

Mindful Leadership: Building healthier, collaborative teams



Contents

Leaders as a positive force for teams	3
The risks of stressed leaders	4
Mindfulness: a core leadership trait	5
Mindful leadership starts with self-care	6
Letting care and empathy lead	7
The mindful leadership payoff	8
Combating stress and thriving together	9
Why mindful leadership is good business strategy	10
How Headspace for Work trains mindful leaders	11
The benefits of Headspace for Work	12

Leaders as a positive force for teams

“Mindful leadership significantly improves employee experience, retention, and overall productivity.”

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3

Great leaders are compassionate, calm, and offer a cool head in a crisis. Presence, purpose, and leadership skills align, creating a sense of stability for their team, especially in the face of challenges and change. Quite simply, they lead by example.

Study after study has shown that employees want leaders with a human touch, not just a corporate touch; someone who can stand in their shoes and demonstrate care, empathy, and guidance in helping them navigate the stresses of work.

When this kind of mindful leadership happens, it significantly improves employee experience, retention, and overall productivity. It makes the workplace a healthier, happier place to be.

However, behind the self-assured exterior, 40% of leaders are overwhelmed and struggle to find their own focus, according to a recent survey by Forrester Research¹, in partnership with Headspace for Work.

This reminds us that leaders are people too, and often don't prioritize managing their own stress,

mental health, and self-care. And yet despite the stress they carry, managers and executives are expected to be there for everyone else.

Given that responsibility, and the critical role leaders play in employee well-being, engagement, and productivity, it's important that we support leaders in return.

With that in mind, this 10-page e-book is an essential guide to mindful leadership. Because if you get your mind right, you will be better equipped to lead with a resilience and resourcefulness that proves inspiring.

In examining and understanding the benefits of mindfulness and meditation, we come to see, and value, the benefits of mindful leaders to teams and organizations.

¹ <https://get.headspace.com/research-mindfulness-and-the-leader-of-the-future>

The risks of stressed leaders

“If people at the top are burnt out, the stress can have a cascading effect across teams and organizations.”

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4

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared burnout a work-related disease that is the result of “chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” It leads to feelings of exhaustion, lower job satisfaction, and negative feelings about one’s job or workplace.

Great leaders recognize when employees are at the end of their rope, but who’s looking out for the leaders? Especially when 6-in-10 of them report being spent at the end of each workday, with 1-in-4 contemplating quitting, according to the 2021 DDI Global Leadership Forecast².

If people at the top are burnt out, the stress can have a cascading effect across teams and organizations. And a stressed-out boss — one who doesn’t listen, or lacks empathy, or is easily irritable — can affect employee morale, retention, and productivity.

So it makes sense that organizations address stress among leaders, encouraging a mindfulness practice that fosters an increased capacity to handle whatever pressures arise.

As leaders develop more compassion, enjoy more clarity of mind, and experience more mental spaciousness, the trickle down effect will be a positive one, allowing them to better guide and support others.

² <https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health>

Mindfulness: a core leadership trait

**“Positive practices —
empathetic support,
a respectful environment,
and meaningful work —
can make a world of
difference in the workplace.”**

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5

What does mindful leadership look like? Well, we show up as our most authentic self, fully present and fully engaged, with a stable attention span that isn't easily distracted, with a sense of calm that can withstand a variety of pressures without feeling rattled, without being reactive.

In other words, mindfulness becomes a core leadership trait. Managers and executives become steadfast captains at the helm, in all weathers. Reactivity is transformed into a considered response; scattered thinking is transformed into grounded analysis; and intense emotions no longer lead to overwhelm.

What does all that mean for the team around you? Consider a 2020 study by Qualtrics³ in which less than 47% of employees felt their manager was attuned to their well-being. People who don't feel supported/understood are 69% more likely to report mental health issues, and 61% say they are less productive.

“A leader's concern for others all too often gets sidelined in today's high-pressure business world,” writes Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* as well as *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body*.

He writes about how positive practices — empathetic support, a respectful environment, and meaningful work — can make the world of difference in the workplace. “Positive practices have been found to increase productivity and organizational performance.”

³ <https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health>

Mindful leadership starts with self-care

“Stepping back to meditate, even for just a minute, can help leaders recalibrate and reduce their own stress as well as the stress of those around them.”

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6

Leaders are naturally focused on achieving results and supporting their teams to accomplish tasks and goals. And if they are also tapped in to the emotional well-being of people they manage, even better. Headspace for Work is dedicated to teaching leaders how to train their mind first and foremost.

