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Tapping into the power of mindfulness

Companies are embracing meditation to train better leaders, one breath at a time

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As business classes get underway at the Drucker School of Management at Claremont Graduate University, MBA students open their laptops and professors fire up PowerPoint presentations in many classrooms.

In the Executive Mind class, however, professor Jeremy Hunter pulls out decidedly different tools: a brass singing bowl and leather-wrapped mallet.

The chimes from three strikes on the bowl quiet the dozen or so students, who have put away smartphones and other devices. They close their eyes. Hunter leads them through a 15-minute meditation focused on body sensations, gently guiding them to rest their wandering attention on specific spots, such as the tips of their noses.

This might seem like an awfully touchy-feely way to train future corporate executives. But all manner of research supports the idea that mindfulness — paying attention to what's happening in the present moment — is essential to becoming an effective leader. Good decision making often comes down to mustering focus, clarity and calm.

That's not easy in a world of multi-tasking, global supply chains, shorter product cycles and general information overload. Which is why the notion that businesspeople can develop their attention skills, just as they'd learn accounting or finance, is catching on. Companies including Google Inc. and General Mills Inc. are embracing mindfulness training with the aim of making their workforces less reactive, more resilient — even more creative.

"It's like upgrading human ability," said Hunter, an assistant professor of practice at Drucker.

The goal of his Executive Mind class is to teach students to pay attention — to what's happening around them as well as to emotions arising within them — so that they can react more skillfully in any situation. That awareness can help budding managers motivate difficult employees and tackle work challenges without becoming scattered, frustrated or worn down.

"Stress reduction is important, but the real value comes in the ability to step out of whatever reaction you're having — which is usually habitual or automatic — so you can do something different," instructor Hunter said. "That happens for individuals, for teams, and it can happen at a company."

Silicon Valley has been an early adopter. The late Steve Jobs credited his early instruction in Zen meditation for his legendary ability to tune out distractions when he was running Apple, according to Walter Isaacson's biography.

Google has offered mindfulness training to its employees for about four years. The flagship program is a seven-week course called Search Inside Yourself. A mash-up of meditation and neuroscience, it aims to help Google's brainy overachievers learn to calm their minds on demand and build inner joy while succeeding at work.

It's the kind of thing you'd expect data-driven geeks to scoff at; instead they're eating it up. The class has a 500-employee waiting list, says Google senior people development lead Rich Fernandez.

And Chade-Meng Tan, the Google engineer who developed the program, has become something of a rock star in mindfulness circles. Now semi-retired and enjoying the job title of "Jolly Good Fellow" at Google, he has founded a nonprofit institute to teach mindful leadership at other companies. His book "Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (and World Peace)" was published last year and became a bestseller.

Fernandez, who holds advanced degrees in organizational and counseling psychology, says he routinely tells people that mindfulness practice is the biggest "game changer" he's seen to help employees thrive in the company's hard-charging culture.

"The velocity and scope of the work at Google is so great that unless you have a set effective practice to ground you and help you sustain your focus, energy and productivity, it's potentially a difficult environment to maintain," he said.

Google also has other in-house meditation and mindfulness classes, including one named Neural Self-Hacking and another called Software Engineering of the Mind. Meditation spaces are available all over the company's Mountain View campus.

In Minneapolis, food giant General Mills Inc. grew a mindfulness program from the grass roots, starting with Janice Marturano, who was general counsel and vice president for public responsibility. She taught 13 people, and interest spread like a virus. Now, more than 450 people have been trained.

Many employees report positive changes in how they focus in the office. Vikram Ghosh said the classes helped him let go of mental chatter about the past and future and concentrate on the task in front of him. In long meetings, his mind used to wander, causing him to miss key things that were said or decided.

"The biggest difference is I can be more present. I'm not carrying the previous meeting into this one," said Ghosh, who now works at Cargill Inc. in Minneapolis as a bakery technology leader.

Marturano, who left General Mills in 2011 to found the New Jersey-based Institute for Mindful Leadership, said the concept of mind fitness is catching on. Her workshop last month at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, drew an overflow crowd.

"There is no way for us to expect the kind of excellence and performance that we need to stay ahead of the competition and be innovative without fully training the capacity of our mind," she said.

Although meditation has ancient roots, modern scientific research on its effects has mushroomed over the last decade. There are now hundreds of published studies showing that the adult brain is actually quite malleable and can be rewired for more happiness and calm.

Research on the brains of meditators has documented neuron growth in the hippocampus — which is involved in learning, memory and emotional control — and the right anterior insula, believed to be involved in awareness. Studies using functional MRIs have recorded change in other parts of the brain as well after just eight weekly mindfulness classes and daily practice averaging just 27 minutes.

That's important, because many scientists have concluded that our brains are largely wired to avoid danger. So a scolding by the boss or getting passed over for a promotion triggers parts of the brain that give rise to fear and anger. Getting to the good stuff like creativity, empathy and teamwork requires engaging other parts of the brain, but that can happen only if employees feel secure.

Juniper Networks Inc., the Sunnyvale, Calif.-based networking and infrastructure company, used that principle to redesign the most fraught boss-employee interaction: the annual performance review.

The typical review just doles out criticism, and that triggers the limbic system, the set of brain structures that deals with emotions. It was as if the company was conducting an annual brain shut-down by making everyone so emotional, said Greg Pryor, Juniper's vice president of leadership and talent matters.

So Juniper tried something new. Among other changes, supervisors began each session with a question like: "How do you think this year went?" That was deliberate: In answering a question, the employee's brain activity shifts to the prefrontal cortex, which is the lobe that houses judgment, as well as morality, character and ambition.

"If you literally start with a question, it takes people out of their ability to process fear, because people generally can't think and process fear at the same time," Pryor explained.

Juniper saw positive feedback immediately: 82% of the employees rated this new "conversation day" format helpful or very helpful — a big jump.

Even though mindfulness has become about as secularized as yoga, there is still the perception of any meditation as an Eastern spiritual practice. Claremont's Hunter, on the other hand, views it as a natural extension of management guru Peter Drucker's admonition that before they can manage anything else, "managers must learn to manage themselves."

"This isn't solely a Buddhist idea," Hunter said. "Adam Smith emphasized almost the same idea in 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments.' He called it 'the impartial spectator,' this capacity to see yourself in a dispassionate and clear way. So [mindfulness] is not just some foreign, exotic import. This is part of our Western philosophical tradition."

The benefits are obvious to anyone who's ever worked in an office: a boss who keeps an eye on the big picture and a cool head in a crisis.

Cesar Quebral, who takes evening and weekend classes at Drucker as part of its Executive MBA program, said meditation has helped him on the job. Quebral, 41, is a group technology manager at Western Asset Management, a Pasadena firm that manages money for individuals and institutional investors. If the electronic trading systems he manages fail, literally billions are at stake. Every second counts.

"The pressure is really high," he said. But Quebral said the mindfulness skills he's learned through the Executive Mind class have helped him stay centered and focused when things go wrong. As a result, he said, he can arrive at "a better, rational decision rather than make quick decisions that might cost the company money or hurt someone."

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