

Mindfulness:

Multiply Productivity Through Undivided Attention

Mindfulness can empower you to replace knee-jerk reactions with more conscious — and ultimately more efficient — behaviour.

By Alberto Ribera and J.L. Guillén

GENERAL MILLS IS NOT JUST A LARGE NORTH AMERICAN food corporation with more than 41,000 employees, \$17 billion in net sales and over 100 brands under its umbrella. It is also a pioneer in executive education and leadership training, thanks in part to its 2006 adoption of a ground-breaking program aimed at cultivating ‘mindfulness’ — a state of heightened awareness and attention — in its workforce.

After participating in the company’s mindfulness training programs, employees testify to enhanced listening capacity, clearer decision making and higher productivity. Other leading companies have since launched similar programs, including **Google, Procter & Gamble, Apple, Yahoo!** and **Unilever**. Meanwhile, the latest research in the fields of Psychology, Neuroscience and Management has begun to lend scientific credence

to the notion of mindfulness, which until recently was derided by many as pseudo-religious mumbo jumbo.

In this article, we will explain how mindfulness can strengthen a broad set of executive functions to boost productivity, improve decision-making and enhance well-being, based on research and coaching experiences we have undertaken in designing and delivering programs for multinational corporations.

The Antidote to Attention Deficit

In this age of multitasking, instant messaging and constant connectivity, the fact that people are finding it increasingly difficult to focus their attention on one thing at a time hardly comes as a surprise. Every day we are bombarded with stimuli, distractions,

The capacity to focus your attention substantially improves your emotional balance, so that you can avoid impulsive responses.

interruptions and growing pressure to do more with less, with negative repercussions on our productivity and well-being. The result: disordered minds, reactive behaviour and unduly high levels of stress and anxiety.

We recently surveyed 1,000 executives to measure the impact of this attention deficit on workplace performance. We used two recognized temperament scales — ‘exploratory excitability’ and ‘impulsiveness’ — both of which are related to hyperactivity, disorderliness, a propensity to seek out novel experiences and an intolerance for monotony and routine. In the first test, 72 per cent of participants exhibited *high* or *very high* levels of ‘exploratory excitement’, suggesting heightened levels of novelty-seeking behaviour. In the second test, 45 per cent showed *high* or *very high* levels of ‘impulsiveness’, implying a lack of control of automatic responses and an unwillingness to focus in-depth on issues at hand.

Given such findings, any tool or practice that serves to relieve mental overload and helps people devote their full concentration to the task before them seems warranted. This is exactly what mindfulness aims to do: it helps you stop functioning on autopilot and engage more consciously and proactively in your work. In addition to giving your full attention to the present moment, acting deliberately or mindfully also helps you detach yourself, making you less prone to emotional prejudices and whims.

Our ability to manage external stimuli and our response to them depends on the degree to which we allot our attention. Mindfulness allows us to develop a broad set of cognitive and executive functions, raises self-awareness levels and facilitates emotional regulation, empowering individuals to substitute knee-jerk reactions with more conscious—and ultimately more efficient behaviour. It is worth underscoring the difference between mindfulness as a technique and mindfulness as a state of mind: the former is just a means, but it is important to keep the latter — the true end — in sight.

‘Cultivating our attention’ is one of the key aspects of practicing mindfulness. The good news is, we can train our minds to do this, just as we firm our muscles when we do physical exercise. As psychologist **Daniel Goleman** explains, “Attention is a mental muscle, and can be strengthened with the right practice. The basic move to enhance concentration in the mental gym: put your focus on a chosen target, like your breath. When it wanders away (and it will), notice that your mind has wandered. This requires

mindfulness—the ability to observe our thoughts without getting caught up in them. Then bring your attention back to your breath. That’s the mental equivalent of a weightlifting rep.”

The effort we make to refocus our attention on what is most relevant has a reward: in sharpening our mind, we are effectively helping it to rest. There are a variety of techniques to achieve this state of sharpened attention and full awareness, but all have one thing in common: the establishment of an ‘anchoring point’ to return to when your attention begins to wander.

