

Incorporating Meditation as a Professional Skill within the Business Curriculum: Theory, Attitudes and Application

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Abstract

The author suggests that a number of barriers currently exist to the wider inclusion of meditation in the business curriculum: (1) the lingering association that many people have with meditation as a strictly spiritual practice, rather than as a tool that anyone can learn and apply; (2) the concern that students will think meditation is inappropriate as part of professional training and unrelated to their future managerial role; and (3) the lack of knowledge among business professors about how to teach meditation and integrate its practice into the topics of their course. The paper addresses these concerns by reviewing the current research and popular use of meditation; presents the results our research into student attitudes towards seven statements about the value of meditation in the business curriculum; and discusses the practical issues such as when and how to introduce meditation, approaches to integrating meditation with other course topics, and effective responses to typical student concerns.

Index terms— meditation, curriculum, spiritual.

1 I. Introduction And Current Research

If one word can capture the essence of the current business environment it is "change". Increasingly over the past several decades business professionals have been challenged to "thrive on chaos" (Peters, 1988), survive in a world of "permanent white water" (Vaill, 1996), and prepare for a "dynamic, turbulent, and even chaotic world" (Whetten & Cameron, 2005, p. 491). As noted futurist Alvin Toffler observed about the demands of the twenty-first century, "Change is not merely necessary to life –IT IS LIFE" (Toffler, 1984).

The capacities that must be developed if business professionals are to achieve and maintain success in this ever-changing environment include the ability to make sense of uncertainty and ambiguity (Weik, 1995), the capacity to respond creatively to new and complex situations (DeGraff & Lawrence, 2002), and the skill to cope effectively with on-going stress (Goleman, 1998). Although increasingly complex decision tools and ever faster information exchange methods provide the opportunity for business to harness the energy of change, it is the decision maker who must comprehend, imagine, and respond in a composed fashion to the demands of the moment; innovative business systems can facilitate, but they can't decide, create or calm. A major challenge facing educators at this juncture in history is to educate the whole student, not only with facts and procedures from the outside, but with the intra-personal capacities to thrive in the face of uncertainty and change (Goleman, 1998). One psychological/emotional tool to support effective behavior is readily available, has been successfully tested, and is increasingly applied in business settings, but is still met with some suspicion and doubt. The tool is meditation, and although recent research and practice has confirmed its usefulness in the business setting, some of the greatest resistance to inclusion of meditation in the business curriculum comes from the instructors who would present the knowledge and help develop the skills associated with this technique. We would like to address the source of this resistance by first addressing the widely shared assumption of many western academics that meditation is a form of spiritual practice and therefore has no place in a secular educational setting. Second, we

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will respond to the concern shared by many educators that business students will not be receptive to learning and practicing meditation in a business course by presenting the survey responses from several hundred undergraduate and graduate business students. Finally, we will share our classroom experience with successfully integrating meditation into a graduate-level business course.

Meditation is an ancient practice, and for most of its history has been associated with spirituality and enlightenment rather than the training of business students. Although awareness in the United States of Eastern meditation techniques can be traced to the Transcendentalists in the 19th Century, the more recent surge in the popularity of meditation has been attributed to the Beatles' trip to India in the 1970s to learn Transcendental Meditation (TM) from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. TM is a technique that invokes mental concentration and physical relaxation through repetition of a phrase or syllable. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi has been one of the most vocal advocates of teaching meditation to managers and doing research on its effectiveness. A representative research report of TM's effectiveness is reported by Schmidt-Wilk (2003) for a Swedish top management team involved in Total Quality Management and by Schmidt-Wilk, Heaton and Steingard (2000) for its impact on spirituality in management. Since the research was supported by the Maharishi University of Management, its objectivity is suspect. Von Bergen et al. (1997) reports that the research on meditation's efficacy is poorly designed and lacks experimental controls. Research done outside the influence of the Maharishi University, using well designed controls, has strongly supported TM's beneficial effects for coping with the stressful demands of modern life. For example, a randomized placebocontrolled study of 84 patients with coronary artery disease (Paul-Labrador, et al. 2006) found the participants in the meditation group had significantly lower blood pressure and improved measures of insulin resistance as well as "cardiac autonomic nervous system tone" compared with a control group receiving health education. As reported by Nagourney (2006), results of a study presented at a conference of the Society for Neuroscience clearly showed meditation helped subjects feel more focused, energetic, and alert than did naps, exercise or caffeine. Reed (2006) reported on research done at Harvard Medical School which showed that meditation helps prevent the rate of cortical thinning with age. Older meditators had active cortical regions that were comparable to those of younger non-meditators. Other empirical studies in reputable journals have shown meditation's benefits on productivity (Frew, 1974), time management (Harung, 1998), and leadership skills (Harung, et al. 1995, and McCollum, 1999).

