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Mindfulness and Experiential Learning

By Bauback Yeganeh and David Kolb

Over the last forty years researchers from many different theoretical perspectives have discovered that individuals develop consistent, routinized approaches to learning called learning styles (Sims and Sims 2006). Of the models that have emerged, Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) has largely influenced leadership and organization development. The experiential learning cycle is one of the most well-known illustrations in management education and has become the key theoretical model to express the nature of experiential learning (Cunningham, 1994). Experiential learning theory also forms some of the basis for notions of the learning organization (Vince, 1998; Casey, 1993; Senge, 1990). Furthermore, organizational research and practice supports the premise that when learning is defined holistically as the basic process of human adaptation, it subsumes more specialized managerial processes such as entrepreneurial learning, strategy formulation, creativity, problem solving, decision making, and leadership.

Learning styles are used to make sense of the world and adapt to it. But what happens when learners over-routinize their learning styles? Are they missing opportunities to reach their learning potentials? This article discusses how mindfulness techniques can enhance experiential learning and provides tools for practice in organizations. Mindfulness is an age old practice used to overcome the tendency to "sleep walk" repetitively through our lives. In recent times it has been accepted into mainstream psychology, social psychology, and medicine. Empirical studies are now finding statistical support for what many have known for two millennia: that practicing mindfulness enhances mental and physical health, creativity, and contextual learning. In a world of flux and rapidity, living mindlessly can result in a host of problems including but not limited to: tunnel vision, increased stress, reduced physical health, reduced creativity, and difficulty navigating complex systems. As our sister fields of psychology and social psychology grow mindfulness research and practices, our field must as well. In this article we explore and discuss mindfulness as a tool to assist learners in unlocking their full learning potential in organizations.

Mindfulness

So what exactly is mindfulness? Any construct that has existed for thousands of years has many definitions. We would like to offer two of the most widely accepted descriptions of mindfulness. In our research with Darren Good at Case Western Reserve University, we found two predominant streams of mindfulness research and practice, meditative mindfulness and socio-cognitive mindfulness (Good & Yeganeh, 2006; Yeganeh, 2008).

Meditative Mindfulness. Although it is widely used as part of a secular mindfulness practice, mindfulness is the core of Buddhist meditation (Kabat Zinn, 1994). Thich Nhat Hanh, Gunaratana, Kabat-Zinn, and other present day authors advocate developing mindfulness through meditation techniques to help people heal

themselves and live intentionally. A distinction of meditative mindfulness is that it requires a discipline of anchoring the mind in the present moment. This is often accompanied with a practice of awareness and acceptance through breathing. Kabat-Zinn (1994) defines mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (p.4). Non-judgment, in mindfulness theory, is accepting the current state as part of a constant flow of changing experiences. This paradigm suggests that letting go of judgment strengthens the mind, and it challenges the illusion that over-thinking something gives one control over it. Authors who discuss mindfulness within these parameters also talk about the antithesis of mindfulness which is mindlessness, or a state of auto-pilot and lack of intention. Are you aware of your breathing right now? Try some deep calm breaths from the diaphragm prior to reading on. Try practicing acceptance of whatever you are experiencing in the moment by letting go of evaluation and judgment.

Socio-cognitive mindfulness. Developed by social psychologists, this understanding of mindfulness emphasizes cognitive categorization, context and situational awareness (Langer 1997; Langer, 2000). Harvard social psychologist Ellen Langer, often relates mindfulness to learning:

> "When we are mindful, we implicitly or explicitly (1) view a situation from several perspectives, (2) see information presented in the situation as novel, (3) attend to the context in which we perceive the information, and eventually (4) create new categories through which this information may be understood." (Langer,1997, p.111)

