


Mindfulness

Creating a culture of calm

STORY **Julia Stockman**
People & Culture Consultant
Baker Tilly Staples Rodway Taranaki



It's a fast-paced, frantic world we live in and there will be times when all you want to do is crawl into a dark cave and wait till the chaos and noise dissipate before emerging.

Unfortunately, for most of us, the reality is that life doesn't quite work that way. You know what it's like: demanding deadlines, the pressure to deliver, constant distractions. The result? Anxiety, stress and an unhealthy workplace. More and more, the importance of being able to calm our minds amidst the chaos is critical if we are to focus our attention and effectively perform at work. For leaders, creating a culture of wellbeing, where people can thrive and flourish, is not only good for business but is at the heart of true leadership.

The World Health Organisation predicts that mental illness will be the leading cause of disability and absence in the workplace by 2030 if it's not proactively addressed. The Southern Cross Health Society' Wellness in the Workplace' survey of 2015 estimates that New Zealand lost approximately 6.7 million working days to absence in 2014. The direct costs of absence alone, most commonly from minor illness, amounted to \$1.4 billion across the economy in 2014. It's estimated that on average, employees have nearly three times as many presentee days (whereby the employee is 'at the office' but not 100% well), as absentee days, resulting in much higher 'hidden' costs of poor mental health. The average cost to New Zealand employers of absentee and presentee days is estimated at over \$1,500 per year, per employee.

These are quite sobering statistics for anyone to read. Yes, the world is complex, and we need resilience to cope. But it's not all doom and gloom. We can build resilience, and complex problems can be easily solved if we are in the right headspace. So, what's the answer? Mindfulness.

Mindfulness was once viewed as somewhat unconventional for western society. It is the practice of self-observation without judgement, with a focus on our minds' inner voice. As scientific research uncovers the enormous benefits on our wellbeing, it is quickly gaining momentum.

A study published in the Journal of Applied Psychology in 2012 revealed that individuals who practised some form of mindfulness experience had significantly less emotional exhaustion and more job satisfaction than individuals who did not. In addition, research conducted by the Institute for Mindful Leadership reveals that when we practice mindfulness, we reduce stress, we're able to think more creatively, enhance performance and we can increase our emotional intelligence and empathy levels.

Let's consider the challenges facing you as a leader. How do you go about creating that culture of wellbeing, where people can thrive and flourish? Carley Huack's (Executive Coach and Founder of Living Well Awake) message to leaders is; "when you create a strong foundation of authenticity, psychological safety, wellbeing, and belonging in the workplace, you alter the atmosphere. You create ease where there was tension. You boost productivity, cultivate self-awareness, maximise effectiveness, increase creativity, enhance teamwork and foster healthy relationships." Sounds easy right? Leading people is one of the most challenging roles we can take on in life. It takes passion and energy but often, we're left at the end of each day feeling exhausted. What part does mindfulness play? And can we use mindfulness as a leadership tool?

A 2017 Harvard Business Review research study revealed that when leaders are stressed, their anxiety can be felt across the entire organisation. Only 7% of employees believe that their 'stressed' leaders effectively lead teams. With these statistics in mind, it's relatively easy to see how much we need to nurture the concept of mindful leadership.

"A mindful leader is someone who embodies leadership presence by cultivating focus, clarity, creativity and compassion in the service of others."

THE INSTITUTE FOR MINDFUL LEADERSHIP

So, what does it mean to be a mindful leader? Mindfulness is a practical skill that we, as leaders, can use to navigate through leadership challenges effectively. By using our own mindfulness practice, paying attention to how we are showing up with the people we lead, we can control our reactions to difficult situations so that we can process and make rational decisions, not emotive ones. And the first step in becoming a mindful leader is self-awareness.

Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence guru, writes in his book Emotional Intelligence; "For leaders, the first task in management has nothing to do with leading others; step one poses the challenge of knowing and managing oneself." Daniel Goleman says that people who have a high degree of self-awareness recognise how their feelings affect them, other people and their job performance.



“Without self-awareness and the ability to manage our emotions, we often unknowingly lead from hurt, not heart. Not only is this a huge energy suck for us and the people around us, but it also creates distrust, disengagement and an eggshell culture.”

BRENÉ BROWN

- Were these expectations reasonable and achievable?
- Have I got a good understanding of the skills, knowledge and ability of my people before assigning tasks?
- Have I empowered my people to achieve the goals?

Mindful leaders don't just hold others accountable; they do the same with themselves.

Mindfulness in leadership is starting to take shape. More and more people are learning the power of mindfulness and how this can empower them to become the best version of themselves. The environment we live and work in is constantly evolving, and we are often overwhelmed by the complexity of today's world. We know this for a fact. So as a wise person once said, “You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.” As we look for ways to strengthen and build our resilience, ways to calm our minds as we surf the waves, I encourage you to lean in, be brave and curious to explore your own mind in mindfulness.

julia.stockman@bakertillysr.nz

A mindful leader won't simply blame others if the goals aren't met. They will take an honest look at themselves and see if they did everything possible to help their teams succeed. American Researcher and Author, Brené Brown, says that we need to be curious of our own blind spots and how we can pull these into view. We need to be committing to helping the people we serve find their blind spots in a way that's safe and supportive. This is leading from the heart. Next time something doesn't quite go to plan at work, or someone doesn't quite meet your expectations, ask yourself:

- Do I have good intent, and do I care why?
- Did I set clear expectations and communicate them clearly?