

Mindful Service Transforms the Workplace

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Introduction

Stress, disconnection, and criticism are three factors that notably stifle creativity, degrade teamwork, and lower productivity in the workplace. While there is no debate that such factors directly affect a company's bottom line, leaders are often at a loss about how to meaningfully tackle these interconnected issues. YOL's Mindful Service™ model addresses these challenges with hands-on training in four areas: 1) mindfulness practice; 2) trust building; 3) diversity awareness; and 4) compassion training. As an experiential learning company that works internationally to create better leaders and teams, YOL has developed and tested its unique approach to service engagement and found that Mindful Service™ can have lasting, positive impacts on individuals, interactions, and whole team dynamics. YOL partners with local nonprofit organizations to tackle a variety of social and environmental projects. During Mindful Service™ teams and individuals work together to accomplish tangible community projects, transform stress into productivity and compassionate action, and turn disconnection into trust. Participants in YOL's Mindful Service™ programs immediately report a significant decrease in overall stress, as well as higher levels of empowerment, self-awareness, and inspiration. Over time, Mindful Service™ can improve individual and group engagement, collaboration, motivation, productivity, and creativity.¹

Not Your Typical "Give Back" Day

Research shows that participating in community service improves health and facilitates peak performance. Allan Luks, former Executive Director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America and author of *The Healing Power of Doing Good*, says in his book that "volunteering reduces the body's stress and also releases endorphins, the brain's natural painkillers."² Those who volunteer regularly are "ten times more likely to be in good health than people who don't volunteer,"³ and those positive feelings that come from meaningful service likely contribute to positive wellbeing in the long term. Luks' research suggests there is a flow state that is particular to altruism-driven service, which he terms the "Helper's High." Volunteers experience Helper's High as powerful positive feelings and physical pain relief—effects that linger on. Flow states, like Helper's High, are "optimal state(s) of consciousness where we feel our best and perform our best."⁴ They are so profoundly central to human activity that Steven Kotler, bestselling author of *The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance* and co-founder of the Flow Genome Project, describes them as "the secret to ultimate human

¹ Retrieved 11 November 2018 from www.yoltrips.com/impact

² Luks, A. & Payne, P. 2001. "The Healing Power of Doing Good: The Health and Spiritual Benefits of Helping Others." iUniverse, pg. 9

³ Retrieved 18 November 2018 from http://allanluks.com/helpers_high

⁴ Kotler, S. 2014. "The Flow Landscape: The Gateways to Ultimate Performance," Forbes, 4 March 2014, retrieved 21 October 2018 from www.forbes.com/sites/stevenkotler/2014/03/04/the-flow-landscape-the-gateways-to-ultimate-performance/#23b079866311

performance.”⁵ Compared to flow states generated by athleticism or creative pursuits, which typically last two to three hours, Helper’s High can last for two to three *days* after service engagement.⁶ Mindful Service™ generates this flow state and harnesses its power to teach new self-regulation and self-care practices and enhance connection between participants.

Shared service engagement can have profound and long-lasting effects on a professional team. When willing volunteers step out of their normal routines and come together to work toward a common goal, this broadens their perspectives and cultivates a sense of purpose. Tackling a community project allows participants to feel the impact of their service on one of the many social and environmental issues that exist in today’s world. When volunteers see the power of their positive intention play out in real life, they challenge the perception that “I can’t make a difference,” which so often dampens positive action.

The four elements of Mindful Service™ (mindfulness practice, trust building, diversity awareness, and compassion training) work together to amplify the natural mental, physical, and emotional benefits of community service. When we participate in service that is specifically designed to support an organization’s mission, ourselves, and our team’s culture, we reduce stress and ignite our sense of collective capacity to take action and make change across our life contexts, including the workplace.

From Stress to Mindful Productivity

Stress is a natural physiological response to the pressures of life. All mammals, including humans, have a shared feature in our nervous system: the fight-flight-freeze response. The sympathetic nervous system activates this reaction to keep us safe when we experience threats—or simply perceive something as a possible threat.⁷ Over the span of human history, most dangers around us came in short bursts, from predators or marauders. Yet in the present day, perceived threats to our survival are often sustained: family conflict, disagreement with colleagues, alarming political headlines, looming destruction of the natural environment, and the like. These stressors are lasting and layered. The more negative life events we endure, the more stress we experience. This near-constant activation of our natural stress response can result in debilitating levels of anxiety or depression that interrupt individuals’ daily functioning and limit their capacity to contribute to productive workflow.

