

Mindful or Mind full? Tips for the female leader on using mindfulness during COVID-19

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So last week I found myself standing in the grocery aisle of my local supermarket. Surprisingly, this turned out to be a very enriching experience for me, not because I couldn't for the life of me figure out which brand of pasta to cook for dinner, but because I witnessed an incident that got me thinking about the importance of mindfulness.

Let me start off by saying that I wasn't eavesdropping, the lady was standing right next to me and she did not seem to care about being discreet. She received a phone call while shopping which from the looks of it seemed to be one of her employees... "Oh yes! I completely forgot about that. I'll approve the purchase and send the document to you ASAP" she said. A few seconds after hanging up she was approached by someone who seemed to be an old acquaintance of hers. She began to chat with her acquaintance while typing on her phone. Now I'm not a communication expert, but from observing her behavior she didn't seem to show much interest in the conversation because she was busy typing away on her phone. The phone rings again... "I just sent the email a second ago." she said, "What? There's no attachment? Oh no, I'll send it again."

While this might seem like an everyday experience, as a researcher in psychological resources and female leaders, I couldn't help but see the link between the incident in the grocery store and the importance of mindfulness. Like the lady in the grocery store, most female leaders believe that the only way to successfully manage workforces and households simultaneously, is to multitask and increase the speed at which tasks are performed. These two strategies are expected to increase productivity and assist the female leader with getting through the day. But is this the most effective way to deal with work and home responsibilities especially during COVID-19 when some female leaders are still working from home?

While paying attention to the present moment i.e. practicing mindfulness may require additional effort, research has indicated that mindful female leaders tend to be more productive in the long run. Multitasking and rushing through tasks might seem like the way to go, however, these strategies may result in scattered attention which negatively affects productivity and accuracy as this leads to weakened memory and cognitive loading. Additionally, multitasking and rushing through tasks results in female leaders entering an autopilot mode which increases the possibility of losing touch not only with the present moment but with the people around them.

On the other hand, focused attention and being mindful results in increased productivity and allows one to achieve more every day without working longer hours. This is because when practicing mindfulness, we are able to remind our minds to get back to the present moment and focus on the

task at hand. The increased focus helps minimize mistakes and not only increases productivity but also saves more time in the long run. Let's take the lady in the grocery store as an example... If she was fully present and aware of what was taking place in the present it is highly likely that she would have correctly sent the email with the attachment the first time thus preventing her from having to resend it. It is also likely that being fully present would have increased meaningful engagement with her acquaintance which indicates that while multitasking might sound like a good idea, being mindful increases the quality of interactions both with work and everyday tasks.

So, what does this mean for the female leader working at home during COVID-19?

With COVID-19 and the working from home (WFH) situation, female leaders are under more pressure than ever to successfully juggle multiple roles, what many researchers term the "double burden syndrome". Female leaders are expected to double up on household chores, care-giving responsibilities, and manage workforces all within the confines of their home and with limited time. Adopting a mindful approach to these everyday tasks will assist the female leader in finding balance between work and home roles and increase work and family engagement. Here's five tips for the female leader to mindfully work from home and increase productivity:

1. Meditate, meditate, meditate!

I'm not the "hippy" type! I bet that was your first reaction right? Even if you're not into deep meditation, taking a few minutes every day to breath, listen and become aware of the sensations of your body and mind can help create a calmer mind space and assist with focus. Simple acts like listening to relaxing music as you prepare to start your day and closing your eyes for a few minutes while directing your attention to the physical sensation of four or five deep breaths as they go in and out of your body can go a long way!

2. My space, my mind

Although researchers advocate for the importance of designated work spaces to decrease work/home conflict, confining your work space to a specific area in your home can also facilitate the ability to remain mindful. Set up a work station and train yourself to complete all work related tasks such as checking emails, texting work colleagues and listening to voice messages at your work station! Soon enough you will become so accustomed to working at your work station that trying to accomplish these tasks while you are out or in front of the TV will become a thing of the past. This will also decrease the urge to multitask.

3. You may be superwoman but slow it down!

Yes, there are only 24 hours in the day and yes you want to do it all, but evidence based research suggests that leaders who take the time to pace themselves with regard to daily activities are significantly more productive. This doesn't mean that you should work at snail's pace! Make a mindful effort to work in the present moment as much as you can. Take in every sensation of the current experience, this could mean reading, drinking a cup of coffee and driving a little slower than usual. By doing this you are able to be fully present and pay attention to what you are doing.

4. Your task, my task, let's NOT multitask.

As a female leader you become overwhelmed with doing as much as you can in a limited amount of time. This might lead you to multitask. Authors in mindfulness argue that multitasking is actually a farce! This is because you are not really concentrating on many things at once but instead simply moving between tasks in rapid succession. Task switching can

actually be more time consuming and compromise the quality of the work you put out. Instead, focus on one task at a time and devote your full attention to that task.

5. Transition time...yep I'm ready

Working from home means moving between work and home responsibilities. In order to be fully immersed in your activities, be present for transitions in your work from home day. Whether it's making the transition from a meeting to eating lunch or from completing your last report to picking up groceries. These transitions can increase your thoughts and feelings and cause you to enter a new task without fully disengaging from the one before. By preparing yourself to transition from one task to another you allow yourself to check in and check out of each experience which can increase your level of engagement.

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The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 112-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

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In May 2020, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

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