

Exploring the Concept of Mindfulness in Public Relations Practice

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness, the act of being thoughtfully focused in the present moment, has recently become a common topic of discussion in media and popular culture. Much has been written, documenting the effectiveness of mindfulness in the home and at work. While the concept could have relevant application in the public relations workplace, some might argue its esoteric nature conflicts with appropriate professional standards of practice. Using social order theory as a starting point, this essay presents concepts of mindfulness as presently advanced through popular culture and scholarship. The essay concludes with eight recommendations for applying mindfulness precepts in PR practice in ways that would not put practitioners at odds with marketplace expectations.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been great popular culture interest in the philosophical concept of mindfulness and its relevance in the human experience (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). An increasing volume of published research documents the many benefits of mindfulness (Salzberg, 2014). Professional athletes, celebrities and politicians have rushed to endorse it (Skidelsky, 2011). Entering the term *mindfulness at work* into an Internet search engine results millions of relevant web page links.

While mindfulness would seem to have application in the public relations workplace, its “ethic of compassion” (Seppala, 2013, para. 3) might be perceived to conflict with PR practitioners’ view of assertive marketplace-based standards of practice. Taking mindfulness-based concepts too far in another direction might allow mindfulness to be construed as some sort of transcendent tool to increase productivity and profits (White & Cooper, 2014). This essay will briefly explore mindfulness concepts and offer recommendations for applying them in ways that would not put the PR practitioner at odds with reasonable professional expectations.

What is Mindfulness?

“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.” (Jon Kabat-Zinn, Founding Director, University of

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Massachusetts Medical School Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society)

Mindfulness has taken on a variety of interpretations. At its most basic, it involves “being awake and aware – being tuned in to yourself, to others, and to the environment” (Boyatzis & Yeganeth, 2012, p. 4). To be mindful means to be thoughtful in the present moment, and to allow that thoughtfulness to guide future actions in a disciplined and beneficial way. Mindfulness means focusing on *the processes* of life and work more so than the outcome (Serafin, 2007). It’s about the trip, not the destination.

A mindful individual trains attention to select what is most important. This involves taming the “monkey mind” (O’Hara, 2013) that constantly leaves the present, jumping back and forth between memories of the past and imaginations of the future.

Mindfulness has its roots in Buddhist meditative practices. Although mindfulness is not a religion, Pema Chödrön, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama and other ordained Buddhist teachers have translated its Eastern concepts to foster growth of the practice in Western culture.

Mindfulness is not a health care regimen, although its use has been supported by a number of high-profile medical professionals. Clinical evidence shows mindfulness practice supports the human immune system, fights obesity, diminishes the propensity for alcohol and drug abuse, and reduces anger, depression, hostility and stress (Axelrad, 2013; Bazarko, Cate, Azocar & Kreitzer, 2013; Caldwell, Baime, & Wolever, 2012; Wupperman, Marlatt, Cunningham, Bowen, Berking, Mulvihill-Rivera & Easton, 2012).

Mindfulness at Work

It is appropriate to contemplate workplace mindfulness within the theoretical construct of social order. A socially ordered workplace is mindful; it has a clear division of labor, established trust among workers, a regulation of power for decision-making, and a set of systems that legitimize activity (Eisenstadt, 1992). Communication in the socially ordered workplace is organized and meaningful (Alexander, 1992).

A focused attention to reality “without the distractions and consultations the intellect contrives” (Richo, 2005, p. 94) would be consistent with a socially ordered workplace. In such an environment, workers would “share power responsibly, communicate clearly, and work productively together no matter what cultural, economic, social, or technological uncertainties may develop” (Swanson, 2012, p. 134).

A key mindfulness precept is the idea that all elements of existence are interrelated. As Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel describes it, “we cannot find a true boundary or edge to any thing, because all things exist in dependence on other things”(Mattis-Namgyel, 2011, p. 34).

By contrast, a mindless workplace involves distracted behavior. It is a workplace where there is more focus on *doing* than *being*. In the mindless workplace, workers would be unable to see the correlation between otherwise disconnected phenomena. There would be excessive reliance on “categories and distinctions created in the past” (Langer, 1989, p. 11) that separate rather than unite. Workers could easily make assumptions and take actions that are “not so smart” (McRaney, 2011). A workplace where mindless behaviors are commonplace would be a workplace where social order is manifested in *disorder*.