The American Psychological Association (APA) estimates that workplace stress is costing American businesses more than \$500 billion annually, and 550 million workdays are lost each year because of on-the-job stress.⁸ Harvard Business Review states that workplace stress drastically negatively impacts engagement and attendance at work:

⁵ Kotler, 2014

⁶ Kotler, 2014

⁷ “Understanding the Stress Response,” Harvard Medical Journal, 2011, retrieved 1 November 2018 from www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/understanding-the-stress-response

⁸ Seppälä, E. & Cameron, K. 2015. “Proof That Positive Work Cultures Are More Productive,” Harvard Business Review, 1 December 2015, retrieved November 1, 2018, <https://hbr.org/2015/12/proof-that-positive-work-cultures-are-more-productive>

“While a cut-throat environment and a culture of fear can ensure engagement (and sometimes even excitement) for some time, research suggests that the inevitable stress it creates will likely lead to disengagement over the long term. Engagement in work—which is associated with feeling valued, secure, supported, and respected—is generally negatively associated with a high-stress, cut-throat culture.”⁹

Meanwhile, in a worldwide employee engagement study conducted from 2011-2012, Gallup found that only 13% of employees—about one in eight—are “engaged” in their jobs, meaning they report they are “psychologically committed to their jobs and likely to be making positive contributions to their organizations.” A surprising 63% are “not engaged”—they’re putting in the time required, but not much passion—and 24% are “actively disengaged.”¹⁰ Related research by Gallup and the Queens School of Business found that “disengaged workers [have] 37% higher absenteeism, 49% more accidents, and 60% more errors and defects,” contributing up to \$500 billion a year in losses in productivity.¹¹

With this awareness, some businesses are beginning to address factors that create stress for employees at work and find ways to increase engagement in ways that will benefit both workers and the bottom line. Recognizing the power of organizational culture to shape these factors, many companies are now pioneering “culture” programs with the valuable aim of positively influencing employees’ experiences.

Yet, perks and flashy, “fun” programs that try to announce to millennials “We’re different than your parents’ corporation!” won’t sufficiently solve the severe underlying problem of workplace stress. Rather, research shows that teaching people how to regulate their nervous systems can significantly decrease stress levels and positively impact engagement, productivity, teamwork, and profits. Mindfulness is one of the most well-known techniques for self-regulation, and the practice has been demonstrated many times over to have powerful effects on reducing absenteeism and turnover, increasing productivity, improving relationships, job satisfaction, self-control and discipline, and promoting a more grounded and focused workplace.¹² Interest in mindfulness (defined by scientist, writer, and meditation teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn as “paying attention...on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally”¹³) initially gained popularity in the U.S. because of its use in medical healing. It has since rapidly spread across sectors, including health care, the military, education, and now, business. Corporations such as Google, General Mills, and BlackRock invested early in mindfulness training for their teams, seeing firsthand the benefits of self-regulation as a wellness tool for combating workplace stress.¹⁴

⁹ Seppälä & Cameron, 2015

¹⁰ Crabtree, S. 2013. “Worldwide, 13% of Employees are Engaged at Work,” Gallup, 8 October 2013, retrieved on 18 November 2018 from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/165269/worldwide-employees-engaged-work.aspx>

¹¹ Seppälä & Cameron, 2015

¹² Lear, K. 2016. “Mainstream Mindfulness” Inlay Insights, 5, retrieved on 18 November 2018 from http://inlayinsights.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/inlay-insights_whitepaper-4.pdf

¹³ Kabat-Zinn, J. 2017. “Jon Kabat-Zinn: Defining Mindfulness” Mindful, 11 January 2017, retrieved on 11 November 2018 from <https://www.mindful.org/jon-kabat-zinn-defining-mindfulness/>

¹⁴ Lear, 2016, p 8-9

Mindful Service™ goes beyond the trend toward personal mindfulness practices, teaching participants how to regulate stress while engaging in shared activity. At YOL, leaders learn how to apply self-regulation practices in personal and shared contexts, promoting balanced life choices and a sustainable, effective approach to productivity. Mindfulness can be practiced by pausing an activity and changing the focus of attention. For example, closing your eyes for a few breaths or scooting back from the computer for a quick body scan to feel what’s going on inside. Alternatively, mindfulness practices can be done amidst the action, right alongside whatever you’re doing (imagine eating each bite of food with full attention or walking to the bus stop with focused awareness of every single time your foot touches the ground and savoring where that contact happens). Mindful Service™ teaches participants both how to pause *and* how to engage in mindful work for the maximum benefits of stress reduction and nervous system regulation. Through direct service engagement, we also discover how to add layers of intention to the heightened attention that mindfulness promotes. These somatic skills for working together with the body and mind (instead of trying to circumvent biological and habitual tendencies) constitute a primary line of support for managing stress and improving nervous system regulation—one that can be applied immediately at home and in the workplace.

