



SEE COLLEAGUES AS THEY ARE, NOT AS THEY WERE

HOW TO GET ALONG BETTER WITH CO-WORKERS

By IMD Adjunct Professor Duncan Coombe

IMD
Chemin de Bellerive 23
PO Box 915,
CH-1001 Lausanne
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11
Fax: +41 21 618 07 07
info@imd.org
www.imd.org

Is there a colleague with whom you have a strained working relationship? If, by chance, you are some kind of work superhero who just answered “no” to that question, is there at least someone with whom you would like to have a *better* relationship?

If so, please ask yourself the following questions in relation to that person:

- Do you notice him as he truly is today, or based on your memory of how he was last week or last month – or even last year?
- When you have a conversation with him, is your only aim to change his mind? Or also to change your own?
- When you see his name in your inbox, do you already have a “story” about him, before even opening the email?

These issues get to the heart (and brain) of executive mindfulness. While we know [from research](#) that mindfulness is good for us, what seems to be missing from the conversation is how one might be mindful at work, without meditating at our desks or breaking into a sun salutation. But an understanding of mindfulness – how it really operates in the context of daily work activities – is essential to good working relationships; relationships that let both us and our coworkers grow and change over time.

Stripping away all the jargon, mindfulness is *noticing what is happening in the present moment, without judgment*. This can take one of two forms: either “novelty seeking” where we seek to notice new or different things in our present moment, or “focus” where we seek to bring greater single focus to the present moment. The opposite of mindfulness is what we call (get ready for your word of the week) “habituation.” Habituation simply means operating in a deeply habitual way on auto-pilot in the ways we think and act. Mindfulness is therefore the act of noticing in a non-habitual and non-judgmental manner.

Improved noticing leads to improved awareness, which in turn leads to better options, decisions, and actions. And better options, decisions, and actions are of interest to every executive I have ever encountered.

Try this right now: scan your environment for something new. Pause and actually taste your coffee, feel your body weight in your chair, notice one thing about your office space you have never noticed before. If you’re about to head to a meeting, walk a different route to get there. In the meeting, try not speaking speak for 10 minutes (unless your boss asks you a question!).

These are all mini-ways of practicing mindfulness. Here are four more substantial ways to use similar techniques to get on better with that colleague:

1] See your colleague as they are today, not how you remember them from yesterday. By the time we have worked with someone for a few months or years, we have developed expectations for what they will say and do. So, as an experiment, simply notice your colleague afresh. How do they look today? What is their tone of voice? What are their facial expressions? Are they really saying the same old stuff, or is there something new to be heard that you could notice and appreciate?

2] Notice whether your conversation changed your mind at all. After talking with your colleague, did you in any way change your mind — even in a small way? If you did not change your mind at all, it might indicate that you were not seeking new information and in fact only sought to confirm what you already knew. Bear in mind that this does not mean you are necessarily wrong — it just means you were not open to being influenced by new information. Part of becoming mindful is becoming open to being surprised.

3] Ask yourself what script you hold when you see a person's name in your inbox. I've [previously written](#) with my good friend and colleague, [Darren Good](#), about the “flash images” we form about people when we see their names in our inboxes. This flash image, based on past experiences, happens before you even read the content of the email, and then influences the way we read the email. While this is a normal part of brain functioning, it has a potentially adverse impact when our negative lens leads to negative interpretations. Experiment with reading the email as if this person were a friend.

4] Seek new and affirming information about someone. On the assumption you are human like the rest of us, there are a few people who get under your skin. Mindfulness offers the opportunity to intervene in these negative thoughts and observations. As an experiment, consciously seek to notice something positive about the person. What is one thing about this person that you appreciate? What is one thing they say that is helpful? What is their contribution to the organization? What is their single greatest strength? Focus on that and pay total attention to that one thing. Hold that focus and make that your first “foothold” on the path to an improved relationship.

Will your life change as you try these experiments? Probably not. Will every meeting go well and every relationship blossom? Definitely not. But you will have developed a sense of what mindfulness could be in your context — changing up your habits, noticing things afresh, and seeing with greater focus. Remember, if it helps you to improve the quality of your noticing and awareness, then it improves the quality of your thinking, your decisions, and your actions.

Mindfulness provides a deeply practical way to start anew – a way to clean out the cupboards of our old habitual ways of noticing and relating to others and be more intentional about developing habits of success.

[Duncan Coombe](#) is Adjunct Professor of Organizational Behavior and Leadership at IMD. He co-authored the award winning book [Care to Dare](#) and advises organizations on matters relating to human growth and development.

This article was first published on [Harvard Business Review](#).

Related Programs

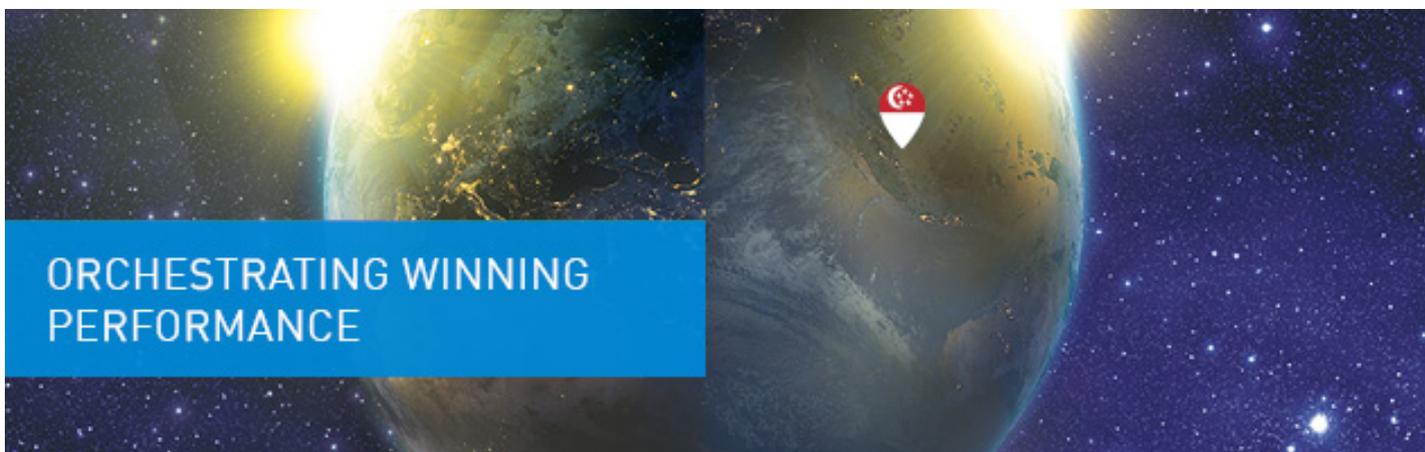


HIGH PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP – <http://www.imd.org/hpl>

Listen, influence, impact

Program Director George Kohrieser

- Boost your capacity to change and move to the next level of your leadership performance
- Discover your leadership roots and foundations, diagnose your leadership tasks, advance your leadership skills, and develop a personal leadership path that ensures inspiration and resilience
- Develop your own leadership style: learn effective dialogue, revitalize your vision and build on your strengths



ORCHESTRATING WINNING PERFORMANCE – <http://www.imd.org/owp>

Create your own learning journey

Program Directors Michael Wade and Dominique Turpin

- Learn about the newest trends in business management and leadership
- Solve challenges with face-to-face learning from world-class Faculty
- Improve your team's commitment and performance around a common strategy
- Customize your learning with your own personal program schedule
- Become part of a network of 100,000 executives from 140 countries