

Mindfulness and Interpersonal Relations at Work:  
The Relationships of Mindfulness and Active-Empathic Listening to  
Team-Member Exchange

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### Abstract

Today's organizations operate in uncertain and ambiguous environments. Thus, team-based structures and interpersonal relations at work become increasingly important for organizational practices. Prior research suggested that personal characteristics and interpersonal abilities play a role in the development and maintenance of high-quality team member relations. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to examine whether personal characteristics, namely trait mindfulness and active-empathic listening, predicted team-member exchange quality. More specifically, this study examined whether active-empathic listening partially mediated the positive relationship between trait mindfulness and team-member exchange. Data were collected with an online survey among employees in Germany ( $N = 308$ ) and evaluated using multiple regression analyses, as well as the PROCESS bootstrapping analysis macro. Results of the present study revealed that both, trait mindfulness and active-empathic listening, predicted high-quality team-member exchange. However, trait mindfulness was not related to active-empathic listening, so that attentive listening did not serve as partial mediator within the relationship of trait mindfulness and team-member exchange. In sum, this study contributes to current research by shedding more light on individual-level characteristics that are related to high-quality team-member exchange. Further theoretical and practical implications, as well as suggestions for future research are introduced in the discussion.

*Keywords:* team-member exchange (TMX), trait mindfulness, active-empathic listening

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Organizational external and internal environments have undergone extensive changes since the past few decades (Courtright, Thurgood, Stewart, & Pierotti, 2015; Eisenhardt, Furr, & Bingham, 2012). Simultaneously, today's working environments keep moving rapidly towards volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. In this context companies need to become more agile in order to stay competitive. For this reason, organizational hierarchies become flatter and the use of team-based structures becomes increasingly important for sustainable organizational success (Bettis & Hitt, 1995; Garvey, 2002). Considering these trends, more research attention has been allocated to horizontal coworker relationships at work (Banks et al., 2014).

Today there is scientific consensus that effective team functioning, for instance due to high-quality team-member exchange (TMX; Seers, 1989), benefits both, employee well-being and organizational performance (Banks et al., 2014; Seers, Petty, & Cashman, 1995). More specifically, healthy and supportive working relations were linked to positive individual outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Banks et al., 2014; Biggs, Swailes, & Baker, 2016), organizational commitment (Banks et al., 2014), psychological health (Madlock & Booth-Butterfield, 2012; Schermuly & Meyer, 2016), and decreased turnover intentions (Banks et al., 2014). Moreover, organizational advantages that have been associated with effective team functioning are increased team performance and adaptability (Biggs et al., 2016; Madlock & Booth-Butterfield, 2012; Maynard, Kennedy, & Sommer, 2015).

Given the positive outcomes of high-quality team-member exchange, it is necessary to examine how supportive working relations can be developed and maintained. Prior research proposed that the quality and strength of relations at work vary along with individuals' interpersonal abilities, such as interpersonal awareness, sensitivity, and concern (Banks et al., 2014; Seers, 1989). Furthermore, empirical studies have linked other-directed behaviors, such as active-empathic listening (Bodie, 2011), perspective taking, and empathic concern (Davis, 1983) to supportive interpersonal behaviors and high-quality relations (Bodie, Vickery, Cannava, & Jones, 2015; Itani & Inyang, 2015; Jones, Bodie, & Hughes, 2016).

Moreover, in interpersonal relationships outside organizational environment, healthy relational functioning has been linked to mindfulness – an attribute of attentiveness to present-moment events with an accepting and nonjudgmental attitude (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Kozlowski,

2013; Quaglia, Goodman, & Brown, 2015; Saavedra, Chapman, & Rogge, 2010). Key mechanisms that mediated the positive relations between mindfulness and relationship quality were, among others, self-regulation of behavior, stable attention towards interaction partners, and reduced emotional reactivity (Barnes et al., 2007; Good et al., 2016; Quaglia et al., 2015; Saavedra et al., 2010). Another noteworthy finding in this context was that characteristics of mindfulness were shown to predict the abovementioned construct of active-empathic listening, which in turn, benefited interpersonal relations (Jones et al., 2016).

However, one limitation of research on mindfulness as facilitator of high-quality relations is that little attention has been provided to its effects on interpersonal relationships at work. So far, only a few studies have examined the effects of mindfulness interventions on social functioning and interpersonal relations in the work setting (for an overview, see Good et al., 2016). To the best of the author's knowledge, no empirical research has examined the link of mindfulness as personal disposition to team-member exchange, yet. For this reason, the goal of the present study is to contribute to the emerging literature on trait mindfulness and its effects at work. More specifically, one contribution of the present study is to transfer previous work on mindfulness and romantic relationship quality into the organizational context and examine its connection to team-member exchange quality. Furthermore, the present study aims to shed more light on personal characteristics that may foster high-quality working relations. Because active-empathic listening has been linked to supportive interpersonal behaviors, the second goal of this study is to examine, whether active-empathic listening can be another factor that benefits team member relations. Finally, considering that prior research has established a positive association between mindfulness and active-empathic listening, the present study will investigate if attentive listening may be one mechanism through which mindfulness has a positive impact on team-member exchange. Therefore, the present study will examine, if active-empathic listening partially mediates the relationship between trait mindfulness and team-member exchange quality.

## **Mindfulness and Interpersonal Relationships**

### **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is characterized as the quality of maintaining steady attention, being aware of present external and internal stimuli as they arise, as well as attending to these events in a nonjudgmental and accepting way (Baer, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The concept of mindfulness has its roots in Buddhist meditation traditions, which goal was to train the mind in order to reduce human suffering stemming from unawareness and aversion (Brown &

Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Later, health-promoting principles of mindfulness have been introduced to the clinical domain with secular interventions such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, which do not have religious content (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1982). Nowadays mindfulness-based programs aim to increase cognitive and behavioral control in order to decrease illness and suffering, as well as to increase participants' overall quality of life (Hart, Ivtzan, & Hart, 2013; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012).