Frankly, we don’t live life in a silent room on a meditation cushion. Our world is fast-paced, ever-changing, and intense. For this reason, Mindful Service™ participants train in self-regulation practices while directly engaging in hands-on service. This challenge requires them to focus and prepares them to immediately put these valuable somatic skills into practice after the service experience is complete. Using self-regulation tools in action is a critical part of understanding their power, and practicing them during service work gives participants confidence that they can take steps to activate their own wellbeing in dynamic environments, such as the workplace. There are innumerable ways to establish present-moment awareness, yet humans are profoundly diverse and there is no “one size fits all” somatic self-regulation practice that works well for every person or every situation. Mindful Service™ participants are encouraged to experiment and explore which skills or practices suit their constitution and professional needs most effectively and enjoyably.

From Disconnection to Trust & True Connection

Loneliness in the U.S. has increased intensively in recent decades¹⁵ and has had a direct negative impact on physical wellbeing. People with stronger social relationships have a 50% higher likelihood of surviving disease regardless of all other factors.¹⁶ Social connection is now considered so central by the nonprofit Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, that they’ve decreed it to be one of six health domains that every doctor should evaluate on every visit. While there are several factors at play in the comprehensive rise in loneliness for people of all ages, Cigna’s 2018 survey of more than 20,000 people showed that, as Dr. Douglas Nemecek, the

¹⁵ Retrieved from: https://cigna.newshq.businesswire.com/press-release/new-cigna-study-reveals-loneliness-epidemic-levels-america?WT.z_nav=newsroom%2Fnews-releases%2F2018%2Fnew-cigna-study-reveals-loneliness-at-epidemic-levels-in-america%3BBody%3Bhttp%3A%2F%2Fcigna.newshq.businesswire.com%2Fpress-release%2Fnew-cigna-study-reveals-loneliness-epidemic-levels-america

¹⁶ Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T.B., & Layton, J.B. 2010. Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review. PLoS Med 7(7): e1000316. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>

organization’s Chief Medical Officer for Behavioral Health, put it: “There is an inherent link between loneliness and the workplace, with employers in a unique position to be a critical part of the solution.”

It takes time and focus to build genuine connection and trust in any work environment, yet the investment is worthwhile. Social connection should be recognized as a key foundation for wellbeing, collaboration, and productivity. A recent worldwide survey conducted by Ernst & Young Global (EY) showed that, of the 9,800 participants, “fewer than half of all surveyed professionals have a high amount of trust in their companies: Only 46% place ‘a great deal of trust’ in their employers, and 15% report ‘very little’ or ‘no trust at all.’”¹⁷ Explaining the importance of this data, EY Global Diversity & Inclusiveness Officer Karyn Twaronite noted: “Trust is essential to productivity because positive teams that trust each other are more productive, creative, and resilient—which helps improve a company’s overall effectiveness.”¹⁸

Another critical aspect that limits trust and connection in the workplace is diversity, and how well individual employees and leaders are able to navigate the reality of human difference. People arrive at work with varying levels of self-awareness and diversity awareness. When left unexamined, unconscious bias manifests as microaggressions, assumptions, distorted expectations, and distrust. In the workplace, these behaviors predictably lead to a breakdown in connection and higher levels of stress, tension, dysfunction, and disengagement. According to Ultimate Software and the Center for Generational Kinetics, in an emotionally unsafe workplace, 60% of employees would quit their job on the spot. Additionally, they found that a large factor contributing to emotional safety is being “respected for who we are.”¹⁹ A study by VitalSmarts, a leadership training company, found that more than a quarter (27%) of those who observe workplace discrimination report it “to be common, impactful, and beyond their ability to manage,” leading to “frustration, stress, depression, and helplessness on the job.”²⁰ Disconnection, unexamined bias, and emotional unsafety are present in many workplaces because of an unrecognized, unmet need for connection.

Mindful Service™ trains participants to build trust and connection, via deeper awareness of themselves, of others, and of our interdependence—all in the context of community service engagement. Before beginning service work, participants discuss their individual biases and take some time to reduce assumptions about each other and the communities they’ll work with. Participants are invited to explore the particular assumptions that they carry just beneath conscious awareness and to consider how those assumptions affect their interactions with one another. A safe and open environment is the ideal place to illuminate bias and compassionately

¹⁷ EY Global. 2016. “Study: Could Trust Cost You a Generation in the Workplace?” EY, retrieved on 3 December 2018 from <https://www.ey.com/gl/en/about-us/our-people-and-culture/ey-global-study-trust-in-the-workplace>

¹⁸ Twaronite, K. 2016. “A Global Survey on the Ambiguous State of Employee Trust” Harvard Business Review, 22 July 2016, retrieved on 3 December 2018 from <https://hbr.org/2016/07/a-global-survey-on-the-ambiguous-state-of-employee-trust>

¹⁹ Dishman, L. 2017. “How to Shut Down Microaggressions at Work,” Fast Company, 7 March 2017, retrieved on 5 December 2018 from <https://www.fastcompany.com/3068670/how-to-shut-down-microaggressions-at-work>

²⁰ “Discrimination at Work Prevalent Yet Subtle Workplace Bias Erodes Productivity and Engagement,” VitalSmarts, 21 March 2017, retrieved on 5 December 2018 from <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/discrimination-at-work-prevalent-yet-subtle-workplace-bias-erodes-productivity-and-engagement-300426635.html>

examine the aspects of our cultural conditioning that may be out of alignment with our actual values. When explicitly taught in the workplace, these diversity awareness skills are usually a response to a negative incident in a charged workplace. Only rarely are they addressed in the positive, as we do in the shared context of community service.

