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Building the mindfulness skills that support business success

1. Notice your emotions, thoughts and assumptions. Imagine getting in a helicopter and viewing them from above. Practise detaching and simply observe.
2. Concentrate on the other person or people. Become alert to all the small non-verbal clues, cues and signals that can reveal what's really going on.
3. Mobilise your existing knowledge base. Take a step back so that you can analyse and think. It's this accurate interpretation that will support you in making the best decisions about what to do.
4. Select the most suitable skills from your portfolio. Monitor how things go. Sometimes you'll need to adapt your behaviour to match others. But other times this may not be the best response. Balance any pressure to adapt with the need to remain authentic.

MIND THE GAP! HOW MINDFULNESS WILL HELP YOU SUCCEED

It can be hard to notice what's really going on

There is a remarkable characteristic shared by many of those we've filmed in international settings over the last 15 years: they didn't appear to notice what was actually going on – and going wrong – right in front of them! In fact, some of the interactions we've caught on camera are almost embarrassingly bad. For instance, we've filmed meetings where significant Asian counterparts didn't get much chance to talk. The Australians present left feeling reasonably content, having missed the non-verbal signals telling them their counterparts were annoyed. Typically, the Australians' perspective was, "We worked through everything on our agenda and we think we got our points across. So, overall, we felt it was a pretty good meeting."

You might be inclined to dismiss such reactions as showing ignorance or lack of motivation. But the truth is more complicated. These were all intelligent, well-intentioned people who had some existing experience of global business and were strongly motivated to succeed. They were by no means ignorant and they were not novices.

To check this point, we started interviewing people first. We asked them what sort of challenges they were anticipating. Their replies often showed a fair amount of basic knowledge. For example, they might mention a book they'd read about international business. They might add that they knew 'relationships are important in Asia.' So during the forthcoming interaction, they were planning to focus on building a positive relationship with their counterparts. So what was it that stopped these smart people from applying their insight, just when they needed it most?

The source of the problem

In the midst of the stress and complexity of even quite ordinary cultural interactions, it can be hard to notice what's going on. Your attention might be focused on your own agenda, rather than on how the communication is developing, including how well you're relating to and understanding the other person. At the very time you need to be mindful, you become mindless! You can even find yourself slipping into behaviours that may be the *opposite* of what would help you secure a positive outcome. Any cultural skills you've developed don't even get a look in! Think of it as 'cultural cruise control'. It's as if you're still flying on automatic pilot, but now there's a storm brewing, you have one engine out and all the warning lights are flashing!

Finding the solution

This is why an essential element of the UGM cultural competence model is *mindfulness*. After all, if you don't believe a situation warrants some special

focus or effort (because you don't see anything challenging or problematic about it), then all the skills in the world are useless. If you don't notice the symptoms of communication breakdown, you won't apply your skills to rectify them – or even better, prevent them arising in the first place.

It's the ability to be *mindful* that provides you with a powerful and dynamic link between knowledge and action. When you're mindful, you're fully present and aware. You notice exactly what's happening in both your internal and external worlds. As a result of this close attention, you're able to observe what's going on and start using what you've learned to help decode all those small communication clues and signals, available in the moment. These can point you towards what you need to say and do.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is essentially an attribute of consciousness. It reflects the ability to bring your attention and awareness to the present moment. Although you might think that attention and awareness are natural functions exercised daily by all of us, the term mindfulness captures a *particular* clarity of consciousness. In this sense, it's positioned in direct contrast to those habitual or automatic states where you simply react according to a long-standing behavioural pattern, irrespective of whether it's useful in the current situation.

How does mindfulness help in international business?

When you're confronted with a culturally complex situation, you need to notice and manage your own emotions and assumptions, while also noticing and managing those of others, as best you can. You need to monitor what's going on internally and externally. Internally, you might be aware of feelings of frustration or confusion. By observing these, you can begin to detach from them, reducing the likelihood that you'll take the simple (and less helpful) course of reacting on the basis of these emotions.

It's as if you create a space where you're able to think. You can ask yourself, "What's going on here? What knowledge do I have that could be relevant in helping me figure things out? What behavioural options do I have? What actions on my part might be both appropriate and effective?" You can scan your portfolio of skills and make your selection. Then you can monitor the effect of your actions. Are you moving closer to your goals or not? Do you need to make some adjustments or try something else?

UGM research on global business is showing that the act of paying attention empowers the person who is mindful. Stereotypical or limiting patterns of thought are disrupted and fresh insights become available. Mindfulness functions as a bridge between what you *know* and what you are able to *do*!