Langer (1997) argues that our school systems largely encourage mindless learning through the accumulation of "objective" truths, rather than mindful learning which places a value on context, uncertainty, and doubt. As with meditative mindfulness, socio-cognitive mindfulness authors contrast mindfulness with mindlessness, which is described as automatic behavior. When mindless, "we act like automatons who have been programmed to act according to the sense our behavior made in the past, rather than the present." (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000, p.2). Mindfulness from the socio-cognitive perspective requires broadening one's repertoire of cognitive categories. The idea of creating new categories was influenced by Langer's earlier studies in bias and prejudice. Explaining the practical benefits she illustrates that "If we describe someone we dislike intensely, a single statement usually does it. But if, instead, we are forced to describe the person in great detail, eventually there will be some quality we appreciate" (Langer, 1989, p.66). One of the reasons Langer's work is so compelling is that it thoroughly supports the notion that simple labels (e.g. good and evil) do not accurately reflect the complexity of the world. Instead they allow for mindless rationalizations that justify a broad range of dysfunctional behaviors, from ineffective to criminal. Are you aware of how you are sorting and labeling what you are reading right now? Are you aware of the images, memories, and thoughts that your mind is recalling as you are reading? Try exploring one or two categories you have been using while digesting this article thus far.

Figure 1: Meditative and Socio-Cognitive Mindfulness/Mindlessness Comparison

Socio-Cognitive Mindfulness	Similarities	Meditative Mindfulness
1. Sensitivity to context 2. Openness to new information 3. Novel distinction/New Categories 4. Multiple Perspectives	1. Awareness 2. Novelty 3. Engagement	1. Present-centered 2. Nonjudgmental 3. Purposeful
Socio-Cognitive Mindlessness	**Similarities**	**Meditative Mindlessness**
1. Autopilot 2. Following predetermined rules 3. Engaged in routinized behaviors 4. Rigid perspectives 5. Lacking capacity for variation	1. Autopilot 2. Rigid Biases 3. Predetermined Rules	1. Habitual Reactions 2. Living in past/future 3. Judgment/Evaluation 4. Autopilot

One way to distinguish the two schools of thought is that meditative mindfulness, with its focus on present centered awareness, describes an internal process required to maintain a mindful state, where socio-cognitive mindfulness definitions seem to focus on cognitive applications of mindfulness (e.g. how we can more effectively sort out experiences and make sense of the world based on new mental categories/models). Furthermore, meditative mindfulness authors offer techniques in practicing mindfulness through breathing, acceptance and present centered awareness. Socio-cognitive mindfulness deemphasizes meditation, suggesting supplemental practices such as placing a value on doubt, looking for disconfirming data, and producing new ways of thinking and acting. Each of these approaches offer research streams in which a person's degree of mindfulness is measured through statistically validated self-report assessments. Meditative mindfulness is often measured by Brown & Ryan's Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and socio-cognitive mindfulness is measured by the Langer Mindfulness Scale (LMS) (Bodner, 2000). A factor analyses (Yeganeh, 2006) of these two scales completed by 314 participants confirmed multiple and unique dimensions to mindfulness. Our research

supports the following multi-dimensional definition of mindfulness:

