



# Mindfulness Meditation as an On-The-Spot Workplace Intervention<sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 6 May 2016

Received in revised form 28 January 2017

Accepted 31 January 2017

Available online 23 February 2017

### Keywords:

Mindfulness

Meditation

Temporal focus

Affect

Threat

Intervention

## ABSTRACT

This article introduces the concept of mindfulness meditation as an on-the-spot intervention to be used in specific workplace situations. It presents a model of when, why, and how on-the-spot mindfulness meditation is likely to be helpful or harmful for aspects of job performance. The article begins with a brief review of the mindfulness literature and a rationale for why mindfulness could be used on-the-spot in the workplace. It then delineates consequences of on-the-spot mindfulness interventions on four aspects of job performance - escalation of commitment, counterproductive work behaviors, negotiation performance, and motivation to achieve goals. The article closes with three necessary conditions for an on-the-spot mindfulness intervention to be effectively used, as well as suggestions for how organizations, managers, and employees can facilitate the fulfillment of these necessary conditions. Possible negative consequences of mindfulness and which types of meditation to use are considered. Taken together, these arguments deepen our understanding of state mindfulness and introduce a new manner in which mindfulness can be used in the workplace.

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## 1. Introduction

Many employees have turned to mindfulness meditation in order to reduce and deal with stressors they face at work. Fortune 500 corporations such as Google, Ford, Intel, and General Mills have started mindfulness-based training programs for their employees (Hayes, 2014; Hughlett, 2013; Pinsker, 2015; Tan, 2012). Corporate CEOs have spoken publicly about the benefits they experienced by practicing meditation (Carlock, 2014; Lockhart & Hicken, 2012). The Potential Project, a

company which specializes in corporate mindfulness trainings, now has offices in most major cities throughout the world (Bigelow, 2014).

Mindfulness meditation is a practice which cultivates mindfulness, a state of consciousness in which people have present awareness and nonjudgmental acceptance of internal and external experience (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Dane, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; for other definitions of mindfulness, see Sutcliffe, Vogus, & Dane, 2016; for relevant methodologies, see Choi & Leroy, 2015). Present awareness and nonjudgmental acceptance have been thought of as two separate factors (Cardaciotto, Herbert, Forman, Moitra, & Farrow, 2008). The purpose of this article is to introduce the concept of an *on-the-spot mindfulness intervention*, in which an individual induces a state of mindfulness when it is needed in a specific workplace situation. On-the-spot mindfulness interventions, relative to long-term mindfulness training interventions, may have the benefits of costing less time and money, as well as allowing people to be less mindful in situations when mindfulness is actually counterproductive.

Although scholars in industrial-organizational psychology and organizational behavior have begun to conduct research on mindfulness meditation (e.g., Hülshager et al., 2014; Long & Christian, 2015) and other mindfulness concepts (e.g., Weick & Putnam, 2006; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), the quick adoption of mindfulness practices is outpacing the research on the topic. Having an unclear understanding of the consequences of mindfulness could lead to overprescription and misuse (Grant, 2015; North, 2014).

However, it is also possible that mindfulness is being used too rarely. Many people are miserable at work, engage in unproductive forms of conflict, and have a great deal of trouble cutting their losses and admitting when they are wrong. If cultivating mindfulness on-the-spot helps