Compare it to an emergency drill on a plane. By first putting on your life jacket and mask, you are better equipped to assist others and keep everyone else calm.

“So many leaders I have met in sessions say they struggle with time for themselves,” said Evelyn Lewis Prieto, director of meditation at Headspace. “A lot of leaders have such good intentions — wanting to lead, wanting to do well for their people, teams, and own performance — but they are stressed, and that stress builds up into resentment for not having time for themselves or their team. In turn, their team interprets it as management doesn’t care.”

Integrating meditation and mindfulness into a leader’s flow of work begins with small breaks to experience moments of pause and reflection without letting a racing mind or swirling emotions take over. By allowing more breathing space (literally!), you are cultivating more space in the mind, which means you will find more space in relationships, at work and at home.

A small break for self-care can make a huge difference in the impact stress can have on a team. The body, when stressed, releases a hormone called cortisol, which raises one’s heart rate and blood pressure — blocking out rational thinking and triggering a fight-or-flight response. Stepping back to meditate, even for just a minute, can help leaders recalibrate and reduce their own stress as well as the stress of those around them.

Letting care and empathy lead

“Mindful leaders are more capable of attentive listening, and developing a deeper understanding for what people are experiencing.”

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7

Once you’ve carved out the time to prioritize self-care, your gentler, more empathetic approach will start to lead and be noticed.

Mindful leaders are clearer, calmer, and more compassionate, demonstrating an unshakeable composure. Consequently, they are more capable of attentive listening, and developing a deeper understanding for what people are experiencing. This newfound skillset leads to increased empathy, and employees consequently feel seen, heard, and acknowledged — so you can imagine what that can do for morale.

Creating happier, healthier employees begins with leaders who care. “A common theme we’ve seen in research is that leaders are asking for help with skills like resilience, emotional intelligence, and the developing the ability to be more humane in the workplace to support the mental health of their teams,” said Tom Freeman, head of engagement at Headspace for Work. “We believe that compassionate leadership is an essential tool to help improve these areas for both employees and organizations.”

Workers who say their manager doesn’t care about them are twice as likely to be worried about losing their job, according to a study by Qualtrics⁴. For employees struggling while working from home, those who say their manager doesn’t care about them are twice as likely to quit their job.

⁴ <https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health>

The mindful leadership payoff

“Leadership traits that are revered – motivating people, treating people with dignity and respect, and driving results – are similar to those of mindful leaders.”

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8

When meditation and mindfulness are actively encouraged and integrated, the benefits really start to create a ripple effect throughout the workforce. Leadership traits that are revered – motivating people, treating people with dignity and respect, and driving results – are similar to those of mindful leaders.

There are many ways that developing mindful leaders can pay off:

- **Lower Stress:** Feeling less stressed means finding more availability for teams, and showing up with a more positive demeanor.
- **Focus:** A trained mind is a focused mind, reducing the prospect of easy distractedness, which, in turn, leads to clearer decision-making.
- **Empathy:** Mindfulness teaches emotional regulation, considered approaches, and increases the ability to stand in the shoes of others, with empathy in mind.
- **Emotional Intelligence:** Self-awareness, open-mindedness, the ability to stay present,

and non-judgmental approaches to challenging situations are traits of mindful people.

- **Collaboration:** Focus, empathy, and emotional intelligence combine to help people solve problems as a self-aware team.
- **Creativity:** A culture committed to improving focus and collaboration leads to mental agility, curiosity, and improved morale.
- **Increased Productivity:** A happy team is a cohesive team, which leads to improved productivity across the board.

According to Forrester Research, scientifically backed meditation and mindfulness helps leaders be more present and find more focus (42% of respondents), and creates a better mental state for employees to be more productive and feel more in control (56% of respondents).

Combating stress and thriving together

“Leaders who practice mindfulness act as positive role models, setting an example for those around them on how to stress less, focus more, and face challenges, big or small.”

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9

Just as stress can spread between close individuals or teams, so can a sense of ease and calm.

Behavioral psychologists at Headspace for Work suggest that developing habits through meditation and mindfulness can help combat stress in individuals who work or live close together — essentially a cascading effect of resilience when faced with struggles, personally or professionally.

Mindful leaders can have a tremendous impact on individuals' experience at work, creating cultures of mindfulness where people have the increased capacity to overcome obstacles and stress without being overwhelmed.

