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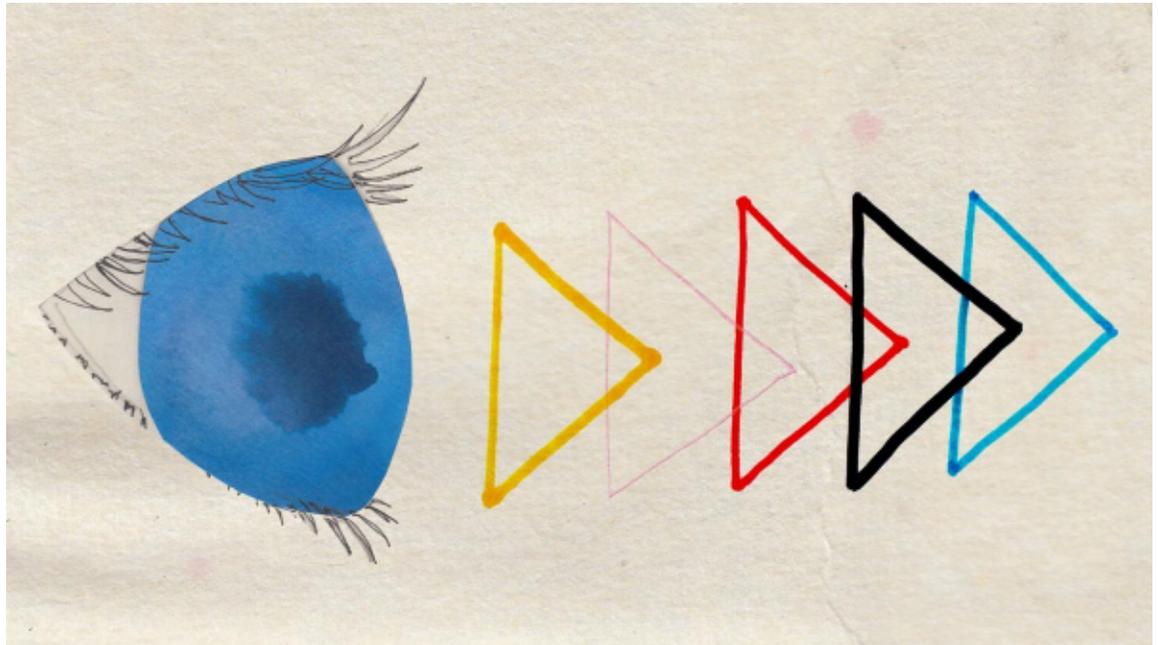
by Shawn Achor and Michelle Gielan

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JENNIFER MARAVILLAS FOR HBR

The most forward-looking companies are willing to take risks to achieve greatness. Most leaders give lip service to this idea, but few actually do it. We have worked with banks willing to take on toxic assets (again) and hedge funds willing to take a \$100 million gamble on a failing company. But their leaders would still be terrified to ask their employees to stop working for two minutes a day to watch their breath go in and out.

In over 700 of our talks at conferences, we have only twice heard a senior leader follow up the financial goal-setting for the next year by telling the company that one of the biggest keys to success will be mindfulness. “Hard work, working faster, doing more with less” — those are the limited solutions of myopic, risk-averse organizations. The problem is that our calculus for [risk and strategy at work is wrong](#). Truly forward-thinking leaders recognize that one of the best business strategies is developing the mindfulness of their workforce.

Aetna, one of the leaders of the movement to apply positive psychology practices to work, instituted a mindfulness training program designed to teach employees how to take short breaks to center themselves through meditation and yoga. More than a quarter of Aetna’s 50,000 employees have taken part. Mindfulness scores increased as expected, but incredibly, on average, [stress levels dropped by 28%, reported sleep quality improved 20%, and pain dropped by 19%](#). Aetna also [calculated the savings to the company](#), finding that, on average, mindfulness participants gained 62 minutes of productivity a week, which is an estimated [\\$3,000-per-employee increase in productivity for the company each year](#). Individuals in the top 20% of stress rankings have nearly [\\$2,000 more in medical costs](#) for the preceding year, so this intervention could create significant medical savings. Based on Aetna’s experience, that’s potentially a \$5,000 average swing per employee, depending on the employee’s starting point. And even that number probably underestimates the financial value of mindfulness, as it doesn’t include the positive impacts on turnover, rehiring costs, retraining costs, customer service, or client-facing sales.

