



GARRISON INSTITUTE



**MINDFUL  
LEADER**

Creating a Culture of Mindfulness at Work:  
*Coaches, Consultants and Internal Champions*

*Summary Report*

August 14 - 16, 2019

## Introduction: What is mindfulness, and what does it look like in the workplace?

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Definitions of mindfulness vary considerably. The traditional and most widely accepted definition is perhaps one which was put forth by Jon Kabat-Zinn, MIT Professor and creator of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), who defines mindfulness as:

*Paying attention on purpose in a particular way and non-judgmentally moment to moment.*

Some more expansive definitions of mindfulness suggest that it encourages kindness, compassion, and emotional well-being, while other more strict definitions view these as collateral benefits but not necessarily a direct result of mindfulness practice.

What is certain is that mindfulness is a state that can be cultivated through a variety of practices including meditation, yoga, breath work, and embodied movement. The potential benefits of mindfulness practices are many, including an increased ability to focus, relaxation and stress reduction, and improved mental *coherence* - which is the capacity to use various parts of the brain in concert with one another.

Unfortunately, mindfulness and other forms of wellness practices are often understood to be something that happens *outside* the workplace. Employees are encouraged to meditate, do yoga, whatever they need to do to take care of themselves- as long as they do it on their own time.

And yet, there is a growing number of people, sometimes collectively referred to as the mindfulness movement, who are exploring the potential benefits of bringing mindfulness into the workplace. Proponents contend that mindful workers, teams, and organizations function differently - productivity levels often increase as stress levels drop, communication becomes more effective, and collaboration gets easier. But while incorporating mindfulness practices into the workday sounds like an ideal way to address many of the challenges common to a variety of different organizations, in practice- shifting a team or an organization toward a more

mindful way of working is anything but easy. So what does it take to create a culture of mindfulness at work?

This was the central question of the August 14th-16th, 2019 un-retreat *Creating a Culture of Mindfulness at Work: Coaches, Consultants and Internal Champions*, which was held at the Garrison Institute in partnership with Mindful Leader.

The un-retreat participants were mindfulness leaders from a variety of fields – business, consulting, healthcare, education, wellness, to name a few. This group of professionals came together with the intention to create a safe space where they could engage in dialogue and inquiry, share experience and expertise, and work together toward innovation and new strategies for success. Rather than have a predetermined set of presenters disseminate information to an audience, the un-retreat format enabled the participants to select topics for discussion, break into smaller groups before reconvening for presentations which in turn stimulated further discussion.

This report is a written overview of the topics that were addressed during the un-retreat and summary of the key insights and points of consensus arrived upon throughout the program. The Garrison Institute offers this report as a contribution to the ever-growing body of wisdom in support of the benefits of mindfulness in the workplace, and as a collection of best practices to consider toward a successful creation and implementation of a workplace mindfulness program.

## I. Toward a Living Systems Paradigm

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One of the first insights that emerged is the importance of recognizing that mindfulness is not a switch that gets flipped on; mindfulness is something that grows within an individual, a team, and an organization if it is properly cultivated. This sort of change is not a linear progression, rather it involves a variety of elements which must support one another.

When building a mindfulness program, participants discussed the importance of clarity with goal setting and determining outcome measures. It was observed that creating a mindful team is not the same as creating a more mindful organization. The dynamics between teams and organizations may be complex, and at times a well-intentioned team may wind up at odds with an organization that is hostile to the idea of building a mindfulness program. Rather than try to impose mindfulness on employees, it is wise to plant seeds of awareness and nurture them in order to create and sustain momentum for a team, thereby shifting a mindfulness program into a *living systems paradigm*.

