

# MINDFULNESS FOR TEAM WELLBEING

Team coach and mindfulness teacher **Carroll Macey** explains how mindfulness supports coaching for collective wellbeing.

The principle of wellbeing can be defined as ‘the state of feeling healthy and happy’ (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2022). Without it, teams run the risk of increasingly poor decision-making, and having less energy to achieve their goals and fewer resources available to ensure they do no harm in their relationships with others and to themselves as individuals. It is so important. So, what is wellbeing in the context of team coaching?

## LIFE PARADOXES

We live in a seesawing world, constantly tipping wildly as one side becomes heavy and the other light. There are many dichotomies in life, such as everything that has a beginning must have an end – which is difficult for those of us who find it hard to embrace change. That greater success, happiness and health comes from working less is evidenced in many books and research papers over recent years (we don’t really appreciate this until we have a health crisis or burnout). So too that there is no ‘I’ in teams, and that teams are a complex system of individuals where the ‘I’ is multiple and the possibility of both conflict and harmony is a constant polarity. Creating an effective team is like taking all the ingredients for a cake and putting them together into a mixer. Let’s explore this further in a mindful way.

## THE MAGIC OF TEAMS

Take each ingredient needed for a cake. Notice the unique quality of each one. The colour of the light brown sugar, the way the light catches the crystals, the smell. As you add the flour into the mixing bowl, a little puff arises, coating the sides slightly. The richness and texture of the cocoa powder, the taste as some of it is inhaled. Break the eggs. Notice the smoothness of the shell, the heaviness of the yolk and the viscous, transparent nature of the egg white. Add some milk and the whole bowl is a fascinating swirl of separate colours and textures. Pour in boiling water. Feel the heat as it flows into the mixture; now switch on the mixer and the cake mixture becomes liquid. Every ingredient is still there adding its unique flavour and

texture, yet without each one of those ingredients the cake will not be the same. Now we put it in the oven and bake for 25 minutes and you have something entirely different, amazing in visual appeal, taste and smell.

This is what team coaching is: a seemingly magical transformation, a combination of individuals that is greater than their individual parts. It’s helping the team make meaning about what is present and emerging in the moment in their relationships, tasks, processes or aims in service of meeting the team’s needs: baking the cake so that it rises to its full potential of taste and texture! The ingredients that made the cake are still there, but they are metamorphosed.

## BEING PRESENT

Mindfulness-based approaches are central to my practice because I’m interested in the idea of how we connect to other people, and to do that effectively we must do our own inner work as team coaches. What do I mean by inner work? If we’re going to make a connection with other people, we need to make sure that we’re connected to what is happening within us first, and to be aware of that impact on the people around us. As team coaches, it is important to be able to stabilise and manage our attention and presence, to find balance. I tend to do this in quite a pragmatic way through mindfulness-based approaches.

## FINDING BALANCE

As part of mindfulness practice, we can be aware of conflicting emotions, having the intention to hold them lightly, to notice what is present. In so doing, a wisdom arises, and this is where polarities come into being. For example, noticing that within the team there is anger and frustration also means that there is love (or compassion may be a more acceptable word) and calmness – one cannot exist without knowledge of the other. Wellbeing for teams (and individuals) goes out of balance when we lean too far towards one polarity.

As team coaches, we can help a team find balance by accepting that both can exist at the same time and that the sweet spot is somewhere in the middle. A definition of mindfulness is ‘paying attention in the moment’. We can choose where to focus our attention and we can find a point of balance between two opposing polarities.

*Team coaching is helping the team make meaning about what is present and emerging in their relationships, tasks, processes or aims*

## DRIVERS OF WELLBEING

How can we understand more about a team’s collective wellbeing? Diagnostic tools such as teamSalient (see [www.teamsalient.com](http://www.teamsalient.com)) can provide insights on some of the key ‘drivers’ of mindfulness:

- The level of **psychological safety** – a shared belief that it is safe for team members to take risks and be themselves – has a significant impact on wellbeing. Are members able to be open with each other and discuss problems and issues without negative judgement? Are they able to make mistakes and learn from them, or is it safer to keep quiet? Can team members be themselves? We need to create a safe space where individuals can reveal themselves and start to see the possibilities of how the team can connect to do the work.
- The team knowing its **purpose**, its reason to exist and its contribution to the organisation. Living a purposeful life and belonging to a thriving community or environment is an important aspect of wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> Is the team’s work important and satisfying to team members? Does the team have a clear sense of direction? What are the team’s perspectives on this? How has the Covid-19 pandemic changed their meaning-making of work and life balance?
- The degree in which there is **‘team glue’**; do team members spend time together to get to know each other? What is the level of cohesion and interdependence? During the pandemic, this was one of the hardest drivers for team leaders to maintain as a result of the increase in remote learning, leading to a noticeable increase in mental health issues.
- **Communication, collaboration and achieving results** are all important drivers for success and contribute to team glue, but when overdone can contribute to exhaustion and increased attrition. A Microsoft 2022 Work Trend Index study of more than 31,000 people in 31 countries reported that 43% of the workforce were considering leaving their jobs because of unsustainable workloads, the biggest cause being the amount of time spent on collaborating!<sup>ii</sup> In a two-year period, this study found that: team weekly meetings increased by a whopping 252%; six billion more emails were sent; there was a 32% increase in chatting online; and that there was an average after-hours work increase of 28%.

## AN INVITATION TO PRACTISE

Let us try one of the mindfulness exercises that I often use in my work<sup>iii</sup> to bring the team into the room, to focus a team’s attention on what’s important to them right now.

Read this and then close your eyes and allow yourself to drop into your thoughts, simply noticing what’s on your mind right now. It’s okay if your head is full of thoughts; as human beings, our heads are often full of thoughts. That’s part of the process of how the mind works. Notice that your mind is full and choose not to get lost in the narratives running through it. Just observing, noticing, labelling, letting those thoughts go. You can always come back to them afterwards when you’ve finished the practice. Right now, we’re choosing to place our attention where we want it to be. Right now, it’s on noticing the thoughts. Now gently bring your attention and focus to your breath and allow yourself to breathe, not controlling the breath. Just noticing where the breath is and being curious about each breath as you breathe in... and the breath as you breathe out.

Take 10 breaths, noticing each one. Enjoy the sensation of just breathing as an anchor to being present. Open your eyes and notice how you feel mentally, physically and emotionally.

As team coaches we need to be present to what is emerging in ourselves and in the team, and this takes a little practice as neural networks are rewired. In the UK’s National Health Service the phrase, ‘put your own oxygen mask on first’ is well-known. To be a good, or even great, team coach, you need to be able to do that. If your wellbeing is compromised then so much data that is present and available to you – in you, in the situation and in the team – will be missed. Once you are settled into a regular practice of awareness, offer that practice to the team as a ‘check-in’. We hold a responsibility as team coaches to ensure the wellbeing of ourselves and the team.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Carroll Macey is an executive coach, team coach and mindfulness teacher. She has been coaching for over 20 years and is a faculty member for both teamGenie – a company specialising in team design, coaching and development – and Team Coaching Studio, where she is head of ED&I and co-founder of the TCS Team Coaching Community of Practice.

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