

Mindful Business

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At the annual Wisdom 2.0 Conference in San Francisco, executives from high-tech companies in Silicon Valley, such as Google, Apple, Pixar, Facebook and Hewlett-Packard address the relationship between technology and quality of life. Recent speakers have included Evan Williams, Twitter co-founder, Tony Hsieh, Zappos CEO, and Bill Ford, Executive Chairman of Ford. The concept of “Mindfulness” as one potential antidote to the overwhelming demands that today’s communication technology has created in our lives is a main theme.

Being “mindful” is the ability to pay non-judgmental attention to the present moment. At the core of mindfulness is quieting the mind’s constant “chattering” and interrupting the pointless ruminations about the past and the future that leave us stressed, anxious, and depressed. When we are mindless, we are trapped in rigid mindsets, oblivious to context or perspective. When we are mindful, we are actively drawing novel distinctions, rather than relying on distinctions drawn in the past.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a MIT-educated molecular biologist, introduced the Western world to a secular approach to mindfulness over twenty-five years ago. Initially applied at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center for the treatment of patients with chronic pain, the concept of mindfulness has now been integrated into a program that is focused on stress reduction, the mindfulness based stress reduction program (MBSR). The basic mindfulness practice is a meditation which involves sitting for about 20 to 30 minutes, with closed eyes, keeping the focus of awareness on the breath or other bodily sensations; when thoughts come into awareness, they are gently released without judgment and awareness returns to the breath.

MRI scans show that through daily meditation, the density of the gray matter in our brain’s prefrontal cortex, which is essential to focus, memory, compassion, and impulse control, increases. Other scientific research supports the positive effects of mindfulness meditation on listening skills, decision-making, ethical judgment, depression, PTSD and other psychological challenges.

Considering the benefits from mindfulness practice, numerous businesses, such as General Mills, Apple, Procter & Gamble, Aetna and Deutsche Bank, have implemented mindfulness programs for employees. Google’s mindfulness program called “Search inside yourself” has been described in a recent bestselling book. Mindfulness has been applied in many settings including the treatment of veterans with PTSD, in prisons, and in K12 schools.

Two years ago, we (Dr. Bill Kuechler and Dr. Yvonne Stedham of the UNR College of Business) created a course called *Mindful Leadership* for MBA students. This course integrates the theory and practice of mindfulness with the theory and practice of leadership. Meditation in class and between classes is a core element in this course as well as keeping a journal of observations of mindfulness - or lack thereof - in the workplace and in leadership situations. Despite the unorthodox content and format of this course, it has become very popular in the MBA curriculum. Students report that they develop skills and tools

beyond the technical knowledge acquired in a typical MBA course. Comments such as “I have learned many technical skills in my MBA classes but in this class I have learned a skill that will allow me to effectively apply my technical skills” and “I have become noticeably less stressed and more effective and happy at work” support the unique contributions this course makes to management education.

Committed to supporting the expansion of mindfulness into business, we have recently developed and delivered a Mindful Leadership program for the Nevada Department of Transportation. This program is a condensed version of the MBA course and is taught on four Friday mornings. As in the MBA course, the program includes in class meditation and journaling. The positive response by NDOT employees leads us to predict continuing growth for business-focused mindfulness programs in northern Nevada.