In addition to the growing literature in scholarly journals, the role of meditation in improving management and worker skills has appeared in recent popular magazines such as "Time" (Miranda, 2006, and Cullen, 2006), "Business Week" (Der Hovanesian, 2003), "Workforce" (Luthar, 1999) and "Fitness Magazine" (Bodian, 2005). Concerning meditation's direct benefits to business, an article by Der Hovanesian (2003) in "Business Week" presented findings from the National Institute of Health and the "Mind/Body Medical Institute" at Harvard University. Results showed that meditation enhanced the qualities companies need most from their workers: increased brainwave activity, enhanced intuition, better concentration, and the alleviation of stress from work.

Given recent reports of the positive cognitive, physical and emotional benefits from regular meditation, why is not widely included in the curriculum of business schools? It may be surprising to learn that such respected business schools as Columbia, Stanford, University of Notre Dame, and the London School of Business have included meditation as part of their curriculum. It is curious, therefore, that meditation is not taught more frequently as a skill in business school programs. It is proposed that the following barriers currently exist to the wider inclusion of meditation in the business curriculum: (1) the lingering association that many people have with meditation as a strictly spiritual practice, rather than as a tool that anyone can learn and apply; (2) the concern that students will think meditation is inappropriate as part of professional training and unrelated to their future managerial role; and (3) the lack of knowledge among business professors about how to teach meditation and integrate its practice into the topics of their course. The first concern with attitudes towards meditation as spiritual practice rather than a personal skill useful to business has been addressed by the preceding review of current research and popular use of meditation. We will now turn our attention to addressing the second barrier.

2 II.

3 RESULTS OF RESEARCH ON STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD MEDITATION

In an attempt to address the second barrier to the inclusion of meditation in the business curriculum, student resistance, the authors collected survey data over the course of a year from business students in order to evaluate their attitudes toward seven statements about the value of meditation in the business curriculum. A questionnaire was developed, pre-tested, revised and distributed to students enrolled in four courses in the Business Administration program. Both graduate and upper-division undergraduate courses that were required in the curriculum were sampled. In this manner, students who had selected various options within the program (such as Finance, Accounting, Marketing, Quantitative Analysis, Human Resources) were represented. Courses given during the Summer Quarter of 2005 were selected as well as those given during the Fall Quarter of 2006. In this manner, a representative sample of Business Administration students was achieved. Virtually all students in these courses filled out the questionnaire since it was done during class session and students' names were not required. A total useable sample of 209 questionnaires were collected and used for analyses.

Summary results for each of the seven statements are presented, with the sample size and percentage of responses (in parenthesis) shown next to each response. In the sample of 209 students, 52.9% were males, 56.7% were MBA candidates, 49.8% were full-time employed and 25.3% were part-time employed. Summary results for the demographic questions (see Appendix) indicated that for those who did not practice some form of meditation (Question 8, "No"), 37.5% (N=77) said they would be interested in learning to meditate (Question 11, "Yes").

