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Get Out of Your Own Head: Mindful Listening for Project Managers

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Get Out of Your Own Head: Mindful Listening for Project Managers

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Abstract

In oral communication, both listeners and speakers come to the process with psychological barriers to its effectiveness (Frisk, 2010). Mindful listening, the practice of bringing full, moment-to-moment awareness to the speaker's message, can help a listener notice and work through these barriers (Shafir, 2003). Health care practitioners who practice mindfulness have demonstrated greater overall empathy (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998). Mindfulness training has also been given to legal professionals to aid in negotiation and mediation (Riskin, 2004). For project managers, empathy and facilitation are two of the key interpersonal soft skills that that are extremely important to project team development (Frisk, 2010). This paper explores the concept of mindful listening. Then, using examples and exercises, it provides a framework for how a project manager can apply mindful listening to be more present, cultivate empathy, and listen to their own cues. Finally, it suggests future directions for research on this topic.

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1. Introduction

It is important for project managers to have interpersonal skills in order to develop a project team (Novello, 2008; Frisk, 2009; Project Management Institute, 2008; Heldman, 2009). The Project Management Institute (2008) summarizes the need for interpersonal skills in a project manager as follows:

> The project management team can greatly reduce problems and increase cooperation by understanding the sentiments of project team members, anticipating their actions, acknowledging their concerns, and following up on their issues.

Interpersonal skills required by a project manager include empathy, communication, facilitation, and negotiation (Project Management Institute, 2008; Heldman, 2009; Frisk, 2009). These are sometimes called "soft skills" to differentiate them from the occupational skills often required to do a job. In the case of a project manager, an occupational skill might be the creation of a work breakdown structure, which is a tool used to decompose the work elements of a project. A soft skill would be the ability to effectively communicate the meaning of that work breakdown structure to a project team member not versed in the technical details of project management.

Heldman (2009) states that, in her experience, soft skills are often inherent in project managers' personalities but can be learned. For those that have built their careers on their technical skills, but feel they might lack interpersonal skills, this can be heartening. Many project management books, however, make mention of these skills and cite them as important, but do not teach how to cultivate them. The *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide)* devotes only a paragraph to soft skills (Project Management Institute, 2008). Heldman's own *PMP Project Management Professional Study Guide* allows three paragraphs for interpersonal skills, which is hardly enough to define, let along teach them (Heldman, 2009). It is left to project managers to learn these skills on their own from other sources.

In any communication, both the listener and the speaker come to the process with psychological barriers (Frisk, 2009). Among these are: incorrect assumptions, snap

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reactions, apathy as a listener, defensiveness, fear, and personality and perception filters. Active listening is one technique that is often taught to facilitate listening and mitigate psychological barriers, especially listener apathy. Instructions for active listening include maintaining eye contact to show you are listening and paraphrasing what the speaker said in order to verify that you understood the meaning (Frisk, 2009; Shafir 2003). While these techniques are useful and complementary to effective listening, they do not allow the listener to monitor for the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that manifest themselves as listening barriers.

Mindfulness is described as bringing attention to the present moment and experiencing it directly, using an open, accepting, and non-judgmental awareness (Bishop, et al., 2004). As thoughts, feelings, and sensations come into the observer's awareness, they are simply noticed as soon as possible, observed in a non-reactionary way, and allowed to pass. Put another way, the observer treats whatever enters their awareness with the curiosity and equanimity that a scientist might in observing the natural world.

Mindful listening is the practice of bringing this full, moment-to-moment awareness to a speaker and their message (Shafir, 2003). Shafir (2008) also found that mindful listeners are able to: "1. *Sustain their attention* over time, 2. Hear and see the *whole message*, 3. Make the speaker feel *valued and respected*, and 4. Listen to *themselves*." Mindful listening goes beyond active listening and puts the listener in a unique position to determine when psychological barriers are affecting how they process the speaker's message.

