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The mind business

By David Gelles

Yoga, meditation, ‘mindfulness’ – why some of the west’s biggest companies are embracing eastern spirituality



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General Mills, the company behind Cheerios cereal and Häagen-Dazs ice cream, is headquartered on a leafy expanse outside Minneapolis, Minnesota. Enclosed walkways connect a network of modernist buildings, protecting Midwestern workers from heat and humidity in the summer, and bitter cold and towering snowdrifts in the winter. Inside the halls, some 3,000 people work on everything from product development and marketing to litigation, regulation and mergers and acquisitions. The employee base is generally reflective of middle America – predominantly white, casually dressed and possessing a genial, if hard-working, disposition.

Yet there are signs that in some significant ways, General Mills has a distinctly unusual corporate culture. Open the right door on a Tuesday morning and you might find a few dozen team leaders and executives meditating silently together on cushions, steeling their minds for the work week ahead. Enter a conference room later that afternoon and witness more than 50 senior employees from across the organisation standing on one leg in the tree pose as they practise yoga. Note that in every building on the General Mills campus

there is a meditation room, equipped with a few zafus – or cushions for sitting practice – and yoga mats where, day after day, employees duck in to grab a few minutes of equanimity in between their meetings. These are the most obvious signs that, as an organisation, General Mills has something resembling a collective spiritual life.

This isn't some passing fad sweeping middle management, or a pilot programme dreamed up by human resources. For seven years now, a growing number of General Mills workers have been practising meditation, yoga and so-called "mindfulness" in the workplace. And what began as a side project by one executive has transformed the culture of a Fortune 200 multinational.

"It's about training our minds to be more focused, to see with clarity, to have spaciousness for creativity and to feel connected," says Janice Marturano, General Mills' deputy general counsel, who founded the programme. "That compassion to ourselves, to everyone around us – our colleagues, customers – that's what the training of mindfulness is really about."

The General Mills initiative is at the vanguard of a movement that is quietly reshaping certain corners of the corporate world. With meditation, yoga and "mindfulness", the foundational tenets of Buddhism, Hinduism and other pan-Asian philosophies have infiltrated the upper echelons of some of the biggest companies on earth.

William George, a current Goldman Sachs board member and a former chief executive of the healthcare giant Medtronic, started meditating in 1974 and never stopped. Today, he is one of the main advocates for bringing meditation into corporate life, writing articles on the subject for the Harvard Business Review. "The main business case for meditation is that if you're fully present on the job, you will be more effective as a leader, you will make better decisions and you will work better with other people," he tells me. "I tend to live a very busy life. This keeps me focused on what's important."

Though the combination of mysticism and capitalism may seem incongruous, this interplay has found fertile ground at some of the best-known companies in the US and Europe. It is a mash-up of ancient insights and modern-day management theory, and it is happening at Target, Google and First Direct, among others. Today, in organisations large and small, eastern wisdom is changing western business.

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These influences have been at work for decades. A generation exposed to "Beat" culture, hippies and eastern mysticism produced a flock of business leaders, including George and one Steve Jobs. Apple's founder and former chief executive was a Zen Buddhist and spoke openly about how his time meditating in India shaped his world view and, ultimately, Apple's product design.

25%

of large US companies have now launched 'stress-reduction' initiatives

“If you just sit and observe, you will see how restless your mind is,” Jobs told his biographer, Walter Isaacson. “If you try to calm it, it only makes it worse, but over time it does calm, and when it does, there’s room to hear more subtle things – that’s when your intuition starts to blossom and you start to see things more clearly and be in the present more.

Your mind just slows down, and you see a tremendous expanse in the moment. You see so much more than you could see before. It’s a discipline; you have to practise it.”

There are no reliable statistics on how many companies offer meditation in the workplace, but a quarter of large US employers have launched “stress reduction” initiatives, according to the HR and outsourcing consultancy Aon Hewitt, and that number is growing steadily.

