



# HOW EFFECTIVE LEADERS MODEL HEALTHY, MINDFUL BEHAVIOR

**Naz Beheshti**

# When mindfulness becomes part of our very being, it becomes portable. We can take it with us anywhere.

When mindfulness informs our life choices, small and large, it becomes mindfulness in action. Once we get in the habit of making strong choices, the ripple effects travel far and wide. One mindful choice begets another. In business, active choices produce sounder strategy and stronger vision and culture.

First, however, we have to break the cycle of disconnection and distraction. We have to step away from the noise of the world, from the noise of our minds. When we find ourselves slipping into stress, into self-sabotage, into sleepwalking mode—anything that disconnects us from our authentic Self—we must pause. Organizations often need to pause as well. Under the pressure of competition and high turnover, we can find ourselves defaulting into crisis-management mode, putting out individual fires and losing sight of the big picture.

Sometimes a pause is literally just a pause: taking a moment to gather ourselves before a crucial meeting or presentation. Sometimes that pause is a walk in the park, a weekend retreat, a sabbatical. However long or short, the pause sets the stage for the next step. It carves out space and time for us to breathe. A conscious breath is the best way to become present and aware. Try it now. Take a deep, steady breath and then slowly exhale it all out. How does that feel?

Taking a mindful breath is like hitting the reset button. It calms us both physically and mentally and gives us a moment to reason and gain perspective. It is about physical breath, yes—but so much more. We also allow our thoughts and feelings to breathe, our heart and mind to reconnect. We become aware of our bodies and of how our thoughts and emotions manifest physically.

We are now ready to make a mindful choice.

**When mindfulness informs our life choices, small and large, it becomes mindfulness in action.**

The path to a conscious choice is straightforward but rarely easy. As leaders, we must incorporate mindful principles into both our individual and organizational practice. How often do you find yourself unable to pause? Unable to break the cycle? Say you notice your performance at work has hit a wall. You are no longer on your game in the way you would like to be. This is not a time to scold yourself, but rather to pause, to reassess, to reset. You might find yourself irritable and prone to losing your patience. This is a sign you have depleted your reserves, that you have not devoted sufficient time to keep the well of your resilience full. This is a time to pause, to reset, to restore.

Our perhaps you notice yourself sliding into autopilot. You sleepwalk through your day, relying on quick fixes to boost your energy. This is a time to pause, to step back, to remember your purpose and return to your intention in life.

Companies sometimes need a moment to pause and reconnect with purpose and intention as well. When facing an unexpected challenge, such as a disappointing earnings report or a disruption in the market, entire organizations can tense up. Smart leaders give their teams a chance to take a collective breath to ensure they are moving forward with calmness and clarity.

Resetting starts with a pause, even if that first step can sometimes feel like a stumble.

## HOW EFFECTIVE LEADERS MODEL HEALTHY, MINDFUL BEHAVIOR

We need the ultimate wealth, our well-being, to create impact and be effective leaders. Without it, we will be unable to achieve our goals, and the demands and pressure of work and life will accumulate and weigh heavily upon us. This leaves us feeling depleted and out of control. The solution is not drinking copious amounts of caffeine for an energy boost. We need genuine focus that does not come from energy drinks or coffee.

During my sessions with CEO clients, I have noticed that they share a prominent trait—the ability to stay laser-focused. Some of these clients strive to be more focused, while other clients are laser-focused to the extreme. While being laser-focused is a powerful ability and is vital to running a successful business, being excessively laser-focused can be detrimental to health and well-being.

Many people believe that working long hours without a break leads to successful outcomes. They might not recognize that this behavior can be counterproductive when self-care is compromised. As people sacrifice play and recovery time and neglect their connection with friends and family, they move into a vicious cycle, one that defined my earlier career. They often turn to processed comfort foods for a false sense of energy and convenience and skip the gym in an effort to gain more time, but their increasingly compromised well-being undermines their laser focus and productivity. They unwittingly take a route that leads toward burnout and away from success.

I often see leaders who run around all day with back-to-back meetings. They have loads of energy and a great deal of activity but zero focus. Without focus, how can they lead a company to excel and fulfill its vision? Their work is not as effective or meaningful as it could be.

Be wary of entering a spiral of hyper energy without focus and activity without creativity and clarity. This eventually leads to boredom, disengagement, demotion, or possibly losing one's job.

The kind of flow you seek fosters a mindful focus, not mania. It attends to physical health and well-being, allocates adequate time for play and recovery, and includes breaks to allow yourself to reboot. Flow works with your body's natural rhythms.

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Part of being an excellent leader is modeling healthy, mindful behavior. A culture of wellness will not take root in a company if the leader's choices run counter to it. Conversely, if you commit fully to it, that investment will pay off exponentially, both for you and your company. It has ripple effects that influence others in positive ways, driving employee engagement and better business outcomes.

The key to activating it lies at the intersection of action and awareness, and aligning these comes from cultivating what I call the Three C's: clarity, concentration, and confidence.

