

# Mindfulness 101: An Essential Practice for Public Leadership

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When I say mindfulness what comes to mind?

If the image that immediately pops up is a “woo-woo bleeding heart” sitting cross-legged, alone on the mountain top, eyes closed, silently contemplating the meaning of life - while the rest of us get the real work of the world done - you wouldn't be alone.

But the truth is the real work that government and nonprofit leaders take on day in and day out is increasingly complex: diverse stakeholders, competing priorities, resource constraints, 24-7 connectedness, and tough calls trying to balance engagement and transparency with the urgency of now.

**To maintain the capacity to do the challenging work of public service for the long haul, leaders need access to a diverse set of tools and habits that help them continue to cultivate focus, resilience, and joy.**

Mindfulness is one of those essential practices.

So what is mindfulness exactly? Simply put it's about paying attention. So easy to understand-- and so challenging to actually do.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the [University of Massachusetts's Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare, and Society](#) defines mindfulness as using specific practices to:

- Pay attention
- To the present moment
- On purpose
- Without judgment

[Study after study demonstrate benefits of mindfulness](#) that align with the challenges nonprofit and government leaders regularly face. Through consciously paying attention to the present moment, leaders can:

- Reduce the negative impacts of stress
- Cultivate increased focus, authenticity, and intentionality

- Create the mental space needed for innovation and creativity
- Find more joy

In addition to the personal benefits that help public leaders sustain their efforts, organizations can benefit from mindfulness too. In a recent [Harvard Business Review article](#), authors Justin Talbot-Zorn and Frieda Edgette discuss how **integrating contemplative practices at work enables leaders and their organizations to create the space necessary to step back, ask the right questions, and develop more effective and innovative strategies**. More pointedly, intentionally creating “[purposeful pauses](#)” in our organizational practices helps to mitigate the profound risks that follow when our teams or cultures are simply operating on autopilot. Former General Mills senior executive and founder of the Institute for Mindful Leadership Janice Marturano asks in Finding the Space to Lead: A Practical Guide to Mindful Leadership, “How often are ethical lapses the result of failing to be fully present to see with clarity the potential impact of our choices?”

So, how might you practice paying greater attention in your own life and work?

**Here are few resources to get you started:**

- [How to practice mindfulness throughout your workday](#)
- [Take a walk down the meditation hallway](#)
- [Mindfulness and mainstream government](#)