

SPECIAL PERSPECTIVE

Mindfulness, the Predicting Brain, and Decision Making in a VUCA World



Contributed by Juan Humberto Young and Jochen Reb, Singapore Management University.

The last two years have brought to the foreground more acutely than ever, the difficulties of living and managing in our postmodern society characterized by staggering volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity - widely recognized under the acronym VUCA. A crucial challenge is how organizations can thrive in such an environment. We believe that increasing mindful strategic awareness at all organizational levels plays an important role in meeting this challenge, and recent advances in how the mind works inform us how.

The familiar view of how the mind works presupposes a process of reactions to stimuli whereby the mind registers a stimulus – either an external percept or an internal sensation - and generates a reaction based on this input. In contrast, new discoveries in neuroscience suggest that the mind is in a constant process of predicting. For example, the feeling of thirst is conceived as not as resulting from dehydration, but as a prediction that dehydration would result from not drinking now, thus prompting action to address problems (such as dehydration) even before they arise.

The capacity to anticipate is vital. World class athletes, for example, are able to anticipate the unfolding game better than their less-skilled peers, whether it is predicting the space and time where and when a ball is heading or a punch is landing. In other words, beyond their physical skills, world class athletes are first and foremost world class predictors in their game. And this makes sense, since simply reacting in competitive environments would always be a fraction too late. The edge is in anticipating the future.

This capacity to anticipate – or strategic awareness – applies to organizations and societies as well, and it is both more challenging and more valuable in today's VUCA environment. And, it applies to seemingly minor decisions (such as whether to wear a mask) or to major decisions such as whether and how to diversify the workforce that may transcend personnel concerns and spur innovation or impact the firm in other ways. All these choices depend on the ability to anticipate what could happen in the future.

The question then is obviously whether this capacity to predict accurately and with far-sightedness can be trained. In our view it is possible. In looking at the most common, natural activity of any human being what stands out is the ability to making decisions. This indicates where we should concentrate training and personal development: improving people's capacity of skillful decision-making. Here is where *mindfulness practice*, the ancient practice of awareness and self-observation, is of great value, especially in a form adapted to the challenges of our VUCA world. In this context, more than practicing mindfulness in its original intention of personal enlightenment and transcendence, or as a method to reduce stress and support mental health, mindfulness practice serves to develop the capacity to make skillful decisions and thrive on the challenges and vicissitudes of life today.

What do we mean in concrete terms? We are referring to a mindset beyond quantitative or procedural decision analysis techniques; to a strategically aware mindset that allows envisaging possible new directions and their consequences.



This is the main skill that needs to be trained for: building strategic awareness that will feed skillful decision-making processes enabling people, organizations, and institutions to predict outcomes that will satisfy their needs without harming others and the environment.

At SMU, we offer training methodology called Mindfulness-based Strategic Awareness Training (MBSAT) that is designed to help people improve their strategic awareness and enhance their capacity for skillful decision-making. In the MBSAT training, participants learn over eight sessions, once a week over a period of two months, techniques and practices that enable them to process information from the environment and their own internal milieu in a more effective way. They learn to expand their perceptual abilities by amplifying their competency to read cognitive data and incorporate sensorial, emotional and behavioral information for an enriched pool of data, called BETA in MBSAT, the acronym for body sensations, emotions, thoughts, and action impulses.

During the two months of training, the participants learn to recognize hindrances to their development, mostly in the form of legacy beliefs, fixed ideas and habits that impede them from moving forward and achieving more sustainable well-being.

This is of crucial importance in our fast-changing society. Individuals and organizations unable to adapt to constantly evolving circumstances quickly drop out from the societal and economic network, and lose the ability to operate effectively in whatever endeavors they are engaged in.

Through mindfulness-based training such as MBSAT, individuals learn to keep optimizing their portfolio of beliefs as the necessary condition to make skillful decisions in work and life.

Further Reading and Information: Mindfulness-based Strategic Awareness Training by Juan Humberto Young, Wiley 2017
https://www.amazon.com/Mindfulness-Based-Strategic-Awareness-Training-Individuals-dp-111893797X/dp/111893797X/ref=mt_other?_encoding=UTF8&me=&qid=1629405663

Mindfulness Initiative @ SMU: <https://business.smu.edu.sg/mindfulness>