MINDFUL COMMUNICATION

By Denise Hellekson

Supervisors have many important responsibilities; they are expected to help develop employee skills, maintain discipline, resolve conflict, foster team building and build morale, develop plans for meeting company goals, and ensure employee productivity. Research shows that supervisors play a critical role in influencing the health of the work environment, and are the main reason most employees choose to stay with an organization or find work elsewhere.

Yet with all of the demands that come with the role of supervisor, it can be easy to feel stressed and overwhelmed, and become reactive rather than responsive to the needs of others. So how can supervisors manage the demands of the job and maintain healthy connections to their employees? One practice that is gaining more and more attention for its positive impact on overall well-being and stress management is mindfulness. Mindfulness means paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally (Jon Kabat-Zinn). According to researcher Holly Rau, “People who reported higher levels of mindfulness described better control over their emotions and behaviors during the day.”

In a recent article in The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing, a healthy work environment was described as one in which:

- A high level of trust exists between managers and employees,
- Employees treat each other with respect,
- Supervisors foster communication and collaboration,
- Employees feel physically and emotionally safe.

In the article, mindfulness was identified as one of five key factors that contributed to a communication-healthy work environment for nurses. The article focuses on professional nurses who have an ethical mandate to become skilled communicators and maintain a healthy work environment. One of the goals of professional nurses is to truly be present with others, which is a focus...
of mindfulness practice. Being truly present is meant to enhance the quality of work life both for themselves and for others.

There are many ways to develop a practice of mindfulness, including focused breathing and guided meditation. The goal of mindfulness is to become aware of what is happening in the present moment, without judgment, which can be very useful in making critical decisions and responding to the needs of the organization and your employees.

Communicating with others can offer one of the greatest opportunities to practice mindfulness. Practicing mindful communication necessitates that we slow down and allow ourselves to really look at the choices we make with others. Louise Altman suggests five practices that can help promote mindful communication:

1. Understand what you believe and why. We’re motivated by beliefs that are often unconscious and can impede what we consciously intend. We are operating from beliefs that drive every element of our communication—“I don’t have time for this.” “She’s not sincere,” “He doesn’t get it,” “I need to get this done now,” “I’ve told her this a million times.” It’s impossible to stay mindful present unless you understand what’s motivating your feelings and behavior in the moment. It’s in that moment of awareness that you can shift your response.

2. Accept that your perceptions are always limited and that your mindfulness task is to open your mind and heart to see more. There is always something new to learn and to see. When we open ourselves to the experience of others, the constant unfolding of learning is surprising.

3. Bring your empathy, however weak, to every communication. There’s a wonderful saying that’s making the rounds online these days: “Be kind, everyone is carrying a heavy burden.” Emotional contagion is real, and your conscious intent to understand others from where they sit will be felt.

4. Start recognizing the role your judgment plays in how you communicate. I’m not referring to your discerning rational mind—rather the way your judgment reduces or devalues the other person in your communication. Since we are always emotionally triggering ourselves and others, a judgment is instantly felt. The brain is always monitoring for reward and threat, so we can’t expect anything other than some form of defensive response from others when they feel judged.

5. Your intentions need to be linked to your outcomes. Form intentions to use as a rudder to guide you in your communication. Stay open to what others are trying to communicate. While we cannot know (without asking) what a positive outcome would be for the other person, we can commit to contributing to creating a supportive atmosphere.

Here are five practical steps to begin practicing mindful communication at work:

- **Be fully present** — Put all digital devices in available pockets and focus on the employee (this helps in picking up body language cues and ascertaining intent).

- **Listen intently** — Be slow to speak and rather use reflective listening techniques to get to the bottom of any presenting issue.

- **Connect** — Use of eye contact, appropriate facial expressions, body posture, and proximity all help in assuring the subordinate that this conversation is important to you.

- **Show genuine appreciation for the interaction** — Statements like: “I am so pleased that you mentioned this” or similar give the employee confidence and the motivation to keep trying to influence the company’s strategy positively.

- **Act on what has been mentioned** — All people expect feedback or the loop to be closed by the manager when an issue has been raised.

As Louise Altman stated, “Mindful communication requires us to reshape our field of awareness in every interaction. It asks, what can I bring to this communication, rather than what can I get from it? What qualities—kindness, acceptance, patience, lightness, humor, strength—can I offer? The results will provide us with the ROI (return on investment) we need.”
3 BENEFITS TO MINDFULNESS AT WORK

Research says mindfulness works for individuals. But does it work in the bottom-line-driven workplace, or is it just a frivolous feel-good program?

This is the question tackled in a growing number of studies. Here are three ways, based on four recent studies, that cultivating moment-to-moment awareness might improve workplaces.

MEDITATION MIGHT BUILD SELF-CONFIDENCE IN LEADERS

Our Mindful Mondays series provides ongoing coverage of the exploding field of mindfulness research.

