

**It can
transform
your relationship
with yourself,
with other
people, and with
the pressures
of the
modern world,
but...**

Is mindfulness good for business?

**By Jeremy Hunter
Illustrations by Daniel Carlsten**



Many of us know firsthand that the knowledge economy values how well we use our minds more than how many things we make each hour. It's ideas we need. Invention. Innovation. Creativity. That's the fuel of our rapidly changing global economy, yet the work world still largely operates on old notions of productivity: work faster, think faster, and use as many tech tools as you can to increase your efficiency. People skills, even in this age of "emotional intelligence," are more expected than cultivated. And the idea that the workplace could (and should) be a place where people flourish and develop sets heads nodding in agreement, but are we really making that happen?

After teaching executives in MBA programs about mindfulness for over a decade, I'm convinced that productive human action is about much more than getting stuff done. My students and I have tried to explore the underlying drivers of real productivity, which go way beyond better, faster information technology. It seems to us now that beyond cloud computers and brilliant smartphones, the secret to productivity lies within and between us. It's about a calmer, more open and undistracted mind, greater self-awareness, and an enhanced capacity for self-transformation—not to mention disciplined passions and stronger human relationships.

This isn't exactly a new idea. Long before it became a topic at sold-out Silicon Valley conferences, mindfulness was identified as a business need. It just didn't go by that name. The preeminent management guru Peter Drucker struck on mindfulness principles early in his career, and he put it this way in his 1968 book *The Age of Discontinuity*: "Trained perception and disciplined emotion are as pertinent to the ability to earn a livelihood as they are to the mature human personality." He believed that people who are able to see clearly gain an advantage over those unable to step out of outworn, habitual ways of perceiving—especially when faced with chaos.

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OVERHEARD AT THE OFFICE

"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."

Joe Ens, VP, marketing,
General Mills

Before they can manage anything, Drucker argued, "managers must learn to manage themselves."

Nevertheless, managerial and leadership education is still largely focused on the external, rational, and technical, while the myriad shifts and pressures of the 21st-century work world seem to cry out for a more rounded approach. Cultivating the perceptual, emotional, and interpersonal aspects of human beings—all key elements of mindfulness practice—strengthens capacities we need to live and work effectively. And far from being an exotic Asian import grafting itself onto the Western mindset, mindfulness fills a long-felt but little-understood gap in the education of executives and entrepreneurs.

What results when people practice mindfulness in cubicles and boardrooms? What happens, for example, if enhanced awareness causes them to question the very organizational culture they commute to each day? Is mindfulness at work actually transformative or merely palliative? Could newfound awareness cause some employees to chuck it all?

To search for answers beyond what I could find in my own backyard, I talked with some of those who are blazing this trail to a new way of building and doing business. Admittedly, as someone who teaches mindfulness to businesspeople, I have my biases, but if mindfulness means anything, it means examining our underlying assumptions and what we're doing as we're doing it. I want to do just that, and encourage others to do so as well. The very act of bringing mindfulness to business requires us to keep asking the question: Is mindfulness good for business?

Beyond outside-the-box thinking

Can a 99¢ cake mix catalyze profound personal transformation? It can if you're Janice Marturano. The once in-house attorney who steered General Mills' complex acquisition of rival Pillsbury found herself pushed past burnout when the three-month negotiation stretched into a brutal 18-month process. Deciding the fate of, among other things, boxed cake mixes meant that 10,000 jobs were on the line. Facing enormous pressure—her government counterpart had a nervous breakdown—Marturano also dealt with the death of both her parents during that time.

When the deal was finished, a depleted Marturano repaired to a leadership retreat led by Jon Kabat-Zinn, creator of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center and founder of the renowned Center for Mindfulness in Worcester, Massachusetts. The weeklong experience of resting, replenishing her strength, and cultivating greater →

Your Mind at Work

New Ways to Approach Those Niggling Challenges in the Office



Distracted & scattered

PRACTICE

Learn a practice where you follow a simple object (like your breath). The repeated returning to a focal point trains your attention.

BENEFIT

Focus. Your attention wavers less and you're not as easily pulled away by external distractions or internal chatter.



Annoyed by difficult colleagues, office politics, gossip

PRACTICE

Let others talk about themselves. Listen and consider what might cause them pain.

