

Mindfulness and the art of managing people as people, not 'resources'



Mindfulness has become a buzzword in the corporate world. Google, Starbucks, and many other corporate behemoths wish to infuse it in their employees to reengage them. In many ways this approach to mindfulness may be mindless. It assumes that people are resources and that you need to get the MOST out of them. This viewpoint also often assumes that employees do not want to bring themselves to the task. This may be, of course, for a good reason. People easily feel taken advantage of and sense manipulation.

One way to use mindfulness as a manager is foster multiple ways of understanding human motivation. This socio-cognitive form of mindfulness pioneered by Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer does not require spending money on meditation retreats or Yoga instructors (even though that cannot hurt). It simply requires you to be open to multiple options of understanding human action. It allows you to question your current mindset rather than jump to quick conclusions. When managers are more mindful, consequences for the workplace are drastic.

Yet, in many corporations managers are induced to be mindless. They imbibe a cultural narrative that portrays people as mere instruments to advance team or corporate goals. The labels for employees vary from human resources to human assets, to human capital. Managers get rewarded based on achieving corporate goals making the most of these resources, assets or capital. To do that, they easily resort to a very generic approach to motivate employees. Our economics classes teach us that we need incentives to work. Our general corporate culture reinforces the view that all we want is more: more money, more status, more visibility, and reputation. To engage people we then hand out rewards, such as retreats, money, or best-employee awards.

By being more mindful we can step back and draw on different insights about human behaviour. According to an evolutionist perspective we can see that our species has not survived by looking out to be top dog and having more than others. Rather, we have survived because we can cooperate and form community. Paul Lawrence calls this an independent drive to bond that we need to satisfy, in order to feel human. Paul Lawrence points to another key source of human motivation, which he labels the drive to comprehend. Accordingly, we survived because we used our increased brain size to make sense of the world in abstract ways and created tools. The main point of this perspective is that all of our four independent drives (the drives to Acquire, Bond, Comprehend and Defend) need to be satisfied in **balance**, none of them maximised.

Let's see: I am managing employee X. He has decided he is underpaid and raises a ruckus. He refuses to collaborate on simple tasks like providing feedback on product specifications. Giving him more money may seem like the only way to approach the situation given the prevailing mindset (and given that you wish to keep him).

With a more mindful approach, however, one could try to understand why he feels underpaid. In fact the conversation of money may indeed be symbolic of a deeper sense of not feeling valued as a person within the group. There may be easy fixes to that conundrum like making sure managers provide outlets for authentic human bonding, and true co-creation of meaningful job tasks. There may be more difficult cultural and personal reasons that make him defiant.

To satisfy the unmet need for bonding, managers could evaluate the working relationships and develop programs to increase the quality of such personal relationships. Retreats for that purpose could work, but simply paying attention to how people interact with each other at the job may give managers new leverage to motivate better.

To satisfy the drive to comprehend, managers could actively engage the employees in problem solving. People want to solve problems. Why would they otherwise “waste” their time on crossword puzzles, Sudoku or trivia games? What better problem solving can occur than on the job to advance the quality of the processes or products the company provides?

Many times people do not feel heard and valued. Fights about salary are often symbolic and tend to disguise the larger issue: that people wish to be treated with **dignity**. It sounds trivial. Yet, a mindful shift in perspective can increase our awareness of our shared humanity and help resolve many conflicts.

As managers we often forget that. We are hired to do a job. We are prone to see the world of work as separate from the rest. That does not mean humans do not stay human. Mindful Managers can adopt multiple perspectives and while employees are hired to do a job they also wish to be treated with dignity.

How this can be done better may be something to ponder for the new year.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on [A Humanistic Perspective for Management Theory: Protecting Dignity and Promoting Well-Being](#), *Journal of Business Ethics*.
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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