<sup>☆</sup> I acknowledge support from FCT – Portuguese Foundation of Science and Technology (project “UID/GES/00407/2013”), a Católica-Lisbon SBE research grant, the INSEAD R&D Committee, and the INSEAD-Wharton Alliance. For feedback on previous drafts, I am grateful to Sigal Barsade, Wilson Bastos, Rachel Hee Seo Hafenbrack, Quy Huy, Philippe Jacquart, Zoe Kinias, Ravi Kudesia, Jackson Lu, Shefali Patil, Jennifer Petriglieri, Luis Filipe Roxo, Álvaro San Martín, Francesco Sguera, Stefan Thau, Sarah Wittman, Andy Yap, Editor-in-Chief Naveen Donthu, and one anonymous reviewer who went well above and beyond the call of duty. For impactful conversations, I thank Justin Berg, Lucille Beverly, Dan Cable, Yann Cornil, Horacio Falcão, Zen Goh, Adam Grant, Charles Hafenbrack, Cindy Hafenbrack, Matt Hafenbrack, Ivona Hideg, Linda Hoyt, Lynn Isabella, Adam Kay, Will Maddux, Amer Madi, Jean-François Manzoni, Pooja Mishra, Jared Nai, Jay Narayanan, Laura Noval, Burak Oç, David Patient, Hayagreeva Rao, Jochen Reb, Marian Ruderman, Samantha Sim, Isabelle Solal, Kenneth Tai, Nico Thornley, Jutta Tobias, Dan Turban, Kathleen Vohs, Batia Wiesenfeld, Valery Yakubovich, An Yi, Maurizio Zollo, attendees of the Wharton Management Department PhD Seminar, the INSEAD Singapore Brown Bag, and the Wharton-INSEAD Alliance PhD Consortium, and attendees of presentations at Bocconi, Católica-Lisbon SBE, Darden, EMLYON, ESSEC, IE, INSEAD, London Business School, Nova SBE, Singapore Management University, and Sungkyunkwan GSB.

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### A Framework for Mindfulness Meditation as an On-The-Spot Workplace Intervention

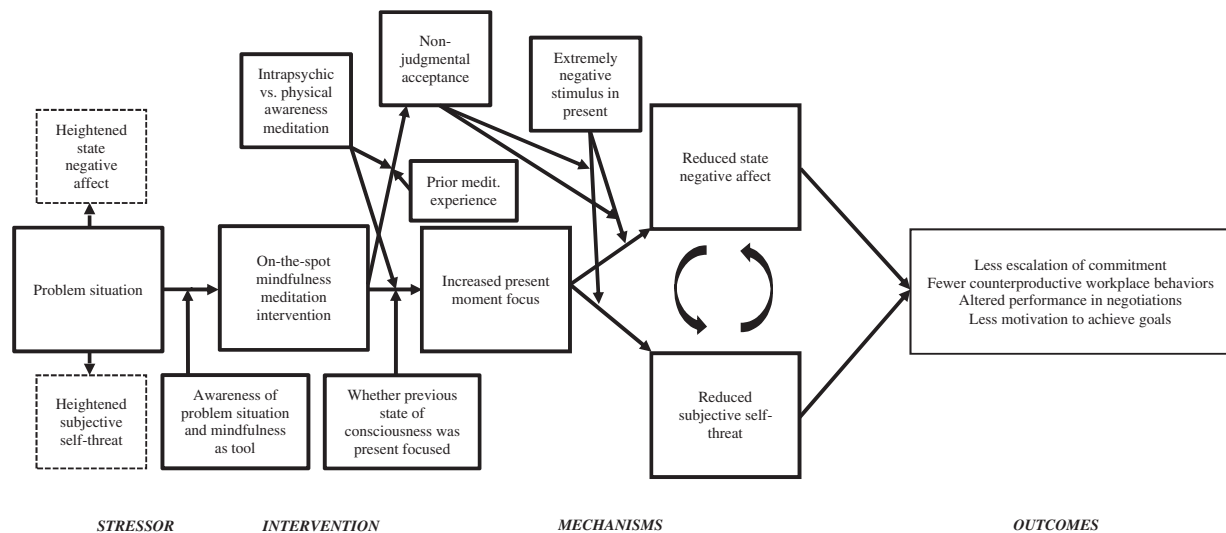


Fig. 1. A Framework for Mindfulness Meditation as an On-The-Spot Workplace Intervention.

reduce these and other issues (Hafenbrack, Kinias, & Barsade, 2014; Hülshager, Alberts, Feinholdt, & Lang, 2013; Long & Christian, 2015), then the framework advanced in the present article is valuable for both business practitioners and theorists.

