

MINDFULNESS and DEVELOPING DECISION MAKING

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It might be hard to imagine a corporate training room where everyone, including the trainer, sits in complete silence. Or how about a coaching session where both the coach and the coachee are both gently gazing at the floor? Mindfulness, a way of being present, is making its way into big business and government and unassumingly and quietly changing the face of individual development. One of the reasons for this change is that workplaces are becoming noisier, more demanding and increasingly complex. Within this backdrop, managers and leaders are required to make big decisions that can have far reaching consequences. The juxtaposition of sitting in silence to make sense of the noise is intriguing and this research explores the relationship between mindfulness and decision making.

AIM

The aim of this research project is to understand whether mindfulness impacts decision making. Do working professionals who have an established mindfulness practice have a different decision making profile in comparison to working professionals without a mindfulness practice?

Jon Kabat-Zinn, who started Mindfulness on its path to popularity in Western society back in 1979 defined it as “Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.” A mindfulness practice is a set of skills and attitudes that enables individuals to become more mindful, as per Kabat Zinn’s definition.

The research briefly explores the importance of decision making in the workplace, and how decision making can be assessed. We used Decision Styles tool for this purpose.

The key differences between those who practice mindfulness and those who do not are established, and we explore how organisations can apply the findings into the wider workplace in a practical and meaningful way.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were recruited through our existing network of mindfulness teachers and practitioners. The search for willing volunteers was also extended via LinkedIn, with a request posted in the group ‘Working with Mindfulness’.

49 participants who fitted the research parameters of i) an established daily mindfulness practice of eight weeks or longer and ii) being a working professional, completed the Decision Styles tool. (Eight weeks is the industry standard for the established and popular mindfulness training course such as:

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindfulness Based Living Course (MBLC) or Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBSR))

50 Decision Styles profiles that had been completed for reasons other than this study were randomly selected from the Zircon database and anonymised.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DECISION MAKING IN THE WORKPLACE

Decision making research attracts attention from both the 'real world' and the media because of the implications it has for such a wide range of topics (Weber and Johnson, 2009). Ranging from whether to buy virgin or recycled paper through to decisions that contributed to the crash of the world economy, decision making in the workplace has some very real consequences. Success and failure are down to the quality of decision making, or indeed lack of decision making.



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The role of managers and professionals are of particular interest when it comes to decision making. Managers need to “see their way through what may be a bewildering flow of information to make decisions and solve problems” (Walsh 1995). Rogers and Blenko (2006) surveyed executives at 350 global companies about their organisational effectiveness. They found that the top performers were set apart by the speed, quality and execution of their decision making. Badaracco (2016), the John Shad Professor of Business Ethics at Harvard Business School talks about “gray-area problems” which require broader, deeper, more concrete yet imaginative thinking, whilst objectively considering the full impact of the decision. He acknowledges the difficulty of thinking clearly around gray-area issues and suggests the best approach to take is to open your mind, assemble the right team and analyse effectively.

So decision making is a crucial skill for high performance in the workplace. Furthermore, to do this well, managers and professionals are required to make skilful decisions around complex issues that are difficult to think clearly about.

MEASURING DECISION MAKING

Typically there are two ways of organisations understanding how individuals make decisions:

- I. A trained assessor observes individuals making decisions against a set of decision making criteria; this approach usually involves setting a task that requires decisions to be made in an interactive setting. The assessor might also ask the decision maker to describe the approach they took.
- II. Individuals complete a psychometric tool that outputs a profile by comparing them to a relevant norm group such as ‘working professionals’.

Style	Dimensions	Definition. The degree to which an individual...
Approach	Single Minded Open Minded	...is open to alternative perspectives and is able change their mind after a decision has been made
Belief	Hesitant Self-Assured	...believes in their ability to make and follow through on decisions independently of others
Consult	Independent Inclusive	...seeks advice and takes other’s views into consideration when making decisions
Control (Future)	External Internal	...is optimistic, has an “internal locus of control” and expects good things to happen to them in the future
Deliberation	Planned Spontaneous	...carefully considers and takes time to plan their decisions
Facts	Intuitive Objective	...analyses the available information and facts before making decisions
Pace	Measured Rapid	...makes quick decisions and enjoys working at a fast pace
Responsible	Cautious Bold	...takes responsibility for decisions and is prepared to make decisions without all the facts
Risk	Risk Averse Risk Seeking	...views risk as an opportunity and enjoys operating in an environment that has an element of uncertainty
Thought	Apparent Considered	...contemplates and takes time over important decisions

Table 1: An example of method II – the Decision Styles tool

DEVELOPING DECISION MAKING

Why develop decision making?

Typically two development needs arise when supporting individuals in developing their decision making. One is to raise an individual's self-awareness of how they make decisions, and the second is to help create a shift in how decisions are made.