Beyond mindfulness as intervention, literature discussed mindfulness as a disposition (Hanley, Baker, & Garland, 2017; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). As the human mind tends to wander, people can quickly become occupied with their thoughts and emotions (Brown & Ryan, 2003). These cognitive and affective distractions can, in turn, lead to the reduction of present-moment awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). However, individuals differ in their disposition to maintain stable attention to the present (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Thus, the ability to maintain steady moment-to-moment attention has been conceptualized as trait mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

### **Mindfulness and Relationship Quality**

Prior research has linked mindfulness to different aspects of human well-being. For instance, mindfulness was found to foster self-regulation, reduce impulsivity and mood disturbance, as well as promote more positive emotional states and life satisfaction (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Mesmer-Magnus, Manapragada, Viswesvaran, & Allen, 2017; Tang, Hölzel, & Posner, 2015). Furthermore, mindfulness was shown to be related to enhanced interpersonal functioning and high-quality relationships (Good et al., 2016).

In order to understand the relationship between mindfulness and high-quality relations, it is necessary to discuss how mindfulness can have an impact on individuals' interpersonal functioning. One construct that has been discussed in literature as the key mechanism between mindfulness and enhanced social functioning is self-regulation (Leyland, Rowse, & Emerson, 2018; Tang et al., 2015; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Self-regulation is the control and adaptation of one's cognitions, affect or behaviors according to a desired state (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Leyland et al., 2018). Mindfulness has been linked to self-regulation because theories explaining human behavior e.g., the Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1980) and Control Theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981), have emphasized stable attention and situational awareness as important components of self-regulation (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Good et al., 2016). Specifically, it is assumed that mindfulness may foster self-regulation because present-moment awareness might enable the accurate monitoring of cognitions, affect and behaviors, as well as their comparison to a desired state (Hart et al., 2013; Leyland et al.,

2018). With regard to interpersonal functioning, conscious processing of information in social situations may support individuals in the selection of behaviors that are consistent with their social needs, values, and interests (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Deci & Ryan, 1980). At the same time, present-moment consciousness can reduce “mindless” behaviors (Kahneman, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000) such as impulsive reactions, which can be harming for interpersonal relations (Barnes et al., 2007; Shapiro & Schwartz, 1999). In conclusion, attentive individuals may be able to consciously process internal and external events and compare them to a desired state. This may lead to the selection of more appropriate behaviors in social situations and thus, to better social functioning, which is crucial for high-quality relations (Quaglia et al., 2015).

Empirical evidence for positive effects of mindfulness on social functioning and relationship quality can mostly be found in research on romantic couples (Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004; Quaglia et al., 2015; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Specifically, higher mindfulness among romantic partners was associated with emotion regulation and decreased emotional reactivity e.g., less verbal aggression and anger-hostility during partner interactions (Barnes et al., 2007; Quaglia et al., 2015; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Moreover, prior research showed that mindfulness predicted sustained attention and positive attitudes towards interaction partners (Barnes et al., 2007; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Subsequently, mindfulness was linked to partner connectedness and support, higher relationship satisfaction, and overall to higher-quality relationships (Barnes et al., 2007; Quaglia et al., 2015; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Based on these insights provided by previous research among romantic partners, the present study is going to investigate the effects of mindfulness in another area where enhanced social functioning plays an important role, namely in work and team settings.

### **Mindfulness and Team-Member Exchange Quality**

Beyond the associations of mindfulness to social functioning and relationship quality among romantic partners, little is known about the effects and mechanisms of mindfulness on relationships at work. In order to fill this gap, the present study will look at the implications of mindfulness in the work setting. Relationships at work are described as patterns of exchange between two or more interacting parties, which usually aim to accomplish a mutual goal (Blau, 1964; Mitchell, Cropanzano, & Quisenberry, 2012). One specific type of interpersonal relations at work are reciprocal exchange relationships between organizational members and their peer groups, namely team-member exchange quality (TMX; Seers, 1989). According to Seers (1989), TMX describes an individual’s willingness to assist other team members by

sharing work-related ideas, providing feedback and help, as well as the perception of support that is provided by other colleagues. Therefore, team-member exchange describes the quality of employees reciprocal relationships to coworkers (Banks et al., 2014).

Considering the abovementioned positive outcomes of high-quality team-member exchange, it is necessary to examine how these interpersonal relations can be fostered. Individuals' behaviors, such as the exchange within teams, can be influenced by different environmental factors e.g., task and outcome interdependence (Courtright et al., 2015), as well as values and practices on the organizational and team level (Ehrhart, 2004; James et al., 2008). However, meta-analytical results showed that team-member exchange is positively related to leader-member exchange (Graen & Cashman, 1975), a construct that represents the quality of supervisor–subordinate relationships (Banks et al., 2014). Consequently, Banks et al. (2014) assumed that the same abilities, such as interpersonal awareness, sensitivity, and concern, which enable individuals to form healthy relationships, operate analogously for leader-member exchange as for team-member exchange. These results also support Seers' (1989) idea that levels of team-member exchange will vary with individuals' interpersonal abilities.

