



Mindful Leadership: A competitive advantage for small business

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By Maria Gonzalez Special to CBC News



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In these turbulent times characterized by global economic instability and uncertainty, there is a huge opportunity for small businesses to create a competitive advantage by changing their approach to leadership and culture.

The competitive advantage is that of sustainable performance and resilience by everyone in the organization — which in turn translates into sustainable performance and resilience for the business. This can be successfully achieved by creating an organization comprised of what are referred to as "Mindful" leaders.

Mindfulness is a trainable skill that can be learned by anyone. It's developed using the techniques of Mindfulness Meditation, which has its roots in Buddhism, a 2,500-year-old science of the mind. World-class athletes and musicians know the value of this skill, and it's equally beneficial to businesses.

Mindfulness meditation is about paying attention. It trains you to be attentive and conscious, without judgment, about what's happening in any

given moment. With practice you become aware of what is arising in your thoughts and emotions so that you — and your decisions — are not hijacked by them.

Additionally, you can train yourself to be "completely present," preventing the mind from wandering when listening to another person or doing any task. These techniques help your mind to become calmer, more aware and more focused.

Who benefits

The key thing to remember when applying Mindfulness to a business is that the strict definition of a leader being the owner or president of the company is no longer reflective of reality. A leader is anyone who is in a position to influence another person.

Everyone in an organization has the opportunity to influence others all day long, whether it be customers, other employees, lenders, suppliers, or other stakeholders, including the community in which they operate.

That is why developing Mindful leaders throughout an organization presents such an important opportunity for a business.

[Mindfulness techniques](#) can be employed while sitting, lying down, standing or walking. For example, it can include using a word or phrase to help focus the mind, or using breathing to relax the body.

Mindfulness strategies can be applied to every aspect of your life and your business, whether you are creating products and services, dealing with customers, making a presentation, driving your car, spending time with your children, or playing a round of golf.

An organization comprised of Mindful leaders stands out from its competition because of its sustainable performance and resilience. It more easily attracts and retains talent, because it offers a rewarding work environment. People at all levels feel that they are creating value, experiencing fulfillment in their work, and working with people who have presence of mind.

Mindful leadership also carries with it numerous other benefits for the organization, such as:

- Improved time management
- Better judgment and decision making
- An enhanced ability to anticipate and serve customer and other stakeholder needs
- Improved conflict resolution
- More effective teamwork
- Enhanced ability to create and sustain partnerships
- Greater creativity, innovation, and inspiration
- Higher productivity
- Increased ability to deal effectively with stress, individually and collectively

In addition, research by organizations including the U.S. National Institutes of Health, the University of Massachusetts and the University of Wisconsin shows that Mindfulness Meditation affects the inner workings of the brain and has a positive impact on the health of individuals and their performance. Meditation can also help people reduce and manage stress and regulate blood pressure, among other things.

Every organization knows the detrimental impact of stress on its business and the toll it takes financially, creatively, and on overall performance, not to mention the human cost. In fact, companies lose an estimated \$200 billion U.S. annually in absenteeism, sub-par performance, tardiness and workers' compensation claims related to stress, according to the Mind / Body Medical Institute at the Harvard Medical School. These effects are often keenly felt by small businesses, which have limited resources.

Becoming Mindful

Anyone who desires positive transformation can become a Mindful leader. Like all skills, Mindfulness is something that is learned — it takes motivation, good techniques, and practice, practice, practice.

Ideally, one practices the meditation techniques 20 to 30 minutes per day, and as many days of the week as possible. Most training programs are eight weeks in duration, with 60 to 90 minutes per class once a week.

Having trained hundreds of people, what I find particularly effective is to use a two-pronged strategy. The first is to meditate daily. The second is to use what I call Mindfulness in Action strategies that accelerate the individual's learning by having them apply Mindfulness to as much of their daily activities as possible. This would include using techniques to be fully present while doing things such as meeting with a client or stakeholder, negotiating a deal, running on the treadmill, on a flight, or on the golf course.

The effort to train the mind pays off as Mindful leaders develop the ability to reduce the amount of stress in their lives, to calmly manage any stress that remains, to think creatively, to make optimal decisions, and to plan for the future while competing today.

They'll reap personal rewards as well, because Mindfulness will improve health, quality of life, and enable people to experience greater fulfillment.

And the personal and professional competitive advantages can grow exponentially as more people in an organization embrace the idea of becoming more Mindful.