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Developing Mindful Leaders

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Organizations invest billions annually on a success curriculum known as "leadership development," which ends up leaving so much on the table. Training and development programs almost universally focus factory-like on inputs and outputs — absorb curriculum, check a box; learn a skill, advance a rung; submit to assessment, fix a problem. Likewise, they leave too many people behind with an elite selection process that fast-tracks "hi-pos" and essentially discards the rest. And they leave most people cold with flavor of the month remedies, off sites, immersions, and excursions — which produce little more than a grim legacy of fat binders gathering dust on shelves.

What if, instead of stuffing people with curricula, models, and competencies, we focused on deepening their sense of purpose, expanding their capability to navigate difficulty and complexity, and enriching their emotional resilience? What if, instead of trying to fix people, we assumed that they were already full of potential and created an environment that promoted their long-term well-being?

In other words, what if cultivating a successful inner life was front and center on the leadership agenda?

That was the question Todd Pierce asked himself in 2006 after years of experimenting with the full menu of trainings, meetings, and competency models in his capacity as CIO of biotechnology giant Genentech. He had just scoured the development reports of some 700 individuals in the IT department and found that "not one of them had an ounce of inspiration. I remember sitting there and saying, 'There's got to be a another way.'"

At the time, Pierce was benefiting personally from work with a personal coach and had recently woken up to the power of the practice of mindfulness (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness>) . He called in a kindred soul, Pamela Weiss (http://www.appropriateresponse.com/what_we_do/leadership.html) , a long-time executive coach and meditation teacher, to help design an experiment that would cast out the traditional approach to leadership development to focus instead on helping people grow.

"If you want to transform an organization it's not about changing systems and processes so much as it's about changing the hearts and minds of people," says Weiss. "Mindfulness is one of the all-time most brilliant technologies for helping to alleviate human suffering and for bringing out our extraordinary potential as human beings."

Pierce and Weiss distilled a set of principles that form the basis of what became the "Personal Excellence Program (<http://www.thepersonalexcellenceprogram.com/pep/>) " (PEP), now heading into its sixth year inside Genentech (Pierce left the company this fall after 11 years to join salesforce.com). Together, these pillars offer up a short course in unleashing human capability, resilience, compassion, and well-being (and they're unpacked in even more detail in Weiss and Pierce's entry (<http://www.managementexchange.com/story/growing-people>)).

1. Developing people is a process — not an event. "Development is all too often considered a one-time event," says Weiss. She and Pierce designed PEP as a ten-month-long journey that unfolds in three phases, with big group meetings, regular small group sessions, individual coaching, peer coaching, and structured solo practice.

2. People don't grow from the neck up. Too much training focuses on the the mind — it's about transferring content. "We talk about the head, the heart, and the body," says Weiss. In fact, they do more than talk about it — they enact it every day at the start of every meeting. The "3-center check in" is the gateway drug to mindfulness. As Weiss describes it: "You close your eyes for a moment and you notice, 'What am I thinking — what's happening in my head center,' then you notice, 'What am I feeling — what's happening in my heart center.' then, 'What am I feeling — what's happening in my body.' It's a way in which people start paying attention and practicing mindfulness without ever practicing meditation."

3. Put mindfulness at the center (but don't call it that!). Weiss and her team were careful to keep the language of specific belief systems and religions out of PEP. The program revolves around three phases: reflection on and selection of a specific quality or capacity you want to work on (patience, decisiveness, courage); three months of cultivating the

capacity for self-observation; and the hard work of turning insight into deliberate, dedicated, daily practice.

4. **It's hard to grow alone.** "People grow best in community," says Weiss. "People don't grow as well just reading a book, getting an online training, or just taking in information. There's an exponential impact in having people grow and learn together." That's why the PEP "pod" (small 6-8 person group) is the main vehicle throughout the year.

5. **Everybody deserves to grow.** Pierce felt strongly that PEP should be available to people across the board — not just the usual "stars" — and that it should be voluntary. "The program is by application and not declaration," he says.

As PEP heads into its sixth year at Genentech, some 800 people have participated in the program. (Weiss added a graduate curriculum and a student training program to create "PEPtators" as few people want the journey to end.) The impact has been nothing short of transformative for individuals and organization alike. When Pierce took over the IT department in 2002, its employee satisfaction scores were at rock bottom; four years into the program, the department ranked second in the company and is now consistently ranked among the best places to work in IT in the world (even in the wake of Genentech's 2009 merger with Roche Group — always a turbulent and dispiriting experience).

Pierce attributes that to "the emotional intelligence of people and the capacity to change" developed in PEP. But don't take his word for it. The data-obsessed Pierce commissioned a third path impact report on PEP. It came in glowing: 10-20% increase in employee satisfaction, 50% increase in employee collaboration, conflict management, and communication; 12% increase in customer satisfaction; and nearly three times the normal business impact.

"Through PEP we have created a smarter, more agile, and more responsive organization," says Pierce. "The reduction of suffering, the capacity to deal with difficulties, the level of engagement — these things are very powerful and you can't call a meeting to get them or give people stock options and have them. These are skills and qualities you have to cultivate and practice."

So how's this for a new year's resolution for hard-charging leaders: turn every ringing, pinging, tweeting, and blinking thing off — especially your mind — and just breathe.