Recently, more researchers have brought mindfulness from the mountaintop to the meeting room to study its effects on business success. Ellen Langer, a psychologist from Harvard and one of the world’s leading experts on the impacts of mindfulness, helped clarify what mindfulness looks like at work and beyond in the [New York Times](#). She says that it’s “noticing moment-to-moment changes around you, from the differences in the face of your spouse across the breakfast table to the variability of your asthma symptoms.” (You can watch her video about Mindfulness for Senior Executives [here](#).) In our own work, we define mindfulness as “the awareness of events and potentialities within an environment.” Observe your team at work: Do they seem very aware? Or are their brains constantly ahead of the present and missing what’s happening in the here and now — the facial reactions of other team members, opportunities to see meaning in stress, and the opportunity to praise or recognize someone before jumping into problems? A lack of mindfulness robs everyone of the opportunity to see potential paths to success.

It’s not hard to spot the ill effects of mindlessness. We can all fall victim to the productivity trap of frantically filling our days with meetings to attend and forms to fill out. Think about these questions: 1) When you aren’t doing something “productive,” do you feel like you are getting behind or not using your time well? 2) When you aren’t scheduled, do you fill micro-moments by pulling out your phone and checking stocks, refreshing your inbox, reading headlines, or playing a quick game of Angry Birds? 3) If you have downtime, do you sometimes feel lost as to how to fill it? 4) Do you want a more successful team? 5) Do you want a promotion? If you answered yes to any of these, you or your company may be ready for mindfulness training.

Mindfulness training, with significant results, is possible in just minutes a day. In a fascinating intervention, Amy Blankson from the Institute of Applied Positive Research ran a pilot study with Google's new hires, called "Nooglers." The pilot study encouraged the new hires to practice mindfulness by meditating for two minutes a day and writing down gratitudes in a journal. Engagement scores rose for those who took part in the program. While this is just one example of many, the reason we're highlighting Google is because it might seem from the outside that the company has the least need for finding ways to increase engagement. But as Laszlo Bock, the Head of People at Google, described in his book *Work Rules*, after the newness and excitement of all the great perks in the Google environment (endless swimming machines, micro kitchens, colorful bikes, free sushi, etc.) wear off, engagement can drop unless the employee takes proactive steps to consciously choose mindfulness and gratitude.

Some of you might be thinking that you have too much going on to focus on meditation. We would argue you have too much going on NOT to focus on it. Researchers from the University of Washington [found](#) that your accuracy rates, ability to multitask, and ability to handle stress significantly improve if you practice meditation for just eight weeks. In an [article](#) published in one of the top psychology journals, our research colleague Alia Crum found that by making individuals mindful of the meaning behind their stress, the negative effects of their stress dropped significantly. Mindfulness training can help people become aware of meaning when we would otherwise miss it.

There are lots of researched ways to increase mindfulness, but instead of overloading you with options you probably won't adopt, let us suggest an easy one: When you first get to work in the morning, spend two minutes a day starting a ritual of doing nothing except watching your breath go in and out and being aware of your surroundings.

Too often, the most ambitious leaders assume that if you are running around, you are achieving much. If you want to be a forward-thinking professional, stop thinking about the future for a moment. If you want to do more today, sit down and practice being aware of your breath and the fact that you have access to meaning right now.

Shawn Achor is *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Happiness Advantage* and *Before Happiness*. His TED talk is one of the most popular, with over 11 million views. He has lectured or researched at over a third of the Fortune 100 and in 50 countries, as well as for the NFL, Pentagon and White House. Shawn is leading a series of courses on "21 Days To Inspire Positive Change" with the Oprah Winfrey Network.

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