BENEFIT

Not as judgmental. You take more time to explore what might be causing other people pain and problems instead of assuming the worst.



Physically worn down by too much tension, rushing through meals, staring at screens

PRACTICE

Take a few minutes and let your attention scan your whole body from toe to head. Go breathe fresh air.

BENEFIT

Body awareness. You more often notice how you actually feel in your body and when it needs care.



Stuck: solution to a problem keeps evading you

PRACTICE

Sit quietly doing nothing for five minutes. Then as you contemplate the problem, imagine you're seeing it for the first time.

BENEFIT

Fresh eyes. Increased ability to let go of assumptions, expectations, and storylines and see things anew.



Frustrated with lack of progress in yourself or others

PRACTICE

Listen fully to a longer piece of music without doing anything else at all. This helps you appreciate rhythm, rather than trying to force things.

BENEFIT

Patience. You let things develop in their own time rather than always trying to push them.



self-awareness ended up becoming for this veteran corporate warrior “one of the top 10 hardest things I’ve done in my life.” It’s tough for active, achieving people to just sit quietly doing nothing and suspend their doubts that they’re just wasting time. It goes against what they’ve been taught and rewarded for. Yet Marturano came away transformed, sensing the possibility that mindfulness could be a key element in cultivating leaders.

While continuing her work as deputy general counsel for General Mills, Marturano accepted an invitation to join with Saki Santorelli, executive director of the Center for Mindfulness, to present programs in mindful leadership sponsored by the center. The avid response of leaders to a suite of mindfulness methodologies over several years caused Marturano to leave General Mills in January 2011 to operate the Institute for Mindful Leadership full-time as an independent project spearheaded by her.

“Leadership becomes more isolating the more senior you become,” says Marturano. “There are very few places where leaders have a safe environment to put it all down, listen to others, and explore fundamental and difficult questions.” In the institute’s programs, leaders cultivate awareness and learn to explore ways of bringing more space into a meeting, examine their own schedules and determine why they make the choices they do, and consider how to communicate effectively in the midst of chaos and how to navigate difficult conversations. Not least of all, they identify what their own leadership principles are.

With mindfulness, participants begin to uncover the workings of their own minds, seeing how the filters in their minds affect perceptions, decisions, and strategies. They begin to become more conscious of the preconceived notions and motivations—the storylines and tape loops—that walk in with them

as they enter a room. Learning to put aside these filters, they find themselves more open to others’ ideas and more willing to listen and learn. They become receptive to a greater set of possibilities. They not only think outside the box; at times they throw out the box altogether. Mindfulness fuels adaptation.

According to Marturano, a deeper shift also occurs. Participants “clearly and more consistently observe that we’re connected in a million ways to everything around us. We’re connected to people, to community, to nature.” During a leadership retreat, a “type A-plus” aerospace executive found himself walking outside at night without his BlackBerry. He happened to look up at the night sky. Stunned and awestruck, he realized he hadn’t seen the stars in years. He had been too busy to notice. The next morning he woke up wondering what else he had missed.

Let’s just do it and not tell anybody

Just as personal trials like Marturano’s Pillsbury saga can lead to transformation, challenging times can create openings for organizations to try something new. Harvard Pilgrim Healthcare, a Massachusetts-based insurance provider, had already been in receivership for five years when Tara Healey, an organizational development consultant and long-time meditator, and Tami Ireland, a like-minded vice-president, intuited that mindfulness would be helpful for the company’s struggling associates. They conspired to introduce it quietly and without fanfare. “Let’s just do it and not tell anybody,” Ireland said at the time.

Though Healey was afraid that employees would think of mindfulness as far out and flaky, the initial course turned out to be a big hit for the dozen people from across the organization who took part. “It was like when Sally Field won the Oscar. You liked this! You liked this meditation and mindfulness! Wow!” said Healey. The first dozen alums created a buzz that spread as far as the CEO’s executive assistant, who became a vocal supporter.

The pilot blossomed into Mind the Moment, a growing portfolio of programs offered to Harvard Pilgrim employees, the company’s clients, and other interested organizations. Now close to 30% of Harvard Pilgrim’s 1,200 employees have experienced mindfulness practice, and the programs have growing wait lists for enrollment. Healey is expanding her teaching staff to accommodate the increased demand.

