Mindfulness in the Workplace: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effects mindfulness has on people's work lives. In it, we present an analysis of our interviews with eight managers and professionals who have a meditation practice. It is an exploratory study designed to generate hypotheses about a topic that has not yet been studied. Analysis of the interviews suggest that persons who practice mindfulness may have more external awareness at work; be more accepting of their work situation; have more modest, realistic work goals; be more selfless; be less concerned with material acquisition and wealth; have a more internal locus of evaluation; be more likely to derive meaning in life from more sources than just work; be better able to cope and remain calm in difficult work situations; be more likely to experience work difficulties as challenges than threats; enjoy their work more; be more adaptable at work; and have more positive interpersonal relations at work.

Keywords:

mindfulness; meditation

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Talking about practicing mindfulness while he is directing, a filmmaker said

It's also just kept me calm enough to take in what I am seeing. I'll be on the set, adjust

the lighting, and find a little corner--because I don't want them [the crew and actors]

going, "Oh, what's he doing?" And I'll breathe and do something positive to get back in

touch with my body--often for 30 seconds or 60 seconds. And I find that not only am I

happier, but I can watch the actors with greater clarity because I am more focused.

Because it's also very subtle; you're watching eight, ten, fifteen takes of a scene. The

differences are subtle, subtle things, and you have to be very focused to see what

somebody's doing. I find that the meditation in an ongoing way really helps that.

This independent filmmaker is answering a question about his mindfulness meditation

practice and how it affects his work life. The filmmaker's comment is revealing in at least four

ways. First, it indicates that mindfulness has helped him to be calmer at work. Second, it hints

that mindfulness has helped him to be able to process more sensory information than usual.

Third, it suggests that a quick mindfulness meditation helped him to concentrate when his work

called for it. Finally, it points out that mindfulness has aided him in perceiving more information

and important but subtle information in his work environment. This paper examines the effects

mindfulness has on people's work lives and the above four implications are the kind of thing

we've found.

We define mindfulness as nonjudgmental, concentrated observation of one's perceptions,

thoughts, and emotions in the present moment, with an attitude of equanimity, curiosity,

openness and acceptance (Bishop, 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003).

In this paper, we present an analysis of our interviews with eight managers and

professionals who have a meditation practice. It is an exploratory study designed to generate

hypotheses about a topic that has not yet been studied. Analysis of the interviews suggest that persons who practice mindfulness may have more external awareness at work; be more accepting of their work situation; have more modest, realistic work goals; be more selfless; be less concerned with material acquisition and wealth; have a more internal locus of evaluation; be more likely to derive meaning in life from more sources than just work; be better able to cope and remain calm in difficult work situations; be more likely to experience work difficulties as challenges than threats; enjoy their work more; be more adaptable at work; and have more positive interpersonal relations at work.

Although mindfulness in the workplace may seem of interest to only a small group of meditators, it may in fact interest anyone who cares about workplace stress; interpersonal relations at work; managerial competence; or management, spirituality, and religion. Research has shown that mindfulness can improve people's ability to manage stress, and stress management is an important managerial competency (Whetten & Cameron, 2007). It has also shown that mindfulness helps build relationships and that it may increase empathy, both of which are also important managerial competencies (Goleman, 1998; Whetten & Cameron, 2007).

Mindfulness in the Literature

Outside of academia, an interest in mindfulness in the workplace has been shown in the popular press, including books such as *The Mindful Leader* (Carroll, 2007), *Awake at Work* (Carroll, 2004) and *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope, and Compassion* (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Some companies have provided training programs in mindfulness, such as BASF Bioresearch, Bose, General Mills, and New Balance (Center for Mindfulness). It has even become one of the core values of an audio publishing company, Sounds True. "At Sounds True, we strive to practice mindfulness in every aspect of our work. Recognizing the importance of silence, inward attention, active

listening and being centered, Sounds True begins its all-company meetings with a minute of silence and maintains a meditation room on-site for employees to utilize throughout the day" (Anonymous, 2003).

The reasons above, and the fact that we have found that mindfulness has had a profound effect on our own work lives, have led us to pursue this study's research question: What effect does mindfulness have on people's work lives?

Academic papers ordinarily begin by identifying the prior scholarly conversation that they are part of. This is often a problem for exploratory studies such as this, which by their nature investigate topics that have not been researched before. There are no previous scholarly conversations that they enter, instead they hover around the edges of somewhat related, already ongoing conversations, hoping to either enter one of them or to create a new one. This study connects to the research literature on mindfulness in psychology, medicine, law, religion, and education. It also addresses the management; organizational behavior; and management, spirituality and religion literature. There is not much in the way of conference presentations or publications on meditation of *any* kind in the management, spirituality and religion literature, but there is some. And what we find, such as Delbecq's (2002) Academy of Management panel of executives and others discussing meditation and its impact on their work, is a promising sign.

