

Mindfulness Brings Calm, Compassion and Creativity to Family Enterprises

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Families in business together need skills in managing both emotional and financial demands. They must remain calm and focused in the face of high stakes situations. They need to let go of baggage from the past while not being overwhelmed by the uncertainty of the future. While some families struggle with these skills, many become masterful in focusing their attention on the demands of the present moment without being distracted by the past and future. Exemplary family firm leaders create confidence in those around them by maintaining their equanimity, even in the face of constant pressures from a variety of sources.

Perhaps you'd be surprised to learn that all of these valuable leadership attributes — focused attention on the present moment, concentration leading to fresh insights, calm presence in the face of multiple demands - can be cultivated with a regular practice of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is getting a lot of attention these days from a variety of disciplines, ranging from business to health care to education. A growing body of evidence shows that mindfulness promotes important benefits for individual well-being and organizational success. Many prominent businesses — including Google, Target and General Mills — are bringing this discipline to their leaders and associates because they recognize it supports better decisions, higher morale and a stronger bottom line. Thought leaders, from the Harvard Business

Review to the Mayo Clinic to the Federal Trade Commission, all agree that the benefits of mindfulness justify moving this practice out of retreat centers and into the power centers of our society.

Mindfulness is a straightforward and practical discipline that yields benefits to any practitioner. Given the higher emotional intensity often typical of family firms, we believe that mindfulness is especially valuable to families in business together. Cultivating the ability to respond calmly to stressful, emotional situations can be a game changer for family firms. Developing an ability to maintain compassion and trust when faced with very difficult — even aggressive — behavior of others is crucial. Learning to take complex, multifaceted situations and respond with deliberate, focused attention is essential. All of these capacities can be fostered through mindfulness practices.

Benefits for Family Enterprise

- Families can get caught up in worrying about the past or future. Mindfulness cultivates an ability to remain centered in the present moment.
 - Families can be rocked by emotional complexity and relationship stress. Mindfulness cultivates an ability to remain calm in the face of emotions and conflict.
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- Families can get stuck in habitual responses in both the family and the business. Mindfulness cultivates sustained concentration which yields fresh insights.

What is Mindfulness and how do you do it?

Mindfulness is the act of slowing down and fully attending to what is happening in the present moment. As you concentrate your attention, often beginning with a focus on breathing, your mind begins to clear itself of its usual chatter, clutter and reactions. As you devote your complete attention to one simple thing at a time, your entire system calms. As the calm deepens, your focus and concentration also deepen. The practice of mindfulness is a kind of training for your thinking muscles; it strengthens your ability to focus and concentrate, leading to lower stress, deeper insight and thus better, more enduring decisions.

A person can become more mindful through regular, simple practice. The most common approach to learning mindfulness is to set aside a few minutes each day to simply focus on your breathing. Sit quietly and pay close attention to your breath, breathing in deeply and breathing out deeply, all while keeping your mental attention focused only on this breathing. When you find your mind wandering (which it will), gently bring it back to the focus on your breath. Start by doing this for a short period — even as little as two or three minutes —and gradually over time you will find you can extend

the time of focused attention. Think of it like a workout for your powers of concentration. As you build up to 10, 20 even 30 minutes of daily quiet attention, you will find a profound carryover to the rest of your day. Over time, you will find it easier to maintain focused attention in the face of multiple demands and to make calm responses in the face of emergencies.

Another simple way of developing the habit is to set a cue for yourself, whether it is when your phone rings or when you get up from your desk. Take that moment and focus on the present, on your surroundings, on your breath. Slow down and simply “be” for a few seconds, attending only to what is present at that exact moment, whether it’s the sound and tone of the ringing phone or on the feeling of your feet meeting the surface of the hallway. If you practice in this manner regularly, multiple times throughout the day, you will strengthen your ability to be present to the experience of the moment. Practicing mindful attention at unemotional times like these will strengthen the control you have over your mind at more stressful and emotional times. Your power of concentration and calm will lead to more reasoned reactions and fresher insights.

Can strong, “Type A” leaders really do this?

Type A leaders may find it hard to imagine responding in this way. Action, reaction and more action is the hallmark of the dynamic, aggressive leader. However, we believe that top guns can access the many benefits

How to practice mindfulness.

How regularly? As often as you can. Daily is best. It’s hard to get the benefits without a regular practice.

There are many ways to cultivate focus. One option: attend to your breathe. When your mind wanders, which it will, gently bring it back to the inbreath and outbreath. Gaze at a candle or flower. When your mind wanders, return to the object of your attention. Or consider focusing on a phrase or mantra.

Make time, regularly, to sit quietly and focus on the present moment.

How much time? At the beginning, 5 minutes or less. Seasoned practitioners sit for 20–40 minutes daily.

