

Mindfulness, mental health and magnificent management consulting – a synopsis

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Can mindfulness enhance our consultancy problem solving and genuinely support our wellbeing and mental health? Or is just new age hippy trippy stuff?

CMCE April Showcase brought together Constança Casquinho (ex McKinsey strategist and a Mindfulness professor at Nova School of Business and Economics) and Victoria Fellowes (an executive coach and human capital expert) to answer the question.

Constança told us her story of escaping lockdown confinement to liberate a jellyfish from the beach, being confronted by a policeman and the value of reflecting and responding instead of reacting. She also spoke about the importance of observing our thoughts and taking deep breaths to give ourselves 'mindful capacity' to choose our response.

Victoria introduced mindfulness and coaching as tools to assess and develop management 'resilience', protect our capabilities, mental health and wellbeing regardless of the obstacles that we have to face. In addition, she shared her thoughts on the relationship between coaching and mindfulness, and the value of mindfulness in enabling coaches and consultants to absorb the impact of what they hear and experience. As management consultants, we are often at the forefront of issues and hence more prone to stress, leading to burnout, toxic work environments and poor productivity. The better we manage stress, the more we can take in our stride, the bigger difference we can make.

So perhaps mindfulness should become part of a balanced approach to work and life – a bit like eating well, staying hydrated, having good sleep and exercising?

What is Mindfulness anyway?

Mindfulness is defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn as the "capacity to pay attention deliberately to the present moment without judgement." Mindful not 'mind full'. In other words, being aware of what we are, what we are doing and not being overwhelmed by it. Judging less and understanding more – just be. It also keeps your blood pressure down and transmits calmness and confidence to those around you.

Victoria defined mindfulness in a corporate environment as 'respect and consideration of others' e.g. think before you write that email and define the tone to use and the message you want to convey. On video calls it could be respecting people's space (and time) to answer – the Elephant Pause, counting 'one elephant, two elephant' before you start talking again – to give them time to think (this also relates to System 1 and 2 thinking – we don't want responses to be too automated).

If we are going to get to the bottom of big and holistic issues, we need to create the mental and emotional space to engage, to respond rather than just react. Mindfulness with the space and capacity it offers gives consultants the extra edge and the additional listening space makes it more

likely we can fulfil the trusted advisor role, moving beyond mere transactional exchanges. We have a role to teach this.

Stop Your Wizardry Wilting

But how do you get there? How do you make it from Wilted to Wizard in ten minutes? And how do we help (encourage?) our clients get this? Victoria identified some practical tools.

- Say this out loud with conviction – *“This is actually NOT about ME at all.”* Really, it is not. It is almost always about the circumstances. This can be particularly useful when firefighting to create a buffer to take you from reaction to response.
- And repeat after me – *“And CUT!”*. The scene is over. Turn off and step away. Be aware of when you have reached your daily limit of tolerance. We have all gone one meeting, one call, one email too much and upset the apple cart as a result.
- Then Mix It Up (or Opposites Attract). Combine your physical (intense), emotional (enjoyable) and mental (relaxing) parts to do something different from ‘work’. Step out of the environment (put down the smartphone NOW) and declutter the mind to give yourself room to think. It might be going for a walk (fast and intense), listening to 80s rock music followed by a calming crossword. You can manage all of this in 20-30 minutes (just don’t rush lunch afterwards and give yourself indigestion) to prime you for better efforts and outcomes afterwards.

So what of the proven benefits of mindfulness in the problem solving process? Stronger focus and improved memory (supports better framing and issue analysis), calmness under stress response (improves ideation) and indeed good corporate citizenship (supports buy-in and implementation).

Mindfulness is more than just breathing exercises but breath does work as an anchor for attention, quietening the ‘monkey mind’. Try it now. Close your eyes, inhale, exhale, repeat six times. Don’t you feel better and calmer already?

Opening Clients Up

Mindfulness also helps clients engage and share their problems. It helps manage emotions, get out of impulsive autopilot (and reactive) modes, creating spaces, helping to choose responses. Think of the last time you were tired and how you ‘reacted’ to someone compared to the last time you were relaxed and ‘responded positively’. Practicing mindfulness helps us choose our response and, whilst practice helps us get better, there’s no exam or critic at the end. Practice is the goal itself.

We can work through a ‘mindfulness-focused consulting problem-solving approach’. When using mindfulness, the immediate physical change is increased calm and serenity. This provides space for the client to be calm (perhaps useful if they sometimes manifest as an angry tiger with toothache), reflective and open. It encourages us (consultants and clients) to see more to life than the job or the day.

Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter

“You take a slight step back to accelerate forward.” (Or *“to draw back in order to leap better”* as used by diplomat Dudley Carleton in the early seventeenth century). We’ve all used the phrase *“well we wouldn’t start from here”* in assignments but I like this one – maybe we can just move a little bit over there and then start? The value of a pause to help you move forward, to reorient. Imagine being in a tight car parking space. You need to move back a little in order to turn out and be able to

make progress. Make the space to pause, reflect, respond and then accelerate. Stepping back enables certainty.

Factoring in Mindfulness Alongside Our Own Professional Development

Like many things, it just takes practice and making that practice a habit (without judgement of course!). Practice five minutes in the morning. Experience the taste of your coffee (rather than gulping down the caffeine shot), listen to the bird song, look at the sky. And you can SCHEDULE this stuff if you want to.

Perhaps a regular meeting with 'Justin Case'? Stick two blocks of 20 minutes in your diary every day to get some space and alone time. If you like the early mornings you might get out for a 6.30am half hour walk and listen to the silence and bird songs whilst pushing any thoughts back through that revolving door...

Once you start practicing all this, you begin to realise you mediate mindfully more than you think and you can always check out for a moment or two to observe your breath. The breaks make sense – they help strengthen the part of the brain responsible for focused attention and decision making. And that's the core tool of the management consultant isn't it?

And if your clients still think 'mindfulness' is flaky or 'new age hippy dippy' then reframe it. Find the language they do understand – make it about 'an effective manager can communicate well' or 'so how do you make someone feel good.'

Health and Safety is core compliance for most organisations and isn't mindfulness just mental health and safety? Top management is increasingly concerned with (and very responsible for) mental health and wellbeing so perhaps mindfulness becomes about the nurturing practices for what is constructive to our thinking capabilities.

And our closing thoughts?

If uncertain (or tired) then pause, stop, think and seek help. You wouldn't drive (or operate heavy machinery) when too tired, so why are you taking critical decisions then? Take ownership for how you, we (and our colleagues) are feeling and the implications. And notice that breath. Because "tomorrow is safer than an explosion."

If you want to be magnificent at management consulting, you can be mindful about it. Your mental health (and your clients) will thank you for it. It's just good business sense.