

Mindful leadership for audit leaders

Mindfulness is a philosophy not a science. There may be aspects that resonate with you more than others. Perhaps it is something to explore with your team - mindful auditing may help to reduce some of the operational pressures that auditors are exposed to. Mindfulness provides a way to press the pause button just long enough to settle the mind.

To be objective. To be productive. To be calm.

With corporate governance almost continually under the spotlight, and not in a positive way, internal audit is under increasing pressure to perform. We need to be the best leaders we can possibly be.

Perhaps mindful leadership has some of the answers.



Why mindful leadership is relevant to internal audit

Mindful leadership focuses on the practical, for example:

- Typical words associated with the concept, that resonate with internal auditors include - objectivity, productivity, engagement, culture, performance, stress management, energy, focus, stewardship, accountability and sustainability - sound familiar?
- Internal audit planning is often challenging for internal auditors so perhaps a mindful approach may help with the complexities of audit planning, offering an alternative lens to the intricacies of prioritising assurance coverage and managing relationships.

- As internal auditors, one of the key drivers is adding value, so an enhanced understanding of the mindfulness concept may also add value when considering specific audit engagements such as culture, staff turnover and absence management.
- Internal audit is a people dependent profession. Attracting and engaging talent is critical. Perhaps the positive environment that mindful leadership promotes could be invaluable in creating a culture that supports the creative, complex, cerebral work of auditors.
- Communication is a key aspect of auditing. Mindfulness looks at ways to improve active listening, maintaining focus and giving a task complete attention without distraction. A priceless gift for an auditor.

What is mindful leadership?

According to Professor Mark Williams, former director of the [Oxford Mindfulness Centre](#), mindfulness is "about allowing ourselves to see the present moment clearly."

As an auditor, seeing clearly is what helps you to be objective.

Mindfulness can help you to achieve this aim.

In her book, [Finding the Space to Lead](#), Janice Marturano tells of a Fortune 500 company facing a decision whether to initiate a national product recall. Three executives presented their analysis but could not reach a consensus opinion. Rather than debate their differences, they each went away for quiet contemplation for an hour and reconvened. They presented again and came to a quick consensus that the recall was necessary. They allowed themselves space to process information.

The organisation had invested in mindful leadership training which helped them manage the:

- strong pull to react and make a decision
- narrow focus that comes with stressful conditions
- negative effects of information overload
- power of using the lowest common denominator to leverage for consensus.

It is increasingly difficult to remain in the present moment. Communication is relentless, whether it is the distractions of an open plan office, commuters, deadlines and reminders, email, colleagues or smartphones reminding us of information on Facebook, LinkedIn and WhatsApp.

Mindfulness is a way of thinking to help block out the noise and focus on what is important. It is a skill that according to Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of today's secular mindfulness, is about "being alive and knowing it."

It is about actually tasting your lunch not snatching mouthfuls between emails. It is about paying attention to the meeting you are in not thinking about the next one. It is about listening to the reply when you ask someone how their weekend was.

Mindful leadership takes this further by "*cultivating focus, clarity, creativity, and compassion in the service of others*" according to Janice Marturano, founder of the [Institute for Mindful Leadership](#).

Think for a moment about a recent meeting or conversations you've had.

- Was the person you were talking to fully present in that moment?
- Did you have their full attention?

- Were they engaged?

Having someone's full attention is powerful. Being fully present in the moment is noticeable to those around you. Leadership is powerful, the ability to shine light or cast a shadow over those around you.

What do you do?

Is mindfulness a new fad?

Not really. Fads don't tend to last for multiple millennia!

Mindfulness has been around for thousands of years; an integral part of many religions, the study of yoga and also meditation. In more recent years it has become popular as a non-secular concept in its own right.

It has grown in popularity largely because it is practical. It is also a useful technique to combat stress and anxiety; issues which have become prevalent in the workplace, schools and life in general.

Celebrity American doctor, Mark Hyman sums it up well, "The thing about stress is that it's automatic. It finds you. The problem with relaxation and mindfulness is that it's a lot of frickin' work."

You may have heard of some of the fundamentals in a different guise, after all it has been around a while; the idea of pausing before responding, being curious rather than judgemental or the *being present* concept within the **Fish!** philosophy.

How to be a mindful leader

Do not expect to learn this skill in a ten minute read! Courses are normally eight weeks.

Personal learning translates into the workplace: managing conflict, coaching, relationships and leadership. Breathing exercises are a key part of mindful training as is learning to find space/meditate unnoticed on a walk or at your desk.

