

Mindfulness: Increasing Performance in the Workplace ©

Chris L. Johnson, Psy.D.

In today's round-the-clock business atmosphere, external pressures crackle in the air. Employees are under intense pressure to deliver more with less, work longer hours, and to be more innovative all the while improving profitability. Mergers, downsizing, multinational competition and information overload all impact morale, job satisfaction, retention of talent and productivity. Push, push, push.

What's the cost of this constant push? People, dedicated business people, are showing signs of exhaustion. They lose their zip, their focus, their power. Their health may suffer from the stress. Over time they burnout or leave; worse, they're present in body but not in spirit. Creativity and energy wanes. Stress impacts leadership across the organization and may result in the loss of competitive edge.

Stress refers to both the physiological and mental reactions a person experiences in response to a *real or perceived threat or change*: a looming performance review, roll out of a new product line, work with new colleagues, an upcoming promotion. Stress is *less* about what actually happens—individually or organizationally—than about the sense one makes of it, and the subsequent actions taken.

How events are perceived and interpreted determines just how "stress resilient" or "stressed out" an individual, and ultimately the organization, becomes.

More than half of the workforce in the U.S. reports 'job stress' as a major problem in their lives, up more than 100% from similar studies conducted over a decade ago (Roger Starch 2000 Global Survey). Additionally, "health care expenditures are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress" (Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 1998) with stress-related disorders costing American corporations and industries approximately \$9,500 per employee—over \$300 billion annually (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000.)

To head-off possible disruptions as workplace stressors escalate from issue to problem to crisis, and to transform this energy to enhance performance, business organizations must identify and empower leaders to minimize stressors, to think creatively, to innovate new and effective ways of operating in an increasingly complex marketplace. In short, they must increase organizational resilience.

One way to do this is for organizations to work mindfully. Consulting psychologists, with their blend of unique skills in organizational assessment, systems development and executive coaching are in a position to assist organizations to do just that.

Mindfulness is an intentionally focused awareness—a way of paying attention on purpose in the present moment and non-judgmentally. While this notion may seem simplistic, especially in a complex marketplace, attending to the constant activity of the mind for a few brief minutes can yield powerful and even surprising information. Operating "mindfully"—in the moment an event occurs—enhances the ability to both

identify and minimize sources of stress while *enhancing competencies that build resiliency*.

Individuals regularly practicing mindfulness experience less stress, more resiliency and a greater sense of clarity, balance, energy and zest for living. Research has shown that mindfulness practices

- Increase clarity and creative thinking
- Enhance leadership
- Improve complex problem-solving and decision-making
- Enrich emotional intelligence
- Foster enhanced self-awareness of the mind-body connection
- Aid in mood regulation and immune system management of a wide range of physical concerns.

Businesses that operate mindfully increase their organizational resilience by:

- continually monitoring their moment-to-moment activities to assess if they're running smoothly
- openly seeking new ideas for increased effectiveness
- anticipating problems in advance, prepping for them, learning from them
- responding promptly to adverse events in a flexible rather than rigid way.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, the best-selling author of *Full-Catastrophe Living*, is the founder of the internationally renowned Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. The Center brings mindfulness meditation practices into mainstream institutions including corporations. Their corporate program participants have reported changes in attitudes, physical and mental behaviors that are directly related to positive changes in work-related performance. These include enhanced ability

- to consciously respond to situations rather than simply react
- to bring greater concentration and focus to their work
- to monitor stress levels and take effective steps to address it.

Large corporations are becoming aware of the benefits of mindfulness practices in their organizations. Firms such as Pacific Investment Management Co and technology leaders Apple Computer, Yahoo!, Texas Instruments, Nortel Networks and Google have all instituted mindfulness training and wellness opportunities on-site. Even "old economy" outfits including consulting firm McKinsey, Deutsche Bank, and Hughes Aircraft have taken the step.

Stress is part of life and work; stress is here to stay. However, the individual and collective capacity to effectively handle that stress, to make informed decisions, and to access previously untapped resources relies on one's ability to be present. Literally, it is only *in the present moment* that any of us can stop our habituated and driven modes of activity, see ourselves, others, and situations more clearly, and choose effective solutions that impact the fabric of our lives and business practices.