



# Mindfulness and Collective Intelligence - Building cultures of collaboration.

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## Executive Summary

Many organisations have done a great deal to help teams function well. Most of this has been around the **WHAT**– roles, processes, tasks, tools. This has led to many organisations having team competence. Nonetheless, everyone still experiences many dysfunctional teams. Most of the problem now is in the **HOW** – how teams interact with each other on a human level.

While many acknowledge the dysfunction, they are blind to their own role in this – how constant distraction, interruptions and lack of presence lead to a team atmosphere that lacks emotional safety and engagement. Mindfulness in teams can profoundly shift this – simply through noticing and acknowledging this deep level of humanity that exists in our interactions and which affects outcomes.

Addressing this with simple rituals and habits leads to a pronounced shift in the collective intelligence of teams.

## Introduction

In most organisations, no one solves problems by themselves anymore. Most of what people do, in fact 99.5% of most people’s experience in large organisations is one of collaboration.

While many are still stuck in a paradigm of looking at individual KPIs, most of the studies on this topic conclude that knowledge worker productivity should be assessed on the team level, because:

*“Knowledge work is not an individual task, but usually performed in collaboration with others on complex tasks that they cannot perform alone.”*

*“Team productivity is not simply the sum of individual productivity.”*

*“Changes in productivity of an individual knowledge worker may not affect the productivity of other knowledge workers.” (sources see on page 10)*

So, if value is generated at the team level, it is important to look at how a team functions. In the last 20 years, we have learned a tremendous amount about managing projects, getting stuff done, and designing effective processes for teams. At the same time, many teams do not work effectively, and they know it. Increasingly, the problem is not a lack of good team roles and definition – increasingly the gap is somewhere else.

There have been a number of waves of research into team performance – and most of them have come up with the same conclusions. It is not the composition of the team, or the functional experience of the team members that makes a difference – but rather how teams members interact with one another.

In our more and more volatile, uncertain and disruptive world we need diverse perspectives to solve problems. Teams that only focus on individual knowledge and do not bring the wisdom of the team together are less able to respond in an agile manner, to drive innovation and as a result, are less productive.

Mindfulness plays a key role in cultivating collective intelligence in teams.

# What drives team collaboration and increases performance?

It is useful to look in a little more detail at some of this research. Initial research by Edgar Schein was followed on by work from Amy Edmundson – yielding strong evidence that **emotional or psychological safety** was one of the key determinants of whether a team was able to deal with uncertainty and learn and perform well.

A paper in Harvard Business Review by Druskat and Wolff laid out the importance of consciously addressing this:

*“No one would dispute the importance of making teams work more effectively. But most research about how to do so has focused on identifying the task processes that distinguish the most successful teams—that is, specifying the need for cooperation, participation, commitment to goals, and so forth. The assumption seems to be that, once identified, these processes can simply be imitated by other teams, with similar effect. It’s not true.”*

*“Group emotional intelligence isn’t a question of dealing with a necessary evil—catching emotions as they bubble up and promptly suppressing them. Far from it. It’s about bringing emotions deliberately to the surface and understanding how they affect the team’s work. It’s also about behaving in ways that build relationships both inside and outside the team and that strengthen the team’s ability to face challenges”.*

More recently, there have been two major re-examinations of this. In his article “The New Science of Building Great Teams”, based on a detailed analysis of actually measured team interaction, Sandy Pentland stated: “we have discovered the best type of team members are democratic with their time—**communicating with everyone equally and making sure all team members get a chance to contribute. They listen as much as or more than they talk and are usually very engaged with whomever they’re listening to.**”

Google also set out to re-examine what drives team performance, focusing on such issues as IQ or functional experience. After a data intensive analysis of the performance of 170 teams they came to the following conclusion: “We were dead wrong,” the company said “**the best teams respect one another’s emotions and are mindful that all members should contribute to the conversation equally. It has less to do with who is in a team, and more with how a team’s members interact with one another.**”

As Google found out in their study, emotional safety is a prerequisite of teams to collaborate in an efficient way.

