

# The Case for Meditation as a Professional Skill: Making Better Leaders Through Meditation

“The main business case for meditation (*in the workplace*) is that if you’re fully present on the job, you will be more effective as a leader, you will make better decisions and you will work better with other people,”  
(A current Board Member at Goldman Sachs)

Leaders are by design routinely exposed to an inordinate amount of stress in their lives. Coupled with common workplace challenges, many of our leaders (or leader trainees) are also socially, emotionally, or financially challenged. Additionally, many leaders experience the stress of being responsible for diverse teams and for the career development of others within their sphere of responsibility. The sum of these stressors, and other life factors, often contribute significantly to lower efficiencies, decreased productivity, heightened emotional interactions, unacceptable absentee rates and growing health care utilization costs. These disturbing facts ultimately stifle an organization’s bottom line and hampers staff development efforts.

While employee assistance programs are designed to support individuals after issues are identified, typically little is done that will specifically and proactively address and strengthen a leader’s resiliency to stress or to improve sleep thus preventing the negative effects of inadequate rest. Currently, a Consciously Resting Meditation<sup>SM</sup> (CRM) Program, designed to improve resiliency to stress as well as personal and professional success, is showing efficacy at Georgia State University.

# Making Better Leaders Through Meditation

## An Example of Outcomes of Meditation in the Workplace by the Numbers

- 3,500 Number of *Aetna* employees who signed up for the company's mindfulness and yoga (*meditation based*) programs
- 89% Percentage of *General Mills* senior executives who said they had become better listeners as a result of meditation training
- 33% Reduction in employees' stress levels after one hour of yoga a week (*Aetna/Duke University* research)
- 25% Of large US companies that have now launched 'stress-reduction' initiatives
- 1<sup>st</sup> *General Mills*' position in *Leadership Excellence* magazine's 2011 'Best for Leadership' rankings (up from 14<sup>th</sup> in 2010)

# The mind business (edited/excerpt)

By David Gelles - the FT's US M&A correspondent

(edited/excerpt – full article available at [www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/d9cb7940-ebca-11e1-985a-00144feab49a.html#axzz2IdrkLtoo](http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/d9cb7940-ebca-11e1-985a-00144feab49a.html#axzz2IdrkLtoo))

General Mills, the company behind Cheerios cereal and Häagen-Dazs ice cream, is headquartered on a leafy expanse outside Minneapolis, Minnesota. Enclosed walkways connect a network of modernist buildings, protecting Midwestern workers from heat and humidity in the summer, and bitter cold and towering snowdrifts in the winter. Inside the halls, some 3,000 people work on everything from product development and marketing to litigation, regulation and mergers and acquisitions. The employee base is generally reflective of middle America – predominantly white, casually dressed and possessing a genial, if hard-working, disposition.

Yet there are signs that in some significant ways, General Mills has a distinctly unusual corporate culture. Open the right door on a Tuesday morning and you might find a few dozen team leaders and executives meditating silently together on cushions, steeling their minds for the work week ahead. Enter a conference room later that afternoon and witness more than 50 senior employees from across the organization standing on one leg in the tree pose as they practice yoga. Note that in every building on the General Mills campus there is a meditation room, equipped with a few zafus – or cushions for sitting practice – and yoga mats where, day after day, employees duck in to grab a few minutes of equanimity in between their meetings. These are the most obvious signs that, as an organization, General Mills has something resembling a collective spiritual life.

This isn't some passing fad sweeping middle management, or a pilot program dreamed up by human resources. For seven years now, a growing number of General Mills workers have been practicing meditation, yoga and so-called "mindfulness" in the workplace. And what began as a side project by one executive has transformed the culture of a Fortune 200 multinational. "It's about training our minds to be more focused, to see with clarity, to have spaciousness for creativity and to feel connected," says (*a company spokesperson*).

The General Mills initiative is at the vanguard of a movement that is quietly reshaping certain corners of the corporate world. With meditation, yoga and "mindfulness", the foundational tenets of Buddhism, Hinduism and other pan-Asian philosophies have infiltrated the upper echelons of some of the biggest companies on earth.

