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Mindful Workplace Community

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The Role of Mindfulness in Team Work and Collaboration

☐ As social beings, we are more motivated when we feel part of a team.
☐ In the knowledge economy, teamwork is the central driver of value creation.
☐ Team members have diverse emotional needs; understanding each other's needs- and our own – can foster trust and collaboration.
☐ Mindfulness help us cultivate connection and understanding at work. It supports perspective-taking and psychological safety.

Collaborative Overload…?

We're spending more time working in teams than ever before. [According to a study by The Harvard Business Review](#) the time managers and employees spend on team activities has blown out by 50 percent or more over the past two decades. On top of that, at many companies more than three-quarters of an employee's day is spent communicating with colleagues.

But is this collaboration effective?

When spending most of their time in meetings or answering colleagues' requests, people have little time for all the critical work they must complete on their own. Research done across more than 300 organizations shows in most cases, 20% to 35% of value-added collaborations come from only 3% to 5% of employees.

How can we increase work efficiency then and use mindfulness for support?

To answer this question, let's have a look at the outcomes of two key research studies – Google's project Aristotle and David Rock's SCARF model.

Google:
The Secret of Building a Perfect team

Google did an extensive study on what makes teams perform. Over two years they conducted 200+ interviews with their employees and looked at more than 250 attributes of 180+ active Google teams. They asked themselves: "What makes a Google team effective". They initially thought it would be things like diversity, or manager's influence or personality mix, but in fact, none of them made any real difference. The conclusion of Google's research was:

> *"Who is on a team matters less than how the team members interact, structure their work, and view their contributions."*

The most important aspect of a team that made them succeed was the environment that promoted and sustained psychological safety, which according to Amy C. Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management is *"a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking."*

Two Key Components of Psychological Safety

A group of individuals need to have psychological safety so they can become a team. The Google researchers found that individuals on teams with

higher psychological safety are less likely to leave Google, they're more likely to harness the power of diverse ideas from their teammates, they bring in more revenue, and they're rated as effective twice as often by executives.

Driving psychological safety are:

☐ **Equality of airtime** – equality in conversational-turn taking, everyone speaks roughly the same amount during a meeting;

"If one member or a small group dominated the conversations, the collective intelligence declined".

Team members thrived when they felt they could speak up confidently bringing their full self to work or could try new things and discuss possibilities openly.

☐ **Ostentatious listening** – when members of a team demonstrate they are actively listening.

It's all about focus – listening intently to every word and nuance in the conversation. You try to ignore your inner dialogue (narrative network) which distracts you from truly listening. You feel the flow of the conversation and focus on what is really said. You interpret the words in the context of the other person. You show sensitivity to feelings and needs of the other person. You repeat what has just been said and make eye contact. You can even be aware of the energy between you and others. Be aware of the environment without decreasing the quality of the conversation.

Five key dynamics set successful teams apart from the rest:

1. **Psychological safety**: Can we take risks without feeling insecure or embarrassed?
2. **Dependability**: Can we count on each other to do high quality work on time?
3. **Structure and clarity**: Are goals, roles, and execution plans clear?
4. **Meaning of work**: Is our work personally important for all of us?
5. **Impact of work**: Do we fundamentally believe that the work we're doing matters?

Mindfulness as a Core Driver of Psychological Safety

Developing all these dynamics is a learning process. And there are probably at least a few ways this can be achieved. As a follow-up to their research Google developed what they called a [tool to help teams determine their own needs](#) and a [tool to foster psychological safety](#). Let's have a look at Google's findings from the mindfulness angle, particularly how mindfulness helps in building psychological safety and the other four dynamics needed to make a successful team.

☐ **Mindfulness teaches non-judgment**. Non-judgment of ourselves and non-judgment of others. This does not mean that we are not allowed to have an opinion but rather we are not to judge ourselves or others as bad people for having an opinion or preference. Non- judgment also means that when things do not turn out optimally, we refrain from judging ourselves or others as failures. We then can shift our stance from failure to feedback. What can we learn from this situation in order to move forward?

☐ **Mindfulness also teaches acceptance**. Acceptance of what is or has happened, acceptance of vulnerability of others. Acceptance is not having to like everything or be passive but rather accept what actually is and act with awareness. Acceptance releases from the bondage of grasping and averting and desperately trying to control something we cannot. When we release these grasping and averting tendencies, we open ourselves up trusting ourselves and our abilities. We can then bring this trust onto the relationships with others.

☐ **Mindfulness helps us build trust amongst team members**. Compassion and perspective taking meditation (see exercise 3 below) practices build skills that allow us to maintain a trusting mindset even in the face of challenges.

