

# Workplace mindfulness could benefit individuals and organisations

May 6 2016, by Nurfilzah Rohaidi

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Whenever you need a break at work, instead of checking your social media account, try this instead: **STOP**, and by that I mean Stop, Take a breath, Observe and Proceed. Stop whatever you are currently doing. Take a conscious breath, or two, or three. Observe how you are feeling at this very moment: are you feeling tense? Energetic? Tired? Think about your intentions for the next hour or day: what needs to be done? And finally, proceed to connect back with the flow of your day.

This is a quick, yet powerful mindfulness practice that helps you to realign your attention and focus on the present, says Jochen Reb, associate professor of organisational behaviour and human resources at the Singapore Management University (SMU) Lee Kong Chian School of Business. His research interests lie in the psychological aspects of behavioural decision-making as well as the study of mindfulness at work.

According to Professor Reb, mindfulness is defined by present-centred attention and meta-awareness—to be fully in the here and now, moment to moment, and to be aware of it. Mindfulness teaches you to pay attention to your own habits and actions, some of which may seemingly be subconscious. "You can experience temptations but not necessarily give in to them," he says. "We often give in automatically, for example, by checking our e-mail on the phone when we wake up at night."

But with mindfulness, practitioners could become more aware of their impulses and then make a decision whether they want to address them or not. "We try to practice becoming more aware of these impulses,

recognising that we actually have a choice; it doesn't have to be automatic," he explains.

## **It pays to pay attention**

Research into the practice of "present-moment awareness" shows clear, empirical evidence that it reduces stress and anxiety; increases workplace efficiency; and enhances overall well-being.

Recognising this, demand for mindfulness-based training programmes for employees has been steadily increasing, driven mainly by large, highly visible organisations such as Google, Intel and General Mills, notes Professor Reb.

In response to the trend of companies hopping onto the mindfulness bandwagon, Professor Reb's book, *Mindfulness in Organisations*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2015, aims to educate business leaders on what mindfulness is really about, and whether mindfulness training would be valuable to their organisations.

The book also provides a contemporary account of empirical and theoretical mindfulness research, as well as suggestions for future research. "Our hope is that this volume will help scholars who are thinking of starting research in this relatively new area," he says.

## **The interpersonal effects of mindfulness**

Not only does mindfulness help leaders with stress management, research shows that their employees benefit indirectly as a result. This observation was made in a recent study by Professor Reb and colleagues, which showed that the more mindful the supervisors, the higher the employees' psychological need satisfaction, and this had downstream

positive consequences.

"Employees with mindful bosses generally performed better and were less exhausted from their work. That was a very interesting moment for me when we found this interpersonal effect," he elaborates.

"Mindfulness is not just good for you—in an organisation, if your boss is more mindful, you benefit quite a bit from that as well."

While most studies focus on how an employee's mindfulness relates to his or her emotional exhaustion and job performance, few have set out to examine how one's mindfulness impacts others around them in the workplace. Professor Reb's paper, "Leading mindfully: Two studies of the influence of supervisor trait mindfulness on employee well-being and performance", published in *Mindfulness* in 2014, seeks to address this current gap in mindfulness research.

"I think there is still a lot of potential for mindfulness in terms of research. There are still a lot of things we don't know yet in the workplace and with respect to its interpersonal effects," he says.

## **Mindfulness as part of our everyday lives**

Professor Reb is quick to stress that mindfulness need not be a religious or spiritual practice, but one that can be viewed from a secular and pragmatic perspective. This is the approach he takes as the director of the Mindfulness Initiative @ SMU, which strives to make a positive impact on individuals, organisations and society by engaging them in education and outreach.

"We meet regularly to practice mindfulness together, and have organised mindfulness events in the past—conferences with 200 plus people participating. We also try to offer workshops on campus to involve members from different parts of SMU," he says.

And the myriad benefits of mindfulness span across fields and disciplines. One of the active members of the Initiative is in the SMU School of Social Sciences—naturally, as mindfulness is an important area in psychology, he says. Mindfulness also helps lawyers or conflict resolution practitioners by allowing them to take a step back to look at things a little more objectively, rather than get caught up in their emotions in a conflict situation.

Professor Reb hopes to see more companies look into [mindfulness training](#) programmes for their employees. Eventually, he wants to see the practice become an intrinsic part of our daily routine. "Why not do three minutes in the morning before work as a short practice to focus your mind?" he suggests.

Indeed, his work into mindfulness goes beyond academia for Professor Reb, who also practices yoga and meditation. For him, studying mindfulness brings enormous personal gratification and the satisfaction that he may contribute to bettering lives. "What I like about [mindfulness](#) is that it's both a scientific topic—I can look at it as a researcher—and at the same time, I can also feel like I can have a real impact on people," he shares.

**More information:** 10.1007/s12671-012-0144-z Jochen Reb et al. Leading Mindfully: Two Studies on the Influence of Supervisor Trait Mindfulness on Employee Well-Being and Performance, *Mindfulness* (2012). [DOI: 10.1007/s12671-012-0144-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-012-0144-z)

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