



We're mindful - why isn't our organisation?

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WHY THE INTEREST IN MINDFULNESS?

The practice of mindfulness has been closely associated with improvements in mental health, physical health and overall wellbeing (1).

These benefits have also been observed in the workplace, where 'mindful' individuals are reported to better cope with stress, have improved relationships and greater engagement with the organisation and its goals (2).

So, can we translate the knowledge about mindful individuals to create a mindful organisation? Does a group of mindful people create a mindful organisation? How do we create a mindful organisation?

A GROUP OF PEOPLE IS *NOT* AN ORGANISATION

An organisation is not merely a group of people. Organisations are complex systems of processes, structures and patterns of behaviour to which people belong.

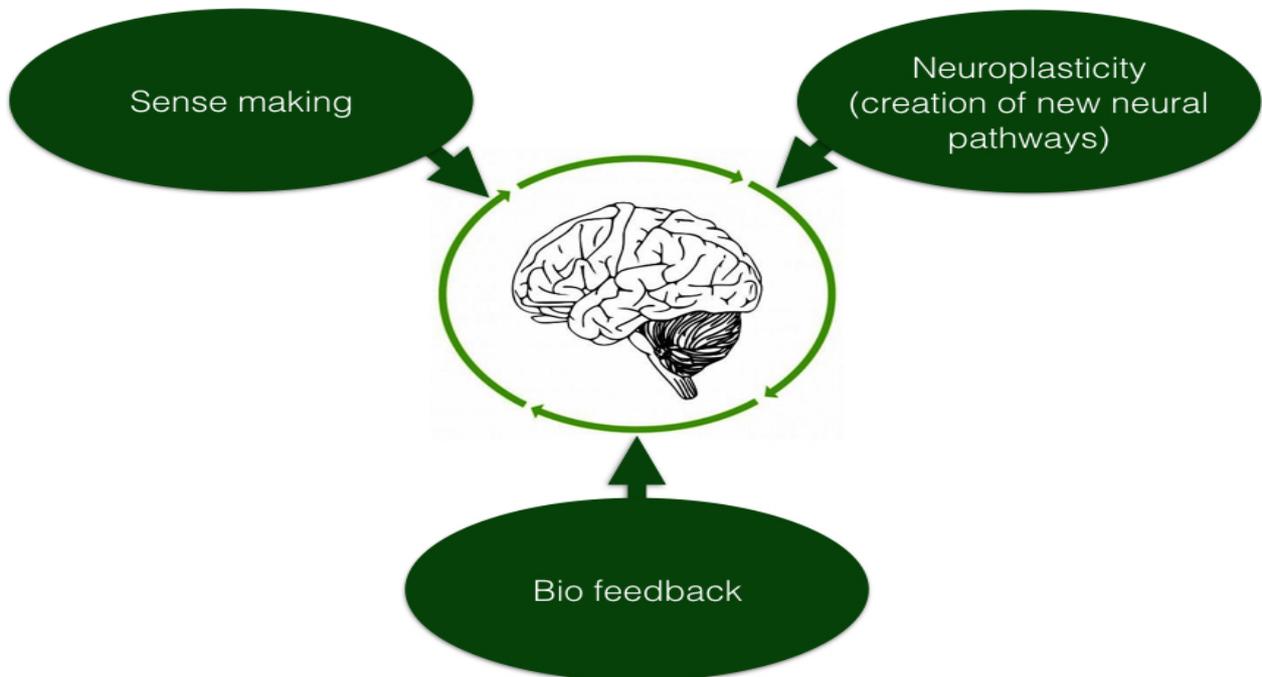
So, simply training people in the practice of mindfulness will not necessarily create a mindful organisation. Experience tells us that we don't create an innovative organisation by training individuals in innovative problem solving.

So how do we develop a mindful organisation? A starting point is to understand the neuroscience of mindfulness - and then to examine how this might apply to organisations.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness is generally understood as being aware and open to experiences in a non-judgmental way. In this state, there are no prior expectations of an outcome or a decision to be taken.

We summarise the neuroscience of mindfulness by the following diagram:



NOTE: [Further detail on the three factors can be downloaded here.](#)

1) Sense-making processes (3, 4)

These are the processes by which we make sense of the world around us.

The *Narrative Focus* is a way of experiencing the world through our memories, intentions and connections with others. It is significantly affected by our relationships and emotions.

The *Experiential Focus* allows us to experience the world without pre-judgement via the internal and external stimuli to which we are exposed.