Once an assessment has been made of how the individual makes decisions, then it becomes apparent if the individual's decision making approach does not suit the work they do, or the organisation they are employed by. For example, a manager that works in an organisation that values collaborative working will be more successful if they take a consultative approach to their decision making rather than making decisions alone and enforcing them upon others.

This would require an *Independent* decision maker to shift to an *Inclusive* style of decision making. It is important to note that neither *Independent* nor *Inclusive* decision making are intrinsically more valuable than the other. The value comes in the decision making style matching the context in which the individual is working. It is equally feasible to imagine an organisation requiring a member of staff to have an *Independent* decision making style if the individual is required to work alone, without a team or experts to consult.



Alternatively, a manager may need to enhance the approach they are already taking. For example, a manager may be attempting to use a *Bold* style when making certain decisions, in particular when taking responsibility for decisions. However, this style of decision making may be new to the individual who has just been promoted and as such they would need to learn how to take responsibility more consistently when they make decisions.

How can mindfulness help?

In their book *Mindfulness at Work* Alidina & Adams (2014) discuss how mindfulness can help avoid auto-pilot decisions where individuals tend to repeat past decisions rather than actually go through a more rigorous cognitive process. Maybe a mindful pause can allow the brain the space needed to generate new ideas or angles not previously spotted? Research studies below provide some evidence that support Alidina & Adams' claim.

Colzato et al (2012) investigated the impact of two types of meditation on convergent and divergent thinking in healthy adult meditation practitioners. They found that open-monitoring meditation, a style of meditation that is similar to mindful meditation in technique, induces a control state that promotes divergent thinking.

Divergent thinking is "a style of thinking that allows many new ideas of being generated" (Colzato et al, 2012, p.1). Convergent thinking, on the other hand is "a process of generating one possible solution

to a particular problem” (Colzato et al, 2012, p.1), which was not sustained by focused attention meditation (eg. repetition of a mantra).



Whilst this research presents some interesting findings, the tasks used were fairly basic including word association and listing possible uses for household items such as a pen.

The thinking that is required for decisions by managers and professionals is likely to require much more complex data and information than the participants in this study were required to process.

Research from Ostafin and Kassman (2012) examined whether meditation training reduces the habitual way we interpret and act in the world. Undergraduates were tasked with three insight problems that could not be solved using prior experience or knowledge, and two non-insight problems which involve logic and an incremental series of steps. Their theory is that trait mindfulness (measured by the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale) reduces the influence of verbal-conceptual processes, which hinder insight problem solving. It could be said that the curiosity of the mindful ‘beginner’s mind’ finds the solution. In the study, individuals with greater trait mindful awareness were better able to solve insight problems, whilst mindfulness was unrelated to solving non-insight problems.

As with Colazato’s study, it used tasks that one is unlikely to come across in an office, or other professional work settings (eg. ‘rope problem’), and also used a student population.

As discussed, research suggests that mindfulness promotes creative thinking such as divergent thinking and insight problem solving. However, the research has not been conducted in the context of the workplace, using problems that do not equate to the type of problem one is likely to face in a professional setting, with a population of students. Whilst some of the students are likely to have jobs, their main priority will not be work. Both divergent thinking and insight problem solving have characteristics that resemble the dimension *Open-minded* from the DA Approach style (see table 2).

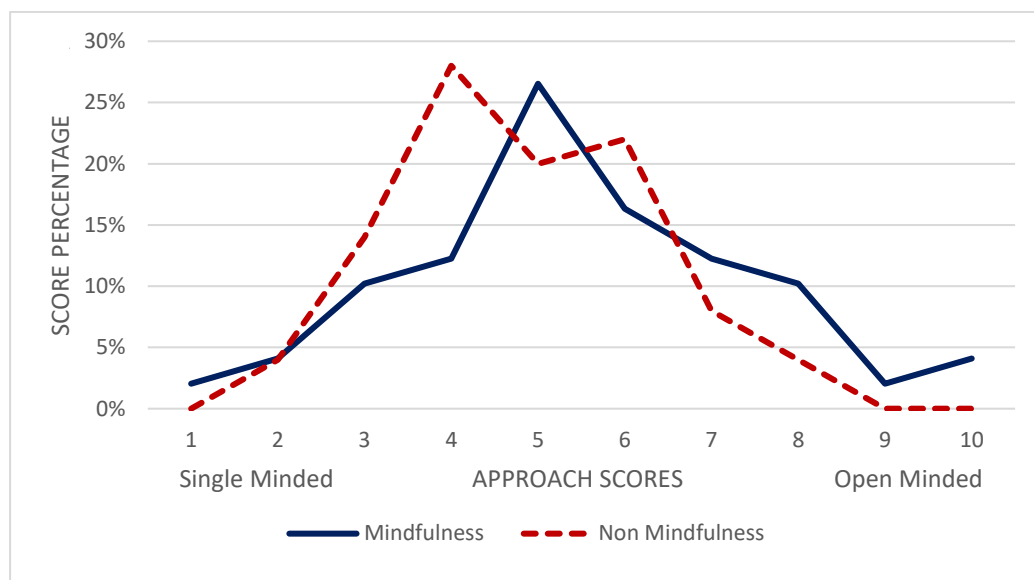
Single Minded	Open Minded
Prefers to take a single course of action, likes to control the elements and finds it difficult to remain open to alternatives. Prefer to know all to the facts, and then select the simplest option, in order to control the outcome and maximise the probability of success. Will stick to a decision and prefers not to change their mind after a decision has been made.	An agile decision maker; is open to alternative perspectives. Finds making decisions easy because they do not feel the need to oversee all of the elements. Works well within ambiguous situations where they cannot control all of the facts. Does not get confused by multiple alternatives or options. Is open-minded and is amenable to alternative ideas and suggestions.