Of the 132 respondents (62.5%) who had tried some type of meditation ("yes" on Question 8), 10.6% did it daily, 13.3% weekly, and 76% occasionally (Question 9). Reasons for practicing meditation (Question 10) were: stress reduction (61.3%); because it was trendy (4.1%); for religious reasons (21.3%), and other (13.3%). Of the 152 students who practiced some form of stress management (Question 13), multiple methods were sometimes checked. Eighteen indicated "yoga/pilates", none for "Tai Chi", 10 for "aerobics/kickboxing", 70 for "music", 28 for "prayer" and 43 chose "other" (listing mainly such things as swimming, jogging, walking, and exercising). For Question 14, of the 170 benefits of the stress management method identified, only 12 were for "improved grades", 32 for "increase in focus/concentration", 109 for "peace of mind/relaxation", 11 for "increased self-awareness", and 6 for "other".

The overall response from students indicates receptivity to learning meditation and having it included in a business curriculum. The results showed that over 90% agreed or strongly agreed that meditation is useful for reducing stress (Question 1) and that over 82% were personally open to learning how to meditate (Question 2). Eighty-four percent expressed a favorable response to the statement that meditation can help achieve success in the business environment (Question 5) and 75% support the offering of meditation as part of a course within the Business Administration curriculum (Question 7). Given these overwhelmingly favorable attitudes towards meditation as a positive benefit, it is interesting to note that only 60.6% of students felt that meditation is useful in the business context (Question 3) and only 39% felt that most people in the work environment are open to meditation (Question 4). The implications of these results will be addressed in the Discussion section.

4 III. ANALYSES OF MODERATING VARIABLES

Chi-square analyses of the moderating effects of the six variables of age (under 30 versus 30 and older), work status (full-time versus parttime/unemployed), gender, ethnic background (Caucasian versus Asian from the Indian subcontinent versus Asian non-Indian subcontinent), management experience (some versus none), and graduate versus undergraduate were completed for a subset of the questions. For "age", the only difference (Chi-square = 12.4, df=1) was on question 3 (there were no significant differences on questions 1, 2, 5, and 7) where 79.3% of those under 30 years old either "Strongly agreed" or "Agreed" that meditation has no use in the business context compared with 56.6% for those 30 years or older. There were no significant differences for the variable "work status" on the selected questions 1, 3 and 4. For the variable "gender", there were no significant differences on questions 1, 2, 3, 5 and 7. It appears that the attitudes towards meditation shown in the results for these five questions are quite consistent regardless of sexual orientation. Considering the variable of "ethnicity", Question 3 had 79.3% Caucasian agreeing or strongly agreeing with it compared to 56.1% for Indian Asian and 56.9% for non-Indian Asians (Chi-square= 5.9, df=2). For question 7, students from the Indian subcontinent overwhelming (90.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that meditation should be offered as part of a course within the Business Administration program, compared with 70.4% Caucasian and 73.2% Asian non-Indian subcontinent (Chi-square=5.7, df=2). There were no significant differences in ethnicity for questions 2 (enjoy learning how to meditate) or 5 (meditation can help achieve success in business). When analyses were done on questions 1,2,3,5 and 7 on those who had some work experience versus those with none, only question 2 was significant (chi-square=5.5, df=1). Those with work experience were more in agreement (89.5%) than those without (77.2%) in their enjoyment in learning how to meditate. For graduate versus undergraduate, significant differences were found on questions 1, 3, and 7 but not question 2 or 5. Eighty-four percent of the undergraduates strongly agreed or agreed that meditation can be useful to reduce stress compared with 93.8% of the graduate students (Chi-square=4.7, df=1). For question 3, 45.5% of the undergraduates strongly agreed or agreed that meditation has no use in the business context compared with 70.8% of the graduate students (Chi-square=13.3, df=1). But when meditation was in the academic context (question 7), over 81 percent of the graduate students supported it being offered compared with 66.4% of the undergraduate students (Chi-square=5.8, df=1).

IV.