The consensus was that a gardening metaphor works well: plant seeds within different parts of the organization and allow them to grow over time. First prepare the “soil” – do your research, get buy in from key stakeholders, then create a team that can grow over time until it reaches a critical mass and becomes self-sustaining. Ideally, your mindfulness program can become self-sufficient and require less maintenance. Shared ownership of the program is also useful for sustainability to ensure the mindfulness program is not dependent on a single individual or champion. When the energy the program brings to the organization takes root and begins to bloom, it can become both regenerative and self-perpetuating. In many cases it eventually becomes clear to reluctant managers and employees that change is in the air and the culture of the organization as a whole is beginning to shift.

## II. Preparing the Soil: Initial Assessment, Setting Goals, and Getting Buy in from Leadership

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### A.) Initial Assessment

In order to assess where employees are starting in terms of both their needs and their level of interest, it is often helpful to simply ask people about their normal workday. “How is your time?” or “How are your energy levels?” are both open-ended questions that offer gentle opportunities for employees to share their perspectives. Sometimes people have an *integrated*

*practice* that they are already doing, rather than a *dedicated practice* that needs to be scheduled, so it is important to take such factors into consideration when designing a mindfulness program.

Knowing your audience will also be helpful both in initial assessments and for cultivating interest. For example, what speaks to a detail-oriented accountant might be very different from what would resonate with a highly creative marketing professional. Framing questions in ways that indicate an understanding of what the employees value helps demonstrate a genuine interest in their concerns and makes them feel valued.

When setting goals and objectives for a mindfulness program, having group members decide what is important to them can help with reaching a consensus about what success would look like. Getting buy-in at the top is key, but in order to do so, mindfulness programs must be supported by the culture. Having a collaborative team that includes a variety of people from different parts of the organization championing the benefits of mindfulness is often very helpful.

## **B.) Convincing a Leadership Team**

Often the *desire* to incorporate mindfulness practices into the workday is great but *permission* is not there. This may be permission from management— can you sit down without clocking out? Or it may be permission within the culture of the team or organization, which may view taking time to practice during the workday as inappropriate. This is because in many workplaces and particularly in the business world, mindfulness and other wellness practices are often understood to be things that happen *outside* the workplace. The culture and mentality of both leadership and staff may need to change to enable the adoption of practices during the workday.

Executives and managers need to understand that in order for a mindfulness program to be successful, employees must be supported by the organization to have both *space* and *time* to practice. And perhaps most importantly, the reward system of the organization cannot be set up in a way that discourages participation. This includes, but is not limited to, systems of compensation. For example, if an hourly employee is required to clock out in order to take a

five-minute break to practice, or if doing so is likely to be viewed negatively during a performance evaluation, it creates a disincentive for the adoption of mindfulness practices.

When making a case for a mindfulness program, thinking in terms of return on investment is very helpful, but quantitative or financial arguments in favor of a mindfulness program are only part of the picture. In order to get buy-in from senior leadership, it may be helpful to consider qualitative metrics and pose the question - what does a mindful team look like? What is *different* about a mindful team?

### **C.) Characteristics of Mindful Teams**

The un-retreat participants agreed that mindful teams have both targets and intentionality. They have a *shared understanding* of how they are going about hitting their goals. Mindful teams also listen effectively and hold space for productive discussion.

Although this might seem difficult to measure, the group recognized that there are ways to do so. For example, if you sit in on a meeting and you observe that people are interrupting one another, talking over one another, or even yelling, note how many times they do so. 10 times? 25 times? This could help demonstrate to senior leadership that there is room for improvement that could lead to more productive use of meeting time and more congenial interpersonal dynamics among colleagues with different perspectives.

In working with teams that embody demographic and professional diversity, it is important to go beyond mindfulness and recognize the value of diverse perspectives and emphasize that the whole is indeed greater than the sum of its parts. Viewing the team or organization as a living system & *nourishing empowered receptivity* is an approach that has the potential to be both highly sensitive to the needs of each member and highly effective in moving toward shared goals. Rather than direct them, guide and support them as they move toward codifying and eventually institutionalizing mindfulness practice.