Here I must disclose an interest. I began meditating more than a decade ago. What began as an academic pursuit in college led me to spend a year studying in India, sitting with meditation teachers from the Tibetan, Zen and south-east Asian traditions. While I haven’t achieved any higher states of consciousness as a result, meditation and mindfulness come in handy on a near-daily basis, helping me maintain equanimity in a high-stress job. Moreover, in the course of reporting on technology, media and mergers and acquisitions, I’ve found like-minded meditators at a surprising range of companies.

Google’s “Search Inside Yourself” programme has introduced mindfulness to more than 1,000 employees. Pioneered by Chade-Meng Tan, an early Google employee, its popularity has been buoyed by Tan’s book of the same title. Tan turned to General Mills for inspiration when he began Search Inside Yourself in 2007, and is now bringing the training to other technology companies.

Indeed, Silicon Valley is a hotbed for mindfulness at work. An annual conference called Wisdom 2.0 draws together thousands of spiritually minded technologists from, among others, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, who trade tips on how to stay calm in the digital age.

Aetna, one of the largest healthcare benefits companies in the US, began rolling out mindfulness and yoga programmes to its employees in 2010. The initiative was dreamed up by Aetna CEO Mark Bertolini, himself a meditator. After attracting 3,500 employees, Aetna this year began offering workplace meditation and yoga as a service it sells to customers. “Every morning I get up and I do my asana, pranayama, meditation and Vedic chanting before work,” Bertolini told Yoga Journal. “That’s my wellness programme. It’s helped me be more centred, more present.”

89%

At the retail giant Target, based, like General Mills, in

of General Mills senior executives said they had become better listeners as a result of 'mindfulness' training

Minneapolis, a group called "Meditating Merchants" was set up in 2010. The training is open to all employees and has so far attracted 500 participants, who meditate once a week at lunch time. Mikisha Nation, a 33-year-old Jamaican woman who works in human resources, helped pioneer the Target group and says the practice complements her own work. "Happy, healthy, engaged team members create an environment that is a great place to work," she says, "even though it might seem weird to sit on a mat in the middle of a conference room."

Green Mountain Coffee Roasters offers monthly day-long retreats to employees, their family and friends and the community at large. Led by Shinzen Young, an American Buddhist teacher, the sessions are held inside Green Mountain's engineering offices in Waterbury, Vermont. And in London, James Muthana runs YogaAt.com, a company that teaches yoga and meditation to corporate clients including First Direct, Taj Hotels and West Ham United football club. Muthana, a former banker who left the City after 10 years, says his practice is growing. "There's a lot of uncertainty in the world today," he tells me. "Our clients are aware that it's not enough to attract talent – you've got to retain and look after that talent."

Within this growing constellation of mindful businesses, General Mills has one of the most sophisticated programmes, with compelling, if nascent, research behind it.



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Known as Mindful Leadership, the General Mills programme uses a mix of sitting meditation based on Buddhist practice, gentle yoga and dialogue to settle the mind. The

idea is that calmer workers will be less stressed, more productive and even become better leaders, thereby benefiting the entire organisation.

Mindfulness can sound deceptively easy. Practitioners sit in a comfortable position, close their eyes and simply notice the physical sensations in their body and the swirling thoughts in their brain. Using moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness, the aim is to observe these sensations without reacting to them. By doing so, meditators gradually recognise the fleeting nature of sensations, including pain, anger and frustration. In time, this allows practitioners to quiet the mind. If it all works as intended, this results in individuals who are less agitated, more focused and easier to work with.

This may sound like New Age mumbo-jumbo, but a growing body of academic research provides a scientific explanation. Meditation is shown to reduce levels of cortisol, a hormone related to stress. When cortisol levels drop, the mind grows calmer and gains the stability to become more focused. “Mindfulness is an idea whose time has come,” says Google’s Tan. “For a long time practitioners knew, but the science wasn’t there. Now the science has caught up.”