5 SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING MEDITATION

The third barrier, the lack of knowledge among business professors about how to teach meditation in a MBA program, will now be addressed. In keeping with our previous discussion of the importance of overcoming students' perception that the business environment is not compatible with meditation, the introduction of meditation should be preceded by the presentation and discussion of its usefulness to managers. Research previously mentioned should be presented as well as examples from companies who do value "alternative" management practices. For example, the Der Hovanesian (2003) mentions that technology organizations such as Apple Computer, Yahoo! and Google were investing in on-site masseuses to relieve work stress. Similarly, Time Warner incorporated meditation classes to help employees deal with the new 12 hour days required after their company down-sizing. A discussion of Daniel Goleman's (1998) work on Emotional Intelligence is an excellent frame in which to introduce

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the usefulness of meditation. He presents evidence showing that 85 to 90 percent of success at work depends on one's "emotional intelligence", defined as personal and social competence. "Personal Competence" includes self-awareness (knowing one's internal states), self-regulation (managing these internal states) and motivation (emotional tendencies that help one reach goals). "Social Competence" has two dimensions, empathy (awareness of other's feelings) and social skills (adeptness at getting desirable responses from others). Meditation's relevancy to enhancing the personal competency component is most apparent from previous research, thus solidifying its value as a useful skill to learn in the Business Administration curriculum. Another outstanding source is the text *Creativity in Business* (1986). It has been used for over 20 years at Stanford's Graduate School of Business and provides a wealth of examples from leading business people on how they used meditation and other exercises to increase their company's and their own success.

After developing this context, the point to be emphasized is that meditation has practical value to both workers and managers apart from any religious or spiritual implications. It is important to introduce this content at the beginning of the course, incorporate its value into the course topic, and assign homework that includes students' reactions to the practice of meditation. Making it a course requirement to practice meditation daily will overcome the students' resistance to it as they progress throughout the course. Written papers should be required each week explaining the problems and concerns experienced during that week's practice. The professor should constantly give positive feedback to students' efforts, emphasizing that the key is not to judge how well they are meditating since this will interfere with its learning. Most MBA students have a very high level of achievement and are hard on themselves if "success" is not soon achieved by quantitative measurement. The "just do it and see what happens" approach peeks their natural curiosity, and the positive feedback given for their efforts will eventually lead to positive results. It usually takes about 4-5 weeks of practice before meditation becomes a regular part of their day and the benefits become apparent. By the end of the course, almost all students will have experienced the beneficial effects of daily meditation.

The actual instructions for how to meditate are quite basic. Whetten and Cameron (2005) discuss the conditions under which various "deep-relaxation strategies" are used in their chapter on "Managing personal stress", with transcendental meditation being one. It's important to frequently remind students to have NO expectations about what is SUPPOSE to happen when they meditate. Tell students to sit up comfortably in their chairs, with their heads balanced in the center of their body and their hands in their laps. They should slowly close their eyes and listen to the following instructions (there also are numerous CDs on "Guided Meditation"):

Rotate your feet left and right (pause for 10-15 seconds before reading each following instruction); now shake your legs back and forth; now shrug your shoulders up and down. Next rotate your head clockwise; then in a counter-clockwise direction. This should be done each time before you meditate to check your body for tension. Breathe deeply through your nose and out your mouth four or five times. Now pay attention to your breath as it goes in and out your chest. Concentrate on your breathing. As thoughts come to your mind, notice them and then return your focus to your breath. If you prefer, concentrate on thinking of a pleasant, soothing sound such as "om", "oh", or "ah". Don't force anything; just relax, watch your breath or focus on your sound. As thoughts appear, think of them as clouds floating by and return your concentration to your breath or sound. Don't worry about how well you are doing

or SHOULD be doing it. Have no expectations about anything. Just stay in the present time and focus on your breath or sound."

