

Mindfulness at work: Study first to uncover positive benefits for teams

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Challenges and differences in opinion are inevitable when working in a team. But new research from the UBC Sauder School of Business suggests some of these conflicts can be reduced, or even avoided,

through team mindfulness.

Team mindfulness refers to a shared belief within a team of focusing on the present moment and ensuring [team members](#) interact with one another without judgment. While individual mindfulness has gained traction around the world, research has yet to properly delve into the benefits of mindfulness in a group setting, which the researchers say could be achieved through activities such as meditation or yoga practiced as a team.

The study is the first to challenge the common belief that mindfulness is a solitary activity, and explores how team mindfulness can be beneficial to teams.

"Mindfulness has been proven to increase job satisfaction and psychological well-being and decrease stress in employees, so we wondered how these benefits may or may not transfer to a team environment," said Lingtao Yu, the study's lead author and assistant professor at Sauder. "We found that when teams are more mindful, this reduces interpersonal conflicts and helps teams better focus on the task at hand."

For the study, the researchers conducted two field studies with a total of 394 students in Masters of Business Administration programs in the United States to develop a scale of team mindfulness and to test the benefits of team mindfulness in reducing [conflict](#). A third field study tested the benefits of team mindfulness within a different work culture using 292 health care workers in China.

The researchers found that, when teams are more mindful, the degree of interpersonal conflict decreased. Team members were also less likely to transform their frustration with a particular task into a personal conflict with their colleagues. This helped the team members detach from the

task and eliminated strong emotions and feelings of prejudice.

"Our research shows that interpersonal conflict can further spill over into interpersonal social undermining behaviours, harming teamwork as a whole," said study co-author Mary Zellmer-Bruhn of the University of Minnesota. "Team mindfulness can act as a safeguard against this and ensures that the task, rather than the person, remains the focus of reactions. It can also limit the intensity of one's opposition and negative emotions, thereby limiting escalation."

The researchers argue that more companies should consider making a concerted effort to be mindful— not only for individual employees, but as a team. Organizations such as Google, Target, General Mills and UBC have been early adopters of individual mindfulness practices and recognize the benefits of it. For example, companies could benefit from bringing a meditation expert to carry out meditation sessions for teams.

"Given that more companies are employing a team-based organizational structure, where team interactions are critical and stress levels are high, we hope to design an evidence-based team mindfulness program that organizations can offer," said Yu. "We believe teams may benefit from doing meditation or yoga together, and setting aside time to share experiences so that team as a whole becomes more mindful."

The study was recently published in the *Academy of Management Journal*.

More information: Lingtao Yu et al, Introducing Team Mindfulness and Considering its Safeguard Role Against Conflict Transformation and Social Undermining, *Academy of Management Journal* (2017). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2016.0094](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2016.0094)

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