

Mindful Leadership 101



For the last couple of years, the term “mindfulness” has gained increasing popularity in the public space. Until 2013-2014 it was known and used in Romania by very few, mostly those who were familiar with meditation.

This accelerated increase in interest towards mindfulness generated an influx of information on the subject, not to mention a whole host of courses and services on this topic, making it all the more important for us to separate the wheat from the chaff.

In this article I will approach several topics and questions that frequently appear in conversations I have with participants in my Mindful Leadership programs.

The first is **“What is mindfulness?”**. It’s an important question because, as Socrates suggests, we need to clarify the meanings of the words we use. With regard to the word “mindfulness”, there are two meanings:

- **A mental state** characterized by the capacity to intentionally observe what I think while I am thinking, to feel (emotions, bodily sensations) while I am feeling them, without judging oneself and without letting yourself be distracted by these thoughts / sensations / emotions
- **A set of meditative practices** that aim to cultivate the mental state of mindfulness described above

To put it more succinctly, to be mindful means to cultivate our capacity to connect and live in the present moment, fully, consciously aware of what we are thinking and feeling, without letting ourselves be distracted by thoughts about the past or future.

Another frequent question is **“What is meditation and how many types of meditation are there?”**

According to the linguists, the word “meditation” comes from the Sanskrit “dhyana” – training the mind. If we were to use a comparison, saying that “I meditate” is like saying that “I practice sports”. There are 46 categories of Olympic sports, some of them having various subcategories. It’s the same with meditation.

There are meditative practices for focus, analytical ones, for contemplation, with visualizations, ones aimed at obtaining an extended state of consciousness etc. That is why it is essential (even mandatory for our own health and safety) to ensure that we have a clear and correct understanding of the purpose for which a certain meditation practice was created. And that we are initiated in it by someone who has a deep understanding of that particular practice and not just a superficial one.

When it comes to meditative practices such as mindfulness, their purposes are, as I mentioned before, to help us connect as fully as possible to the Present moment, by keeping our attention focused on what exists / what is happening in the HERE and NOW, without any sort of expectation.

Among the meditations which fall in the mindfulness category we have **focus meditation** (aimed at breathing and your senses), **body scan, walking meditation** and **meditations to foster positive emotions** such as kindness and compassion (metta meditation).

Another important aspect is ***“How we meditate and for how much.”***

Here things are very clear: **frequency is more important than duration**. Especially at the beginning. It is better to practice as often as possible (ideally on a daily basis) even for short periods of time. For example, it's better to meditate for 5-10 minutes a day, than twice a week for 15 minutes.

Plus, a combination that really works for most is alternating between 5-10 minutes of “formal” meditation with 10-15 minutes of “informal” practice such as 5 minutes of mindful eating, 10 minutes of mindful walking and, if we are driving, doing it in a mindful way (without listening to the radio, talking on the phone and so on).

Another question which gets asked is ***“How are mindfulness practices different from relaxation exercises?”***

The similarities are superficial, because the purpose of mindfulness practices is not to help us feel better or relax (this is a secondary effect), but to help us gain control of our own mind, who otherwise dominates us.

It's very important to understand this distinction and, just like with any other activity, it is essential that we have a clear understanding of what we want to achieve and then find the ways through which we can do it. That is why, I personally don't recommend associating mindfulness meditation with any sort of recreational activity or rest activity.

In order to understand the relevance and utility of cultivating mindfulness in an organizational context, I suggest you read **„Mindful Business”** by David Gelles.