Two Schools of Thought about Mindfulness

There are two schools of thought about mindfulness; the one in which this draws upon began at the University of Massachusetts in the early 1980s, where Jon Kabat-Zinn (1982) developed a mindfulness-based stress reduction program. His program took traditional Buddhist mindfulness meditation and removed its religious aspects; patients learned sitting and walking mindfulness meditation, and learned how to spread this mindfulness throughout the rest of their lives. This project led to hundreds of studies of mindfulness studies in fields such as medicine,

psychology, education and the law. They showed that mindfulness can have significant positive psychological, educational, and medical effects. University research centers for the study of mindfulness have developed at UCLA (www.marc.ucla.edu), University of Massachusetts (www.umassmed.edu), and elsewhere.

Distinct from this research stream is a way of thinking about mindfulness that regularly appears in management scholarship; it comes from the work of psychologist Ellen Langer (1989). Langer uses mindfulness in the sense of "something akin to proactive vigilance" (D. Goleman, personal communication, November 27, 2002). Langer (1989) made a point of distinguishing her definition of the term from the way it is used in Buddhism. Weick and Putnam (2006) use the term Western mindfulness to refer to Langer's use and Eastern mindfulness to refer to the way it is used in Buddhist thought and the stream of research begun by Kabat-Zinn.

Although there are many publications about Western mindfulness in the management literature, there is almost nothing about Eastern mindfulness. We have found only two publications in the scholarly management literature (Kernochan, McCormick, & White, 2007; Weick & Putnam, 2006), and only part of these are devoted to mindfulness. We have found only one academic conference paper in management about Eastern mindfulness (McCormick, 2006).

Method

This study came about because Author 1 and Author 2 have the same mindfulness meditation teacher who, noting their similar interests, suggested that we meet. We met at a pie shop, and Author 1 mentioned that he had hundreds of pages of transcribed interviews from earlier, unpublished research that he conducted of managers and professionals who had a contemplative practice, such as mindfulness. Author 2 suggested that they work together on a study where he would do much of the analysis of the interviews. Author 1 agreed and this paper is the first result of their collaboration.

This study draws on several data sources. Primary among them are the interviews with professionals and managers about the effect contemplative practices have on their work lives. They were conducted in 2000 and 2001. In 2007, eight of these interviews (411 pages) were analyzed, using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. The people interviewed included a writer of fiction and nonfiction, a physicist, a magazine journalist, the chair of a music department in a major research university, an architect who also was an academic dean, an investments manager, and an independent filmmaker. Another source for this paper was the scholarly literature. Finally, we also draw upon our own mindfulness practice. Both authors are long-term mindfulness practitioners.

An Exploratory Study

Our survey of the literature shows that there are no published research studies on mindfulness in the workplace. Since there is no existing research to build upon, our research question calls for an exploratory research design (McNabb, 2004). An exploratory study requires that "the topic has never been studied before; the sample has personal experience in or knowledge about the topic; and the participants are able to talk about the topic" (Wood, Kerr, & Brink, 2006, p. 122). Our goal is that of the ideal exploratory study, which as the first step in developing new knowledge about a topic, leads to "suggestions of hypotheses for further study or to an idea for a conceptual framework" (Wood et al., 2006, p. 121).

As an exploratory study we are not saying that the hypotheses we suggest are true. This study was not designed to test hypotheses; it was designed to suggest concepts and hypotheses that could be tested in further research. The overwhelming amount of scholarly work, research and publications in management are hypothesis testing studies, and those who are not familiar the difference between them and hypotheses *generating* research will probably object to many aspects of the design (like the small, far from random sample being analyzed); but criteria like

these are appropriate for evaluating a typical hypothesis testing research design, they are irrelevant to an exploratory study designed to generate hypotheses. In exploratory descriptive designs where flexibility is paramount, convenience samples are common and "very few, if any, variables are under the researcher's control. They are said to be under the control of the situation—in other words, observed as they happen or as the researcher comes upon them" (Wood et al., 2006, p. 121).

Results

The interviewees reported many different outcomes of their mindfulness practice that influenced their work lives. They are described below. We call the first one *external awareness*.

External Awareness

Becoming mindful of one's thoughts, perceptions, and emotions is a process of developing *internal*, or *self*-awareness. The reports of the interviewees suggest that mindfulness not only helped them to develop internal awareness, it led many of them to also experience greater *external* awareness, by which we mean heightened awareness of information in their environment, including increased perception of detail and subtle social cues.

Mindfulness moves its practitioners' attention from concepts to a more direct perception of the sensations, emotions, thoughts and actions that underlie them. Often, when we experience something again and again, we substitute a concept of the experience for the experience itself-- the concept becomes a placeholder. Then we relate to this concept instead of our actual perceptions. We don't notice subtle changes in the thing itself, because our concepts about the world filter our direct experience of it. Mindfulness produces an unfiltered perception, which is a less mediated experience of what we see, feel, smell, and hear. It is seeing "things as they really are," free "of our expectations based on our past experiences" (Jon Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 35).

