

# THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN MINDFULNESS



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## Abstract

This article presents information about cultural aspects of mindfulness or attention, a topic worthy of exploration and relevance to the global business education literature. The article concludes with implications for business educators and their students.

## Introduction

In the movie “City Slickers,” Billy Crystal’s character asked the seasoned cowboy what the secret of life is. The seasoned cowboy replied, “One thing.” In other words, focusing on one goal or aspect of life at a time rather than on many things at a time will bring success and happiness. For Billy Crystal’s character, that one thing was being with family.

In a world that has grown busier and more complex, the ability to be mindful about tasks has become more valuable than ever before. One of the greatest compliments a person can give to another is to attend to that person mindfully. The propensity to pay attention, to focus, and to concentrate may be culturally based. According to Ketay, Aron, and Hedden (2009), “culture may shape how the brain processes even very abstract stimuli and may influence the features of the environment to which individuals attend” (p. 79). Further, Thomas (2006) identified mindfulness as a vital aspect of cultural intelligence that provides a link between behavioral capability and knowledge. What factors affect attention, and do these factors vary across cultures?

## **Purpose of the Article**

This article presents information about cultural aspects of mindfulness or attention, a topic worthy of exploration and relevance to the global business education literature. The article concludes with implications for business educators and their students.

## **Definition of Mindfulness**

While there are numerous definitions for mindfulness, a common one defines mindfulness as not only paying attention but also deciding to pay attention to one thing at a time. “One of life's most essential skills is the ability to focus one's attention at will. This single ability is the foundation of all mastery and contentment” (Cohen, 2004, p. xiv). In fact, the slogan of the ToDo Institute, a non-profit organization that provides mindfulness information on its website and mindfulness training, is “Life is a Matter of Attention” (ToDo Institute, 2011b).

Attention and mindfulness experts agree that “mindfulness and skillful attention don’t just happen accidentally. Their development involves a conscious effort to use the brain’s capacity to rewire its circuitry” (ToDo Institute, 2011a, n.p.). As with any skill development, practice is necessary to increase attention and mindfulness, and working with attention exercises daily is important (ToDo Institute, 2011a, n.p.). Through practical applications, these exercises allow people to attend to situations differently—more mindfully--than they would normally.

One hallmark of high achievers is their ability to focus their attention on specific things. They “focus in spite of distractions, fears, and setbacks and not necessarily with will power or great courage - with an almost obsessive interest, curiosity, and passion” (Fiore, 2010, p. 64). How can others learn to exhibit such focus? Strategies for developing focus are presented in the paper.

## **Literature Review**

This section reviews literature that identifies global business education aspects of mindfulness, discusses cultural aspects of mindfulness, presents strategies for fostering global cultural mindfulness behaviors, offers information for developing mindfulness, explains the role of singletasking and multitasking behaviors and mindfulness, and provides recommendations for increasing mindfulness in the classroom and in the workplace.

## **Global Business Education Aspects of Mindfulness**

The National Standards for Business Education (National Business Education Association, 2007) explicitly state that culturally aware students will be able to “compare cultural attitudes about use of time, silence, space, gestures, body language, and body and eye contact to [promote] successful international business relationships” (p. 105). Further, Policies Commission for Business and Economic Education (PCBEE) Statement No. 74 emphasizes the criticality of multicultural contexts since they “encompass values, attitudes, and beliefs; social and business customs, behaviors, and practices; sensitivity

to diversity; language; and written, oral, and nonverbal communication” (PCBEE, 2004, p, 16). Mindful behaviors and practices certainly apply to these standards and statements. Understanding how mindfulness may differ from culture to culture will enable those involved in global business to communicate and to work better in situations where mindfulness behaviors in other cultures differ from those of the home culture

Education for a globally connected world is emphasized in *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education* (Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011), a recent book published by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The authors asserted, “Deep learning about cultures other than one’s own is a quintessential arena in which young people become aware of the partial and contingent nature of their own previously unquestioned assumptions and perspectives” (p. 133). In essence, developing this understanding provides students with new eyes for viewing their particular culture and “a better sense of what it means to be acculturated: that no one is culture-free and that everyone operates within particular, though multifaceted and complex, cultural systems” (pp. 133-134).