In their in-house assessments, participants reported feeling more focused and less stressed out and overwhelmed. They also said they felt more →



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OVERHEARD AT THE OFFICE

“Mindfulness allows me to lead with much more openness to the entire situation as opposed to having a fixed view of the way things need to be. I’ve become more open to others’ ideas and more willing to critique my own actions and honestly assess their impact on others.”

*Karen Phipps, president,
Compusense*

Mindfulness Goes Corporate

Just a few of the American businesses that have included mindfulness training within their organizations

Target
Google
Sun Life Financial
Aetna International
Hearst Publications
eBay
General Mills
Twitter
Ford Motor Company
Cargill, Inc.
Genentech
Facebook
Kaiser Permanente
Compusense
Green Mountain Coffee Roasters
Plantronics

productive and energetic. Like Marturano, Healey says that participants see shifts within themselves and how they connect to colleagues and bosses. Difficult bosses will still be difficult, but mindfulness practice creates the ability to relate to them with new eyes and previously untapped skills. That employees can take seven-week classes during working hours is seen as a perk. Many appreciate the fact that this progressive and now financially robust organization is willing to invest in them as whole people and not simply as units of labor. Employers, take note.

Mind control?

Promise also brings potential peril. There are deeper questions about mindfulness at work that some employers are only beginning to consider. For one, some businesspeople think it's presumptuous busybody-ism for organizations to take such an overweening interest in the personal well-being of their employees. After all, it could easily become an invasion of privacy or overstepping the boundary between the personal and the professional. Maybe it's just a newfangled trick for getting people to think the way the company wants them to think.

Google is a pioneer in offering mindfulness and emotional intelligence training to its workers through the Search Inside Yourself program started by Chade-Meng Tan, author of the book of the same name. Rich Fernandez, Google's point man for employee well-being, including mindfulness programs, appreciates the concern that mindfulness training could be seen as overreaching. "You don't want to present your program as the be-all and end-all for all of life's challenges," he says. "You don't want to be the only place where people go for balancing their emotional health and well-

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OVERHEARD AT THE OFFICE

"When you're in tech and you're running from meeting to meeting and driving across town rushing to another meeting, it's easy to lose track of yourself. I need a reminder to take a moment and take a breath."

Kevin Rose, general partner, Google Ventures; heard at a Wisdom 2.0 Conference

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OVERHEARD AT THE OFFICE

“... if you're still looking for a business case to justify spending time meditating, try this one: Meditation makes you more productive.... Meditation gives you practice having power over your urges so you can make intentional choices about which to follow and which to let pass.”

Peter Bregman, author of 18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done, writing in the Harvard Business Review blog

being. This is why we make programs available but we don't make them mandatory. People must have the space to choose.”

And then there's the possibility that enhanced awareness may result in a disconnect between personal and organizational values. If that happens, of course, an employee might simply leave to find a better fit. On the other hand, if an organization can work creatively with the questions that increased personal awareness can churn up, that could be a great asset. For Fernandez, mindfulness as an organizational way of life has become an imperative. “To be a truly enduring company, to succeed in complex and rapidly changing environments, people need to take on many perspectives,” he says. “You have to have multiple world-changing insights and innovations on a sustained basis. So you need to have a set of practices that renews and bolsters you throughout that journey.” In his view, organizations that can bake in mindfulness as a deep value stand a higher likelihood of long-term success.

A disruptive technology

There is a more severe critique, too. Several of the people I talked to acknowledge that “mindfulness” can and has been offered in such a superficial way that it's no longer truly mindfulness. It can turn into a tool to teach people to cope while they continue on the same old course that caused the problems they sought meditation to address in the first place. Of course, meditation and related practices aren't absolute goods. It depends on the context and the intentions of those involved. After all, historical prec-

edent exists of meditation being used for malevolent ends. One example is the Japanese militarist regime during the Second World War, when meditation played a role in training soldiers and fighter pilots to be more ruthless.

Surely, too, a practice you can do by yourself to achieve calm will always run the risk of cultivating and even glorifying self-involvement. All the fellow teachers I spoke with emphasized that if mindfulness doesn't ultimately cultivate greater awareness of connectedness—to others, to the community, to a larger environment—it isn't the genuine article. If people pay attention to their mind, body, and emotions, they begin to approach the world with more openness and inquisitiveness. Quite often that touches off deeper values, such as concern for others and the world at large.

