



Mindful Co-working

Be Confident, Happy and Productive
in Your Working Relationships

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Mindful co-working starts at the top

In organizations large or small, if mindful co-working is to become embedded as a way of working, it has to start at the top. Only then will the message be received with integrity through the chain of command. How does the leadership team collaborate? How do they talk to each other? By extension, how then does the leadership team communicate with the middle management, and how in turn does middle management communicate with the front-line staff? With the answers to these questions in mind, we can then explore how ways of internal communication may then be transmitted through to the customers or clients. There is a powerful cascade effect in most organizations, particularly those where customer service is important. The way that employees and middle managers are treated will have powerful implications for the way that customers are treated.

Thinking about this idea of leading from the top, I recall a compelling occasion at the start of the US President Barack Obama's administration in 2009. Just two days after the inauguration, First Lady Michelle Obama arranged a structured meet-and-greet at the White House, where her incoming staff of advisors met the permanent White House staff such as the gardeners, the plumbers, the electricians, the catering staff and the other workers based at the White House. Some of these workers had served at the White House for decades, and some of them had postponed retirement in order to serve during the administration of the first African-American president. Michelle Obama made an impressive opening statement. She reminded the incoming workers that the permanent White House staff members were there before the Obama administration moved in and they would be there long after their administration ended. She told her advisors, 'I want you to know that you won't be judged based on whether they know your name, you'll be judged based on whether you know theirs.'¹⁹ The message was clear: *we are not here to lord it over these people*. The two groups formed concentric circles and for an hour or so they made sure that everyone had a chance to meet and learn a little bit about each other. It was a

19 Gibbs, N. and Scherer, M. (2009, May 21) 'The Meaning of Michelle Obama.' *Time*. Available at <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1900228,00.html>, accessed on 12 October 2013.

THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF MINDFUL CO-WORKING

powerful egalitarian message of solidarity and respect, for all levels of staff. It was the sort of leadership and role modelling for which Michelle Obama has become well known: humble, grateful and emphasizing the value of all service we all do for each other. Her approach serves well as a model for any leader looking to set the right tone for mindful co-working in their organization. It is also the kind of intervention that can make any organization a place where people love to work.

Questions to consider:

- How important is close co-working in your workplace or in your occupation?
 - How inter-dependent are you on collaboration with colleagues?
 - How accountable are you for your actions in the workplace? How do you share accountability with colleagues? Similarly, how much responsibility do you have for completing work tasks? How is responsibility shared with colleagues?
 - What is the role of team playing in your organization? Do people work in sub-units, working parties and teams? How well do these function? What would enhance their functioning?
 - How creative is your co-working? Are there any recent examples you can think of where colleagues developed an innovation in your workplace – however large or small?
 - How well does the leadership team model mindful co-working? Do the leaders in this organization practise what they preach in terms of mindful communication?
 - Do you know the first names of the people in your organization who work in the lower status jobs? What difference might it make if you were to make more of an effort to communicate mindfully with all grades of staff?
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FIFTH PRINCIPLE: MINDFUL CO-WORKERS HELP EACH OTHER TO DEVELOP, AND THEY RELY ON EACH OTHER TO IMPROVE THE CO-WORKING RELATIONSHIP

This principle speaks to the crucial role that co-workers have in helping each other to develop as workers, with increasing skills, knowledge, confidence and effectiveness. It also affirms that

co-workers themselves have a crucial role to play in the quality and improvement of their co-working relationships.

Why is this principle so important? In most cases, there is a lot to learn from your colleagues. Perhaps one of your co-workers has far greater experience in a given task. Or maybe someone else has crucial knowledge about a certain area of the work. Maybe another co-worker has skills, qualities or innovative capacities that you are still developing. If you approach your colleagues with the attitude of genuine openness to and interest in their skills, knowledge and feedback, there is no limit to the amount of professional expertise that can be honed and knowledge gained from colleagues.

A neglected principle

The fifth principle is probably the least understood and most often overlooked. The reason for this is probably that most people think that they should do most of their learning by attending education and training classes, receiving on-the-job training from people with the trainer or mentor role, or should learn it themselves through trial and error. This loses sight of the fact that most people work much more closely and for far longer with their immediate colleagues than they spend attending classes or receiving on-the-job training or supervision.

Another possibility is that, in some organizations, co-workers are seen mainly as competitors to be trodden on while grasping the greasy pole of career advancement. While this may be a reality in some organizations and professions, this book offers an alternative view, which is that when co-workers help each other to develop, the whole organization thrives and everyone advances together. Where *mindful co-working* permeates an organization, workers who operate together on a win-win basis will be the workers who advance. This is because mindful supervisors and managers know greasy-pole behaviour and one-upmanship when they see it, they know how to look for it, and they know to promote workers who are invested in the whole organization and a win-win paradigm.

