

# Bringing Mindfulness to the Workplace



**UNC**  
KENAN-FLAGLER  
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Executive Development

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## Introduction

In today's work world, we face multiple stress inducing demands and pressures as well as constant connectivity through smart phones, social media, and tablet computers. We are managing numerous fluctuating priorities, working with increased expectations, balancing competing demands for our personal and professional goals, and handling ongoing conflict and ambiguity in complex environments. Consulting firm AON Hewitt estimates that 35 percent of U.S. employers in 2013 offered stress-reduction programs to their employees, and that estimate is expected to grow (AON Hewitt, 2013). HR and talent management professionals are increasingly looking for ways to reduce employee stress, and many employers—like Google, Aetna, Target, and General Mills, to name a few—have found that introducing mindfulness into their workplace not only lowers employee stress, but improves focus, clarity of thinking, decision-making, emotional intelligence, and more.

This white paper:

- Explains what mindfulness is, and why it can improve employee health and productivity and a business's bottom line;
- Explores how mindfulness can improve leadership skills;
- Reviews some of the studies that offer insight into the science behind mindfulness;
- Provides examples of organizations that have offered mindfulness courses and discusses how it has impacted their workplaces.

## What Mindfulness Is

Mindfulness has roots that go back 2,500 years and uses an anchor—often breathing—to center attention and to bring awareness to the present moment (Stone, 2014). The goal of mindfulness practice is to “quiet the mind's constant chattering—thoughts, anxieties, and regrets,” writes Frances Weaver for *The Week*. Mindfulness practitioners learn to focus on the present in everything they do and to accept events in the present moment (Weaver, 2014).

Psychologist Ela Amarie of the Switzerland-based consultancy Mindful Brain observes that there are three characteristics of mindfulness; intention, attention, and attitude. Mindfulness practitioners set the intention to be present. They also bring their attention to whatever is happening (noting sights, sounds, thoughts, feelings, etc.) around them or to whatever they are doing (checking email, meetings with co-workers, or taking a coffee break). They also cultivate a particular attitude with that attention, one that is nonjudgmental, patient, trusting, nonreactive, and open (Mindful Brain staff, n.d).

The goal of mindfulness is to recognize and accept inner thoughts and feelings. This is a reflective thought exercise that most people would rather avoid, perhaps because when we aren't multitasking, we tend to think about the things we haven't figured out yet, such as difficult personal and professional challenges, and until there is a solution, these thoughts dominate. A series of experiments conducted by Timothy Wilson of the University of Virginia found that the majority of the more than 700 study participants found it unpleasant to be in a room with just their thoughts for company. In one experiment, participants were left in a room in which they could press a button and shock themselves. Sixty-seven percent of the men and 25 percent of the women in the study opted to shock themselves rather than to sit quietly and think (Williams, 2014). Today's mobile technology world gives people limitless ways to stay busy and avoid reflective opportunities. Practicing mindfulness can help individuals accept those inner thoughts and feelings and let them go, thereby lowering their stress and focusing their attention on the here and now.

## The Business Case for Mindfulness in the Workplace

**T**hough mindfulness practitioners can see great impact personally and professionally in recharging and regaining productivity, employers are not easily convinced that investing in reflection, openness, and thoughtfulness will impact the bottom line. Encouraging employees to slow down to focus on the present can seem at odds with a corporate culture of speed and goal attainment. Yet this is actually what makes mindfulness valuable in an organizational context. Studies by the National Institute of Health UK, the University of Massachusetts, and the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard University suggest that mindfulness at work is good for business.

The studies found that practicing mindfulness at work:

- Reduces employee absenteeism and turnover;
- Improves cognitive functions (i.e., concentration, memory, and learning ability);
- Increases employee productivity;
- Enhances employer/employee and client relationships, and;
- Improves job satisfaction (Mindful Brain staff, n.d.).