Mindfulness training has been shown to be beneficial in fostering empathy in primary care physicians, nurses, and medical students (Krasner, et al., 2009; Beddoe & Murphy, 2004; Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998). Riskin (2002) has also seen positive benefits in the deep listening skills of lawyers who have been trained in mindfulness. Legal training classes have also incorporated mindfulness practices to aid in dispute resolution, negotiation, and mediation (Riskin, 2004). Empathy, dispute resolution, negotiation, and mediation are all key skills for a project manager when developing and managing a project team, or working with stakeholders (Frisk, 2009; Heldman, 2009;

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Project Management Institute, 2008). If the medical and legal professions can benefit from this training, then perhaps project managers can as well.

This paper proposes that project managers can enhance listening skills by using a framework that focuses on three facets of mindful listening: Being present, cultivating empathy, and listening to your own cues. Discussion of each facet includes an example of ineffective listening, how the listener might have handled the situation in a more mindful manner, and an exercise the project manager can perform to practice these skills.

2. Being Present

Mindful listening requires paying attention to the person you are listening to, which means actually being in the present moment and not thinking about the past, future, or attempting to multitask and perform other actions. By being present, a project manager can sustain their attention over time.

2.1. Example of Not Being Present

Brett is the project manager on a project to deploy a new whole-disk encryption product to company's five thousand laptops. Genevieve, the manager of IT help desk operations, has scheduled a meeting with Brett in his office to discuss her concerns about the lack of money and time budgeted into the project plan to train the help desk to support the product. Genevieve enters Brett's office at the scheduled time and sees that Brett is in the midst of composing an email.

"Sorry, Brett," Genevieve says. "Is this a bad time?"

Brett does not look up. "No, no. Go ahead. I just need to finish up this email to a stakeholder, but I can listen."

Genevieve hesitates, as she would rather have his full attention, but knows that Brett is difficult to get in touch with. She decides to air her concerns while she has the chance.

"Well, I'm worried that no money has been budgeted for training the help desk on whole-disk encryption," she says.

"Hmm," Brett says distantly, eyes still on his monitor.

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Genevieve is not sure if his utterance was in response to her or something in the email he is working on. She is irked, but decides to continue. "On top of that, you didn't allocate any time for training us. We're the front line and will be answering the bulk of the questions, so we really need to be included."

"Huh," Brett says, then makes a purposeful click on his mouse.

Genevieve is ready to leave, but Brett finally turns to her and she feels like she might actually have his attention for the moment. It is short lived, however, as his smartphone chimes. He reads a text message, smiles, and starts responding to it. He does not see Genevieve's furrowed brow and red face as she gets up out of the chair and leaves the room.

"Okay, thanks for stopping by," Brett says absently as she walks out the door.

2.2. Simplifying Your Surroundings

One way of reducing distractions so that you can be more present during a conversation is to simplify your surroundings. When Genevieve requested a meeting with Brett, he could have suggested they move to a conference room rather than use his office. Offices are often full of distractions, telephones and computers being the most obvious; but even calendars, notes, stacks of paperwork, and other reminders of our own busyness can cause our minds to drift outside of the conversation at hand, causing internal noise that interferes with the communication. Even the toys we might keep to reduce stress, such as squeeze balls, miniature cars, and yo-yos, can become barriers to communication if we are fidgeting with them during a conversation. This goes both ways: Stakeholders and project team members can become just as distracted by the items in their own offices. By choosing a neutral, uncomplicated ground to hold a conversation, you simplify the environment for both of you.

At the very least, Brett could have simplified his office environment by turning down the volume on his computer's speakers, turning on its screensaver, and silencing his telephone and smartphone (the same goes for meeting in a conference room). Performing these actions takes seconds, but eliminates potential distractions and signals to the speaker that you are truly ready to listen to their message.

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2.3. Grounding Yourself

Mental distractions can be just as intrusive as physical distractions when it comes to communication. One way to limit the impact these distractions have on your ability to be present by grounding yourself in the moment; that is, giving yourself time to pause before engaging the speaker. Brett knew that Genevieve was coming to his office, but chose to continue working right up to the point that she arrived. By that time, even if he had been able to pull himself away from his computer monitor, it might have been difficult to pull his thoughts away from the email he was working on.