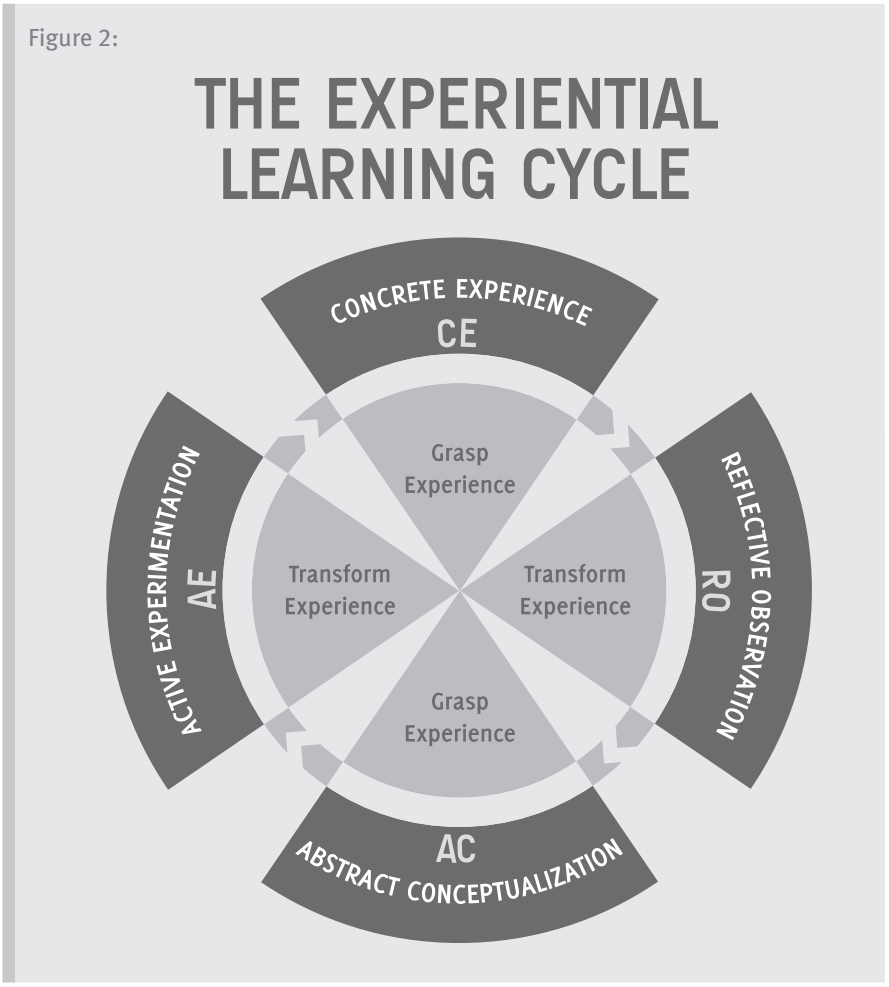
Mindfulness is a state in which an individual:
1. *focuses on present and direct experience*
2. *is intentionally aware and attentive*
3. *accepts life as an emergent process of change*

Mindfulness and Experiential Learning

Building on this research, we began to explore the notion that mindfulness might increase the effectiveness of learning from experience. Specifically we designed a study to explore the learning style(s) of mindful individuals using the two mindfulness scales just described and the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (Kolb 2007) based on experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). By understanding the relationship between mindfulness and experiential learning styles, we could begin to design mindful experiential learning practices to be used in organizations.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of *grasping* and *transforming* experience" (Kolb, 1984, p.41). The ELT model portrays two dialectically related modes of *grasping* experience—Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC)—and two dialectically related modes of *transforming* experience—Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE). Experiential learning is a process of constructing knowledge that involves a creative tension among the four learning modes. This process is portrayed as an idealized learning cycle or spiral where the learner "touches all the bases"—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting—in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned. Immediate *concrete experiences (experiencing)* are the basis for observations and *reflections*. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into *abstract concepts (thinking)* from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be *actively tested* and serve as guides in creating new experiences (see *Figure 2*).

Figure 2:



Learning style describes the unique ways that individuals spiral through the learning cycle based on their preference for the four different learning modes—CE, RO, AC, & AE. Because of our genetic makeup, our particular life experiences, and the demands of our present environment, we develop a preferred way of choosing among these four learning modes. We resolve the conflict between being concrete or abstract and between being active or reflective in patterned, characteristic ways. ELT posits that learning is the major determinant of human development and how individuals learn shapes the course of their personal development. Previous research (Kolb 1984) has shown that learning styles are influenced by personality type, culture, educational specialization, career choice, and current job role and tasks.

