



Leadership: Why are Sony, Apple and Nike offering Yoga classes at work?

We exist in an era where Corporate Wellbeing is not only ethical, but is also being proven to improve morale, creativity, staff retention and reduce absenteeism. It might surprise you how many leaders and companies embrace the practice of Mindfulness and Yoga. **Suzanne Clarke** tells us everything we were afraid to ask about Yoga, and makes a convincing argument for it.

The pace of life has dramatically increased worldwide. There is an urgency to everything we do and our perception of time (or lack of it) has left us stressed and overwhelmed. But still we keep going. Mindfulness has been found to be a key element in stress reduction, overall happiness and

productivity. People have embraced mindfulness but still struggle with actually slowing down to do it. Yoga offers this path to mindfulness while building strength and creating an awareness of the body as a whole unit. It has significantly helped me help many clients adjust to the new world we live in.

Everyone has the potential to be a leader. Historically many of our leaders are male, but according to a recent study at Pew Research Centre in Washington, the share of female CEOs of Fortune 500 companies topped 5% for the first time in 2017, with female leadership on the increase in 2018.

//
 ...guests
 attending [Steve
 Jobs'] funeral
 received a gift of
 'Autobiography
 of a Yogi', a book
 focusing on the
 science of yoga
 and tradition
 of mindful
 meditation.

Male or female, great leaders are fearless in their belief. They are self-disciplined, compassionate both to themselves and to others, have impeccable integrity, complete clarity and take definite action. The best leaders develop other leaders and make the time to do so. They are happy to delegate and trust their team to deliver.

Leadership needs clarity, vision and communication.

Looking after the physical and mental body is a huge step towards clarity. Building a healthy organisation is all

about achieving alignment and clear messaging, so there is little room for confusion. Responsibility for this lies with the leadership team. But why is it sometimes so difficult?

Emotions coming to the surface, fear and risk of failure, making wrong decision, fear of conflict can all contribute to this. 24 hour availability from digital world means we are constantly over stimulated and "on" all the time. Time spent to reflect what has and has not worked gets neglected leading to poor communication and mixed messages.

Burnout is a huge problem too. Many executives don't have a good "thermostat" to know the signs. These include lack of focus, irritability and this can lead to resentment and lost productivity. According to The Wall Street Journal, a Harvard Medical School Study found that 96% of senior leaders feel somewhat burned out and a third of them describe it as extreme.

So where does Yoga fit in?

The development of yoga can be traced back to over 5000 years ago, but some researchers think it may be up to 10,000 years old. When one thinks of yoga, a picture of a person sitting cross-legged, or an image of someone standing on one leg comes to mind for many of us. Maybe it resonates as form of exercise or physical training. There is a physical side to yoga for sure, but as with any type of framework, it is one step in an 8 stepped process.

Step 1. Yamas (behaviours to abstain from) non-harming towards ourselves and others, sense of integrity and how we conduct ourselves in life

Step 2. Niyamas (behaviours to cultivate)-self-discipline, contentment, self-study, spiritual practices

Step 3. Asana (Postures) – through the physical practice of asanas, we develop strength, discipline and ability to focus and concentrate.

Step 4. Pranayama (Breath & Energy Control) – techniques learned to gain mastery over the breath while recognising the link between breath, mind and emotions.

Step 5. Pratyahara (Withdrawal from senses) – exploring the conscious effort to draw our awareness away from external world and focus our awareness to what's happening inside us. This allows us to notice habits and thoughts, perhaps explaining why we do the things we do and feel the way we feel.

Step 6. Dharana (Concentration) - Not always easy to do! Here we learn to slow down the mind, the thinking process, by concentrating on an image or sound.

Step 7. Dhyana (Meditation) - The mind is quiet and still. In the stillness you may notice thoughts. The stamina and strength needed to find this peace is quite impressive and takes practice.

Step 8. –Samadhi (Self Realisation)) -peace and understanding, the ultimate goal of yoga and life.

//
 Learning to be
 an effective
 leader requires
 introspection and
 this is consistent
 with the practice
 of yoga.