A current Goldman Sachs board member and a former chief executive of the healthcare giant Medtronic, started meditating in 1974 and never stopped. Today, he is one of the main advocates for bringing meditation into corporate life,

writing articles on the subject for the Harvard Business Review. “The main business case for meditation is that if you’re fully present on the job, you will be more effective as a leader, you will make better decisions and you will work better with other people,” he tells me. “I tend to live a very busy life. This keeps me focused on what’s important.”

“If you just sit and observe, you will see how restless your mind is,” Steven Jobs (*Apple co-founder*) told his biographer. “If you try to calm it, it only makes it worse, but over time it does calm, and when it does, there’s room to hear more subtle things – that’s when your intuition starts to blossom and you start to see things more clearly and be in the present more. Your mind just slows down, and you see a tremendous expanse in the moment. You see so much more than you could see before. It’s a discipline; you have to practice it.”

There are no reliable statistics on how many companies offer meditation in the workplace, but a quarter of large US employers have launched “stress reduction” initiatives, according to the HR and outsourcing consultancy Aon Hewitt, and that number is growing steadily.

Known as Mindful Leadership, the General Mills program uses a mix of sitting meditation where practitioners sit in a comfortable position, close their eyes and simply notice the physical sensations in their body and the swirling thoughts in their brain. Meditators gradually recognize the fleeting nature of sensations, including pain, anger and frustration. In time, this allows practitioners to quiet the mind. If it all works as intended, this results in individuals who are less agitated, more focused and easier to work with.

This may sound like New Age mumbo-jumbo, but a growing body of academic research provides a scientific explanation. Meditation is shown to reduce levels of cortisol, a hormone related to stress. When cortisol levels drop, the mind grows calmer and gains the stability to become more focused. “Mindfulness (*meditation*) is an idea whose time has come,” says Google’s Tan. “For a long time practitioners knew, but the science wasn’t there. Now the science has caught up.”

That the practice delivers consistent results has led to its popularity not only with spiritual seekers, but also with psychoanalysts, health and now business professionals. At General Mills, several hundred executives have taken part in the program, which has gained national renown and is being exported to other multinational companies.

General Mills has embraced the Mindful Leadership program at an institutional level, an unusual but significant move for a very mainstream multinational. Since then, the company’s reputation as a proving ground for corporate leaders has only grown in stature.

# The Case for Meditation as a Professional Skill

*By Nicole Bélanger (Community Builder, Ladies Learning Code)*

What if I told you that there was one practice that, if incorporated into your daily routine, could help you build some of the most desirable leadership skills and traits? Would you believe me?

Valuable skills like:

- Compassion and empathy
- Creativity
- The ability to manage stress and self-regulate
- Self-awareness
- Efficiency and productivity
- Focus

And the best part? It's absolutely free and you can start tomorrow. I'm talking about meditation.

## **What Is Meditation?**

At its most basic level, meditation is the practice of altering the mind, often to reach an altered state of consciousness or mindfulness.

But the term meditation encompasses a multitude of practices -- not just sitting cross-legged on the floor and chanting 'om', desperately hoping for some divine moment of revelation.

Meditation can be broken down roughly into two forms: focused attention and open monitoring. In focused attention meditation, the individual focuses on a particular object, thought, feeling, or sensation and actively guides the mind back to the point of focus if thoughts begin to stray. But with open monitoring, the individual allows themselves to sense, feel, and observe to create awareness. Beyond these two categories, there is an incredible vastness of styles of practice, ranging from using a mantra, to visualization, to walking meditation and much more.

Chances are if you've tried meditating before and didn't enjoy it, there is another type out there waiting to be discovered that will better suit your needs, lifestyle and personality.

## **Why Should I Bother?**

With inboxes overflowing and calendars ready to burst, meditation can seem like a frivolous luxury that we just don't have time for.

Let's shift that thinking for a minute.