Weick and Putnam (2006) point out that "mindfulness meditation is a direct means to move toward less dependence on conceptualization" (p. 285).

For some types of work, this increased perception of one's physical and social environment is crucial. The added information, and the resulting increased responsiveness, improves face-to-face interpersonal and team interaction, and it allows a more flexible, adaptive, and spontaneous response to situations and others at work.

The musician/department chair gives a good example of this when he talked of how essential mindfulness was for his work, especially musical improvisation. He clarified this idea by presenting what Walker and Avant (2005) would call a contrary example, saying that when mindfulness was gone, "you can be really disconnected with what is happening around you. When that happens in improvised formats, the music is doomed. There is really no hope, because interaction—and thus heightened perception of detail and the ability to respond—is all-important." Then he contrasted this state of mindlessness to the "other extreme when… your perception of detail, and ability to spontaneously adapt to what everyone else is playing is keen—the improvisation becomes a meditation. You actually are aware of more information in your environment. While this experience is naturally valuable for anyone in any discipline, for the improviser—because the environment is changing—it is critical to invoke this state." He linked the increased external awareness of his environment to the ability to quickly— spontaneously--respond to others in his musical group. He even talked about making his work into a meditation.

The filmmaker said that the quality of his work had improved because of this heightened awareness of "the world… other people… my own heart. That whatever I do create will come from a more honest and deep place."

Sometimes enhanced external awareness helps people to perceive subtle, but important, aspects of subordinates' performance. In the quotation that begins this paper, the filmmaker reported that mindfulness meditation led him to perceive more subtleties in the actors he managed. Sometimes he even meditated on the set to achieve a concentrated external awareness of his environment. His heightened awareness resulted in a less filtered, more accurate perception of it. As such, his experience fit with Weick and Putnam's (2006) speculation about the applicability of mindfulness to help people avoid "conceptual moves that… develop misperceptions of themselves, their work and their context" (p. 281).

External Acceptance

Mindfulness involves observation of one's *internal* experience, accepting what one observes. A number of interviewees reported that mindfulness also led them to greater *external* acceptance--acceptance of their circumstances.

A major part of external acceptance is a lessening of the need to control one's environment. Three interviewees said that they experienced this. One reported that as a result of his mindfulness practice his desire "to control the universe" became "a tenth of what it once was." This makes sense since controlling or trying to change things is the opposite of accepting them.

The Filmmaker's Story

This theme of external acceptance is reflected in the interview with the filmmaker, who reported that he had become more accepting at work and as a result enjoyed it more.

Before he began practicing mindfulness meditation, he felt driven by ambitious goals of creating great art, and agonized over accepting jobs in less prestigious venues such as television. He recounted the kind of self-recriminating thoughts he had when considering a job in TV, "Oh, it's not art and it's not meaningful and that would diminish myself as an artist, and what are

people going to think of it? If they hear, they won't think I'm an artist." Now, when he gets a television job, he no longer agonizes over the decision and does not engage in self-recrimination when he does. He accepts that he sometimes directs TV shows, and brings a more open and inquiring approach to the job *as it is*. At work, he tries to pay attention to what he is doing in the moment instead of living in fantasies of doing something else (like being a great artist). He has become more accepting of his actual work circumstances. Here's how he puts it,

> Now I think "Hey, maybe if they pay me thirty-grand to do like three weeks' work *[interviewer laughs]* that's okay." And I haven't done things that were abhorrent. I would do a television show that's something that I believe in. I mean there's also craft, and craft is valuable. But so what if it's not art--if it's only crap? Crap is valuable. I learned stuff doing [crap] and I've worked with some very nice people and had some very nice times-- and what the hell. I would never have allowed myself that freedom a few years back. I would have agonized, asked questions, "Is this okay?" "What does it mean?" I just don't ask those questions so much anymore. I just accept that things are what they are.

He went on to explain that his old strategies for happiness failed him and so instead he engaged in "an attempt to *be* more and enjoy what is. But it has the effect that I'm much more now accepting."

> He talks about how, day-to-day, external acceptance of problems at work that are out of his control became less likely to make him upset, cranky or angry--which was important since making a movie, as he describes it, is so full of recurring disasters. He points out that filmmaking is an art you can't control. It's not something done sitting alone in your room with an easel [like] painting. Or sitting at a typewriter. It is eighty, ninety, a hundred, two hundred people--along with the technical things that break down… You can't control it all. You can't control how the actors will say everything; you can't control how the lights

and sun will look on a given day. You can't control 'Oh, it's raining, and it's supposed to be a sunny day.' You can't control it.