Before you enter a conversation, perhaps before you walk into the conference room or pick up the phone to make a call, try taking a moment to watch your breath, and sense its presence in your body. Breathe in and out, noticing the rising and falling of your abdomen, or the out-breath on your nose. There is no need to change the pace or depth of your breath. It is not about breathing a certain way, but about using it to anchor you in the present moment. When your phone rings, use it as a reminder to take a breath or two before picking it up. The body can also be a tool for grounding yourself in the present moment. Instead of following the breath before entering a conversation, try noticing how the body feels at that very moment. Sense your body as a whole and see what you feel. Perhaps there is a pain in your back or knee, or your stomach rumbles because you skipped lunch, or you feel yourself grinding your teeth because you are nervous about the meeting. Just notice these sensations and, though it might be difficult at first, try not to judge them. Not only can these sensations help you center yourself before a conversation, realizing they are there might help you identify potential barriers to communication (see "Listening to Your Own Cues").

3. Cultivating Empathy

Listening mindfully requires empathy, which means to see a situation from the point of view of the person with whom you are interacting. It also requires validating that point of view. Using empathy, a project manager can see and hear the whole message, and make the speaker feel valued and respected.

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3.1. Example of Not Cultivating Empathy

Sharron is the project manager on a project to redesign the ecommerce site for her retail company's web presence. She is ready to have the team move the new site from development to quality assurance (QA), which means that it will go from being inside the firewall and only accepting dummy credit card numbers, to being in the DMZ and accepting valid card numbers from a limited number of pilot customers. As part of their process, the QA system managers will only deploy applications that have been vetted by the information security office. Sharron did not account for a security assessment in her project plan and she is worried that it will put her behind schedule. She is hoping that she can convince the Director of Information Security, Sam, to exclude her ecommerce site from the requirement. She visits him in his office. Sam turns to her and asks what he can help her with.

"Sam, we really need to get the ecommerce site put in QA," Sharron says. "Marketing wants it in production for the holiday season and it's already Halloween."

"Well, we can't have a site go into QA without a security assessment," Sam says. "But, I can devote all of my resources to it and try to get it done within a week. It puts my office behind on some other stuff, but that will give you a couple of weeks in QA before it goes live."

Sharron shakes her head. "We can't even give up a week. We don't have time. We need an exception."

"I can't do that. If the site goes live and gets hacked or is used for fraud, I'll be the one our auditors will want answers from. Besides there are PCI requirements…and we have to show due diligence to our payment processor. We can't get rid of the assessment, but I can make it our number one priority and try to get it done as quickly--"

Sharron stands up, irritated. "Do you want this project to fail? Look, if you're going to be obstructive then I'm just going to have to go around you. Expect a call from the CIO's office."

With that, Sharron storms out.

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3.2. Seeing Their Point of View

While we may not like to think of ourselves as self-centered, how we perceive the world is filtered through our own biology, thoughts, and feelings, and memories. Understanding this when working with others can help you set aside your own filters and view the situation through theirs. Shafir (2003) describes seeing another person's point of view as getting into their "movie." She muses that many of find it difficult to spend a few minutes listening to another person's point of view but can spend two hours in rapt attention during a film.

In the example situation with Sharron and Sam, Sharron refused to listen to Sam's point of view to the point to where she stormed out of the office before he was even finished speaking. In her story, Sam was an obstacle in her way. If she had taken a moment to put aside her own concerns and get into Sam's movie, she might have noticed that his situation really was not all that different from her own: Both are worried about upper management's perception of them, both have resource limitations, and both are trying to juggle the demands of outside groups (Marketing and QA in Sharron's case, and the auditors and the PCI Security Standards Council in Sam's). Sharron might also have noticed that Sam was attempting to negotiate an alternative that would allow the security assessment to take place and the project released on time but put a resource crunch on them both. Both would have to give up a little, but in the end both would get what they needed.

When you are about to engage in a conversation, try putting yourself into the other person's movie. You can even go so far as to visualize yourself sitting or standing in the same posture they are. Try also to bring the same open-mindedness that you bring with you as you enter a theater. Movies do not achieve their intended results unless the audience is willing to suspend their own reality for a little while and get into the story of the characters on the screen. Simply watch, listen, and experience the other person while the conversation takes place. The analysis and formation of responses can all happen later.