Forget about prioritizing time for your meditation practice. Instead, think of it as making time for:

Alleviating stress, anxiety, and depression  
Improving your health (reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease)  
Improving your focus and productivity  
Becoming a more compassionate individual

Now let me ask you again: Do you have time to meditate?

Countless studies over the last several decades have found that meditation can dramatically improve our physical, mental, and emotional health -- all of which are foundational to our professional success.

Like a house built on a shoddy foundation, a business built on the back of an unhealthy founder can have unfortunate consequences. Investing just a few minutes a day in your meditation practice goes beyond improving your wellbeing in the short-term; studies have shown that meditation has the power to alter our brains and produce incredible, long-lasting benefits.

### **How Do I Get Started?**

As Leo Baubuta of ZenHabits explains, it can -- and probably should -- be as simple as starting out by committing to two minutes of meditation each day. "Start simply if you want the habit to stick. You can do it for 5 minutes if you feel good about it, but all you're committing to is 2 minutes each day", he advises. Your meditation can be as simple as focusing on your breath, but if you prefer a little more support, you can try a guided meditation from an app like Bhuddify or Headspace.

The most important thing is to stay consistent. As Dr. Rebecca Gladding explains, the brain's incredible neuroplasticity that can work in our favour by 're-wiring' our responses to stress and anxiety can easily revert back to their previous state without daily practice:

"It definitely motivates me on those days I don't 'feel' like sitting" she shares, "try to remind yourself that meditating every day, even if it's only 15 minutes, will keep those newly formed connections strong and those unhelpful ones of the past at bay".

While meditation is widely praised as a powerful tool in our wellness arsenal, it is a highly personal practice that needs to feel right. Whether you meditate alone in your car, in the park by your office, or in a group session, the important thing is that you start -- your body and your business will thank you.

# Why This Congressman Is Fighting To Bring Mindfulness To Veterans (edited)

Carolyn Gregoire is a Senior Writer at the Huffington Post, Posted: 03/13/2014 12:02 pm EDT Updated: 03/13/2014 12:59 pm EDT

Wisconsin native Travis Leanna was 22 years old in 2007, when he was deployed to Fallujah for Operation Iraqi Freedom. Initially buzzing with excitement over the prospect of heading overseas and into combat, the young Marine quickly realized that the experience would be nothing like what he expected. Leanna spent most of his time in Fallujah hiding in various locations, working with improvised explosive devices, and looking for civilians who were making bombs.

"I got there and I got really scared -- not scared in the sense of being frightened, but scared of the power of being there and the decisions that can save or end people's lives," Leanna told The Huffington Post. "That's a lot for someone who's in their 20s."

When he returned to Wisconsin two years later, Leanna struggled with insomnia, and says he was "completely emotionally withdrawn from everyone."

"I would wake up startled because I'd think I fell asleep on post and something could be going on," Leanna said. "It was like waking up in combat."

Leanna says he was reluctant to seek help, or even admit that anything was wrong. But after he took part in a paid study of veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, he began practicing meditation. The experience completely changed his life, he says, and brought him the peace of mind that had eluded him since he went into combat years before. Now, Leanna teaches mindfulness and deep breathing to other veterans as part of [Project Welcome Home Troops](#).

Leanna is one of an increasing number of veterans turning to mindfulness to cope with combat-related PTSD, and if Rep. Tim Ryan (D-Ohio) has anything to say about it, mindfulness will be offered as a treatment option to every U.S. veteran.

In November, Ryan and Rep. Rich Nugent (R-Fla.) introduced the [Veterans and Armed Forces' Health Promotion Act of 2013](#), a bill aiming to improve the quality of health care provided to former members of the armed services by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense. The bill seeks to improve health and wellness among the veteran population through integrative health programs, including mindfulness-based programs, healthy eating plans and yoga therapy, as well as the creation of about 10 veteran family wellness

centers across the country. It would also expand holistic care education and research for such common post-war issues as PTSD and traumatic brain injury.