This suggested meditation scenario should last about 20 minutes; one can increase the length of the pauses to achieve this. After 20 minutes have passed, tell the students to slowly open their eyes, breathe deeply a few times, and then stretch their arms over their heads. Sit quietly for about 30 seconds before telling them to resume their normal activity. Questions should be encouraged and discussed. At the beginning of each subsequent class, it is important to ask for problems raised by their practice since this will reinforce the importance of this class requirement. Some common complaints from students about meditation, and appropriate responses to them, follow: (1) "I don't have time to meditate." Twenty minutes a day can always be found and this is excellent practice for managing your time. You can always set the alarm clock 20 minutes earlier in the morning. (??) "I do it at night and fall asleep." Meditation should not be done within a few hours after a heavy meal and never before retiring for the night. (??) "I can't find a place alone to meditate." If you take public transportation to or from work, do it then. After all, people will think you're napping, if they think about you at all! Or you can meditate in your car during lunch hour. One student solved this problem by going to the restroom and quietly sitting there for 20 minutes. (??) "My spouse thinks it's a stupid thing to have to do for a business course". Remember, it's a course requirement, you're in a class to learn new skills, and besides, do you always allow your spouse's opinion to determine your life? (This question should not be asked sarcastically nor rhetorically!) (??) " My mind wanders to other things besides my breath (or word mantra)". This is to be expected. Practice noticing when you are no longer concentrating on your breath or word and return your attention to it. The point is NOT to avoid thoughts but merely to become aware of your thought processes. (??) "How will I know when 20 minutes are up?" Either look at your watch or set a timer (all cell phones have them). After a few weeks of practice, the number of times you look at your watch will dramatically lessen and this is a mark of progress. (??) "Can I play music while I meditate?" If it's quiet background music and this facilitates your concentration, this is fine. If you discover that you are listening to the music rather than focusing on your breath, then don't use it. (??) "Last week I only remembered to meditate twice; what am I doing wrong?" Being aware of your

failure to meditate daily is important. Analyze the reasons and situations for your omissions and take steps to avoid them in the future. Remember, behavioral change takes time and effort. Just keep working on it and see what happens.

These recommendations are based on over 40 years of combined teaching experience in a variety of business courses with a highly diverse student population. Only once did a student refuse to practice meditation due to "religious reasons". Considering that many thousands of students have been taught to meditate, this is a remarkable testament to students' willingness to learn this important new skill for increasing management effectiveness.

V.

6 DISCUSSION

The results of the attitude survey presented above have some interesting implications for how business faculty should approach meditation instruction. On the one hand, the majority of students are very open to learning meditation and seeing it included in a business course. They believe that meditation is useful for reducing stress and contributing to overall success in business. However, students also seem to share the concern of many of their instructors that meditation may not have a place in the business environment: it's useful, but perhaps not acceptable. This indicates the need to "reframe" meditation as a skill that is practical, and one that is being currently applied by successful business professionals in recognized organizational settings. The concept of "framing" (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996) suggests that how an idea is presented ("the frame") plays a significant role in whether people will accept or reject an idea. This implies that, for students, the social meaning of meditation within that context of business is dependent upon how it is introduced by the instructor. Common framing techniques include the use of metaphors and stories to give meaning to a concept. Sharing one's own experiences with meditation as well as presenting the experiences of well-known business executives such as Richard Branson (Branson, 2006) and management consultants such as Stephen Covey (Covey, 2004) can provide a legitimate context for regular meditation practice. Presenting information about the use of meditation by such well-known organizations as AOL and Raytheon (Conlin, 2004) can firmly establish meditation as a respectable and acceptable business tool.

The research results also speak to the importance of instilling in students a sense of competency and efficacy in meditation's personal usefulness. Our experience in teaching meditation is that following several weeks of practice students begin to experience the beneficial outcomes of mental clarity, insight, creative thinking, and reduced stress. Again referring to the social psychological literature, in order to create a lasting change in attitudes and behavior it is not enough to simply present information; increasing knowledge does little to change behavior. Changes in behavior follow changes in attitude about the behavior and perceived ability to engage in the behavior (Ajzen, 1988). The most effective way to influence attitudes and perceived competency is to guide someone through the target behavior and support their repeated practice. As perceived competency increases, intention to engage in the behavior increases as well. This strongly suggests that the best way to introduce meditation into the skillset of future business professionals is to include the practice of meditation in the classroom setting, and allow time for students to process their experiences and reinforce their learning.^{1 2 3}

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.1 APPENDIX

.2 Meditation & Management Questionnaire

The purpose of this survey is to understand students' attitudes toward meditation as it relates to stress and time management at school, work, and in personal life. The information collected from this survey will remain completely confidential.

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