Although through observation it might be easy to distinguish between a workplace that is ordered/ mindful and one that is disordered/ mindless, some strategies that would support productivity could still lead to mindlessness and social disorder. For example, a work environment where people feel powerful, competitive, and in control (Denton, 2011; McCormack, 2010; Wigington, 2008) would be widely recognized as a good thing. There would also be widespread agreement that workers’ control results from “a foundation of effective communication practices” (Gillis, 2007, p. 28) shared among employees.

At the same time, an extreme use of power, competitiveness and control could become mindlessly self-defeating. Perhaps no one better exemplifies this than American business executive Donald Trump, whose shameless pursuit of media attention during the 2012 U.S. Presidential election campaign earned him the label of “bloviating ignoramus” (*George Will: Donald Trump is bloviating ignoramus*, 2012). Using ideas espoused by Donald Trump, Figure 1 contrasts workplace strategies that are mindless with other approaches that are mindful.

Mindfulness in Public Relations Practice

The Public Relations Society of America describes the profession as encompassing “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (*What is public relations?*, 2012, para. 4). Throughout its development, PR has been recognized as a profession intent on controlling and responding to the communication of various publics while developing favorable attitudes about organizations and the issues they represent (Elliott, 2012; Newsom & Scott, 1985).

As a result of technological advancement and new international marketplace pressures, the public relations workplace is among the most volatile. Rapid technological change has resulted in an unprecedented shift to new communication technologies. Entire agency structures have been torn down and rebuilt (Barrett, 2011). A new international competitiveness has brought long-held beliefs about appropriate ethical and technical practice into question (Jeong, 2011). There has been a great reshuffling of workplace roles, expectations, concepts, and desired skills. A public relations professional today can be put out of work suddenly and without warning (Sweeney, 2010; Woloshin, 2009). Thus, the “awake and aware” promises of mindfulness would seem especially valuable in this profession at this point in time (Boyatzis & Yeganeth, 2012, p. 4).

The truth is, of course, that there is actually very little control over what happens at work, whether in public relations or any other field. Despite our best attempts at planning, systems and the people who work within them are unpredictable (Epstein, 1999). The most reliable and complimentary customers still cause grief. Every day brings new and unexpected problems. The results of work are always uncertain.

“When we pause and consider our circumstances, we notice that our limited control, while marvelous, precise, and at times elegant, is delicately poised as a minor gesture in the larger landscape of our experience” (Carroll, 2012, p. 37).

The focus for this essay is: How could a PR professional take a more mindful approach to work without sacrificing professional standards or shirking obligations to clients and publics?

Public Relations – Mindful and Otherwise

This section will begin by offering an example of an organization that goes beyond providing lip service to the mindfulness concept. Mindfulness is embedded in the company leadership’s core values and is a part of everyday decision-making. The section then takes an opposite viewpoint and illustrates a variety of organizational leaders’ mindless behaviors that were inconsistent with appropriate PR practice.

Mindfulness at Eileen Fisher

Fashion designer Eileen Fisher exemplifies a mindful approach to marketing and public relations (Boyce, 2013). Her clothing company generates \$350 million in annual revenue through its 60 retail stores. Products are sold in 90 countries. More than 1,000 employees participate in a stock ownership plan that has already passed one-third of the corporate assets into employee hands. The executive staff includes a Director of Social Consciousness.

Corporate practices call for products of simplicity, beauty, comfort, and ease – created in an environment of “individual growth and wellbeing” that promotes inclusiveness and a “spirit of play” (*Eileen Fisher: Who we are*, 2014, para. 1-6).

All executive meetings begin with a minute of silence that Fisher says allows her team members to “slow down enough to be thoughtful” about their actions (Boyce, 2013, p. 45). Fisher sees her business as a movement for positive social change. The company’s mission statement and guiding principles are shown in Figure 2.

Mindlessness – Five Examples

Several examples of workplace mindlessness are shown below. Each is linked back to a precept identified by Wheatley (with Frieze, 2010) in their work, *Leadership in the Age of Complexity: From Hero to Host*.

Heroic, Ineffectual Leadership

Wheatley and Frieze contend that a mindful leader does *not* act like a hero. A hero frequently and foolishly is deluded into thinking the uncontrollable can be unilaterally controlled. By contrast, a mindful leader doesn't work solo.

