

The business case for Mindfulness.

Stress reduction is not enough

The hugely beneficial impact Mindfulness practice has on stress management is well researched and documented for more than 30 years in the west. However much this might be desirable for businesses, in today's fast paced and relentless commercial environment it is often not enough in its own right to justify the investment in Mindfulness for many organisations.

These organisations are looking for a real return in areas that have an immediate effect on the bottom line, they want substantial improvements in creativity, innovation, team dynamics, effectiveness and ownership at all levels, constructive and positive leadership and team management of the organisation that brings out the very best in their employees.

They need programmes that address not only the complexity of strategic leadership, and tactical implementation at senior levels but also the challenge often felt by first tier line management, where they are no longer 'one of the team' they are now managing but they are still finding their feet and voice as a manager. There often seems little opportunity for a consistent and coherent approach across such a disparate range of needs and responsibilities that can be recognised and validated top down and bottom up. Ideally such an approach would be implicit and explicit within the culture of an organisation, growing organically with the development of individuals.

How can Mindfulness help?

Business professionals want evidence, including evidence that any investment is consistent with their corporate ethos and approach to risk. Over the last 10 years there has built up a body of evidence describing just how Mindfulness works and the real impact it has on individuals and through them the organisations they work for and with.

So what is the evidence base?

The radical change in evidence base largely comes from developments in brain imaging and advances in neuroscience. These two combined have transformed our understanding of brain function and the impact on behaviour. Through imaging it has been possible to detect structural changes in brain function between Mindfulness practitioners and non-practitioners and to see that these changes can develop over relatively short periods (weeks) and are sustained and expanded

through regular practice. One of the major differences seen is in the Pre Frontal Cortex (PFC).

The prefrontal cortex is located just behind the forehead and is divided into a left and right side. It is responsible for:

- abstract thinking;
- analytical thought;
- regulating behaviour including resolving conflicting thoughts;
- making choices between right and wrong;
- predicting the likely results of actions and events;
- governing social control including regulating emotion.

The function of the prefrontal cortex is to:

- regulate thought supporting short and long term decision making giving the ability to plan ahead and create strategies and accommodate to changing and evolving circumstances;
- focus thoughts enabling the ability to pay attention, learn and concentrate on goals;
- evaluate complex tasks and concepts;
- house the active working memory that supports reasoning, learning and comprehension by storing and managing short term and recent memory.

What impact does Mindfulness have on PFC activity?

A major observed change attributed to Mindfulness practice is increased activity in the left and a reduction in activity in the right pre-frontal cortex (PFC). Why does this matter? Firstly the PFC is considered responsible for many of the key attributes critical to business success: strategic and tactical functioning; interpersonal dynamics and the determination and maintenance of values.

Those with a bias towards activity in the right PFC tend to show behaviours associated with anxiety, low mood, discontent and lower levels of happiness. This tendency extends to a reduced sense of being in control and a closing down with dissatisfaction around personal relationships, work and their personal outcomes. They tend to show a more pessimistic attitude and what could be called an avoidance response to life.

Those with a bias towards more activity in the left PFC show behaviours associated with openness, resilience, curiosity, engagement, innovation and emotional regulation. They tend to describe themselves as more optimistic and in control and feel they have a sense of meaning and purpose. This reflects an approach oriented response to challenges and difficulties.

When under considerable stress there is a tendency for most people to move more towards an avoidance response irrespective of their role or position. Mindfulness training can develop the capacity to cultivate an approach rather than avoidance

response increasing our resilience both in daily life and times of high stress. In addition to this, as early as 2003 research identified significant increase in immune function which further enhances resilience under stress. (Stress is a major suppressor of immune function). A recent paper reporting an innovative Mindfulness based Mind Fitness programme for the US marines also suggested it could provide greater cognitive resources for soldiers to act ethically and effectively in the morally ambiguous and emotionally challenging counterinsurgency environment. Clearly this would map across to today's emotionally pressured and amoral business environment where Mindfulness could support clear corporate and personal ethical values.

How does this happen in practice?

Whilst the instructions around Mindfulness are simple in themselves, the application requires a real sense of purpose, curiosity, openness and a resolve to commit to the discipline of training. It's no different to working towards a triathlon, marathon run, or going to the gym. In fact, it is exactly like going to mind gym and requires the same commitment. The greater the investment, the greater the reward.

The training can be either through a four day intensive residential course, two consecutive weekend courses or through regular weekly classes spread over eight weeks. The benefits begin almost immediately, are progressive and rewarding and extend into all aspects of work and home life.

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