

MINDFUL THINKERS FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

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The seven foundational principles of mindfulness could cultivate the facilitation mindset needed for delivery of good systems change programming.

I have been practising mindfulness for the past few years and currently coach people on how to incorporate it into their lives. When discussing the attitudes needed for market systems thinking, I realised many of the elements required were synonymous with mindfulness principles.

Many people are struggling to manage the chaotic nature of our ever increasingly connected, fast-paced, 24/7, information overloaded and goal-obsessed world. Mindfulness practitioners use techniques to manage their minds to better filter the complexity of the day-to-day to bring concerted attention to the things we need to focus on. It may seem like a buzzword, but mindfulness practices are based on thousands of years of practice and, more recently, backed up with science.¹

Much like our lives, the market systems we seek to change are complex, messy, constantly changing and very unpredictable. We need to navigate these systems and clear out the 'noise' of information to identify the root causes of issues and design interventions that facilitate change. In many cases this may require established practitioners challenging their own assumptions about a problem within geographies and populations they may be familiar with. MSD interventions may or may not yield the results we expect and could be steered off course at any moment by events of which we have little control.

It all sounds very familiar to the complexities and uncertainties that mindfulness practitioners train themselves to manage. There are seven principles of mindfulness that provide the foundations of mindfulness practice which are surprisingly applicable to those facilitating MSD programmes²:

1. **Non-judging** - *becoming aware of the tendency to categorise an event or opinion and/or skewing an event or opinion to one perspective and reacting to it by default. By practicing non-judgement, we open our minds to other perspectives of situations, opinions, thoughts and beliefs.*

This principle helps us to remain unbiased in our analysis such that we drill down to the root causes of issues rather than defaulting to known symptoms and common solutions. It enables us to be more emotionally intelligent and to not judge market actors before understanding their motivations and incentives.

2. **Patience** - *we take the time for our mind to both open to new thoughts and practices and to observe change over time, reducing our demand for instantaneous change or knowledge.*

Lack of patience is a known challenge in the development space where time and budgetary constraints are put on upfront diagnosis and design - arguably the most critical components to good MSD implementation – often pushing for rapid, often unsustainable, interventions rather than the sustainable but often slower system change we need to achieve.

¹ Although there are many studies, a more recent example is a study on brain activity related to mindfulness found evidence of improved memory retrieval, decision making, and outward attention. This study can be found from: *Gartenschläger, M., Schreckenberger, M., Buchholz, HG. et al. Mindfulness (2017) 8: 1009. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-017-0677-2>*

² Adapted from: *Kabat-Zinn, Jon. (2013). Full catastrophe living: using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness. New York: Bantam Books and Central England College (2017) Mindfulness Now Programme [Mindfulness Teacher Training Course October 2017]*

- 3. Beginner's mind** – *our mind can become cluttered with repetitive or similar experiences such that we default into being vaguely present during those experiences or reacting to them in a way we always do. A beginner's mind avoids the default position and has the humility to listen and learn.*

By experiencing and observing as if it is the first time gives you a fresh and unbiased perspective making us more receptive to new learning which may yield improved results. It dispels assumptions and fosters creativity and enthusiasm rather than cynicism which is key to both designing new interventions but also persuading partners to try something new.

- 4. Trust** - *trusting in your own analytical rigour rather than being told how to feel and react by external authorities and/or previous memories or experiences.*

Market system analysis and intervention design is often described as an 'art rather than a science'. The abundance of information in a system and the thousands of potential focus areas mean that it is imperative to trust the approach to guide you to a solution (especially amid the apparent chaos of data surrounding you) rather than pre-empting the outcome or being overwhelmed by the task.

- 5. Non-striving** – *this teaches us to accept the present for what it is and adapt to whatever changes arise, becoming welcoming to pivoting and side-stepping on the journey rather than moving on headstrong in one direction and forcing change.*

Here we try to move towards our intervention goals through facilitation with market actors, working at their pace. We try to observe how the system will react to the interventions and adapt and respond accordingly. Non-striving teaches us to let events unfold naturally rather than distorting the system and forcing change which will, inevitably, be unsustainable in the long-run.

- 6. Acceptance** - *one does not need to be resigned or approve that reality or status quo but needs to be willing to acknowledge and accept it rather than be prejudiced or in denial about it.*

When we can accept reality as it is, we can adapt more quickly to address issues rather than denying them and potentially creating a scenario from which there is no recourse to change. It fosters a more risk-tolerant learning culture that openly discusses failure. Being able to develop results measurement and decision-making mechanisms that allow for this type of pause and reflection, without fear of exposure, are key here.

- 7. Letting go** - *An ability to manage your thoughts, emotions and feelings by consciously deciding to let go or hold onto those aspects rather than being absorbed by them.*

Letting go is in knowing when to stop. This is one of the hardest and, sometimes scariest, things for practitioners to do because it opens themselves and the programme up to vulnerability. Practicing acceptance facilitates the letting go of interventions that simply will not work which is key to the innovation process. It also makes sure we are aware of when to acknowledge we have achieved all we can with a partner and to move on to new partnerships or crowding in.

Taken together, these mindfulness principles through an MSD lens provide a neat articulation of the qualities both individual facilitators and supporting donors seeking to successfully apply MSD principles need to cultivate. Mindfulness for MSD anyone?