He manages scores of people and a lot of technology, so his situation resembles that of many other managers. He says that one way to respond to such a difficult situation is to "bemoan it and be bitchy and cranky," which is common response--"a lot of filmmakers get really angry and miserable." In contrast to this, however, his mindfulness practice has helped him learn to accept aspects of his work that are out of his control.

Experience-Based Goals

Many interviewees reported a change in their goal orientation. One said "I'm less goal, or long-term goal oriented," and another "my goal is to goal-less," and a third "I also focus much more on the day and the present than projecting onto where I'm going to be in the future."

In one interview, the idea arose that when people say a person has become less goal oriented, they assume that the person has become undisciplined and lazy. But with mindfulness practitioners, "less goal oriented" is less about laziness and more about paying closer attention to their daily experience, learning from it and defining their goals from what they then understand. This stands in contrast to developing goals by projecting some ideal state that is then sought.

Less Ambitious Goals

A large part of this outcome of mindfulness was the whittling down of highly ambitious or grandiose goals. Interviewees expressed less concern for finding meaning only through great work, and more concern for finding meaning through their actual work. Their goals became less grand—focusing less on fame and more on modest recognition, for example.

Another example comes from the filmmaker, "At this point now, I want to enjoy my work; I want to work to add something to the world if I can as I can. But I just want something to pay the rent and let me also keep working my [mindfulness] practice, and where life goes my life

will go." His goal became to "just try to be a good person and add something nice to the world." The filmmaker saw great, ambitious goals leading to misery

> You look at some of the people who are our greatest of the great artists, and their lives are horrible. And I don't want that any more. I used to be jealous. I used to think "I don't know if I have that kind of genius in me." Now I thank God, *thank God*, I'm a storyteller; I'm a craftsperson. I like what I do. I'm good enough at what I do that I certainly have some people who like what I do.

He finds his more realistic goals to be more meaningful.

> I don't feel anymore that I need to one day be Martin Scorsese or Stanley Kubrick for my life to have meaning… My father was in the arts and theater and he said, "Art makes you immortal, and that's how you make your mark, if you do it right. If you do, you know, then you will create something that will live beyond you and your life will have meaning." That completely disintegrates for me as a concept.

Greatness, and the ambitious goals that make it possible, no longer made sense to him. Asked if his meditation practice has had an effect on his goals, he replied that

> it's been sort of massive and yet subtle at the same time. But the biggest thing, it has in some ways undermined my ambition, or at least what I thought was my ambition. I'm certainly far less ambitious than I was five years ago.

He describes a sense of relief that comes when ambitious goals are gone. "People of that kind of world-changing, epic-creating genius are driven to it, no matter what. And they're taken there by the fates and God and whatever. And if you're not, then great, you're off the hook."

He pointed out, however, that he still has work goals, "I still have things that I want to do. I still work very hard to make them happen." He also acknowledged that his reduced ambition may lead to less career achievement, as it is traditionally defined. "So, it may be that my career

will be damaged by this. It may be that I will never achieve something that I might have achieved. I don't care, because I'm enjoying my life."

Selflessness

It should come as no surprise that many of the interviewees reported that mindfulness meditation resulted in more selflessness, although they usually phrased this in terms of a reduction of their egos. When asked how mindfulness meditation has changed him, one person replied, "I have an awareness now; I have cultivated the awareness of a reality beyond my own ego." Another said, "Now, very often in the course of the day, if something disappoints me or I'm getting puffed up `cause I've been complimented on something, I'll have this awareness that that's just my ego. So those kinds of things which I used to live by more, have receded in importance to me."

The department chair exemplified this trend by not by talking about having less ego, but by centering in the Self. He said that when he was working mindfully and was optimally effective, "The mind has to be not attached to some external thing, but rather centered in the core of its own Being, the Self. Not the small personalized ego-self, but something much broader and infinite"

The Dean's selflessness expressed itself as a desire to be helpful, but without recognition or accolades.

> People that came to teach under me are now running schools. One was just hired last week to run the University of *[Name Deleted]* School of Architecture. Another one is running *[Name Deleted]* State. So they're out and about, and I'm proud. I'm really hoping that people don't even remember who I was, and part of that has to do with overcoming the ego enough where I can actually accept that if it happens.

The filmmaker reported that having a smaller ego helped him become a better filmmaker—one who could recognize his mistakes (and therefore fix them). "My ego's much smaller these days. I used to feel I was the artist and I had a vision. And I think, 'Yeah, I'm the artist, I had a vision, and I can be really wrong.'"

Inner Focus

"What is considered being successful or deadbeat has more to do with how happy you are and your attitude to the world, and less to do with how much you acquire and how much money you make… those treadmills of success are getting to no particular end." This comment by an interviewee exemplifies much of what inner focus is about.

