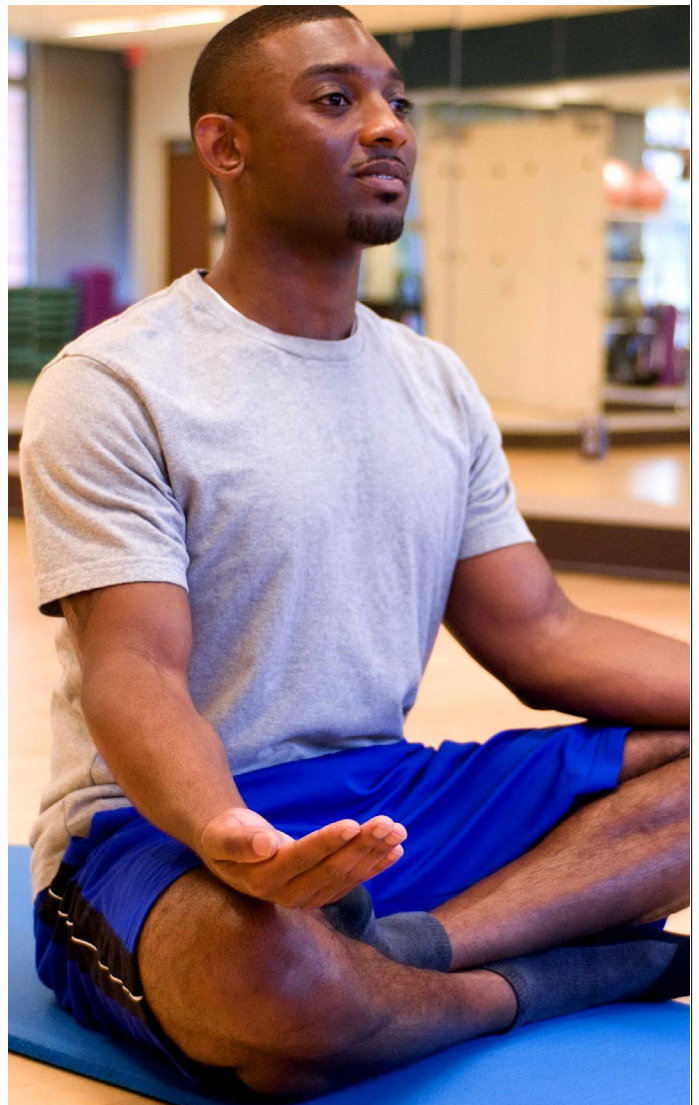


Is Corporate Mindfulness Religion at Work?

“Mindfulness” has become a buzzword—not only in yoga studios and psychotherapy sessions, but in board rooms and corporate wellness programs. As more companies begin to promote being mindful at work, questions arise as to whether mindfulness, or mindful meditation, is a religious practice and whether companies that promote such practices are imposing a belief system on employees. Recently, we have received questions along these lines from Corporate Members. Since this topic continues to be relevant to our clients, this newsletter provides background information about the topic of mindfulness, how it is used in workplaces, and whether or not mindfulness in the workplace is religious.

There are many definitions of mindfulness. Here are a few:

- “The practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one’s thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis” ([Merriam Webster](#))
- “A state of active, open attention on the present. When you’re mindful, you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance, without judging them good or bad. Instead of letting your life pass you by, mindfulness means living in the moment and awakening to experience” ([Psychology Today](#))
- “The cultivation of a focused, nonjudgmental awareness on the present moment, most commonly honed through meditation” ([Huffington Post](#))



This final definition explicitly mentions the practice that is often associated (and sometimes used interchangeably) with mindfulness: meditation. Meditation, in turn, is often associated with Buddhism, which is why some see mindfulness/meditation as a religious practice. This will be explored in more detail below.

The type of mindfulness that many of us are familiar with comes from a model called [Search Inside Yourself](#) (SIY), created by Google engineer Chade-Meng Tan. SIY is the self-proclaimed “unexpected path to success and happiness at work” and touts “resilience, positive mindset, and centered leadership” as benefits.¹ The mindfulness trend may have started in Silicon Valley, but it has spread far beyond the tech world. Companies including Nike, General Mills, Target², Goldman Sachs, BlackRock, and Corporate Member Aetna³ have incorporated mindfulness into their workplaces, in the form of meditation courses and other initiatives. Aetna is in fact a pioneer in this field, and under the leadership of CEO Mark Bertolini, mindfulness has been folded into the company’s culture. As of 2015, more than 25% of Aetna employees, some 12,000 people, had participated in the optional meditation classes.⁴ Additionally, companies including Aetna, Intel, and Keurig Green Mountain have added mindfulness to leadership training.⁵

