

6 Ways Being Mindful Can Make You a Better Leader

by Bruna Martinuzzi

If you consider mindfulness to be just another buzzword or New Age fad, think again. Mindfulness has been around for centuries and has now made the transition from Tibetan monasteries to the corporate boardrooms of America. In "The Mindful Revolution," a recent TIME magazine article, Kate Pickert says that already many devotees see mindfulness "as an indispensable tool for coping—both emotionally and practically—with the daily onslaught."

Is it worth your while, as a business owner, to pay attention to this trend?

The Meaning of Mindfulness

One of the best definitions of mindfulness comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn, professor of medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester, Massachusetts, who says that mindfulness is the awareness that comes when we pay attention—on purpose—in the present moment, while suspending judgment. That's the judgment of how we perceive a person, a situation or any activity at that moment. It's about not living in our heads all the time.

Simply put, it means paying attention to where you are, what you're doing or who you're talking to. It's being in touch with the right here, right now. As Kabat-Zinn puts it in his book, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, mindfulness "wakes us up to the fact that our lives unfold only in moments." If we're not fully present for many of those moments, we may miss what's most valuable in our lives, both personally and professionally.

There's ample research to show that practicing mindfulness reduces stress and boosts our ability to concentrate and have greater clarity. Practicing mindfulness enhances your leadership presence. We can all sense when we're in the company of mindful leaders: They exude a calm demeanor and have a sharp focus that helps them connect with people in the moment.

A number of well-known companies practice mindfulness. Here are a few examples:

Google. One of the most popular classes that Google offers its employees is "Search Inside Yourself." The class teaches mindfulness through attention training, self-knowledge and self-mastery, and the creation of useful mental habits. The training is the brainchild of Chade-Meng Tan, a Google engineer who also wrote a book on the topic. The program has helped Google employees cope with the company's challenging, fast-paced environment—employees report being better able to handle frustrating emotions, calmly overcome objections during product demonstrations and improve customer relations.

General Mills. For several years, General Mills has enrolled its employees in the Mindful Leadership Program. The company reports that the program has increased productivity: Eighty percent of participants say they improved their ability to make better decisions with more clarity, while 89 percent improved their listening abilities. As Joe Ens, vice president of marketing at General Mills, put it in *Is Mindfulness Good for Business?*, "The biggest impact has been on my ability to quiet my mind. It's allowed me to increase my focus when my team is presenting ideas to me."

Intel. This company embraced mindfulness training for its employees a few years ago. According to participants, the program has enhanced creativity and focus, lowered stress, and resulted in greater engagement in meetings and projects.

Other corporate disciples. Numerous other companies have adopted mindfulness as a business tool. These include Aetna International, eBay, Twitter, Facebook, Genentech, Kaiser Permanente, Compusense, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, Yahoo, Apple and Starbucks, just to name a few. Mindfulness training has also been embraced by a wide diversity of individuals, including military personnel, lawyers, physicians, politicians, financial advisors and musicians. It's even included in some MBA programs. Perhaps it's time to take this trend seriously and consider incorporating mindfulness as part of your leadership toolkit.

Taking Action

How can you practice mindfulness for greater success? Here are five simple ways to get started:

1. Practice a breathing exercise. One of the easiest ways to bring the power of mindfulness to your leadership style is to simply include a brief, breathing meditation routine. All that's required is for you to sit still and observe your breath as it goes in and out of your lungs, without changing your breathing. This means not pushing or forcing your breathing, or trying to make it deeper. You simply observe it and focus on it. If other thoughts creep into your mind and start to distract you, acknowledge the thoughts, then resume your focus on your breathing each time. You can do this for 10 minutes when you have time, or even just 60 seconds. You'll find that you'll likely experience an immediate feeling of calm. Give it a try now.

In *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, authors Kabat-Zinn and Thich Nhat Hanh, a Nobel Prize nominee, report that if we pay attention to our breathing on a regular basis, our relationship to it changes dramatically. The breath reminds us to tune into our body for a few moments. This allows us to be more aware of our thoughts and feelings with a greater degree of calmness and with a more discerning eye. We'll see things more clearly and with a larger perspective, all because we're a little more awake, a little more aware. "And with this awareness," the authors write, "comes a feeling of having room to move, of having more options, of being free to choose effective and appropriate responses in stressful situations rather than losing our equilibrium. feeling overwhelmed, thrown off balance by our knee-jerk reactions."

2. Do a three-minute body scan. This is a long-established idea among well-being practitioners. It involves mentally scanning your body by briefly becoming aware of each part of your body as you practice deep breathing. It's a powerful form of self-care. If you need some guidance in this regard, check out this three-minute video from Elisha Goldstein, a psychologist and the author of *The Now Effect: How This Moment Can Change*

the Rest of Your Life.

3. Spend time in nature. Take a walk in a park, or anywhere in nature, on your own. Don't answer the phone, or check email. As Pickert suggests, "Take a hike and observe your surroundings. Resist the urge to Instagram them." Immerse yourself in your environment, and be mindful of the sounds you hear. All you need is 20 to 30 minutes to reap the benefits of this exercise.

4. Establish mindfulness triggers. In her book, *Mindful Leadership: The 9 Ways to Self-Awareness, Transforming Yourself, and Inspiring Others*, Maria Gonzales recommends setting up triggers to remind you throughout the day to relax and practice mindfulness. For example, when the phone rings, it can be a cue to really listen. Take a deep breath before answering it, and fully focus on what the caller is saying without multitasking. When you come to a red light, use it as a trigger to be mindful for a moment or two. Or, just before entering a meeting, take a few seconds to be mindful. Triggers can be associated with any recurring events during your day.

5. Use digital mindfulness aids. *Mindful* magazine recommends three mindfulness apps. You might also find it inspiring to do mindful meditation with a digital timer such as the Insight Timer app, the Online Meditation Timer or the Online Mindfulness Bell. Or check out mindfulness reminders such as qwikALERT and ProdMe. If you're spending long hours at your computer, these can be set to remind you to stop for a moment and practice a 60-second breathing exercise or other quick meditation practice.

6. Eliminate needless rush. Like a chain smoker who puffs one cigarette after another without a break, we often have a tendency to schedule one event right after the other. We schedule meetings or appointments back to back, we set up conference calls right after lunch, and we pack our day until the last minute when we have to leave for home. With a little planning and foresight, we can introduce some breathing space between things. This helps us show up at each event with mindfulness.

Mindfulness isn't difficult to learn. It just requires us to suspend skepticism and decide to make this tool a part of our life. If you're still not convinced, take inspiration from Aetna CEO Mark T. Bertolini, who has adopted mindfulness practices in his leadership. As Bertolini aptly puts it in this video, "Unless I can bring myself in that [chaotic] environment in a steady and mindful way, be present in the moment, at every opportunity, I can't help the people around me and lead them."

You are the instrument of leadership for your people, and mindfulness helps you hone that instrument.