**Mindful Complexity**

**By Ron Schultz**

The opposite of being mindful is being mind-filled. In a state of mind-filledness there is no room for anything new to enter. The paradoxical response to this condition is often to distract yourself even more, with music, food, movies, web-surfing and all sorts of other discursive activities. When looked at from this perspective, you would think that this additional informational input would only acerbate the condition…and guess what, it does. The more distractions you input into your mind, the less mindful you are and the more mind-filled you become. I would think that at this point it would be fairly obvious why one might experience overload?

Within today’s complex work environments, as well as simply staying abreast of what’s going on in the world round us, we make a choice every moment—be here or go there. And overwhelmingly we choose to go there.

Don’t believe me? Try for yourselves. Try to sit still for five minutes without distracting yourself with something else. That includes telling yourself a story, making lists about what you have to accomplish, what you need at the store, how many cracks there are on the floor, what sports event you want to watch, taking the wash out of the dryer—no entertainment. OK that last one isn’t very entertaining, but it could be especially if you’re trying to be aware of all your other distractions. Even reading this piece is a means of distraction… but don’t stop reading, yet.

So why should you care if you are mind-filled or mindful? Let’s take your ability to pick up cues within the environment in which you are operating. Cues are those elements that point in the direction of something new about to emerge. They can show up as physical evidence, a sensation or an intuitive awareness, an expectant feeling you might get walking into a crowded room. If your mind were filled, any new information that might emerge would probably not register as more than background noise.

Now, let’s extend that notion of picking up cues as the precursor to actually recognizing something emerge, as it emerges, rather than trying to track it down after the fact amid all the muddle and debris. This is something akin to trying to figure-out a whodunit mystery in real time. Miss a cue and the mystery remains unsolved. If you aren’t able to be present enough to see and feel the environment with a mind not filled by other distractions and junk, you’ll invariably be surprised when you discover it was Professor Plum in the conservatory with the iPad. Oh, that’s who did it!—after the fact.

In a business context, this is the ability to be moving toward recognizing an innovative idea rather than looking back and trying to figure out what just happened. If others are busily looking back and you’re moving forward, who is ahead of the game?

The ability to become more mindful and make space in your mind allows another profound occurrence to take place. The more you practice mindfulness, the less you become fixated on your own ideas, locked-in by your own biases. Being free from fixed ideas allows you to be more comfortable sitting with a blank canvas. This is the open space upon which the opportunity for real innovation, something truly new and now, can emerge.

Mindfulness is not something that is simply learned and once learned, you’ve got it. It is a practice and requires practice. One well-known technique for developing mindfulness is meditation; the act of stabilizing the mind. This is not about learning to stop your thinking, as some mistakenly purport. Rather it is about being able to watch your thoughts without holding on to any of them.

One metaphor describing the relationship between meditation and thought is that you are a mountain and your thoughts are like clouds floating by. You have no means to jump on one of the clouds or pack it away for later. It just moves on by.

Once you have received initial instruction in how to meditate, something that has been passed down person to person for millennia, it takes practice to begin letting go of the clutter that has been amassed. Mind-filled hording is no less an issue than hording material stuff in your own home. But, by learning to clear some of that out, you actually discover you’ve created more space. And by being able to sit within that space and not freak out because you’ve gotten rid of the comfort of the clutter, something rather remarkable begins to take place. Clarity begins to emerge. And when you can be comfortable simply sitting in the space of your mind while interacting with others, a variety of things can transpire. One crucial to this discussion is that when something emerges out of that interaction with others, it becomes evident to you and not lost amid the stacks of old New Yorkers you’ve carefully stored in the corner.

This ability to cue-spot and capture what emerges within a collaborative interaction actually requires more than just a mindful space. There are six steps within this process.

1. Mindfulness—the ability to return focus to the topic at hand without clinging to thoughts;
2. Awareness—the ability to recognize that you have been pulled away from the interaction;
3. Listening—the ability to hear what is being said within all segments of the environment—inner-personal and intra-personal;
4. Offering—the ability to trust what is known and to capture and present what has emerged;
5. Furthering—the ability to reapply what has emerged to deepen the conversation and afford the next level of emergence, and;
6. Discovery—the ability to identify novelty as it emerges.

Being able to capture the innovative moment, however, begins with mindfulness. It takes a willingness to not be stuck in your fixed ideas about the world you encounter. Modeling that behavior as a leader makes it OK for others to do so as well. The result is that it can bring an enterprise to the front of the pack both from an innovative perspective and from being the kind of place people want to work. This is not a management technique. This is leadership.