***What does mindfulness have to do with you and work?***

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***Why mindfulness at work?***

You might have noticed over the last year that I have often mentioned mindfulness as a tool for helping you to become more self-aware, raise your life state to deal with problems and deal with the pressures of life. So I thought it was about time that I did an Inspire dedicated to the topic.

**‘The ordinary mind is the ceaselessly shifting and shiftless prey of external influences, habitual tendencies, and conditioning; the masters liken it to a candle flame in an open doorway vulnerable to all the winds of circumstances.'**

Sogyal Rinpoche

**What do we mean by mindfulness at work?**

It is about being connected to what is happening within and around you. There are two aspects of this:

* Mindful of yourself – noticing when your….
  + Thoughts and beliefs are affecting your behaviour.
  + Mood is impacting on your performance.
  + Preferred way of communicating with others is unsuitable for them.
  + Personality type is impacting negatively on your relationships with others.
  + Approach to problems and challenges at work are ineffective.
* Mindful of others – noticing if….
  + Someone's tone of voice is betraying more of what they are thinking and feeling than what they are saying.
  + They are not as happy and smiley as usual, and taking action to check in with them.
  + You are not feeling as much rapport with them as usual.
  + Their behaviour and/or performance has changed.

I have been reading ‘Mindfulness At Work' by Maria Arpa recently and she starts off by saying:

‘When the world around you isn't performing how you would like, your choices are either a change of attitude or a change of direction, mindfulness will help you to choose.'

***What are the benefits of mindfulness at work?***

When you are more mindful of yourself and of others you can:

* Quickly spot when problems within yourself, or with others, are starting to develop and take action before they spiral out of control.
* Feel in the driving seat of your life, rather than being at the mercy of your environment, as you can manage your reactions and responses to situations.
* Be more sensitive to the needs of others and your own needs, noticing when they or you need support, and giving a friendly word of encouragement or smile, or thanks.

Research by INSEAD suggests that ‘mindfulness based leadership interventions offer the potential for managers to act with greater care and compassion'. Research by the American Institute of Health at the University of Massachusetts and Harvard have found that mindfulness interventions at work can lead to:

* Reduced costs of staff absenteeism caused by illness, injury and stress.
* Improved cognitive function – including better concentration, memory, learning ability and creativity.
* Improved productivity and overall staff and business wellbeing.
* Enhanced employer/employee and client relationships.

**‘Every human has four endowments: self awareness, conscience, independent will and creative imagination. These give us the ultimate human freedom ... the power to choose, to respond, to change.'**

Stephen Covey

***What does mindfulness involve?***

It is about being in the here and now, focussing on what you can see, hear and feel (taste and smell is also part of it but less important in most jobs!). Neuroscientists have found that we spend about 80% of our time in our heads telling ourselves stories, rather than being connected to our direct experience in the here and now. Here are examples of some stories we can get ourselves caught up in at work:

* ‘I know that Mark is going to be a pain in the next meeting, he is bound to throw his weight around and not listen to anyone else's ideas.'
* ‘Look at Sally, she is so confident when dealing with her team, I'll never be like her.'
* ‘I'm never going to get through all my work this week, my boss keeps on at me about deadlines, but I can't see how I will be able to meet them.'
* ‘I'm dreading doing this appraisal, I hate having to do them, they seem to ignore anything positive I say to them and only focus on the few negative comments.'
* ‘I'm dreading my appraisal, my manager always dominates it and I can hardly get a word in.'
* ‘All I've got to do is get through the next three weeks and then I'll be on the beach for two weeks of holiday, I can't wait.'

**What are the stories that run through your head during your working day?**

***What happens when we tell ourselves these stories?***

It affects how we feel, our mood, and often our confidence takes a nosedive. This then impacts on our ability to work, to speak, listen, be assertive, and our performance suffers. So what would it be like if you focussed on your direct experience rather than the stories that you tell yourself? Let's take the situations above and apply mindfulness to them. This would mean that you are aware of what you are thinking, how you are feeling, and you then take action to deal with the situation you face rather than the story you are telling yourself, for example:

* ‘I'm feeling anxious about the meeting because of Mark's past behaviour, so I need to do the following: prepare notes against the agenda so I am clear about what I need to say. Get myself into the right frame of mind, so that I can be assertive with Mark if he starts to act up. Remember that sometimes these meetings do go smoothly so I must not create a negative, self fulfilling prophecy.
* ‘I need to deal with the facts about Sally and myself. Firstly, she is more experienced than me, but I also know she has undergone training in performance management, which I could do as well. I also don't know if she worries on the inside, and just gives off an air of confidence. I could use Sally as a mentor and model to learn more about performance and team management'.
* ‘Ok, let's deal with the near and now, what are my priorities this week, what can I realistically get done, what do I need to start on first? Do I need to keep my manager updated on progress to get him off my back, can I re-negotiate some of the deadlines?'
* ‘I'm going to ask my team to prepare for their appraisal by listing out all the things they are proud of, what they've found challenging and what they want to develop further. We will go through what they have prepared, with me adding in any bits that they might have missed out.'
* ‘I am going to prepare for my appraisal and email my manager beforehand telling him what I'd like to cover, and go in with that agenda written down. I'll also visualise myself taking an equal role in the meeting and keep on doing that until I feel confident I can.'
* ‘What if the next three weeks were the last on this earth! I'm going to enjoy them, be grateful that I have this job, even if it is challenging at times. I'll look forward to my holiday but also enjoy the run up to it. I'll prioritise what needs to be done before, and what my colleagues can take on in my absence.'

When we get stuck listening to the negative stories in our heads, we can often feel disempowered and stuck. By recognising them simply as stories we tell ourselves, we can recognise we can re-write the script. We can focus on the here and now, what we see, hear and feel and what actions we can take to change the situation and how we think and feel about it. And the first step to doing this is to become more mindful of what is going on within and around us.

**What actions can you take to deal with the negative stories you tell yourself?**

**‘Not causing harm requires staying awake. Part of being awake is slowing down enough to notice what we say and do. The more we witness our emotional chain reactions and understand how they work, the easier it is to refrain. It becomes a way of life to stay awake, slow down, and notice.'**

Pema Chodron

***How can you become more mindful?***

The March edition of Inspire was about becoming more self aware (click [here](http://www.justaddcontent.co.uk/v1/grove/e118_March_2013_Inspire.htm) to read it) and had a number of ideas which will assist you in becoming more mindful:

* Write in a journal to check in with yourself daily.
* Be more mindful, use a guided meditation – see [here](http://oxfordmindfulness.org/learn/resources/) for a three minute ‘breathing space' to be used anywhere or anytime. Give it a go right now, I've just done it and his soothing voice, the noises of the outdoors as he speaks, and taking a few minutes out is really refreshing!
* If you think meditation is not for you, then read the following about the Myths About Meditation: click [here](http://www.care2.com/greenliving/4-meditation-myths-busted.html?page=2). For example, you don't have to switch off your brain and it doesn't have to take a long time.
* Use specific exercises from past editions of Inspire. See [here](http://www.inspiretransformation.co.uk/inspire_newsletter.html) for back issues since January 2006.
* Understand your personality type and the implications of this on how you communicate and work with others. I use MBTI with clients to help them to understand themselves better.
* Read ‘Mindfulness At Work' by Maria Arpa, which is a slim book with exercises to help you to be more mindful at work.

*Melanie Greene; Inspire Transformation*