According to Comfort and Franklin (2011), global managers who are mindful display the following attributes: recognize and heed “their own cultural and individual assumptions, values and norms” (n.p.) and those of their co-workers; understand that these are solely one set of overarching action guidelines attempt to view different situations and cultures through the eyes of co-workers; value the different feelings and perspectives in their actions/evaluations of cultures other than their own; strive to understand when interacting with co-workers from other cultures or from other backgrounds than their own by engaging in active listening; change their language so it is more understandable; employ paraphrasing to check for understanding; verify their own understanding; and understand non-verbal communication cues. Mindfulness is critical in the global marketplace since it fosters better communication and understanding across cultures. In turn, this fostering enhances business relationships and may provide a competitive advantage.

## **Cultural Aspects of Mindfulness**

This section reviews literature that discusses the role of context in cultural mindfulness patterns.

Nisbett’s research (2003) revealed that Japanese and Americans focus on different things when looking at an underwater scene for 20 seconds. When explaining what they saw in the scene, “the Westerners zeroed in on what seemed like the most important thing, but the Asians focused on the relationships between things” (p. 76). The collectivist orientation of Asians is demonstrated by their concentration on relationships and context (Gallagher, 2009).

Context refers to “how people deliver, receive, and interpret messages” (Shwom & Snyder, 2012, p. 47). The importance of context when interpreting messages in a national culture may be thought of as a point somewhere on a distribution scale that ranges from low to high. From low to high, selected national cultures are distributed on a scale as follows: Swiss-German, German, Scandinavian (i.e., Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian),

United States and Canadian, French, British, Italian, Latin American (i.e., Mexican, Brazilian, and Chilean), Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese (Rosch & Segler, 1987).

Victor (1992) identified five characteristics that vary across cultures. These characteristics include emphasis on written word, adherence to law, governance of interpersonal behavior, agreements based on personal promises, and agreements based on written word or contract. In low-context cultures the emphasis on the written word is high, while in high-context cultures the emphasis on the written word is low. Adherence to the law is rigid in low-context cultures, while such adherence is flexible in high-context cultures. Governance of interpersonal behaviors in low-context cultures is through external rules and regulations, while such behaviors are governed by individual interpretation in high-context cultures. In low-context cultures agreements based on personal promises are not binding, while in high-context cultures such agreements are binding. In low-context cultures agreements based on contracts or the written word are binding, while such agreements in high-context cultures are not binding.

Relatively low-context cultures such as the United States and Canada place more emphasis on specific language when sending a message, and devote less attention to the context of a situation. Cultures that rely heavily on context for making sense of messages, such as those of the Asian countries of Japan and China, convey meaning not only through words but also through the contextual situation that accompanies those words. Such attributes could include silence, the history of the communicators, and the paralinguistic (the nonverbal aspects of speech such as rate; tone; volume; and use of vocal fillers such as “uh,” “um,” “you know,” “okay,” and “you guys”) used to convey the message (Shwom & Snyder, 2012).

The tendency to view a situation “in a way that prepares you to take charge of it is a cornerstone of Western individualism” (Gallagher, 2009, p. 77) and is common in a low-context culture. This low-context cultural tendency may inhibit communication since it tends to focus on the external, rather than the internal focus typical of high-context cultures. Thus, these cultural differences between low-context and high-context cultures have caused and may result in clashes over world political events, business dealings, and personal relationships.

Diverse disciplines from anthropology to education, behavioral economics to family counseling, similarly suggest the skillful management of attention is the sine qua non of the good life and the key to improving virtually every aspect of your experience, from mood to productivity to relationships (Gallagher, 2009, p. 2).

Elinor Ochs, Director of the Center on Everyday Lives of Families at UCLA, told the following story. “In it-takes-a-village societies, however, such as Samoans, people are encouraged in very early life to direct their attention outward to others . . . Even before they can talk, these tots are primed to attend to what others are doing and feeling . . . By the age of four, Samoan children contribute to society helping to care for younger siblings and carrying messages for adults” (ToDo Institute, 2011b, n.p). In essence, the Samoan culture values people and relationships. The influence of attention is broader than this, however, since the issue of attention is relevant for all areas of life, including how we raise our kids, treat our partners, do our jobs, cultivate creativity, relate to technology,

and participate in the larger world. It's an area worthy of sincere study and practice" (ToDo Institute, 2011b, n.p.).

