

Why There's More To Taking A Break Than Just Sitting There

By Dov
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Meditation rooms, unplugging, digital Sabbaths, reflection retreats, mindfulness classes--it seems like everyone is clamoring to find a pause button in the face of our always-on, socially connected, fear-of-missing-out lives.

There's definitely something happening here with pauses, but it isn't exactly clear that we're putting our pauses to good use. We'd better learn how to do so in a hurry because pausing has become a crucial capability for leaders, employees, and organizations in the 21st century.

The era of the pause

Our people and our companies need to pause today if they are to behave in the right way. Our leaders, if they are doing their jobs correctly, need to get people not just to pause, but to fill their pauses with the right kind of reflection and questions.

Fortunately, more and more business leaders and thinkers are promoting the benefits of taking a pause. Mindfulness was a pervasive theme at January's [World Economic Forum in Davos](#), where a number of CEOs came out as meditators, sessions were devoted to mindfulness, and actress [Goldie Hawn](#) guided global leaders through a brief meditation session.

Mindfulness, which is often the product of a pause, is quickly becoming a staple. Silicon Valley companies are [retrofitting their campuses](#) to add space for solitary reflection, [airports](#) are adding spaces for quiet contemplation, and even [basketball arenas](#) are being built with meditation rooms.

All of this activity marks an appropriate response to two dynamics. First, we've entered an era in which everyone in our companies has a greater need to pause: nearly every employee can, and does, speak for our companies in their interactions with partners, customers, and their social networks. Long gone are the days when vast swaths of the workforce performed repetitive tasks disconnected from the larger mission.

Today, mindless jobs are done by computers and machines, so whether they want them or not, all of our employees have jobs that require creativity, collaboration, and consciousness. We therefore need all of our people to be mindful as they think of new ways to provide unparalleled customer experiences, tailor offerings to meet unique needs, and imagine new ways to carry out our organizational missions.

The second reason we're clamoring for new pause buttons is that most of our old ones have been taken away. Our time on the global business playing field never ends: some stakeholder in some part of the world is always stepping up to our plate. Work is always on. Columnists used to submit their final draft to editors and be finished with their work. Now, posting this column online only marks the beginning of my engagement with readers on social media.

Demands of the digital age

The barriers and structures that previously provided us with pauses--time zones, physical distance, brick-and-mortar offices, national boundaries, landlines--no longer do so. Because our pause buttons have been swiped and because more of us than ever need to pause, we're scrambling to create new ones.

But there are two deeper dynamics happening here that we need to recognize.

First, it has become a key requirement of leaders to get others to pause. So many of the requests--the big asks--we make of our people today require them to pause before taking action.

Consider what we expect of our people today: We want them to represent the company--to be true to its core values--in every interaction, at a time when a single tweet can deliver a crushing blow or soaring boost to reputation and value. We want them not only to provide service but to deliver singular experiences that deepen our stakeholders' relationship with us. We expect our people to take to social media and engage with their connections in a way that manifests the core values of the organization.

Leaders need to inspire people to pause, so that they can switch off autopilot, ditch the checklist mentality, and harness the mindfulness necessary to unleash the imagination, judgment, and creativity we need from them.

"Pausing can help us quiet the blaring assault of our hyper-connected world."

Second, taking a pause is a necessary act, but only part of the deeper work to be done. This timeout only scratches the surface of the important work we need to do.

While our pauses allow us to de-clutter our minds, I'm talking about a deeper form of pause. We should use our pauses to reflect on the hyper-connected and morally interdependent nature of our work and lives--how our behaviors affect other people. And then we should think deeply about which behaviors we need to thrive, and to help our companies thrive.

This thinking generates deep, values-based questions: Who am I? What do we as a company stand for? What is the right thing to do given our shared values and beliefs? This type of pause does not take any longer than the "timeout" pause, but it goes way deeper, into our foundational beliefs and principles.

Digging deeper

Deeper pauses would help reduce those regulatory violations and lapses in judgment we so often read about. How helpful would it be if someone pauses before accepting a bribe, creating a questionable investment product, or ignoring quality issues on an automotive assembly line? The answer is either "incredibly helpful" or "not helpful at all."

If you use a pause to recall your own values and your company's values--and if these values are the right ones--that brief timeout might protect you, your company, and its shareholders from a potentially devastating action. However, if the pause contains no such reflection or if the values you connect with in your timeout are the wrong ones (i.e., you think instead about keeping pace with a more successful colleague), the pause doesn't add value at all.

At a time when more and more business leaders and their people are pausing, the act of taking the pause matters less--it's quickly becoming table stakes. Pausing can help us quiet the blaring assault of our hyper-connected world.

But taking a timeout, or even meditating, should only be an initial step toward a deeper pause. What matters a lot more than deciding to pause is what we do inside the pause. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, ". . . in each pause, I hear the call . . ." What call do you hear? And how are you ensuring that your people are hearing the right call in their pause?

"Mindfulness is about sharpening our consciousness, and our consciousness links to our conscience, which is a moral faculty."

When we pause, we can do so simply for the sake of taking a breather, or we can do so to conduct deeper and more profound business. When we do the latter, we reconnect with our values, principles, and deep-seated beliefs. This reconnection allows us to reimagine and rethink what we're doing through the lens of our values, and we carry that work back to our daily grind with a greater awareness and stronger connection to who we are and what we value.

That's how our pauses should work. Mindfulness is about sharpening our consciousness, and our consciousness links to our conscience, which is a moral faculty.

When we have "pangs of conscience," we experience pain or shame because our behavior deviated from a standard or principle of conduct that we hold dear. Let's use our pauses to reconnect with those standards and principles and reflect on how we can ensure that they are shared throughout our companies.

We are all in the pause business today, and, as Emerson observed two centuries ago, our pauses are calling out to us to go deeper.

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