First, this article will review the concept of mindfulness and explain why it can be used on-the-spot. Second, this article will present a theoretical model (see Fig. 1) that traces how problem situations trigger the need for on-the-spot interventions and the processes by which these interventions influence aspects of job performance. Third, this article will outline necessary conditions for on-the-spot mindfulness interventions and how organizations and managers can facilitate them, including a consideration of which meditations are likely to be effective and when. Taken together, this article deepens our understanding of mindfulness and introduces a manner in which it can be used in the workplace which complements existing dispositional and long term training approaches in a way that may help employees.

## 2. Mindfulness in the workplace and why it can be used on-the-spot

Although meditation is not necessary in order to induce the state of consciousness of mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Dane, 2011), the canonical means of cultivating mindfulness is indeed through meditation.<sup>1</sup> As a reflection of this, more than 2.7 million people have downloaded the Headspace meditation smartphone app (Wang, 2015), which can be used at one's desk. Some organizations with meditation programs also have designated meditation rooms that employees can use even when meditation classes are not in session (Huffington, 2013). Apple CEO and co-founder Steve Jobs was known to meditate before going on stage for important public speeches (Gelles, 2015). This suggests that many employees already meditate in specific situations at work.

<sup>1</sup> Businesspeople have used other means to encourage mindful awareness as well. Phil Jackson, former head coach of NBA teams the Chicago Bulls and LA Lakers, used insights from meditation to design practice exercises such as scrimmaging without speaking or with the lights off in order to encourage players to be more mentally present (Gelles, 2015). Checklists force airline pilots to focus on each step of the take-off and landing processes to avoid distraction and mistakes (Cawande, 2010). Nuclear power plant managers are known to change the structure of paper forms so that plant operators do not go on psychological "auto-pilot" and make mindless mistakes when filling them out (Levinthal & Rerup, 2006; Schulman, 1993).

Despite the real world importance and utility of mindfulness in specific situations, the literature on mindfulness meditation has devoted little theorizing to it being used as an on-the-spot intervention. Instead, the literature has largely operationalized mindfulness in terms of a measured trait which reflects how much individuals' baseline attentional patterns focus nonjudgmentally on the present moment rather than automatically on the past or future (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Scholars have also examined long-term training programs lasting between two and 12 weeks which are meant to develop a personal meditation practice in which participants meditate nearly every day (e.g., Hülshager et al., 2013; Wolever et al., 2012).

Nonetheless, the aforementioned examples and recent studies suggest that people who have not had extensive formal meditation training could and do still use mindfulness as a tool. A single session of *physical awareness* mindfulness meditation (in which attention is directed towards physical sensations, such as those of one's breath) lasting between 3 and 30 min has led to beneficial cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes immediately thereafter (Arch & Craske, 2006; Hafenbrack, Kinias, & Barsade, 2014; Lloyd, Szani, Rubenstein, Colgary, & Pereira-Pasarin, 2016; Lueke & Gibson, 2015; Reb & Narayanan, 2014; Rosenstreich, 2016; Winning & Boag, 2015) including reduced sensitivity to negative stimuli (Kiken & Shook, 2011), improved focus on the task at hand (Mrazek, Smallwood, & Schooler, 2012), and reduced retaliatory behaviors (Long & Christian, 2015). Some training programs include even shorter periods of meditation, such as the duration of a single breath (Tan, 2012).

Beyond the benefits of on-the-spot mindfulness interventions, there are also potential costs to the long-term mindfulness trainings which increase trait mindfulness, particularly if such trainings are stripped of philosophical or moral considerations such as what is the right thing to do (Farb, 2014; Purser & Loy, 2013). Increasing one's trait mindfulness makes a person more mindful overall in their day-to-day life such that they generally focus more on the present moment and less on the past and future. This could be problematic because focusing on past experience aids learning (Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998) and enables people to have a more positive outlook on life (Mitchell, Thompson, Peterson, & Cronk, 1997) and focusing on desired future states is critical for motivation (Locke & Latham, 2006; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). There is also an avoidance risk such that people may use mindfulness to disconnect from situations when they would be better served to critically think through their challenges (Brendel, 2015) or prepare for potential

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