These two modes utilise different networks and neural pathways in the brain and their usage is inversely correlated - one tends to dominate at any point in time. Mindfulness is the ability to wilfully shift into the Experiential Focus in order to be 'present' to a given situation.

2) Neuroplasticity (5)

This is the potential of the brain to reorganise by strengthening and creating new neural pathways in the process of adaptation.

Mindfulness enhances connections between different parts of the brain, particularly those that improve self regulation and emotional control. It allows us to wilfully direct our attention to the present in a calm and non-judgemental way that strengthens the Experiential Focus.

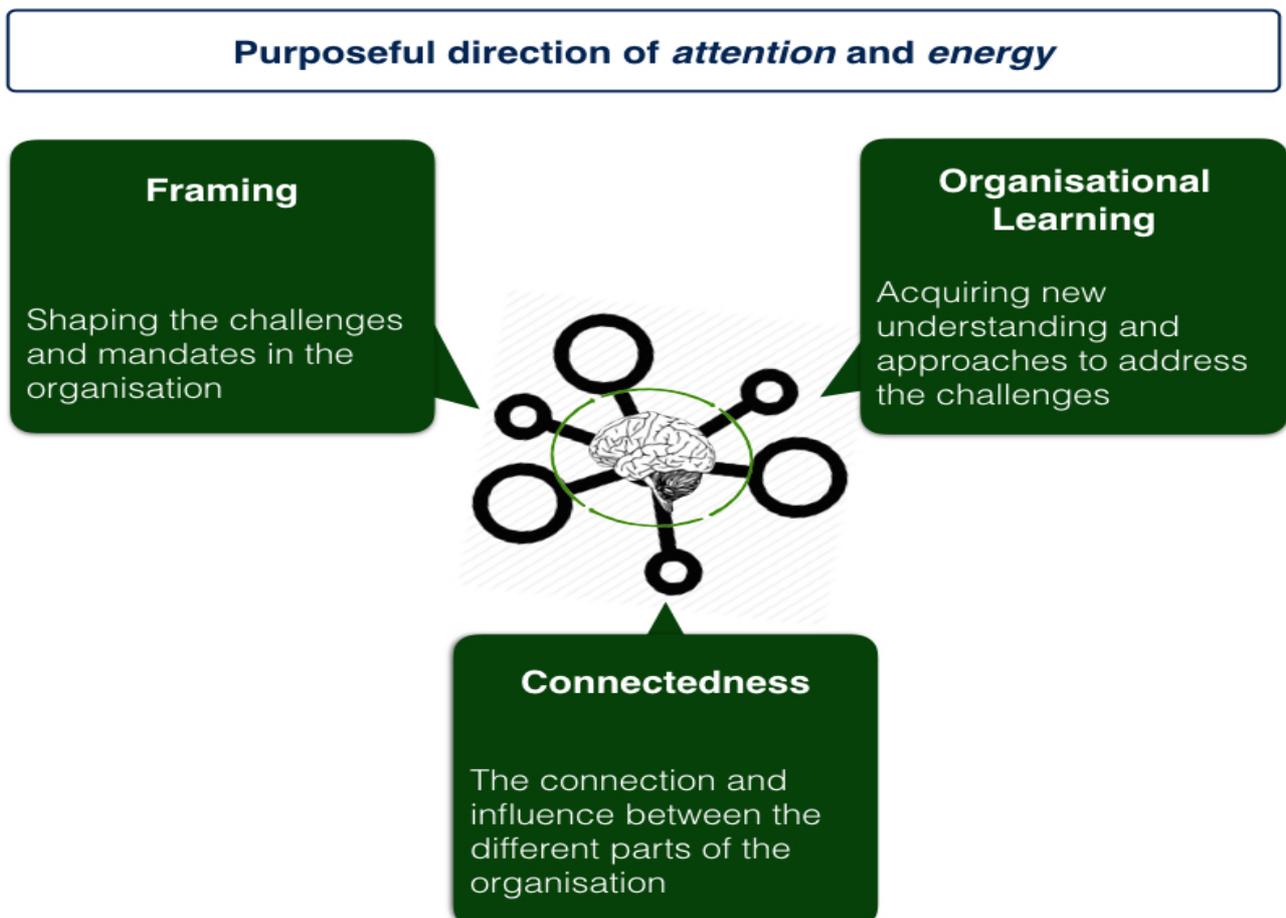
3) Bio-feedback

Bio-feedback describes the close relationship between brain and body and suggests that we think and act with our whole body - ie: the brain and body acting together (6) .