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3.3. Validating Their Point of View

Carroll (2004) reminds us "everyone just wants to bounce their ball." In other words, everyone wants to make a contribution in whatever work they are doing and wants to be recognized for that contribution. Validating someone's point of view in a conversation is one way to not only show that you are listening, but also recognize that they are attempting to make a contribution to the situation at hand.

Validating a point of view does not necessarily mean that you have to agree with it or change your own point of view. Rather, you listen to the other point of view, attempt to understand their perspective, and then acknowledge their perspective in some way. A method for doing this is to attempt to think of a time when you were in a similar situation to the other person's and divulge this information to them (Shafir, 2003). The level of disclosure should not be more than you are comfortable with and, depending on the situation and your profession, there may be ethical, privacy, and confidentiality considerations. Validating their point of view facilitates communication in several ways: As mentioned previously, it shows that you are listening and understand their perspective. In addition, by revealing a similar situation that you were in, you encourage the other person to trust and open up to you more. People tend to be more comfortable dealing with people to whom they are similar, and this can lead to more constructive negotiations.

In our example, Sharron might have had recalled a similar situation to Sam's that she was in as a project manager, when a stakeholder came to her and asked her to skip the entire QA process so that a new storage system could come online early and make them look good to management. She had to fight to keep the QA in tact and avoid a potential disaster. By revealing this episode to Sam, she shows that she can see where he is coming from, making both sides more open to negotiation.

4. Listening to Your Own Cues

Listeners, themselves, are potential barriers to communication due to what Frisk (2009) refers to as the Personality Filter. The Personality Filter is essentially the thoughts, feelings, memories, and habits that make up the listener's sense of self. Much of the time, the listener is not conscious that this filter is taking place. By being more aware of the

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filtering, a listener can look for potential barriers to communication and attempt to compensate for them. The most important realizations are that the Personality Filter exists, that it is completely automatic, and it will likely always be there. Knowing that it is completely normal and common to have this filter makes it much easier to work with. It is no longer a matter of making the filter disappear but instead noticing it and working around it. Project managers can listen to themselves by listening to their own cues.

4.1. Example of Not Listening to Your Own Cues

Ted is managing a project to move their company's information resources from one data center to another across town. It is a huge undertaking requiring detailed work and there are a lot of demands on his time. He is working on the project plan, but has a conference call with Julie, one of the incident handlers in the information security group, at noon. He has not had lunch yet. Ted nearly jumps out of his seat when the phone rings and picks it up right away.

"Yeah," Ted says.

"Hi Ted, it's Julie," says the voice on the other end.

Ted winces. How can anyone have such a nasally voice, he wonders? "What's up?"

"Um, you set up this conference call. We're supposed to go over moving our IDS gear."

"Right. So I think I included everything in the task list. Are you ready to sign off on it?"

"Not quite yet. There are a couple of things—"

Uh oh, Ted thinks. Here we go. He is sure he has thought of everything. Why is she wasting his time?

"…and the other thing is that you left out configuring the SPAN port," Julie says. "We can't packet sniff unless we're on a mirroring—"

"Look," Ted interjects, "I think that's pretty obvious and the network folks will know what to do."

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"I'd feel more comfortable if it was in there."

Ted sighs.

"What was that?" Julie asks.

"Nothing. What else?"

"Let's go down the list, starting with the truck arrival—"

Ted's stomach growls insistently. It reminds him that the Taco Bell he had for lunch yesterday did not agree with him. Maybe he will go to Wendy's today. A burger sounds good. He feels like he is putting on weight, though. He really should work out….

