

Mindfulness in our working world

By Chris Tamjidi, Mobius Senior Consultant

The picture is no doubt familiar to all. In front of us sits a successful leader, in the prime of her abilities. She exudes expertise and competence, albeit a bit distracted. The BlackBerry blinks several times in the course of the conversation. The first impression: everything under control, business is good. But if we look closer, we see that the leg under the table moves continuously in a nervous fashion. The conversation is interrupted several times by text messages - and shortly thereafter a phone call. As we talk, her eyes drift to her laptop. A short glance at an e-Mail. Then, the mood is different - even tenser. The thread is lost - the moment has changed.

Stress, constant pressure, no time to think, endless e-mails, between 80 and 150 per day and at least 30 phone calls. The To-Do List of a typical executive at the end of a day is longer than it was at the beginning of the day. No time for reflection, no room for creativity or the ability to think through an issue until the end. The longing for focus and deceleration is palpable. The working day starts at 6 am, the mind thinking through the e-Mail we read yesterday at 23:20. We go from one meeting to the next seamlessly, interrupted only to check messages. The day ends in exhaustion. We saw the children at some point, but we did not really notice them or take time for them.

The experience is common. The statistics confirm the degree of stress and burnout experienced in working life. We are always "on", and more often distracted and more exposed than ever to multitasking situations. Many people have been saying it for a long time, it has become almost boring: We have to change - and find a new way of thinking and acting. This will require

new solutions. And one solution is mindfulness.

For many people, mindfulness meditation is something somewhat esoteric. Or, at second glance, a kind of cognitive training. Mindfulness meditation is much more than that. The esoteric touch around meditation is thoroughly misplaced. There is hardly a topic that relates to the business world, which is currently being researched more intensely. Annually about 550 scientific studies and publications about mindfulness meditation are published. And the results are becoming increasingly clear: meditation does help - and in many surprising ways!

- **Health:** Body and mind are deeply connected, and especially through our nervous system. Mindfulness meditation helps us to relax and let go of stress. It has very positive effects on our physical health and strengthening the immune system. Hundreds of studies have demonstrated the effect of mindfulness on various diseases and conditions, including headaches, pain syndrome, high blood pressure etc.
- **Cognitive:** Mindfulness is the basis for all higher-order cognitive skills. Brain researchers have found that mindfulness has a positive impact on concentration, perception, creativity, working memory and so on
- **Behavior and mental health:** mindfulness strengthens our mental resilience especially and helps overcome chronic anxiety, burnout, depression and sleep disorders.

At first glance this may seem surprising, but if we look more deeply, it is understandable: We all know that exercise has a positive effect on body, mind and spirit. If we had discovered sports

only in the last 5 years, we would have been similarly amazed how wonderful sport is. Lets take a short look at some of the well-known, and also more surprising ways in which mindfulness can affect our working life.

Mindfulness, stress and slowing down

The prevailing opinion is: Because we do not have time, we are all so stressed. But actually it is the other way around - because we are stressed, we do not have time! Our daily workload is not statistically significantly greater than was the case 20 years ago. What is undisputed, however, that we have to do deal with hundreds of instant requests and tasks. Our mind has to deal with these daily myriad things- and we cannot just simply switch off when we get home or even have time off.

What happens then? Our minds still circle around, jumping from one topic to another, we cannot slow down. Because of this we have no sense of being able to come to rest, relax or have inner peace. But this is exactly what is so crucial. Stress per se is not a problem, but rather the absence of significant time to rest, relax and let go.

Mindfulness training can help us slow down, let go of the constant clutter in our minds, and simply be. Scientific studies have even shown that we can change the structure of our brain and our instinctive responses to things. So rather than responding in a stressed manner, and furthering the cycle of stress and tension, we can become mindful of our own behavior and respond in a more nuanced way. And we can also learn to not further our own stress and burnout by amplifying the negative emotions in our brain. For this reason, mindfulness training has

already taken firm root in many clinics treating burnout patients.