Because team-member exchange may be influenced by specific interpersonal abilities and trait mindfulness was associated with enhanced relationship quality in romantic partnerships, we suggest that mindfulness may also promote interpersonal relations at work. Furthermore, we assume that the same attentional and self-regulation processes of mindfulness, which account for improved social functioning in romantic relationships, may affect interpersonal behaviors in the workplace. In support of these assumptions, literature proposed that self-regulation at work facilitates behavioral adaptation according to individuals' social values such as the general willingness to help others (Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010). Therefore, it is assumed that present-moment awareness of mindful individuals may enable them to monitor current situations accurately, recognize their own and others' needs, as well as situational requirements, and adapt their behaviors accordingly (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Subsequently, modification of behaviors according to one's social values and situational requirements may lead to more prosocial behaviors and engagement in team-member exchange interactions in team settings (Hanley & Garland, 2017; Lord et al., 2010).

Supporting our rationale, mindful individuals have been characterized by enhanced other-orientation and the expression of prosocial behaviors (Good et al., 2016; Hanley & Garland, 2017). In a current literature review Good et al. (2016) emphasized that through

stable attention and increased sensitivity towards environmental contingencies, mindfulness facilitates processing of information in a less egocentric way. This, in turn, might foster greater attentiveness and care for others (Good et al., 2016). Furthermore, an observational study of 45 clinicians showed that high-mindfulness clinicians practiced more patient-centered communication and displayed a more positive emotional tone with patients (Beach et al., 2013). Therefore, patients reported higher satisfaction with mindful clinicians, indicating higher quality patient-clinician relationships (Beach et al., 2013). Finally, results of a recent meta-analysis have linked dispositional mindfulness to agreeableness (Hanley & Garland, 2017), the personality factor that characterizes people as “generally good-natured, cooperative, caring and concerned for others” (Rau & Williams, 2016, p. 38).

In conclusion, mindfulness, as an attribute of unique attention and consciousness, may foster enhanced social functioning in work and team settings. Increased attentiveness of mindful individuals towards their social environment, may result in enhanced self-regulation and more prosocial behaviors. More specifically, attentive employees may capture their own and others’ social needs better than “mindless” individuals and, therefore, behave in a socially beneficial or supportive manner (Davis, 1983; Good et al., 2016; Mischkowski, Thielmann, & Glöckner, 2018). Consequently, adaptation of behavior according to prosocial motives and external necessities, for instance the need to exchange ideas, feedback or support, may facilitate high-quality exchange relationships among team members. It is, therefore, hypothesized that trait mindfulness will be positively related to perceived team-member exchange quality.

*Hypothesis 1:* Trait mindfulness will be positively related to team-member exchange quality.

### **Mindfulness and Active-Empathic Listening**

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of mindfulness in fostering high-quality team-member exchange it is necessary to examine its relationship to effective interpersonal communication. Prior research showed that enhanced interpersonal communication skills and empathic responding to interaction partners, may be further facilitators of high-quality relations (Beach et al., 2013; Block-Lerner et al., 2007; Singh, Singh, Sabaawi, Myers, & Wahler, 2006). Specifically, one competency of effective communication that was associated with relational well-being is active-empathic listening (Bodie, 2011; Drollinger, Comer, & Warrington, 2006; Jones et al., 2016). Active-empathic

listening describes the ability to be actively and emotionally involved in an interaction and display one's attentiveness to others (Drollinger et al., 2006; Gearhart & Bodie, 2011). It includes both, cognitive and behavioral mechanisms, which are sensing and processing of conversational content, as well as active responding to the speaker (Bodie, 2011). More specifically, sensing describes the attentiveness of a listener towards what is said and meant by the counterpart. This includes the comprehension of implicit messages and speaker's emotions (Bodie, 2011; Edwards, 2011). Processing stands for understanding, interpreting, and remembering the conversational content. Finally, responding describes verbal and non-verbal reactions of listeners during conversations, which assure speakers that the listener is following their thoughts (Bodie, 2011). Additionally, active-empathic listening is characterized by listeners' empathic responding (Bodie, 2011; Drollinger et al., 2006). Empathy describes the human capability to take another person's perspective, understand their emotions, as well as the ability to express sympathy or concern for their situation (Davis, 1980, 1983). Active-empathic listening was found to be positively related to empathy, specifically to perspective taking and empathic concern (Bodie, 2011; Drollinger et al., 2006).

Regarding antecedents of active-empathic listening, empirical research showed that it is a dispositional characteristic (Bodie, Gearhart, Denham, & Vickery, 2013). However, active-empathic listening was also influenced by environmental factors. More specifically, individuals could distinguish between situations where more or less active-empathic listening is appropriate and modify their engagement in attentive listening accordingly (Bodie, Gearhart, Denham, & Vickery, 2013). Furthermore, one prior empirical study has linked active-empathic listening to mindfulness (Jones et al., 2016). Mindfulness may promote active-empathic listening, because effective listening requires stable attention towards interaction partners in order to capture and process the conversational content (Jones et al., 2016). Research on mindfulness suggests that by being attentive to present-moment events, mindful individuals are less distracted by their own thoughts and feelings (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Therefore, they may have more cognitive capacities available to attend to other peoples' thoughts (Good et al., 2016; Hanley & Garland, 2017; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Consequently, individuals with higher trait mindfulness may display more other-oriented involvement during interactions, consciously attend to other's thoughts and emotions, and actively reflect their engagement to interaction partners (Bodie et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2016; Wachs & Cordova, 2007).

Recent research has established first empirical evidence for the association of mindfulness with active-empathic listening. In a current online survey, Jones and colleagues

(2016) showed that two mindfulness facets, namely mindful observing and describing, predicted active-empathic listening (Jones et al., 2016). Another empirical study showed a positive effect of mindfulness interventions on the communication quality of care physicians. Specifically, after the intervention care physicians listened more attentively to their patients' concerns (Beckman et al., 2012). Furthermore, Singh and colleagues (2006) observed an increase in active listening abilities among team members after a mindfulness intervention. Moreover, evidence for a positive relationship of mindfulness to active-empathic listening can be found in empirical research on empathy. Various studies showed that people who reported higher mindfulness scores tended to report higher levels of empathy, especially perspective taking and empathic concern (Block-Lerner et al., 2007; Dekeyser, Raes, Leijssen, Leysen, & Dewulf, 2008; Jones et al., 2016; Leonard, Campbell, & Gonzalez, 2018; Silver, Caleshu, Casson-Parkin, & Ormond, 2018).

