Margaret Chapman pauses to reflect on the journey mindfulness is making into organisational life and considers what helps to create a more mindful workplace.
"You cannot stop the waves, but you can learn how to surf." We, our clients and organisations are experiencing a tsunami of challenges.

Majestic employers from Google to Deutsche Bank have been integrating mindfulness into their workplace. The benefits have even been discussed inside number 10 Downing Street. Back in 2011, when I wrote an article for Counselling at Work titled ‘Mindfulness in the workplace: what is the fuss all about?’ I offered a perspective as to why what was seemingly seen as ‘counter-culture’ was transitioning from the marginal to the mainstream, from Eastern Buddhist practice into secular Western organisational interventions. I noted that there was something of the ‘zeitgeist’, a spirit of the times. Two years on, I am still my reflections on what has been happening since then and highlight the steps practitioners can take if they want to develop organisational mindfulness-based interventions (OMBIs).

Despite increasing evidence that mindfulness works, I’ve observed that few organisations are able to or are actively engaged in implementing OMBIs strategically to build individual (and thus) organisational resilience. Perhaps one reason why they are not is that mindfulness is not that easily understood. Meditation at best may conjure up images of 1960s ‘hippies’ and orange-robed monks, in contrast to the corporate image of business; and at worst, it may be seen by some as ‘Buddhism by the back door’. Nonetheless there are ‘green shoots’, which suggests there is increasing interest in and curiosity for what mindfulness can do at work.

What is meant by mindfulness at work?

In her document ‘The business case for mindfulness in the workplace’ Juliet Adams, creator of mindunet.org, has put together a series of steps by which to make an argument for why and how mindfulness can benefit organisations. The first step is to describe in accessible language what mindfulness is. She offers a simple definition, based on ABC:

**A** - awareness to become aware of what you are thinking and doing in your mind and body, right here, right now, in the present moment.

**B** - ‘being with’ your experience: not trying to change what you notice in this moment and developing the capacity to skillfully notice and accept without judgment ‘what is.’

**C** - seeing things as they are and proceeding with a wise mind; developing a gap between your reaction and response.

However, a core theme in mindfulness is that you cannot develop momentary awareness simply by reading about it, it has to be experienced. So here is a short practice, one that you can use yourself and drop in with clients:

**Informal mindfulness practice**

- **STOP**
  - Take a breath
  - Observe; just notice thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations

- **P**
  - Proceed mindfully to respond rather than react

There may be times during the day when you are finding things overwhelming and are not aware of what is happening. Take a moment to stop, take a breath and observe what is happening, including thoughts, feelings and emotions. By reconnecting with your experience, right here, right now, you can respond more effectively.

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Tips for using mindfulness as a change management strategy:

1. Identify what the outcomes to be achieved are. Consider how mindfulness will help.
2. Identify stakeholders: conduct a stakeholder analysis (SA) to assess their interest in the initiative and power over its implementation, collaborate and work in partnership.
3. Ask who will be the mindfulness champion. Can you find someone who has embodied the practice and can talk with passion and maintain the integrity of the approach?
4. Find out what the return on investment is to be measured.
5. Find out what metrics are needed by the different stakeholders to demonstrate individual and organisational benefits.
6. Be mindful as to what and how the language of mindfulness will be used – adapt it for your audience.
7. Keep it secular – mindfulness is about attention and mindfulness is what work is about.
8. Use organisational case examples that are household names eg Transport for London; Google; Astra Zeneca.
9. Develop an awareness of whom mindfulness may be used – adapt it for your audience.
10. Start small: Aim for evolution, not revolution, and progress mindfully. Offer taster sessions, run a pilot and adapt materials and practices that will ‘speak’ to your particular participants.

Where next for mindfulness?

- A feeling of calm and the course has created an awareness of techniques of being in the here and now.
- This quote from the Dunfries and Galloway case study echoes what many of my clients report and in many ways reflects the original intentions of MBRR: ‘You cannot stop the waves, but you can learn how to surf.’
- We, our clients and organisations are experiencing a tsunami of challenges. The impact of the current economic climate, increasing levels of stress and rising sickness absence levels are regularly reported. In the Spring 2013 issue of Counselling at Work, consultant, Vicki Badham, highlighted that 12.7 million days are lost annually due to work-related stress, yet noted that organisations are not acting strategically in managing stress at work and only do something when it becomes debilitating.
- From green shoots… to Downing Street?

Organisational applications of mindfulness offer a real opportunity to address the issue of improving wellbeing at work. The evidence for this exists and is growing. Out of this is developing (albeit currently disparate and fragmented) a body of professional knowledge and practice that mindfulness at work, works. Communities of researchers and practitioners are now coming together in a bid to share experience, knowledge, insights, and practical tools and resources that can help practitioners and organisations.

This takes courage, however, and requires that individuals first have to experience mindfulness. We need to know and feel what a mind-body practice means at first hand in order to become OBMI champions. Through these insights, we have at our disposal the tools with which to nurture the green shoots that are appearing.

In April 2013, journalist Madeleine Bunting reported on Jon Kabat-Zinn’s visit to Downing Street where he held a series of interviews with politicians and policy-makers to talk about the benefits of mindfulness. Why? Because mindfulness has unlimited applicability to everything we face, and it is low cost.

- At the start, there be to inspire us to take our first steps into mindfulness and help create organisations that are fit to house the human spirit.

References: