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Address Diversity and Inclusion Through Mindfulness ☆ member / subscriber content

Tuesday, November 01, 2016 - by **Joshua Ehrlich**

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Mindfulness helps leaders grow and create welcoming environments.

It seems like everyone these days is taking on more, moving faster, and paying less attention. There are serious costs for our ability to lead, innovate, and live meaningful lives. Fortunately, we can learn to pay attention with focus and openness; that is, we can be mindful. The growing research shows that mindfulness can help us live healthier, think clearer, and be more inspiring. Many organizations are turning to mindfulness to help leaders focus and be more resilient. Cisco, BlackRock, IBM, and New York Life all see mindfulness as a tool for organizational productivity and positive culture change. The promise of a discipline of mindful leadership also is appealing for creating inclusive environments. Leaders who are more secure and open can create mindful, inclusive, and diverse organizations.

The challenge and a solution

Leaders facing greater pressure and uncertainty attempt to do more with less, multitask, and transact instead of connect. These overloaded leaders show up as fragile, less effective, and less able to learn and adapt. Great leaders, by contrast, are mature and have a stable sense of self that is not vulnerable to short-term setbacks. They learn from failure and are eager for constructive feedback. The foundation for this is positive self-regard.

Often we try to solve life's challenges backwards, creating a sense of ourselves from the outside in (building self-esteem), instead of from the inside out (cultivating self-acceptance). We cannot control extrinsic sources of self-esteem such as material rewards, approval, and accomplishment. When we chase happiness through these external means, we are never satisfied and our frustration often is with ourselves.

In contrast, self-acceptance is based on a solid intrinsic foundation we can develop from mindfulness: alignment (being in sync with our values and purpose), self-regulation (riding emotional ups and downs), and self-compassion (treating ourselves with kindness).

We can start by becoming more aware of values and purpose. Take a moment now to think about the most important values in your life. What do you stand for? What motivates you and makes you thrive? Most people struggle to describe their purpose—why they are here—and to articulate a vision for their lives. To be fair, for most of us this is a life's work to answer. Ultimately, having a lighthouse is invaluable for keeping ourselves on track, especially when markets and circumstances get tough.

Mindfulness helps leaders manage during stressful times because when we pay attention to our bodies and emotional experience, we can take care of ourselves instead of running on empty. When we are feeling good, we are more able to show we care and to be empathetic. Empathy is the ability to understand and stay with someone else's experience without trying to change or fix it. When we respond empathetically, it makes others feel understood and accepted. And when people feel accepted, they bring all of themselves, their skills, and their ideas to work. This is the core of an inclusive environment.

Mindfulness also is a tool that helps us ride the waves of our daily ups and downs. We may easily get triggered by a colleague's off-hand remark and feel hurt. To be mindful means noticing what is happening, taking a breath, and feeling our emotions moving through our body. By experiencing our feelings nonjudgmentally, and without trying to stifle them, we can learn our hot buttons and vulnerabilities.

Cultivating self-compassion is perhaps the most challenging and subtle aspect of

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self-acceptance. Most of us are constantly criticizing ourselves. The little voice in our head goes on and on about the things we should have done better, the mistakes we made, and so on. The first step is to tune into that voice, not try to silence it, and not to beat ourselves up for beating ourselves up. Instead, we can smile to ourselves and refocus on what we are doing. Self-compassion enables us to take responsibility, buffers the impact of failure, and helps us experiment with new behaviors.

All these aspects of mindfulness can be cultivated with meditation. But mindfulness is not meditation, and mindfulness does not require meditating. Mindfulness is simply being present, open, and engaged. We can practice mindfulness in any moment we remember to come back to ourselves, to our experience, and what is going on around us. Mindful leaders pay attention to process (*how*), not just outcomes (*what*).

Beyond diversity to inclusion

The application of mindfulness to diversity and inclusion is about opening and appreciating rather than rejecting difference. Once we have built an internal base of self-acceptance, we are in a position to accept others. We can be interested and curious rather than reacting reflexively. Instead of focusing on removing our biases and stereotypes, which is impossible, we can focus on paying attention to our reaction to difference with curiosity.

Typically we tense up and close down when we see or experience something foreign. However, when we are able to take a breath and catch that reaction, we can change our response. We can decide to take a second look. What is it that we are reacting to? Does it really threaten us? In this moment we move from judging to including.

When we teach employees to cultivate mindfulness and acceptance, it creates a workplace where people feel welcome instead of worrying about being judged. This kind of inclusive environment is based on psychological safety. This may sound soft, but it is about getting to results more effectively, via learning and invitation. Google's recent research (Project Aristotle) demonstrates that psychological safety results in a sense of belonging, better ideas, and better teamwork.