4.2. Suggestions for Listening to Yourself

From the very beginning, Ted was not listening to his own cues. The stress and nervousness from the demands of the job caused him to jump when the phone rang, even though he was expecting it. If he had taken a moment after being startled by the phone to feel his heart racing, the blood flushing his face, he could have taken a second to breathe and calm himself before picking it up. Instead, he went into the conversation loaded with that anxiety. When Julie spoke, he found her voice grating. Instead of noticing that feeling and realizing that it was affecting him, he turned it into a desire to get off the phone as soon as possible. At first he acted like there was not any reason for them to talk. Then he tried to get her to sign off on the task list without going through it with her. Rather than recognizing this desire and trying to work around it by putting himself in Julie's place, he becomes slightly overbearing and bemoans that she is wasting his time. He is so caught up in the fact that Julie is doing this to him, that he completely misses her first concern. When she gets to her second concern, which is due to a mistake he made, he reacts defensively. If he had taken the time to notice himself becoming upset over this, he might have realized his own mistake and corrected rather than justified it. At the end of the conversation, he could have simply noticed his stomach growling and recognized that he was getting hungry. Perhaps he could have suggested that he and Julie finish the discussion over lunch, or realized that lunch would have to come a little later. Instead, he starts daydreaming and planning out his lunch, completely ignoring the rest of the conversation.

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The next time you are in a conversation, try to notice the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise. Rather than putting them aside, just be aware of their presence. It may help to breathe in and out with them. Notice how they are coloring your perception in the conversation, and how they are filtering the speaker's message. Realize that you have a choice about how to respond to these thoughts, feelings, and sensations. If you feel tired, for instance, and you notice it is making you lethargic, distracted, or apathetic, you could possibly choose to reschedule the conversation, request that the speaker continue the conversation over a walk or coffee. You could also choose to work with the tiredness, understanding that it is what it is, and that it will eventually pass. If you feel annoyed with the speaker, realize that you are becoming annoyed and try to understand where it is coming from. Chances are, it is not anything the speaker is actually doing, but rather some other factor that is influencing your perception. For instance, you could be hungry, tired, or feeling rushed because of deadlines piled upon deadlines. Regardless from where it stems, the benefit is in moving from reacting to thoughts, feelings, and sensations, to responding to them.

5. Getting Formal

If you plan on making mindful listening an integral part of your effective listening process, it is often recommended that you incorporate some form of formal mindfulness meditation practice in your life (Shafir, 2003; Carroll, 2004; Ruskin, 2002; Ruskin, 2004; Santorelli, 2004). Carmody & Baer (2008) found much that mindfulness measured on a number of scales was greater during formal mindfulness meditation practices rather than informal ones (in which everyday activities are performed with full attention). Turning inward and living in the present moment is best practiced during times of quietude and freedom from external distraction, rather than in the thick of your workday. When you engage in formal meditation you are *practicing* so that when you are engaged in an actual conversation during a busy time, it is easier for you to be present, cultivate empathy, and listen to your own cues.

Common forms of formal mindfulness practices include sitting meditation, body scans, and movement (e.g. walking, yoga, or tai-chi) (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Carmody & Baer, 2008; Santorelli & Kabat-Zinn, 2009). Sitting meditation often involves sitting still

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and watching the breath and it moves in and out of your body. The goal, if there is one, is not to clear your mind of all thoughts (though your mind may become quieter in the process) but to disassociate yourself form the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that will come up during the practice. When those things do come up, the breath is used as an anchor and attention is slowly, gently returned to it. A body scan is a type of meditation practice that is often performed lying down. In this practice, you notice the sensations or lack of sensations in individual parts of your body, typically starting with the toes and gradually, body part by body part, working your way to the crown of your head. Yoga postures and tai-chi movements are often thought of as physical exercise but, if performed with awareness of your body and mental state, they can also be meditative. The same is true of walking meditation: Noticing your footsteps and the motion of your legs as you lift, move, and place your feet on the ground.

Though it may seem difficult for a project manager to work a formal meditation practice into an already busy schedule, it does not have to start out as a considerable length of time. Simply finding a quiet place to sit, lie down and perform a body scan, or do some yoga for as little as fifteen minutes can be beneficial. A common recommendation is to practice right after waking in the morning or before going to bed, as these are times of relative quiet. No matter what time of day you practice, the important thing is to make time to do it. As your mindfulness practice continues, try expanding the timeframe until you have gone from fifteen minutes to twenty-five minutes, thirty minutes, or longer.

