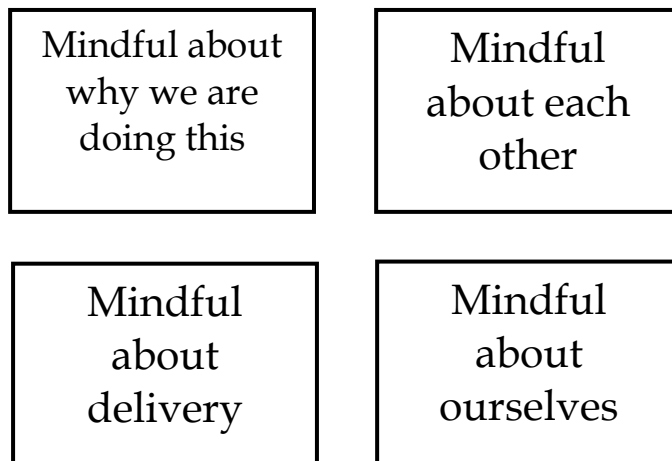


5 What might a mindful organisation look like?

Before launching into how we implement this change, it might be worth looking at a vision of what your organisation might look like if it were to become mindful. As I've said, for me this had to be pragmatic and it had to improve delivery. I devised the model below to try and show board-level leaders how a mindful organisation might be different in practice.



The four quadrants are important because they demonstrate balance. Employers and bosses have every justifiable reason to expect delivery, most of us want to deliver. Evidence suggests that delivery can be supported by mindfulness, but there may well be a misconception that mindfulness is purely about well-being or purely about bringing our attention to the ethereal and that mindfulness is all a bit esoteric.

Enabling people to improve their well-being improves delivery. But being clear that mindfulness is about delivery on its own merits as well as well-being, is important. If we are inclined to try and introduce mindfulness to our workplace, it helps makes it clear that we are after balance and that this approach can be applied to help well people deliver more effectively, as well as support those of us who are struggling.

In addition to showing that we are after balance and to demonstrate the practical nature of mindfulness, the model draws attention to the significant benefits mindfulness can have for well people. This set of tools need not be the exclusive preserve of those who are recovering from burnout. The gym can help you stay fit and keep you getting into your slim-fit jeans, it is not just there to help you lose the weight and get back into them. It is up to us how we use these tools and they can be made available to all.

Mindful about why we are doing this

It is easy to lose track of why we started to do something. This is true in our personal lives as well as in our professional lives. In large projects and programmes, the immediate pressure to hit a particular deadline or prepare for a board meeting can routinely blot out the reason that the project or programme was established. Most activities, whether they are a specific project or programme or another type of organisation, have a clear reason to exist. There is a defined aim. It could be to make money, to save money, to deliver services or build a

structure. Whatever the activity, most will start with a purpose. If we lose track of why we are doing something, the impact can be catastrophic. We can start to invest our energies in ways that do not help achieve the goal, we can lose sight of the overall target delivery date, while focussing on an immediate one, we can even end up delivering the wrong thing.

That's why it was important for me, as a programme leader, to include being mindful of why we are doing this activity as part of the model. We have to take a step back from time to time to reflect on what was the original mission, are we doing the right things to achieve that mission and is it still the right mission. If we do this, we are able to decide whether the mission is still relevant or whether we should be doing something different. We should be able to apply our resources to the most effective actions and determine whether we are on track and take action to get back on track, if we are not.

Part of this links to the value of thinking of programme management as a mindful activity and I will explore this further later, but there is also something here about being able to be dispassionate, and to detach emotionally from some activities. Leaders of projects and programmes or organisations and those working in any activity can get enormously attached to an activity. Having invested skills and time on a course of action, it is entirely natural to not want it to be stopped or told that what you are doing is wrong or needs to be adjusted. This sense of emotional attachment, coupled with the personal threat implicit in our current occupation being brought to an end or significantly changed, can cause any of us to start to defend activities that are not actually productive or effective. Bringing our attention to the vision behind the activity and away from our emotional attachment to the current activity, is a powerful way to help us make dispassionate decisions based on evidence and empower us to change direction or even stop an activity and start doing something new.

Mindful about delivery

This is another point about balance and the practical nature of mindfulness. When any of us are asked to complete tasks, we may struggle to stay focussed. If we are excited by the task and absolutely believe in it, then it may be easier, but even then the prospect of getting home and back to the box set or some other more potent personal distraction, can take our attention away. If the task is tedious, or if we are doing it without conviction, focus can be even more illusive.

Mindfulness can simply help ourselves and our teams to more effectively choose where our attention is placed. Regular mindfulness practice, like regular attendance at the gym, can just improve our ability to focus and this can help us to be more effective.

Moving from the individual to the team perspective, one of the most challenging things for a programme manager is to keep people focussed on the plan. New instructions can arrive from senior sources, or team members get distracted by other requests. Once an activity and a plan has been agreed, success depends on taking the actions necessary to deliver the plan. Bringing our attention to what has to happen next and doing that work.

This does not contradict the earlier point about being willing to change direction. Plans are there to change, but that choice to flex or change the plan needs to be a conscious one. It requires dispassionate attention and on a day-to-day basis teams need to be clear on what needs to be done next and if that has changed, what the new tasks are. If not, the end goal will not be delivered. It is worth considering that the more pressured the environment, the quicker priorities or activities might change and the more important dispassionate, conscious decision making becomes.

Mindful about each other

In the most intense environments, it is very easy to lose sight of the people who are right next to you. If people are struggling with exhaustion or stress they may not even see it themselves. Team members may think they are being super-diligent, or may fear the consequences of admitting they are at the end of their tether. The best teams that I have worked in, are the ones where people, regardless of seniority, feel able to say: “are you OK?”.

The power of looking out for each other can be enormous. Not only can it build the sense of belonging and engagement in the team, it can avoid burnout for team members with the resultant loss in productivity as replacements or interim solutions are sought.

But, to be able to effectively look out for our colleagues we have to bring our attention to their well-being. This can be genuinely hard as we are often wrapped up in our own work and personal lives and find it hard enough to consider how we ourselves are doing.

We may also have to bring our attention to the well-being of someone with whom we don't particularly get along. But going back to my preferred definition for mindfulness – *non-judgmental, present moment awareness* – if we are, in that moment, aware that someone is struggling and we can park our own judgement about that person, we may be able to either engage with them or get someone else to do so and help them avoid burning out or needing time away. This in turn helps us as a team member.

Mindful about ourselves

The oxygen mask analogy will be familiar to many of you, but I've found it an incredibly graphic and powerful way to remind myself that if I am going to help other people, I have to look after myself first. For anyone not familiar, it is simply the advice that you may have received on any plane before take-off. In the unlikely event that the oxygen masks come down, please put the mask on yourself, before you attempt to help anyone else, including your child. For a long time, this was anathema to me. Both as a member of a team, and even more so as a leader, I felt obligated to stay until the end, to look after those in my command, and felt negligent if I stepped away. The idea of putting others before ourselves can be deeply ingrained and in and of itself it is a great sentiment, but it is only possible if we have the energy and capacity to give to other people. If we are burned-out or exhausted, we will be of no help to our colleagues or the organisation as a whole let alone those people in our personal life. In essence, looking after yourself can be a selfless act if it means that you are ready and able to support those around you.

This doesn't mean that there aren't plenty of times when practically, pragmatically, we have to "dig deep" and stay late, or go to that meeting that we were dreading, but if we do these things with a plan to make that sustainable, then we may be present in the team for longer and able to do those extra tough things without needing periods of time away to recharge.