

Want to be a better leader? Observe more and react less

Overloaded executives need coping mechanisms. This personal reflection shows how meditation can help.

by Manish Chopra

Most time-strapped executives know they should plan ahead and prioritize, focus on the important as much as the urgent, invest in their health (including getting enough sleep), make time for family and relationships, and limit (even if they don't entirely avoid) mindless escapism. But doing this is easier said than done, as we all know—and as I, too, have learned during years of trying unsuccessfully to boost my effectiveness.

In my case, I stumbled upon an ancient meditation technique that, to my surprise, improved my mind's ability to better resist the typical temptations that get in the way of developing productive and healthy habits. Much in the same way that intense, focused physical activity serves to energize and revitalize the body during the rest of the day, meditation is for me—and for the many other people who use it—like a mental aerobic exercise that declutters and detoxifies the mind to enhance its metabolic activity.

Before my chance discovery of this timeless technique, I was skeptical, despite the accounts of the many accomplished practitioners who have preceded my

own beginning efforts.¹ Just as learning to swim or the enjoyment of floating in water can't be experienced by reading books about it or hearing others' accounts of the joy of aquatic self-buoyancy, so the benefits of meditation can only begin to be understood by taking an experiential plunge.

So why write about it? Because I think today's "always on" work culture is taking a heavy toll on today's leaders, and we need coping mechanisms. Meditation isn't the only one; it's just one that I feel somewhat qualified to talk about because of my experiences with it over the past five years. I'm far from alone; mindfulness has been gaining currency in business circles, and a few business schools also have been wading into the topic of meditation through the leadership of professors like Ben Bryant at IMD, Bill George at Harvard, and Jeremy Hunter at the Drucker School of Management.²

In my experience, though, most of today's workers—and senior executives perhaps most of all—lack what they need, whether it's meditation or a different approach, to balance and offset the demands of their "anywhere, everywhere" roles in today's corporations. The famous hitter Ted Williams, at the conclusion of a long baseball season, used to go hunting and fishing to relax and recharge. Winston Churchill was an amateur painter who once said, "If it weren't for painting, I couldn't live. I couldn't bear the strain of things."

Most executives can't disappear for long stretches to go fishing, and picking up painting sounds daunting. But they can use simple versions of proven meditation techniques to improve the quality of their lives, even if it's only by increments. My purpose in this article isn't to tell you whether, or how, to meditate; there are several flavors of meditation and I have only really ever tried the tradition of *Vipassana*.³ Instead, I will describe how it has helped me deal with three common challenges faced by leaders: email addiction, coping with disappointment, and becoming too insular.

FIGHTING EMAIL ADDICTION

Compulsively checking email, particularly first thing in the morning, is probably the biggest affliction to grip the modern-day professional. This was also the productivity-destroying habit I had found hardest to shake off.

¹ There has been a trend over the past 30 years or so to secularize a range of teachings from great spiritual traditions in order to make them more accessible for a variety of purposes, including personal effectiveness.

² See "Mindfulness in the age of complexity," *Harvard Business Review*, March 2014, hbr.org; and Beth Gardiner, "Business skills and Buddhist mindfulness," *Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2012, wsj.com.

³ In the *Pali* language *Vipassana* means "to see things as they really are," or, put differently, to gain insight into the true reality of things. For more information, see dhamma.org. *Vipassana* is one of many meditation practices.

In the past, I would find it almost impossible to resist looking at messages as soon as I woke up between 6 and 7 a.m., my mind conditioned in a Pavlovian manner to keep doing it. Some messages came in overnight from other time zones; others might be truly pressing items that couldn't wait. Many were nonurgent notifications and newsfeeds.

The impact of checking everything first thing was a combination of electronic overload, a heightened stress response to difficult messages (leading to knee-jerk replies), and, most seriously, a slower start to the morning's activities. This welter of electronic communications consumed my mind's energy. A curt or unpleasant email from someone important could easily affect my mood and get me off on the wrong foot with other, unconnected people, as I ruminated on whether a personal grievance or some other reason was responsible. The email habit started to feel like self-inflicted harm that I couldn't avoid.

Through meditation, my self-awareness and self-regulation "muscles" have grown to the point where I now am better able, after a good night's rest, to put the first several hours of my day to better use: toward meditating, exercising, writing, planning the day's priorities, and other complex-thinking tasks that would likely be crowded out later. I have relegated my heavy emailing period to the post-dinner timeframe when my mind is typically sluggish and less productive. Also, taking the extra time to respond to emails has helped my responses be more considered and deliberate.