Reduced Concern for External Reward and Recognition

The interviewees talked about moving from concern about external, work-related rewards—both material rewards and recognition by others—to a focus on inner concerns, such as happiness. Many began to see the idea that material, status, and external accomplishment are of ultimate importance was an illusion.

The filmmaker expressed a similar sentiment about the reduced appeal of external recognition and material rewards. Ten years ago, he had an upending experience that motivated him to start meditating; he finished a film that he considered perfect, but instead of feeling elated, he was surprised to find that he quickly dropped into a deep depression. He said that now values inner happiness much more than social accolades or material wealth. That now,

> I'm essentially a really happy person. I have neuroses and fears and things, but I'm not inherently depressed [anymore]… I would trade that for the Oscar, or accolades, or riches. Because when I hit that wall ten years ago, it wouldn't have mattered if I had ten million dollars; it wouldn't have mattered if I'd won every award I could win.

Internal Locus of Evaluation

Interviewees commented on how after they began practicing mindfulness, the approval of others faded in importance. Another way to put it is that their locus of evaluation went from external to internal. The concept of locus of evaluation comes from the personality theory of the influential psychologist, Carl Rogers. The locus of evaluation refers to a person's source of authority or center of responsibility. People who look to themselves to decide whether a behavior has value or not have an internal locus of evaluation; those look to the expectations of society, or try "to behave in terms of values set by other people" (Rogers, Kirschenbaum, & Henderson, 1989, p. 173) have an external locus of evaluation. Rogers argued that dependence on an external locus of evaluation is a predictable indicator of psychological disturbance, and that individuals must develop an internal locus of evaluation in order to become fully functioning, autonomous individuals (Thorne, 2003).

Several interviewees showed a move away from social approval and an external locus of evaluation to an internal locus of evaluation characterized by a focus on inner concerns. One interviewee said something external, her job, was such a source of her sense of identity that "it used to be a validation of being a human being." She reported that since them she had become "much less ambitious, I worry less." Another interviewee said,

> Just, you know, through meditation and the other aspects of my [mindfulness] practice, that certain things are more real than others to me now that seemed unreal, and things that seemed real now don't seem real. Again, it's like that shift from the material world to a kind of inner world and a kind of interconnected world… My need for validation from other people has gotten a lot less, I would say.

The journalist talked about recognition and how it became less important to him.

> There's not the kind of stroking or ego-gratification, you know, for getting off the treadmill--for getting off the track as I have. So I don't regret it. I'm glad I've done it and

I know why I'm doing it. But it means I have to forgo that kind of recognition for now.

The recognition of what other people think of me is not the most important thing, is what

it comes down to.

An interesting example of a reduced concern for the opinions of others and an

increasingly inner locus of evaluation was a change in career ideas for the Dean, who aspired "to

be less than visible. Sort of like the Lone Ranger. I always thought… that it was pretty cool that

the Lone Ranger would leave town. Nobody knew who he was, but the town was better. He

didn't leave a business card or there was nothing named after him." The Dean's comment also

reflects selflessness.

Multiple Sources of Meaning

Study participants often reported moving from a focus on their jobs as their one (or

primary) source of meaning in life, to finding multiple sources of meaning.

The journalist indicated that after practicing mindfulness meditation, not only had work

itself become less important to him but that specific aspects of it also have become less

meaningful and less motivating,

> When I worked at [well-known entertainment magazine], I spent more time being out and
>
> about going to industry functions, keeping up relationships, just networking--than I do
>
> now. I don't really want to do that all the time now, because it just doesn't mean anything
>
> to me. Now, again, I don't mind doing some of it, but my life is not--I no longer am
>
> immersed in that world.

The filmmaker also talked of how much he used to depend on his work as a source of

meaning and how he no longer is so dependent.

> If somebody said to me today you'll never make another film. That's it. Your career in
>
> this field is finished. I would feel sad, 'cause I like doing it. I would not feel my life was

without meaning. I don't think five years ago I could have made that statement. I think five years I would have said, "Oh my God, my life is over! What's the point? Who am I? What am I going to do?" And I guess part of what the study and practice has done, it's separated what I do for a living from who I am, from my value as a person. Which in turn makes me feel less ambitious.

One interviewee said that mindfulness helped him to become less tightly attached to his career.

I do aspire to get to the point where I can accept each day as it comes, and invest myself wholly in what I do. But only for the sake of investing myself wholly in what I do, not for some future gain… which to me is what ambition seems all about. So I'm not sure where this is going to lead, and I can even see getting to the point where I toss stop in this business altogether in and go teach, or write a book, or go work with the kids.

His work-life balance was increased. But the concept of work-life balance does not capture the change the interviewees mentioned; it refers only to the balance between work and family life. The interviewees talked about more than just a better balance between their work lives and family lives; they say that they enjoy life as a whole more.

