



A Return to Centre: Finding Focus and Results in Frantic Times

By **Garry Priam**

Can you recall the last time during the day you stopped, paused briefly, breathed and fully relaxed? If not, do so.

Did you do this without thinking in the back of your mind, “I need to answer those 100 plus emails by noon, finish that report, or pick up my dry cleaning after work”?

Honestly—when was the last time?

Slowing Down for Take Off

Do you take breaks during the day—and eating lunch at your desk while working does not count—or in the evening after finishing your never ending to-do list?

Let me make a personal admission to which you might relate. As I was writing and researching this article, I made a conscious effort to be present, stay focused and not allow my thoughts to drift and think about other tasks. I admit, it wasn't always easy to do, but I like where it has led.

We all know deep down that we cannot maintain the break-neck pace of such multitasking, while also retaining the ability to fully listen to our colleagues and be engaged during meetings. Unfortunately, it's all too easy to stay on autopilot and continually race through our weeks like we are starring in our own version of the movie *Groundhog Day*.

Stress Levels Still Rising

All too often, we feel there is no other option but to embrace the pace, but with workplace stress on the rise in Canada and

employees feeling greater pressure from their superiors, the connection is as obvious as it is unfortunate.

“Employees continue to feel stressed despite companies prioritizing mental well-being more over time,” said Stephen Liptrap, Morneau Shepell president and CEO Stephen Liptrap.

More than one third of the 1,500 respondents polled by human resources consulting firm Morneau Shepell reported they are more stressed from work now than they were five years ago. Nearly the same number reported similar growth about stress caused by personal issues.

Moreover, six out of 10 U.S. employees admit their work-related stress levels have shot up in the last five years, while HR departments have increasingly started to look for tactics and even external services that can help to mitigate this key issue.

What can we do about it and how do we get ourselves to slow down and be present in the moment?

A Move Towards Mental Wellbeing

For starters, we can practice that breathing and consider incorporating mindfulness and meditation into our day.

According to the *MacMillan Dictionary*, mindfulness is a technique to improve mental wellbeing that involves focusing on the present moment while accepting any thoughts and feelings that occur.

That said, there are as many definitions of mindfulness as there are ways to view the world and live your life. What they all agree upon is that the pace of life is too fast and makes too many demands on our time. This holds particularly true when the

‘smart’ technology we carry makes us available 24/7 to friends and work alike. What our technology enables is incredible, but it can definitely leave you breathless trying to keep up.

A Mix of Pace and Grace

The thing is—as many have already discovered—it does not have to be this way.

I have fond memories of Italy as I had the good fortune to have lived there in six different cities over the course of nine years before moving to Vancouver. I experienced the benefits of slowing down: truly enjoying eating amazing foods, sitting at community tables and just talking and listening. Every moment was about being present and mindful, and it was commonplace to socialize and relax for four to five hours or more.

This did not impair business; it was what lifted the world around it—bottom lines and all.

The ROI of Returning to Centre

As every organization knows, burnout and lack of concentration impacts leaders and employees alike, but what is less known is that many are taking active steps to remedy this reality.

The Chopra Center reports that many companies are joining the mindfulness movement, recognizing that putting the mental health of their employees first increases creativity, focus and productivity.

Here is some research related to the impact of mindfulness in the workplace:

- 91 per cent reported it positively impacted the culture;
- 88 per cent would recommend it to a co-worker;
- 66 per cent said they felt less stress or had improved stress-management capabilities;
- 63 per cent are better able to manage themselves at work;
- 60 per cent reported increased focus and better decision-making skills;
- 52 per cent can manage work relationships better; and
- 46 per cent reported increased innovation and creativity.

Mindfulness Already Hard at Work

Consider that Google, Apple, Nike, Salesforce and Facebook already have mindfulness and meditation training in the workplace.

Google believes that meditation can be important for employee mental health and wellbeing. Apple has an on-campus meditation room for its employees to have half hour meditation breaks. Nike has mindful leadership events for its staff. Salesforce opened meditation rooms on every floor of its corporate office in 2016. (And everyone at Facebook just needs a deep breath these days.)

How companies incorporate mindfulness and meditation training in the workplace varies, but the investment of large companies in these strategies illustrates the benefits to productivity and profitability.

Leading a Change of Mind

As people leaders, it is important that we integrate these potentials ourselves and feel comfortable enough to do so for others in the work environment. Organizational leaders and HR professionals have a pivotal role to play in helping to create a safe workplace and welcoming corporate culture—and mindfulness and meditation can only help.

Mindfulness can help make company managers calmer and more aware of their interactions with colleagues and direct reports, while making staff more efficient in today’s fast-paced and over-stimulated workplaces.

This is because mindfulness helps prevent people from multi-tasking, which according to scientists is both impossible and a key driver of underperformance. Studies have shown that multitasking leads to poor critical decision-making, low productivity and hours of wasted time.

“Putting the mental health of their employees first increases creativity, focus, and productivity.”

A Change of Focus

As a result of a growing awareness of the importance of mental health and well-being in the workplace, there is a shift away from employers’ traditional response to helping their staff manage fast-paced and stressful work environments. Companies are now moving towards helping workers develop techniques that specifically manage stress rather than workloads.

Mindfulness is an approach to balancing work and time in a way that allows the mind to focus on one task at a time, and to help people understand the full implications of their actions and decisions.

Simply put, mindfulness is about awareness, concentrating on the moment to allow greater meaning into our lives. It is also an essential tool for returning ourselves, teams and organizations to centre and leading us collectively forward.

Make More of Less

Every HR professional will agree that less stressed, healthier, more satisfied, better rested and more focused employees create a win-win situation for everybody. HR is the catalyst to championing and implementing this, which in turn helps maintain the important balance and harmony between the employees and the organization.

I challenge you to disengage your autopilot, to find a way to rediscover your focus, to pause and take back your time...in every moment. 🧠

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