Competitiveness and the win-win paradigm

Competitiveness is not a bad word among colleagues. Indeed, healthy competition can bring needed energy into a co-working

situation. However, competitive spirits must be channelled with intelligence and care; they can easily tip over into sharp-elbowed behaviour that destroys trust and good will among co-workers. This is a fragile balance, and to help get the balance right it may help to spend a moment looking at the spectrum of exchange among humans – a spectrum of behaviour that we share with all animals.

The spectrum of exchange is a way of understanding the give and take of interactions among animals. In humans and, to some degree, in other higher primates, exchange becomes conscious, which is to say that we think about what to give and what to take, and we can vary our approach depending on circumstances and based on prior learning and experimentation.

Sennett describes a spectrum of five types of exchange, from the altruistic through to the viciously competitive.²⁰ The five types are:

1. *Altruism*: This is where you sacrifice yourself to the other person or to the greater good of the organization or the cause. There is usually a strong internal motivation to do the right thing, a striving for balance, or justice, or progress – but not for praise, advancement or personal recognition. Examples include the person who takes on enormous responsibilities and workload, works extremely long hours or completes tasks that others have not or with a dedication and attention to detail far and above the call of duty. History offers heroic examples of self-sacrifice, for example in Joan of Arc, or countless tales of war-time heroism and self-sacrifice where soldiers dive on a grenade, storm a gun position or draw fire to protect their fellow soldiers. Altruism often springs from a deep desire to help. In the workplace, the risk is that interactions and contributions may become unbalanced among co-workers. Or, the self-sacrificing worker may burn themselves out and inadvertently take down others with them.
2. *Win-win*: In a win-win exchange, you and the other person benefit from the exchange. On an organizational level, it means that different teams, departments or sections work

20 Sennett, R. (2012) *Together: Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*. London: Penguin, pp.72–85.

together so that the whole organization succeeds. This is the desired position in mindful co-working, where all parties collaborate for their mutual benefit and for the benefit of the organization and the people they serve.

The archetype of the win-win exchange is the business deal where all parties gain from the exchange. The exchange is reciprocal and all parties are overtly aware of this. In the workplace, in a win-win situation you and your colleagues all look good, and you mutually strive to make each other look good and to share the credit when things go well, and accountability when things go badly. As work progresses, colleagues work in attuned and dynamic ways, playing to each others' strengths and shoring up weaknesses as needed. When mistakes happen, responsibility is shared, because colleagues in a win-win exchange understand that they work within a system, and when mistakes occur the system itself may need to change, not just individuals within the system.

3. *Differentiating exchange*: Differentiating exchanges are where people discover and define the boundaries between them. It is the province of the full-and-frank discussion and the airing of differences. It is the type of process where intelligent adults, after full debate, may agree to disagree and either go their own ways or agree to collaborate with an understanding that in some areas they may never agree. In international relations, it is the exchange of 'détente' or of peaceful coexistence. It is the absence of war rather than the rich and sustained enjoyment of collaborative human exchange.

Co-working and collaboration can still exist in this zone of exchange, but it will never be as smooth as win-win exchange unless there are deliberate and sensitive attempts built into the exchange which build bridges and help all parties feel valued, equal and respected. To offer an example of such bridge-building, as a college student I worked several summers in a large international call centre with employees from a wide range of national backgrounds, many of whom were immigrants specifically

hired because of their language skills. The managers made a special point of including large banners with welcoming messages in scores of different languages related to the employees' countries of origin. They combined this with culturally varied cuisine in the canteen, celebration of different national traditions, and places where people could post photos and artefacts from their home countries. They also made a point of actively seeking out and promoting staff from as wide a variety of national backgrounds as possible. They saw this as one of their strengths as an organization. All of these activities and processes served to mitigate potential cultural conflicts and to increase cultural awareness and respect. Differences were welcomed and not treated as obstacles to co-working. It worked well, and I recall being impressed by the international feeling of the place and the managers' efforts to make it a welcoming, constructive place to work.