My new conditioning means colleagues know that I won't always get back to every email first thing in the morning. This has stemmed the flow of overnight messages and served to alleviate anxiety and guilt over unanswered emails. Like everybody, I'm at constant risk of slipping back into old habits. I try to guard against this risk with the mental space I have recaptured for myself, motivating myself with the improvements I recognize in my personal and professional life that have occurred as a result of meditation.

TAKING POSITIVES FROM THE NEGATIVE

Shortly after starting meditation five years ago, I vividly recall hearing that McKinsey had lost to one of our main competitors the opportunity to serve an important healthcare ministry. As lead partner on the negotiation, I'd spent months with colleagues from around the world developing what we thought was a compelling approach for helping the ministry.

My instinctive reaction in similar situations previously would have been a mix of deflation, disappointment, frustration, and even resentment towards competitors. Minimizing any damage to the firm—and containing the impact on my own standing and career—would have been uppermost in my mind.

I'm not saying I was completely free of those feelings this time around, either—but something was different. There was more space between me and the emotional reaction that I'd have had previously. I surprised myself by acknowledging to colleagues that the rival bid must really have been better, and I almost took some satisfaction from the competitor's success. The win would admittedly allow them meaningful entry into a market that they had been pursuing for some time, but it would likely mean they would be a more rational competitor in the future. On reflection, I also felt genuinely happy for the clients, who I believed had run a fair and thorough process and had now found a well-qualified partner for this important assignment. I was aware that my own negativity hadn't been magically removed from me by meditation, but I was able to respond in a more neutral manner and not allow myself or others to be consumed by it.

FOCUSING ON OTHERS

Although meditation is a solitary act, it has helped me focus more on others as I shed some of my insecurities and redefined the way I make tough trade-offs. I used to feel insecure about being “left out” of certain meetings or discussions, thereby passing up opportunities to delegate. Similarly, when I faced dilemmas that required balancing conflicting interests, my dominant consideration was “What's in it for me?”

Again, I wouldn't say I'm now free of insecurity or self-interest. But regular meditation has helped me better identify those things that I truly need to be involved with and those that could carry on without my direct involvement. This has freed up a good 10 to 20 percent of productive time, and it has reduced my stress about not pulling my weight. It was also energizing for those who worked with me, as it allowed many of them to step up and take greater ownership and control. While all this might seem intuitive, it had eluded me before because of my insecurities and my lack of self-awareness with regard to my unconscious drives, and about how I was matching my energy level with productive uses of it. Meditation has made me more aware of these issues and, as I continue practicing, I'm hoping and expecting to access further levels of self-awareness and to make more progress toward letting go.

What's also shifted is my definition of personal gain or loss. I still acknowledge the personal dimension, but I find myself slowing down, and reflecting on situations from more angles, including more of how the situation will affect other people or the environment in which we live, and of what's right or fair. The impact of a decision on me personally is less of a yoke that makes the labor of assessing my choices exhausting or draining.

Instead, I find myself coming to “seemingly right” conclusions more nimbly than in the past. When I am able to avoid, or at least put in perspective, my previously perpetual orientation—“How does this serve my agenda?”—the “right” approach becomes relatively self-evident. This is liberating; it helps free me from the internal turmoil that used to arise when I tried to reverse engineer solutions that, first and foremost, served me.

At one point before beginning the practice of meditation, I had a renowned time-mastery coach assist me in rewiring my tendencies, including blocking off periods of the day for important strategic tasks. This advice, like Stephen Covey's habits for personal effectiveness, which I have long admired, was elegant and highly appealing. Yet I found it puzzlingly inapplicable to high-intensity professional life and I rapidly fell back into old habits. I would often feel a sense of passively going through the day's events rather than making active choices in the driver's seat.

Post-meditation, I have experienced a real shift in how I focus my energies. Despite the same, if not greater, pressures at work, I am enjoying more control and a greater sense of purpose in my daily and weekly activities. I no longer take pride in the number and diversity of my appointments—even as I now have to be on guard for new ways pride can present itself.

I would sum up my experience in four words: observe more, react less. I try to observe myself more disinterestedly and to avoid knee-jerk reactions to the rush of incoming stimuli and to situations that seem negative. Even if I don't always succeed, I am more easily able to identify my weaknesses: my sense of insecurity, addiction to short-term benefits, and overemphasis on process-driven results. That helps me work smarter and lead better toward longer-lasting achievements. (Q)

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