In conclusion, both active-empathic listening and mindfulness emphasize the importance of present-moment attention (Jones et al., 2016). Consequently, the present study assumes that the same attentiveness and other-orientation that are cultivated by mindfulness, may encourage listeners to maintain present-moment attention and focus on their interaction partners. Therefore, it is hypothesized that trait mindfulness will be positively related to individuals' self-rated ability of active-empathic listening.

*Hypothesis 2:* Trait mindfulness will be positively related to active-empathic listening.

### **Active-Empathic Listening as Mediator between Mindfulness and TMX**

As outlined above, present-centered awareness of mindfulness may foster socially adequate and supportive behaviors in the workplace (Good et al., 2016). Another construct that may be influenced by stable attention and, in turn, facilitate supportive team-member exchange is active-empathic listening. According to the systematic transactional model (STM; Bodenmann, 1995), individuals need to understand the situation and concerns of their interaction partners, in order to respond effectively to their needs with appropriate supportive behaviors (Bodenmann, 1995). The perception and correct interpretation of others' needs, in turn, often require attentive listening (Bodie & Jones, 2012; Kuhn et al., 2018). Combining these ideas with the proposed relation of trait mindfulness and active-empathic listening, the present study assumes that individuals, who maintain stable attention towards their social environment, may listen more attentively to others colleagues and, therefore, understand

others' needs better than less attentive people (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Dekeyser et al., 2008; Raab, 2014). In the work context, understanding other team members' needs may result in more supportive team-member exchange interactions in order to answer those needs (Block-Lerner et al., 2007; Burks & Kobus, 2012; Kuhn et al., 2018). Consequently, interpersonal awareness of mindfulness may facilitate active-empathic listening, which, in turn, may promote stronger exchange relations among coworkers.

Supporting our argument that active-empathic listening may be one mechanism through which trait mindfulness has a positive influence on high-quality team-member exchange, empirical research has linked active-empathic listening to supportive behaviors in interpersonal relations. For instance, prior research showed that attentive listening was perceived as a characteristic of supportive individuals and that it predicted helping behaviors, such as caring support and supportive communication (Bodie & Jones, 2012; Bodie, Jones, Vickery, Hatcher, & Cannava, 2014; Bodie, Vickery, & Gearhart, 2013; Jones et al., 2016; Kuhn et al., 2018). Furthermore, in the organizational context active-empathic listening among salespeople was related to high-quality customer relationships (Drollinger et al., 2006). Additionally, as active-empathic listening was related to the construct of empathy (Bodie, 2011), further support for the proposed relation of attentive listening to TMX can be found in research on empathic responding. Specifically, empathy was shown to facilitate helping behaviors at work, such as interpersonal citizenship behavior and intergroup helping (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002; Todd & Galinsky, 2014).

Consequently, it is proposed that active-empathic listening may promote supportive exchange interactions in team settings. Furthermore, because mindfulness may enhance attentive listening through sustained present-moment attention, active-empathic listening may be one mechanism, which links mindfulness to team-member exchange quality. Specifically, mindful individuals, who listen carefully to their peers, may be better aware of other colleagues' needs and, subsequently, engage in supportive exchange interactions more often than people who are less attentive to their social environment. Thus, it is hypothesized that active-empathic listening will partially mediate the positive relationship between trait mindfulness and high-quality team-member exchange.

*Hypothesis 3:* Active-empathic listening will partially mediate the positive relationship between trait mindfulness and team-member exchange quality.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

In order to contribute to the emerging literature on trait mindfulness and its associations to beneficial social relations at work we conducted a quantitative, cross-sectional study. Data were collected in the context of a larger online survey on mindfulness, among employees in Germany. We distributed the anonymous link, which was administered through the survey software Qualtrics, among our network via email, mobile applications WhatsApp and Facebook, as well as the German career platform XING. Additionally, we employed the snowballing technique to increase our outreach. Furthermore, the link was sent to employees of a German engineering company through their HR department. The eligibility requirements were to be employed during time of data collection and work more than 10 hours per week. We did not offer any compensation for participation in the study.

In order to minimize response bias, our recruiting message and introduction of the questionnaire described the scope of the study as examining personal and work characteristics and did not mention the investigated constructs explicitly. Moreover, participants were informed about the estimated response time of 15-20 minutes and that the study was approved through the ethics commission of the Maastricht University (The Netherlands). In the introduction we highlighted that participation within the study was voluntary and anonymous, as well as that participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. We provided our contact data for possible ethical and content queries. Finally, participants received a short debriefing explaining our research hypotheses in the end of the questionnaire.

### **Sample**

After distributing the link to a total of 587 potential participants, we received 315 completed questionnaires, resulting in a response rate of 53.7%. Notably, due to the snowballing-approach it was not possible to track the exact number of distributed links that were forwarded by our contacts to others, so that the real response rate might differ. Before data analyses seven respondents were excluded from the sample: three participants indicated to work less than 10 hours per week, four participants stated that they did not understand the items of the questionnaire due to insufficient German skills. Our final sample consisted of 308 participants (53.9% female, 46.1% male) with a mean age of 34.9 years ( $SD = 10.9$ ). Most participants indicated to live in Germany (96.4%), others reported living in e.g., Switzerland, Austria, and France. Majority of the sample were highly educated with 44.5% holding a Master's degree or higher and 22.4% a Bachelor's degree. Participants were holding a variety of different occupations including engineers (18.2%), employees in business and financial

sector (12.3%), managers (11.4%), employees in education, training, and library (8.1%), consultants (7.8%), salespeople (6.5%), and HR professionals (5.2%). Remaining participants held other types of jobs such as healthcare practitioners, artists, secretaries, and assistants. Their mean tenure in the current position was 7.2 years ( $SD = 8.4$ ). On average, participants reported to work 39.3 ( $SD = 10.2$ ) hours per week. Finally, 96.8% of the sample reported to be regularly engaged in interactions with other team members during their work.