That the practice delivers consistent results has led to its popularity not only with spiritual seekers, but also with psychoanalysts, health and now business professionals. At General Mills, several hundred executives have taken part in the programme, which has gained national renown and is being exported to other multinational companies. But to understand how a company with \$17bn in revenues underwent a spiritual revolution involves examining the personal transformation experienced by one General Mills employee – who in turn became the company’s de facto guru.

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Janice Marturano joined General Mills in 1996 as part of the company’s in-house legal team. A compact and quiet woman with a bob of black hair, Marturano had an impeccable résumé when she arrived. After graduating from New York University’s School of Law she was taken on by Curtis, Mallet-Prevost, Colt & Mosle LLP, a New York firm specialising in corporate work. In 1984 she joined the in-house team at Panasonic and then undertook a similar role at Nabisco.

When she joined General Mills 10 years later, Marturano was the liaison to the Food and Drug Administration, heading up policy work around trade regulation. She worked with the Securities and Exchange Commission and focused on anti-trust work, a role that ultimately led her down a spiritual path.

In 2000, General Mills sought to acquire Pillsbury, the baked-goods company known for its iconic Doughboy mascot, for \$10.5bn. The deal was set to create the fourth-largest food

company in the world, but was delayed by regulators. Approval dragged on for 18 months, and Marturano became mired in contentious antitrust policy.

As if those pressures weren't enough, during that same year-and-a-half both Marturano's parents died. The combination of events left her emotionally and intellectually drained. "I thought I'd bounce back. I'd been through deals before," she says. "But I didn't. My mental resilience had become so depleted."

Marturano was still at this low ebb when she was offered the chance to join a retreat taught by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a psychologist who has helped popularise meditation as the author of *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. Though it was unlike anything she had done before, Marturano was in need of a shock to the system, so she headed to Miraval, a resort near Tucson, Arizona, for six days.



General Mills' Janice Marturano, who created the company's 'Mindful Leadership' programme

She was unprepared for the rigorous demands of mindfulness meditation when she arrived. "At the very beginning, Jon said: 'Ok, we're going to meditate for about an hour,'" Marturano recalls. "And I thought: What, are you out of mind? We're going to do what for an hour?" But six days later, on the last day of the retreat, Marturano found herself walking into the desert at 6am and slipping into a deep meditation. By the time the retreat was over, she didn't want to leave.

She continued meditating daily back home in Minneapolis and noticed some marked improvements in her quality of life. She was more emotionally resilient and more focused at work. But after a few years, she was no longer content to live a dual life. "I was a closet meditator," she says. It felt unnatural to practise meditation on the side, and go about work just as she always had. She wanted to find a way to fuse the two.

Marturano began sounding out potential converts, asking if they too might be interested in discovering ways to train their mind. When Marturano had a critical mass she called up Saki Santorelli, an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, who had worked with Kabat-Zinn and others on the physiological effects of meditation.

3,500

Together Marturano and Santorelli developed a draft curriculum, and in early 2006 they took 13 General Mills

Aetna employees who signed up for the company's mindfulness and yoga programmes

executives to a small bed and breakfast in Spicer, Minnesota, for a five-day retreat. Those first 13 students came back to General Mills transformed. "There was quite a buzz when that first group went through," recalls Beth Gunderson, General Mills' director of organisation effectiveness.

"Everybody wanted it. It started to take on a life of its own."

To date, more than 400 General Mills employees have received the training, as have 250 executives and entrepreneurs from other companies. Marturano has also founded the Institute for Mindful Leadership, a non-profit organisation that aims to train executives from diverse professions. After more than 15 years at General Mills, Marturano will shortly depart to work at the institute full-time, though she still remains deeply involved at General Mills, often returning to campus in her continued attempt to remake an entire company's culture.

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On a hot Tuesday in June, I travelled to Minneapolis to see General Mills' Mindful Leadership programme in action. Hearing about hundreds of executives meditating and practising yoga is one thing, but seeing the barefooted, mat-toting senior managers walking from their offices with contented grins is another altogether.