An ideal starting point is the most internationally-renowned mindfulness program, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). First developed in the 1970s by Dr. **Jon Kabat-Zinn** of the University of Massachusetts, MBSR was initially tested in a clinical setting and later applied to the real world of business. Its positive effects on the brain — the general feeling of well-being and effective management of emotions and impulses — have been rigorously evaluated in multiple studies and are extensively documented.

To achieve the desired results, the practice of mindfulness must conform to the following requirements:

- **Non-judgmental observation:** being able to step back from your emotions in order to be free from distorted judgments;
- **Renewed attention:** deactivating the autopilot response so as not to be dulled by routine;
- **Anchored to the present:** living and embracing each moment in a fully conscious way; and
- **Equanimity and composure:** experiencing emotions, but without getting carried away by them.

Reaping the Personal Benefits

The habitual and sustained practice of mindfulness has a notable impact at the neural level. The plasticity of the brain makes it possible to alter its structure and functions. Mental training can alter the patterns of activity, modifying or deactivating established neural connections and allowing for the creation of new ones. Research points to a host of positive effects this can have in three areas.

COGNITIVE EFFECTS. A broad body of research shows that mindfulness enhances attention, memory and a number of executive functions. Some models hold that attention involves three neural networks with distinct functions: alertness, orientation and

conflict management. Mindfulness helps to develop all three by forcing us to focus our attention on just one element. It does this by making us avoid analyzing or judging our thoughts, sensations or feelings, and returning our attention to our breathing each time an unwanted stimulus intrudes on our thought process, making our minds wander. It also significantly improves ‘working memory’, which is necessary to keep valuable information in mind as we perform complex functions such as understanding, learning and deliberating. As for executive functions — by which we must regulate thoughts in order to confront problems, strategize, form concepts and make decisions—mindfulness notably improves cognitive flexibility, allowing us to better navigate uncharted waters.

PSYCHOSOMATIC EFFECTS. Mindfulness has a positive influence on both physical and mental well-being. Of particular note is its impact on one’s capacity to manage stress. Stress not only undermines our ability to work, it can also be extremely costly for organizations in terms of health care, sick leave, absenteeism and staff turnover. Most stress management and prevention methods focus on external factors, leading companies to try to redesign their workplace environment and dynamics. Mindfulness, by contrast, seeks to change not the reality itself, but the way in which the individual *perceives* and *experiences* it. It also reduces the brain’s levels of cortisol, a hormone related to stress and makes it easier to concentrate, and several studies have shown that it can relieve insomnia and boost the immune system.

EMOTIONAL EFFECTS. The capacity to develop and focus your attention substantially improves your emotional balance, so that you can avoid impulsive responses. **Richard Davidson**, a professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a leading expert in the field of mindfulness, has found that cultivating full attention and a conscious response has a direct, positive impact on six key emotional dimensions:

- **Resilience:** rapid recovery in the face of negative life events;
- **Outlook:** commitment, optimism and sustained energy levels, even in difficult circumstances;
- **Social intuition:** empathy, compassion and emotional intelligence in social situations;
- **Self-awareness:** knowledge of your own feelings and emotions;

- **Context sensitivity:** knowing how to interpret the external environment and acting accordingly; and
- **Attention:** maintaining focus, awareness and feelings of control, even in adverse situations.

Positive Effects in the Workplace

The above effects transcend the individual and can benefit the entire organization by raising productivity, enhancing decision-making, boosting creativity and improving social relations and the workplace atmosphere. Let’s examine each in turn.

PRODUCTIVITY. Mindfulness raises productivity in a number of ways. Full attention in the present moment leads to a state of improved concentration, allows practitioners to reduce the extent and frequency of their mind wandering, and enables them to maintain focus for longer periods of time. These effects are especially notable in workplaces where multitasking is the norm. Constantly shifting your attention between multiple tasks has been shown to slow down performance and contributes to making more mistakes.

