Mindfulness in the American workplace – is it the key to better, happier employees?

Why employee development programs should include mindfulness training

Over the last two decades, professionals in a variety of fields – from healthcare to education, from the military to businesses such as Facebook and Google – are recognizing the benefits of practicing mindfulness. But what are those benefits, and why, if you haven’t already, might you want to consider bringing mindfulness to your company?

Beyond productivity

Growing evidence affirms that mindfulness – and meditation, which helps nurture one’s ability to be mindful – increases productivity and improves health.

Aetna crunched the numbers in 2015 and reported that after employees completed mindfulness training, their productivity increased at an annual rate worth $3,000 per employee, while health costs decreased by $2,000 per year per person.

Various studies have shown that mindfulness increases people’s ability to pay attention and improves sleep. Those two benefits alone would likely cut down on the number of mistakes people make on the job, increase workplace engagement, possibly increase innovative observation, and improve health (sleep is important). But there’s more…

DNA and addressing stress

Most people associate mindfulness with reduced stress, and we all know too much stress is bad for us. However, the positive effects of mindfulness and meditation go beyond the common understanding of the benefits of less stress. Mindfulness has also been shown to boost the immune system, speed the healing of psoriasis, and possibly even increase lifespan.

From a clinical perspective, here’s the logic: telomeres are parts of DNA that help cells regenerate. Over time, telomeres naturally get smaller. According to Rina Deshpande (2015), the Clinical Research Coordinator for Dr. Sara Lazar at Harvard Medical School, “The shorter the length of our telomeres, the more susceptible our cells are to dying and the more susceptible we are to disease, as we get older.” A 2013 study suggests that for people who meditate, telomeres appear to shorten less quickly than the telomeres of people who do not meditate, potentially making it possible for them to live longer than they would have if they hadn’t practiced meditation regularly.

“Accomplishing” mindfulness

Mindfulness is not something one “achieves” in the traditional sense, such as how you might try to improve your baseball swing by hitting the batting cages every day until, one day, you are ready to try out for the Boston Red Sox. If we were to try to reduce our stress when we meditated, we might make it worse. For instance, we might get in a kind of battle with ourselves – trying to push away uncomfortable thoughts and emotions – which would likely only increase the amount of tension we are experiencing. Instead, mindfulness is a way of being, of noticing
and accepting what we are experiencing without trying to push it away but also without fixating on it in ways that can lead to unproductive rumination and catastrophizing:

“Why did that happen?”

“I can’t believe he said that!”

“Now the project is going to be late”… “we’re going to lose that client”…

”I’ll be lucky if I even have my job when all of this is through!”

Those kinds of thoughts can distract us and prohibit us from managing challenging situations effectively. But being present with uncomfortable experiences without clouding them with such rumination allows us to see what is happening more clearly. We can learn to accept unpleasant, unpredicted experiences more quickly, so we can move on the next steps of refocusing and planning.

Mindfulness also helps us to notice our unproductive habits, set an intention to behave differently next time, and “start again” (two key words that meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg emphasizes in her instructions).

**Happy inside and out**

A recent study conducted on the Communicating Mindfully course I developed, which is taught at NHTI – Concord’s Community College, found a significant correlation between increases in mindfulness and increases in aspects of emotion regulation. Participants’ communication skills and emotional intelligence also improved.

It gets better. Mindfulness makes it easier to embrace change and accept the discomfort of unproductive habits when they arise, to take risks of stepping out of familiar patterns, and to let go of unproductive self-judgment if and when we fall back on those patterns. That kind of discipline and clarity naturally extends beyond self-awareness to an awareness of how others operate. We’re all human beings, after all. As a result, we begin to experience more empathy, less judgment of others, and less reactivity. That makes for productive interactions with clients and team members. It also makes for a more satisfying life.

**Learn more at the Mindfulness in Society Conference on September 8**

Attend a day-long conference on Mindfulness in Society on Saturday, September 8, 2018 at NHTI in Concord, NH. Speakers include U.S. Congressman Tim Ryan, businessman Charlie Hartwell, meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg, and more. Learn more at [https://www.nhti.edu/community-visitors/mindfulness-society](https://www.nhti.edu/community-visitors/mindfulness-society).

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