A mindful leader encourages positive collaboration and participation among followers. A recent illustration of this concept was observed when 'heroic' owners of an Arizona restaurant took to Facebook to unjustifiably brag about their accomplishments. When customers took issue, the owners proceeded to rhetorically beat their chests and threaten physical violence against their "stupid people" customers and the public at large and was called as "the most epic brand meltdown on Facebook ever" (Broderick, 2013, para. 1).

Uneasy Interactions

When a workplace professional finds it difficult to initiate interpersonal relationships, some level of mindlessness may be responsible. Uneasy interactions can occur quickly in interpersonal relations; they can occur in a nanosecond via social media. Such was the lesson learned when Internet marketing/ PR executive Justine Sacco, en route to Africa, posted a Tweet reading: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!" (Stelter, 2013). The Tweet instantly went viral. Sacco's uneasy interaction resulted in a swift dismissal from employer IAC before Sacco's aircraft had even reached Africa. A mindful PR professional works humbly and naturally, without pretense, to interact thoughtfully with others.

Refusal to Embrace New Ideas

Mindlessness in the workplace can be evidenced in a refusal to embrace new ideas, or an unrealistic clinging to outmoded approaches. Corporate leaders demonstrate this kind of mindlessness when they oppose change that is outside their control. For example, in 2012-2013, several corporate chief executives used the media to complain about Congressional approval of the Affordable Care Act. This created the perception that these CEOs were more interested in politics than in their workers' health (*Whole Foods CEO*, 2013; Wolfson, 2013; Clawson, 2012).

One restaurant owner added a side dish of bigotry when he called ACA "America's punishment for slavery years" (*Arkansas restaurant posts*, 2013). While freedom of expression is every CEO's right, making partisan social or political statements in company's name is not mindful because doing so will always alienate some customers.

Atmosphere of Distrust

When a professional can't engage confidently with a co-worker, one or both parties may be approaching the interaction mindlessly. An appearance of untrustworthiness can also be created through media portrayals of celebrities and other prominent public figures. In

recent years, several celebrity chefs followed a recipe for mindlessness in their interactions with the media. Martha Stewart gained international notoriety in 2004 for her insider trading conviction and prison term. Later, she was named as defendant in a \$200 million breach of contract dispute with Macy's. One insider said Martha was "just trying to make sure that she gets as much money as she can" (Andrews, 2013, p. 3). Meanwhile, Paula Dean's 2013 controversy over racial slurs and alleged mistreatment of staff in her restaurants was called "a public relations disaster that did not need to happen" (*Paula Dean, bad behavior. . .*, 2013, para. 1).

Lack of Accountability

In 2010, former British Petroleum CEO Tony Hayward offered the textbook example of lack of corporate accountability. At the height of BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig environmental catastrophe, Hayward uttered the mindless comment heard round the world: "I'd like my life back." His attendance at a yacht race off the coast of England a few weeks later rubbed salt in the public relations wound (Robbins, 2010). Hayward's "self-destructive communications" cost him his job (Fombrun & Low, 2011, p. 21).

CEOs are not the only workplace professionals who mindlessly perpetuate lack of accountability. In a 2010-2011 survey, hundreds of rank-and-file PR professionals were asked about the impact of mentoring in their public relations workplaces. In initial interviews, two-thirds of respondents claimed no knowledge of workplace mentoring and/or said it was not practiced where they worked. Yet, as interviews progressed, many of these same respondents went on to describe the mentoring they previously declared did not exist. In a subsequent survey, 70% of respondents who reported the existence of mentoring said results were not documented, or if there was documentation they knew nothing about it (Hays & Swanson, 2012; Hays & Swanson, 2011). These confusing results demonstrate that lack of accountability can be found even at the grass-roots level of agency operations.

Toward a More Mindful Public Relations Approach

Mindfulness is not a concept that is absolute, as in *either you have it or you don't*. A working professional can be mindful one minute and mindless the next. Likewise, work environments that appear mindful and socially ordered can still quickly collapse into disorder over a particularly challenging issue or troublesome client. But even a simple recognition of the value of mindfulness surely would have benefit in any workplace. The eight suggestions offered below were gleaned from a variety of expert sources and could help a PR professional move from recognition of the need for more mindfulness to thoughtfully acting in ways to make it happen.

Understand the Mind

The scanning mind is used to perceive our environment, alert us to what's happening around us, and help us tune in to our feelings and the emotions of other people. The focused mind is used for problem-solving and task completion. It's impossible to scan

and focus at the same time. A mindful PR professional could spend some time *thinking about thinking* before using thinking to address a perceived problem (Boyatzis & Yeganeth, 2012).