Sources of Meaning Other than Work

The filmmaker wasn't just dependent on his work; he felt his work had to be great for his life to have meaning. His mindfulness practice changed that and his focus on finding meaning through work alone was replaced by finding meaning through a wider range activities.

Because I can change the world just by being who I am, I have come to believe that if I smile at someone in the store it's as legitimate a way to change the world as to try to make the greatest movie ever made. Both are valuable.

Some of his other newly valued activities include leisure and experiencing nature.

When I go and look at a sunset, I feel whole and fulfilled, present, glad to have been born—in a way that maybe some movie in of itself could never do…

So much in the way that I spend my time has changed. Now I go for long hikes. Hiking has become a big part of my life. I'll take off on a weekday, wandering three-four hours in the Santa Monica Mountains, just watching birds fly. Sit on the mountaintop and meditate for half an hour, and finding joy in that. Something I just never would have allowed myself. I mean, I would have laughed if you told me five or six years ago I would do that. I mean my wife and I had never gone on vacation together. I'd never leave town. What's going to happen, what if something happened, what if I miss something, you know. And now we get into the car and drive off to Zion and hike around in the park and it's just - So every part of my life has changed.

Other interviewees reported that a similar shift away from workaholic dependence on work as their sole source of meaning in life. One interviewee put it this way; he said that he does "not… see work as the end-all, be-all. You've got to have a life! There's so many other things worth doing."

Level-Headedness

The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines level-headed as "Having a 'level' head; mentally well-balanced or cool. Hence *level-headedness*." But the *Encarta World English Dictionary* adds something important when it defines level-headed as "remaining rational and fully in control in difficult situations or emergencies." Combining these two definitions gives us the most appropriate one for this study—mentally well balanced, cool, rational, and in control in difficult situations or emergencies. Level-headedness is potentially one of the most important outcomes of mindfulness for the workplace--especially for leaders. The equanimity that comes

from mindfulness practice allows many practitioners to cope with difficult, stressful situations, sometimes extremely stressful situations.

The investments manager described how, when the stock market goes down and it affects her work, she no longer "gets sucked into that… I used to get scared… [But] the spiritual just kept me straight." She described how mindfulness helped her to maintain equanimity when facing a stressful situation where clients got upset. She told of a time "when the market went down on Friday, 233 points… and clients are calling and saying 'What are you doing?' and all of that." She responded with mindful equanimity, reassuring her clients, "I'm there to say 'You know, this is part of a cyclical market.'" She said that she knew the fall in stock prices was bad and that her clients were upset, "but I'm not going to jump out of a window over it." She focused on her experience in the present. "I'm sitting at my desk; I'm hearing a voice over the telephone." She remained level-headed and didn't allow herself to get overwhelmed by her clients' panic.

Another interviewee also said that mindfulness had helped her to become more level-headedness, saying, "I don't get freaked with the difficult stuff anymore… now when life's difficult; that's okay. It's still difficult; it's just okay that it's difficult."

The film director talked about how his mindfulness practice helped him to remain calm in the face of disaster. He said that he worked hard to bring the values of his mindfulness practice to his work setting by

> Never yelling. Deal with problems in a calm way, with a sense of humor. When you make a movie, they're sort of controlled accident. Every day there are disasters--sets fall down, people don't show up, the film gets scratched.

Responding to stressors in the work environment with some equanimity will make it easier to cope with them (Kabat-Zinn quoted in Goleman, 1997). Weick and Putnam (2006) point out the

importance of one of the aspects of mindfulness--present-centeredness--when it comes to coping with a difficult sitution, "To bounce back from a disruption involves vivid attention to whatever is at hand in an effort to ascertain how it can be cobbled together to resume whatever was interrupted" (p. 282).

The research literature supports interviewees' reports of being composed, focused and effective in demanding situations, pointing out that mindfulness helps people to act effectively under high degrees of stress (Weissbecker et al., 2002). Their grace under pressure is what the research literature on mindfulness calls non-anxious presence (Strand, 2006).

Challenge

The research on stress shows that a person's ability to withstand or manage the negative effects of stress can be increased through psychological hardiness. Psychological hardiness has three aspects, one of which is "feeling challenged by new experiences rather than viewing change as a threat to security and comfort" (Whetten & Cameron, 2007). Many interviewees reported that mindfulness helped them to deal with difficult situations as challenges instead of threats.

One example of a person who now experiences workplace problems as more of a challenge than a threat is the filmmaker. He said that some people in his situation cope with difficulties in his line of work by saying, "'Fuck everything, I'm quitting. I'm going to my trailer and drink for three hours.' [This is] not unheard of behavior on a movie set." When faced with difficulties, however, he tried to

> make an adventure of this, you know. What goes wrong? How can we turn it into
> something good? How can we turn the accidents into happy accidents? "Okay, the set fell
> down. Well, what can we do to—well the set looks kind of good half fallen down. What
> are we going to do with that?"