The interesting question is - if this has been obvious to the world of research and in fact to most people in the business world for 30+ years - why it is still such a problem to establish **emotional safety** in groups? In our eyes there are a number of hurdles that hinder emotional safety and thus have an impact on the quality of collaboration.

## We misunderstand our emotions

First and foremost, there is still a deep misunderstanding of what emotions are. The general attitude, that we experience in our training, is that emotions are somehow irrational, difficult, and to be avoided, and have no real place in a logical, professional working world. From this point of view, they are either something to be suppressed – or something to be managed away. But actually, in their most simple form, emotions are simply patterned changes in the body in response to particular triggers. They have evolved to ensure our physical,

emotional and social survival. So fundamentally, emotions transport information – which we need to listen to. Emotions in groups transport information as to what is important for a healthy emotional and social collaboration – so actually, rather than being suppressed or avoided, they serve as the indicator for how we can actually create a healthy collaborative culture.

## We are stressed and mindless

Another endemic reason as to why this topic is so elusive is that people are simply stressed – and thus have a very narrow focus, and are indeed mindless, not noticing the obvious. In one company we have worked with, when quizzed, senior managers said that emotional distress, unnecessary conflicts, friction and unhappiness were eating up 30+% of the capacities of their teams. When asked how long this has been going on for, they said 18 months. When asked when was the first time they talked about this the answer was – today! If this company of engineers had identified a process or technical problem that was costing that much capacity, they would have solved it in weeks. But at some level, despite seeing this, the background stress and pressure were so high, that there was actually no real time to address this and talk about this. In a way they were blind to this glaring issue.

This lack of noticing is often exacerbated with the fragmentation that people experience in meetings – half the people are mentally checked out, or checking their messages on their devices. In a meeting they simply do not notice how their fragmented and inattentive behaviour actually contributes both to a lack of task focus, and to emotional safety. It is hard to feel emotionally safe with a senior person who is not listening, or who is having a conversation on the side, while we are making a presentation that we've spend weeks on.

## We experience a lack of skills in emotional regulation

And finally, many people are actually poor at naming, accepting and working with their emotions. In exceptional situations (very positive or very negative) emotions are dealt with, but beyond that there is no real appreciation or ability to actually work with emotions. This is no-one's fault – we simply have not learned it.

It is somewhat as if a group of individuals are watching Barcelona play football. Everyone has some understanding of the game, and how the game should be played – but they simply lack the skills to do this themselves. Working with emotions is somewhat akin to a process of becoming literate in a language – at first we only have words for the most basic emotions. As we become literate, we can begin to name and experience 100s of emotions, and pick them up directly.

# How can we benefit from emotional intelligence?

## Anchoring practices of emotional intelligence in teams

So, while many companies, managers and teams spend a lot of time defining roles, responsibilities, goals and processes of teams, they simply spend no time discussing and developing the processes of emotional safety in teams. This is a serious omission – anchoring such practices is just as important as defining roles, tasks etc.

Once we acknowledge that we have to anchor habits of emotional intelligence in teams, it is worth thinking about how to do it. Mindfulness plays a central role here.

## Mindfulness and the intelligence of emotions

Mindfulness is a practice of noticing and experiencing what is going on inside of us and around us. Many people think mindfulness is just a practice of relaxation, but this is a misunderstanding. When we practise mindfulness, we are learning to not only rest our attention on the breath – and thus indeed relax – but also consciously direct our attention and cultivate self-awareness – in particular, in the form of body awareness. This leads to a heightened body awareness – and since emotions take place primarily in the body (and not in the head), a heightened ability to notice, become aware of and regulate emotions.

We also heighten our empathy through mindfulness practice – feeling what others feel and thus being able to understand their experience.