Our hypotheses about the relationship between mindfulness and learning style were influenced by William James, the originator of the theory of experience on which ELT is based. James (1890) stated, "no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before" (p.155). The mind often neglects the rich context available for observation that makes experience unique. Instead it often automatically labels stimuli based on limited exposure and moves on to the next stimulus to underobserve. To extend this further, our labels of work experiences such as productive, boring, awful, successful, urgent, relaxed, and so on are also often based in automatically categorizing experience, rather than being fully present in the unique context of the moment. James' emphasis on immediate direct sensual experience is exactly the focus on here and now experience that has been characterized by mindfulness for thousands of years. James also emphasized the importance of attention. He defines a spiral of interest-attention-selection similar to the experiential learning cycle

that creates a continuous ongoing flow of experience summarized in the pithy statement—"My experience is what I agree to attend to." (1890, p. 403). This also is a central element of mindfulness.

Supporting these links between learning from experience and mindfulness, our research found that individuals who scored high on Langer's mindfulness scale emphasized direct concrete experience in their learning style (Yeganeh, 2006). We also found that individuals scoring high on mindfulness did not score high on reflective observation, suggesting that they were not "lost in thought" or rumination but were attentive to their experiences. The results suggest that the practice of mindfulness could help individuals learn from experience in two ways:

1. Encouraging a focus on here-and-now experience uncluttered by preconceptions and bias
2. Intentionally guiding their learning process by paying attention to how they are going through the phases of the learning cycle

Mindfulness becomes important when we consider *how* we choose to process and learn from events at work. Learning style determines the way we process the possibilities of each new emerging experience, which in turn determines the range of choices and decisions we see. The choices and decisions we make to some extent determine the events we work through, and these events influence our future choices. Thus, people create themselves and their learning styles through the choices of the actual occasions they live through. For many, this learning style choice has become relatively unconscious, comprised of deeply patterned routines applied globally to learning situations. Mindfulness can put the control of learning back in the learner's hands.

Practicing Mindful Experiential Learning

As it relates to mindfulness, ELT provides a grounded explanation of the learning processes of the mind when making sense of the environment (Zull 2002). The mind makes sense of complex environments by generalizing. In doing so, rules and guidelines are abstracted (AC) from experiences (CE) which are then acted (AE) and/or reflected (RO) on. Indeed this is what has enabled early civilization to take shelter when weather worsens, use fire to ward off nocturnal scavengers, seek medicine when ill, teach right from wrong, and so on and so forth. It is clear that this propensity to generalize can be a gift, enabling us to thrive. However, the process of generalizing from experience can also result in rumination, bigotry, fortunetelling, stress, and the like; all of which decrease learning ability. The ability to generalize is neutral; it is how we go about doing so that determines generative or degenerative outcome. Incorporating mindfulness practices into experiential learning processes will help organization members become more intentional about how and when they learn. An underlying assumption in mindful experiential learning is that the quality of experiential learning increases as organization members are more intentional. Practical examples of mindful experiential learning in organizations are limitless. For example organizational teams can increase awareness of how individuals work with one another in specific situations, and who is best for specific kinds of work on a team. Leaders can better manage complex projects without making rash decisions based on limited information. Strategy makers can become more effective in processes by rethinking how data is collected and considered. Below we provide mindful experiential learning tools that can be adapted for use in organizations based on specific needs.

Mindfulness can free the mind to intentionally think and create in new ways. Those with rigorous mindfulness practices routinely practice present centered awareness. Meditation is a powerful way to discipline the mind into practicing mindfulness. However, there are also ways to practice mindfulness for those who are not dedicated to a meditation program. One thing is certain, if organization members are interested in developing mindful experiential learning skills, it is vital to begin a mindfulness routine, whether through meditation or not. For those interested in practicing mindfulness without meditation, it is important to find a way to regularly attend to one's state in order to be intentional in subsequent thoughts and behaviors. Self-monitoring when coupled with practicing acceptance creates new opportunities to think and act in learning situations. This requires a routine of "checking-in" with the self, which can be done through regular journaling, questioning, and/or taking several deep breaths from the diaphragm while accepting the present moment. Some mistakenly confuse acceptance with apathy, which it is not. In mindfulness theory, acceptance disallows the mind and body to suffer from things beyond one's control. This can paradoxically enable one to attain goals that may have otherwise been self-sabotaged by stress and attempts at over-controlling. Working toward goals is congruent with practicing mindful experiential learning in organizations. However having an overbearing outcome-orientation in which preoccupation with a specific result hinders work effectiveness, is a classic sign of mindlessness.