4. *Zero-sum*: This is where you win and the other person loses – or vice versa. This is a very common form of exchange in modern, competitive societies. In the workplace, it manifests in greasy-pole politics where co-workers compete for promotion. In the classroom, testing usually demarcates winners and losers. On the sports field, winning and losing is the name of the game. And in the financial markets, where the principle of buy low and sell high is the prime directive, one person's monetary gain is usually another's loss. Translated to the co-working environment, in this paradigm the sharp-elbowed and ruthless will advance and the gullible or sensitive will be left behind. It makes for great television drama, but if you work in such an environment it's hell to live through.
5. *Winner-takes-all*: This is where you win and the other person is destroyed. It is the law of the jungle – Hobbes' view of nature, red in tooth and claw. This is the logic of predator-prey, slash-and-burn, of total war, of genocide. As a species, we still have this propensity, as is made clear in the headlines every day. Equally, we have the capacity

to eradicate this form of exchange, and the optimistic view of humanity is that we may well manage it as a species as we become steadily more integrated, more democratic and more aware of how to manage our inner landscapes.

While the workplace may seem an unlikely place for such annihilating instincts as winner-takes-all to manifest themselves, any high octane workplace may succumb, and in times of great uncertainty and upheaval, the winner-takes-all strategy may feel instinctively appealing. It speaks to the most basic and ruthless instincts to survive, and when it feels one's life or livelihood is in danger, it is a strategy that may feel adaptive to the context. It is best to remember, in such instances, that the instinct to annihilate the other is driven by fear untempered by reason. In such situations, pause for reflection is called for, and good advice from a trusted mentor or outside source. Remember the Confucian adage: *Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.*

Great expectations: developing the co-working relationship

When co-workers use a win-win approach to collaboration, an interesting possibility arises: we can take joint responsibility for developing and enhancing not just our performance as workers, but also the co-working relationship itself.

In mindful co-working, colleagues understand that the co-working relationship is an entity in itself and must be looked after; all parties have responsibility for the quality and improvement of the collaboration. Mindful co-workers understand that they can't rely solely on supervisors and managers to help them get along with each other and work effectively as a unit, so they take significant responsibility for this themselves. When there are ruptures in the co-working relationship, such as a mis-step or a disappointing interaction, all parties take equal responsibility for repairing the co-working relationship. Sometimes this is assisted or brokered, for example by a supervisor, but even in this case the parties try to work it out with each other and do not resort to telling tales or venting to third parties, that is, gossiping. Only in the worst

and most intractable cases should formal grievance be needed; in organizations using mindful co-working, this should be vanishingly rare.

Looking after the co-working relationship also means that we play to each others' strengths and shore up weaknesses. If one colleague knows that their co-worker excels in a particular part of the job, it makes sense to let them carry that out. At the same time, a more able colleague can help a less able one, providing guidance and assistance in graduated stages until they are confident and skilled in the task.

When co-working relationships are functioning very well, and as the trust deepens between colleagues, the relationship becomes more robust. Co-workers feel more able actively to seek out weaknesses in the system, and the strength of the relationship allows them to reflect on opportunities to improve their work. In highly evolved co-working relationships, the co-workers are able to become, in Nicolas Taleb's phrasing, 'anti-fragile'.²¹ That is to say, when trouble happens, mindful co-workers take it as a learning opportunity, process the difficulty and come back stronger than ever. Taleb uses the example of the airline industry, which grows ever safer as lessons are learned; the industry as a whole becomes stronger and safer each time something goes wrong with an aircraft. In the same way, mindful co-working relationships can become ever-stronger when co-workers take an anti-fragile approach to learning from their mis-steps.

Shared consciousness in closelyknit teams

When co-working pairs and teams start working really well together, they can become very closely integrated units. Examples of this might include a bike racing team, a tight-knit platoon out on patrol, a well-honed acrobatic troupe, or an experienced surgical team. At a certain point, their level of synchrony reaches the point where they begin to share communication on a deep and intuitive level. The level of sensitivity and intuition about each others' thoughts, feelings and actions becomes so subtle that the unit works as a unified entity

21 Taleb, N.N. (2012) *Antifragile: How to Live in a World We Don't Understand*. London: Allen Lane.

– almost a single organism. When co-working pairs or teams – or indeed whole organizations – work at this level, there is powerful unity of purpose and mutual support. People instinctively watch each others' backs, play to each others' strengths, and everyone is carried forward on the wave of unified intention and concentrated action.

Questions to consider:

- Can you describe the five principles of mindful co-working? What distinguishes the first three principles from principles four and five?
 - How can these principles be integrated into your co-working and your organization? Would they need any adjustments?
 - What do you think of the proposition contained in the fifth principle, that supervisors and managers can set the tone and provide the structure and training, but it is then up to each worker to carry out and improve their co-working relationships using the principles of mindful co-working? What are your ideas about how co-workers can develop and enhance their co-working relationships?
 - More broadly, what do you think are the benefits of co-working? What about the drawbacks or potential challenges of co-working?
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