A decade ago, Mirabai Bush, founding director of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, introduced a mindfulness program at Monsanto, a company that had been widely criticized for perpetuating shortsighted and damaging agricultural practices. At a corporate retreat, a top scientist approached her after a session and said, “I realized that we're creating products that kill life. We should be creating products that support life.” It's a long journey from a personal insight like that to large-scale change, but at least we can say that mindfulness was starting to serve as a disruptive technology within the company.

Creative disruption could be a very good thing to counteract all the destructive disruption we've encountered in recent times. The world financial meltdown in late 2008, occasioned by rampant groupthink on Wall Street and in other financial capitals, sent shockwaves that still reverberate in our everyday lives. The actions of the traders could hardly be called mindful.

Robert Chender, who started the New York City Bar Association Contemplative Lawyer Group, trains lawyers and investment managers in meditation. He thinks there's a real role for mindfulness on Wall Street. “It starts,” he says, “with an understanding of cause and effect. How does my action actually affect not only me, not only the guy I'm working with, but how does it affect things in general?”

Real mindfulness can give us a greater appreciation of interdependence, Chender says, and that's sorely needed in Wall Street, not to say the world at large. “The Iroquois had a rule about making decisions for the seventh generation. We're not even making decisions for *this* generation. We're making decisions for *me*.”

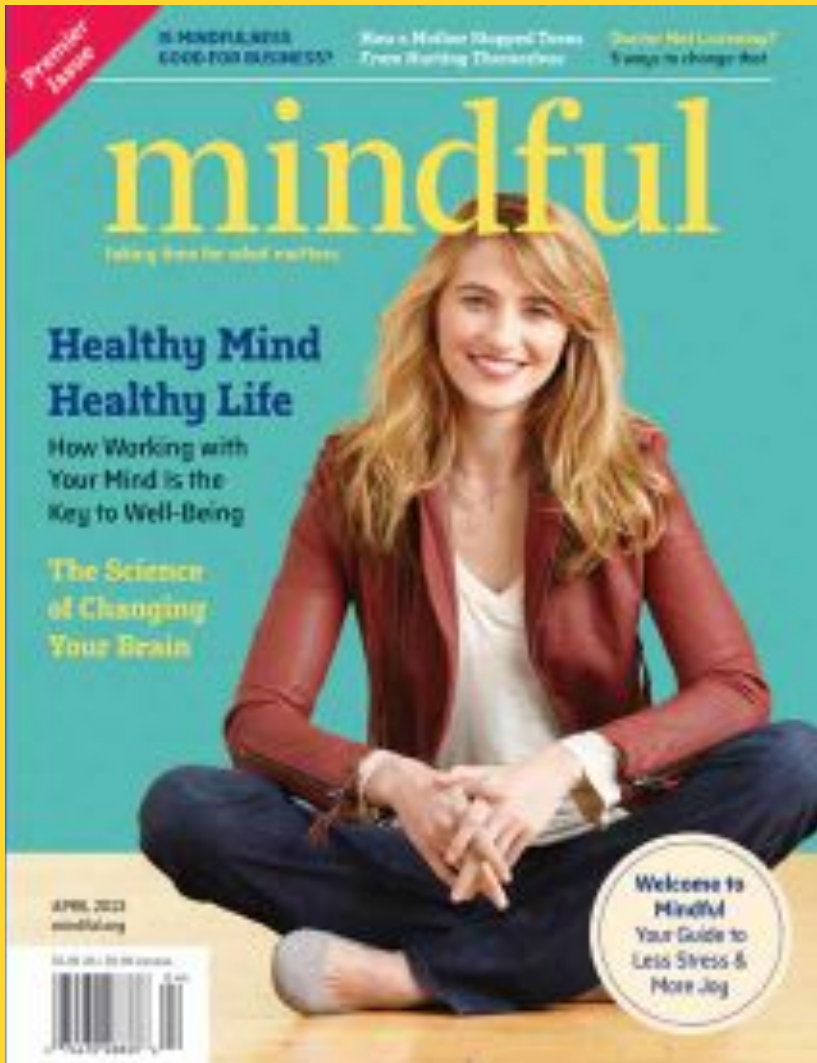
“There are always going to be people who are threatened by looking more deeply at our motivations and connections to others, but it seems obvious that business needs to take into account a bigger view of cause and effect, of interdependence.” ●

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