Tools for Mindful Learning

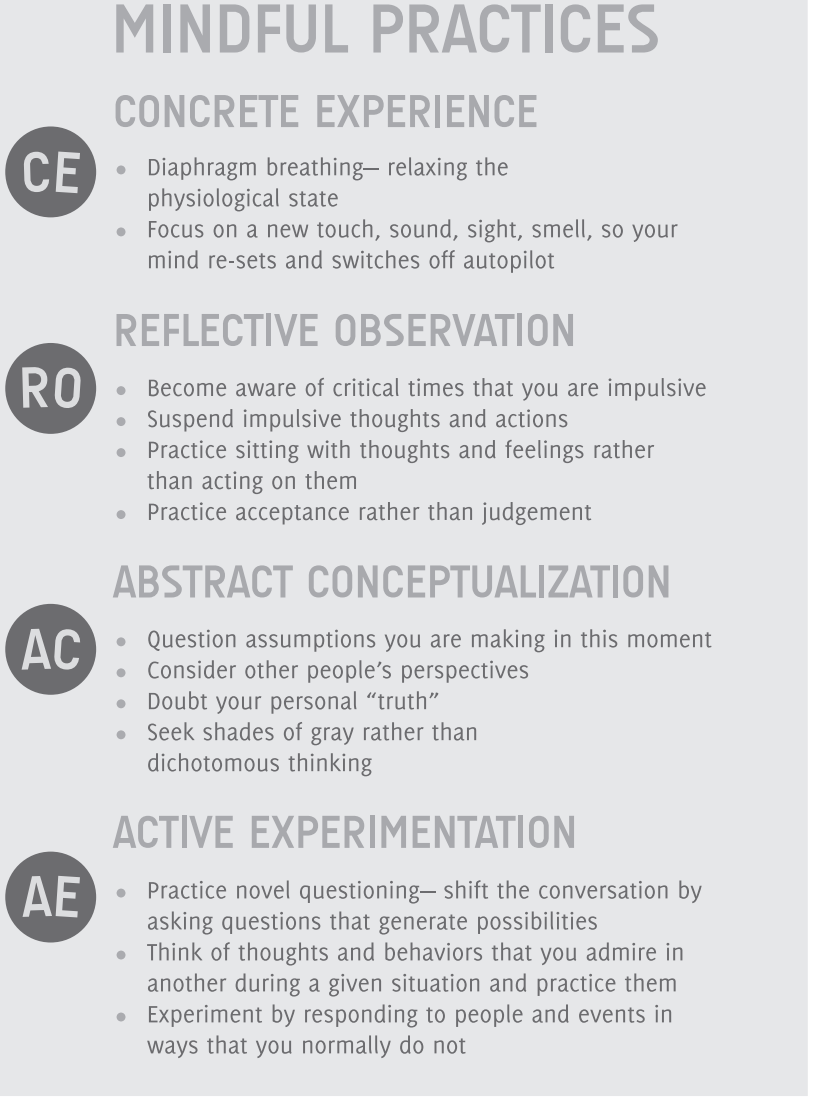
Those who use the Kolb Learning Style Inventory to assess their learning style often decide that they wish to develop their capacity to engage in one or more of the four modes of the learning cycle—experiencing (CE), reflecting (RO), thinking (AC) and acting (AE). In some cases this is based on a desire to develop a weak mode in their learning style. In others it may be to increase capability in a mode that is particularly important for their learning tasks. Because of the dialectic relationships among the learning modes, inhibiting dominating modes can be as effective in developing strengths as actively developing inhibited modes. Overall learning effectiveness is improved when individuals are highly skilled in engaging all four modes of the learning cycle at contextually appropriate times.

