

Meditation in the Workplace: How “Doing Nothing” Might Actually Improve Business



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For millennia, the practice of meditation has been the exclusive domain of monasteries in any of the world’s major religions. It is associated in our imaginary with groups of people “renouncing the world” to get closer to a higher dimension. It is certainly true that those are the individuals who historically refined the art of meditation, in their search for a way to undo the shackles of the material world, and thus dedicate their attention entirely to the spiritual realm. But in the last decades, something interesting has been happening: meditation has been slowly but surely seeping through to the very material world it was thought to deny. The movement has been coming from different and complementary angles: the Chinese occupation of Tibet created an inflow of Tibetan Rinpoches (“precious one”, the term is used in Tibetan Buddhism to refer to recognized lamas) to India, and then to the West, bringing with them age-old teachings; the beatnik revolution of the 60’s brought Yoga to the West by trend-setting pop stars; the post-industrial search for “happiness” and comfort finds people eager to discover new ways to reduce their stress levels. All of this has contributed to making meditation a household term all over the planet.

Today, walking into any bookstore, and finding your way to the “self-help” or “personal development” section, you will see an incredibly rich bibliography on the subject of

meditation. To check this for myself, I recently ventured into a popular Parisian bookstore. Between a famous scientist-turned-Buddhist monk (“Altruism: The power of compassion” by Matthieu Ricard), a Zen nun (“Reflections of a female priest” by Shundo Aoyama), a Tibetan priest (“Running with the mind of meditation” by Sakyong Mipham), and a journalist accidentally stumbling into the practice of meditation (“Meditate, then Act” by Youki Vattier), the neophyte would have a hard time choosing amongst the myriad books on the subject. It is certainly the new fad but, as in any such sociological development, they always start for a good reason. For this one to have occurred, we can infer that (a) people are eager to find ways to calm their stressed minds in today’s hectic world, and (b) that somehow meditation has – at least partly – answered this call.

Apart from books, seminars and conferences on the subject abound. At any time, somewhere or other, a talk or workshop is happening on meditation. The subject has even found its way to our smartphones, with such apps as “Inscape”, “Zenfie”, “Stop, Breathe & Think”, “Headspace”, “10% happier” ... The list grows by the day, it seems! I personally favor the “old-fashioned” way of “just sitting and watching the breath”. It doesn’t require more than a cushion, a quiet place... and a good measure of personal discipline. But one can’t complain at seeing this wonderful art appealing to a growing number of people, in so many different forms.

In the therapeutic world, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) has gained a lot of ground in recent years, mixing Buddhist-inspired mindfulness meditation techniques with cognitive therapy, to treat depression and other ailments of the psyche, but what of the workplace? Until recently, that space has remained somewhat oblivious to the growing interest in meditation practice. After all, today’s efficiency-obsessed companies’ philosophy seems



in complete opposition to the idea of “sitting and doing nothing”. But taking a closer look at the mechanisms at play, and with all the interesting results that research on the brain has produced, one can see a new picture emerging. Meditation induces certain brain functions, notably reducing the level of cortisol (the “stress hormone”), and stimulating the production of oxytocin, a hormone favoring sociability and a sense of security. Isn’t that a good reason for wanting to explore the possibly positive effect that meditation can have in a professional environment?

In my practice as executive coach, working regularly in the corporate world, I have seen an interesting trend in the past decade, as high-powered individuals have become much more accepting of meditative exercises during “business” coaching sessions, as ways to calm their minds and enhance their focusing capabilities. I remember, some years ago, the first time a manager timidly asked me to teach him what he called a “concentration method”. He had obviously read about my interest in Buddhist meditation on my CV, but we had never touched upon the subject in the series of sessions we had had up to then, where we concentrated solely on business issues. I found the idea interesting, even if a little unsettling, and proceeded to give him some rudiments of meditative exercises. To my surprise, this became a staple feature of every one of our coaching sessions: we would take ten minutes, sometimes more, to do a “concentration session” together. My client found them to reduce his stress level, allowing him to deal more efficiently with the highly

competitive environment his job entailed. I have since gone into the habit of suggesting to my business clients, at some point during a coaching session, a form of meditative or breathing exercise, and it is invariably welcomed as the rich, mind-calming, mind-opening technique that it is.

Vimala Thakar, an Indian spiritual teacher, offered an interesting definition for meditation:

“This awareness of the so-called outward and the inward movements of life, is meditation. Meditation is watching the movement of mind in relationship. If you try to force the mind into silence by withdrawing from activity, you will never understand what silence is. There is a great beauty when one discovers what silence in action is. Meditation is a new approach to total life. It does not demand of you any isolation. It is a state of total freedom from movement, to be there, and then to move into time and space, words and speech, feelings and emotions, to move into them out of the totality, out of the wholeness.”

Understanding meditation in its global breadth, as these words imply, encourages us to bring it into all aspects of our lives wholeheartedly, including – and especially – in the workplace, confident that any tool that allows people to experience true silence, is also a formidable enabler for wholesome action.

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