

How Meditation Benefits CEOs

By Emma Seppala; December 14, 2015

Mindfulness is quickly following yoga in becoming a billion-dollar industry. It's no surprise, then, that the popularity of meditation – one way to practice mindfulness – is also growing among CEOs and senior executives. Why are business leaders embracing meditation rather than, say, massage or ping-pong? Because there's something to meditation that appears to benefit CEOs more than recreation or relaxation do alone.

As CEO of the TLEX Institute, Johann Berlin specializes in bringing mindfulness training to CEOs and corporate teams. He says he's seeing a growing interest among leaders in meditation as a way to build leadership skills – and achieve business goals. “Most of our new clients ... are not sold by mindfulness as a novelty. They want to see how these approaches ... are truly beneficial to existing priorities like retention, talent advancement, innovation.” For example, one of Berlin's clients, a Fortune 25 company, has integrated mindfulness techniques into its high potentials program with the goal of creating agile and flexible mindsets as a foundation for leadership.

The research on mindfulness suggests that meditation sharpens skills like attention, memory, and emotional intelligence. I spoke with a number of executives about their experiences with meditation, and saw again and again how their observations about meditation in the workplace connected back to the findings of academic research.

Meditation builds resilience. Multiple research studies have shown that meditation has the potential to decrease anxiety, thereby potentially boosting resilience and performance under stress. That's certainly been true for Alak Vasa, founder of Elements Truffles, who started meditating as a trader at Goldman Sachs and ITG. She claims meditation helped her keep fear and panic at bay, even under duress. “There was this one instance where the market tanked and there was panic on the desk. The trading desk was an organized riot. Thanks to my meditation practice, I was able to keep my composure and propose solutions to reduce the impact of the market crash.”

Jonathan Tang, founder and CEO of VASTRM fashion, first introduced meditation to his staff after 9/11. “In the aftermath of 9/11, the employees at my company were noticeably shaky and distracted. I decided to bring in a meditation facilitator to offer people the ability to sit silent for 20 minutes. The room filled up quickly as people really needed an outlet for peace. When the session was over, people who had never meditated before were filled with a sense of calm. It helped them be more present at work and even carried forth to being more present with their families at home.”

Meditation boosts emotional intelligence. Brain-imaging research suggests that meditation can help strengthen your ability to regulate your emotions.

Archana Patchirajan, successful serial entrepreneur and CEO and Founder of Sattva, shared that in her early years as a leader, she wanted things to happen in her way and on her timeline. “I didn't tend to understand what my team was going through. I would just get angry if they did not perform according to my expectations.” Given research that shows anger's impact on cardiovascular health, it is critical that leaders be able to manage their anger, and put themselves in others' shoes. “Thanks to meditation I have developed patience.” Archana says. “I have a better relationship with my team. Best of all, I maintain my peace of mind.”

Dr. James Doty, a neurosurgeon at Stanford University's School of Medicine, also values meditation for its ability to cultivate emotional intelligence. A colleague had developed a cutting-edge medical device, but the company he had started to develop and sell the device was on the rocks. Doty, an

early investor, became the CEO. At a meeting with vital – but disgruntled – stakeholders, he faced an angry, unreasonable investor. He credits his mindfulness practice with helping him respond with empathy: “I paused and slowly took a few breaths... This led me to actually listen and understand not only his situation, but what he wanted and expected. By not responding in an emotional manner, it resulted in his not only becoming supportive but also becoming an ally in making the company a success. The company ultimately went public at a valuation of \$1.3B. ”

Meditation enhances creativity. Research on creativity suggests that we come up with our greatest insights and biggest breakthroughs when we are in a more meditative and relaxed state of mind. That is when we have “eureka” moments. This is likely because meditation encourages divergent thinking (i.e. coming up with the greatest number of possible solutions to a problem), a key component of creativity.

Charly Kleissner credits meditation with helping him come up with new ideas and ventures that would otherwise not have occurred to him. “I co-founded the 100% IMPACT Network because of my meditation practice.”

Meditation improves your relationships. While stress narrows your perspective and that of your team, and reduces empathy, negatively impacting performance, meditation can help boost your mood and increase your sense of connection to others, even make you a kinder and more compassionate person.

Chirag Patel, CEO of Amneal Pharmaceuticals and Ernst & Young 2011 Entrepreneur of the Year, credits meditation with helping him feel more connected to his clients. “In a business you start connecting to your customer as your family rather than merely a business transaction.” The same goes for his relationships with his colleagues and staff.

Meditation helps you focus. Research has shown that our minds have a tendency to wander about 50% of the time. Add in work interruptions, text messages, IMs, phone calls, and emails, and it’s no surprise that employees have a hard time staying focused. But studies show that meditation training can help curb our tendency for distraction, strengthening our ability to stay focused and even boosting memory.

Peter Cooper, founder of Cooper Investors, attributes his ability to invest wisely to his meditation practice. “Being an investor requires the distillation of large volumes of information into a few relevant insights. Meditation has helped me discard interesting but unnecessary information and focus on the few things that make a difference to long run investment performance.”

Importantly, meditation is not just “one more thing to do.” If you’re thinking that you have enough on your plate and don’t need yet another thing, consider this advice that Arianna Huffington shared with me. “Although I’ve known its benefits since my teens, finding time for meditation was always a challenge because I was under the impression that I had to ‘do’ meditation. And I didn’t have time for another burdensome thing to ‘do.’ Fortunately, a friend pointed out one day that we don’t ‘do’ meditation; meditation ‘does’ us. That opened the door for me. The only thing to ‘do’ in meditation is nothing.”

But as both research and experience show, doing nothing can have real results.

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