Table 2: Full descriptions of the Approach style of decision making in the Decision Styles tool

By comparing the ratings on the Approach factor between mindful and non-mindful participants, it is possible to establish what differences exist between the two groups, as measured by Decision Styles.

KEY FINDING

In comparing the decision making styles of those with an established daily mindfulness practice, and those without, we concluded that those with a daily mindfulness practice are more likely to have an *Open-minded* Decision Styles style on the APPROACH factor¹.



Graph 1: Comparison of Mindfulness and Non-Mindfulness Groups on Approach Factor

An individual with an Open Minded style is an agile decision maker; they are open to alternative perspectives. Such a decision maker finds making decisions easy because they do not feel the need to oversee all of the elements. They work well within ambiguous situations where they cannot control all of the facts. They do not get confused by multiple alternatives or options. They are open-minded and amenable to alternative ideas and suggestions.

At the other end of the scale is a Single Minded decision maker. They would be someone who prefers to take a single course of action, likes to control the elements and finds it difficult to remain open to alternatives. They prefer to know all of the facts, and then select the simplest option, in order to control the outcome and maximise the probability of success. They will stick to a decision and prefer not to change their mind after a decision has been made.

¹ The results of the independent t test were significant, $t(97) = 2.231$, $p = .028$, $d = .45$, indicating there is a significant difference between the scores of mindfulness participants on the APPROACH factor (1 = 5.59, SD = 1.957, $n = 49$) and the scores of non-mindfulness participants (2 = 4.82, SD = 1.45, $n = 50$). The 95% confidence interval for the difference between the means was -.085 and 1.46).

APPLYING THE RESEARCH

How can organisations apply the findings of this research to enhance the decision making of their managers and key decision makers?

Assessment

The first step is to undertake a robust assessment of key decision makers. The Decision Styles tool is a cost-effective, valid, reliable and time-efficient method by which assessment can be undertaken (Zircon 2015). From just one individual through to thousands, the Decision Styles tool can help organisations understand the preferred decision making styles of their employees. Best practice once assessment has been completed is to feed findings back to the individuals to gain buy-in and engagement in the process.

Should the organisation find itself needing to develop managers and key decision makers to have a more *Open Minded* decision making style, then mindfulness training is a clear pathway.

Development



One-to-one

Mindfulness training can be offered in the form of training or coaching in a one-to-one setting. This is usually the realm of senior executives and leaders. It provides flexible and highly tailored training. A coach trained in psychometrics would combine feedback from the Decision Styles and other tools such as Values Fit and Unique Strengths to enhance and inform the coaching process.

Group Training

This is a popular method for training staff as not only is it cost-effective, but is often more enjoyable and individuals learn from each other as well as the mindfulness trainer and practices. For groups of between fifteen and thirty-five, it is a great opportunity for employees to meet each other on a non-work basis and a great way for mindfulness to grow and emerge through the organisation organically. Courses can run through the basics in four weeks or deliver a more substantial eight week affair. Good mindfulness courses can be adapted to suit the organisational needs whilst allowing individuals the space needed for personal growth and development.

Online Training

In today's global world where technology enables workers around the world to work together, online training has become an essential tool for any organisation with remote workers. Mindfulness lends itself well to the digital world and learners can come together for scheduled live classes, or follow at their own pace. As with face-to-face training, online training offers an array of courses that suit the organisation's needs.



CONCLUSION

This research has identified a link between those who have an established daily mindfulness practice and an Open Minded style of decision making, as measured by the Decision Styles tool. The research findings suggests that those with a daily practice are more likely to have an Open Minded style than those without. Organisations wishing to develop decision making in their staff can choose from a range of options to use mindfulness as a development tool. The author favours a combination of coaching and mindfulness training as this usually serves a more intricate balance of needs. However, as the best route depends upon a number of factors it will therefore vary for the individual(s) and the organisation.

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