There are a number of benefits that individual practitioners and companies that encourage mindfulness among employees have experienced. The one we most often hear about is stress reduction—researchers have found that meditation lowers cortisol, a stress hormone.⁶ Less stress is good for business, as stress can cause decreased productivity, increased health care costs, and higher turnover, all of which add up to costs for the company.⁷ Aetna has looked extensively at the benefits that employees and the company as a whole can reap from mindfulness. Of the employees who participated in a mindfulness class, many reported decreased stress and increased sleep quality. Employees also added 62 minutes of productivity each week on average, saving Aetna an estimated \$3,000 per employee per year.⁸ In addition to stress reduction, other studies have found that the benefits of practicing mindfulness include improved self-regulation, increased adaptability,⁹ anxiety reduction,¹⁰ and reduced risk of stroke and heart attack.¹¹ (Note: not all scientists are convinced of the reported benefits and think that more research needs to be done before benefits can be proven.)¹²

But even with all of the science behind mindfulness, for many, the question still remains as to whether or not it

is a religious practice. Many articles on the current trend of mindfulness and meditation in the workplace cite the movement’s religious and spiritual origins. A variety of descriptions can be found in different publications:

- “... has its roots in the spiritual traditions of India” ([New York Times](#))
- “... ancient discipline with roots in Hinduism and Buddhism” ([Washington Post](#))
- “... rooted in ancient Eastern philosophies, such as Taoism and Buddhism” ([Harvard Business Review](#))

However, some who are in the mindfulness business distance themselves from these religious associations. *10% Happier*, a book and now an app by Dan Harris of ABC News and Joseph Goldstein, a longtime meditation practitioner and teacher, goes out of its way to create this distance on its website:

Despite its PR problem, mindfulness meditation is a simple, secular, scientifically validated exercise for your brain...Just in case you’re worried, meditation does not require a lot of the things people fear it might. For example, you don’t have to sit in a funny position. (Unless you want to, of course.) You also don’t have to: light incense, chant, or believe in anything in particular. There’s nothing to join, no special outfits to wear.¹³

MINDFULNESS AT AETNA

Corporate Member Aetna is a pioneer in the world of mindfulness. We heard from two of their mindfulness leaders about their ground-breaking work.

“To me the title of Chief Mindfulness Officer reflects a new possibility in business: to bring mindfulness practices to employees as well as to impact a significant portion of the American population. This possibility is both inspiring and humbling.” – **Andy Lee, Aetna’s Chief Mindfulness Officer**

“We’re helping members assess the role mindfulness can play to reduce stress so they’re better able to grow in wellness. We educate them about how stress is a barrier to lifestyle change and we provide tools and programs they can use as part of their personal wellness strategy.” – **Cheryl Jones, Aetna’s Director of Mindfulness**

Thus far we have advised our clients that there is nothing inherently problematic with offering meditation classes or encouraging mindfulness in the workplace (in fact, we have had mindfulness trainings for the staff here at Tanenbaum). If your company is engaging in mindfulness initiatives, consider the following **better practices** to ensure that you do so in a productive and inclusive manner:

- Communicate the business case for why your company is encouraging mindfulness
- Make sure that the department in charge of these initiatives is prepared to answer questions about religious associations with the practice. (As a Corporate Member, you can provide access to this department to *Religion at Work*, which offers information about eight religious traditions, including Buddhism.)
- Consider the tone of communications and their intended outcome. If a team leader or any other individual in a position of power is pressuring other employees to participate, that becomes a problem.
- Ensure that these activities are opt in and that there are no negative repercussions for not participating.
- Be aware of the diversity among your employees—some may see mindfulness as personally beneficial and secular, while others may see it as a religious practice that may or may not align with their beliefs. As we can see from the case of the school in Georgia, some people may feel that mindfulness/meditation goes against their own religious beliefs and/or practices.

As always, we encourage Corporate Members to ensure that employees of all faiths and none feel safe and respected in the workplace.

i. <https://siyli.org/>

ii. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/fashion/mindfulness-and-meditation-are-capturing-attention.html?_r=0

iii. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/business/at-aetna-a-ceos-management-by-mantra.html>

iv. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/business/at-aetna-a-ceos-management-by-mantra.html>

v. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2015/04/27/future-of-work-mindfulness-as-a-leadership-practice/2/#416ad4f75999>

vi. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/07/mindfulness-schools-workplace_n_7085718.html

vii. <http://www.businessinsider.com/surprising-costs-to-the-work-place-2011-11?op=1>

viii. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/business/at-aetna-a-ceos-management-by-mantra.html>

ix. <https://hbr.org/2015/01/mindfulness-can-literally-change-your-brain>

x. <http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/mindfulness-meditation-may-ease-anxiety-mental-stress-201401086967>

xi. <https://hbr.org/2015/02/there-are-risks-to-mindfulness-at-work?version=meter+at+0&module=meter-Links&pgtype=article&contentId=&mediald=&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F&priority=true&action=click&contentCollection=meter-links-click>

xii. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/business/at-aetna-a-ceos-management-by-mantra.html>

xiii. <https://hbr.org/2015/01/mindfulness-can-literally-change-your-brain>

xiv. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/03/24/ga-parents-offended-by-the-far-east-religion-of-yoga-get-namaste-banned-from-school/>

