**Mindful Collaboration: The Path to Happiness & Good Business**

**By Ron Schultz**

It’s no secret that Steven Jobs, arguably the most creative innovator of our lifetime, practiced mindfulness. What he knew was that the more we are able to abandon ideas we hold tightly to, the better we can see with fresh eyes what might be right in front of us. The more we can listen to ourselves and others the less likely we are to get distracted from the tasks before us. And the better we are at perceiving markets and emerging opportunities, the more success we can realize for ourselves and others.

Unfortunately, visions of going viral push us in directions that are often counter to where we really want to go. We see videos on YouTube with hundreds of thousands of hits that boggle the imagination with their mindlessness. In contrast, brilliant presentations of well thought out ideas about how to change social challenges are all but ignored.

Reaching an audience and then seeing it increase is one of our most valued measures of success. It’s a measurement that has no regard to content. The thinking is simple: the more popular the better. Pop culture is designed to be superfluous, it is built and then collapses around the vocabulary of fad, wave, trend, craze, vogue, style, and fashion.

Organizations are certainly not immune. Plotting and scheming to move from a group to a movement is the dream of every changemaker. And to prove it, billions of dollars are spent each year to market and magnetize people to the next big thing. However, our culture of wanting more often overlooks why we want more. The answer to that is fairly simple: happiness. We’ve even started developing ways of measuring happiness, and what we discover is that we aren’t all that happy, but we sure want to be.

Our unhappiness is what drives us to search for that great new idea that promises us fashion, fame and fortune. And even though we know happiness is rarely found in lasting measure in any of those things, we aren’t sure where else to look. For many, the drive to move beyond the *three F’s* can become a source of disappointment. “How can I ever hope to change the world for the better, alone?” We see evidence of those that have; Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Florence Nightingale, Pete Seeger, Aung San Suu Kyi, Muhammad Yunus, but is that really who *we* are?

Then we hear about the emergence of social entrepreneurs who are actually doing well by doing good. This idea starts resonating in ways that make complete sense with both who we are and what we want to bring to the world. But the thought of starting, alone, feels overwhelming.

The fact is, of course, that none of these folks, from Gandhi to Yunus, did what they did alone. They all recognized two things:

1. They had to collaborate, and
2. They had to be willing to lead by example.

Collaborating with others begins with being sensitive to the current situation and environment in which we intend to operate. That sensitivity is not just to the environment outside, but to that within ourselves, as well. But if we aren’t familiar with the terrain in either place, moving beyond our borders becomes even more challenging.

To breakthrough that boundary, we make inquiries into and about our local landscape. Not too surprisingly, from this a call to action often arises. This is not necessarily one of those dramatic cloud-parting callings with thunder and lightning, although if that shows up, it’s best to listen. Usually, it starts with a feeling, an intuition, an appreciation for what has to be done. And we know we have to do it.

The critical factor is listening to it, however it emerges. In listening for this calling, we are developing a mindfulness about the current conditions that surround us. There is currently a great deal being written about the power of mindfulness in organizations and corporations, like programs at Shell and Google. And a lot of money is being spent by others to learn how to cultivate it.

The truth is, this is not an unknown place to many of us. We often find ourselves in mindful states: when we’re showering, walking down the street, going shopping, or exercising. When we space out doing these things, something invariably makes us aware that we’ve lost our focus and brings us back, like tripping over a curb, or forgetting the bread you went to the market for in the first place. Mindfulness and awareness are nothing more than that, focusing on something specific and becoming aware when you’ve become distracted from it and are brought back.

Another means for cultivating both mindfulness and awareness is meditation. Meditation is nothing more than looking at what arises as we sit without distraction and then bringing our focus back to our meditation if we space out and, metaphorically speaking, trip over something in our way. The outcome is we learn that even when we are not meditating, we are still able to continue to focus our attention on the current conditions around us, which often leads us to an encounter we might otherwise have not predicted.

Being willing to encounter someone and have a real conversation is a first step toward collaboration and the innovation that arises out of those interactions. Now, we’ve all had conversations that didn’t lead to working together with someone, and those in which something totally unexpected emerged. And it’s pretty easy to cast aspersions and make judgments when things don’t work. Unfortunately, human interactions are unpredictable. We simply have no way to accurately know what will emerge when people interact.

However, when we are unable or unwilling to recognize this unpredictability, we lose all ability to find common ground. Instead we focus on the disappointment of our unfulfilled expectation, and rather than reaching out toward another, we become even more self-absorbed in dissatisfaction.  Effective collaboration depends on our ability to connect more directly with others and ourselves. When it comes to making a genuine impact on the world we encounter, mindfulness – our ability to connect with ourselves and be open to others – is a key component in how we get there.

The mindfulness required to recognize our own sense of worthiness to do this work, and then reach out toward others, requires more than just a wish to do so. It requires our being willing to look at ourselves and how we show-up. Why is this important? Because mindfulness is about being present, and it is while we are present that we can see and capture what emerges out of our conversations and collaborations, together. Without the ability to be present with ourselves and others, no real exchange can take place. And if there’s no exchange taking place then we’re not really collaborating.

If we’re not really collaborating, then nothing truly novel is emerging that can magnetize others to join our collaboration, and by extension, create even greater interaction and subsequent emergence. And since the most effective and productive collaborations take place when we are truly mindful of ourselves and others, it stands to reason that we reach more people by cultivating it than by ignoring it.

That’s how we make lasting change and start movements that aren’t simply the next big thing. And, oh yes, how we begin to generate real happiness. The question is, are we willing to incorporate into our programs what corporations all over the country are recognizing; that cultivating mindfulness is good for everyone and good business.