

**icare**<sup>™</sup>

# **Mindful Leadership**

Unlocking the power of workforce wellness

Learn. Adapt. Evolve.

**Mindful Leadership**  
**Unlocking the power of workforce wellness**

Written by: Isabelle Phillips

Research and Concept: Isabelle Phillips

With thanks to: Justine Lee and Michael Dash,  
Eugene McGarrell and Andrew Ellery from  
the Health and Community Engagement  
Team at icare.

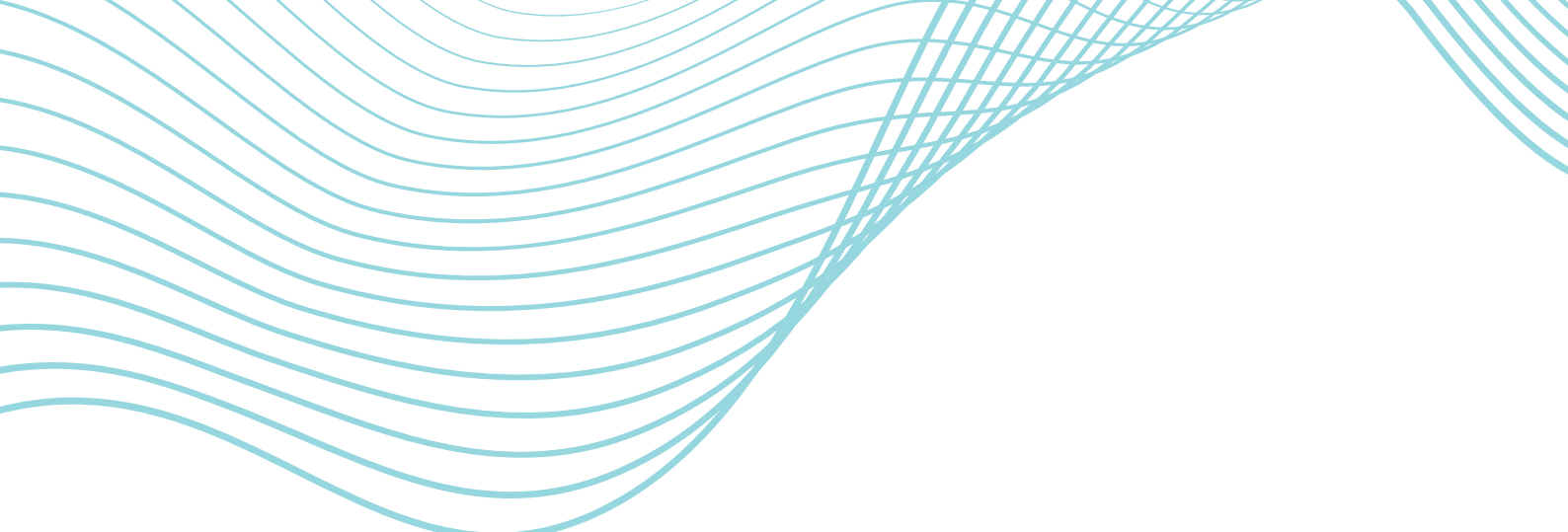
All facts and figures in this whitepaper are drawn from recognised sources and actual results recorded in Mindful Leadership sessions hosted by icare for leaders from a range of industry sectors.

Copyright © 2018  
Printed in Australia

## Table of contents

1	Introduction .....	5
2	Workplace stress — What’s it costing us?.....	5
3	Mindfulness — An emerging response.....	7
4	Beyond stress reduction — Wellness + Performance .....	8
5	How it works — Inside mindful brain .....	9
6	Leader mindfulness.....	10
7	Cascading impacts of mindfulness.....	12
8	Further reading .....	12

“Slow down to go further”  
- Russian Proverb



“Mindfulness  
supports me to  
coach myself —  
to get up out of  
the forest floor.  
I get back into the  
helicopter and see  
what is going on”

- icare Mindful Leadership  
participant, week 5 of 10

# 1 Introduction

**Fascinating new research indicates the wellness benefits of mindfulness are experienced by those practicing mindfulness, as well as those working with the mindful person. This cascading effect builds a strong case for developing leader mindfulness to combat workplace stress.**

Mindfulness in popular culture has exploded in recent years and is moving into the organisational context rapidly, pitched as a solution to workplace stress. Organisations are using mindfulness to combat workplace stress caused by increasing job insecurity, poor leadership and bad job design. But are organisations approaching the mindfulness in the right way?

This whitepaper summarises the endemic problem of workplace stress and outlines three key responses to stress. The paper clarifies what mindfulness really is, provides an overview of the benefits and outlines strategies to ensure mindfulness is skilfully deployed to create results using insights from real case studies.

icare invites you to use the strategies in this report to maximise your return on organisational mindfulness initiatives and harness the power of the well workforce.