Mindfulness also helps nurture imagination and improves mental health, according to Manfred Ke De Vries, INSEAD distinguished professor of leadership and development (Williams, 2014). People who practice mindfulness report having improved innovative thinking, better communication skills, and more appropriate reactions to stress. They also say that they are better able to handle conflict at work and experience improved teamwork and team relations (Mindfulnet.org staff, n.d.). In addition, research by Jochen Reb, an associate professor of organizational development at Singapore Management University, found that mindfulness can also improve decision-making by helping clarify objectives and generating options (Karelaia, 2014).

## Mindfulness and Leadership

**M**indfulness can help all employees, but it can be particularly beneficial for senior leaders. William George, former chief executive of healthcare giant Medtronic, said in an article in *FT Magazine*: “The main business case for (mindfulness) is that if you’re fully present on the job, you will be a more effective leader, you will make better decisions, and you will work better with other people.” (Gelles, 2012).

To help frame mindfulness, particularly when it comes to making better decisions, consider its opposite; mindlessness. Mindlessness means not taking the time or effort to think. Mindless decision makers don’t take the time to think about new and different options, relying instead on past assumptions or experiences. Mindful decision makers, on the other hand, take the time to consider all of the attributes of the different options, making more informed, current decisions (Ideas for Leaders staff, n.d.).

Mindfulness can also help senior leaders improve their focus on their mindsets, emotional states, and how those two affect how they interact with others. Intentional,

long-term focus helps improve leaders' flexibility and adaptability. It also helps them move beyond their familiar ways of thinking and seeing the world and become open to new ways of listening, leading, responding, and innovating (Mindfulnet.org, n.d.).

## The Science of Mindfulness

**T**here is real evidence that improving mindfulness changes the brain for the better. In 2011, a group of Harvard researchers reported in *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* the results of their study on a group of people who practiced mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). Using magnetic resonance images, they found that those who practiced MBSR had increases in gray matter concentrations in the brain. They concluded that "participation in MBSR is associated with changes in gray matter concentration in brain regions involved in learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking." (Holzel et al, 2011).

Neuroscientist Richard Davidson of the Center for Investigating Health Minds (Madison, Wisc.) also found that mindfulness changes how the brain functions. His studies found that mindfulness improves cognitive flexibility, creativity and innovation, well-being, emotional regulation, and empathy. Regular practice also improves attention (Mindful Brain staff, n.d.).

Other research has shown that improving one's mindfulness reduces the levels of cortisol in the brain, a hormone related to stress. When cortisol levels drop, the mind calms down and is able to become more focused (Gelles, 2012). Mindfulness can also lower blood pressure, increase the body's immune system, and improve emotional stability and sleep quality (Weaver, 2014).

And finally, a recent meta-analysis of mindfulness studies conducted by researchers at Johns Hopkins found evidence that improving mindfulness decreases anxiety levels, depression, and pain of practitioners. The researchers concluded that although there was no evidence that practicing mindfulness through regular focus was better than any other treatment approach (like drugs), it was an equivalent alternative (Harnett, 2014).

## How to Increase Mindfulness at Work

The Mindful Brain staff offer the following tips on how to increase mindfulness at work.

- **Be aware.** Encourage employees to spend 15 minutes before work each day to sit and be aware of the sensations of their breath and body. When their minds wander, teach them to bring their attention back.
- **Take five.** Teach employees to use the STOP sign technique whenever they feel stressed:
  - *Stop* what you are doing.
  - *Take* five conscious breaths.
  - *Observe* the sensation of the body and notice what you are thinking about.
  - *Proceed*.
- **Do one thing at a time.** Teach employees that when their minds wander away, to bring them back to the here and now.
- **Take time outs.** Encourage employees to take short breaks (1-5 minutes) every 90 to 120 minutes. Remind them to mindfully stretch, breathe, or walk during those breaks.
- **Eat lunch somewhere else.** Encourage employees to eat their lunches away from their computer. Teach them to take a couple of breaths and really notice their hunger levels and the food they are about to eat.
- **Listen.** Encourage employees to practice mindful listening during meetings by being fully present for whoever is speaking.
- **Note accomplishments.** Encourage employees to make a mindful note of what they accomplished at the end of every day.

(Source: Mindful Brain staff, n.d.)

