

Calming a restless mind – training leaders in mindfulness

by Matthias Birk, Mobius Senior Consultant and Executive Coach

Around 25 managers, all engineers by background, sit silently in a workshop room, eyes closed. The only sound you hear is the sound of their breath. Sitting upright, they are observing their breathing. Used to constant multitasking and maximizing their time and output, what makes them spend even just 10 minutes sitting and breathing?

Let's look at one example: Ray Dalio, CEO and founder of investment management firm Bridgewater Associates, and widely acclaimed one of the most successful investment managers of all time is an avid meditator. Why does he meditate? "Its 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the evening", he says. "And that's a challenging thing. But people who invest in it and experience it and do that for more than six months never stop doing it. And the reasons are, not only does it feel terrific at the time but they carry it through the day and it's really such an unbelievable investment. So when you think about the 20 minutes in the evening and the 20 minutes in the morning and then you think how much does this change the effectiveness and the enjoyment of my whole day it's such a radical payback that you want to do it." Ray Dalio is not alone. A growing number of CEOs are practicing regular meditation today.

At the same time our scientific understanding of the benefits of meditation is growing rapidly. Scientific publications on the topic of mindfulness have grown exponentially over the last decade. Still modern science has only just begun to identify the benefits of meditation. What we do know today is that medi-

tation actually changes the brain. We can observe for example increased activity in the left pre-frontal cortex leading to increased alertness and focused attention.

Robert Stiller, founder and former chairman of Green Mountain Coffee and a regular meditator claims for himself that "meditation helps develop your abilities to focus better and to accomplish your tasks." And that "If you have a meditation practice, you can be much more effective in a meeting". Subsequently he has brought in meditation instructors for his employees at their headquarters in Waterbury, Vermont.

Maybe most well researched is the impact of meditation on stress, and general well-being. We know that regular meditation decreases the activity in the amygdala, a region connected to anxiety, anger and stress. Marc Benioff, founder and CEO of Salesforce.com reflects that "I enjoy meditation, which I've been doing for over a decade — probably to help relieve the stress I was going through when I was working at Oracle," and Ramani Ayer, former CEO of The Hartford Financial Services Group says about meditation that "it has demonstrably reduced my stress and helped to maintain my good health".

Some evidence also seems to suggest that meditation can make us better, more creative problem solvers. Legal Sea Foods CEO Roger Berkowitz says "I meditate twice a day for 20 minutes, closing my eyes, clearing my mind, and repeating my mantra until I'm in a semiconscious state. Sometimes, I'm wrestling with an issue before meditation, and afterward the answer is suddenly clear."

And Ray Dalio says, meditation gives him an open-mindedness: "There is no thoughts just clarity. And that opened mindedness is where I find that creativity comes from." Scientific evidence however still has to grow to let us make a clear claim on this.

So it is hardly surprising that companies are wanting to systematically reap such benefits. Apple, with its founder Steve Jobs never making a secret of his affinity for Zen meditation, allows employees to meditate at work, providing classes on meditation and yoga on-site, and offering the use of a meditation room. Google has believed for a while that meditation can help improve not only employees' mental health and well-being but the company's bottom line as well. In 2007 it started the program "Search Inside Yourself", that teaches employees mindfulness. Indeed, Silicon Valley is a hotbed for mindfulness at work. An annual conference called Wisdom 2.0 draws together thousands of spiritually minded technologists from companies like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

But by far not only tech-firms are bringing meditation to their employees. The publishing Company Prentice Hall for example is said to have a meditation space in their corporate headquarters, which they call the "Quiet Room." Employees can take a break and slip into the space for meditation, prayer, or just a moment of quiet reflection when they're feeling particularly stressed out. And just recently a manager from the UN headquarters told me that they were offering regular meditation sessions to their employees.

In the programs I co-facilitate at Columbia Business School and with executives at a number of corporations, executives are often quickly convinced by the benefits of meditation. They want to try it out. Guiding them through 10 minutes of meditation many realize how challenging it can be to bring the mind to a still point. “Oh, it does not work for me” is something I hear every time. “I have tried it a few times and I simply cannot focus”. To use an analogy here: Few of us would give up going to the gym after three times, just because we cannot yet see tangible results. The analogy is not far fetched. We know from recent findings in neuroscience that the mind is as plastic as the body - and it needs practice. Richard Davidson, Professor of Psychology at University of Wisconsin puts it this way: “In our country people are very involved in the physical fitness craze, working out several times a week. But we don’t pay that kind of attention to our minds. Modern neuroscience is showing that our minds are as plastic as our bodies. Meditation can train the mind in the same way exercise can train our body”.

It is how Steve Jobs said: “If you just sit and observe, you will see how restless your mind is. If you try to calm it, it only makes it worse, but over time it does calm, and when it does, there’s room to hear more subtle things – that’s when your intuition starts to blossom and you start to see things more clearly and be in the present more. Your mind just slows down, and you see a tremendous expanse in the moment. You see so much more than you could see before. It’s a discipline; you have to practice it.” Researchers find changes in the brains of participants engaging in meditation already after two months of regular daily discipline.

Ultimately, meditation helps us experience what we are beyond our thoughts and emotions.

“When I go into my meditation I go into a subconscious state. It opens my mind. It relaxes me. When I carry that outside the meditation it gives me an ability to look at things without the emotional hijacking in a way that gives me certain clarity”, says Ray Dalio. And Andrew Newberg, Research Director at Myrna

Brind Center for Integrative Medicine claims: “Meditation trains the mind to become less attached to its own desires, attachments and beliefs. When this happens, the way we see ourselves and the world will change.” Or as Albert Einstein put it long ago: “A human being is part of a whole, called by us the Universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” ■

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