### Measures

After providing their informed consent, participants filled in the information on their demographics such as gender, age, educational background, profession, and tenure. Furthermore, we asked participants about their experience with a series of meditation and mindfulness practices to control for dispositional mindfulness. Next, in order to ensure that participants were working in an environment, where team-member exchange is possible, we asked them if they regularly engaged in interactions with other team members during their work with a yes or no question. Finally, participants filled in self-reported measures that will be described below. Scale reliabilities estimated by Cronbach's alpha are depicted in parentheses along the diagonal in Table 1.

**Mindfulness.** In order to measure a person's level of dispositional mindfulness, we used the German translation (Michalak, Heidenreich, Ströhle, & Nachtigall, 2008) of the 15-item Mindful Attention and Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003). MAAS assesses the unique quality of attentiveness and consciousness of present moment events in the general population. All MAAS items are reverse coded (e.g., "I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I'm doing"). In contrast to original scales, we changed the direction of the 6-point Likert scale to 1 = Almost never, 6 = Almost always, according to the direction of all other response scales within the survey. Thereby, we aimed to enhance usability of our questionnaire for the targeted sample group. After recoding the items, higher mean scores indicated higher levels of dispositional mindfulness.

**Team-member exchange quality.** Employees rated the quality of their team member relations with a German version (Trippel, 2012) of the 10-item Team-Member Exchange Quality scale (TMX; Seers et al., 1995). The scale was developed to measure reciprocal relations among team members. Sample items are e.g., "How often do you make suggestions about better work methods to other team members," and "How willing are other members of your team to help finish work that was assigned to you?" We modified the wording of some items of Trippel's (2012) translation in order to adjust these to the original scale. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, five of them asked participants to indicate perceived

frequencies (1 = Never, 5 = Very often), other items asked participants to estimate the likelihood of certain events (1 = Not likely at all, 5 = Very likely). In the end a mean score was derived from all 10 items. Higher scores stand for higher-quality team-member exchange.

**Active-empathic listening.** We used the Active-Empathic Listening Scale (AELS; Bodie, 2011) in order to measure individuals' self-rated active and emotional involvement during social interactions. Scale items are e.g., "I am aware of what others imply but do not say," and "I keep track of points others make." We used the translation-back-translation approach to develop a German version of the AELS (Brislin, 1980). Originally, participants indicated how frequently they perceived the items to be true about them on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Never or almost never true; 7 = Always or almost always) (Bodie, 2011). However, in order to improve the usability of the German scale, we modified the response format and asked participants for their extent of agreement to the statements (1 = Totally disagree, 5 = Totally agree) (Farmer, Van Dyne, & Kamdar, 2015). Higher mean scores indicated higher self-rated levels of active-empathic listening.

### **Data Analyses**

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we calculated the mean scores, standard deviations and conducted correlation analyses for all study variables. Thereafter, we followed the procedure for partial mediation by Baron and Kenny (1986). In the case of the present study, active-empathic listening would serve as partial mediator between trait mindfulness and TMX under the following conditions: First, trait mindfulness as predictor variable has a direct effect on the outcome variable TMX. Second, trait mindfulness has a direct effect on the mediator, namely active-empathic listening. Third, active-empathic listening has a direct effect on TMX controlling for trait mindfulness. Last, if active-empathic listening serves as a partial mediator, an indirect effect of mindfulness on team-member exchange quality through active-empathic listening must be present (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Subsequently, we tested our hypotheses by conducting three multiple regression analyses. For the analyses we used total mean scores for trait mindfulness and TMX. Because the factors of active-empathic listening – sensing, processing, and responding – have been shown to be highly intercorrelated (Bodie, 2011; Gearhart & Bodie, 2011), we treated the scale as one-dimensional and used the mean score from all items. Furthermore, as suggested in related current studies, we controlled for demographics and used age, as well as gender as covariates (Leonard et al., 2018). Finally, we tested the indirect effect of trait mindfulness on TMX through active-empathic listening by using the PROCESS bootstrapping analysis macro (Hayes, 2013). Specifically, we conducted the simple mediation model (model 4) with 5,000 bootstrapped samples.

### Results

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of study variables are depicted in Table 1. Preliminary correlation analyses showed that trait mindfulness was related to team-member exchange quality ( $r = .14, p < .05$ ), but not to active-empathic listening. Furthermore, active-empathic listening was positively related to team-member exchange quality ( $r = .17, p < .01$ ). The results of the multiple regression analyses are depicted in Table 2. Hypothesis 1 suggested that trait mindfulness would be positively related to team-member exchange. Our results showed that trait mindfulness had a positive effect on team-member exchange quality. The relation between trait mindfulness and team-member exchange was statistically significant with a small effect size ( $\beta = .18, p < .01$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Hypothesis 2 suggested that trait mindfulness would be positively related to active-empathic listening. Contrary to our assumption, trait mindfulness did not predict active-empathic listening ( $\beta = -.03, p = .62$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not confirmed. Hypothesis 3 suggested that active-empathic listening would partially mediate the positive relationship between trait mindfulness and team-member exchange quality. Partly in accordance with our Hypothesis 3, active-empathic listening was a significant predictor of team-member exchange quality, with a small effect size ( $\beta = .14, p < .05$ ). However, because of the missing relation between trait mindfulness and active-empathic listening, we did not find an indirect effect of trait mindfulness on TMX through active-empathic listening. The mean estimate of the indirect effect, calculated by the PROCESS macro, was .00 with a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval of  $[-0.01, 0.02]$ . Therefore, active-empathic listening did not serve as partial mediator in the relationship between trait mindfulness and TMX. Hence, Hypothesis 3 was not supported (see Figure 1).

