

# Manage yourself to get thin

Beverly Landais provides some practical tips to regain control of your life and, in turn, contribute more to your firm.

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**T**ime is your most precious asset. It cannot be stored up and once lost it is gone forever. The degree to which you feel in control of your time and your life has a significant effect on your well-being. It follows that the better you manage the critical events of your life, the better you will feel and the more energy you will have to get things done that are important to you. After all, time management is life management.

The good news is that you can make a huge difference by using a few simple self-management techniques such as practicing mindfulness, introducing structure and exercising self-discipline in your working practices. Together, these can help you to be more productive and capable of delivering further value in the workplace, which is a direct benefit to your organisation. From a personal perspective, you are likely to feel a lot less stressed by being more in control of your life.

## Getting things under control

Productivity coach and bestselling author, Brian Tracy, writes that getting things under control is mostly a matter of mental attitude coupled with clarity about priorities and by being well-organised. He encourages focus of effort on the vital few not the trivial many. Bluntly put, you may be well-organised and have a clear set of priorities, but if you don't have the right mindset, you are unlikely to succeed.

So, what can you do to develop a mindset of success? Enter the Locus of Control. First studied by psychologist Julian Rotter in 1966, the Locus of Control describes how you view your ability to influence the things that happen in your life. If you believe the outcome of your actions will determine your success in life, you have an internal locus. Alternatively, if you think that events

outside your control govern your success, you have an external locus of control. An external locus of control feels like the pressures of your work and responsibilities are directing your activities. Most of what you are doing is reacting and responding to external events.

An overactive external locus of control can sap your resourcefulness and breed a sense of helplessness. It can feel as if you are a puppet on a string. There is a big difference between action that is taken on purpose and with a specific goal in mind, and reaction which is an immediate response to external pressure. It is the difference between feeling positive and in control of your life and feeling negative, stressed and pressured. To perform at your best and contribute true value to your organisation, you must have a strong feeling of control over the important areas of your life.

So, what are your beliefs about your ability to control and manage your life? The fact is that habits form from behaviour, and behaviour is driven by your beliefs. If you believe that you are unable to improve your self-management, then it is highly likely that you are right. You can take all the courses on time management you like, but if you perceive yourself as being a weak time manager at the mercy of external events, nothing will help. If you do not change your beliefs about your personal level of effectiveness and efficiency, your ability to manage your time – and your life – will not change either.

However, the great thing about beliefs is that we can choose to change them. So, how do you develop new, confident ideas about yourself and your level of personal productivity? It is essential to decide to establish a specific self-management habit, like returning phone calls within a certain timeframe. Every change in your life comes about when you make a specific decision to do something different. In doing so, you will move into

the internal Locus of Control, and things will begin to change for the better.

## Visualise yourself as you want to be

A top tip from Brian Tracy is to start by visualising yourself as you want to be. A useful technique is to see yourself as already a well-organised and highly productive person. What would be different about the way you behave? Create a picture of yourself as calm, confident, highly efficient, more relaxed and about to complete your work to a high standard within the deadline set. Imagine how a highly productive person behaves. Would the person's desk be clear and tidy? Would the person appear unhurried and unstressed? Create a clear mental picture of yourself as a person who is in control of their time and life.

Decide today to act as if you are already good at self-management. Think of yourself as organised in everything you do. How would you approach your day? What would be different about the way you act? This visualisation technique will help you form good habits. If you can imagine it, you can act to become it.

One of the best books written in the past few years on mindset is Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011). His insight is that we need to use two different types of thinking to deal with the variety of situations we face in our daily lives. He calls these thinking types System 1 and System 2.

According to Kahneman, System 1 represents the ancient, reactionary part of the brain that does the 'Fast Thinking' we need to get through everyday life. Fast thinking is the type of thinking we use to deal with short-term tasks, problems and situations. We act quickly and instinctively. In most cases, fast thinking is entirely appropriate for our day to day activities. Whereas System 2 represents the newest, 'Slow Thinking' rational part

# gs done and still have a life

of the brain – the prefrontal cortex – which is responsible for considering options and developing long-term plans. Kahneman says slow thinking is when you step back and take more time to reflect on the situation before acting.

Kahneman's insight is that failure to engage in slow, 'Critical Thinking' when it is required and necessary is the cause of many of the mistakes that we make. It follows that to get your life under control, you need to engage in slow, critical thinking on a regular basis. This ensures that you are clear about the outcomes you desire before plunging in. What is the result that you are striving to achieve? Try starting with the simple question, 'what am I trying to do?' If you find yourself slipping into a negative frame of mind, ask yourself 'how well does this belief service me?', then choose something more useful.