Mindfulness and concentration

Daily life in many companies is dominated by one thing above all - constant sensory overload. We do many things at once, and cannot always bring something to an end. This feeds a cycle of multi-tasking, which has been shown to undermine our concentration, productivity and quality of our work.

What we need however are concentration, focus and perseverance. Because of the permanent stress, many executives cannot lead a quiet conversation or pursue any thought to the end. Many suffer from a neurological phenomenon - the "attention deficit disorder" - and are in a state of sustained silent panic and restlessness. They are erratic, intense, imperious and unfocused.

Regular meditation has been proven to train quiet attention and to significantly strengthen concentration. Researchers have found that even brief meditation can help. Some results - Just four days of 20-minute mindfulness training can improve cognitive skills such as attention and concentration significantly.

Emotional Intelligence and Empathy

A number of management researchers see emotional intelligence or empathy as more important indicators for the success of a manager than technical knowledge. In parallel, brain researchers have discovered that we all have mirror neurons in our brains - we can perceive not only the emotions of others, but their experience is also mirrored naturally in our brains. Empathy is natural. Thus we do not learn empathy, but ONLY notice it. Mindfulness cultivates self awareness of our own emotional states, and also that of others.

This essential knowledge is also part

of the "Search Inside Yourself" project by Google, a mindfulness-based training program, developed with mindfulness researchers. It has been available since 2007 for Google employees and is an important part of the development of the management culture at Google.

Sustainability

Researchers at INSEAD were commissioned by the EU to evaluate measures to improve CSR in the business community. They found with surprising results. The full quote is worth reading:

"The standard executive education approach based on engaged discussion and case analyses fails to facilitate managers to shift towards higher probabilities to make socially responsible decisions."

"On the other hand, coaching programs based on introspection and meditation techniques, without any discussion about CSR topics, exhibit a significant impact on both the probability to act in a socially responsible way and on the factors that influence the probability to behave that way."

At first glance, surprising. At second glance, maybe not. Actually, every person, every manager in their hearts would like to do good for others - for employees and for our environment. They just often do not have a clear head or are so caught up in their mill that they have no time to think or act sustainably.

You only need to have the space for it, a mental space to reflect the consequences of our own actions. So many people, not least those in charge of the training program at Google believe that mindfulness meditation can make a substantial contribution for a successful company and also a better world.

Slowing down, less stress, better cognition, attention and empathy and more natural interest in sustainability: these are natural results of mindfulness

meditation. Therefore, mindfulness is actually a very pragmatic approach to cultivating good and sustainable leadership. We even believe that mindfulness is one of the essential answers to the question of "how" is. Many talk of sustainable management but when asked how to do that, especially when we are in a stressed, exhausted state, there have been few answers.

Mindfulness training is to acquire more than a tool. It encompasses self-awareness, embracing perception and intelligent social interactions. One study in 2007 analyzed over five hundred leaders and divided into different levels of performance. Many were functionally good leaders - but only 5 to 10% were truly outstanding "leaders". And the interesting thing - more than 50% of the outstanding leaders had a regular practice of mindfulness or a similar contemplative practice.

Now to the disappointment: Mindfulness meditation is not a magic pill. Although it is scientifically proven in hundreds of studies, it's like a sport - we need to do it regularly, otherwise nothing will happen. And we need to try and experiment to see how it fits into the working world.

So this is an interesting time. A time of much experimentation and learning - to see in what forms mindfulness will take root in the working world. A number of different approaches have been tried - based on stress reduction, employee satisfaction, emotional intelligence, learning and growth. And all have shown very promising results and are being rolled out further. We invite you to experiment too. ■

Chris Tamdjidi lives in Germany where we works as a consultant and also runs a mindfulness hotel. At the hotel and in his consulting, he works with companies who are trying to balance the fast paced demands of the modern workplace with human wellbeing and wisdom - a delightful and challenging dance.