Take a Collaborative, Non-Linear Approach

When approaching a conflict or problem, a mindful public relations practitioner could look for ways to collaborate that deviate from traditional Western analytic top-down thinking. The Western approach carries the assumption that there's only one correct answer (Tremmel, 1993; Schön, 1983). In reality, this is seldom the case. A mindful PR practitioner could ask, What other options are available? Have they been recognized and explored?

Embrace Complexity

A mindful public relations professional can realize that not every situation requires an immediate answer. "Conflicting information confuses us only when we're trying to reach a definite conclusion. But if we're not trying to reach a conclusion in the first place – if we just observe and pay attention – we may actually have a fuller, more accurate reading of whatever we encounter" (Mattis-Namgyel, 2011, p. 58). In some public relations situations, perhaps careful attention is more important than immediate action.

See Work As It Is

Different people view work differently. Corporate human relations executive and author Michael Carroll linked Tibetan Buddhism's "six confusions" to six mindless stereotypes people have about their work (Carroll, 2004). Work can be seen as drudgery, war, addiction, entertainment, inconvenience, or a problem. While it can sometimes be all of these, it seldom if ever *always* falls into one of these categories. A public relations professional who always sees work through only one confusing frame misses out on opportunities that result from a more mindful approach. Relevant questions to ask might include, *How am I perceiving the act of work?* and, *Does this perception equip me to do my best work?*

Expect Ambiguity

The practice of PR is, by nature, ambiguous. Opinion is always in flux. Demographics are always changing. There are always more facts unknown than known. A mindful public relations practitioner embraces and expects ambiguity, and accepts the fact that even the best laid plans cannot guarantee particular outcomes.

"We need to support those leaders who know that the problems are complex, who know that to understand the full complexity of any issue, all parts of the system need to be invited in to participate and contribute." (Wheatley with Frieze, 2010, para. 8).

Educate Clients and Publics

Every seasoned PR professional has suffered with clients who thought market research was a waste of time, or that public relations meant “more sales tomorrow.” To allow for a more mindful relationship with our clients, and to ensure the continued viability of our profession, it’s important that a mindful practitioner dedicate time to educating clients and others about PR. The more people know about public relations, the more likely people are to mindfully understand what it can and cannot do.

Work for a More Mindful Media

Media professionals’ creation of mindless media content and the embrace of that content by consumers is a worldwide epidemic. The result is “attitudes and behaviors not necessarily in the best interest of the audience” (Serafin, 2007, p. 180). The youngest members of our society are the most vulnerable (Healy, 1990). Public relations people are right in the middle of the epidemic, propagating numerous “false promise” media messages that fail to deliver on the grandiose claims they make (Carroll, 2012). A public relations professional has an ethical obligation to step back from the spin, constantly evaluate the very nature of the work being undertaken, and create a climate for more responsible media communication.

Balance Work and Life

This final recommendation is likely to present great challenge. It is easy for a PR professional to become caught in Western cultural expectations that dictate a technical, rational approach to work at the expense of all else. These same expectations assign value by quantity of output instead of quality of interaction. A mindful PR professional learns to balance work and life by saying ‘no’ to requests that do not need to be fulfilled and communication that does not need to be made.

Conclusion

“One of the most challenging venues to take [mindfulness] ideas and make them real is work.” (Sharon Salzberg, New York Times Bestselling Author and Co-Founder, Insight Meditation Society of Barre, Mass.)

Public relations is an profession that is undergoing great change from within and without. Much of what has been written about this change focuses on *doing* rather than *thinking*. Perhaps it is time to prioritize the latter rather than the former. Even a cursory review of the literature on mindfulness clearly shows that applying a more thoughtful approach to work leads to increasingly harmonious experiences for individuals and organizations.

It is hoped that the examples offered this essay clearly distinguish mindful and mindless business practices, and show that mindless practices are unlikely to offer satisfactory long-term consequences. The profile of Eileen Fisher’s organization shows that

mindfulness and marketplace competitiveness need not be mutually exclusive. A mindful organization can still be assertive and profitable.

The eight suggestions toward a more mindful approach in public relations are action steps that can be taken individually or collectively. If implemented, they can bring about more thoughtful work, more ordered workplaces, and more contentment among employees and clients. All of this would increase the value of public relations engagement with clients, with publics, and with the world at large.

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