

"I have been a supervisor for many years. One of the things I have learned, sometimes the hard way, is that it takes more than technical skill to effectively manage and motivate staff. It takes 'people skills.' I really want to be the kind of manager who engages and inspires employees. As I continue to develop my skills, what traits should I focus on? What skills should I try to cultivate?" These are great questions. Over the course of three Successful Supervisors, we are focusing on traits that effective managers will want to have in their repertoires emotional and social intelligence, the ability to listen deeply and communicate authentically, and mindfulness. These are overlapping skills, but proficiency in these areas will go a long way toward moving you in the direction you want to go. This month's issue will focus on Mindfulness. Email EAP at ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com or contact your EAP account manager at 1.800.647.3327 with any questions or feedback.

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What do these organizations have in common ... Google, Apple, Barclays, Deutsche Bank, Yahoo, Raytheon, NASA, Proctor and Gamble, Bose, New Balance, Aetna, General Mills, Monsanto? All of these organizations have implemented groundbreaking mindfulness meditation programs as core parts of their leadership training curriculums. Managers and supervisors are learning mindfulness techniques to deal with stress, be more focused on the job, and connect more meaningfully with the people they lead.

No longer solely the practice of monks living in isolated caves in the Himalayas, scantily clad gurus teaching in the ashrams of India, or "new age" Americans indulging between bowls of granola, mindfulness practice has become mainstream. It is being integrated into schools, hospitals, prisons, and the workplace.

In today's stressful and fast-paced work environment, it is often difficult for leaders to maintain their values (providing the best services to customers, leading with compassion and empathy, supporting and developing engaged workers) while meeting the day-to-day demands of the workplace (tight budgets, frequent change, increased workloads, reduced staffing). And yet, in order to be a successful leader, the balance between values and accountability must be maintained. As we discussed earlier, leaders need to stay grounded and authentic, face challenges with humility and graciousness, be emotionally available and responsive, and get the job done.

Adding mindfulness practice to your bag of skills can enable you to do this. As one practitioner said:

"My mindfulness practice provides me with a way to observe the stressful situations around me and not become caught up in them. It has taught me how to pause, and then, in that moment, I can make the choice about whether to react or respond and how to do so more skillfully."

Since so many of our mistakes or bad judgment calls occur when we are operating on autopilot or in the midst of a "knee-jerk" reaction, the ability to take a few deep breaths and pause before reacting or responding can make a world of difference in our ability to lead in moments of stress, during challenging situations, or when emotions are running high.

So, what exactly is mindfulness?

Mindfulness refers to the practice of bringing your attention into the present moment. You pay attention, in the present moment, to what is happening both inside and around you without adding story or commentary, feelings of aversion (this is yucky and I don't like it!), grasping (I like this! I want more!), judgments, or criticisms (I should not be feeling like this.). Your awareness is actively engaged. You are where you are, doing what you are doing, and that is what you are paying attention to. All the while, you maintain a gentle and non-judgmental attitude, accepting yourself exactly as you are and letting things be exactly as they are. If you get distracted, you simply notice the distraction, and then refocus.

Janice Marturano, VP and Deputy General Counsel of General Mills, put it this way:

"Mindfulness training develops the mind's ability to be focused and to notice the autopilot, fragmented way we live ... mindfulness cultivates our ability to sustain attention ... to actively be in the moment ... to make clear decisions ... to notice our propensity to react rather than ask "what's called for now?""

Meditation is one of the methods we use to teach ourselves to be mindful. During meditation practice we consciously focus our attention on something (the breath, a candle or flower, a special word or mantra). Whenever the mind wanders ... and it will ... we gently pull our focus back to the breath or chosen object. As we do this over and over again, we train our mind to stay focused, alert, and in the present moment. A sense of relaxation occurs and the mind rests and settles. This is sometimes referred to as a state of restful alertness.

What are some of the benefits of mindfulness practice?

Mindfulness practices and meditation have been around for thousands of years. It has only been in recent years that comprehensive scientific studies have been conducted to empirically assess the benefits. Not surprising to those who have practiced mindfulness on a regular basis, thousands of studies support what practitioners have posited all along ... that individuals who practice mindfulness on a regular basis experience profoundly positive effects across all areas of their lives.

The July/August 2012 Journal of the American Psychological Association identified the following benefits:

- ◆ Stress reduction: practicing mindfulness increased positive affect and decreased negative affect, depression, and anxiety
- ◆ Memory: participants in 8 weeks of mindfulness training demonstrated a significant increase in memory even under extreme stress
- ◆ Focus: meditators demonstrated significantly better performance on all measures of attention

- ◆ Emotional reactivity: meditators were much better able to disengage from emotionally upsetting events and shift their focus

Those who practice mindfulness meditation regularly will likely notice improvements in their ability to:

- ◆ Stay in the moment and be present with employees instead of being distracted or mentally checked out
- ◆ Remain calm and non-reactive in emotionally challenging situations
- ◆ Respond mindfully and empathically instead of having a knee-jerk or autopilot reaction
- ◆ Manage change with greater equanimity
- ◆ Stay centered
- ◆ Recover more quickly when upset
- ◆ See the good in themselves and others
- ◆ Experience well-being and peacefulness

With practice, all of the benefits listed above can be available to you, allowing you to be the kind of leader you want to be. Learning more about mindfulness and meditation practice is easy. There are numerous mindfulness teachers and programs available in the community as well as online programs and guidelines. Please call your EAP consultant at *LifeSolutions* at 1.800.647.3327 for additional information.

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