### III. Planting: Launching a Mindfulness Program

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When it comes time to launch a mindfulness program, how do you make sure people show up to learn and start practicing? Many of the participants pointed out that if efforts to encourage participation are too light, the program is unlikely to build momentum and become self-sustaining. At the same time, a heavy-handed approach could be counterproductive. So how do you find the right balance between making the program required or optional?

One of the key points of consensus that emerged from this discussion is the value of tactfully encouraging people to participate without pressuring them to do so. It is unwise and often counterproductive to force people to participate, for a variety of reasons. For example, making the program mandatory can make the subjective experience of participation feel like an obligation rather than an opportunity. And any attempts at coercion could foster suspicions that the intention of the program is simply an attempt to squeeze more productivity out of their already stressful workday. Therefore, making mindfulness practice optional but highly encouraged is essential.

Participants emphasized that consistently inviting people to participate is a respectful approach, and reminded one another that, “If you’re selling the benefits of mindfulness, the vast majority of your task is listening.” Encouraging members of the team or organization to “just show up and listen” or “at least try it” can be very successful— the number of people who attend an introductory session may be double the number who initially expressed interest in the program itself. It is often less about “selling” the program, and more about educating and inspiring.

One participant pointed out that it is important to acknowledge that we each have a unique starting point, and avoid weaponizing mindfulness against anyone. For example, saying something like, “If only she were more mindful, she wouldn’t be so difficult to work with” is not a tone that is likely to nourish empowered receptivity. Criticizing an employee or colleague for a lack of mindfulness can be very harmful. Remember— it is not about prescribing behavior to participants or striving for perfection; it is about allowing them the space and to become aware of and acknowledge where they may be experiencing struggles and limitations while

equipping them with the tools and strategies that can help them to better meet the challenges that a day might bring.

The final and perhaps most important point discussed is the critical need to design a program that is inclusive and explicitly values diversity. Participants spoke of studies that have shown that when one of ten participants of a group is a member of a minority group, differences of opinion are attributed to identity; however, when two of ten members are of the minority group, these same views are then perceived as a part of the group's whole. Therefore, creating an environment that is respectful and values different perspectives is essential, as is being culturally open and sensitive in how we define behaviors in being mindful from the very beginning.

## IV. Nurturing: Increasing Engagement & Moving Toward Sustainability

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Once you have planted a mindfulness program within a team or an organization, how can you encourage its growth? The consensus among un-retreat participants was that a mindfulness program must be nurtured over time, and they shared helpful perspectives regarding the best ways to go about building, strengthening, and encouraging adoption.

In order to move toward sustainability, one question that is worth examining is how best to go about reaching a critical mass. One participant reflected that in nursing, once you get 20% of the unit to decide that the change is positive and beneficial, you have reached a tipping point where adoption of mindfulness practices starts to build momentum. So rather than try to convince as many people as possible, it is often advantageous to focus your efforts on members of a team who hold more influence and “low hanging fruit”—team members who are more receptive and therefore easier to convince when striving toward a critical mass.

One participant pointed out that repeated invitations are helpful both for people who attend an introductory session and those who were initially reluctant, or those who refused to engage.



Another pointed out that for many employees – particularly managers and executives – their calendars are their gatekeepers, and convincing them to make time in their already busy schedules is a challenge that may require several attempts. Hearing from colleagues that the program is enjoyable and helpful can be more compelling than hearing it from mindfulness champions – it creates word of mouth and helps people feel comfortable engaging with the program.

In order to cultivate interest among those who are resistant to the idea of making time for a dedicated practice, it can be advantageous to find small ways to integrate mindfulness in the workplace throughout the day. For example, starting a regularly scheduled meeting with a brief practice and a moment to breathe afterward can invite participation without placing additional demands on employees' time and energy. Do not expect everyone to get fully on-board overnight; instead, such integrated practices will continue to provide little opportunities for engagement to foster interest that could be conducive to the growth of the mindfulness program.