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Study Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	34.87	10.91	-				
2. Gender	1.46	.50	.13*	-			
3. Trait Mindfulness	4.08	.20	.20**	.22**	(.87)		
4. Active-Empathic Listening	3.85	.08	-.25**	-.17**	-.10	(.80)	
5. TMX	3.48	.05	-.14*	-.03	.14*	.17**	(.75)

*Note.*  $N = 286-302$ . Gender was coded as 1 = female, 2 = male. Cronbach's alphas are displayed in parentheses along the diagonal. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ .

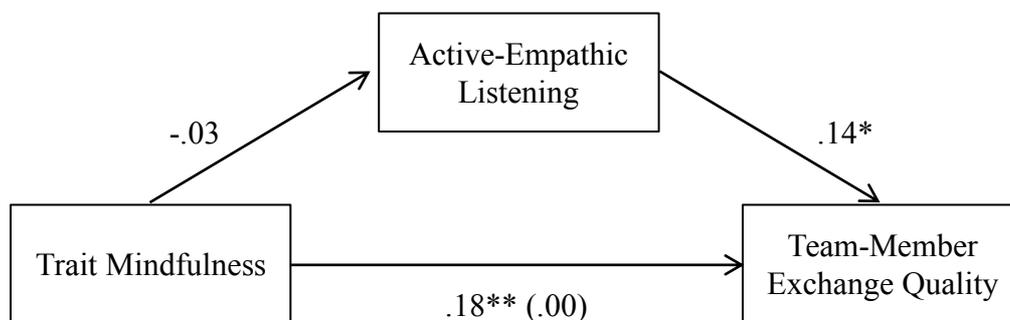
Table 2

*Regression Analyses Investigating the Relationship of Trait Mindfulness with Team-Member Exchange Quality and the Mediating Role of Active-Empathic Listening*

Block	Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$R^2$	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>
Criterion: Team-Member Exchange Quality								
1	Age	-.01**	.00	-.17**	.02			
	Gender	-.05	.06	-.05				
2	Trait Mindfulness	.13**	.04	.18**	.03	.05	9.31**	283
Criterion: Active-Empathic Listening								
1	Age	-.01***	.00	-.21***	.08			
	Gender	-.13*	.06	-.13*				
2	Trait Mindfulness	-.02	.04	-.03	.00	.08	.25	294
Criterion: Team-Member Exchange Quality								
1	Age	-.01*	.00	-.14*	.02			
	Gender	-.03	.06	-.03				
2	Trait Mindfulness	.13**	.04	.18**				
	Active-Empathic Listening	.16*	.06	.14*	.05	.07	7.67***	282

*Note.* Gender was coded as 1 = female, 2 = male. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

In total the statistical model including trait mindfulness and active-empathic listening as predictors, as well as age and gender as covariates, accounted for a small significant portion of variance in team-member exchange quality ( $R^2 = .07, p \leq .001$ ).



*Figure 1.* Depicted are standardized regression coefficients for the hypothesized model. Mean estimate of the indirect effect of trait mindfulness on TMX through active-empathic listening is displayed in parentheses. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

### Discussion

Today it is unusual for a single person to have the knowledge, skills, and capacities to solve complex corporate challenges independently. For this reason, teamwork has become more important for the working environment and research. In response to the increasing significance of teamwork and interpersonal relations at work, the present study aimed to broaden the insight into the role of personal characteristics, namely trait mindfulness and active-empathic listening, as facilitators of high-quality team-member exchange. More specifically, we investigated whether these two constructs would be related to team-member exchange quality and if active-empathic listening plays a mediating role within the positive relationship of trait mindfulness and TMX. Results of our online survey among employees in Germany showed that participants who scored high on trait mindfulness also reported high-quality team-member exchange. Hence, trait mindfulness was, as expected, a significant predictor of TMX. Furthermore, individuals with high active-empathic listening scores reported high-quality team member relations at work. Thus, active-empathic listening was a second significant predictor of TMX. However, against the findings of previous research, mindfulness was not related to active-empathic listening. Therefore, in the studied sample, attentive listening did not serve as partial mediator within the positive relationship of trait mindfulness and team-member exchange. Taken together, our findings imply that individuals' traits and interpersonal skills are, indeed, related to high-quality working relationships.

### Theoretical Implications

Our findings have a number of important theoretical implications that we would like to discuss hereafter.

**Research on team-member exchange.** First, our results contribute to research on team-member exchange by examining the link between employees' personal qualities and TMX. Whereas prior studies have examined group-level variables e.g., collective goals and group-focused transformational leadership as predictors of TMX, previous research provides little insight into individual-level attributes that promote team-member exchange (Chun, Cho, & Sosik, 2016; Wang, Li, Wu, & Liu, 2014). However, social exchange literature proposed that individuals' abilities, such as interpersonal awareness and sensitivity, may also play a role in the development and maintenance of high-quality team member relations (Banks et al., 2014; Seers et al., 1995). Looking at the results, the present study confirms prior assumptions that healthy working relations are related to employees' traits and interpersonal abilities (Bodie et al., 2013; Brown & Ryan, 2003). Thus, by establishing a positive empirical association of TMX with trait mindfulness and active-empathic listening, the present study

sheds more light on employees' personal characteristics, which are related to team-member exchange quality.

