



Cultivating Mindfulness in Uncertain Times

There is no doubt that these are uncertain times. No one has access to a magic crystal ball. The reality is that you are working in uncharted territory with no clear answers. Yet as a CEO, you are there to provide a vision and navigation for your company. How do you do this in these turbulent times?

For years eastern cultures have practiced "mindfulness". This is not "New Age" fluff. Jon Kabat-Zinn, teacher of mindfulness meditation and the founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center defines it as: "Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." At its core mindfulness is about being present to what is right in front of you. It is a quality of attention and heightened awareness, both of your internal landscape and external environment, that provides clarity and serenity; just what is needed when economic storms are stirring.

Over the last 25 to 30 years researchers¹ have discovered that the mind and the body are intimately connected. It is now known that thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and stress all have a great impact on health and illness. Research has shown that individuals who practice reflective techniques tend to enjoy greater health and well-being. In particular, the ability to concentrate attention can promote deep relaxation in the body, and that the ability to be more mindful in each situation can help break habitual patterns of response to stress. It is only by cultivating this heightened awareness that you can recognize your default patterns and purposefully choose alternative actions rather than react out of impatience, fear or distress.

Your reactions to stressful events become so habituated that they occur essentially out of your awareness, until, because of physical or emotional or psychological dysfunction, you cannot ignore them any longer. These reactions can include tension, illness, emotional stress, controlling behaviors and perfectionism.

Today's CEO is facing unprecedented challenges and greater levels of complexity than ever before. Many of these challenges weren't even imagined ten years ago due to advances in technology, world economies and interdependence between nations and rapidly changing demographics. There is no handbook.

CEO's will find their experience and expertise limited in the face of such ambiguity. You as an individual can only see so far. The "lone wolf" CEO cannot succeed. In order to lead powerfully in today's world, you will need to tap wisdom and experience beyond your own and encourage collaboration between individuals, groups and organizations to access knowledge and information that is beyond your current scope. It will take a collective, creative effort to solve the problems we are experiencing in our world. Emerging CEO's will be the ones inviting others to the table to create the unimaginable. Autopilots need not apply.

¹ Studies can be found listed at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness>

The Buddhists use the term “beginners mind”, a term that refers to an attitude of openness and lack of preconceptions just as a beginner would. In a world that rewards the right answers, you must shift to “beginners mind” embracing the unknown and become the person who asks the right questions. Albert Einstein is credited with saying “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” This is particularly true today. Old solutions rehashed fall short. Default models of success won’t work. Traditional ways of thinking won’t create new opportunities.

Purposefully creating conditions for success in the present moment, in the presence of the inevitable myriad of distractions that occur, requires mindfulness and calm. Creation and innovation only occur in the present moment, not in the past and not in the future. Enlisting domains of knowing that encourage presence may be unfamiliar to you. It requires practice and vigilance. Many successful executives over-use one domain, usually the intellect, without becoming adept at tapping other leadership domains. Enlist all four domains of knowing – the intellect (mind), the emotional (heart), the body (somatic) and the spirit (meaning-making and inspiration). Each of these domains can expand your leadership repertoire and practicing in each builds awareness of your own (and others’) thinking, feelings, sensations and motivations. This leads to inspired leadership.

Mindfulness is paying attention - to the “gut feeling”, the furrowed brow and the shallow breathing or the run-on thinking that diminishes your capacity to function at your best. Engaging your discomfort instead of avoiding it will teach you to manage what triggers your stressful situations more effectively. You will learn that your most productive time is the time you are least busy and pre-occupied. Allowing time to be reflective not only supports your resiliency and calms you physically, but also induces clarity of mind and a focus on what is essential, truly important and central. From this place of calm and centeredness, you may become the CEO that moves your company, and even your community, from breakdown to breakthrough.

If you think that cultivating mindfulness is just new age fluff, think again. On second thought, don’t think. Just pay attention...

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