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The Quiet Ego: Assuaging Organizational Concerns About Mindfulness

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Hyland, Lee, and Mills (2015) provide ample evidence regarding the value of mindfulness to individuals and the industrial–organizational community as a whole. However, as they noted, mindfulness programs and practices have not yet found widespread implementation among businesses and other organizations. Hyland et al. suggest two primary reasons for this. First, the move toward a nonjudgmental, presently aware, and accepting mind is a tall order for most individuals in our Western society who are heavily conditioned to be relatively self-interested, judgmental, and future oriented. Second, typical mindfulness programs (e.g., mindfulness based stress reduction; MBSR) may be too costly and time consuming for organizations.

These concerns suggest that many organizations are reluctant to adopt mindfulness practices, at least in their current presentation. This should not, however, discourage researchers and practitioners from attempting to assist employees to think, feel, and behave less defensively and more

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compassionately toward themselves and others. Rather, we should be looking for alternative concepts and constructs that may bring about some of the same benefits of mindful meditation practices but do not require extensive adaptation to be suitable for organizational environments. We believe that Bauer and Wayment's (2008) conceptualization of the quiet ego might be a construct that is more compatible with the workplace culture and that the less demanding quiet ego intervention may be a more appropriate match.

The Quiet Ego and Workplace Culture Fit

The quiet ego is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of research on psychological characteristics that are associated with benefits from transcending excessive self-interest (Wayment & Bauer, 2008). Although quieting the ego includes transcending excessive self-focus, the goal is not to quash the self entirely. The quiet ego construct suggests that a healthier approach to life (and work) is to balance the concerns for self and other. A quiet ego doesn't necessarily lead to a nonjudgmental mindset but rather allows people to apply this balanced approach in the way that they interpret the information that affects their judgments. The quiet ego has been found to be associated with less negative and more holistic thinking, effective coping styles (e.g., more problem focused, less avoidant), health and well-being, and constructs related to balance and growth (e.g., humility) and has been found to be a unique predictor of life satisfaction even after controlling for self-reported mindfulness and self-compassion (Wayment, Bauer, & Sylaska, 2015; Wayment, Wiist, Sullivan, & Warren, 2011).

The quiet ego is a midlevel construct that lies at the theoretical intersection of four well-known psychosocial characteristics: inclusive identity, perspective taking, detached awareness, and growth. *Inclusive identity* refers to an ability to see oneself as interconnected with other people and the natural world. This sense of interdependence and mutual influence is reflected in one's psychological self-identity (Leary, Tipsord, & Tate, 2008) and may strengthen a person's sense of belonging, which is a fundamentally important human motive (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When members of an organization develop an inclusive identity, positive organizational-level attitudes will flourish. For example, employees will be more likely to focus on the common qualities and interconnectedness of everyone in the organization. Thus, individual selves will give way to a virtual organizational self, leading to increased affective organizational commitment. There will be a reduction in need for personal achievement and motivation that is purely self-interested. Rather, there will be the development of a common understanding that *our* success is *my* success, and *my* success is *our* success.

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Relatedly, one should also expect to see less conflict and more collaboration among project teams, work groups, and employees in general. Cohesion is a basic component of team effectiveness (Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005) and requires an inclusive identity. Employees who possess an inclusive identity view others as similar to themselves, which allows for bonding or member integration (Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001). We argue that, although mindfulness might provide conditions that could lead to increased team cohesion, its self-focus nature may not always be conducive to this important team characteristic.

Perspective taking involves an ability to shift attention away from the self (Cassell, 2002), which can facilitate compassion toward others when done in the context of an increased conceptual understanding of the conditions of others by virtue of inclusive identity. Within organizations, employees will develop a mutual understanding of how to effectively communicate and maximize the contributions of individuals, depending on their strengths and weaknesses. For example, performance appraisal, an important component in performance management process (Landy & Conte, 2007), is predicated on the assessor's accurate evaluation of others. A supervisor or assessor who is high in quiet ego characteristics is more likely to have a conceptual understanding of the conditions and experiences of the assessed employee, which allows for more accurate assessment.

Boland and Tenkasi (1995) identified perspective taking as essential to the development of organizational knowledge. Organizational success depends on the ability of employees to integrate the knowledge, beliefs, and motives of others (within or outside the organization) with their own (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995). This creates an understanding that will allow for more optimal decision making. Perspective taking has been consistently shown to be advantageous in competitive interactions in which negotiation and understanding opponent strategies is key to success (e.g., Gilin, Maddux, Carpenter, & Galinsky, 2013). In addition, power (e.g., held by managers and other organizational leaders) and perspective taking synergize to enhance interactional justice and the tendency to share critical information with others (Galinsky, Magee, Rus, Rothman, & Todd, 2014). Perspective taking provides employees with the ability to be more creative. Grant and Berry (2011) demonstrated that perspective taking that was generated by prosocial motivation (as would be the case with the quiet ego) strengthened the relationship between intrinsic motivation and creativity in three unique organizational samples.