When building momentum around a mindfulness program, two options worth considering are selecting mindful mentors and creating a "buddy system." In the former case, having an accountability partner can encourage consistency of practice. In the latter case, people who have been through a mindfulness program can help build and support one another in bringing mindfulness to other parts of the organization. Both can also create a feeling of connectedness and continuity among initial participants in the times between dedicated practice sessions.

## V. Meeting Resistance and Dealing with Skeptics

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Although many members of a team or organization may be initially receptive or at least curious about mindfulness practices and their potential benefits, often there will be a range of others who are indifferent, skeptical, or even opposed to the creation and implementation of a mindfulness program. The un-retreat participants had a great deal of lived experience and

strategies that can be helpful for winning over skeptics or dealing with those who do not want to participate.

At an individual level, it is important to recognize that some of the skepticism people feel about mindfulness may arise from a fear of change. If the person's workday is already stressful, the idea of adding anything new might appear likely to further destabilize a stressful situation. In such cases, it is important to connect and "start where they are," gradually introducing new concepts in a way that feels like an offering, rather than an imposition. Ask people what their goals are, and frame your appeal as, "I can help you reach your goals." And remember—you do not have to start with a marathon. Baby steps are still successes, and there are times where it is important to let that be enough.

When met with resistance at an organizational level, effective triage is a great way to direct your energies where they are most likely to yield results. In many cases you will not need a majority, you will just need enough people (and enthusiasm) to keep funding for your mindfulness program. Therefore, it may be wise to:

- Try to rally people who are enthusiastic to share their experiences with colleagues.
- For those who are neutral, it is generally best to tactfully engage them and offer repeated invitations.
- And for opponents, it is often wise to simply thank them for their time, unless they are decision-makers, in which case it may be worth the extra effort to continue searching for ways to get them to buy in.

Being flexible is also invaluable. Since leadership and systems are both highly changeable, it is wise to play the long game rather than looking for quick wins. Ultimately, any mindfulness proponent will likely have to acknowledge that there are a variety of valid perspectives within any group or organization; therefore, it is important to recognize that disagreements and contrary opinions may in fact reflect *co-existing truths*.

## VI. Evaluation and Metrics

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When evaluating the effectiveness and benefits for a mindfulness program, definitions of success vary significantly by industry, so an appreciative inquiry is worthwhile. It can be difficult to demonstrate the effectiveness of a mindfulness program, so establishing key metrics and the tools that will be used to measure them is key.

One participant pointed out that it is worth considering what data the organization is already measuring, both during an initial assessment of the organization's needs and when evaluating effectiveness of an ongoing program.

Consider the questions— How many criteria would be wise to evaluate, and how best to narrow them down? What are the outcomes that are most relevant to measuring mindfulness? And what combination of quantitative and qualitative measures will be appropriate for evaluating progress in different contexts?

Quantitative measure are a compelling way to evaluate a mindfulness program's effectiveness. In some cases it is appropriate to focus on presenteeism, engagement, and enhanced performance. These are generally easy to quantify and can be persuasive to senior leadership and other decision makers when it is necessary to demonstrate value and return on investment.

In some instances, focusing on qualitative metrics might be appreciated. For example, *resilience* is a key indicator of success in organizations that have high levels of burnout. In such cases it may be more effective to use surveys that ask participants, “How quickly and to what degree can you bounce back?” Employees can then examine their own progress based on their subjective experiences. If 80% of the participants in the program say that their resilience has increased, it would then be fair to say that the program is having an impact.

Do not forget to return to the same questions you asked when inviting people to participate. “How is your time?” “How are your energy levels?” If the answers to such questions have changed, it will help them evaluate their own progress and help you assess the effectiveness of the program itself.

