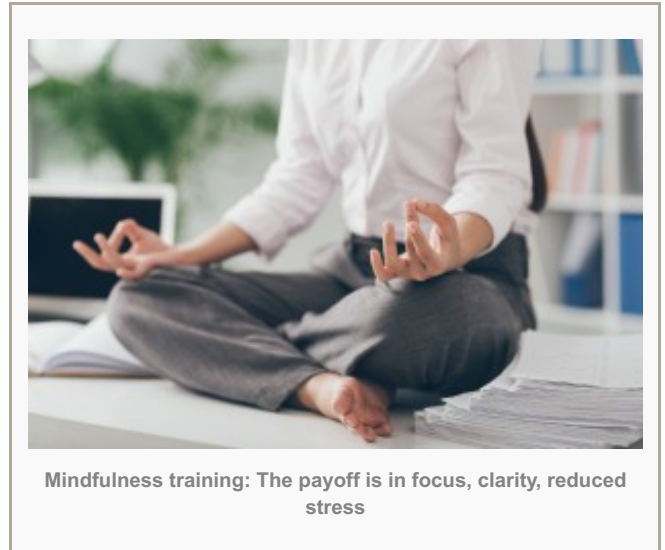


In search of awareness

It got its start at Google, it involves meditation and it is really, really trendy. If those clues don't immediately conjure up images of cross-legged coworkers grounding themselves in meditation and mindfulness training, don't feel too out of touch.

The concept of mindfulness training, already rampant on the non-fiction bestseller lists, is still relatively new to the business world. But if it is making inroads in corporate Canada's senior ranks, some of the credit goes to the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Business' executive training group, which for a couple years now has been offering a two-day "Search Inside Yourself" course, promising "mindfulness and emotional intelligence" to participants.



"It has actually been an out-of-the-box success," says Michelle Milan, CEO of [Rotman Executive Programs](#), who has made it a mission to bring such non-traditional programs to the school. "I think we were their first (academic partner) but they have now been offering this program all over the world," she says of Search Inside Yourself.

Milan credits a "surge in popularity" in mindfulness training to the fact that it is no longer viewed as mysterious Eastern mysticism.

"It is not just stress reduction in management, but also improved clarity for leaders, improved decision making, improved leadership—ability for the leader to better understand their own reactions, to have more self-awareness, more control, more understanding of their impact on others."

The program's long list of promises was among the reasons that Katie Bishop, a vice-president at TD Bank, decided to give it a try. "I was interested in how they would tailor it for a corporate crowd," she says. "Those types of topics, some people tend to think that they will be a little fluffy."

She was reassured somewhat prior to going in by the mindfulness course's Google roots: it was pioneered by one of the tech giant's early employees, Chade-Meng Tan. Since then, the Google engineer has founded the [Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute](#) as a not-for-profit Google spinoff and published the *Search Inside Yourself* book, which forms the core of the course material.

Bishop, 41, found herself smack dab in the demographic middle of a group of about 200 people ranging from twenty-something business students to corporate types her age and older. All were looking for the same thing apparently: to be happier, more focused and less stressed out at work and at home.

At the bank, Bishop has dealt with her share of skeptics about the "new agey" training. She notes that a fellow TD employee from the HR department attended the same session and hopes that at some time the bank will try and spread the self-awareness gospel to all the executives at TD.

That is pretty much the thinking of Toronto communications executive Julie Fotheringham, a meditation-hardened SIY veteran. Fotheringham, who creates leadership development programs for corporate clients at [Hageman Communications](#), brought the program to a number of companies including a top-five Canadian bank and the Ontario

dealers of one of the country's largest automakers.

"I was impressed enough to recommend that we expose clients to it who were looking for different ways of growing their own leaders internally," says Fotheringham, who has taken versions of the training four times to date. (In her case, most of her exposure to the mindfulness training has been in customized corporate workshops, rather than the two-day affair offered at the business school.)

She admits that there is still a bit of selling involved before her corporate executives are willing to say yes to the program. "I kind of had a smirk on my face when I presented it: 'Here is something that is new and current and comes out of Google. Are you interested?' And they wanted to find out more. It feels like it is the newest thing and I think that the way we live today is really drawing us towards it."

She believes people need a respite from the electronic immersion of e-mails, tweets and texts and that mindfulness training allows them a framework to order their lives amid the addiction of holding a never-ending stream of information in their hands.

So what's a mindfulness training program like? Imagine a standard large meeting room with rows of chairs and instructors trying to calm attendees down, rather than pump them up. In the case of SIY, the training is about one-third content (some of the theory around mindfulness and emotional intelligence) and the other two-thirds comprised of skills training (individual, paired and group work on things like attention training, active listening and verbal feedback).

Fotheringham says that for about one-third of participants, mindfulness training "has been completely transformative." Those are the people who may embrace the idea of daily mediation, a key component of the training. Others, meanwhile, may simply become calmer and more focused, she says.

Laura Delizonna, a San Francisco-based "positive psychologist" who has been part of the SIY group for three years, says the main benefits of mindfulness training and emotional intelligence are in "the realm of productivity and performance, and overall well-being and happiness."

While she says that most people will benefit from mindfulness training, "there are some exceptions." Those are typically people hostile to the idea of mediation or thinking it has some sort of religious component. "There is no sense having those people do it. It is like enrolling someone in an exercise class who has no interest in exercising."

Fortunately for her, and for the rest of SIY's clients, she says those are the minority. Most people, and our business culture at large, seem primed for these approaches. "We are arriving at a more complex understanding of what it means to be effective in the workplace," says Delizonna. "Developing this state of mindfulness is what effective people already do and there are practices we can do to increase it."

Photography: Shutterstock; TD Bank; Hageman Communications



SIY alumna Katie Bishop: Hopeful that self-awareness will spread



Mindfully minded: "The way we live today is really drawing us towards it," says leadership consultant Julie Fotheringham

