

Theoretically Linking Mindfulness and Ethics in the Workplace

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Extended Abstract

Based on Interpersonal Neurobiology Theory (Siegel, 2007), we build a conceptual path model linking mindfulness, or present moment awareness, to ethical behavior at work. Mindfulness is defined as the practice of intentionally paying full attention to the present moment without being distracted by judgments, ruminations about the past, or thoughts of the future. Mindfulness is characterized by the ability to observe oneself in various circumstances, to accept that everything in our experience is subject to constant change, and to thereby avoid the stress associated with negative circumstances, thoughts, and emotional states. For example, mindfulness allows an employee to fully engage in his or her most pressing work activities instead of remaining emotionally focused on an early morning conflict with a child or spouse, worrying about an upcoming performance review, or getting wrapped up in self-recriminations for procrastinating on the project that now needs attention. Mindful people are able to notice when the mind gets off track in such ways and bring themselves back to the task at hand. Not only does this continual process of re-focusing on the present help employees become less distracted, it also results in a better understanding of how the mind itself is often a greater source of stress and dysfunction than our objective circumstance (Kabat Zinn, 1990; 1994).

Theoretical Background

Interpersonal neurobiology is an interdisciplinary theory that describes the process by which individuals can alter their neural pathways and associated patterned behaviors through the cultivation of mindfulness. As described in Figure 1, the primary results of mindfulness are thought to include both psychological and neurological integration. Integration of both systems should then contribute to an employee's compassion and spaciousness. As compassion grows, we argue that employees are more likely to engage in interpersonal ethical behaviors, and that as spaciousness increases, employees are likely to expand their perceptions of ethical dilemmas and potential responses.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Rooted in studies of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) and neuroscience, interpersonal neurobiology suggests that our early relationships create neural pathways in our brains that prime us for response patterns throughout our lives. For example, individuals who lack healthy early relationships may be vulnerable to stress, depression, anxiety, and emotional reactivity, all of which may have negative impacts in the workplace. On the other hand, those individuals who had secure attachments are likely to exhibit psychological hardiness, self-regulation, behavioral flexibility, and empathetic engagement with others. These characteristics have been found to be positively correlated with key performance outcomes such as organizational citizenship and core task performance (e.g., House, 1971; Joireman, Kamdar, Daniels, & Duell, 2006; Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2001; Mumford, Baughman, Threlfall, Uhlman, & Costanza, 1993; Pescosolido, 2002; Porath, & Bateman, 2006; Wright, Cropanzano, & Bonett, 2007). Thus, we might argue that generally speaking, securely attached individuals are likely to be strong performers at work.

Historically, limited understanding of brain development has led social scientists to believe that neural pathways, once established, were highly resistant to change, if not immutable. Therefore, the neural and psychological patterns exhibited by poorly attached individuals were assumed to be highly resistant to change. More recent findings from neuroscience and psychology indicate that this conclusion is erroneous. In fact, the brain is now thought to be characterized by neuroplasticity, or the ability of the brain to develop and change based on our experiences (Kembermann, Gast, & Gage, 2002).

Conceptual Model

Applying these ideas to our model suggested that neurological changes associated with mindfulness include a smaller amygdala (responsible for our instinctual safety, fight, or flight reactivity), a larger frontal lobe (responsible for our higher order thinking and rationality), and a thickened corpus collosum (responsible for allowing the right and left hemispheres to communicate more effectively) (Lazar, et al., 2005). As employees re-wire the brain to become less reactive and strengthen our frontal lobe capacity, their brains are better able to decouple stimulus and reaction, allowing their amygdalas to de-activate and our frontal lobes to engage. Therefore, a mindful brain may be better integrated than a less mindful brain.

Proposition 1: Mindfulness is positively associated with neurological integration.

