

Promoting mindfulness to men requires different approach: Project

Linking training to business, sports, performance and workplace can broaden appeal

BY SARAH DOBSON

TRAINING around mindfulness has gained greater acceptance in the workplace, as employers and employees alike come to see the positives of the approach, such as greater focus, reduced stress and enhanced relationships.

But mindfulness seems to attract more women than men, according to the experts.

“Men benefit from mindfulness training in significant ways but the challenge is to get them to sign up,” said Geoff Soloway, co-founder and chief training officer at MindWell-U, a mindfulness consultancy based in Vancouver.

“Mindfulness is proven to lower stress, improve self-care and increase resilience and well-being — all of which men desperately need — but many see mindfulness as ‘fluffy’ stuff and so they often shy away.”

But after conducting a two-year project around mindfulness involving employers such as WestJet and Coca-Cola Canada — with in-person training, group classes, retreats, lunch ‘n’ learns, workshops and one-on-one coaching — the consultancy determined men are more likely to sign up for mindfulness training if

it’s linked to business, sports or performance, and it’s delivered at work.

“When we linked mindfulness training to business and leadership, highlighted its use by winning athletes and sports teams... or showed how it’s used in the military, men were more inclined to give it a try,” said Soloway. “And when we delivered mindfulness training in the workplace, demonstrating it’s endorsed by their employer and making it more accessible, we really saw men open up to mindfulness and reap the rewards.”

How the training is positioned is really important, he said.

“For a lot of people, referring to it just as ‘mindfulness’ or ‘mental health,’ it doesn’t come across as engaging enough, and so when we position mindfulness training as performance training, and within the workplace, it actually shows that this is related to their level of productivity and performance at work, and that’s something that more men care about.”

But is a different approach really necessary? Yes, according to Daniel Skarlicki, Edgar F. Kaiser professor of organizational behaviour at the

Sauder School of Business at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, which was also involved with the “Meeting Men in the Moment” project.

“Men are not drawn to it as much as women, and obviously men are just as needing to tend to their own wellness as women are, if not more, but they just don’t go there,” he said.

“Men are particularly in a tough spot because they’re not in touch with their feelings — as a generality, some men are, some women aren’t — and part of the problem is men have been raised (or) socialized to suppress their emotions. We hear this term ‘man up.’”

Through the project, the group found one of the best ways to reach more men with mindfulness is to call it something else, said Skarlicki.

“First of all, you never call it ‘meditation,’ you call it ‘leadership mindfulness,’ he said, or “performance training” or “leadership training.”

And it’s not a “practice,” it’s a “challenge,” such as a 30-day challenge, he said. It’s also good to tell men it’s about testing not necessarily their stress response but their executive function.

“So it’s the language that we use to describe what we’re interested in, and men are much more attuned to that language,” said Skarlicki. “They don’t want to be seen as weak. They think it’s not necessary because they don’t see the problem so therefore they’re not going to see the need for a solution.”

It’s also important to deliver a blended approach, providing the mindfulness training both in-person and online. Offering the training at work also makes it look like it’s endorsed by the organization, so it’s OK for them to sign up.

“We try to bring the mindfulness training to them at work, so we show them how it’s not separate from their work, it’s something they can do at work, so we try to shift their mindset,” said Skarlicki.

It’s also a good idea to keep the content short, sharp and action-oriented.

“We try to teach them how it will make them better leaders as opposed to ‘This is going to help you deal with your wellness.’ We’ll say, ‘This is how you use it, there’s a function here that will be important and interesting to you.’ So we show

them how it can help them reach their goals, so we base the mindfulness practice in something that's active for them," he said.

WestJet, Coca-Cola get on board

To get more men involved in mindfulness, it makes sense to tie the training to performance, ground it in logic and ensure there are strong male role models, according to Pam August, organizational development specialist for WestJet in Calgary.

Men need this type of training to be grounded in strong rationale, she said, while admitting it's an over-generalization.

"It needs to make logical sense in order for them to engage with it to a greater extent than for women. More women had had experience in this type of learning through other avenues (such as yoga or self-study). Interestingly enough, after doing the training, more men than women talked about how they use it in their life with their families. They needed the logical hook and then saw broader applicability."

WestJet has offered mindfulness training to help people be more

present in the moment, and to manage the stress of working in a hectic, growing airline, said August.

"It has helped them better connect with our guests and with other WestJetters."

And while the company did find more women were attending the training, it was "pleasantly surprised" at the number of men who got involved.

"The strong intellectual foundation of the training, the 'why' and the rationale made this training more accessible to them. A number of our pilots were impressed that we offered this to them to support optimal performance."

Coca-Cola Canada started introducing mindfulness through lunch 'n' learns in partnership with Mind-Well-U, according to Tova White, Coca-Cola's Toronto-based vice-president of HR.

And while more women participated, that was not unusual considering the employee makeup, she said.

"Participation was fairly reflective of our desk space population."

The 6,000-employee company is not necessarily looking to attract

more men to this type of training, said White.

"We always want to make all of our programs accessible, and I never heard the barrier was 'I don't want to do that because it's too female; it's more 'I can't do that, I'm out with customers,'" she said.

Male employees are just as stretched as their female counterparts, said White.

"They're also taking kids to sports, juggling busy careers, so I think it applies very nicely to anybody who needs a little reset in their life."

As soon as you make anything more accessible, you're going to attract a broader range of people, she said.

"A lot of the media coverage and buzz around mindfulness has made it very appealing for professionals, young, old, men, women... it's getting a lot of credible accolades."

And in promoting the program, Coca-Cola talks about both the wellness benefits and results on the job, said White.

"It's about achieving goals and results in your life, and no one is well-served if there's just so much on their plate, and they're so overwhelmed —

there's a tipping point at which you go from being busy to less effective."

Foundational skill

Mindfulness is a foundational skill set for both men and women, said Soloway.

"What we're witnessing across both sexes is increasing mental health issues, increasing chronic health issues, and these are all related to stress and the busyness of our lives — we're asked to do more with less time, we have devices attached to us, so our attention is constantly spinning, and I think the repercussions of that is it's having an impact on our brains and our bodies. So mindfulness is this foundational skill for... focusing our faculty of attention, and that has a way of wiring our brains, which has really positive implications for our health and mental health, and performance."

To have a competitive edge today, leaders need to be able to refocus in the midst of a storm, he said, "and that's really difficult to do, so being able to train yourself to respond skillfully and with clarity requires mental exercise, and that's what mindfulness can provide."