Practicing mindfulness increases one's ability to understand cultural context. The next section describes behaviors that foster cultural mindfulness.

### **Fostering Behaviors of Cultural Mindfulness**

Because of global interdependence, business practitioners need to be cognizant of behaviors that foster cultural mindfulness. "When interacting with a person from another culture or visiting another culture (even if it is only in the next neighborhood), it is easy to miss the nuances and meaning of the behavior of others" (Moulton, 2009, n.p.). How can people be more mindful in multicultural situations? The following behaviors are conducive to cultural mindfulness:

1. Observe the way in which others behave.
2. Be open to unique behavior without evaluating it.
3. Employ the senses to notice nuances and details, remaining attuned to these behavioral signals.
4. Display curiosity, particularly in reference to cultural contexts.
5. Strive to connect with others so that common cultural aspects are revealed.
6. Appreciate the cultural behaviors and nuances encountered.
7. Remember that a particular word may mean different things to different people.
8. View the situation from many perspectives.
9. Realize how one's behavior influences others.
10. Be mindful of one's experience and how that experience influences communication situations (Moulton, 2009).

As Gervais (2011) stated, we may be missing out on things that we have culturally learned to ignore or undervalue, or we may miss them entirely. When we start from the premise that we are not maybe missing something, but we are definitely missing something because we are limited by our own culturally reinforced brains – there is less likelihood that we will insist on the "rightness" of our perspective. This could have revolutionary implications for education, for training and development, and for learning at work (n.p.).

By employing these ten strategies, a person will develop behaviors that foster mindfulness among global cultures. The following section presents information about developing mindfulness.

### **Development of Mindfulness**

Just as yoga was once perceived as being "out there," as an activity that was practiced by people on the fringe, meditation was perceived in a similar fashion. However, that is not the case today. Both yoga and meditation are not necessarily religious activities, although the practice of prayer has been categorized by some as a type

of meditation. Because of growing acceptance of meditation practice as mainstream, several recent studies have focused on the role of meditation on focus or mindfulness (Cahn & Polich 2009; Chan & Willacott, 2007; Chiesa, Calati, & Serretti, 2011; Gura, 2010; Kumar & Telles, 2009; Roeser, & Peck, 2009; van den Hurk, Giommi, Gielen, Speckens, & Barendregt, 2010; Weick & Putnam, 2006). Results of these studies have revealed that regular meditation practice, even for a short period of time, produces positive results such as (1) less stress through less cortisol production, (2) better focus or mindfulness, and (3) better health (The Doctors with van Aalst, 2009).

While meditation practices may vary, one more common type of practice is centering. Centering involves sitting with eyes closed and focusing the mind on a word or saying such as “Peace,” “Amen,” or some other saying that is meaningful to the practitioner. It is not necessary to speak the expression aloud. When the mind wanders from the expression and races off to another thought, the practitioner returns to the expression. Alternatively, a person may simply focus on the breath rather than on a saying (The Doctors with van Aalst, 2009). In addition to meditation, mindfulness can be cultivated through chi going, tai chi, and yoga (UCLA Mindfulness Awareness Center, n.d.). Further, such activities as writing, walking, music, and art can be used to develop mindfulness.

One focus or attention exercise in the ToDo Institute’s (2003) *Working with Attention* booklet is “Chewing Your Attention.” This exercise requires placing one’s utensils down following every bite of food and focusing on chewing one’s food thoroughly before moving to the next mouthful. Such a practice helps to avoid mindless eating and is suggested by health experts. The old adage to chew a mouthful of food 40 times is reinforced in this focusing exercise.

Self-awareness, a critical aspect of emotional intelligence, is defined by Goleman as “the ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others” (as cited in Bolender Initiatives, LLC, n.d.) and requires that a person practice mindfulness. Over 20,000 studies of mindfulness are included by the National Institute of Health in its National Library of Medicine (The Doctors with van Aalst, 2010). The results of these research studies indicate a mindfulness meditation practice may increase empathy for others and oneself, enhance attention and “on task” performance, lessen judgmental thinking, elevate the ability to speedily refocus following distractions, and expand one’s gray matter and grow brain size.