Designate a spot for your practice. Place a cushion or comfortable chair there, along with a flower or other beautiful element to cultivate a peaceful setting.

of mindfulness, and that they have a lot to gain by doing so. In the context of a family business, the discipline of attention may be even more valuable. It can be difficult to remain objective when you are personally and directly involved in the situation at hand. Brothers and sisters working together may push each other's buttons in a management meeting. A mother and daughter may get tangled up in a power struggle while trying to make a decision about the location of a family meeting. A simple remark made to the CEO by her uncle during a board meeting may trigger a disproportionate response. We have all seen scenarios like this and found ourselves triggered to respond in emotion-driven ways that hampered our best thinking and led to suboptimal outcomes.

The driving personality of many successful leaders, in the family or the business, generally assume that the best response to complex and emotional situations is to push through, press forward and nail down a solution, preferably as quickly as possible. Typical responses to tough situations may include:

1. Find a solution — even a suboptimal one — and move on;
2. Ignore the difficult issue and hope things will resolve on their own;
3. When confronted with differences, persist and persuade until your way prevails.

While these approaches may lead to short-term solutions or resolution, they tend to create long-term damage to relationships and escalate the stress of all stakeholders in the system, in addition to leading to less than optimal solutions. In a family business, preserving relationships and communication for the long term is essential.

In the heat of the moment, we often do not realize that our responses are largely anxiety driven. We experience some kind of a threat (to our position, our authority, or our sense of security) and we react almost automatically to reduce the unpleasant anxiety. It is only by stepping back and out of the immediate situation that we can become aware of the extent to which emotion and fear are driving our behavior. The practice of mindfulness gives us the discipline to slow down, recognize how our emotions may be driving our actions, and the capacity

to choose between a more carefully considered and broader set of options.

Another benefit of mindfulness, and perhaps especially for leaders, is that emotions are contagious. When a leader is stressed and over-reacting to a situation, that bleeds out to others in the system. However, if the leader is able to take some practiced calming breaths and attend to the heart of the matter, instead of being captured by the heat of the emotions involved, then that leader will serve as a calming influence on the group, enabling everyone to focus with their rational minds and thus generate better ideas.

Perhaps Type A's can find it useful to replace their imperative of "Don't just Sit there, Do Something" with "Don't Just Do Something, Sit There."

Increasing your capacity to accept and to genuinely understand

The family business ecosystem, with its complex overlap of family, owners and management, requires emotional intelligence and resilience. The needs and priorities of each of these groups is not always aligned, decisions and trade-offs may not always be to your liking, authority has to be shared, and the path forward is often littered with landmines. One of the key benefits of a practice of mindfulness is that it develops your ability to accept that sometimes things are what they are. If your father has always been a dogmatic leader, he's not likely to change when he's edging towards age 70. If your brother doesn't have the work ethic you would like him to have, there's nothing you can do to make that reality different. What you can control is how you react to these ongoing sources of frustration. The practice of mindfulness is a powerful way to calm your mind and choose your response to frustrating external conditions. While mindfulness isn't a magic wand that can change reality, a mindful approach can bring you more acceptance of situations over which you have no control or more productive response that incorporate increased creativity and fresh thinking.

How does mindfulness work in practice? First, when you find yourself reacting to a situation and can develop the habit of taking a step back and taking a calming breath, you place yourself in a better position to think clearly. When your emotional buttons are not being triggered,

you can reach out to the other person and, as Covey might say, “seek first to understand before seeking to be understood.” Ask the others about their state of mind, their concerns-put yourself in their shoes and attempt to deeply understand their point of view. This takes calm, active listening. You are not merely giving them a chance to vent, you are seeking to understand how and why a reasonable person might see things as they do. You are focusing all of your attention on their words and your desire to understand the situation from their point of view rather than listening with half a mind and concocting your responses and counterarguments as they speak.

As you listen to their view and attend to your reaction or thoughts in the face of this information, you may be surprised to find that the less you seek to “find” the solution, the more likely that a new and fresh solution emerges. Sometimes the most creative answers emerge from a kind of blank mind. This is not unlike the experience we have all had of standing in the shower and having an important insight come to us, seemingly

out of the blue, or going on a long walk or drive in the country only to find the answer to a stubborn problem rising in the mind when we are thinking of nothing and everything all at once.

Conclusion

To be mindful is to be truly alive, present and at one with those around you and with what you are doing. A regular practice of mindfulness has been linked to the creation of fresh ideas, a stronger immune system and a greater individual capacity for joy. In addition, there is growing interest and research to support the idea that

mindfulness leads to more effective organizations and greater health, and, as we have discussed, this may be particularly valuable in the world of family businesses. As promising as all of this is, it is important to remember that in order to derive these benefits, regular practice is essential. Like any new capacity, the ability to stay calm and focused in the present moment takes practice, and one becomes more skillful with more practice.

Further Reading & Resources

There are many organizations to tap for more information or resources on mindfulness. Just two to consider:

1. Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, scientist, writer and meditation teacher. Books: “Full Catastrophe Living” (Revised Edition 2013), “Wherever You Go, There You Are” (2009)
Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care & Society, University of Mass. Medical School
2. Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist Monk, Author, Peace Activist. Book: “Peace is Every Step, The Miracle of Mindfulness etc.”
Plum Village Monastery



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