

5 Steps to Effective Mindful Leadership

Career Development





In collaboration with the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, the American Bar Association conducted a nationwide study of approximately 15,000 attorneys from 19 states and all regions across the United States. The study found:

- Twenty-one percent of licensed, employed attorneys drink alcohol excessively;

- Twenty-eight percent struggle with some form of depression;
- Nineteen percent exhibit symptoms of anxiety;
- These symptoms most significantly impact younger attorneys in the first 10 years of practice;
- Lawyers are at higher risk of alcohol use disorders than other professional populations;
- Lawyers suffer more significant mental health distress compared to other professions; and
- Lawyers most often fail to seek help for fear of being found out.

In the general employee population across the globe, stress significantly impacts the workplace, reducing productivity and increasing absenteeism.

Lawyers are often integral members of organizational leadership teams, serving as trusted advisors to both senior leaders and the business. The better we take care of ourselves, the more effectively we can serve our clients and stakeholders. While there is no quick fix or miracle cure, mindfulness can help lawyers reduce stress and improve leadership.

The impact of mindfulness in the workplace

Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present in the moment without being overly reactive or overwhelmed by what is happening around us. In addition to reducing stress, mindfulness can improve problem-solving and focus, increase creativity and energy, and foster empathy.

What mindful leadership looks like

Leading people is an enormous responsibility requiring a complex array of skills, relevant industry knowledge, and the ability to inspire, motivate, and mobilize employees to achieve often big, audacious strategic imperatives. A frazzled leader rushing around on auto pilot is anathema to leadership excellence.

The mindful leader is rooted and focused in the tasks and objectives of the present moment, deploying critical thinking skills to execute with clarity, creativity, collaboration, and commitment to both the employees and the organization. Responding without judgment to one's own condition and to issues that arise is a hallmark of mindfulness.

Steps to mindful leadership

There is no single path to mindful leadership, but one can adopt habits and behaviors (even if one at a time) to progress along the way. Mindfulness is not a destination but a way of being. It is a moment by moment practice that ebbs and flows. It's not about perfection, it's about progress. With each day's practice you build momentum.

1. Establish a mindfulness practice

Like success, mindfulness doesn't happen without effort and practice over time. A jumpstart can begin with as little as five minutes at the beginning of the day, before a meeting, or whenever you need to reset yourself emotionally or mentally. In that time, find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed (a hallway, your office, or even a bathroom stall will do).

First, close your eyes and take a few calming breaths. Next, visualize how you will bring your best (e.g., most calm, confident, assured, knowledgeable) self to the day, meeting, or interaction.

Cultivating this habit will be especially helpful when facing difficult conversations and situations in your daily role. As Zig Ziglar says, “You don’t have to be great to start, but you have to start to be great.”

2. Ditch multitasking

The concept of multitasking is deceptively seductive in creating in one’s mind the illusion of great productivity (“My, I was busy today!”). In reality, multitasking can cost as much as 40 percent of productivity, resulting in many calories burned with little accomplished.

Focus on one thing at a time until completion, then move to the next task. Adopting a simple mantra written on a note in front of you or that you recite whenever you find yourself veering off course can provide simple yet effective redirection: This one thing I do.

3. Plan your day

Many of us walk into the office with the best intentions. But halfway into your first task, the phone rings, or someone comes into your office, and before you know it, your whole day has been derailed by various activities that did nothing to move you towards your defined objectives.

One effective solution is to plan your day before you begin. A huge list of action items won’t help; prioritize the single most important thing you must do. Ask yourself: What will keep me awake if I don’t get it done today?

Tackle that one thing to completion first. Around that most important thing, plan time to respond to phone calls and emails, and be realistic enough to leave space for the unexpected. After every interruption, return to that one task until it is complete.

4. Block off your calendar

Meetings can be gremlins that thwart every effort at meaningful accomplishment. Back-to-back meetings leave no time for action, while meetings set with short breaks in between leave insufficient time for focused concentration.

To the best extent possible, block off certain days on your calendar when you will actively work. This forces others to schedule meetings in the remaining time. For example, if Monday, Friday, and half the day Wednesday are blocked off for working time, back-to-back meetings on Tuesday, Thursday, and half of Wednesday are fine because you will be in “meeting mode” during those days, knowing you have time set aside to get work done.

5. Stop tracking with your eyes

Nothing says, “our conversation doesn’t matter,” more than a leader whose eyes follow everyone who comes by, or waves and nods at others, or checks messages, turning every time the computer pings. Focus on one conversation at a time.

Give your full attention to the person in front of you and make them feel as if they are the only person in the world. If you don’t have the presence of mind, or if you are waiting for an expected interruption, reschedule your conversation until you can be fully present. Not only will this foster good

relationships, but it will maximize your ability to capture and act on the information discussed.

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