

Business Skills and Buddhist Mindfulness

Some Executive-Education Professors Teach Ways Students Can Calm Their Minds, Increase Focus

By BETH GARDINER

Business schools are beginning to embrace a practice that has grown popular in the corporate world—teaching and studying mindfulness, the originally Buddhist approach to increasing awareness of oneself and one's surroundings.

In M.B.A. and executive-education courses, a handful of professors offer techniques to help students calm their minds and increase their focus. Such skills, they argue, are crucial for those hoping to succeed in an increasingly frenetic environment where distractions from an always-buzzing phone to pressure for strong quarterly profit reports constantly impinge on decisions.

While the idea of mindfulness originates in the serious practice of meditation, B-school faculty say it has many applications for executives who aren't looking for a spiritual fix but simply want to clear their heads and become aware of reflexive, emotional reactions that can lead to bad decisions.

And it isn't just individuals that can be mindful, they say. Donde Ashmos Plowman, dean of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Business Administration, has examined the mindfulness of organizations, a concept described previously by Karl Weick, at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business.

Mindful organizations are those that pay close attention to what is happening within them, are ready to correct mistakes rather than punishing workers who report them and respond quickly to changes or problems, Ms. Plowman said.

She and several colleagues tried to quantify the mindfulness of 180 different business schools, asking deans and other administrators to complete questionnaires. Critics have accused business schools of culpability in the many high-profile lapses of corporate ethics in recent years, and Dean Plowman said studying the schools' mindfulness could indicate whether they are capable of self-correction.

One thing the researchers noticed, Dean Plowman said, was that deans rated their schools' mindfulness more highly than did those working for them.

"It's easy for people at the head of an organization to end up in a bubble," she said. "That really alerted me to say, 'What do I need to do as a dean to improve the way we communicate?'"

Others apply mindfulness at a more individual level.

At IMD business school in Lausanne, Switzerland, leadership professor Ben Bryant introduces his executive-education students to techniques for concentrating on their breathing and becoming aware of sounds and sensations, which he says can help them center themselves at the office or in a business meeting.

"Hard-core meditators are horrified that this word is being used in business," he said. "They think meditation was never meant to be instrumental in making money."

Nonetheless, Mr. Bryant feels it is worthwhile to help those running companies to slow down and think about how best to direct their attention. Especially for CEOs, "it's the smallest things that they do that have huge ripple effects," he said. "Because their lives are so busy and so loaded up with things, they miss too many opportunities to make either themselves or their organizations different."

Jeremy Hunter, who teaches at the Peter F. Drucker and Masatoshi Ito Graduate School of Management at Claremont Graduate University outside Los Angeles, believes mindfulness should be at the center of business schools' teaching. That, he argues, is because it is about improving the quality of attention, and in the modern workplace, attention is the key to productivity.

"To me, it's fundamental to how work gets done these days," he said. "Basically, that's what work is, attention."

In a series of four seven-week executive-education classes, and a separate course for M.B.A. students, Mr. Hunter teaches what he calls self-management, "managing your insides so you can deal with your outsides better." He often starts class with a brief meditation, and covers topics like managing emotional reactions and dealing with change.

"One of the powers of being at a business school is that you reach an audience that would never show up at a meditation fair" but can recognize the techniques' usefulness, he said.

After a conversation about multitasking, one student became frustrated with a weekly work meeting where staff were more focused on their cellphones than the discussion, Mr. Hunter said. When he returned to the office and insisted that everyone put their phones in a box before starting, his colleagues initially

responded with irritation, but the weekly gathering soon became so much more efficient that it was cut from to an hour from 90 minutes, Mr. Hunter said.

At Harvard Business School, leadership professor William George focuses on helping businesspeople to better understand their emotions. He ran a two-day conference in 2010 on mindful leadership with a Tibetan Buddhist meditation master, and has meditated regularly since 1975.

In his executive-education class on leadership development, he instructs students who include CEOs to open up to others about their toughest experiences.

Such conversations can increase self-awareness, which Professor George sees as central to good leadership. It isn't a lack of intelligence that causes executives to make poor decisions, but a lack of awareness of the feelings that drive their reactions, he said.

"It's the inability to admit your own mistakes, or your fear of failure, your fear of rejection, your desire to be seen as Mr. Perfect, or Ms. Perfect in front of groups, that's what leads to failure," he said. "It's amazing to me how executives in their 40s or 50s who are running giant enterprises can get really into this."

Contact

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