## 2 Workplace stress — What's it costing us?

**Workplace stress is costing the Australian economy an estimated \$44 billion dollars every year. Estimations are calculated on the combined costs of absenteeism, presenteeism and turnover.**

Unprecedented levels of technological disruption, our shrinking globe, changing workforce demographics and diminishing employment security are all contributing to a growing tide of stressed out workers. To create organisational outcomes in this disrupted world we need our people to be at their best; to care, to think, to engage. And yet workplace stress can inhibit all of these capabilities. Beyond diminishing performance, some reports suggest that job stress even prompts employee illness and injury. Worryingly, work-related injuries and illnesses prompted by job stress last longer than other types.

Our leaders do so much to attract and retain great talent. Expensive recruitment and selection processes shortlist high performers with the right values fit. Yet, when those high performers arrive, both their wellness and performance levels, are challenged by stressors such as bad job design, poor leadership and bad attitudes.

### The problem of job design

Assuming physical conditions are not dangerous, the 'magic' formula for a stressful job is this: lots of responsibility to achieve outcomes and little control over the levers to achieve those outcomes. Think about a bus driver who must get to each stop in a strict time frame, whilst following all road rules and remaining friendly to all commuters. The bus driver might have strict KPIs around drop-off and pick-up windows and yet he or she has no control over road conditions.

#### Take-Away

Reviewing job design is an important strategy to address workplace stress. However, as the example of the bus driver illustrates, sometimes it can be a difficult one to resolve.

### The problem of bad attitudes

The surprising fact about stress is that a short burst of stress is good for us, as long as we think it is good for us. Studies show our physiological reaction to short bursts of stress actually depends on our understanding of stress and our relationship to it. An important strategy to address the negative impacts of workplace stress is to assist employees to explore their relationship to short bursts of stress and to embrace healthy attitudes towards it. Mindfulness supports individuals to approach the realities of work life with an attitude of acceptance. Over time mindfulness practitioners report greater wellness as their relationship to their stressors become healthier.

#### Take-Away

Offering mindfulness to ground-floor employees is becoming a popular organisational response to workplace stress. But is this enough?

This approach has come under criticism in academic circles and in the popular press. If mindfulness supports high-levels of coping, as has been claimed, are we simply enabling toxic workplaces, bad management practices and unrealistic work hours? Could we be doing our organisations a disservice in the long run? In response to these challenges some are ensuring their mindfulness investment really counts by offering leaders access to credible leadership programs with experienced mindfulness teachers.

## The problem of poor leadership

Most of us are familiar with the adage that people join organisations and leave bosses. While leaders are often viewed through a heroic lens, the global financial crisis led to research into leaders as anti-heroes. This research into 'bad bosses' found that leaders can constitute the most stressful part of the job, that this stress is passed on to spouses and families, contributes to subversive workplace behaviours and intentions to leave.

**Take-Away** Supporting the leaders in your organisation is an important strategy to address workplace stress. Mindfulness training for leaders can assist them to move to greater wellness and performance and, as new research shows, it can cascade to their teams and stakeholders.

“It’s quite concerning that so much is happening upstairs that is uncontrolled. It’s almost hyperactive in some ways.”

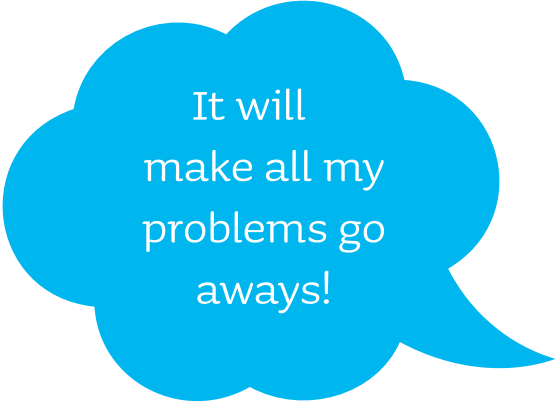
– icare Mindful Leadership participant, week 3 of 10

### 3 Mindfulness — An emerging response


The word 'mindfulness' describes deliberate attentional awareness to whatever is arising in the mind or the body whether it is good, bad or ugly. It is 'showing up' with raw curiosity to whatever the world throws at us.

Mindfulness allows us to remain equally present to new information from without (such as early signs of market shifts or technology-driven disruptions) and from within (such as the rising tide of irritation that starts as a tightness in the gut and becomes constricted breathing and rushing thoughts).

Despite the popularity of mindfulness, misconceptions abound. Here are some of the most common:




It will  
make all my  
problems go  
aways!




It's about  
going into a  
trance, and  
zoning out.



It's  
not for busy  
executives  
like me... I'm  
too busy



It's all about  
blissing out.