## How Organizations Are Cultivating Mindfulness in the Workplace

Google is, by all accounts (it was named *Fortune's* top great place to work in 2014), a world-class employer. The organization prides itself on being socially conscious, offering employees (known as Googlers) substantial benefits and perks like on-site cafes, dry cleaners, nap pods, and more than a dozen mindfulness courses. Google's most popular "Search Inside Yourself" mindfulness course, offered since 2007, has a six-month wait list and thousands of Googler alumni.

The program consists of 19 sessions or an intensive two-and-a-half day retreat, and is designed as a contemplative training program that helps participants learn to better relate to themselves and to others. The training consists of three parts: attention training, self-knowledge development, and "creating mental habits." Attention training focuses on developing the ability to bring one's mind, under any circumstance and at any time, to a place that is calm and clear. Self-knowledge development focuses on becoming more aware of one's self, creating a quality of self-knowledge and self-awareness that improves over time. This self-awareness helps mindfulness practitioners master their emotions. The third part of the training focuses on creating mental habits - for example, creating a mental habit of kindness. Participants are taught to look at every person they encounter and think "I want this person to be happy." Once it becomes a mental habit, kindness comes naturally (Baer, 2014).

Google says this and other mindfulness programs are good for the company because they teach emotional intelligence, which helps people better understand their colleagues' motivations. It also boosts resilience to stress and improves mental focus (Baer, n.d.). Participants of the "Search Inside Yourself" program agree. They report being calmer, more patient, and better able to listen. They also say the program helped them better handle stress and defuse emotions (Kelly 2012).

Healthcare giant Aetna liked the outcome of their study on mindfulness so much they now offer their mindfulness programs to customers, and more than 3,500 employees have participated in the programs. In 2010, Aetna developed, launched, and studied two mindfulness programs—Viniyoga Stress Reduction and Mindfulness at Work—in collaboration with Duke University, eMindful, and the American Viniyoga Institute. The goals of the programs were to help reduce stress and to improve how participants react to stress (Gelles, 2012 and Aetna staff, 2012).

The Viniyoga Stress Reduction program is a 12-week yoga-based program. Participants learn ways to manage and reduce stress through yoga postures, breathing techniques, guided meditation, and mental skills. The Mindfulness at Work program is based on the principles of mindfulness meditation. The program teaches participants relatively brief (5-15 minutes in duration) mindfulness practices designed to reduce work-related stress and to improve work-life balance. During the study, these practices were delivered in person and in an online classroom environment that used audio, visual, and instant messaging.

### Five Steps to More Mindful Meetings

Meetings are a good place to encourage mindfulness because it encourages participants to stay in the present and to not react too quickly to information. It also encourages new perspectives to be explored before making decisions. Here are five steps HR and talent management professionals can take to foster more mindful meetings in their organizations.

1. Encourage meeting participants to conduct a self-check before the meeting. Instruct all participants to ask themselves “What mental state am I in?” By becoming more aware of their mental state, they can choose the state they want to be in during the meeting.
2. Encourage meeting leaders to conduct a group check-in. Meeting leaders can take five minutes at the start of every meeting and ask each participant to answer the question, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how present are you right now?” This will help participants reflect on where their attention is and prompt them to be in the present moment.
3. Encourage meeting leaders to always state their intentions. This goes beyond stating the usual discussion topics. For example, one intention of a meeting may be to give team members a chance to connect with each other.
4. Encourage meeting leaders to distinguish the meeting parts. Meetings have multiple parts, and it is helpful for participants to know which part they are in.
5. Teach meeting leaders to always wrap the meeting up. Encourage them to take five minutes at the end of each meeting to intentionally create clear agreements about what is going to happen in the future.

(Source: Kashen, n.d.)



Participants in both programs showed significant improvement in perceived stress levels. Thirty-three percent in the Viniyoga program and 36 percent in the mindfulness program showed improvement in perceived stress levels, versus 18 percent in a control group. Participants in both programs also showed significant improvement in various heart rate measurements, demonstrating that their bodies were better able to manage stress. In addition, the study found that these improvements could be realized when the programs are presented in person or online; the study showed “statistically equivalent” results between the delivery methods (Aetna staff, 2012).