We have created a practical model *(Figure 3)* from mindfulness and experiential learning work that answers the following question: What are various

mindfulness practices that can be used to develop the capacity to engage in one or more of the four modes of the learning cycle in organizations? The next section provides some useful tools to improve specific modes of experiential learning through mindfulness. Keep in mind that the key to being mindful when learning is intentionality, as opposed to being on autopilot in any of the phases.

Developing the capacity for experiencing (CE).
This requires fully opening oneself to direct experience. Direct experience exists only in the here-and-now, a present moment of endless depth and extension that can never be fully comprehended. In fact, being heavily biased in the thinking mode (being too much "in your head") can inhibit the ability to directly sense and feel the immediate moment. Engagement in concrete experience can be enhanced by being present in the moment and attending to direct sensations and feelings. This presence and attention are particularly important for relationships. Interpersonal skills of leadership, relationship and giving and receiving, can improve by developing the experiencing mode of learning. Those who tend to be heavy in thinking and light on experiencing may wish to write out lists of everything floating around in their minds. This can include "to do's", ideas, concerns, and anything else cluttering the mind. The mind often replays these thoughts to maintain control over them. Once thoughts are written out, it is easier to practice engaging in the present moment, knowing that the list is only a glance away if something seems forgotten at a later date. Clearing the mind is a central tool for shifting from abstract thought into engaging present moment experience. Additionally, any time words are being used to think or speak, abstract thinking is happening. Words are symbols, representing only a fraction of full experience. To develop the capacity for experiencing, one can practice observing the environment while consciously shifting the mind away from words that arise, and back to the momentary observation. Taking deep breaths while doing this, anchors the mind in momentary awareness of perception: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell, and away from abstract thought. If thoughts appear in the mind, one can gently but firmly re-focus on the breath and away from thinking in order to be more fully present. Deep breathing is a powerful intervention for strengthening the ability to experience. Most of us breathe shallowly, especially when engaged in tasks that pull us away from momentary awareness. Anchor points for creating a mindful learning routine can be as simple as routinely taking deep breaths from the diaphragm. In order to remember breathing, one can practice routine self check-ins, asking "how deeply am I breathing right now?" Creating reminder cues such as a pen dot on the hand, and/or a symbol at the desk can help as well. Because the practices suggested to engage in experience include adaptations of meditation, they often come with a host of benefits such as reduced stress, increased clarity, improved health, calmness, and creativity.

Figure 3: Mindful Experiential Learning Practice Guide



Developing the capacity for reflecting.
Reflection requires space and time. It can be inhibited by impulsive desires and/or pressures to take action. It can be enhanced by the practices of deliberately viewing

things from different perspective and empathy. Stillness and quieting the mind foster deep reflection. Information skills of sense-making, information gathering and information analysis can aid in the development and expression of the reflecting mode of learning. To practice this phase of mindful experiential learning, one can actively discover critical times of impulsive action and plan to suspend action during these times through mindfulness. Focus on the physiological cues that signal when impulsivity is about to occur. When these cues arise, practicing redirecting the mind towards reflection can be a powerful tool. Those who feel quick to judge and act can routinely ask themselves "what actions have I been rushing into that I can sit with a bit longer to make sure I am being intentional?" This can be done numerous ways. One suggestion we offer clients is to program their computer calendars to announce this question on their screens every hour or few hours. Another useful practice is to hone in on one issue that requires reflection, and spend 10-15 minutes to generate new questions to answer about the issue. Create a question for yourself that you normally would not ponder, and place a value on doubt, rather than rushing into being correct. Finally, practice acceptance of the moment by identifying which actions are generative and which ones are just a way of trying to take control of an uncontrollable aspect of the environment.

Developing the capacity for thinking.