**Research on mindfulness at work.** The second contribution of the present study applies to current research on trait mindfulness. One goal of the present study was to transfer previous work on mindfulness and romantic relationship quality into the organizational context. For this purpose, our study was, to the best of our knowledge, the first to predict and systematically test the link between trait mindfulness and team-member exchange quality. The fact that people with higher levels of trait mindfulness reported higher-quality team member relations, extends prior research that has linked mindfulness to enhanced social functioning and relationship quality among romantic partners (Barnes et al., 2007; Good et al., 2016; Quaglia et al., 2015; Saavedra et al., 2010). Our findings are theoretically relevant because they contribute to a more holistic understanding of the role of mindfulness in the context of high-quality relations. They do so by showing that positive associations of trait mindfulness and healthy relationships are not tied to private settings but are also relevant for interpersonal relations in the work context.

However, it remains unclear in what ways mindfulness is connected to higher levels of TMX. In order to gain a holistic understanding of the trait mindfulness-TMX relation, mechanisms that operate between these two variables need to be examined. As mentioned before, literature suggests that present-moment awareness of mindfulness might facilitate self-determined behaviors, which align with one's social goals, values or external requirements (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Deci & Ryan, 1980). In work and team settings this could imply that employees with higher levels of mindfulness may engage in more supportive behaviors and reciprocal exchange interactions with their team members.

Beyond self-regulation, social-exchange theory (Blau, 1964) can shed further light on possible mechanisms in the relationship between mindfulness and TMX. Social-exchange theory suggests that individuals engage in a series of interdependent interactions that generate obligations among exchange parties (Blau, 1964; Mitchell et al., 2012). When one party provides the other with a valued or beneficial resource, an obligation is generated to return the favor (Mitchell et al., 2012; Seers, 1989). Combining these ideas with the construct of mindfulness, it can be inferred that mindfulness has the potential to increase the consciousness of one's own and other team members' exchange interactions. Thus, mindful individuals may perceive their and others' exchange interactions as more salient. This, in turn, may lead to a stronger perceived exchange, higher willingness to reciprocate others' exchange, and in sum to the perception of higher-quality relations among team members.

Taken together, the present study contributes to the emerging literature on trait mindfulness at work and provides the groundwork for further research on the role of mindfulness in beneficial working relations and involved mechanisms.

**Research on active-empathic listening.** Third, our results contribute to literature that has emphasized attentive listening as an essential factor for supportive interactions (Bodie & Jones, 2012; Bodie et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2016). As mentioned before, the positive relation between active-empathic listening and team-member exchange quality, may be explained by the systematic transactional model (STM; Bodenmann, 1995). From the model it can be inferred that individuals, who listen actively and empathically to their team members, may be able to comprehend that their coworkers need support and anticipate what kind of support they need better than less attentive listeners. Subsequently, these individuals may adapt their behaviors and respond effectively to others' needs with exchange interactions (Kuhn et al., 2018).

Additionally, our significant findings may be explained by the fact that people can distinguish active-empathic listeners from less attentive listeners (Bodie, 2011). Previous research showed that active listeners were perceived as more understanding and supportive by their interaction partners (Bodie & Jones, 2012; Reis, Lemay, & Finkenauer, 2017). Subsequently, when employees' perceive their coworkers to be more responsive, they may feel more comfortable to ask them for support and engage in more exchange interactions with these team members (Kuhn et al., 2018). Therefore, individuals with higher active-empathic listening scores, may experience greater exchange interactions than less attentive listeners. However, within the present study it remains unclear which mechanisms and causal directions account for the positive relationship between active-empathic listening and TMX. Therefore, further research is needed in order to examine how exactly active-empathic listening is related to high-quality team member relations.

**Other theoretical implications.** Finally, we would like to discuss implications of our non-findings, particularly the missing link between trait mindfulness and active-empathic listening. Although mindfulness and active-empathic listening share mutual theoretical foundations, today there are inconsistencies in research on whether these two constructs are related or not (Jones et al., 2016; the present study). Prior research suggested that mindfulness could benefit active-empathic listening because it allows individuals to stay focused during social interactions (Krasner et al., 2009; Singh et al., 2006). Furthermore, it was proposed that facets of mindfulness, namely mindful observing, describing, and acting with awareness, are related to the three stages of listening – sensing, processing, and responding (Baer, Smith,

Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006; Jones et al., 2016). An online survey tested these assumptions and showed that mindful observing and describing were significant predictors of active-empathic listening (Jones et al., 2016). Interestingly, acting with awareness, which is the facet of mindful attending that refers to present-moment consciousness of one's actions and aligns the most to the concept of trait mindfulness, did not predict active-empathic listening (Baer et al., 2006; Jones et al., 2016).

Consequently, although we did not confirm our last hypothesis, our results add to the current debate on the relationship of mindfulness and attentive listening. So far, present-moment orientation seems not to be the key mechanism that links mindfulness to active-empathic listening. Instead, mindfulness seems to be linked to active-empathic listening through dimensions that are specifically relevant for listening and communication skills. These qualities may be observing external and internal sensations with curiosity, as well as the ability to describe and express experiences with words (Jones et al., 2016). Thus, future research could address the question of why and how certain facets of mindfulness are related to active-empathic listening, whereas others are not.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite the theoretical contributions, our study has two limitations that need to be considered for the interpretation of our results and future research. First, our study collected self-reported perceptual measures only and did not observe behaviors that e.g., make up active-empathic listening and team-member exchange. Thus, our data may be threatened by common method variance e.g., the consistency effect and social desirability (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Consequently, finding that self-rated trait mindfulness and active-empathic listening correlate with TMX, does not automatically mean that people with higher mindfulness and listening scores objectively engage in more exchange interactions with their team members than other individuals. However, previous studies support the proposed relation by showing that mindful individuals and active listeners engaged in more other-directed support than people with lower levels of these characteristics (Berry et al., 2018; Bodie & Jones, 2012). In order to investigate whether high-levels of trait mindfulness and active-empathic listening are indeed accompanied by frequent exchange interactions among team members, future research could use multiple sources to collect more objective data (Spector, 2001). For instance, future studies could benefit from dyadic designs and obtain measures of the predictor and criterion variables from different employees (Podsakoff et al., 2003). More specifically, one employee could provide the measures of own perceived trait

mindfulness and active-empathic listening, whereas another team member could evaluate the extent and quality of exchange interactions with the coworker in question.

