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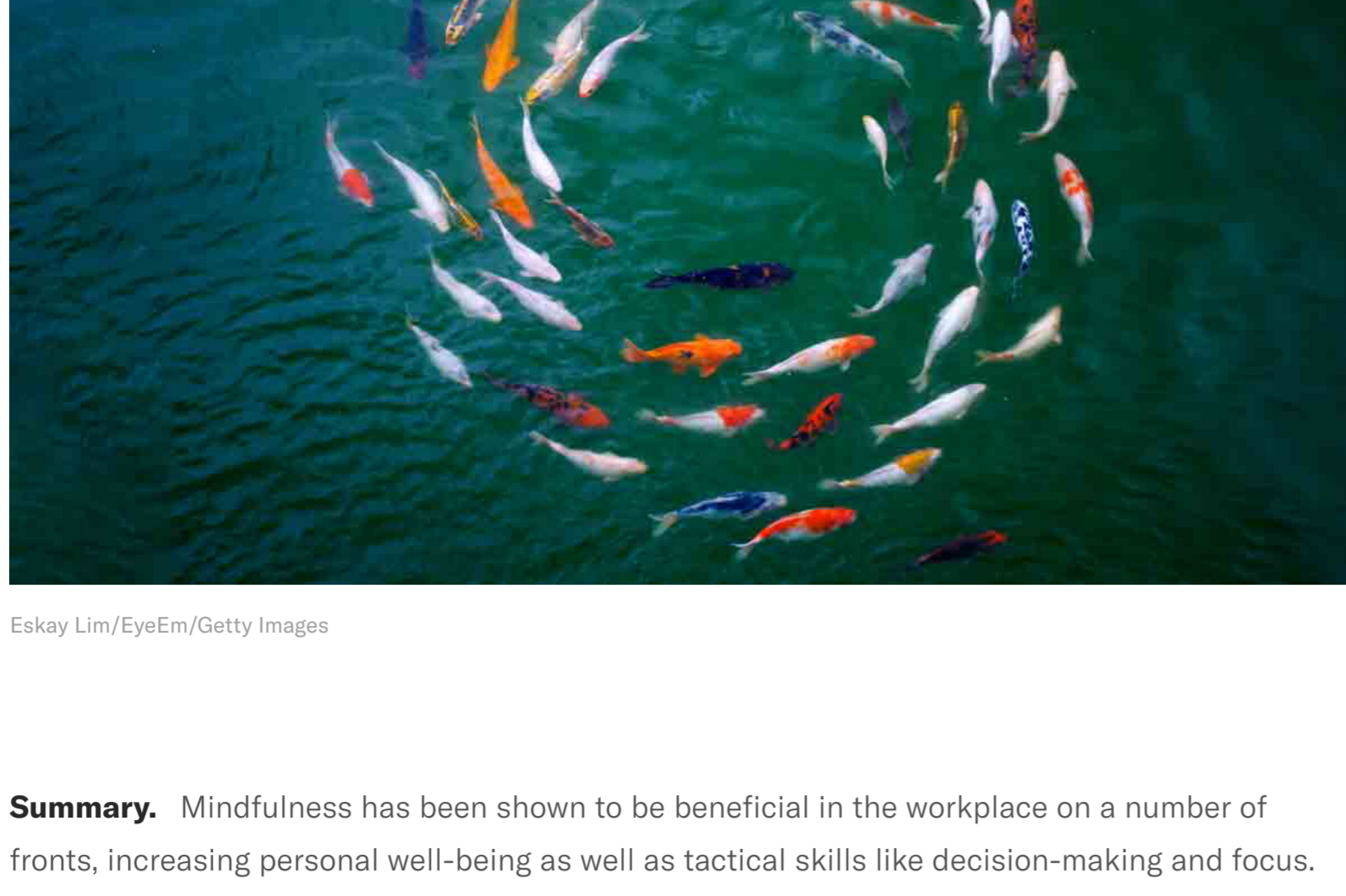
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Leading Teams

Why Your Team Should Practice Collective Mindfulness

by Megan Reitz and Michael Chaskalson

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Summary. Mindfulness has been shown to be beneficial in the workplace on a number of fronts, increasing personal well-being as well as tactical skills like decision-making and focus. But if a team's culture is toxic, the benefits of mindfulness for the individual team... [more](#)

Evidence suggests that mindfulness can help to reduce stress and anxiety, increase resilience, divergent thinking, job satisfaction and improve focus and leadership flexibility. But is it enough? Having researched mindfulness in organizations and for leaders for many years, we advocate its implementation in many situations. But we also believe that when it comes to the ability of individuals and teams to thrive at work, a team's culture will repeatedly trump most individuals' mindfulness practice. It's not enough for people at work to build their capacity for emotional regulation if they're persistently bullied or work in a toxic team.

That's why we also advocate the practice of **team mindfulness**. Just as someone practicing individual mindfulness becomes more self-aware and less judgmental, with team mindfulness, the team becomes more aware and accepting of itself *as a team*. Its members are **collectively aware** of the team's objectives, tasks, roles, dynamics, and structures. That awareness emerges as a result of the team regularly paying attention to these factors, openly and non-judgmentally. This is different from each team member practicing mindfulness on their own — which has its own **benefits** — instead, it's about what the team does together.

Groups that develop team mindfulness are demonstrably concerned for the wellbeing of their members. They are collectively aware of the tasks and goals that they share; and they are aware of, and able to address, the dynamics that inevitably flow between team members.