Practicing yoga, adopting a meditation practice, practicing attention exercises, and increasing self-awareness are helpful in enhancing mindfulness. Next, the role of singletasking vs. multitasking behaviors and mindfulness is discussed.

## **Singletasking Behaviors vs. Multitasking Behaviors and Mindfulness**

Much has been written about the need to engage in multitasking behaviors in today’s society. While multitasking involves attempting to do more than one thing at a time, singletasking refers to working on one item at a time. Singletasking does not mean that a person is not involved in many projects; rather it refers to focusing on one project before moving to another. While some multitasking is acceptable, particularly with lower

level tasks such as walking and chewing gum simultaneously, recent studies have determined that engaging in frequent multitasking behaviors is actually detrimental to both task efficiency and task effectiveness (Hemp, 2009).

One aspect of multitasking is the propensity for people to use technology in meetings and in the face-to-face classroom, which decreases attention on what is occurring and may decrease an individual's level of mental presence. Thus, the term "absent presence" has been used to describe this type of multitasking. Kleinman (2004) defines absent presence as a situation where individuals may, through technology use, remove themselves "from the context of shared group behaviors to become involved in a virtual world that is not available to those around them" (n.p.). It is not necessary, however, to use technology to appear to have "absent presence." For example, one may read a book in the presence of others and be absent from the social situation.

The practice of singletasking is recommended by Babauta (n.d.). Benefits of singletasking include: it is less complex, more efficient, and allows the human brain to operate optimally. Conversely, with multitasking, the switching from one task to another trains brains to "have a shorter attention span" (Babauta, n.d., p. 92). When people are multitasking, they are not fully engaged with another person. Further, lack of attentiveness may result in less than stellar comprehension and require the repetition of information.

Settle-Murphy (2009) recommended strategies for enhancing engagement of remote (not face to face) participants, which would also be effective strategies in the classroom. One recommended strategy involves specifying participation ground rules twice—once in advance of the meeting and again just before the meeting begins to increase participants' attentiveness. Moreover, "you might also get specific and ask that people refrain from handling e-mail or instant messaging during the meeting" (Settle-Murphy, 2009, n.p.)

Five strategies for increasing one's ability to singletask are paying attention, clearing away distractions, determining what is the most important thing one can be accomplishing at the moment, dedicating oneself to the task, and practicing singletasking (Babauta, n.d.). Most or all of these steps could be incorporated into almost any teaching activity.

The value of cultivating the ability to singletask has been discussed. Next, enhancing the ability to be mindful, thus increasing the ability to singletask, in the classroom is presented.

### **Increasing Mindfulness in the Classroom**

Lehrer (2011) reported that highly developed executive function can aid children and adults in regulating their attention and impulses. Executive function is "a collection of cognitive skills that allow us to exert control over our thoughts and impulses" (p. C32) and may be developed by engaging in yoga, tae-kwon-do, challenging board games, and computer exercises (Lehrer, 2011).

Ritchhart and Perkins (2001) identified three instructional practices that are helpful in increasing mindfulness in the classroom: looking closely, exploring possibilities and

perspectives, and introducing ambiguity. Looking closely involves learning to be open to new information by cultivating sensitivity. Instructors might ask students to complete an activity such as “What’s On A Penny?,” (R. Dortch, personal communication, October 18, 2000) by having students closely examine a penny for all of its attributes. Exploring possibilities and perspectives allows students to view perspectives of others. For example, in a business writing course, a message could be examined in terms of the perspective of the consumer and that of the business organization. How do the perspectives differ? How can the differences be bridged? Introducing ambiguity involves refraining from absolute statements. If an instructor makes “this could be” statements rather than direct statements, students are more likely to fill in the gaps and avoid narrowing too rapidly (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000). Practicing these three aspects allows students to become more mindful and to reduce mindless behaviors.

Strategies for increasing mindfulness in the classroom have been discussed. In the next section, strategies are presented for increasing mindfulness in the workplace.