Too often, diversity initiatives in the United States are focused on quotas. The leaders I coach resent these programs because the metrics make no sense to them. They simply want to hire the best people. But if they don't have enough of the right stripes and types on their team (limited to black, white, Asian, Hispanic, and gender), they are penalized. In other countries, there is at least more of a sense of diversity as represented by different countries and regions across the globe.

We can go beyond these limited paradigms to reframe diversity as all backgrounds, perspectives, and thinking and operating styles. We need to put responsibility back in leaders' hands, showing them how to create inclusive environments that result in diverse teams. This is a more complex solution, but also is one that will create true global diversity by focusing on the best process versus simply on desired outcomes.

A case in point

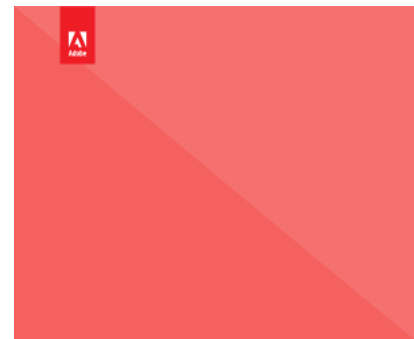
A client of mine—I'll call it Megabrand—is a Fortune 50 consumer products conglomerate that has put significant effort into diversity. Megabrand made the business case, branded its campaign, and sent newsletters. It spent years on creating affinity groups, diversity programs, and training. The company taught how diverse teams are more creative, and explained the dangers of unconscious bias.

However, Megabrand still struggles to recruit and retain black employees beyond entry levels. The company's IT department is 90 percent Asian men, and it suffers the common problem of not having women at senior levels. The hard-driving performance orientation and lack of cultural acceptance at Megabrand makes it harder for leaders to take responsibility for problems, so nothing has changed.

Megabrand now realizes it needs to do transformative work with its leaders on their self-awareness and openness. Such deep personal change requires more than classroom programs. The company is now launching an in-depth, year-long, mindful leadership initiative that includes extended one-on-one coaching.

Organizational solutions

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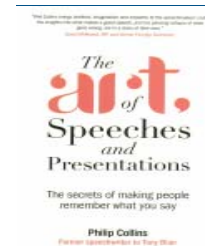
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There are several systems tools we can use to foster cultures of mindfulness and acceptance. Goal-setting and performance management systems typically reinforce the self-esteem model. A single number (usually 1-5) sums up your entire year's performance. Because that number is on a bell curve, you are guaranteed to feel bad about yourself.

As other companies are already doing, we can move from the once-a-year outcomes model to an ongoing process model. Effective leaders have regular one-on-ones with their direct reports and clear away distractions so they can be fully present and listen. They coach their people on the *how*, not just on the *what*. They ask employees to reflect on their values and purpose, which empowers them to believe in possibilities and reminds them of common bonds.

Working from the top down also means creating inclusive boards—picking board members for their varied experience and perspectives, not for their ability to make the CEO comfortable. Such a board represents the community it serves, and so is naturally more credible. A mindful and inclusive board is one in which there is constructive debate versus forced consensus, and real dialogue versus scripted presentations. This kind of board sees its role as leading, not just ratifying.

Geopolitical implications and next steps

The rejection of difference is a global phenomenon. When it builds, it becomes prejudice, racism, and xenophobia. Fear of the other fuels retreat and withdrawal in the United States (“Let’s build a wall to keep out foreigners”), in the United Kingdom (with Brexit), and in the Middle East (with ISIS fundamentalists). The temptation is to locate these problems outside ourselves. This buys us a minute of psychological relief.

We can step out of this trap and examine our own discomfort. We can cultivate an attitude of openness and curiosity. We can create mindful organizations by working with ourselves. Then we can take a step back and ask difficult questions. Are we really appreciating people for who and where they are? Are we recruiting all qualified talent or just people who look and think like us?

These questions can make us uncomfortable and feel bad about ourselves. This is where self-acceptance comes in. As we work to develop acceptance in ourselves, we also can create environments that support it. Our organizations must be places where we can ask questions without fear or judgment. Then we can truly see the power of diversity and inclusion. Difference need not threaten us. We can grow, transform each other, and perform together. This is what inclusion really means: not losing our individuality, but enhancing it by recognizing and embracing others.

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Author



Joshua Ehrlich

Joshua Ehrlich is chairman of the Global Leadership Council, an international network of experts in leadership and organizational transformation whose vision is to create mindful leaders, teams, and organizations. He is the author of *MindShifting: Focus for*

Performance.

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