A recent article in the *Financial Times* quoted several high-profile executives from the world of finance extolling the benefits of mindfulness practices, including **Philipp Hildebrand**, vice chair of **BlackRock** and a former head of the **Swiss National Bank**, who said, “In a world of screens, texts, cell phones — information all over you — spending 20 minutes purposefully *not thinking about anything* is a pause that refreshes. In some ways in the financial world, it is a must.”

Not letting yourself be ruled by every sensation, emotion or feeling that wells up in the course of a day saves valuable time and energy. Why? Because it avoids unhealthy rumination — chewing on things that perturb you over and over. By not dwelling on things, you reduce your levels of emotional fatigue, which means you can devote more of your energy towards performance, rather than sweating the small stuff.

Collectively, adopting a positive outlook, refusing to react automatically, and consciously choosing to accept situations strengthen resilience, which translates into a greater capacity to adapt to challenges as well as recover more swiftly when things don’t go as planned. Furthermore, employees who are able to immerse themselves completely in their work activities display more commitment and willingness to contribute to the productivity of the organization. As such, mindfulness positively

influences three aspects of productivity: vigour, dedication and loyalty.

The productivity benefits of running a workplace mindfulness program have been demonstrated by a number of organizations. In the case of General Mills, 83 per cent of those who participated in its Mindful Leadership at Work course said they subsequently took time each day to optimize their personal productivity, compared with 23 per cent who said they did so before the course. In addition, the number of people who made a conscious effort to eliminate tasks or meetings with little productive value increased from 32 to 82 per cent.

DECISION MAKING. While we like to think that organizational decision-making is a rational process, in reality we know that our

thinking and reasoning are unavoidably shaped by unconscious, automatic impulses and biases. This is not always a bad thing: when time is of the essence, such impulses allow us to act quickly, without taxing our cognitive abilities and resources. However, if cognitive shortcuts become the norm, this can lead us to act impulsively, neglect important details and ignore alternative ways of approaching a particular situation.

With a mindful attitude, we broaden our field of vision and are able to identify and adopt alternative ways of doing things. With our autopilot deactivated, our decision-making processes gain in terms of perspective and scope. This is particularly relevant to dynamic, fast-changing environments, where uncertainty rules. Some suggest that mindfulness can also boost ethical decision-making. This is not to say that devoting your

Go With the Flow: Finding Joy in Your Work

Renowned Psychology and Management Professor **Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi** coined the term 'flow' to describe the overwhelming pleasure that people experience when they fully immerse themselves in a task they enjoy. Though it is frequently applied to people engaged in creative or sporting pursuits, many people, regardless of their occupation, describe peak moments when their work just seems to flow effortlessly — when their actions and consciousness are perfectly aligned.

The benefits of flow are immediate and clear. At the individual level, they include better performance, increased motivation and a positive spirit. At the corporate level, this positive attitude and maximum commitment translate into a collective willingness to work together for organizational success. Flow starts with individuals empowered to boost their own effectiveness and with managers offering helpful suggestions and constructive criticism. Everyone supports each other so that the organization performs at its best.

Flow encompasses eight dimensions, but we advise managers to take special note of the first three, as these are considered prerequisites for flow in the workplace.

Balance challenges with skills. This is the first rule of flow: people must have a reasonable chance of accomplishing the tasks set before them. Of course, the tasks should present varying degrees of complexity, so there is room for the person's skill levels to be elevated. Each person's outlook will condition the extent to which a particular activity is found to be gratifying.

Set clear goals. People won't be able to immerse themselves in an activity if they don't know which task to undertake. Objectives must be clear, for both the short and long term. Too often, people miss the opportunity to experience 'the moment' because their focus is on an end goal at some distant point in the future, instead of enjoying the process of getting there.