Among the veteran population, mental health issues have reached a recent, and troubling, high. [According to a recent Institute of Medicine report](#), the number of active-duty service members diagnosed with a psychological condition has increased by over 60 percent between 2001 and 2011, and an estimated [22 veterans commit suicide](#) each day. PTSD -- an anxiety that develops after exposure to traumatic events -- afflicts roughly 11 to 20 percent of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans, [according to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs](#), and up to 30 percent of Vietnam veterans.

As these numbers continue to grow, critics say the government is not offering veterans enough mental health resources. CNN has called the lack of attention given to veterans' mental health issues the "[greatest risk to returning service members](#)."

"The default position is that we can treat this with medication, and I'm not saying that medication doesn't have a role to play here, but to have these vets on 10 or 12 or 15 prescriptions is insane," Ryan told HuffPost. "It just doesn't make any sense to anybody ... The other issue is that we really need to look at, study and evaluate these integrative health approaches."

"This bill is to try to address those issues in a different way, and with approaches that are working in different places across the country in the field of integrative health, and to use these approaches to try to help heal our veterans from some of these very difficult traumas that they have," Ryan said.

Ryan and his staff are currently working with members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee to get the bill on their radar. Ryan says they're also aggressively campaigning to get co-sponsors in Congress, which he believes will save money for the health care system in the long run, since most mindfulness and integrative health interventions are relatively inexpensive. What's more, they've been scientifically proven to be [effective complementary treatments](#) for a number of mental health issues.

"[Mindfulness] is really helping people, and it's time for us to not be afraid of doing it because we don't know a lot about it," said Ryan. "It's time for legislators to learn about it because it's hitting all the buttons -- it's helping the veterans, it's low-cost, it's low-tech, and there aren't any side effects ... If that doesn't cross partisan lines, I don't know what's going to."

Many veterans that Ryan has worked with at various VA offices are already doing some form of mindfulness practice, whether it's yoga or deep breathing, as a way to help them process their trauma -- and it's working.



"You're getting vets who haven't slept through the night in two years, and after just two or three sessions, they begin sleeping through the night and they're slowly weaning themselves off all their medication," said Ryan. "Why not see that and figure out how we can provide those services to vets across the United States?"

There are thousands of studies indicating the physical and mental health benefits of meditation. One such [study](#), from the University of Michigan Health System and the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System, found last year that veterans who completed an eight-week group mindfulness program showed a significant reduction in symptoms, compared to those who did not undergo any program.

"Part of the psychological process of PTSD often includes avoidance and suppression of painful emotions and memories, which allows symptoms of the disorder to continue," Anthony King, the study's lead author and a research assistant professor at the UM Department of Psychiatry, [said in a statement](#). "Through the mindfulness intervention, however, we found that many of our patients were able to stop this pattern of avoidance and see an improvement in their symptoms."

Outside of Congress, a number of parties have expressed their support for the bill, including groups that advocate for mindfulness, integrative health and veterans' rights. Since the bill contains a healthy diet component, sustainable farming groups have come out in favor of it as well.

Ryan says he's pleased with the "broad coalition" of support the bill is receiving, saying, "We have the inside-outside game going on."

"There's more and more interest coming as people see the science come online and we begin the educational process," said Ryan. "That's really what I want this bill to be -- an opportunity to educate people and members of Congress about what's happening in the field of integrative health."

Ryan himself first came to mindfulness as a way to deal with stress, burnout, information overload and "just a lot of busyness" -- and after going on a [five-day retreat with Jon Kabat-Zinn](#), founding director of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, he says the practice changed his life.

Soon afterward, Ryan began working to bring mindfulness to in-need schoolchildren in his home state of Ohio and to veterans as a stress-relieving, trauma-reducing intervention. Ryan has also brought mindfulness to the Hill through the [Quiet Time Caucus](#), a weekly gathering during which members of Congress can participate in a 30-minute group meditation. Ryan hopes that mindfulness will create real change on the Hill and beyond.

"Your connection to others really gets enhanced when you slow down. You're able to be with people and you tend to become a bit of a better listener, and therefore a little kinder and more compassionate," says Ryan. "I think [mindfulness] can be something that, moving forward, can be very healing for veterans and for our citizens -- and it's going to heal the body politic as well."