Thinking requires the ability to cognitively represent and manipulate ideas. It can be distracted by intense direct emotion and sensations as well as pressure to act quickly. Engagement in thinking can be enhanced by practicing theoretical model building and the creation of scenarios for action. Analytical skills of theory building, data analysis and technology management can aid in the development and expression of the thinking mode of learning. From a mindfulness perspective, questioning assumptions can help to focus the mind in order to make "theories-in-use" intentional rather than automatic. Taking time to view assumptions from multiple perspectives can enrich thought. A way to do this is to experiment with how one would make sense of a situation if a current belief were untrue. Another tool is to consider the role that context plays in current mental models, and how these might differ if the context changed. Creating contextual knowledge rather than pursuing dichotomous thinking can strengthen the capacity for abstract thought. Be aware that mindlessly shifting from abstract thought to concrete experience can interfere with learning in some scenarios. Practicing a focused routine of abstract questioning and seeking shades of gray can develop the mind's ability to fully think in learning situations.

Developing the capacity for action.

Acting requires commitment and involvement in the practical world of real consequences. In a sense it is the "bottom line" of the learning cycle, the place where internal experiencing, reflecting and thinking are tested in reality. Acting can be inhibited by too much internal processing in any of these three modes. Acting can be enhanced by courageous initiative-taking and the creation of cycles of goal-setting and feedback to monitor performance. Action skills of initiative, goal-setting and action-taking can aid in the development and expression of the acting mode of learning. Mindfulness can assist with this phase by helping learners be intentional about actions, especially when reflective observation is a more comfortable state for the learner. Asking people novel and thoughtful questions can be a safe and mindful way to begin practicing action. Another tool is having the learner envision all the ideal behaviors that he/she would like to practice. The learner then can decide which behaviors would be generative to practice in specific learning situations and begin practicing one or two of them mindfully. Learners who would like to move to action more often or more strongly will benefit from being aware of and releasing any automatic self-judgments, self-schemas, feelings and thoughts that support inaction. This can be accomplished through acceptance and breathing practices. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that acting isn't just about filling space with behavior. Intentionally suspending behavior can be a mindful act as well.

Conclusion

Everybody has learning style preferences. Cultivating mindfulness can help organization members become more intentional about how they think and behave in a given learning environment. In order to be more aware of learning processes, learners must find unique ways to engage in routines of momentary awareness. Regular practices of deep breathing can help create anchor points for learners to check in on thoughts and behaviors. In organizations it is helpful for learners to identify people who they can routinely check-in with on the degree to which they are being intentional in learning situations. These conversational anchors provide environmental cues to stay focused on a mindfulness practice and emotional support to remain optimistic. Using coaches who are well trained in mindfulness is also a powerful tool. Finally, we encourage learners not to be discouraged when facing difficulty in starting a mindful experiential learning practice. It may be best to try 1 or 2 specific mindful learning practices, and go from there. Anything more can be overwhelming and may actually inhibit progress. As techniques are mastered, additional methods can be added. In this article, we have provided mindful experiential learning practices that can improve the quality of learning in the four modes of experiential learning. These can be adapted to coaching processes, employee development programs, dialogue sessions, cultivating emotional intelligence, daily meeting practices and much more. We have presented new research and practical approaches to mindful experiential learning in organizations. We encourage others to develop innovative ways to use mindfulness in organizations and to share the results through articles and presentations so that one day using mindfulness in organizations becomes the norm. We believe it is needed more now than ever before.

Mindfulness is an age old tool to

enhance life by reducing automaticity. Mindful experiential learning can be cultivated in organizations without mandating employees to commit to specific meditation practices. In many of our experiences with coaching leaders, simply presenting some of the practices discussed in this article has been enough to generate interest, resulting in self-driven exploration of mindful experiential learning. Experiential learning theory helps us understand the mental architecture of learning. Mindfulness helps us understand processes by which the mind is aware, intentional, and accepting. Using the two together unlocks a powerful tool for empowered adult learning in organizations.

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