☐ **Mindfulness trains the ability to notice our own mental states and those of the people around us**. We see more, we feel more, we are more present. Thus, attending to people's needs, building trust and psychological safety.

☐ **Mindfulness also teaches how to listen actively and be fully present with our team members during the conversations**. Ostentatious listening is in fact listening mindfully, understanding, noticing cues, recognizing people's feelings.

☐ **Mindfulness helps building inclusive teams**. Being mindful and fully

present helps us to ensure that there is equality of airtime for all the team members.

In summary, mindfulness is about creating an environment and office culture where team members consistently feel supported and have the resources and time they need to prioritize their tasks, build healthy collaborations, and have open and positive communications.

SCARF Model:
We each have different social needs and motivations

Consciously or not, every time we interact with someone, we're meeting some of their social needs and perhaps depriving them of others. That is, we're using language and engaging in behavior that either uplifts and motivates people, or causes them to withdraw or shut down.

When it comes to workplace interactions, psychology research makes it clear that we can [maximize engagement](#) and [drive lasting performance](#) when we help our team members meet one another's needs. But which needs should we focus on and how?

Over a decade ago, mindfulness and brain researcher David Rock identified five such domains in humans' social experience. They include **Status**, **Certainty**, **Autonomy**, **Relatedness**, and **Fairness**. These domains make up [The SCARF® Model.](#) If we experience a loss of status, certainty or autonomy; if we feel that we haven't been included or that something is unfair, we see it as a type of threat that we need to be

protected from. The thinking part of the brain shuts down and we can lose perspective, judgement and ultimately disengage, which impacts on our performance. The goal of using the SCARF model is to minimize the threat response and maximize positive engaged states of mind to enhance collaboration with others.

Let's take a look at each of the SCARF areas in more detail:

Status

If status is one of your strongest drivers, you are naturally competitive. You love winning but hate coming second. It might be having the highest sales record, or the owning the latest technology or throwing the most exuberant party that drives you. It could be beating your personal best. Whatever it is, being 'top' is key. It's important to you to feel highly respected in the workplace.

Certainty

When you are sensitive to certainty, you like things planned well in advance and you don't like last minute changes. You have a natural affinity with systems and processes. You are a "list person" and often find yourself the organizer in social and work situations.

Autonomy

When autonomy is important, you like being in the driver's seat. You like calling the shots and having a feeling of choice when it comes to the work you do.

Relatedness

If relatedness is one of your strongest drivers, you always make the effort socially and hate it when others don't. You find it easy to connect with others and love doing things that make others feel important and special.

Fairness

If fairness is important to you, you are happy to be beaten by a better player but hate someone who cheats the system. People who jump the queue really get under your skin, but you'll sign up to a roster that ensures everyone contributes equally.

From Threat to Compassion

So SCARF reminds us that we are all different, which means we will have different responses to a situation. What might energize and engage one person, might alienate and cause another to shut down. It can definitely help us better understand the social behavior of those around us.

How does mindfulness help with that?

Mindfulness helps us cultivate understanding at work and supports perspective-taking. Taking the perspective of others cultivates understanding and insight and opens up options. When we tune into others, we can experience their point of view and from that see joint solutions. The practice that is particularly helpful in fostering collaboration and understanding is compassion practice.

Using the SCARF model can help us move from anger to compassion for those with whom we disagree, as well as to compassion for ourselves. And it does not mean that we agree with their opinion. As we know from previous issues, we don't have to agree with a person to feel compassion toward them. Offering compassion to ourselves and others calms the brain and the body. It can bring us out of a hyper-aroused state where we can't think clearly. And using the SCARF model can help us understand why we might disagree with others and they with us.

The next time you see others as different from yourself or when you put others above or below you, try using the following "Just like me…" compassion meditation.

Exercise 1: Compassion practice *"Just like me…"*

Sit comfortably in a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. Take a few breaths and when you are ready bring to mind a person with whom you are experiencing some difficulty. Start repeating mentally or out loud phrases such as:

Just like me, this person wants to matter.
Just like me, this person wants life
to be normal again. Just like me,
this person feels pain when they are
left out. Just like me, this person
has suffered.
Just like me, this person is uncertain of the future.

Just like me, this person sees me as a threat
to their sense of control. Just like me, this
person has felt unloved.
Just like me, this person
wants choices. Just like
me, this person wants to
belong.
Just like me, this person looks for safe social connections.
Just like me, this person feels threatened by
what they don't understand. Just like me, this
person feels things aren't fair.

Tip: You can think of your own phrases to meet your needs best in your current situation.

