

Meditation helps productivity, creativity and the bottom line in the corporate world, claims Ronald Alexander

The best leaders in today's business world are those I call 'mindful leaders'. A mindful leader is one whose ability to lead has come from their capacity to enter into a state of creative reflection.

Before the mindful leader speaks, s/he takes time to think about and feel how their communications will be received. It's similar to the ancient teachings of Zen or the martial arts – the leader anticipates how the person or team receiving a message is going to respond.

It works because when a mindful leader moves into this quiet state of reflection, their breathing slows, they take in more oxygen and this triggers the left pre-frontal cortex part of the brain. This is the spot that lights up during meditation.

Neuroscientists have discovered that regularly exercising this part of the brain is like going to a gym for the mind; it leads to a greater capacity for concentration and listening, and generates positive feelings of optimism, hope and creativity.

Mindful leaders are far less stressed. Here in LA I work with several young executives in the music industry. Over the last three years, everyone I've seen has initially come to me with a high stress level that manifests itself in physical symptoms such as headaches, ulcers, insomnia, anxiety, depression, etc.

Over time, I've shown all of these folks how to utilise what in spiritual terms might be called 'mindfulness' or 'insight' meditation, but what I call in the business context, 'taking time for the quiet break of self-reflection'. Their sleeping and health patterns have improved dramatically and they report they no longer yell at people but are more mellow, and are able to contain their stress responses.

The idea is really taking off all around the world, not just here in the US. I was in Asia recently and talking with a guy who had worked in the dotcom business before the bubble burst. Now he was running a yoga studio with his wife. I assumed they would mostly be teaching mothers or single women – traditional yoga clientele – but in fact, 60 per cent of their clients were young businessmen who wanted to deal with stress and tap into this capacity to be more optimistic.

The experience of Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple Computer, is a great example of what can happen when you enter into this state of mindfulness. He had a 'light bulb' moment

after wandering around India's holy places with a friend. He imagined a child sitting before a computer on their desk, accessing enlightenment and 'changing the world'.

Not long after, he and Steve Wozniak created the first Apple computer, taking a computer the size of a giant room and making it so small you could put it on top of your desk – the world's first desktop computer was born. His spiritual journey had led to an amazing moment of inspiration and the birth of an iconic product.

People worry that in a fast-moving commercial world, mindful leaders might take hours to make crucial decisions. Not so. You can make a fast assessment in just the three to five minutes it takes to enter into quiet reflection. If you are a mindful leader who holds fast the key values of mindful reflection, your decision-making processes are enhanced, and you create a more awakened intelligence within you. The effects spread throughout your department, your business and even into your family relationships.

Ultimately, what distinguishes the mindful leader from one who acts in an impulsive way is that mindful leaders are more interested in doing the right thing, rather than doing things right. They hold values of positive self-regard and unconditional positive regard for others. They see each and every interaction as an opportunity to awaken new potential in the person they are leading. They aim to enhance creativity and wellbeing in people – an ideal that traditional leadership models have often worked against.

A mindful leader sees himself as a gardener and his people as plants in a garden. Like a good gardener, he plans new growth for the future as well as taking care of existing planting. Above all, he understands completely that growing his people is at least as important, if not *more* important, than growing the bottom line. ■

Dr Ronald Alexander is based in the US, where he works as an executive and leadership coach to the media and entertainment industry. He is holding public workshops in London on 19th & 20th May and is available for private consultations on the 15, 17, 22 and 23 May. For details email info@ronaldalexander.com or see www.ronaldalexander.com

