

# Where are we now?

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’



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Major 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?’<sup>1</sup>, I offered a perspective as to why what was seemingly seen as ‘counter-culture’<sup>2</sup> 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 share 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’<sup>3</sup>. 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’<sup>3</sup> Juliet Adams, creator of [mindfulnet.org](http://mindfulnet.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 skilfully 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

**S** STOP

**T** Take a breath

**O** 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.

‘Organisational applications of mindfulness offer a real opportunity to address the issue of improving wellbeing at work’

#### Use the language of business

Jon Kabat-Zinn is regarded as the father of secular approaches to mindfulness. His work arose out of a desire to help people manage chronic pain when all other clinical interventions had proved ineffective<sup>4</sup>. In what is fast becoming the classic programme, upon which the many adaptations of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) are based (including mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)<sup>5</sup>), there is no reference to the religious or spiritual beliefs that inform the approach. In other words, there is ‘no Buddhism by the back door’.

Returning to Juliet Adams again, she suggests that it is best to avoid reference to mindfulness’ Buddhist roots and instead to translate the research evidence from MBSR/MBCT, that mindfulness works, into the ‘bottom-line’ benefits, ie to translate OMBIs into the language that resonates with the organisation. For example, there is evidence to suggest that developing attentional intelligence, which is to skilfully notice what is happening right here, right now, enabling us to react in an emotionally intelligent way, can help us to:

- Be more effective at decision-making<sup>6</sup>
- Deal more effectively with complexity<sup>7</sup>
- Improve working memory in stressful environments<sup>8</sup>
- Increase our awareness and reduce absent-mindedness, so improving job performance and wellbeing<sup>9</sup>
- Reduce conflict and improve working relationships
- Create more mindful, emotionally intelligent leaders who act with greater corporate social responsibility and compassion to create kinder work environments<sup>1,10</sup>.

So by simply ‘getting some head space’ as meditation consultant and author, Andy Puddicombe<sup>11</sup>, puts it, we can create a gap between our reaction and our response. This can help us to:

- Get out of habitual patterns of thinking; so be more creative and ‘think outside the box’
- Choose more effective solutions to difficulties encountered
- Be more engaged and experience higher levels of job satisfaction.

#### Working with organisational change initiatives

At the inaugural Mindfulness4Scotland conference in March this year, Sandra Gyaltzen, a learning and development officer specialising in social work with Dumfries and Galloway Council, and colleague, Jane Kellock, a senior manager in social work and health improvement with West Lothian Council, outlined the OMBI they developed based on the Association for Mindfulness’ Mindfulness-Based Living Course (MBLC)<sup>12</sup>. It comprised:

- An introductory ‘taster’ session\*
- Eight sessions of course content
- A full day of silent meditation practice
- Follow-up practice groups.

#### Making the business case

Their work recommends that when planning to make the business case for introducing mindfulness at work, it could be useful to:

- Anchor the proposed OMBI to the department’s existing change programme
- Draw on evidence to demonstrate that mindfulness is effective in addressing key business issues, such as secondary stress
- Emphasise the way in which mindfulness builds sustainability
- Position the business case within wider health policies and initiatives designed to increase health improvements
- Emphasise the link between the OMBI to national drivers such as promoting wellbeing
- Introduce the approach through an existing initiative (eg the Active Health at Work programme)
- Link the proposed OMBI to organisational metrics, such as reducing sickness absence (to bring on board key stakeholders, such as occupational health).

In an evaluation of the Dumfries and Galloway pilot OMBI programme, participants reported the following:

- Raised levels of awareness and feeling calmer by staying in the ‘here and now’
- Awareness of internal distractions, acknowledgment and acceptance of how things can be handled differently internally
- Despite finding the daily practice difficult to keep up (core to the classic MBSR), a participant reported feeling much calmer, being aware of the automatic pilot and the need for more mindfulness in daily life.

\* For a particularly superb introduction to mindfulness developed by Sandra Gyaltzen visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch>

### Implementing OMBIs

So what can be learned from those organisations that have implemented mindfulness? To support other practitioners and organisations, I have developed my own 'top 10 tips' to help them use mindfulness as a change management strategy:

#### 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 act as 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 how 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 attention is what work is about<sup>13</sup>.
- 8 Use organisational case examples that are household names eg Transport for London; Google; Astra Zeneca. Use research evidence that looks at the benefits of mindfulness in the workplace<sup>3</sup>.
- 9 Proceed mindfully. As OMBIs are in their infancy, it is the responsibility of practitioners to implement mindfulness programmes with integrity; that is, to achieve adaptation, without dilution<sup>14</sup>. This includes:
  - Ensuring that teachers have the necessary competences, including a commitment to their own practice and supervision.
  - Developing an awareness of whom mindfulness may not be suitable for, and developing appropriate selection criteria with willing participants<sup>15</sup>.

- 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.

#### Who owns mindfulness? Adaptation without dilution

A key theme that occupies leaders in the clinical applications of mindfulness is the potential, in addressing the organisational 'issues of the day', for integrity to be challenged. However, adaptation is at the heart of mindfulness. World leaders in the research and practice of mindfulness, Professors Zindel Segal and Mark Williams, and Dr John Teasdale<sup>16</sup>, have made a significant contribution to adapting MBSR to create MBCT and so help long-term sufferers of recurrent episodes of depression. In their original text, (popularly referred to by clinicians as the 'Green Book'<sup>\*\*</sup>) they provide a curriculum for practitioners to develop mindfulness interventions with clinical populations.

In 2011, one of the authors, Professor Mark Williams, co-wrote a version of that book (also green) called *Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World* with journalist Danny Penman<sup>17</sup>. This popular best-seller makes mindfulness accessible to a lay audience, and is rapidly becoming a 'green book' for MBIs in workplace settings<sup>1,17</sup>.

In essence, no one owns mindfulness. Adaptation already exists and indeed fits with the original spirit of MBSR. Jon Kabat-Zinn never intended that the original curriculum should be prescriptive. But as a 'well-defined, systematic, patient-centred approach to group mindfulness training',<sup>18</sup> it was designed to be delivered in a flexible way.

**\*\* So called because the dust cover is coloured green**

#### Where next for mindfulness?

*'I am feeling a lot calmer and the course has created an awareness of techniques of being in the here and now.'* This quote from the Dumfries and Galloway case study echoes what many of my clients report and in many ways reflects the original intentions of MBSR: 'You cannot stop the waves, but you can learn how to surf'<sup>19</sup>. 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<sup>20</sup>.

#### 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 OMBI 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<sup>21</sup> 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. What better lead than this could there be to inspire us to take our own first steps into mindfulness and help create organisations that are fit to house the human spirit.

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