A.D. Amar and colleagues at the University of Westminster measured the self-perception of leadership skills among a sample of senior managers in the London area—and then put them through a 12-week secularized Vipassana meditation-training program.

Their results, published in the Academy of Management Proceedings, revealed that training significantly enhanced their overall self-confidence, as well as the individual skills like inspiring a shared vision and demonstrating moral intelligence.

"However," conclude the authors, "meditation did not statistically significantly enhance participants’ skills as a role model and enabling others to act"—areas that will need more study in the future.

MINDFULNESS MIGHT WORK BEST IN CONJUNCTION WITH AUTONOMY

As we reported in June, researchers found that the more mindful the supervisor, the lower their employees’ emotional exhaustion and the higher their job satisfaction. But that study also revealed a caveat: When basic psychological needs like feelings of autonomy and connection with other people aren’t being met, the employee can lose the benefits of having a mindful supervisor.

A new study, published in the September 2014 edition of the Mindfulness, extends that study by specifically exploring the link between mindfulness and autonomy.

The researchers recruited two hundred and fifty-nine participants, assessing them for their mindful traits—like the ability to pay attention for long periods of time—and exploring how much autonomy they felt like they had on the job (as opposed to facing a more controlling managerial style).

Echoing that previous study, the researchers found that both autonomy and mindfulness “had direct relations with employee work well-being.” Feeling less empowered at work was associated with a lower level of health and happiness. These indirect effects, found the researchers, were moderated by mindfulness—meaning that more mindful people were less likely to feel frustration, even when supervisors squashed their independence.

“Mindfulness thus appears to act as a protective factor in controlling work environments,” conclude the researchers.

ONLINE TRAINING CAN ENHANCE EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

If mindfulness works in the office, then what’s the best way to deliver the training?

A study published in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine sought to determine whether an online mindfulness program created for a specific workplace, the Dow Chemical Company, could cut stress while enhancing the resiliency and well-being of employees.

Eighty-nine participants completed scientific scales designed to measure their degree of stress, mindfulness, resiliency, and vigor. They were then divided into two groups—one to take the online class and one to sit on the wait list.

After the first group finished, the researchers came six months later to see how everyone was doing. They found that, in fact, the group that took the class was doing a lot better—they were less stressed, more resilient, and more energetic than the group that couldn’t yet take the class.

“This online mindfulness intervention seems to be both practical and effective in... enhancing overall employee well-being,” conclude the researchers.

—By Jeremy Adam Smith, producer and editor of the Greater Good Science Center’s website, www.greargood.berkeley.edu.
CRANKING WIDGETS:
TURN YOUR WORK INTO STRESS-FREE PRODUCTIVITY

One of the great revelations David Allen makes in “Getting Things Done” is his analogy of cranking widgets. In a nutshell, he talks about those simple jobs where you come to work in the morning with a pile of widgets to crank, and you leave work with a pile of nicely cranked widgets. It's a mindless job, but there's not much stress, and it's satisfying, and it's simple. And you know if you're being productive because you are really cranking those widgets.

For most of us, it's not that simple. We've got a million emails, voicemails, phone calls, documents, and visitors to deal with. That's on top of a list of projects and to-dos that can drive anyone crazy. With all of that going on, we look at our list and see an item that says, “Redesign website” or “Research market trends.” Frankly, those are not widgets that can be cranked. They are intimidating projects that might sit on the to-do list while we go check out our favorite blog.

So what to do? Turn your work into a Cranking Widgets job.

Here's how:

• **For every project that you have, select one next-action.** You can make a whole list of next-actions if you want, but it's most important to get one next-action. This is defined as the very next physical action that needs to be done to move your project forward. Let's look at that carefully: Very next means that it's something that should be done first, instead of later, otherwise the project can't move forward; if there are more than one of those, just choose one. Physical action means something you can do in the physical world: things like call, email, write, list, read, decide, talk to, brainstorm, buy. Things that can't be done in one action are multiple actions, widgets that can't be cranked.

• **Take a look at your to-do lists and make sure that all items are crankable widgets.** Sometimes things on our to-do lists are actually multiple widgets combined into one item. Start garden, for example, might entail things like list tools needed, call mom for seedlings, go to store to buy tools, get watering can from shed, turn over dirt, etc. Redesign website might start with a next-action of surf web for inspiring examples of good design, or read article on design, or draw three design ideas, or brainstorm new website name.

• **List the widgets by the type of crank used.** This is another way of saying that you should group by context. Group phone calls together. Group reading items together (in a folder). Group emails to be written together. Group websites to research together. That way, when you're cranking out the phone calls, you have them all on one list and can just crank, instead of searching for the widgets that need to be cranked.

• **Just crank.** If you've truly broken your to-do list down to crankable widgets, there's no more thinking involved, at least not at a higher level. All you gotta do is crank them. When you crank one, celebrate, and get going on the next. At the end of the day, you should have a nice stack of cranked widgets, and that's pretty satisfying.

—Reprinted with permission, www.zenhabits.net