When we begin to notice our emotions, and those of others, through our heightened mindfulness, the point is not to manage them or to make them go away. The point is actually to be curious about them and learn to accept them. What is the emotion telling me? Emotions always contain intelligence – they are algorithms from our evolutionary history and they provide us with valuable information. Take some examples:

- Irritation before lunchtime – many notice that people get more irritable when they are hungry. Evolutionary history has taught us that making complex decisions takes energy – and we take worse decisions when we do not have the energy we need. So, irritation is a sensible response to continued demand for complex thinking when our energy level is low. The point is not to suppress the irritation – but to notice it – and take a break!
- Resentment at unfairness – humans survived in clans. Clan-based society was very egalitarian in many (but not all) ways – simply because everyone needed to play their part to ensure survival. In reverse, this also meant that if not everyone was taken care of, so that they could play their part in ensuring our survival, the chances of the survival of a group would decline. So, when a team leader is being unfair to someone, our emotional instincts know that this will cause withdrawal of that one person, and heightened emotional uncertainty among the others – meaning they will also not give fully. This will lead to a suboptimal outcome. So again, the emotion of resentment at unfair treatment – or even the anger someone else feels when they see someone being treated unfairly – has a good evolutionary basis.

All emotions contain such intelligence – even if this might not be obvious on first sight. But fundamentally learning to accept and be curious about emotions leads to a tremendous emotional literacy. And it is also interesting to know that since the job of the emotion is to be noticed (if the information the emotion contains is not noticed, then it has not fulfilled its purpose), research has shown that the ability to precisely label the emotion (and notice the precise body changes associated with it) actually immediately reduces its intensity.

This is true for individuals – as well as groups. Just saying – hey, seems like we are hungry – immediately makes everyone drop their irritation and notice their hunger. **This is why a leader can create a lot of emotional safety, just by naming emotions in the team and allowing them to be.**

Mindfulness is a crucial component in noticing and working with emotions – both among individuals as well as among teams.

It is easy to see this if we consider the absence of mindfulness. Imagine your company decided emotional safety was crucial, and made a poster about this for every meeting room. Would this change anything?

No, because stuck in their emotional states, without actually noticing it, no one would be actually able to change their behaviour. And even if everyone went through training on the importance of emotional safety – there is a high likelihood of everyone forgetting immediately.

So how can we overcome this? Our brain is neuroplastic – it does respond to repeated practice. And it's repeated practice which anchors this ability in ourselves and in our teams. It's like learning to walk or to play the piano. The repetition creates new pathways in our brain, which become easier to travel along after a while.

## Anchoring habits in teams

Having understood how important emotional safety is (and turn-taking, social cohesion, etc), and knowing how difficult it is for people to change their habits, the first step could be to consciously anchor habits of mindfulness in teams.

Why habits of mindfulness? Because they are simple behaviours that teams can adopt, which in their nature bring out aspects of mindfulness – attentional focus, positive outlook, emotional awareness and integration.

**Habits of attention and focus** – The starting point has to be to establish habits of attention. This is the basis for individual mindfulness – learning to manage our attention - and is also the basis for mindfulness of a team. If we look at the working day of many people, a great deal of time is spent in meetings with people repeating themselves, not being aware of what others have just said, or not really listening when people are speaking. Many people are on their devices, or arrive late. As a team it is important to cultivate skills of listening – really hearing someone's perspective, as well as also hearing what is behind the words, what is the motivation? Establishing specific habits around devices, attention, side conversations etc. can be very helpful too.

**Habits of Care and positivity** – teams don't function well just because the right people are together and the right topics are on the agenda. Team work has become so interconnected, and also complex, that the human engagement, joy and learning of team members is a central aspect of success. When people feel trust, efficacy and appreciation they engage and give – when they do not, they hold off, and divert their energies to other things. So demonstrating care in team work can be very important to improving the sense of bonding and community. In today's world we often focus on the urgent and the negative – meaning that our experience is coloured by this. So it is also helpful to consciously shift to the positive as a team – noticing what has gone well, achievements, and appreciating each other.

**Habits of emotional awareness** – Emotions influence much of what goes on between us, and also significantly influences the effectiveness of teams. But we usually only deal with emotions when they come up, and try to get rid of them as quickly as possible. Instead it is important to have a process by which we regularly allow emotions to surface – to allow them to naturally be a part of what it means to work together, but also ensure that they do not dominate. Establishing habits such as a Check In or a Check Out, doing specific exercises to notice team emotions, and the emotional habits of the team can also be very helpful.

