



Meditate to Improve Performance



By [Randel Carlock](#), INSEAD

Deep breathing, savouring food and walking alone are some of the methods that can teach awareness and better one's well-being.

For centuries, meditation helped Asians lead more meaningful lives. Meditation is now going global because research is proving its effectiveness for improving human performance and well-being.

Two INSEAD colleagues, Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour, [Zoe Kinias](#), and PhD student [Andrew Hafenbrack](#) have even [demonstrated](#) how 15 minutes of meditation improved resistance to the sunk cost fallacy in business decision-making.

A study at Northeastern University showed how people trained in meditation for just eight weeks behaved with attention to others 50 per cent of the time, compared with 16 per cent for an untrained group. Research like this is why large US corporations like General Mills and Target now use meditation as a

tool to improve their performance.

In the C-suite, meditation has significant advantages for developing executives into more capable leaders.

Business schools are effective at teaching the technical tasks of managing, but teaching leadership has proven more problematic.

Leadership is much more an art than a science, demanding a curriculum based on personal exploration of self and social awareness.

Leaders must learn to see themselves accurately and be aware of how they see other people.

Looking at powerful leaders like Churchill, Reagan, Gandhi, Clinton, Jobs or Mandela, we often find limited technical management skills, while values and personalities drive the agenda. No one would ever argue Steve Jobs was a good manager technically, but how he used his personality to lead Apple changed the world.

Nelson Mandela used meditation to prepare himself for leading South Africa as a united nation. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, he revealed how reflection became the basis for future success.

Oprah: You said if you hadn't been in prison, you wouldn't have achieved the most difficult task in life – changing yourself. How did 27 years of reflection make you a different man?

Mandela: Before I went to jail, I was active in politics – and was generally busy from 7am until midnight. I never had time to sit and think. But in prison, I had time to think. I had a clear view of my past and present, and I found that my past left much to be desired, both in regard to my relations with other humans and in developing personal worth. In my younger days, I was arrogant – jail helped me to get rid of it. I did nothing but make enemies because of my arrogance.

What Mandela is describing is the self-awareness that mediation teaches: who you are and how you relate to others.

So how does meditation fit into our busy lives? I use a simple technique whenever I struggle to translate an idea into words. I shut my eyes and breathe deeply, allowing oxygen to refresh my brain and help me focus on

an idea rather than the entire article. When I open my eyes, the words are there.

I would suggest, initially, the use of a few everyday meditation techniques to start living more consciously by focusing on the here and now.

The starting point for meditation is actively thinking about your breathing. If you ask most people about improving their health, they will talk about a better diet, regular exercise or reducing stress. But using your breathing to re-energise your mind and body is equally important.

Breathing is natural to all living things: learning to control it consciously gives you another tool to influence your well-being.

Most of us use about 30 per cent of lung capacity, so deep belly breathing through the nose is an internal massage that helps the mind address pent-up struggles and the body balance itself. Count silently one to five for each breath in and for each breath out.

Ironically, the mobile phone is a great meditation tool. Most people lose track of how many times a day they automatically check their e-mail. Try checking it every two hours and use two minutes to practise deep breathing.

Disconnecting from the internet to reconnect with yourself focuses your mind on the present and avoids constantly stimulating your body to produce the stress hormone cortisol. It is simple biology; the less you check your messages, the more focus and less stress you have throughout your day.

Meals are another great place to live more consciously. Start every meal like a gourmet by tasting the first few bites and using all your senses to explore the texture, aroma, temperature, flavours and colours – the total tasting experience. Savouring food makes eating more fun and teaches you awareness.

Once or more a week walk alone for 15 minutes to somewhere scenic or just special to you and enjoy everything you see. No checking messages or reading the paper: just yourself and the place.

Take small breaks throughout the day to scan your body for tension and then focus your breathing on the points of discomfort, stretching gently. This helps provide more energy and is comforting after hours at the desk.

In my work at INSEAD, I use meditation in the Executive MBA and master's in professional psychology. The reaction of MBAs to meditation is often: "We don't want this fluffy stuff. Teach us new leadership skills we can apply at work."

I would suggest trying one of the ideas discussed above or sit quietly for five minutes in the morning or evening and practise breathing deeply. But don't expect miracles. In fact, don't expect anything – so as to be surprised.

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