Second, our measures were all taken at the same point in time. For this reason, our data is correlational in nature and does not allow for causal conclusions (Spector, 2001). Although there are theoretical arguments for the assumption that trait mindfulness and active-empathic listening precede TMX, causal directions may also be reversed or reciprocal. For instance, team-member exchange can provide employees with valuable resources, such as task-related support and decreased workload (Farh, Lanaj, & Ilie, 2017). Manageable workload, in turn, was found to promote mindfulness at work (Hülshager, Walkowiak, & Thommes, 2018). Thus, supportive working relations may preserve employees' attentional resources that are required to maintain mindfulness (Hülshager et al., 2018). Consequently, future research could investigate causal directions between trait mindfulness, active-empathic listening and TMX by e.g., conducting a longitudinal study (Spector, 2001). Nevertheless, cross-sectional designs are popular and often used in the beginning stages of research to legitimate the time and costs required for more complex studies (Cole & Maxwell, 2003). By establishing significant relations between the predictor variables and TMX, the present study laid the groundwork for more conclusive research (Spector, 2001).

Further potential fields of research identified by the current study include studies of mindfulness and active-empathic listening. One example could be investigating whether present-moment attention of mindfulness is, indeed, not related to active-empathic listening by collecting more objective data. At the same time, it can be examined whether other mindfulness facets, such as mindful observing and describing, still correlate with objective measures of attentive listening (Baer et al., 2006; Jones et al., 2016). Observation of dyadic interactions in the context of a laboratory study could shed more light on the relations of interest (Adair, Boulton, & Algoe, 2018; Kuhn et al., 2018). For instance, participants could provide self-reported measures on the abovementioned mindfulness constructs. Thereafter, dyadic conversations between participants could be recorded in order to observe and assess objective listening behaviors (Kuhn et al., 2018). In addition to observational data, the study could collect other-reported measures of active-empathic listening (AELS–Other-Report; Bodie, 2011). Thereby, speakers could indicate, whether they perceived that their interaction partners were following the conversation attentively and engaged in active-empathic listening from their point of view. Consequently, observational data and other-reported measures of active-empathic listening may shed more light on the question of which mindfulness qualities are linked to attentive listening and which are not.

### **Practical Implications**

The present study provides practical implications for Human Resources specialists and corporate management. Taking into account the positive outcomes of high-quality team member relations, for instance employees' well-being and performance (Banks et al., 2014), organizations should promote supportive interpersonal relations among their staff members. Assuming that mindfulness and active-empathic listening may facilitate high-quality team-member exchange, the present study introduces new ways for organizations of supporting their employees in the development and maintenance of healthy working relations. Specifically, organizations could support their employees in the development of mindfulness and attentive listening.

In order to develop employees' mindfulness and active-empathic listening, organizations can make use of mindfulness-based interventions that have been linked to enhanced listening skills and improved interpersonal relations (Beckman et al., 2012; Singh et al., 2006). More specifically, effective methods that were shown to increase mindfulness, attentive listening, and enhanced team functioning at the same time were the mindful communication program (Beckman et al., 2012) and the mindfulness-based mentoring intervention (Singh et al., 2006). However, researchers warn that effects of mindfulness interventions may fade if individuals do not engage in regular practices (Hülshager, 2015; Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Thus, organizations should also provide their employees with sustainable possibilities to practice mindfulness and e.g., sponsor subscriptions to effective mindfulness smartphone apps such as Headspace (Wen, Sweeney, Welton, Trockel, & Katznelson, 2017). This way, individuals can integrate the use of self-guided mindfulness meditation in their daily routine and benefit from positive effects of mindfulness trainings in a sustained manner.

Furthermore, current research has emphasized that the ability to be mindful is not only a matter of personal dispositions and practice but that it is also influenced by working conditions (Hülshager et al., 2018). Therefore, organizations that want to promote employees' mindfulness should provide working conditions that preserve employees' energetic resources, which are a necessary requirement for mindfulness (Hülshager et al., 2018). More specifically, organizations should keep employees' workload to a manageable extent and provide sufficient opportunities to recover from intense work tasks during the work day (Hülshager et al., 2018; Trougakos, Hideg, Cheng, & Beal, 2013). All in all, organizations should provide employees with training opportunities to develop mindfulness and attentive listening abilities. However, employers should also provide appropriate working conditions,

where individuals' have sufficient energetic resources available to maintain present-moment attention to their social environment.

### **Conclusion**

The present study revealed that both, trait mindfulness and active-empathic listening, were significant predictors of self-reported team-member exchange quality. Our research, therefore, provided empirical support for the association of personal characteristics and interpersonal skills with high-quality working relations. By establishing a significant link between TMX and two individual-level constructs, our results extend the research on TMX, which so far has mostly examined predictors on the group-level. Furthermore, we contribute to research on trait mindfulness and active-empathic listening at work. The next step in this line of research could be to conduct longitudinal field studies, in order to examine the causal directions and effect mechanisms between TMX, trait mindfulness, and active-empathic listening.

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