“Companies that have a culture of compassion, and have leaders leading with self-compassion, end up with happier people who are more supportive of each other,” said Evelyn Lewis Prieto, director of meditation at Headspace.

Leaders who practice mindfulness act as positive role models, setting an example for those around

them on how to stress less, focus more, and face challenges, big or small.

Essentially, mindful leaders are creating mindful workplaces where everyone can strive and thrive. It is a culture where individuality and unity go hand in hand within an environment that is kinder, less reactive, and more aware of one another.

Mindful leadership is good business strategy

“Companies that have thrived in the past year are those who have stepped up to care for their employees, supporting their well-being with mental health solutions.”

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10

Leadership development is a \$366 billion a year industry, according to TrainingIndustry.com⁵. What's more, learning and development professionals want to see leaders gain skills that focus on treating people better, according to a 2020 study by *Training* magazine⁶.

The Headspace for Work team agrees — happier, healthier employees are mindful, with increased focus, improved overall well-being, and the skillset to manage emotions even in the most stressful situations. It naturally follows that those same traits would make better leaders.

According to recent data by Forrester Research, mindful leaders are more focused, they improve team collaboration, and report higher levels of creativity among teams.

“With the scientifically backed skill of mindfulness, leaders will start to develop a natural, non-judgmental awareness and compassion for themselves and their teams,” Headspace for Work’s Tom Freeman said. “This, in turn, will help them have better

clarity, strength, and stability when it comes to communication, making decisions, giving feedback, and empowering their teams through both steady and unsteady times.”

Companies that have thrived in the past year are those who have stepped up to care for their employees, supporting their well-being with mental health solutions.

Investing in developing mindful leaders just makes good business sense. It teaches leaders self-care, self-regulation, how to be present and fully engaged, and how to build greater empathy. At the same time, developing mindful leaders provides value to the employees who feel assured when led by a more emotionally intelligent and empathetic leader.

⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chriswestfall/2019/06/20/leadership-development-why-most-programs-dont-work/?sh=7d8ed74761de>

⁶ <https://pubs.royle.com/publication/?m=20617&i=658424&p=34>

How Headspace for Work trains mindful leaders

“Reducing their own stress, and learning to be in the moment, self-aware, and non-judgmental, is the first step to mindful leadership.”

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11

While many of the underpinnings to becoming a mindful leader are similar to individuals becoming more mindful individuals, Headspace for Work’s enterprise offering also conducts workshops geared specifically to building mindful leaders.

Here is an abbreviated overview of how we train mindful leaders:

- **Encourage leaders to develop self-care practices in their own lives — such as meditation and mindfulness.** Reducing their own stress, learning to be in the moment and self-aware and non-judgmental is the first step to mindful leadership.
- **Understand how self-compassion is a foundation for compassion for others.** People want leaders who are empathetic, capable of listening, and addressing their concerns. People want leaders who are empathetic, and capable of listening and addressing their concerns, creating cascading compassion across teams and organizations. We are better able to support others and our teams if we look after ourselves first.

- **Ensure that performance management comes from a place of compassion and empathy, rather than just an exercise.** When that happens, there is a stronger human relationship between managers and their teams.

After the training, we send app-based nudges to leaders to remind them how to practice mindfulness for themselves and in leading their teams.

The benefits of Headspace for Work

“Headspace for Work can help you prevent your leaders from becoming burnt out and give them the tools to develop mindful habits that lead to healthier, happier leaders.”

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12

The team at Headspace for Work is focused on creating happier, healthier employees through meditation and mindfulness.

Our research shows that mindful leaders are better leaders and help employers with employee engagement, retention, and increased focus and productivity.

Leadership is critical to supporting employees, teams, and organizations. Headspace for Work can help you prevent your leaders from becoming burnt out and give them the tools to develop mindful habits that lead to healthier, happier leaders.

LESS STRESS

30 days of Headspace lowers stress by 32%

4 sessions reduce burnout by 14%

MORE FOCUS

4 weeks of Headspace can increase focus by 14%

A single session cuts mind-wandering by 22%

EASIER TEAMWORK

3 weeks of Headspace shows 21% more compassionate behavior, and cuts aggression and reactivity to negative feedback by 57%

GREATER RESILIENCE

10 days of Headspace resulted in a 4.5% increase in resilience

11% increase in resilience after 30 days



Learn more about Headspace for Work