In our work with teams we've seen that such groups experience less unhelpful team conflict and are psychologically safer. Whether face-to-face or virtual, groups that are mindful at the team level will do better — especially when faced with a crisis.

Based on our research over the last five years we've come to understand individual mindfulness as consisting of three key aspects: allowing, inquiry, and meta-awareness. We now find this a helpful way of describing team mindfulness as well.

Allowing

Allowing is the wisdom to accept present-moment reality and to approach any situation openly and compassionately.

Accepting things as they are doesn't amount to neglecting your team's responsibility to change that which should be changed. Rather, it's about not putting an exorbitant amount of energy into wishing things were different than they actually are or figuring out who is to blame (a common reaction to things going wrong — especially in a crisis). It means avoiding "if only it weren't like this" discussions and instead asking how to solve the problem together.

Allowing involves embracing team member's personal experiences, not just their professional ones. Team members encourage one another to share more about themselves (but always give choice here, respecting individual and cultural preferences). The team's compassion for one another builds as they find out what matters to their colleagues and the circumstances they are in.

In one team we worked with, for example, one of the members seemed to have a constantly critical mindset. Nothing was ever good enough: the team's performance, the organization, other team members. In a dialogue about the team's dynamics in which the issue was raised, team came to realize that she set really high standards for herself, and that she suffered from those standards as well. This realization as a group helped her to ease up on herself and also led the team to value her critical perspective.

Any member of a team (not just the team leader!) can ask:

- How can we be compassionate towards ourselves as well as to one another?
- How can we care for and hear our colleagues who have diverse perspectives and circumstances?
- How can we be more accepting of the system wide dynamics such as organizational culture or the reality of a crisis?

Inquiry

Inquiry is the capacity to be curious at three levels: about individual team members and their habits and preferences (including your own); about your team and its dynamics; and about the organizational and societal system around you.

To satisfy this curiosity, teams should pause, question and enable moments of reflection. In meetings teams tend primarily to focus on the *what*: advocating results and targets. They also need to include the *how*: inquiring into the processes of working as a team. Build time for this into your agenda or use **action learning** for specific, key team challenges which facilitates the discipline to stay in inquiry before jumping to action. Giving the team a moment to stop and reflect lets you identify the habits that serve and that don't serve the team and its objectives.

One team we worked with was experiencing low engagement — often team members wouldn't even join video calls or would spend the whole call on mute without contributing. But when one team member initiated a brief check-in at the beginning of each meeting, asking, "How are you showing up today and what impact would you like to have on other members of the team?" suddenly those team members became more talkative.

Teams can ask themselves:

- If there was a way to improve our ability to think creatively together, what would it be?
- Whose voice are we *not* hearing right now that we need to hear in order to respond well to this situation?
- How will our response right now — to one another, and to our wider system of customers and suppliers — influence the strength of our relationships in the longer term?

Meta-awareness

Meta-awareness is the capacity to observe and describe experiences from an individual, team, and system-wide perspective rather being confined solely within any individual's personal experiences. Not an either/or — it's all of the above. You notice your own perspective *and* that of the team as a whole, all within some degree of awareness of the system as a whole.

Team leaders are often in the best position to enable meta-awareness, but in a mindful team any member should have the space and opportunity to increase mindfulness in meetings, whether they are face-to-face or virtual. That comes about when everyone in the team is consciously enabled to draw attention to what is happening — in the team dynamic and in the present moment.

It can help to use short mindfulness practices to increase steadiness, awareness, and focus. For example, one-minute meditations to begin a meeting, in which individuals simply check in with themselves, focus on the present moment, and form an intention for the meeting.

But more than that, the team should take the space regularly to consider its own dynamics and any patterns it might be stuck in. Team leaders especially should recognize and observe, in real time, how systemic and cultural assumptions influence their perceptions. Taking a deep breath and standing slightly apart from the flow of events, team leaders can come to see things more clearly. That shift to meta-awareness is particularly useful in a crisis when habitual responses embedded in previous ways of responding are no longer adequate.

Finally, consider designating one team member as the "observer" at your next meeting. Their role is to keep the big picture in mind and to remind the team of different ways to develop allowing, inquiry, and meta-awareness. Or ask everyone to share their observations at a particular moment in the agenda.

A construction company we work with had a bright orange chair in each meeting room, in contrast to the rest of the subtle decor. When we commented on this, we were told that it was "the customer's chair." In team meetings when issues were being discussed and decisions made, the team would pause and listen to the colleague sitting in the orange chair who would speak as if they were a key customer. They would comment not only on the issue, but also on how the team was working together. This practice on top of being valuable fresh perspective and a pause for thought.

Teams can ask themselves:

- What do we notice that is going on in ourselves and in the team?
- If we were a key customer, supplier, or a junior employee, how would we see this issue?
- If we were to be an observer of this team meeting, what would we notice in terms of communication, psychological safety, assumptions, or focus of attention?

To be sure, there is a business case for team mindfulness. Teams that excel in these three areas will be psychologically safer and better able to innovate; they will experience less churn. But there is also a moral case. People in mindful teams will experience higher levels of wellbeing and job satisfaction. Especially in these times, that's reason enough.

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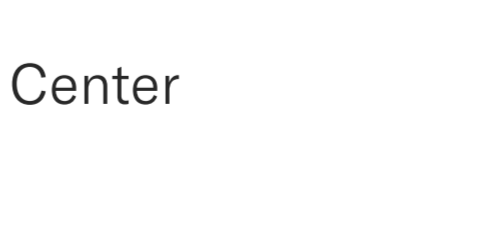
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