It's a  
time to  
analyse my  
problems.

Primarily, mindfulness is the deliberate and diligent attending to whatever is arising in the mind and the body. This attending comes with an attitude of curiosity, openness and kindness to ourselves and others. Mindfulness does not seek to bliss us out, but to connect us to everyday reality; both the joys and the discomforts.

In our rushed and overloaded modern lives, mindfulness is a chronically under-developed capacity. It is a faculty of mind that gives us space to step away from autopilot behaviours and move from reaction to action. It is neither an intellectualised analysis process nor a way to zone out. Practicing mindfulness is, in fact, a way to tune in to experience. With practice, this new way of being can transfer into daily life. Deliberately slowing down and observing all we perceive can feel like hard work at first. Actually, in a surprisingly short time, this practice enables us to make better decisions, build better relationships and elegantly surf any treacherous waves of discomfort that come our way during the day. Research shows those waves reduce in both height and duration when we learn to just observe. After a few weeks people report feeling like ‘someone just turned the colour and the sound up.’

Learning mindfulness is a little like learning to ride a bike. No amount of reading about it will support you in the same way as getting on the bike and riding.

## 4 Beyond stress reduction – Wellness + Performance

Studies show a surprising array of benefits for mindfulness practitioners including:



Longevity      Relationship Quality      Self Actualisation      Vitality

Decades of research with military and police personnel, special education teachers, accident and emergency nurses and elite sports players demonstrate improvements in wellness and performance after just eight weeks of mindfulness practice. Wellness improvements include reduced rumination, neuroticism, depression and angry

hostility. Over and above the reduction of the negative, mindfulness also boosts the positive, such as increased life satisfaction, self-esteem, vitality, relationship quality, selfactualisation and even longevity.

### Ask yourself

Would you like to see these wellness indicators in your workforce? In your boss? In yourself?

More recently scientists have tried to identify what mindfulness might offer in workplace contexts. Workplace specific research in mindfulness demonstrates performance related benefits including improved cognition, timeaffluence, ethical decision-making, relationship quality, reduced burnout and risk-management.

### Ask yourself

Would you also like to see these performance benefits in yourself? Would you like to see these benefits in your team, or your boss?



Increased Cognition      Ethical Decisions      Time Affluence      Risk Management

It’s interesting to note that most people, from university students in China to business leaders in Australia, easily accept the research that is now widely known; mindfulness equals increased wellness and performance.

### Take-Away

Sharing the evidence-based research on mindfulness and its benefits is an important strategy. Leaders must be invited to self-select to ensure authentic participation in mindfulness initiatives.

Interestingly, after just a short time of practice, people start to develop keen curiosity about exactly how it works. How do the many wellness and performance gains emerge from this unglamorous act of sitting? How does deliberately attending to the breath, noting distraction with kind and deliberate effort change us for the better?



## 5 How it works — Inside mindful brain

**It turns out that us humans are notoriously poor at affective forecasting. Affective forecasting is predicting what will make us well and happy, and we not at all good at it.**

When we are time-pressured and feeling pulled in many directions at once, a natural inclination is to work faster and multi-task even more. Then, the distracted, racing mind seeks downtime activities that further erode our wellness (for example; spending too much or drinking too much). A negative spiral of ill-health and dissatisfaction can follow if we don't catch ourselves in time.

At first, mindfulness appears to be a counterintuitive path to wellness for those living busy lives. Initially, the practice can seem both arduous and banal. Deliberately taking time out to sit still, to place our attention on our breathing, to observe fleeting thoughts, all without taking any action, can seem like a crazy approach to get on top of the stress of work and life.

So what are the underlying mechanisms? Or, as this leader, who runs a tech and innovation division, once asked after a mindfulness practice session:

“How on earth does this work?”

– icare Mindful Leadership participant, week 3 of 10

**The following explanations come from traditional mindfulness teachings from the East, some 2500 years ago, from Western psychology and from the newer field of neuroscience. Just how it works is understood in different ways depending on your vantage point.**

### Novelty seeking

Mindfulness can assist us to escape a ‘groundhog-day’ approach to work and life. Instead, the mindfulness practitioner can deliberately seek novelty in each new experience. With mindfulness we can feel energised rather than drained, learn better, manage risk earlier and avoid burnout altogether. (For an example of the mind that misses the nuances — most people miss a repeated word in written text — have a look at the paragraph above this one!)

### The observer mind

Mindfulness uncouples us from the suffering inherent in the binary choices of ‘express’ or ‘suppress’. Most of us know that ‘expressing’ on autopilot sometimes damages our relationships. We also know that habitual ‘suppressing’ comes with real, long-term health risks. Mindfulness offers a third way: ‘observe’. Watching our thoughts, emotions and sensations arise and dissipate may seem like a strange pathway to wellness. In fact, when we slow down and observe, we develop the freedom to choose our actions. We can choose to respond to the unfolding situation with the care that is needed to achieve the outcomes we seek.

