Mindfulness Isn’t Just a Trend, It’s Key to Being a Better Leader

The shift toward achieving mindfulness is putting leaders in a better place to run their companies.

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Leaders tend to spread themselves thin. They want to have a hand in every aspect of their business. Yet, while some may see this tendency as dedication, in reality, it pulls leaders’ focus in too many directions.

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To minimize the problem, some leaders are looking for a way to keep themselves rooted in the present. And the resulting efforts by some to achieve mindfulness — in the workplace as well as in people’s personal lives — is putting leaders in a better place to run their companies.

While conducting research for their book, *The Mind of the Leader,* Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter interviewed more than 1,000 leaders and found that practicing mindfulness, meaning a focus on the present, achieved by meditation and other techniques, helped those leaders engage with their employees, create better connections and improve company performance.

“Mindfulness is a trainable skill,” Hougaard told me via

email. “Neuroscientists have demonstrated that we can train our mind to be more focused [by] going to the ‘mental gym’ and managing how we use our attention.”

Fortunately, for those unfamiliar with mindfulness, achieving this goal is easy. Here are four useful steps:

1. Break patterns.

Multitasking. Back-to-back meetings. Micromanaging. These are all habits leaders create because they *think* they increase productivity. But these practices actually disconnect leaders from the present.

“So many leaders today are stuck in habitual patterns of how they have worked in the past or how they have accepted ways of working that make them busy but not effective,” Hougard’s fellow author Jacqueline Carter said by email. “When they start to pay more attention to their mind and realize they have the ability to be more effective in how they manage their mind, they can bring more focus, clarity and a sense of ease into even the busiest of days.”

Instead, leaders should examine their work habits. They should think about how processes develop and consider whether newer, more mindful techniques exist.

For example, many leaders have found success using block-scheduling. This entails dedicating two-hour time blocks to one task. Whether that task might be answering emails or holding meetings on the progress of a project, block-scheduling helps leaders to focus on one thing at a time. When the scheduled time block is over, the leader shifts to a new task. Even if something doesn’t get finished, containing a particular responsibility within a time frame helps leaders stay focused.

2. Narrow the scope.

Nowadays, people are surrounded by details and data. But trying to absorb everything leads to important facts being overlooked. Being mindful helps entrepreneurs see the whole picture in front of them.

Kevin Wijayawickrama had something interesting to say on this subject. Wijayawickrama is the managing principal for the auditing and tax service company Deloitte; he's based in Irvine, Calif. Wijayawickrama described how he met with an executive there to talk about their leadership styles.

Wijayawickrama said he went into the meeting with his entire focus on the leader before him. This allowed him to look beyond the executive's words and assess the executive's tone and body language.

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"I discovered that [the executive wasn't] worried about the professional role, but rather about how to flex and transform [his/her] personal leadership style in a new environment," Wijayawickrama said in an email. "You can't empathize with another person and understand what they're looking for if you don't take time to share these kinds of meaningful – and mindful – moments."

So, always acknowledge when distractions pop up. Stop and take a step back. Ask people to repeat what they just said, as a way to refocus and truly absorb all details of the situation.

3. Don't work just for the sake of working.

Taking time to recharge contributes in a big way to productivity. But all too often, leaders plan meetings and

projects just to have something to do. Without a clear purpose, leaders and employees are unable to give their full focus.

Peter Strauss, founder and CEO of Hilton Head Island, S.C.-based Hamilton Captive Management, realized his team was having weekly meetings just to have them. Since nothing was getting accomplished, Strauss eventually traded the meetings' serious purpose for fun activities. This has allowed him and his employees to relax when there is time, and to focus when it's necessary.

"We have much less turnover," Strauss reported via email. "We are more successful when we are more mindful, less focused on our bottom line and more focused on where we are heading."

So, replace busy work with a chance to relax. If your team has accomplished a goal ahead of schedule or there are no updates to discuss, have fun. Meditate or have a team movie night so everyone is refreshed for the next challenge.

4. Check your ego at the door.

Egos tend to cloud the mind. Instead of focusing on what your team needs, leaders want the company to succeed so it reflects well on them. But this blinds employers to what employees need.

"Compassion is the quality of having positive intentions for others," Hougaard said. "Compassion in your leadership will make your people know you have their back. This, in turn, leads to higher engagement, loyalty and performance."

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To lead with compassion, entrepreneurs need to get out of their own way. They should focus on the present and before making a decision, take time to observe. What will this choice

change? How does it help the team? What consequences are possible? Taking a moment to pause will help leaders be more mindful of their actions and decisions.

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