It does not take long to see benefits. Increased empathy has been shown to occur after as little as eight weeks of formal meditation training and practice (Krasner, et al., 2009; Beddoe & Murphy, 2004; Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998). Even measurable changes in brain activity have been shown to occur. Davidson, et al. (2003) measured a significant increase in left-sided anterior brain activity for meditators versus non-meditators after an eight-week meditation training and practice program. Left-side anterior brain activation is associated with decreased anxiety and decreased negative feeling, and increased positive feeling.

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While detailed instructions on sitting meditation, body scans, and movement is outside the scope of this paper, a list of resources for starting a formal meditation practice is included in Appendix A.

6. Future Directions

Research in mindfulness has its roots in a medical setting (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Possibly because of this, many of the scientific studies regarding mindfulness and listening in the workplace are specific to helping professions such as medicine and psychotherapy (Beddoe & Murphy, 2004; Connelly, 1999; Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998; Shafir, 2008). The application of mindfulness to these disciplines can likely be extrapolated to other professions where listening is important, such as project management. However, empirical evidence of a direct benefit would increase the likelihood of project managers and project management organizations to adopt this practice.

A possible experimental model for testing mindful listening for project management would be to perform an experiment across several project management organizations. Half of the project managers across these organizations would make up the experimental group. They would be trained in mindfulness and mindful listening and asked to apply those skills with stakeholders and project team members in their upcoming projects. This course would have to be developed by the researchers, provided by a third-party, or based on existing programs. The other half of the project managers would be the control group and allowed to use the same listening skills they have always used. At the end of each project, the team members and stakeholders would be asked to fill out a written survey to find out how well they feel they were listened to. The project managers in the experimental group would also complete a written survey before taking the mindful listening course and after completing their projects to determine if they feel their listening skills had improved. All surveys mentioned would have to be developed by the researchers, but could be based on existing mindfulness and listening surveys. There are at least five well-researched mindfulness questionnaires upon which the surveys could be based (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006). The work of Drollinger, Comer, and Warrington (2006), designed to measure active empathetic listening in

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salespeople from the point of view of both customers and the salespeople themselves, could also be modified and applied to project managers and their constituents.

7. Conclusion

Soft skills such as communication, empathy, facilitation, and negotiation are important for a project manager when developing a project team and managing stakeholders. Effective listening is a major part putting theses skills to work. A project manager can bolster their active listening skills using mindful listening, allowing them to be more present with the listener, cultivate greater empathy, and listen to their own cues. A regular mindfulness meditation practice enables a project manager to tap into these skills more readily. There is considerable literature on the effects of mindfulness and mindful listening in the workplace for specific domains, and it is likely that these effects would replicate in studies on project managers. Further research specifically involving project managers and project management organizations is recommended to verify this.

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9. Appendix A: Resources for Beginning a Formal Mindfulness Practice

This is by no means an exhaustive list of resources for beginning a formal mindfulness meditation practice, but it should give the reader several places to start.

9.1. Published Books

Some of the books used as references in this paper also provide a good introduction to mindfulness meditation. Others have been added.

Carroll, M. (2004). *Awake at work: discovering clarity and balance in the midst of work's chaos*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). *Full catastrophe living: using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness.* New York, NY: Bantam Dell Publishing.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: mindfulness meditation in everyday life.* New York, NY: Hyperion.

Santorelli, S. (2000). *Heal thy self: lessons on mindfulness in medicine.* New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

Shafir, R.Z. (2003). *The Zen of listening: mindful communication in the age of distraction*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books.

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9.2. Audio Resources

Guided audio meditations are available and can often be an excellent way to begin a meditation practice. Some

Mindfulness Meditation Practice CDs and Tapes with Jon Kabt-Zinn. Jon Kabat-Zinn. http://www.mindfulnesscds.com/. Retrieved December 1, 2010.

Mindful Meditations. University of California Los Angeles Mindful Awareness Research Center. http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22. Retrieved December 1, 2010.

9.3. Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction

The Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School provides list of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction programs worldwide: http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/stress/index.aspx. Retrieved December 1, 2010.

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