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Rotman

The Magazine of the Rotman School of Management. Fall 2012



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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Meditation: A 'New' Approach to Managing Workplace Overload



Today's employees and managers are deluged with an unprecedented amount of information and distraction. If it's not e-mails, texts or instant messaging, it's phone calls, co-workers, and constantly-changing demands and deadlines. **Basex** research found that 50 per cent of a knowledge worker's day is spent 'managing information' and that an excess of information results in a loss of ability to make decisions, process information, and prioritize tasks.

While organizations have addressed these challenges with a variety of stress-management solutions, until recently *meditation* was not among them; it had a reputation for being flaky and unfit for corporate consumption. However, studies have proven the value of meditation in changing the brain and point to its practical application in the workplace, and the practice is now being used in established companies such as **General Mills, Google** and **Prentice Hall**.

In order to understand meditation, it helps to first understand *mindfulness*. **Jon Kabat Zinn**, former executive director of the Centre for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, defines it as, "paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." Basically, mindfulness is a focus on the current moment without the stress and anxiety of judging it.

Mindfulness is the goal, while mindfulness meditation is a process for accomplishing that goal. Contrary to popular belief, mindfulness meditation doesn't involve incense or chanting. The practice involves focusing on the breath or bodily sensations and non-judgmentally acknowledging distracting thoughts and feelings as they occur. You then gently return to the object of focus, whether it's your breath during formal meditation practice or an everyday activity like drinking a cup of coffee.

Research shows that because the brain actually changes its structure as a result of meditation, its effects are lasting, and include the following:

Stress Reduction. One obvious benefit of mindfulness meditation is stress reduction. According to the **American Institute of Stress**, this problem currently costs over \$300 billion annually due to increased absenteeism, employee turnover, diminished productivity, medical, legal, and insurance expenses, and Workers' Compensation payments.

A recent study found that mindfulness meditation

actually decreases the size of a part of the brain associated with the stress response. What's even more incredible about these results is that the change happened in the brains of novice meditators. Participants took an eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course in which they meditated for an average of 27 minutes a day. Brain scans taken before and after MBSR revealed decreased grey matter in the amygdala – the part of the brain that senses threats and triggers the fight-or-flight response. While a half hour may seem like an eternity in a corporate environment, one study found that as little as ten minutes of meditation five days a week for four weeks could result in "lowering symptoms of burnout, enhancing relaxation, and improving life satisfaction."

Empathy. According to a **Hay McBer®** study, 80 per cent of workplace success is attributed to emotional intelligence – the ability to manage oneself, relate to others, and deal with life's pressures. Empathy is an important competency of emotional intelligence (EI). Having the capacity to step into someone else's shoes by acknowledging and understanding his or her perspective is essential to developing and maintaining healthy and productive working relationships. Yet in the deadline-driven workplace, it's the first thing to go as the focus narrows from people and relationships to task completion.

Studies have found that 'compassion meditation', where you focus on compassion and empathy for others, increases empathy. In a 2008 study, **Richard Davidson** and his colleagues found that compassion meditation activated the limbic system, the brain's emotional network, in both novice mediators and monks. In another study that same year at Stanford, just four minutes of loving-kindness meditation proved to result in increased feelings of social connectedness and positivity toward strangers.

Decision Making. While decision making is believed to be a purely rational process, it is also a highly emotional one. **Antonio Damasio** discovered that cognitive decisions could not be made without also incorporating feelings regarding that decision. This has huge implications for the workplace. Choices, once thought to be made on a purely economic or rational basis, incorporate emotions that may run counter to logic.

A study did find, however, that experienced meditators could better separate their emotions from their decisions when they were faced with seemingly unfair choices, in the

form of different ‘offers’. As a result, meditators accepted a greater number of offers based on their actual merit compared to the control group. Why? Apparently, control group members more often accessed a part of their brain associated with disgust, rejection, and betrayal, which led to a higher likelihood of their rejection of offers. The meditators, on the other hand, were not limited by that part of the brain. Mindfulness meditation training seems to improve decision making by minimizing or removing emotional components that may cloud clearer thinking.

