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WORKPLACE WISDOM

Mindfulness in Corporate Life

by April Thompson

The workplace can be filled with stress, egos and distractions that challenge the productive and happy atmosphere we desire. Both employees and employers are adopting mindfulness to help cope and transform both themselves and their work environment.

Rooted in Eastern philosophies like Buddhism, most workplace mindfulness programs have stripped the techniques to a secular form more

appealing to skeptics or adherents of other religions. The key practice—simply known as “sitting” or meditation—involves focusing our attention on our thoughts, breathing, emotions or bodily sensations for a set time period, while the term mindfulness refers to the ability to be aware of the present moment, whether meditating or in a business meeting.

While Fortune 500 companies like Procter & Gamble, Aetna and General

Mills have instituted formal mindfulness programs, Michael Carroll, meditation teacher, executive coach and the author of *Awake at Work*, says that the mindfulness revolution has been largely seeded from the ground up. It’s emerged through people exploring the practices in their personal lives, and then bringing them to work.

Personal and Professional Benefits

Jacqueline Gallo, operational excellence manager for Whitcraft Group, a manufacturing plant in Eastford, Connecticut, discovered meditation 12 years ago while seeking solace during a traumatic time. Today, Gallo does three short sits a week and occasionally participates in 10-day retreats. Whitcraft doesn’t offer meditation to employees, but Gallo says mindfulness enables her to be available to her staff and solve problems without getting “swept off my feet so easily by all the desires, agendas and emotions confronted at work.”

Carroll cautions that it’s not about trying to eliminate our own or others’ emotional agendas or personal biases at work; rather, individuals use mindfulness to become more conscious of and relaxed about them. “Meditation helps develop agility in viewing... to self-regulate, drop fixed mindsets, become self-aware,” explains Carroll, who has coached university presidents, CEOs and nonprofit executives in mindful leadership techniques. “You learn things from a competitor’s perspective or pick up on social cues you may miss if you instead had a fixed lens on a situation.”

Corporate Acceptance

While meditation may be on the upswing in the workplace, it was a battle to legitimize it, according to Tara Healey, program director for mindfulness-based learning at Harvard Pilgrim Health Care (HPHC). A longtime meditation practitioner, Healey started the Mind the Moment program a decade ago while serving as an organizational capacity building

consultant. Surveys had shown that employees were overwhelmed and dissatisfied, but lacked the skills to rectify their situation.

“The leadership said, ‘Great, let’s do it, but not tell anyone,’” relates Healey. She notes that meditation, a core component of her multifaceted mindfulness course covering everything from workplace stress to mindful listening, wasn’t accepted in the workplace at that point.

Today, 30 percent of her company’s 1,050 employees have completed a six-week class introducing them to the power of mindfulness; some go on to participate in a guided monthly group meditation practice or use company meditation rooms for individual practice. The health services company also offers the course to its member companies throughout New England. To date, more than 12,350 people in 174 companies have participated, encompassing varied fields from higher education and health to finance

and technology. A survey of employees showed that initially 99 percent felt it was a good use of their time; another taken six months later found that 87 percent were still using the techniques.

HPHC informatics analyst Stephanie Oddleifson, who took the course nearly 10 years ago, says it transformed her way of thinking and behaving in the workplace and furnished a set of practices she uses every day. In times of conflict, “I was so quick to make up stories in my head and jump to conclusions previously,” she says. “Now I’m able to pause before responding and observe my thoughts without getting caught up in them. I can diffuse tense situations with humor and not take things personally.”

Additional research substantiates the anecdotal evidence for meditation’s workplace benefits. In 2015, scientists from Canada’s University of British Columbia and Germany’s Chemnitz University of Technology compiled data from 20-plus neurology studies,

finding significant correlations between meditation and areas of the brain related to capacities for self-regulation, introspection and complex thinking. A Rice University study specifically found a positive relationship between workplace mindfulness, job performance and employee retention.

While workplace mindfulness programs vary and may incorporate helpful talks, encouraging readings and group discussions, Healey and Carroll both caution that reading or talking about mindfulness or meditation is no substitute for the practice itself, which many find challenging. “You won’t taste the benefits just reading about it,” remarks Healey. “The practice will come into play come showtime.”

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Joy is the simplest form of gratitude.

– KARL BARTH