**Habits of Integration** – Good teamwork is dependent on the EQUAL engagement of all. A number of studies have shown that, interestingly enough, equality in turn-taking was a high predictor of the collective intelligence of teams. This is especially important in global teams where the different nationalities and cultures represented have very different viewpoints, which can help understand a problem better and develop a solution which is globally more robust. Often however such meetings are in asynchronous settings – with some people in a room, who usually dominate and one or two unfortunate team members at the end of a phone line or on a skype link, trying to follow what is going on. So consciously ensuring equality and integration of all can also anchor collective intelligence in a team.

## Mindfulness in Teams

We have worked a great deal with anchoring mindfulness in teams. This is a process of both, individual mindfulness and anchoring habits of mindfulness in the teams. Naturally there are some challenges in this:

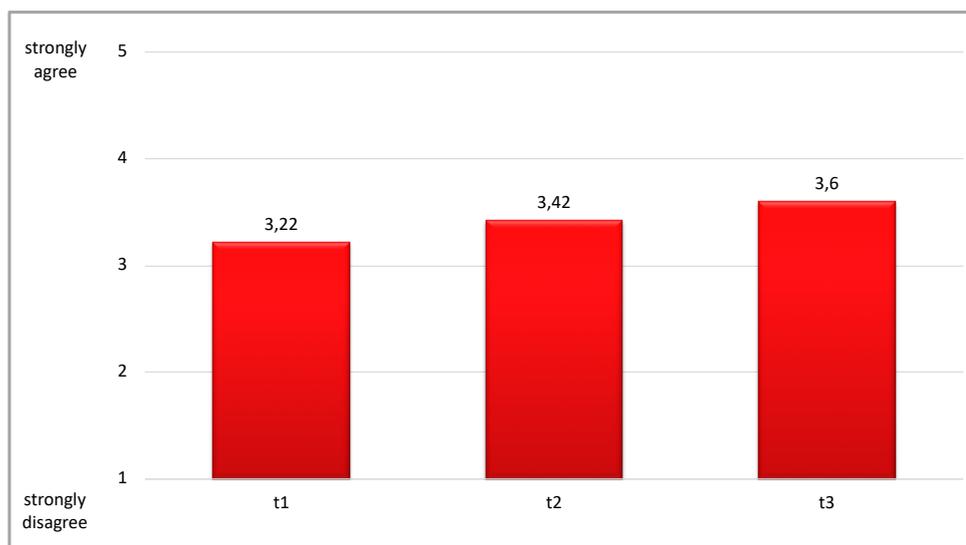
- Not everyone might be keen on mindfulness – and some even downright sceptical. So whereas in many situations, when people take part in a mindfulness programme they have explicitly chosen to be there, in a team mindfulness situation, not everyone has the same level of interest. Our experience is that emphasising the science, discussing the experience of people and encouraging participants to trust their own level of engagement with mindfulness always addresses this.
- Some teams, or especially team leaders, might really want to engage in a process of anchoring mindfulness in teams – but there are very pressing operative problems or simmering conflicts in the team. These need to be addressed – we cannot bypass these problems. When working with teams, mindfulness facilitators need to have sufficient skills of dealing with team processes.

**“WHILE THERE ARE CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING MINDFULNESS, THE EFFECTS CAN BE VERY STRONG.”**

Anchoring habits in teams can have a long-term impact. An individual has varying amounts of discipline – which can fade. But once habits are anchored in teams, they tend to reinforce each other – and even deepen. We have taken measurements of team dynamics at t1 (the start of a training), at t2 (the end of a training) and at t3 (3 months after the end) and seen that there has not only been an improvement from t1 to t2, but also from t2 to t3.)

