

Explaining how mindfulness consistently brings positive workplace outcomes

blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2017/04/03/explaining-how-mindfulness-consistently-brings-positive-workplace-outcomes/

4/3/2017



Mindfulness training has become a hot management trend, as leading organisations like Aetna and British Parliament increasingly offer mindfulness programs for employees. This growth is fuelled by [research](#) supporting the benefits of mindfulness for workplace functioning, from focus and burnout to job performance and leadership. Yet this interest has glossed over the almost-comical reality of applying contemplative practices like meditation in the modern, frenetic workplace. While the research evidence is compelling, we lack clear theories of why individuals benefit from something that seems so counter to how people typically work.

In simplest terms, mindfulness involves being present, while the primary purpose of work is to achieve future goals. Accomplishing work objectives demands that people think and act quickly, and rely heavily on past experiences to automatically guide their present behaviour. While it might be nice to imagine operating with slow deliberation and present focus, this is not how managers tend to operate. In fact, work often seems to demand the exact opposite!

So how do we explain, in practical terms, why studies of mindfulness consistently demonstrate positive workplace outcomes? Our recent [study](#) helped to answer this question. We interviewed 39 professionals with existing mindfulness practices. Among other things, we tried to understand how they perceived mindfulness as helping them at work. This understanding should be invaluable for designing and benefitting from workplace mindfulness training.

Understanding how mindfulness changes how people think is crucial for explaining its apparent workplace benefits. Leading mindfulness scholars, like [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#) and [Mark Williams](#), have theorised people as using two basic modes of relating to the world: Doing and Being (**see Table 1**). Doing mode is what we typically use to work and to realise future goals. Engaging in Doing mode involves using a specific set of cognitive properties, including thinking and acting automatically, focusing on past and future, and quickly evaluating events and outcomes. Being mode is tantamount to mindfulness, intentionally attending to and accepting the present moment.

Table 1. Being v. doing modes

Being Mode (Mindfulness)	Property	Doing Mode (Goal-Directed Cognition)
COGNITIVE MODE COMPARISON		
Present	Temporal Focus	Past and future
Non-conceptual	Perception	Conceptual
Direct experience	Locus of reality	Narratives
Acceptance	Judgment	Evaluation
Self-quieted	Self	Self-centered
Goalless	Goals	Goal-directed
Intentional	Agency	Automatic

While relying on Doing mode is undoubtedly crucial for workplace success, our study suggests that over-relying on this mode can be problematic. The properties that come with this mode can be limiting. Just like using a hammer to fix a leak, this typical way of thinking is often the wrong tool for a task. For example, imagine you are managing a subordinate and discover they made an error on an important client email. If you are relying solely on the Doing mode, as is typical for most people, this may trip you up. You may start to call your subordinate names (hopefully just in your head!), while your thoughts race towards placating the client and obsessing about how this will affect your reputation. While this may prompt a quick response to the client, this train of thought is also really limiting. The self-oriented thoughts about reputation drive a stress response. The negative evaluation of your subordinate can undermine that relationship and the real work of management — finding ways to grow, motivate, and retain talent. Interviewees in our study offered many such examples of Doing mode creating such limitations.

Now take the same scenario, but imagine you are mindful and have activated Being mode and its cognitive properties. Unlocking this toolkit may help you to enact more appropriate responses. Experiencing acceptance of the error may help you to avoid silently cursing your subordinate. Focusing on the present may leave you feeling less self-centred and anxious about your professional reputation. These different tools help you to avoid falling into these traps, which could get in the way of effectively managing your subordinate and correcting the error.

This example helps to demonstrate why mindfulness may be valuable to work. Many situations are effectively addressed through the toolkit provided by Doing mode, but not all. Often Being mode added tools helpful for effectively engaging these situations in which Doing mode was problematic. This partially reflects [emerging theory](#) from clinical psychologists, who have suggested that “Doing mode ... becomes a ‘problem’ when it volunteers for a task that it cannot do. ... When this happens, it pays to ‘shift gear’ into ‘Being’ mode. This is what mindfulness gives us: the ability to shift gears as we need to, rather than being permanently stuck in the same one.”

However, our interviews revealed an interesting adjustment to this theory, with big implications for work. In some cases, when individuals were mindful, they reported that they had both Being and Doing modes operating together. Rather than shifting gears, they reported employing both ways of thinking simultaneously, effectively expanding the tools they could use.

Rather than Being or Doing, we described this condition as “Being while Doing,” an ideal state of mindfulness at

work. This allowed individuals to harness the power of Doing mode while avoiding many of its limitations. In this way, mindfulness at work offers an array of crucial benefits that supports feeling and functioning well. While interviewees sometimes struggled to maintain this combination, they also reflected its significant benefits. By relating mindfulness to our typical ways of thinking at work, we are starting to understand not only what mindfulness may offer to work, but *why* it offers these benefits. This is an important step towards understanding how to harness this quality and its benefits for work.

More broadly, we see this as an emerging frontier for management in today's complex workplace, one meriting further innovation and research. The growing movement around mindfulness at work will involve managing these tensions to foster "Being While Doing" to realise organisational benefits. We call this new body of practice "[Contemplative Management](#)." In time, understanding how to manage mindfulness at work may produce substantial benefits to individuals and organisations, benefits difficult to attain through typical training intended to augment thinking as usual.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the authors' paper [Being While Doing: An Inductive Model of Mindfulness at Work](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, (2017), 7, 2060.
- Read the authors's previous blog post [Mindfulness has big impacts for performance, decision-making and career longevity](#).
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Featured image credit: [Abstract details](#), by [Tookapic](#), under a [CC0](#) licence
- Before commenting, please read our [Comment Policy](#).

Darren J. Good is an Assistant Professor of Applied Behavioral Science at the Graziadio School of Business and Management at Pepperdine University, serving as core faculty in the MBA and Masters of organisation development programmes. He researches the intersection of mindfulness and leadership. Over the past decade, Good has regularly coached executives and consulted as a trusted advisor to organisations. He was named a 2014 Ascendant Scholar by the Western Academy of Management. Good holds a Ph.D. in organisational behaviour from the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University.



Christopher J. Lyddy is an Assistant Professor at Providence College School of Business in Rhode Island, US. His research explores the integration and impacts of mindfulness at work, with current projects exploring how the quality and practice of mindfulness intersects managerial cognition, loss of self-control, and organisational routines. He previously earned degrees in Economics and City Planning at the University of Michigan and MIT, and worked as a researcher at the Brookings Institution and MIT-Sloan School of Management.



- Copyright © 2015 London School of Economics