

## Mindfulness: The key to great leadership

**“I am feeling increasingly overwhelmed. I knew when I became a supervisor that I would need to work long hours and make some personal sacrifices — I am okay with that. What I didn’t anticipate was how unrelenting the pressures and distractions would be. I spend most of my day putting out fires. I never seem to find the time for the things that really matter... like looking after staff or completing important projects. Is there any way out of this?”**

Leading people in today’s “gas pedal” culture is a very challenging task. The “busy-ness” that is part and parcel of today’s leadership can distract us from what is really important and limit our ability to lead with excellence. The next three issues of the *Successful Supervisor* will explore how to develop your innate abilities to focus on what is important, create space, foster creativity and wise decision making, and cultivate a way of leading that is authentic, compassionate, and skillful. Material is adapted from *Finding the Space to Lead: A Practical Guide to Mindful Leadership* by Janice Marturano, Bloomsbury Press, New York, 2014. If you have any questions or would like to share your thoughts with us, email [ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com](mailto:ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com).

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Most people assume a leadership role because they want to make a difference. They want to contribute to the well-being and success of their employees, their organization, and their community. And yet, in today’s frenetic work environment, those aspirations can quickly take a back seat as leaders become distracted by issues of immediacy (happening right now and appears urgent). Those “urgent” issues, even if they are not really that important, end up taking precedence over what matters (relationships with staff or an important long-term project). Leaders often feel like they are wasting their time while being prevented from doing their best work on the most important parts of their job.

**Does it have to be this way?** Not according to Janice Marturano, former deputy counsel of General Mills and executive director of the Institute for Mindful Leadership. Marturano asserts, “You can lead with excellence by cultivating your innate capabilities to focus on what’s important, to see more clearly what is presenting itself, to foster greater creativity, and to embody compassion.” She continues that by developing these capabilities, leaders can create a win-win-win situation: good for the organization, good for the employees, and good for the community.

**What is the key to great leadership?** Mindfulness. Mindfulness is not simply a stress reduction technique or learning how to take deep breaths. It is also not a religion. Mindfulness is a practice that trains capabilities of your mind that rarely receive any training. Just as you can train the muscles of your body to be stronger and more responsive, you can train your mind and strengthen its capabilities as well. You can train your mind to notice when you are distracted or on autopilot and redirect the mind to be fully attentive to what is happening in the present moment. As you deepen your capacity to be present and attentive — even in the midst of crazy-busyness — you create the mental and emotional space to make wiser choices and to relate to others in skillful and caring ways.

**What exactly is mindfulness?** It is often defined as consciously paying attention, in the present moment, without judging, and with a general attitude of friendliness and curiosity towards whatever arises. Marturano answers the question this way:

*When you are mindful of this moment, you are present for your life and your experience just as it is*

- *Not as you hoped it would be*
- *Not as you expected it to be*
- *Not seeing more or less than what is here*
- *Not with judgments that can lead you to a conditioned response*

*...but for exactly what is here, as it unfolds, meeting each moment with equanimity.*

Imagine living primarily in the present moment without dealing with baggage from the past or worries about a future that may not even happen!

Mindfulness is most often learned through the practice of meditation. Beginners receive meditation instruction and then set aside formal times to sit and practice being present with whatever is arising in their awareness. These sittings can range in time from five minutes several days a week to an hour or more every day, depending on what works best for the person. With practice, what is learned “on the cushion” begins to integrate into daily life.

Other ways to develop a more mindful presence include physical practices that coordinate body, posture, movement, breath, and focused attention (Tai Chi, QiGong, and some types of yoga) and reflection and contemplation (What are my leadership values? How can I do more of what I value?).

And, yes, leaders can chew gum and walk at the same time. You can slow down, allow for mental and emotional space, practice mindfulness every day, and still get your work done. In answer to the initial question, there is a way out.

For further information on how you can become a mindful leader or to learn more about meditation instruction, please contact Deb Messer at 412-647-9064 or [messerdm@upmc.edu](mailto:messerdm@upmc.edu).

Stay tuned for the May edition, where we will explore practices that help cultivate mindful leadership.

*This information is not a substitute for professional care or your organization's policies. If you have or suspect you have an issue related to the material presented here, consult an appropriate professional.*

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