### Team Climate Inventory

TCl: Team Participation

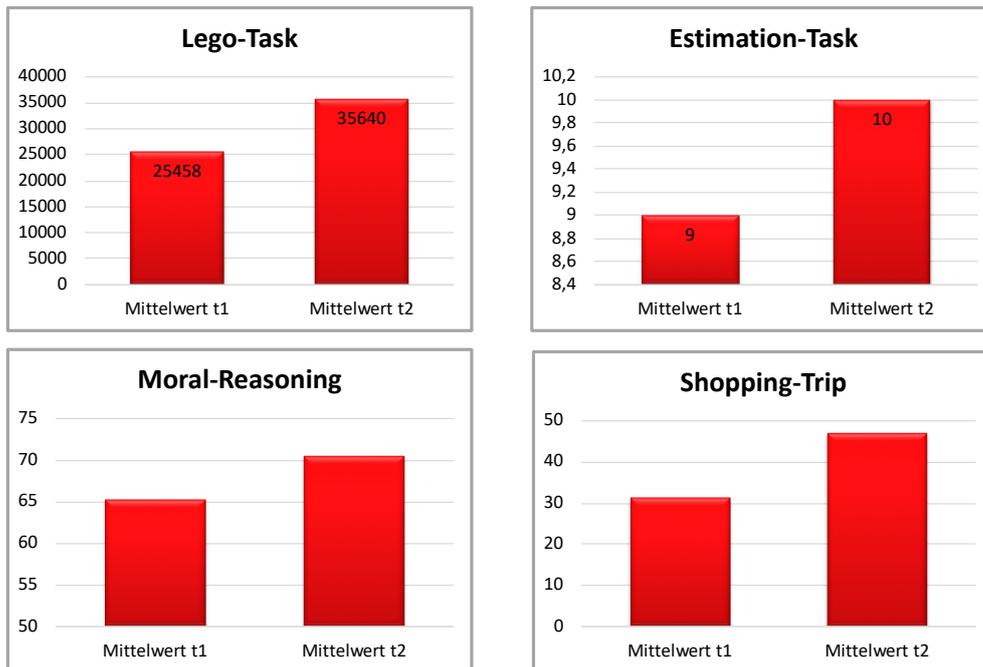


## Collective intelligence of teams

Woolley and collaborators developed a series of collective intelligence tests to assess the collective intelligence of teams. Just like an individual IQ test essentially serves as the predictor of someone's ability to solve a variety of problems in the future, so too a CI measure serves as the predictor of a team's ability to solve problems. The research evidence has been continually strong, that this is very much driven by the social sensitivity of team members and equality of turn-taking. We have now used the tests developed by Woolley and others and used them with teams at t1 and t2 times, and seen a strong improvement in the ability of teams to solve problems.

## Mindfulness practices have a strong impact on collective intelligence

Team Collective intelligence



## Connecting as humans

Anchoring habits of mindfulness in teams brings out our deep humanity. This is not an obstacle to working in teams, but actually nourishes and strengthens us. It is important to place this at the centre of such work. Anchoring mindfulness in teams will not work if the sole aim is to instrumentalise it to make people work better or improve performance. This will be felt immediately. But if there is a genuine realisation that we simply work better if we take care of each ourselves and each other, and that modern work is deeply human, then anchoring such practices can really help a team connect, listen, care for each other, and flourish.

**“THE AIM OF MINDFULNESS IS NOT TO MAKE PEOPLE WORK BETTER BUT TO BRING OUT OUR DEEP HUMANITY. THIS STRENGTHENS COLLABORATION”**

## What does the experience tell us?

We were asked by a major automotive company to conduct training for a number of core development teams. The teams were in a very challenging situation, under continual pressure to deliver results. This had led to an endemic atmosphere of lack of emotional safety and very high stress levels. They were very open to working on their resilience, and were also conscious of how much the stress was affecting them. In the training we focused on mindfulness, resilience and collective intelligence and the results were measured by tests which were developed by the MIT. The outcome – an almost 30% improvement in the team’s ability to solve the complex problems in the collective intelligence tasks.

## Final thoughts

From our point of view, the practice of mindfulness and the focus on emotional intelligence increase transparency and awareness of our strengths. Attention and focus are key to drive innovation and change. If we collaborate and put all our wisdom together we find better solutions and use the full power of our collective intelligence. To grow.

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