He mentioned how one particular aspect of mindfulness, equanimity, helped him to view difficulties at work as challenges.

> Every day is a disaster, so people approach it as a disaster. So to be able to [instead] approach those disasters with a sense of equanimity--with a half smile. "OK. Well look what happened. What do we do? Do we do A? Do we do B? Do we do C? Anyone have any ideas?"

He goes on to say how much better that approach was to the alternative, which was that "they hear me [panic and exclaim things like] 'Oh, my God, the film is scratched!'"

Since psychological hardiness has been shown to help people avoid the negative effects of stress, mindfulness' help in developing one of its aspects—the ability to see difficulties as challenges instead of threats—may be one reason that many studies have shown that mindfulness meditation reduces the negative results of stress (J. Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995; J. D. Teasdale, 1999; John D. Teasdale, Segal, & Williams, 1995) Teasdale, Segal, Williams, Ridgeway, Soulsby, & Lau, 2000).

Job Enjoyment

A common comment in the interviews was that mindfulness helped the interviewees to enjoy their work, and to be happier in general. We were originally tempted to say that job satisfaction had been increased, but after looking at the literature on job satisfaction, we realized that it was a complex concept that was defined in different ways. Sometimes the enjoyment of work was only one of nine properties of the concept and other times enjoyment of work wasn't even mentioned. So we went with the narrower, more precise idea of job enjoyment.

One interviewee put it plainly when he said that before he began mindfulness meditation, he 'had a lot of pain' but that now he was "very happy." The filmmaker talked about how he now comes "to the set with a smile every day" and how he is "in a good mood." Another interviewee

said that because of mindfulness practice, he was now enjoying his life. And another interviewee had this to say about how his attitude towards work changed after taking up mindfulness. "It's lots of fun. It gets to be more fun. *Q: A more enjoyable process.* A: Absolutely. And if it's more enjoyable for me, it's going to be more enjoyable for the people around me."

Adaptability

"You're able to be infinitely flexible, and then find that opening at the right time." Adaptability is the ability to be "able to adjust easily to changes and new conditions; capable of being modified to suit different purposes or conditions" according to the *Encarta World English Dictionary*. Some interviewees reported that their mindfulness practice made them more adaptable.

The filmmaker found that mindfulness helped him to be more adaptable when things didn't go exactly as he planned.

> And I can be excited about what the actors are doing, instead of getting into that trap that directors usually fall into--"Oh, it isn't just the way I want it to be" or "I had this dream of it being a certain way and it's different. " I tend to celebrate the differences. Of course, it's that way in my head. These are human beings creating something; it's not going to be what's in my head that will make it better. And I'm much more able to be excited when an actor creates something and at least be very open to 'maybe it's better than what I thought.' And if it isn't, maybe they'll get my way too. But also that spirit of compromise-- that spirit of let's do it once their way and once my way. And sometimes they were right.

The department chair, who is also a jazz musician, pointed out how when performing certain tasks, such as musical improvisation, the adaptability provided by mindfulness is

essential. He even said that when the "ability to spontaneously adapt to what everyone else has played is keen--the improvisation becomes a meditation."

He said that mindfulness made him more creative, "the meditative experience is very, very valuable in this way, and it also enables musicians to not be so attached to the conditioned kinds of patterns that everyone brings to their respective disciplines." Kabat-Zinn (1990) echoes that sentiment when he points out that mindfulness "allows us to be receptive to new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in the rut of our own expertise, which often thinks it knows more than it does. No moment is the same as any other. Each is unique and contains unique possibilities." The department chair/musician describes

> a state of mindfulness [as one where] the mind has to be not attached to some external
>
> thing… at that point and time, you're aware of your environment but you're free from it.
>
> You're not bound by, say, in this situation, the commentary happening around you and
>
> sometimes directed at you. Yet at the same time, you're aware of that but you are
>
> grounded in something that is transcendent of that. So you're able to be infinitely flexible
>
> and then to find that opening at the right time.

Mindfulness gave him more freedom to act in a way that was optimally responsive to his environment. Adaptability may be aided by external awareness. People may be better able to "adjust easily to changes and new conditions" if they perceive more of those changes and subtle aspects of those conditions.

Interpersonal Relations

Building supportive work relationships is an important managerial competency (Whetten & Cameron, 2007), and many of the interviewees reported that their mindfulness practice improved their relations with others at work. For example, the department chair said that

one of the most frequent testimonies I get from students is that when they undertake a

regular meditation practice, they actually can feel some effects during the day. When they

meditate in the morning, they feel more mental clarity, more flow and ease in their

interpersonal reactions and relationships,

The filmmaker was more specific about the way that his mindfulness practice improved

the way he related to others at work, saying that he became more loving, more compassionate,

calmer, and less blaming.