### **Increasing Mindfulness in the Workplace**

Connerley, an expert in multicultural workplace issues, asserted, Culture influences our thoughts, words, and actions in ways that are often unrecognized and that can lead to misunderstandings, missed opportunities, and less than ideal outcomes. No matter how highly skilled, well-trained, or intelligent you are—if you are making culturally inappropriate assumptions, you will not be accurate in your assessment, meaningful in your understanding, or appropriate in your interactions in the workplace (Ho, 2006, n.p.).

Not only do such cultural missteps cost organizations money, they also cost in terms of lost time and damaged relationships. Mindful managers employ these five key attributes:

- commitment to resilience;
- deference to expertise;
- preoccupation with failure, referring to “continuous attention to details to detect small discrepancies that could be symptoms of larger problems in a system” (Weick & Putnam, 2006, p. 9);
- reluctance to simplify interpretations; and
- sensitivity to operations (Weick, 2001).

While preoccupation with failure may seem counterintuitive, practicing mindfulness allows one to perceive things one might not normally perceive rather than focusing on the routine and blocking out what is not expected.

Further, Weick (2001) explains: Whether mindfulness is central or is not is dependent on how the firm explains the reasons for its successes and failures in coping with problems. If successful coping is attributed to continuous inquiry, candor, wariness, updating, tolerance of discomfort, and flexibility, assumptions supporting mindfulness will be institutionalised in the culture. But if those same successes originated instead from factors such as central direction, specialisation, competence, compliance, and confirmed expectations, existing schemes of categorisation will be maintained and contexts will be

treated as though they are understood even though they are given only cursory attention (p. 138).

Veil (2011) proposed the Mindful Learning Model that recognizes potential crisis warning signals stemming from mindlessness behaviors so that adaptation and organizational learning can occur. Among those warning signals are rhetorical barriers of classification with experience (nuances of a situation are not recognized), reliance on success, and trained mindlessness. Classification with experience refers to a person's inability to perceive outside of the person's experiences, and as a result, not perceiving warning signals of crisis. Reliance on success occurs when organizations focus only on past success, not recognizing potential red flags. Trained mindlessness describes how employees can be trained to disregard potential crisis warning signals. For example, if employees are shown the correct way to complete a task or assignment, adhering to the routine is encouraged, and crisis warning signals may be ignored. Veil asserts, "By taking into account the contexts, environment, and perspectives surrounding a situation and welcoming new information, mindfulness allows us to reframe the situation" (p. 135) and organizational learning is encouraged.

### **Implications for Business Education**

This article has presented information about cultural variations in attentiveness and mindfulness. While Eastern cultures tend to view situations holistically and contextually, Western cultures typically address situations with a narrower focus. As a result, when Westerners and Easterners interact, the potential for misunderstanding arises, particularly if they have not had the benefit of cultural training. Following the strategies provided in this article for fostering cultural mindfulness, such as being open, employing the senses, displaying cultural curiosity, striving for connection with others, viewing situations from several perspectives, and appreciating differences in cultural behaviors, should enhance the quality of multicultural interactions.

Business educators and their students should be cognizant of the importance of cultural knowledge in terms of attentiveness and mindfulness. Along with this knowledge, practicing mindfulness is critical to enhancing one's cultural expertise. Providing students with opportunities to develop such mindfulness will increase their cultural competence. Opportunities to interact with others, to keep a blog or journal about such interactions since writing increases mindfulness, and to develop an action plan to elevate cultural competence may be helpful in building both cultural competence and confidence.

The ability to mindfully single task in a multi-tasking centered world is essential. Incorporating instructional practices that encourage mindfulness such as looking closely, exploring possibilities and perspectives, and introducing ambiguity will enhance the ability to communicate effectively with others regardless of their native culture. Prudent business educators and their students will strive to increase their ability to single task by participating in such activities as focus exercises, yoga, chi gong, and tai chi; engaging in music, art and writing; and practicing mindfulness meditation. Adopting a meditation

practice, if only for five minutes a day, is an important step not only toward cultural competence but also for integrated health (The Doctors with van Aalst, 2009).

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