



# Be mindful of mindfulness

By Chris Charyk | June 1, 2016

Today's health care leaders face an increasingly complex and daunting mix of strategic challenges: meeting aggressive growth and profitability targets despite new value-based reimbursements, maintaining and improving quality metrics, and keeping providers and staff engaged, productive, and fully aligned to the organization's vision.

Not to mention also managing their own stress, energy levels, and well-being through the tumult.

In the search for tools and approaches to manage these challenges, health care leaders have often turned to leadership research, hoping that what has been successful for corporate leaders will prove effective in health care as well.

***97% of senior executives said strategic thinking is the most critical leadership skill***

It is therefore somewhat ironic to note that it is health care research that's now driving growing interest throughout the leadership world in mindfulness – and how adopting a regular practice of mindfulness meditation can lead to better leadership and business outcomes.



Over the past 35 years, research led or inspired by the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School has shown major reductions in medical and psychological symptoms – including stress, anxiety, and chronic pain – from the practice of mindfulness-based stress reduction.

A number of forward-thinking corporate leaders from companies such as Google, Apple, and Proctor & Gamble are now embarking on a multitude of pilot programs to explore how the practice of mindfulness might benefit organizations and their leaders.

In the organizational context, the term “mindfulness” is most often used to describe a meditation technique that helps people get better at managing stress and maintaining mental clarity. But

mindfulness has much more to offer the leader who explores further. Specifically, new findings from neuroscience research, together with the experience of mindfulness “early adopters,” suggest that mindfulness can be a powerful means for leaders to deepen their strategic thinking capabilities.

## The awareness connection

In surveys of senior executives, strategic thinking consistently rates among the top two or three critical leadership competencies. In a February 2014 Harvard Business Review article, Robert Kabacoff, the vice president of research at Management Research Group (MRG), cites a 2013 MRG study in which 97 percent of a group of 10,000 senior executives said strategic thinking is the most critical leadership skill for an organization’s success. And while there’s no universally accepted definition for strategic thinking, there is a general consensus that it requires elements such as interpretation, challenge, alignment, and learning.

Fundamental to all of these strategic thinking elements is a leader’s awareness: awareness of inputs to the strategic plan; awareness of the quality and limitations of data; awareness of likely reactions of competitors, customers, and internal stakeholders; awareness of alternative scenarios; and awareness of other obvious factors as well as more subtle influences.

Ultimately, it is leaders’ self-awareness that may most critically determine the rigor, quality, and effectiveness of their organizations’ strategy. Do leaders truly understand all of the explicit and implicit assumptions that they’re making? Are they thinking big enough? How much has wishful thinking played a role? Have the larger, systemic impacts been under- or over-emphasized? What hidden forces, such as anger, ambition, desire for revenge, or fear of failure, might be clouding the picture?

Deepening self-awareness is at the heart of a regular mindfulness practice. Mindfulness practitioners learn how to objectively observe physical sensations, emotions, individual thoughts, and the larger thought patterns that make up assumptions, beliefs, perspectives, and mindsets. As a leader’s self-awareness grows, so does the ability to make better decisions, avoid unproductive patterns of thought and behavior, understand the motivations of others, and anticipate the impact of new initiatives.

For health care leaders, adopting a mindfulness practice offers a compelling opportunity to leverage a proven health management approach in the service of improved strategic thinking and stronger leadership.

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