I deal with my crews, my actors… with a kind of joy and love and compassion. I think

I've always had some… but I think it's been much more fed by this [meditation practice].

The last one [movie] was a really fabulous experience; we all had a wonderful time, and

there was a real sense of community. I tried very hard, too. The director is the one setting

that up; you're the one to establish the tone. And I made a real conscious effort to bring

the values that I'm working on in my [mindfulness] practice onto the movie set…

I think a part of it is just coming to the set with a smile every day. You know, be

in a good mood. Which, again, I think, as a director affects everybody. Everybody is

looking to you to take their cue. So I walk on the set in the morning and I'm smiling,

saying hi to everybody, asking how their families are. Kind of rechecking with

everybody, and making people feel like they're part of the family. That energy really

starts the whole set to feel like that.

He went on to say that his relations with others at work also became more open. This increased

openness to others and their ideas reflected not only an improvement in his relations with others,

but also reduced egotism, greater acceptance, a reduced need for control, and adaptability. "I was

able to start communicating about some things that I might have kept inside before. I thought of

myself as a very honest, out-there person. But what I started to realize was, no, I kept a lot of things to myself."

Mindfulness helped some interviewees with a particularly difficult aspect of interpersonal relations--interpersonal conflict. This is important because conflict management is a significant management competency (Goleman, 1998; Whetten & Cameron, 2007). The filmmaker reported that mindfulness made him more open to compromise. He said that when things went wrong, he was not antagonistic—calm, not yelling.

The improvement in conflict management is not surprising; the research shows that mindfulness training helped reduce conflict in romantic relationships (Hayes, Follette, & Linehan, 2004); that mindfulness increased cooperation (Cloninger, 2006); that mindfulness training reduced aggression (Birnbaum, 2005); and that it lessened the grip of rigid, mindless automatic behavior patterns that aggravate conflict (Dumas, 2005). The research is mixed with regards to the question of whether mindfulness increases empathy (Beddoe & Murphy, 2004; Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998), but it has been mentioned so many times in the literature that we were surprised that empathy was not mentioned by the interviewees.

Conclusion

We started by saying that the goal of this exploratory study was to develop some hypotheses that could be tested in future research or to suggest a conceptual framework. We developed some hypotheses but did not see how the concepts fit together into a conceptual framework. Table one summarizes the effects of mindfulness in the workplace reported by the interviewees in this study.

Insert Table 1 around here

Based on our analysis of the interviews, we hypothesize that, when compared with people who do not practice mindfulness, persons who practice mindfulness:

(1)　Have more external awareness at work,

(2)　Are more accepting of their work situation (external acceptance),

(3)　Have more modest, realistic work goals,

(4)　Are more selfless at work,

(5)　Are less concerned with material acquisition and wealth (inner focus),

(6)　Have a more internal locus of evaluation (inner focus)

(7)　Are more likely to derive meaning in life from sources other than just work (multiple sources of meaning),

(8)　Are better able to cope and remain calm in difficult work situations (level headed),

(9)　Are more likely to experience work difficulties as challenges than threats,

(10)　Enjoy their work more,

(11)　Are more adaptable at work, and

(12)　Have more positive interpersonal relations at work.

Thinking about directions for future research about mindfulness in the workplace, an obvious next step would be to test the hypotheses suggested here.

Other directions also come to mind. The interviews were unstructured, so follow up structured interviews might be useful for clarifying some of the ideas and relationships that were implied but not described in detail; and for investigating outcomes that seemed likely but weren't mentioned. We were surprised, for example, that no one mentioned increased self-awareness, which seemed a likely outcome of mindfulness and is a major managerial competency (Goleman, 1998; Whetten & Cameron, 2007). Finally, we have suggested concepts to explain the outcomes

of mindfulness but have not presented a framework that explains the links between these

concepts. Developing that would be an important theoretical task.

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Table 1.

Reported Changes from Mindfulness Practice at Work

Before Mindfulness	After Mindfulness
Values	
Values the material	Values the spiritual and psychological
Values fame, recognition, and the opinions of others; external locus of evaluation	Values happiness; internal locus of evaluation
Life meaning derived from work alone	Life meaning derived from multiple activities
Egotistical values	Selfless values
Interaction With the Work Environment	
Experiences concepts of the world	Direct experience of the world
Control of Environment	Acceptance of environment
Ambitious, idealized, goals based in fantasy	Present-centered, modest goals based in experience
Driven and unhappy with work	Enjoys work
Response to Difficulties in the Work Environment	
Difficulties seen as threats	Difficulties seen as challenges
Strong negative emotional response	Level-headed emotional response
Rigid, inflexible	Adaptable, flexible
Interpersonal Relations at Work	
Generally more negative	Overall more positive