## Concentrate on the grey matter

Of course, all of this requires discipline, and this is where the practice of mindfulness has a part to play. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) at the University of Massachusetts defines mindfulness as: "The awareness that comes from paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally". The British Mindfulness Institute reports that the most interesting and dramatic research has come from the field of Neuroscience. One study recently published investigated the brain grey-matter concentration of participants of an 8-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Programme (MBSR). Grey-matter concentration simply means the number of neurons that are working in the brain at a given moment in time. The study showed that after eight weeks of mindfulness practice there were significant increases in grey-matter concentration in brain regions involved in learning



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and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing and perspective-taking.

It is no surprise then that people in the business world are turning their attention to the application of mindfulness in the workplace. When practised and applied, mindfulness fundamentally alters the operating system of the mind. Through repeated mindfulness practice, brain activity is redirected from System 1 our Fast Thinking mode to System 2 our Slow Thinking mode – which directly supports our ability to make better decisions and deal more effectively with life's challenges.

In 2015 the Mindful Nation UK inquiry by the Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group resulted in the publication of the Mindful Nation Report. Such was the interest in workplace findings that the Mindfulness Initiative channelled grassroots enthusiasm into a Private Sector Working Group. The result is a document entitled 'Building the Case for Mindfulness in the Workplace' which was published in 2016 by the volunteer working group. This working group is ongoing and made up of champions from private sector companies including BT, EY, GE, GSK, HSBC and Jaguar Land Rover, supported by leading workplace mindfulness trainers and researchers.

The document is a helpful resource for those developing a business case for mindfulness training within their organisation. It provides an updated summary of the research evidence, narrative rationales addressing different organisational needs, case studies and a range of toolkits to help with programme planning, implementation and evaluation.

A recent review of the scientific literature establishes the connection between the practice of mindfulness and many aspects of workplace functioning. It associates mindfulness training with improvement in three key areas:



Wellbeing, Relationships and Performance. Savvy business leaders are increasingly incorporating mindfulness practice into the workplace. Google, Goldman Sachs, and Medtronic are among the many leading firms that have introduced meditation and other mindfulness practices to their employees. Executives at these and other companies say meditation is not only useful as a stress-reduction tool but can also enhance creativity, opening doors where once there seemed to be only a wall.

### Become more mindful at work

So how can you or your team start bringing mindfulness into the rhythms and routines of your daily work? Here are seven easy to implement tips to help you become more mindful at work:

- 1 Practice five minutes of mindfulness each day.** Most people find mornings the best time to practice mindfulness, but you can do it any time of day. Try downloading one of the many short mindfulness meditation courses available online (including meditation apps such as Headspace, Calm, or buddhify).
- 2 Use the first hour of your working day for essential tasks.** Our minds are most focused, creative, and expansive in the morning. Making email your first task of the day wastes the opportunity to use your brain to its highest potential. Put it to better use by focusing the first hour of your day on meaningful work.
- 3 Deploy time-chunking techniques to get more done.** Try the Pomodoro Technique which was developed by Francesco Cirillo. ‘Pomodoro’ is Italian for tomato. The method works by getting you to structure your work in 25-minute sessions, each separated by a short break. Cirillo took the name from the tomato-shaped kitchen timer that he used to manage his time as a university student. The method is remarkably simple. Each 25-minute session is one ‘pomodoro’. When you complete one, take a five-minute break before embarking on the next. After completing four ‘pomodori’, take a more extended break to rest and recharge. At first, it might seem counter-intuitive to have so many breaks throughout the day. But research shows that this can enhance your work rate when you return to the task at hand.
- 4 Beware the attraction of distraction.** Decide where you want to focus and for how long, then turn off all digital and phone notifications. The notification alarms on your phone, tablet, and laptop keep you mentally busy and put you under pressure, thereby triggering reactionary external Locus of Control responses. They disrupt your flow and cause damage far more than they add value.
- 5 Pay attention to attention.** Try to maintain focus on a single task, and then notice when you find your mind drifting off to another task — a sign that your brain wishes to switch tasks. When this happens, mentally shut down all the superfluous tasks entering your thoughts while maintaining focus on the task at hand.
- 6 Put it on your calendar.** Schedule a check-in with yourself every two weeks to assess how well you’re doing with the previous tips, or as a reminder to revisit this article to refresh your memory. Consider engaging one of your peers to do the same thing. This step will provide a chance to assess each other, which can be both helpful and motivating.
- 7 Make it a habit of capturing insights.** At the end of each task or meeting, take a few minutes to capture your most significant ideas. A good self-coaching question is “what is it that I have learnt today?”. Once you get the hang of it, slow, reflective thinking can take a surprisingly short amount of time, and the benefits will be manifest.

There will always be sceptics yet there is a compelling body of evidence that you can make a huge difference to your wellbeing and productivity in the workplace by adjusting your mindset with the practice of mindfulness. Maximise the benefit by adding a few simple self-management techniques such as introducing structure and exercising self-discipline in your working practices. You can decide attitude to self-management. Doing so is the first step in regaining control of your life and contributing to building value in the organisation where you work.



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