The structure of the Mindful Service™ program mirrors this trust building and awareness through conscious partnership with more than 20 service partner nonprofit organizations in the Bay Area, Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, Phoenix, San Diego, and greater Denver area, as well as internationally in Jamaica, Mexico, and Guatemala. As part of the process of designing Mindful Service™ community service experiences, YOL first listens to the actual—rather than assumed or perceived—needs of our partner organizations. Because we commit to long-term partnerships that go beyond a “drop in, pat ourselves on the back, and check out” service experience, YOL presents participants with multiple ways of staying engaged—whether through advocacy, networking, outreach, and fundraising. We invite participants to leverage their business skill sets to strategize with our service partners in order further longer-term goals. The practice of Mindful Service™ raises individual and collective awareness of the power of trust and connection, and it also calls us to compassionate accountability among team members. The outcomes are greater trust, safety, and a deeper connection that, in turn, inspires motivation and cohesion for shared action, productivity, and effectiveness in work.

From Criticism to Compassionate Interaction

Pressure to produce in a high-stakes workplace culture reduces collaboration and creativity and stifles professional growth. A typical response to negative feedback or intense organizational demands is to set even more rigid expectations as a defense from outer critique. Self-criticism engenders a fear of failure which reduces risk-taking and increases difficulty receiving future feedback for improvement.²¹ Internalized and externalized criticism of oneself and others can become habitual, paralyzing, and destructive, yet science shows us that positive thought patterns like compassion actually motivate growth and performance much more effectively than negative ones. While practices of compassion and self-compassion are often stereotyped as personal self-improvement projects, a growing body research shows that self-compassion and workplace compassion have a significant positive impact on an employee’s emotional resilience, stress management, and risk-taking, as well as teamwork cohesion. A study published by BMC Public Health in 2012 found that when employees feel they are bonding with one another, their stress levels decrease.^{22 23} Indeed, when employees are accepted and supported

²¹ Neff, K. 2018. “The Motivational Power of Self Compassion,” Self-Compassion. Retrieved on 30 October 2018 from <https://self-compassion.org/the-motivational-power-of-self-compassion/>

²² Morin, A. 2015. “*Introducing a Little Compassion to Your Workplace*,” *Forbes*, 24 June 2015, retrieved on 30 November 2018 from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/amymorin/2015/06/24/introducing-a-little-compassion-to-your-workplace-culture-has-big-benefits/#6f071df74370>

²³ Ozaki, K., Motohashi, Y., Laneko, Y., and Fujita, K. 2012. “Association between Psychological Distress and a Sense of Contribution to Society in the Workplace,” *BMC Public Health*, 1 April 2012, retrieved on 30 November 2018 from <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-12-253>

by others, regardless of their imperfections, they feel safer working together, becoming less stressed and performing at a higher level.

Researcher, author, and professor Dr. Kristin Neff has done a great deal to help us understand the wide-ranging benefits of self-compassion. Her extensive research has shown that the practice is associated with increased self-confidence and belief in one's own potential for success, as well as greater motivation, perseverance, and emotional resilience. Findings show that self-compassionate people are more likely to take responsibility for their past mistakes and acknowledge them with greater emotional equanimity. The Mindful Service™ curriculum teaches participants to engage with their own selves and others compassionately through specific skills that are highly valuable and transferable to the work environment. In every service experience, compassion training is applied at the individual, group, and global level. Companies that are invested in improving their teams will find the practices of self-compassion and compassionate communication to be profoundly effective, transformative tools, aligned with their aim to truly support higher levels of collaboration, wellbeing, and performance.

Conclusion

Mindful Service™ transforms the workplace by delivering direct personal experiences, skills, and practices to increase motivation, productivity, connection, and teamwork. The somatic skills that participants actively practice together in Mindful Service™ are selected for their easy uptake in the workplace, and teams that learn them as a group can more effectively sustain positive changes over time. It takes practice to transition from feeling stressed, disconnected, and critiqued, to a state that is more mindful, trusting, and rooted in compassion for the self and others. Mindful Service™ is an exciting growth opportunity with benefits for profits, planet, and people alike.

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