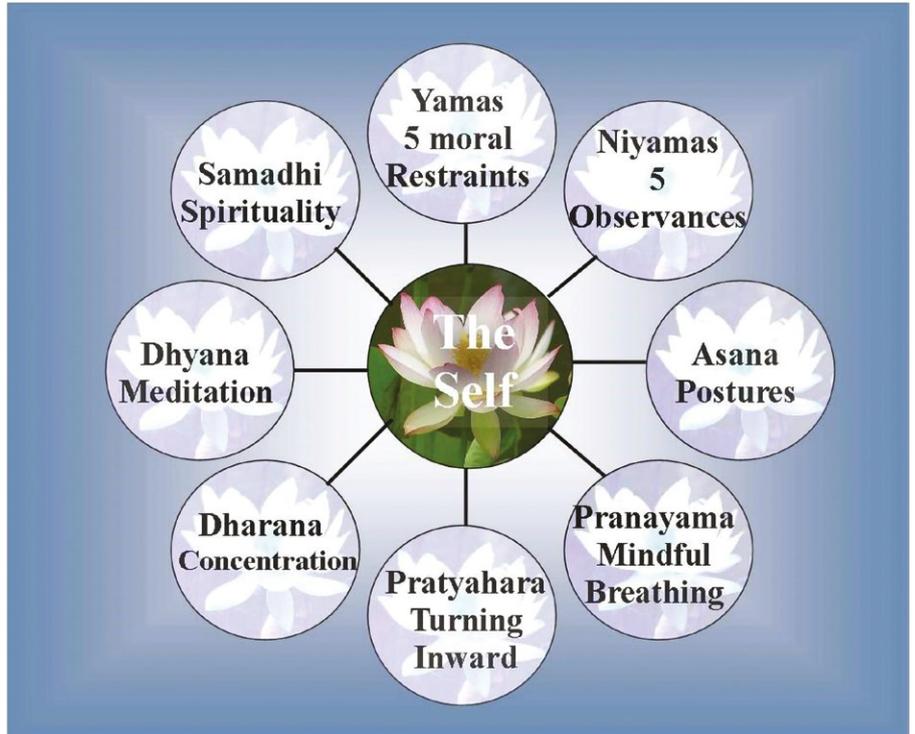
However, scratching the surface of the physical side of yoga there is a lesser known (in the western world) practice and that is one of connection.

Yoga is the practice of connection: connecting the mind, body and spirit, using the most valuable tool we all own, our breath. One part cannot be separated from the other. We are the only creatures on earth that can consciously change the way we breathe. It is our mechanism to support life, recovery and self-development. Our breathe is one of the few things we can access to change the way we are feeling or thinking and to calm and restore ourselves.

The better you breathe, the better you lead.

Learning to be an effective leader requires introspection and this is consistent with the practice of yoga. Yoga helps you to manage and become a master of your mind. Yoga in leadership involves not just physical yoga, but learning how to witness the fluctuations of the mind in whatever situation you are in and work with what is witnessed. It creates a space for personal honesty and understanding of your true self can be discovered. In the world of today's leaders, a strong, clear mind-set is a must.

Mark Bertolini CEO of Aetna Insurance has a regular yoga practice every morning at 5.30am. He quotes "if you are



more mindful and present, meetings are shorter, work gets done, people appreciate your leadership and you have a better life."

He brings principles of yoga regularly into his workplace, by getting his team to turn off all devices and come to every meeting fully present.

Companies like Sony, Nike, and Apple have recognised the emphasis yoga has on both the physical and mental wellbeing and offer yoga classes at work.

Apple Co-founder Steve Jobs was so passionate about his quest for self-

realisation, when he passed away in 2011, guests attending his funeral received a gift of "Autobiography of a Yogi", a book focusing on the science of yoga and tradition of mindful meditation.

Yoga like leadership meets you where you are, both ongoing processes that take time to develop and both are never finished. Yoga aims towards self-realisation, a term we can all relate to. We all want to release our higher potential, be the best we can be or to create all that we can in life. This self-awareness is seen as key to leadership development.

Practicing yoga can only add value to any leader and their business. Surely it is worth exploring?

Suzanne Clarke

Suzanne Clarke is an Executive and Wellbeing coach; she has a wealth of experience in sales and marketing roles in the pharmaceutical industry and has married this with key skills teaching yoga. Suzanne specialises in resilience and empowerment, enabling those in leadership roles to manage stress, allowing them to identify their true purpose in both business and personal ambition. Suzanne is a graduate of the Kingstown College Advanced Diploma in Personal, Leadership and Executive Coaching and the Advanced Diploma in Mental Health and Wellbeing Coaching.