Mindful leadership requires making space. Space to be yourself, to harness the qualities of leadership excellence. Marturano defines these qualities as:

- **Focus.** Sustaining attention. Being present.
Learning to notice when your mind wanders and how to redirect it enables you to fully concentrate on situations and people. Without this you are less productive, reading documents can take longer than anticipated, thoughts wander, reports take longer to write plus you end up working evenings and weekends to catch up.
- **Clarity.** Learning to pause and chose how to respond, helps us to challenge preconceptions. It also helps us to notice when we are being reactive in certain situations. When we are rushed we often we see what we expect to see. A dangerous trait for auditors.
- **Creativity.** Our creative mind needs space to find solutions and innovations. We often wake in the morning with a searched for answer or it comes back to us when we least expect it. This is because we have allowed our mind to stop analysing.
- **Compassion.** Compassion is about understanding, the well-being of others. It is different to empathy which can be achieved without making a connection. Allowing ourselves self-compassion is difficult, it may even feel selfish. Without first internalising the concept we risk not being fully aware of our impact

on others.

Anyone can be a mindful leader.

It requires an open and honest mind, the ability to be self-critical and a willingness to learn.

Perhaps mindfulness is natural to you. People ask you how you maintain your balance amidst chaos but you have no words to articulate it.

What is your learning style? Read a book, go on a course, talk to others, your human resources team should be able to recommend a start point. If not, an internet search will find what you need.

The evidence so far

In his book, *Mindful Work*, David Gelles cites examples of organisations (Target, Google, Aetna) that claim productivity benefits from introducing mindfulness and meditation into working practices. He also warns that the quest to capitalise and justify the initiative to the bottom line may result in it becoming artificial or sanitised. Risking what makes it valuable.

Productivity comes from increased focus, greater attention to detail, effective scheduling, objective decision-making, less worry and reduced burn-out. It comes from a happier, healthier workforce with ownership of their own and others well-being.

Since 2007 schools across England have been testing *programmes* that includes mindfulness techniques with positive results in well-being and attention.

A case study from Tata Steel in Port Talbot, on the *Mindfulness Initiative's website* demonstrates the value for internal audit and risk, as explained by Terry Rumble, Operational Support Manager.

"Many people are familiar with tools designed to help staff pause, reflect and identify before acting. Yet, in major industrial disasters such as Bhopal, there were good processes and systems in place, but still the events happened. Following a mindfulness workshop, I saw that this approach might help combat the tendency to switch off."

We decided to incorporate mindfulness into our Leadership in Health and Safety modules. Training involved blue- and white-collar workers and trade union representatives, and it generated a lot of interest. Some managers immediately saw the opportunity to bring mindfulness to front-line staff, and have requested further practical sessions. Some trade union staff members believe that mindfulness can benefit the workforce, and their teams trust these views. That's exciting because it is not management-led.

Mindfulness has given people new ways of approaching our risk assessment strategy and encouraged deeper, more logical, thinking on "what if". I believe mindfulness is the missing piece of the jigsaw and complements our current strategies."

In the United States, a study found that mindfulness techniques could help service personnel recover from the stresses of combat more effectively. The cost of stress to the UK economy was estimated at £5bn by the Institute of Directors in 2017. If mindfulness can benefit the effects of combat stress what can it do in the workplace?

An eight-week mindfulness course was endorsed by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence in 2004 as

an alternative to medication.

With any concept there will always be differing opinions, Professor Mark Williams, former director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre reported "there's encouraging evidence for its use in health, education, prisons and workplaces, but it's important to realise that research is still going on in all of these fields. Once we have the results, we'll be able to see more clearly who mindfulness is most helpful for."

What do I need to do?

That is your choice.

Although mindfulness is personal to you it will impact all of those around you.

Can you see the potential benefits?

What type of leader do you want to be?

Closing Thoughts

Mindfulness is a philosophy not a science. There may be aspects that resonate with you more than others. Perhaps it is something to explore with your team, mindful auditing may help to reduce some of the operational pressures that auditors are exposed to.

There are a multitude of teachings, tools and advice on what makes a good leaders. It is up to leaders to learn what works for them, to be their best and to support those around them.

You must learn to be still in the midst of activity and to be vibrantly alive in repose

Indira Gandhi

Further Reading

Book: [Finding the Space to Lead](#), Janice Marturano

Book: [Mindfulness at Work](#), Oli Doyle

Book: [Mindful Work, How to Change Business from the Inside Out](#), David Gelles

Website: [Online support](#) endorsed by NHS Digital