General Mills has offered voluntary mindfulness programs to its employees in their Minneapolis headquarters since 2006 and as of late 2013, has trained 500 employees and 90 senior leaders. The company offers a four-day retreat for officers and senior managers, a two-day training program for new managers, and a two-hour class that meets for seven consecutive weeks that is available to all employees. The company also offers weekly meditation sessions, yoga classes, and now has a dedicated meditation room in every building on its campus. General Mills offers these mindfulness courses to improve employee focus, clarity, and creativity (Hughlett, 2014 and Gelles, 2014).

The programs appear to be having the desired effect. After one of the seven-week mindfulness courses, participants were surveyed. The survey found that:

- 83 percent of participants said they were taking time each day to improve their personal productivity, up from 23 percent before the course.
- 82 percent of participants said they now made time to eliminate tasks with limited productivity, up from 32 percent before the course.
- Among the seniors who participated, 80 percent said they had experienced a positive change in their ability to make better decisions. Eighty nine percent of participating senior leaders said they were better listeners (Gelles, 2012).

Intel began offering its Awake@Intel mindfulness program in 2012 at two of its locations in Oregon and California. So far, 1,500 employees have participated in 19 sessions, and on average, participants report a two point decrease (on a scale of 1 to 10) in stress and feeling overwhelmed, a three point increase in overall happiness and well-being, and a two point increase in having new ideas, insights, mental clarity, creativity, the ability to focus, the quality of relationships at work, and the level of engagement in meetings, projects, and team efforts—all articulated goals of the program (Wong, 2014).

The program opens with having participants identify what they want to improve through the program. During the program's first month, participants learn how to quiet their minds and explore the components of emotional intelligence. During the last part of the course, participants learn about mindful listening. Intel recently decided to expand the program and will now make it available to all of its more than 10,000 employees in 63 countries (Wong, 2014).

Target also offers mindfulness meditation training. Its "Meditating Merchants" network began in 2010 at the retail chain's Minneapolis headquarters. The mindfulness training is open to all employees and now includes nearly 1,000 employees at several company locations. Waterbury, Vermont-based Green Mountain Coffee Roasters has also embraced mindfulness. It offers monthly day-long mindfulness retreats to its employees, their families, friends, and the community at large (Hughett, 2013 and Gelles, 2012).

## Conclusion

In today's work environment, mindfulness is a personal and professional strategy to improve performance and productivity. As Google, Aetna, General Mills, and Target can attest, bringing mindfulness to their workplaces has decreased employees' stress levels, improved their focus and clarity, improved their listening and decision-making skills, and improved their overall happiness and well-being. Perhaps most importantly from an HR and talent management professional perspective, mindfulness can reduce employee absenteeism and turnover, improve employee and client relationships, and boost job satisfaction.

## About UNC Executive Development

Our approach to program design and delivery draws upon the power of real-world, applicable experiences from our faculty and staff, integrated with the knowledge our client partners share about the challenges they face.

We call this approach [The Power of Experience](#). We combine traditional with experiential and unique learning to ensure that all individuals gain relevant new skills that they can easily implement within their own organizations. Through action learning and business simulation activities, we challenge participants to think, reflect and make decisions differently.

### Our Approach: The Partnership

Our team customizes each leadership program through a highly collaborative process that involves our clients, program directors, faculty and program managers. We are dedicated to following-up with our clients and individual participants to ensure that their learning experiences have been meaningful and impactful. This integrated approach consistently drives strong outcomes.

### Our Approach: The Results

Our executive education programs are designed with results in mind, and we are focused on successfully meeting our clients' business and academic expectations. Below are a few examples of the results our client partners have achieved:

- Leadership refocused with new strategy and cohesive vision
- Strategic plans created for the global marketplace
- Supply chains streamlined
- Products redefined
- New markets targeted
- Cost-saving measures developed
- Silos leveled
- Teams aligned

Participants leave empowered to bring in new ideas, present different ways to grow business and tackle challenges. The result is stronger individuals leading stronger teams and organizations.

### Contact Us

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