- 1. Clarity:** Have clear, well-defined goals to understand what actions need to be taken for success. Visualize and write down the best outcomes and revisit them regularly throughout the day. Meditate, and sleep seven to nine hours daily. Play often. Eat whole, clean, nutrient-dense foods.
- 2. Concentration:** Commit to embody complete concentration and engagement in your intended action. To avoid procrastination, use a timer to help you get past the biggest mental hurdle, which is getting started. Set the timer for anywhere between twenty-five and forty-five minutes depending on your task and preference. When the timer goes off, take a two- to five-minute break (if you want) and set the timer again. Repeat accordingly. Block out all distractions (prioritize and delegate beforehand) and stay present. Focus.

**3. Confidence:** When we are immersed in the present moment and task at hand, we aren't concerned with protecting our ego, which releases inhibitions and makes us feel like we can achieve anything. You become unstoppable when you choose to listen to your Inner Coach, not your Inner Critic, and when you reframe every challenge as an opportunity for improvement, strengthening your opportunity mindset. Visualize the best version of your Self and write it down. Ingrain this in your mind and heart through repetition while simultaneously taking small steps toward becoming that version of yourself.

Here is just small sampling of the many "business hacks" I offer leaders in my new book, *Pause. Breathe. Choose*, to get started.

## **PROMOTE A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE AND LEAD BY EXAMPLE**

Many employees follow their boss's lead when it comes to striving for career success. It is common to feel the need to arrive before the boss and stay until after they leave.

As a leader, be aware of the messages you are sending, whether intentional or not. If you come in early and stay late, miss dinner with family, or eat lunch at your desk while working, you may unintentionally be a prominent source of stress for employees and colleagues who feel obligated to follow suit.



Make a conscious choice to lead by example, promoting mindfulness and a healthy lifestyle.

- Take breaks.
- Engage often with your colleagues and employees.
- Refrain from eating at your desk.
- Avoid working excessive hours.
- Be involved in your company's wellness program.

Leaders are responsible for modeling a healthy workplace culture. When you commit to one or all of the above, you will notice a positive ripple in other areas in your life and in the lives of your employees.

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## **ENCOURAGE EMPLOYEES TO BE ACTIVE DURING THE WORKDAY**

As a leader in your workplace, communicate and demonstrate to employees that it is acceptable to take a midday break to hit the gym, even if it is over lunch. When employees understand they will not be scrutinized for leaving their workspaces, they will be more likely to find time for a workout.

A burst of physical activity in the middle of the day helps people return to work energized, happier, and more engaged. This is a win-win, beneficial for the well-being of employees and the business.

A growing body of evidence finds that “sitting is the new smoking.” James Levine, an endocrinologist at the Mayo Clinic, stresses that excessive sitting is not something you can correct later with a workout. Too much time in the chair actually shuts down parts of our metabolism. The key is to keep moving throughout the workday. Standing or treadmill desks are ideal, but even standing during a phone call or walking down the hall to see a colleague will keep the metabolic switch from shutting down.

## **NOURISH MINDFULLY**

As appropriate for your role, do what you can to foster healthier food in your workplace, which provides everyone with the fuel to be more effective and productive.



- Keep break rooms and kitchens stocked with healthy snacks, such as fruit, vegetables, yogurt, and nuts (instead of soda, candy, donuts, and cupcakes).
- Replace junk food vending machines with wholesome options.
- Provide healthy choices for company meetings, parties, and events.

## **RESTRICT AFTER-HOURS COMMUNICATION**

Some companies restrict emails or work calls between 7 PM and 7 AM to give everyone an opportunity to disconnect from work. This is a cherished time. We need these twelve hours to effectively decompress, recover, relax, and not think about work.

A new French law bans work emails after hours to prevent burnout. Workers and employers agree that that this practice has long-term benefits. Companies such as Volkswagen, BMW, and Puma have also enacted policies and procedures to safeguard employees' time off. Harvard Business School professor Leslie A. Perlow has extensively studied the benefits of what she calls "predictable time off." Companies that commit to allowing employees to "turn off" report higher job satisfaction and retention rates. The conversations required to make that time off a reality, moreover, foster greater team communication and cohesiveness.

## **BUILD A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE, HABIT BY HABIT**

Like a snowball rolling down a hill, a new habit might start small. Over time it gathers force and momentum and helps transform an unhealthy lifestyle into a healthy one. I have seen this snowball effect countless times, both in my own life and in the lives of my clients, on both an individual and the organizational level.

It is your responsibility. No one can force or beg you to adapt a healthy lifestyle. Whatever you choose, as a leader, you will model to others. So...

***Pause.* This is a big move in and of itself because you must be aware of the need to step back. Here you plant the seed for everything that follows. Stop. Step back. Reassess.**

***Breathe.* Deepen what you started by pausing. Commit fully to the current moment, the here and now. Be present. Focus your intention.**

***Choose.* Choose mindfulness. Choose happiness. Choose life. 🌱**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naz Beheshti, the CEO and founder of Prananaz, is an executive wellness coach, speaker, and Forbes contributor with more than one hundred published articles on mindful leadership and corporate wellness. Prananaz provides corporate wellness solutions that improve leadership effectiveness, employee well-being and engagement, and company culture. Beheshti has more than twenty years of experience working at Fortune 500 companies, learning firsthand from luminaries ranging from Steve Jobs to the Dalai Lama, and consulting with and coaching international business leaders, entrepreneurs, startups, universities, and major global organizations. She also cofounded Rise2Shine, a nonprofit helping to alleviate children's suffering in Haiti. Beheshti lives in New York City with her husband.

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