a coach, I ask people what they know about another person's perspective in a challenging situation. I have been constantly impressed by how effective this strategy can be in helping someone move forward and find comfort in their path again.

Sometimes it is about simply noticing the wider context and at other times it inspires the person to reach out and actively demonstrate that curiosity to the other. This curiosity breeds empathy, understanding, and better relationships. In large organizations, there is so much complexity to navigate. It is impossible to know everything. Being mindful of this avoids the traps of assumptions and internal storytelling that might otherwise be guiding our actions.

## - Mindfulness in support of relationships

As an influencer of change in a corporate setting for three decades, I believe the single most important thing in driving successful outcomes is our relationships with our colleagues. Of course, many other factors like strategic clarity, alignment of resources, and (occasionally) just good timing, all influence events but at the end of the day, work is done by people. Decisions are made by people, and people are all subject to their own biases, experiences, and a complicated interplay of life and work pressures. As such, every human interaction, even the smallest email exchange, can be fraught with misunderstanding and frustration that can slow down the necessary course of events for a successful project, an employee's sense of belonging, or any goal that is being sought.

Hedgefund manager and Billionaire, Ray Dalio, in his book Principles<sup>v</sup> (p 205) describes in some detail the need to understand that people are wired very differently. Being aware of our own minds (and that they are different from other people) is the first step to being more conscious or mindful in the context of a given interpersonal interaction. Things that, to you, feel like a personal affront can just be a function of their personality difference to yours, or a function of "invisible" circumstances influencing their behavior. I use the mantra "it's personality not personal" frequently to remind myself and others of this reality, and it brings a sense of ease and acceptance.



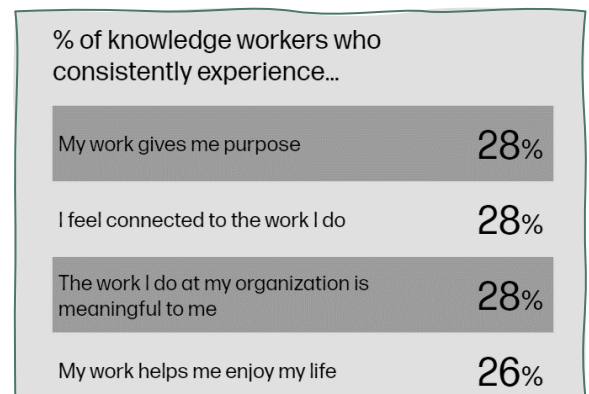
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As a simple example, recently I had the opportunity to meet a new colleague for the first time (via Zoom), and I left the conversation with some unexpected emotions. You might say that the person “triggered me”. On the surface, I was upset that they seemed to be rushing, not listening and dismissive towards me. Examining that interaction with some mental distance soon after it occurred, I was able to see the interaction with more sensitivity and appreciate the possible, invisible context behind it, reducing any need for me to carry those emotions further. This could be important at some future moment when this person is on the path of a goal that I need to achieve.

Micro-reactions like these happen all the time in life and at work and go largely unnoticed. Sometimes we just have a general sense of unease after a conversation at home or work and it can influence subsequent interactions, sometimes with a snowball effect. Having a discipline of mindfulness in how we think about these circumstances can help create a positive work environment and reduce the risk of stress being felt where it is not needed.

## - Our missing sense of fulfillment

In the Work Relationship Index study referenced earlier, HP identified six drivers for a better relationship with work, one being “Purpose, meaning, and empowerment at work”. Look at the startling statistics taken from that report. Only 28% of workers consistently experience a sense of purpose, connection, or meaning with their work. This can lead to a feeling that their work is not contributing and eventually to disengagement which affects business outcomes.



Mindfulness, in bringing more awareness to our lives, can bring a greater sense of what matters to us, what we value most in our life, and what motivates us. Some of the earliest work on human motivation was that of Abraham Maslow and his much-cited hierarchy of needs. More recently, Scott Barry Kauffman (2020)<sup>vi</sup> has reimagined Maslow's work, providing new insights on how to live to your full potential and experience your most creative, fulfilled life. Kaufmann uses the metaphor of a sailboat<sup>vii</sup> to visualize our more security-oriented needs as well as those that are about our growth and transcendence. Experiencing a sense of purpose is a human need and one that workers in professional settings increasingly seem to lack.

This lack of fulfillment, I believe, is also a function of how the boundaries between the worlds of work and life have changed and how expectations in society have evolved. In the past, employees may not have been so concerned about meaningful work, but as societies and economic conditions have changed, so has the focus on these higher-order human needs. I have experienced this phenomenon in the people that I have led and coached. They want to feel connected to the work that they do and that it matters. The first step in finding that connection is helping them to define it. It is different for everyone for the same reasons that I mentioned earlier i.e., everyone is wired differently. I would like to see this type of exploration of purpose and fulfillment be part of general management education. Until then, I encourage readers of this perspective to find time to take a step back and be attentive to opportunities that are more aligned with their strengths and values. If you are a leader or manager, encouraging the same of your employees could go a long way to strengthen their engagement.

## - Closing thoughts

Mindfulness, while not a panacea for a harmonious or fulfilling work experience, is a practice that can benefit anybody. It should reduce the stress of day-to-day interactions, create more resilience in times of change, and facilitate a greater sense of purpose and connection. The primary tool for mindfulness is, of course, meditation and this can range from a dedicated daily practice to self-created mindful moments across the day. There is a vast array of resources from different spiritual and secular teachers available online and offline to anyone wishing to build such a practice, but I won't spend time on that here. I have certainly found a dedicated meditation practice to be invaluable to my leadership but, in the end, it is only a training ground for the most impactful place to practice mindfulness for influence and impact which is here and now in your current experience.

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<sup>i</sup> Perry, E. (Aug 19, 2022). Confused about mindfulness and meditation? Here's how you can benefit. Retrieved from <https://www.betterup.com/blog>

<sup>ii</sup> Kabat-Zinn, Jon (2018). Meditation is not what you think.

<sup>iii</sup> Work Relationship Index (2023). HP Inc. Retrieved from <https://www.hp.com/us-en/work-relationship-index.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Langer, E (2014), Mindfulness in the Age of Complexity, Harvard Business Review Online

<sup>v</sup> Dalio, R (2017), Principles: Life and Work

<sup>vi</sup> Kauffman, S.B. (2020). Transcend – The New Science of Self Actualization

<sup>vii</sup> <https://scottbarrykauffman.com/sailboat-metaphor/>

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