Detached awareness is the ability to focus on the immediate moment without predetermined expectations or frameworks that prejudge the persons or situations. In some ways, this definition is similar to popular notions of mindfulness (Bishop et al., 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown, Ryan,

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Creswell, & Niemiec, 2008). In contrast to mindfulness, however, which generally describes a moment-by-moment awareness, detached awareness also reflects a type of situational awareness, an ability to "step back" when necessary and adjust initial understanding or responses when aware of possible areas of defensiveness. Ego defensiveness drives the tendency for managers with low self-efficacy to avoid soliciting input from employees (Fast, Burris, & Bartel, 2014). Employee defensiveness reduces the effectiveness of multisource feedback methods due to an unwillingness to learn from the perspectives of others (Taylor & Bright, 2011). If members of organizations could utilize detached awareness, they would be more likely to accept feedback and look for opportunities for personal and organizational growth rather than be overly concerned with ego threats.

Finally, *growth* refers to an understanding of the nature of human development, a motivation to take a less defensive stance toward the self and others, and balancing self and other concerns in a way that facilitates an expanded sense of self (Bauer & Wayment, 2008). Being concerned with growth results in a long-term orientation regarding the consequences of current actions, thus facilitating an individual's ability to utilize a long-term perspective when thinking about the self and the organization. Jacobs and Washington (2003) provided evidence for the notion that fostering employee development is related to increased organizational performance. Allowing room for and fostering employee growth was found to be positively related to overall company performance in a multinational organization, with performance increasing when employees were targeted for intellectual growth, given the opportunity for managerial participation, and allowed to be involved in the development of new products (Chalhoub, 2009).

Priming the Quiet Ego: A Brief Intervention

Whereas typical mindfulness interventions (e.g., MBSR) are time intensive and behavior based, quiet ego interventions are primarily cognitive (rather than behavioral) and brief. Wayment and Collier (2015) developed and recorded effective 15-, 10-, and 4-minute quiet ego contemplation (QEC) recordings that consisted of brief description of the four characteristics, with time for participants to reflect on the ideas. In a series of recent experimental studies, listening to and reflecting on the four quiet ego characteristics have resulted in some positive outcomes among first-year college students making the transition to a new, stressful environment and among middle-aged women induced to be in a negative mood. For example, after listening to the 15-minute QEC three times in 30 days, first-year college students reported higher quiet ego characteristics, more acceptance and tolerance of different perspectives, reductions in a biological marker of oxidative stress, and greater ability to focus (e.g., less mind wandering on a computerized

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task; Wayment, Collier, Birkett, Traustadottir, & Till, 2015). Among middle-aged women who were distressed, those who listened to the 15-minute QEC one time showed a diminished immune reactivity to the stressor. Most recently, an effective *online version* of the QEC was also developed in which participants listened to the prime as part of an online exercise (Wayment & Collier, 2015). The brevity and the option to use an online version address many of the concerns regarding the practicality of other mindfulness interventions. These brief interventions are easily adaptable to different contexts such as the work environment.

Conclusion

Despite the evidence that mindfulness is linked to improved physical and mental health (Gu, Strauss, Bond, & Cavanagh, 2015), organizations are reluctant to adopt mindfulness programs because of recent controversies regarding the goals of mindfulness programs (a method of stress reduction or a spiritual path), religious ties, and complex practice protocols. At present, it is not entirely clear that mindfulness practices are completely in line with the goals and values of many organizations. For example, fostering a non-judgmental, present-focused mindset seems to be, at least in some respects, counterproductive for organizations that depend on actively making value judgments about future expected organizational outcomes. It has been well documented that mindfulness practice, regardless of experience level, can lead to difficult, challenging, or impairing experiences (Perez-De-Albeniz & Holmes, 2000; Shapiro, 1992), such as changes in executive functioning, emotional responses, motivation, physical well-being, and social relationships. Part of the difficulty lies with the traditional purpose of mindfulness as part of the path toward enlightenment, which may have effects that can be somewhat incompatible with a business or work climate (e.g., the dissolution of self). On the other hand, the quiet ego construct has its roots in humanistic and philosophical traditions on what constitutes eudaimonic well-being (Bauer & Wayment, 2008; Wayment et al., 2015), which may be more clearly aligned with organizational goals. Researchers and practitioners in the industrial–organizational community should consider further exploration into the applicability of quiet ego characteristics in organizational practices such as hiring, training, and development.

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Flourishing in the Workplace Through Meditation and Mindfulness

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We believe that Hyland, Lee, and Mills (2015) introduced important considerations concerning the importance of mindfulness for research and practice

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