Give immediate feedback. Commitment comes in large part from a sense that what we are doing has some larger purpose and is of value to the rest of the organization. This means that for people to devote themselves to an activity, they need to know if they are performing well or not. Feedback can come from colleagues, supervisors or clients — in tandem with our own personal benchmarks set for ourselves.

When challenges and skills are well aligned, goals are clear and feedback is relevant, we are ready to experience the remaining five dimensions of flow, summarized below.

Intense concentration. Our mind is orderly and fully focused on a task at hand.

Effortlessness. On entering a deep state of concentration on the task, we do it almost without effort, pressure or tension.

Control. We have the feeling of controlling the activity and the fear of failure disappears, giving way to a feeling of empowerment.

Loss of self. There is no longer any room in the consciousness for insecurity or frustration stemming from social comparison; we become our stronger selves.

No sense of time. When we surrender our physical and mental being to the moment, time either flies or seems plentiful. Once you finish the task, you discover the final dimension of flow: a profound sense of fulfillment and achievement that is a reward in itself; and a desire to do it all over again.

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full attention necessarily makes you more ethical; however, it does free up the mental space needed to ensure that decisions are approached from all angles — including an ethical one.

Returning to the General Mills survey, 80 per cent of the participants in the company's course on Cultivating Leadership Presence reported a positive change in their ability to make better decisions with more clarity, and another 89 per cent noticed an improvement in their listening capabilities. This is further evidence of a positive relationship between mindfulness and decision-making that is more conscious and strategic.

CREATIVITY. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have yet established a direct relationship between mindfulness and workplace creativity, but there are indications that such a link exists. Harvard researchers, for example, have demonstrated that mindfulness can be a useful tool for promoting greater creativity, flexibility and use of information in an educational setting. Given that at a neurological level, the cultivation of attention promotes new connections and the development of lateral thinking, it stands to reason that organizations with mindful leaders would be more inclined towards creativity and innovation.

One of the world's most cutting-edge companies, Google, obviously believes that promoting mindfulness among its workforce could reap such benefits. It has been running its popular Search Inside Yourself program for several years, divided into three stages: attention training; self-awareness and self-mastery; and the development of useful mental habits. Those who have gone through the program give it high marks, and it is always oversubscribed. Many claim it has changed their lives. Google's **Richard Fernández** told *The New York Times* how the class transformed his own work behaviour: "I'm definitely much more resilient as a leader. I listen more carefully and with less reactivity in high-stakes meetings. I work with a lot of senior executives who can be very demanding, but that doesn't faze me anymore. It's almost [like having] an emotional and mental 'bank account'. I've now got much more of a buffer there."

SOCIAL RELATIONS AND WORKPLACE ATMOSPHERE. As indicated, by improving an individual's sense of well-being, mindfulness promotes positive emotions, reduces stress and increases empathy. Not surprisingly, this has a direct and positive impact on social relationships, which in turn has a contagious effect on the wider workplace atmosphere. Active listening also enhances commu-

nication and collaboration, and reduces interpersonal conflict. Mindfulness seems to be particularly effective at promoting positive emotions when an individual's psychological capital — their hope, optimism and resilience — is low. In other words, it appears to help those who need it the most.

In closing

The discourse on what needs to be done today to develop effective leaders has changed markedly. Globalization and constant technological change have created volatility, uncertainty, chaos and ambiguity, which in turn have generated unprecedented levels of stress among executives and the organizations they lead. Mustering resilience in this context requires tapping new reserves of physical and mental energy. For this reason, more and more companies are deciding to launch their own mindfulness programs to bolster their employees' resilience.

In the words of mindfulness practitioner and former **Medtronic CEO Bill George**, now a Harvard professor: "Mindful people make much better leaders than frenetic, aggressive ones. They understand their reactions to stress and crises, and their impact on others. They are far better at inspiring people to take on greater responsibilities and at aligning them around common missions and values. As a result, people follow their mindful approach, and their organizations outperform others over the long run." **RM**



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