Just as mindfulness promotes integrative structural changes in the brain, it also may have beneficial, integrative effects on employees' psychology. As they develop the ability to focus on themselves and their immediate circumstances without judgment, employees may begin to see how their minds fall into dysfunctional habits of thought and reaction that unnecessarily complicate their lives. They may begin to notice a deep complexity in present moment experiences, with every emotion, sensation, and experience being a deeply nuanced tapestry subject to constant change. In essence, they become highly practiced experts at noticing and experiencing greater detail in their lives. As they become better able to notice and experience

their lives without judgment, their ability to see their circumstances clearly, as they truly are, rather than as they wish or expect, is heightened. In other words, as employees become expert at noticing, they may become more expert at accepting. It is this noticing and accepting that is at the heart of beginning to repair the effects of dysfunctional attachment. Essentially, mindfulness provides a vehicle by which adults can create a secure attachment to themselves within themselves and increase their ability to regulate their emotions (Davidson, 2004). As the attachment patterns begin to change, the capacity for more resonant interpersonal relationships also starts to shift. In this way mindfulness promotes psychological integration.

Proposition 2: Mindfulness is positively associated with psychological integration.

As the space between stimuli and reaction becomes more distinct, individuals may experience a sense of time expanding, often referred to as "spaciousness." Spaciousness is generally associated with perceptions of having more time in the day, feeling less rushed, and experiencing less deadline-related stress (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). We posit that this effect is due to neural integration, whereby frontal lobe activity begins to dominate amygdala activity, and psychological integration, whereby employees learn to pause and withhold judgment before reacting to stimuli. Employees become less reactive and more responsive, discover a broader range of reactions than just fight or flight, and the capacity for behavioral flexibility arises as a result.

Proposition 3: Both psychological and neurological integration are positively associated with spaciousness.

As employees learn to notice and accept their experiences, rather than judge themselves, they learn the fundamentals of self-compassion (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; 1994). Furthermore, they may begin to more clearly perceive that the machinations of their minds are not unique; that in fact, being distracted, preoccupied, and removed from the present moment is quite common (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). As commonalities among colleagues, rather than differences, become salient, and as the capacity for self-compassion increases, employees may find that their capacity for compassionate, empathic responses to others increases.

Proposition 4: Both psychological and neurological integration are positively associated with compassion.

Common project management issues provide a practical example of this process. Many managers struggle with projects that run over time. Common reactions are to engage in fight reactions such as blaming others (employees, those upstream in the supply chain, or customer demands) and increasing deadline pressure, all forms of abusive supervision rooted in a "fight" reaction. Blaming degrades trust, inhibits clear and honest communication, and often results in high levels of dysfunctional conflict, all of which are barriers to effective performance. Increasing deadline pressure may result in higher levels of stress and overtime, both of which increase the chance of burnout (a flight reaction). All of these may increase the error rate and the need for rework, making deadlines even more difficult to meet and creating a spiraling effect of increasing reactivity and stress.

In contrast, a manager who is better equipped to decouple the stimulus of a project running over time with his or her fight or flight reactions allows frontal lobe functioning to supplant amygdala reactivity. As a result, this manager may discern that blaming others is a way of shirking responsibility that is counter to his or her ethical code and that overworking his or her project team is disrespectful and counterproductive. Instead of automatically blaming and increasing deadline pressure, this manager may decide to facilitate an open and honest planning meeting with all of the project leads in the supply chain. If facilitated skillfully rather than reactively, this meeting may actually enhance communication and trust, allowing the entire team to identify opportunities for system and quality improvements, more realistic deadlines, and more efficient use of human resources.

Thus, we argue that employees who possess compassion understand the need and usefulness of treating others ethically (interpersonal ethical outcomes) while those who possess spaciousness clearly discern and hold themselves to ethical standards (perceptual ethical outcomes).

Proposition 5: Compassion is positively associated with interpersonal ethical outcomes.

Proposition 6: Spaciousness is positively associated with perceptual ethical outcomes.

Implications and Conclusion

The conceptual model presented here may have important implications for management practice and research. From a practice standpoint, this model suggests that if organizations can effectively teach employees to be more mindful, they may reap the rewards in terms of increased adherence to ethical codes of conduct as well as discretionary ethical behaviors. As employees become more compassionate and act in more ethical ways, acts of aggression and/or abusive supervision, such as that noted earlier, are less likely to occur. From a scholarly standpoint, introducing mindfulness from the psychological and neurological literature into the field of management provides an opportunity to test the relationships described herein which may provide fruitful insights into how organizations can facilitate more ethical behaviors among employees and expand the boundaries of what is possible in resolving complex ethical issues.

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Figure 1: Conceptual Model Linking Mindfulness and Ethics