Self-Awareness. According to emotional intelligence experts, “All of the EI competencies build on self-awareness.” Essentially, self-awareness provides the insights to identify and improve upon areas of weakness while further capitalizing on strengths. This is important in any capacity, but especially within a leadership role. **Bill George**, former CEO of **Medtronic**, found that meditation helped him to be more “self-aware and more compassionate toward [himself] and others.” In a 2011 study, mindfulness meditation was shown to lead to an increase in the part of the brain associated with self-awareness.

Positive Emotions. The concept of mood and ‘emotional contagion’ has important implications for the workplace. Both good and bad moods move quickly throughout an organization, though bad moods travel faster. While staff members need to be aware of the impact of their moods on others, **Daniel Goleman** feels that this is especially important for leaders because their moods tend to “go viral” the fastest. “Being in a good mood . . . helps people take in information effectively and respond nimbly and creatively.”

Neuroscientist **Richard Davidson** and his colleagues found that after an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program, study participants showed greater activation in their left prefrontal cortex, which is associated with positive emotions and a more adaptive response to negative or stressful events.

How the Corporate World Is Using Meditation

Although more and more organizations are opening up to the benefits of this ancient practice, there is no standard for meditation in the workplace. At one end of the spectrum, companies offer ‘meditation rooms’ or more innocuous ‘quiet’ or ‘recovery rooms’ where workers can simply take a break from stress. These areas often double as prayer rooms. **Prattice Hall**, **eBay**, and **GlaxoSmithKline** fall into this category.

A little further along the spectrum are companies that provide meditation classes and retreats, in addition to physical spaces. For example, **Google** brings meditation to its employees through the Search Inside Yourself (SIY) program, which mixes science, meditation and business expertise. According to **Chade Meng Tan**, founder of SIY, emotional intelligence provided the “vehicle for aligning meditation with real life.”

Genentech and General Mills have made the most advanced commitment to the benefits of meditation. A biotechnology company owned by **Roche**, Genentech went from offering meditation and mindfulness classes in 2006 to a more comprehensive program called PEP (Personal Excellence Program) that uses the insights of mindfulness and meditation to fuel personal development and innovation. PEP is a ten-month journey comprised of three phases: selecting a topic for personal development, observing for greater self-awareness, and practicing new habits for greater effectiveness. Though the second phase involves mindfulness and meditation, PEP’s creator **Pamela Weiss** steers clear of specific beliefs and religions. A third-party review of the program revealed the following results:

- a 10 to 20 per cent increase in employee satisfaction
- a 12 per cent increase in customer satisfaction
- a 50 per cent improvement in employee communication, collaboration, conflict management, and coaching
- 77 per cent reporting a “significant measurable business impact” as a result of PEP participation (the norm is 25 to 30 percent)

More than 800 people have participated in the PEP program, now in its sixth year, and a graduate program has been added.

In 2006, General Mills began offering a Mindful Leadership Series that combines mindfulness meditation, yoga and dialogue. More than 140 officers and directors participated in the four-day Cultivating Leadership Presence through Mindfulness, while another 150 participated either in *Catching Lightning: Innovation and Mindfulness* or in *Mindful Leadership at Work*. Follow-up research revealed the following:

- 83 per cent of participants said they often “take time each day to optimize my personal productivity” (up from 23 percent before taking course)
- 82 per cent said they “make time on most days to eliminate some tasks/meetings with limited productivity value” (up from 32 per cent before the course)

In closing

Although the benefits of workplace meditation are becoming clear for a growing number of organizations and leaders, more comprehensive and widespread integration is still needed. It is my hope that one day, mindfulness meditation will be as essential to the workplace as the technology that is creating a need for it. **R**

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