

Pausing Amidst the Chaos: The Power of Mindfulness

By Rob Kramer

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Two of the most common issues leaders and managers request help with is managing stress and work/life balance. Stress and imbalance have been adopted as simply a “way of life” for most people. Thus, how does one seek to eliminate (or greatly reduce) these present challenges in a world that is today’s face paced, high demand workplace? In working with thousands of classroom participants and hundreds of coaching clients over the years, collectively we have found that the way out of the chaos is to actually learn to embrace what is.

“What is” can be summed up as the situation affecting us at the present time, and how we are reacting to it. This may include the many stressors of work which often impact focus, attention, and effectiveness. In continually juggling our time, energy, and effort, moments of mindlessness can occur throughout the day, adding to longer work days, increased strain, and potential culpabilities effecting how we manage the quality of labs, clinical trials, meetings, and daily interactions. Being an effective leader, however, is rooted in moment to moment awareness, in being present and *mindful* to our reactions. That is, to notice *how* we respond when under stress or when we feel out of balance. It is this important step of witnessing our responses that begins the change within us, and ultimately how we lead.

What are some of the many payoffs in learning to be mindful?

- Researchers at the University of Wisconsin found that people who practice mindfulness have, “genetic and molecular differences, including altered levels of gene-regulating machinery and reduced levels of pro-inflammatory genes, which in turn correlated with faster physical recovery from a stressful situation.”¹
- In a study at Rochester University, researchers found when physicians practiced mindfulness that, “the participating doctors became more mindful, less burned out and less emotionally exhausted... and, those changes correlated with a significant increase

¹ “Mindfulness Meditation Found To Result In Gene Expression Changes.” redOrbit Staff & Wire Reports. December 8, 2013.

in attributes that contribute to patient-centered care, such as empathy and valuing the psychosocial factors that might affect a patient's illness experience."²

- Wake Forest University psychologists found that, "even a brief introduction to (mindfulness) can improve your cognitive performance by 50%... enhance your memory, verbal fluency, visuo-spatial awareness and attention."³

So how does one develop mindfulness in daily life?

The good news is there are countless strategies to develop mindfulness. The trouble is that it can be difficult to know where to begin. And the temptation to stop working on a practice when it becomes challenging, or seems to "not be working," can be prevalent at the beginning. A common trap is to easily give up, or to jump to another technique too fast, never fully realizing the full value of the practice. Therefore, it is suggested to find something that sounds interesting and doable, and stick with it for at least thirty days to experience its many benefits.

Here are some suggested techniques:

- Follow your breath. Sit quietly and count your breathing. See if you can get to 10 breaths without your mind wandering. If it wanders, bring your attention back to your breath and start the counting over again.
- Walk mindfully. While walking, pay attention to your footsteps and how they connect to the ground. Also notice your breathing as you walk. If your mind wanders from either of these, return to them.
- Engage in a physical activity such as gardening, swimming, playing with the kids (etc.). Notice yourself in the moment, engaged in the activity. Continually bring your focus to physical sensations, sounds, sights or smells.
- Watch your thoughts. Sit quietly and observe where your mind goes. Pay particular attention to the types of thoughts you are having. Perhaps they are dominated by work, or a specific issue you are having at home, on what you plan to do next, or what you were just doing.

There are endless resources to begin exploring mindfulness. If you are new to this work, two resources I suggest starting with are:

- *Real Happiness* by Sharon Salzberg (book with accompanying CD)
- *Mindfulness for Beginners* by John Kabat-Zinn (CD of guided meditations)

² "How Mindfulness Can Make for Better Doctors." Chen, Pauline W., MD. New York Times. October 15, 2009.

³ "Meditate your way to workplace efficiency." Taylor, Ian. Men's Health. Retrieved from <http://www.menshealth.co.uk/healthy/brain-training/the-zen-worker>. 2011.

With any mindfulness practice, a vital component that distinguishes it from other techniques is to practice without judgment. That is, when practicing, we may find our minds taking over and providing narratives such as, “this is stupid,” or “I stink at this, I keep losing focus,” or “this is really hard.” This is a critical moment in development mindfulness. If this occurs, the technique is to notice that we are judging; to witness the judgment and then return to the practice. This is the beginning of shifting awareness from what is going on in the mind, to what is going on in the present moment around us. Returning to the body, returning to the practice, returning to the present moment; these are the building blocks of good leadership practice.

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