Through bio-feedback, mindfulness has a noticeable affect on our bodies by lowering cortisol levels, and slowing rates of breathing and heartbeat. This produces a sense of calm, a wider window of tolerance (7) and increased resilience to stress. It is also associated with a strengthening of the immune system and the body's telomeres - an essential part of the cell structure that affects the way the body ages (8).

THE MINDFUL ORGANISATION - PUTTING ATTENTION WHERE IT MATTERS

By applying these principles, we derive a model of organisational mindfulness that has the goal of *the purposeful direction of attention and energy* through the organisation. This outcome is achieved by three processes:



A) Framing

Framing refers to the way we define and address organisational challenges.

We distinguish between those parts of the organisation engaged in ‘exploiting’ an existing business idea and those that are ‘exploring’ new business ideas (9).

The ‘**exploit**’ areas emphasise experience, history and best practice. In this space, the organisation is focused on refining and incrementally improving its way of doing business. This is a **Narrative Focus** at play.

The ‘**explore**’ areas describe those areas where the organisation seeks to define and develop a new business idea, a new value proposition to serve a new market, or perhaps a new technology. This is achieved through an **Experiential Focus**.

Organisations may be understood as a portfolio of different activities - some are exploit oriented, while others have a stronger explore dimension. Often, these activities are referred to as ‘business as usual’ (exploit) and ‘bridge to the future’ (explore).

Both of these activities within the portfolio need to be growing, adapting and improving. But we use different ways to frame and address these challenges. Table 1 below summarises the key differences between these two types of challenges:

Sense making	Narrative Focus (Default Network)	Experiential Focus (Direct Experience Network)
Design principles	Exploit focus	Explore focus
Type of organisational activity	BAU	Bridge to the future
Planning horizon	H1 / H2	H2 / H3
Planning tools and approach	SWOT, TQM, Continuous Improvement	Scenario planning, Blue Ocean strategy
Performance management	Productivity, Efficiency, Standard operating systems	Value added, disruption, new learning

Table 1

B) Organisational learning

Organisational learning is critical to the ongoing adaptation of the organisation as the environment shifts. But organisational learning is **not** simply an aggregation of individual learning. It involves the creation of new “neural” pathways within the organisation, and between the organisation and its key stakeholders.

These new “neural” pathways are represented by new processes, structures and patterns of behaviour in which the new learning has been embedded. Without these, meaningful adaptation and change is rarely possible. This is sometimes referred to as the ability to close the ‘knowing-doing gap’ (10).

Mindful learning forums allow a safe, non-judgmental exchange of information and ideas between groups and people. Mindful lookbacks promote a similarly safe and non-judgemental review of past projects, successes and failures.

Importantly, these forums and lookbacks are only used when necessary and useful - not as an ongoing part of BAU.

C) Connectedness

Most organisations are a series of different activities that are connected to each other - both inside the organisation, and between organisations. This connectivity is an important part of mindfulness as it provides the basis for the all important two-way process of feedback. But the connectivity also characterises the organisation as a complex adaptive system (11) - and these complex systems have a number of distinguishing characteristics:

- interconnectedness and interdependence between the various parts of the system
- system integrity - the organisation is more than, and different to, the sum of its parts
- emergent learning - a series of unrelated activities can result in higher level capabilities and the eventual adaptation of the whole system
- unintended consequences - an intervention in one part of the system can cause unintended consequences in another
- brittleness - the potential for system failure where a few nodes within the system become over-connected and cause an unsustainable build up of momentum.

These characteristics have both positive and negative consequences, and mindfulness gives organisations the ability to regulate the negative effects of the connectivity. This plays a significant role in enhancing the effectiveness and overall resilience of the organisation.

DEVELOPING THE MINDFUL ORGANISATION

A key to developing a mindful organisation is to recognise the role of leadership. Leaders cannot directly create a mindful organisation - their role is to create the processes necessary for a mindful organisation to occur (12).

In essence, these processes purposefully direct the attention and energy of the organisation to address the key challenges (both positive and negative) that it faces.

This is done in three ways:

1) Framing:

- View the organisation as a portfolio of different activities
- Recognise and frame the challenges for each activity, and use the appropriate tools and frameworks.

2) Organisational learning

- Set up focused learning forums for specific activities only when and where these are needed. Allow information exchange and exploration of ideas in a safe and non-judgemental way
- Design learning processes that apply the philosophies of 'exploit the current business idea' vs 'explore new business ideas' in different parts of the organisation.

3) Connectedness

- Adopt an integrated approach to decision making and interventions and promote emergent learning - recognise that a reductionist approach can be sub-optimal
 - Use centralisation sparingly - monitor excessive-connectivity and over-control across the organisation.
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