### Increased empathy

Mindfulness connects us to others. Attention to our own discomfort reveals the finer nuances of our own pain and releases us from this. Our ability to recognise social pain and physical pain in others is refined, compassion and kindness arise connecting us to self and others. Humans are herd animals. Connection is a key indicator of wellness, lifesatisfaction and longevity.

### The mindful brain

The way we use our mind changes our brain. Neuroscientists have identified increases in brain matter associated with IQ, specifically cortical thickness, in mindfulness practitioners.

Mindfulness practice also correlates with reductions in the density of the amygdala (associated with stress responses and post traumatic stress disorder). In fact, in mindfulness practitioners our executive function is still active even when the amygdala is ‘tripped’, hence less overwhelm when stress is experienced and better decisions under pressure.

## Quick self-test

1. I can perceive feelings and emotions without having to react to them on auto-pilot
2. I can remain present to my inner experiences (feelings in the body, emotions) even when they are unpleasant or painful
3. I rarely break or spill things, lose my keys or drop my phone.
4. I am aware of both my fleeting feelings and my more stable moods. I can describe them using a large emotional vocabulary.
5. I can accept my anger, sadness, joy, vulnerability and other experiences without judgement. These big ideas form the current 'big-five' factors of mindfulness and are represented, in one way or another, in most mindfulness scales.

## 6 Leader mindfulness

**Today leadership is contextualized by volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous business environments.**

The forces of globalization, technological advances and emerging workforce trends are driving an increasing pace of disruption even in the most traditional markets. Leaders are managing an increasingly contingent workforce, in an ever-changing environment. Increasingly leadership success no longer relies solely on technical expertise, or decades of earned know-how. Leaders need something else, something close to 'nowness'. They need the capacity to be fully here, open to all that is emerging rather than a reliance on old mental maps. Influencing the workforce in this regard makes sense in a world where business futures are anything but a calculable progression along a predictable pathway.

Mindfulness practice assists leaders to cultivate this presence, or openness to the moment. Leaders report seeing with fresh eyes what is unfolding before them. After a few weeks of practice, leaders report the ability to catch their own habitual responses to situations. Leaders who once operated on auto-pilot report gaining the freedom to let old habit patterns go when they are not serving anyone or improving the situation.

## Week One

‘Doing it for 20 minutes would be a challenge.’

‘How will this help my team?’

‘I’m just here for me’.

## Week Five

‘I am realising I am terrible for drifting off and suddenly I find myself in a bizarre scenario that I didn’t even know how I got to, and I knew straight away I drifted.’

## Week Ten

‘It’s not about seeking bliss. It’s a gift you give to yourself each day.’

‘Managing difficult situations is much less energy expensive for me now.’

‘I can be more focused on what I am doing. Not as well as I’d like to be, but better.’

‘Now I have presence. It is hard to articulate, but there is something different going on now. For example, the other day I was thinking “not another sales presentation”. I saw my thinking and then I noticed: it was a really great presentation! I was actually really impressed. Previously, I had this unknown preconception, and I am now thinking: was that why they were not very good?’

- icare Mindful Leadership participants 2017

## 7 Cascading impacts of mindfulness

Science is discovering that when leaders are mindful the wellness benefits don't just stay with the leader. The benefits cascade out to many.

Higher leader mindfulness is linked to higher employee job performance, job-satisfaction and pro-social behaviours. Leader mindfulness is also linked to reduced employee exhaustion and fewer deviant behaviours. We don't yet know how this happens.

We do know that supporting optimal wellness and performance of knowledge workers is a key challenge for business leaders.

Research indicates that supporting the wellness and performance of your leaders with mindfulness may be the best way to boost wellness in your organisation.

## 8 Further reading

Kabat-Zinn, J. 1994, *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*, Hyperion.

Siegel, D.J. 2008, *The Mindful Brain: The Neurobiology of Well-being*, Sounds True.

Wallace, B. Alan, 2006 *The attention revolution : unlocking the power of the focussed mind*, Wisdom Publications

Gunaratana, H. *Mindfulness in Plain English*. Edition, 2. Wisdom Publications, 1992.

Langer, E. *Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility*, Ballantine Books 2009.

### About the author

Isabelle Phillips is a UTS Business School researcher, lecturer, Asia Pac corporate consultant and public speaker. Isabelle is an expert in leadership and mindfulness. Isabelle is called upon by journalists and organisations on the subject of effective ways to build workforce wellness and performance.

**icare**<sup>™</sup>  
[icare.nsw.gov.au](http://icare.nsw.gov.au)