Take a few deeper breaths and when you feel ready, bring that person to your mind again and start repeating mentally or out loud phrases such as, for example:

May you be happy.
May you be free from pain
and suffering. May you feel
loved.
May you feel
safe. May
you…

Exercise 2: Reflecting on needs

a) Think of a challenging discussion or meeting in which you recently took part
b) How did you experience it? What did you feel?
c) How would you explain your feelings according to your needs? SCARF categories?
d) What might you have missed? Could you articulate this?
e) What did others miss? What could you do for them?

Exercise 3: Practicing a perspective changing

Step 1: Person A describes a difficult situation they experienced recently with someone else. Feel free to get worked up about it.

Person B listens mindfully

Step 2: Switch Roles (B speaks on the same

topic, A listens) Step 4: Perspective shift

Person A switches perspective. Describe the situation from the point of view of the person you were talking about

☐ What might their situation be?
☐ How many tasks/challenges might they facing?
☐ What do they need to do?
☐ What can you do to improve their situation?

Step 5: Switch roles
Step 6: Reflection

☐ What did you notice in the process?
☐ What shifted for you? Any insights?

Exercise 4: Self-assessment questionnaire

If you would like to find out what are your individual social motivations, you can complete this very short self-assessment questionnaire, using the Neuroleadership Institute's SCARF® Model.

Seeing your own results may help you better understand the social reactions of yourself and others and mindfully choose how you want to behave.

Complete the self-assessment questionnaire [here.](here)

Practice

Tips for boosting resilience and fostering teamwork and collaboration while working from home

Tips	Habits
Check-in	Start meetings, discussions and large gatherings with a check-in. Either as a group, or in breakouts.
Check-out	End meetings, discussions, presentations with a check-out. How do we feel after this meeting etc. – was it helpful for us? What did we miss? What did we learn?
Stress level check	Invite people to stand and with their hands signal their personal and then their work stress level – from low to high. Take a moment to really look at each of your stress levels as a team. Acknowledge it by summarizing it and perhaps comparing it to

	the previous week.
Mindful moment – 2 mins to arrive	Integrate a real moment of checking in and settling into meetings. And don't make it a dead ritual – discuss whether it helped or not.
Appreciating the positive	Start the content part of the agenda with appreciating what has gone well, what has been achieved. Spend some fixed amount of time on this, do not let the urgent or the problematic issues drown everything else out. Allow yourself to appreciate the massive changes you have all mastered recently.
Random acts of kindness	One day a week where everyone should perform three random acts of kindness to colleagues or other people. Take a moment to share this.
5 minutes pain change	People very often tend to complain, which causes emotional imbalance. Since it is true that there is also pain within a business context allow for this to be shared: offer these discussions on purpose but limit it to exactly 5 minutes from time to time.
Good mood backgrounds	Ask everyone to select a beautiful nature background and have it on all meeting long. You will be surprised how much looking into nature for the whole meeting will affect everyone's mood.

Other practices and exercises to foster teamwork and collaboration:

Journaling

Discover your own ideas/ways to be more mindful as a team member and to contribute to creating a more mindful team no matter if you are a leader or team member:
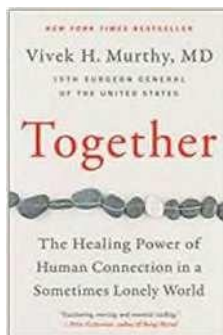
- ☐ *I depend on others for…*
- ☐ *Others depend on me for…*
- ☐ *I am impacting other people (in my team) by …*
- ☐ *To foster collaboration with others I will…*

Recommended Reading

Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World
by Vivek H Murthy M.D

The *New York Times* Bestseller, Murphy's book is about the importance of human connection, the hidden impact of loneliness on our health, and the social power of community.

Humans are social creatures: In this simple and obvious fact lies both the problem and the solution to the current crisis of loneliness. In his groundbreaking book, the 19th surgeon general of the United States Dr. Vivek Murthy makes a case for loneliness as a public health concern. Loneliness, he argues, is affecting not only our health, but also how our children experience school, how we perform in the workplace, and the sense of division and polarization in our society.

But, at the center of our loneliness is our innate desire to connect. We have evolved to participate in community, to forge lasting bonds with others, to help one another, and to share life experiences. We are, simply, better together.

The four key strategies he shares in his book will help us not only to weather this crisis, but also to heal our social world far into the future

Resources and Further Reading

TED Talk: [Building a psychologically safe workplace](#), Amy Edmondson, TEDxHGSE

[The five keys to a successful Google team](#), Google rework, Julia Rozovsky, November 17, 2015

[What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team](#), The New York Times Magazine, Charles Duhigg, February 25, 2016

[Charles Duhigg Asks: What Makes a Great Team?,](#) Charles Duhigg

[Collaborative Overload,](#) HBR, Rob Cross, Reb Rebele, and Adam Grant, January–February 2016

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