Focus	Measures	Tools
<b>Impact on Organization</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement</li> <li>• Presenteeism</li> <li>• Team Cohesion</li> <li>• Enhanced Performance</li> <li>• Organizational / Operational Integrity</li> <li>• VOI</li> <li>• Emotional Health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self assessments</li> <li>• Attrition/Retention rates</li> <li>• Reduced health care costs</li> <li>• Decrease in executive interventions and referrals to HR</li> </ul>
<b>Impact on Individual</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resilience</li> <li>• Attitude, Intention &amp; Attention</li> <li>• Interpersonal Skills</li> <li>• Conflict</li> <li>• Sense of Purpose</li> <li>• Empathy/Compassion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self assessment</li> <li>• Demand re-engagement</li> <li>• Meeting objectives</li> </ul>
<b>Program Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching Integrity</li> <li>• Cost / ROI / VOI</li> <li>• Actionable Takeaways</li> <li>• Sustainability</li> <li>• Appropriate to the culture</li> <li>• Relatable to the culture - unconscious bias</li> </ul>	

## VII. The Future of Mindfulness: Trends, Controversies, and Unanswered Questions

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Toward the end of the retreat, participants' discussions moved away from the practical considerations of creating and implementing mindfulness programs, and toward broader questions about the future of mindfulness in the workplace. Mo Edjlali observed that there is a tendency among mindfulness professionals and within the movement itself (and indeed, society as a whole) for people to listen only to others who share their perspectives, and emphasized the value of considering alternative viewpoints.

There was a considerable amount of discussion about the proliferation of mindfulness apps on mobile devices, and a general consensus that some are much better than others. Successful apps tend to have a few characteristics— they are sequential, introduce practices, are appropriate for beginners, crescendo the practices, offer feedback & rewards, and tend to have a variety of options enabling users to customize a practice to suit their needs. One participant observed that some people seem to be more comfortable trying out different practices (yoga, guided meditation) on their own using an app before coming to practice with colleagues, while others may prefer to experiment with new practices in a group training and then subsequently use apps to deepen their practice between sessions.

The un-retreat participants identified an array of advantages and disadvantages to using apps as part of a mindfulness program.

Advantages:	Disadvantages:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many offer virtual coaching</li> <li>• Nudges can encourage consistency</li> <li>• Easy opportunities to explore new practices</li> <li>• Low cost barrier</li> <li>• Opportunities for a virtual community</li> <li>• Built in metrics to store, capture and evaluate data</li> <li>• Encourage practice between training sessions</li> <li>• Guided practices are good for beginners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practices often get mixed up or diluted</li> <li>• Can be too lock-step: difficult to tailor the practice to the individual</li> <li>• Difficult to evaluate which apps are most helpful given the plethora of options</li> <li>• Individualistic by nature, so opportunities to strengthen a sense of community may be missed</li> <li>• Few offer silent practice to go deeper</li> </ul>

An interesting trend on the near horizon is that doctors may soon be able to prescribe the use of such apps, and have it covered by insurance under the heading of *digital therapeutics*. One participant emphasized that all mindfulness app developers are racing toward this, and it will be fascinating to see how this affects the healthcare industry.

One of the more controversial perspectives that many of the participants found thought-provoking was the argument that burnout is a form of victim-shaming. The rationale behind this is that calling it “burnout” puts the onus on the individual, when in fact many of the problems employees face also need to be addressed at the organizational and societal levels.

There were a number of other emerging trends discussed during the un-retreat. One notable trend is around millennials, who are now the largest group in the workforce, and who have a different culture and style of engagement with communal institutions. This lends itself to finding new ways of creating meaning and connection. These discussions raised many questions that could not be answered just yet, but would be worth considering during future gatherings.

What was certain is that there is real value in coming together to ask questions, share best practices, and form a sense of community among leaders in the field of mindfulness. The Garrison Institute and Mindful Leader are grateful to all those who participated in this un-retreat. We believe that the continued exploration of this subject has the potential to significantly benefit many individuals, teams, organizations, and society as a whole. We hope that our combined efforts to build this body of knowledge will encourage profound and welcome changes in the modern workplace.

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