

# PAMPHLET 9

## ORGANIZATIONAL MINDFULNESS

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*Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being as humans, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed—be it ecological, social, demographic or a general breakdown of civilization—will be unavoidable.*

Vaclav Havel

I define mindfulness as paying attention to what is (inside and outside of ourselves) and then reflecting nonjudgmentally on what is and why it is so. I define organizational mindfulness as the connecting and sharing of the mindfulness of people, in a forum such as dialogue, to create new meaning and knowledge that will help people and organizations achieve greater congruence between their intentions and outcomes.

Most people in organizations are not mindful. They are too busy rushing from task to task to pay attention to what they are doing. For example, union representatives and department managers tried interest-based bargaining in an effort to resolve difficult issues and to change their adversarial relationship to a partnership. They hired a consultant, went to training, and held several day-long meetings. Flip chart pages covered the walls of the conference room. Their activities were different, but below the surface, nothing had changed. They withheld information from one another. Many participants feared being authentic. Outside of the meetings, hostile actions were taken by both parties. Finally, impatient managers tried to force an agreement, and the employees rebelled. The outcome was a more hostile relationship than before and increased anger, cynicism, and distrust.

Union leaders and managers wanted to learn from their experience. They conducted an “after-action review” and asked, “what happened and what can we learn from it?” They learned they had tried a new program to “fix” their relationship without understanding and choosing consciously to

change the underlying and unconscious beliefs that drove their traditional behavior. Unaware of those traditional beliefs, they lived them out unconsciously as they tried new approaches that required different beliefs. Their lack of awareness predetermined their disappointment.

Another client shifted responsibility for approving the hiring of new employees from hierarchical line-managers to a “strategy team” of employees from different areas and levels of the company. The employees on the strategy team came from the same culture as the line-managers. Paternalistic managers were replaced by a paternalistic team. The result was a more bureaucratic, time-consuming, and aggravating process than before.

This dynamic happens daily as organizations establish self-managed teams, total quality programs, employee involvement programs, and the other new tools organizations utilize to meet the demands of the marketplace. Paternalism is identified as the root of a problem and, mindlessly, paternalistic means are used to correct the problem resulting in more insidious paternalism than before. Mindfulness is needed to end this dynamic.

The evolution of the human nervous system did not prepare us for the mindfulness required for survival today. In their book *New World, New Mind*, Robert Ornstein and Paul Ehrlich described the evolutionary history of human beings. Early humans lived in a world of immediate challenges requiring “quick reflexes.” An animal or enemy surprised our ancestors and they had to respond quickly or perish. Over millions of years, humans adapted to the world by focusing on scarcity, the short-term, dramatic changes, and emergencies requiring immediate action. Contextual change was slow and imperceptible. Our nervous systems evolved in such a way that humans are, “sensitive to the beginnings and endings of almost every event more than the changes, whether gigantic or tiny, in the middle.”

This description of our nervous systems prompts me to think of life in organizations a zero-sum mentality, the inability to focus on process and the long-term, the unwillingness to spend time between beginnings and endings where new forms can be created, the pursuit of quick-fix after quick-fix, and the inherent ability to respond to crisis. Our nervous systems are well-suited to pre-history but are poorly equipped to focus our attention on gradual, long-term, and global trends that threaten the environment and organizations. The inherent time scale of human beings is too fast to see gradual change below the surface of the obvious. At the same time, cultural evolution has the ability to drive change at unprecedented speed. A mismatch exists between the human mind and the

world people inhabit. “. . . We are out of joint with the times, our times.” Our need for mindfulness is great. In a chaotic world of discontinuous change and paradox we cannot optimize our personal or organizational success absent greater consciousness. We must evolve consciously and become mindful intentionally.

To be mindful, we must slow ourselves down. Anne Lindbergh told the story of Andre Gide who traveled fast through the jungles of Africa. One morning the native guides sat in a circle and refused to leave the camp. When Gide urged them to get moving they looked at him and with firmness said, “Don’t hurry us—we are waiting for our souls to catch up with us.” Many of us are far ahead of our souls.

Solitude is necessary for us to be mindful. It takes time to think and become conscious. We need time alone for our brains to function at their best and to reach our highest potential. Solitude positions us to gain insights from our unconscious—to make the connections necessary for creativity. In solitude we can adopt a spacious perspective aware of the interconnections, interdependencies, and interrelationships of the living networks that make up our lives. Through reflection, attentive people become wiser and healthier than their frenetic colleagues.

Mindfulness is paying attention—aware of our beliefs, our behavior, and our impact on others. Attentive people empty themselves of preconceptions to make room for new insights and awareness. Alert people scan their environment continually for patterns, opportunities, and synchronicity. Mindfulness is the balancing of “being, doing, and becoming.” Mindfulness is required if we are to anticipate the future.

Some say we must manage the intelligence or the knowledge of the organization. I believe we need to manage the mindfulness of the organization. Our present level of mindlessness (demonstrated by the incongruence between what we want and what we are achieving) is not sustainable. We must increase our consciousness, reflect, and take actions that benefit the larger systems that make up our world. We need to become aware of ourselves, our organization’s culture, environment, assumptions, and underlying beliefs. We must become aware of our organization’s relationships with other systems—their interrelations, interconnections, and interdependencies. People who are aware of these things, and reflect upon them without judgment, will be cognizant of their organization’s context, its fabric, essence, and background music. We must then take action. Otherwise there is no purpose in being mindful.

The greater our consciousness, the greater the pain we feel. Many people

choose to be oblivious, unaware, and unconscious to avoid pain. They believe they are entitled to feel good all the time. Mindful people live with the pain of seeing what the deluded deny the reality of an unsustainable belief system. Those who are awake also experience the joy of learning, the integrity of living in reality, and the richness of life.

**One cannot live a life of integrity or create a sustainable future without being mindful.**

### **RECOMMENDED READING**

*New World, New Mind* by Robert Ornstein & Paul Ehrlich