The two-hour extended session was scheduled to begin at 4pm in a large conference room off the main lobby. As people arrived, many hugged one another and I noticed some tears. General Mills had recently announced its first round of mass layoffs in decades – some attendees were having to fire members of their team, while others were losing their jobs. As participants trickled in, they sought out Marturano and greeted her like an old friend.

A circle of 50 or so meditation cushions was already set up, and people gradually settled down, sitting cross-legged or kneeling. They wore loose-fitting clothing and many sported T-shirts featuring General Mills products, including one woman in a bright yellow Cheerios getup. Once the group was seated, Marturano, also sitting in the Lotus position, rang a set of Tibetan prayer bells three times. "Take a posture that for you in this moment embodies dignity and strength," she said in a slow, sonorous voice. "Allow the body to rest, to step out of busyness, bringing attention to the sensation of each breath."



Sighs rippled through the silence as highly stressed execs let the work day fall away. Marturano instructed the group to keep attention focused on the breath, the first step in basic meditation. The group sat obediently, focusing on the sensation of air going in and out of their nostrils. After a few minutes, she invited them to expand their awareness to the sensations throughout the body.

After 30 minutes Marturano rang the bells again. The group stood in unison, moved the cushions to the side of the room and spread yoga mats across the conference room floor. For half an hour Marturano led the room through a series of gentle yoga poses, imploring her audience to focus on the sensations they were experiencing in their bodies.

Seated once more, Marturano gave the group an impromptu talk that wove together mindfulness practice, a poem and some General Mills shop talk. Marturano also spoke about the layoffs. “When we’re in any kind of transition in our lives it’s so easy to get into the swirl and get lost,” she told them. “Use this practice to gain stability in the mind. It’s a lonely time, but it’s also a hopeful time.”

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General Mills has embraced the Mindful Leadership programme at an institutional level, an unusual but significant move for a very mainstream multinational. Since then, the company’s reputation as a proving ground for corporate leaders has only grown in stature. Leadership Excellence Magazine ranked it the best for developing leaders in 2011, up from 14th in 2010.

1/3

reduction in employees' stress levels after one hour of yoga a week (Aetna/Duke University research)

The company has even begun research into its efficacy, and the early results are striking. After one of Marturano's seven-week courses, 83 per cent of participants said they were "taking time each day to optimise my personal productivity" – up from 23 per cent before the course. Eighty-two per cent said they now make time to eliminate tasks with limited productivity value – up from 32 per cent before the course.

And among senior executives who took the course, 80 per cent reported a positive change in their ability to make better decisions, while 89 per cent said they became better listeners.

Other companies have found that such programmes can generate both health benefits and cost savings. Aetna, partnering with Duke University School of Medicine, found that one hour of yoga a week decreased stress levels in employees by a third, reducing healthcare costs by an average of \$2,000 a year.

Mike Martiny, General Mills' chief information officer, began practising with Marturano in 2007 on the recommendation of a team member. He continues to this day, sitting for 30 minutes to an hour, three to four times a week. Martiny says his meditation has enabled him to focus his attention more effectively. "The premise is to be open to what is happening right now," he says. "There isn't such a thing as multitasking. What people call multitasking is really shifting attention back and forth between activities very fast." By choosing what to focus his attention on, and devoting himself to it fully, Martiny's work has improved. Mindfulness practice has also helped Martiny become more present when spending time with his wife and four teenage children. "If I'm at family event and I'm looking at my phone, I might as well not be there," he says. "It's more honest to not be there."

Like almost every executive I talked to, Martiny said he didn't consider himself a Buddhist. (The one exception was Tan at Google, but even he says Search Inside Yourself is not religious. "Everything can be completely secular," he says. "There is no religion associated with bringing attention to the breath. Anyone can learn this.") Marturano is adamant that she, herself, is not a Buddhist. Nor is she troubled by any apparent contradiction around using compassion to breed better capitalists. The goal, she says, is to help each individual live healthier, more productive and peaceful lives, and make them less-stressed workers and better leaders.

1st

General Mills' position in Leadership Excellence magazine's 2011 'Best for

Yet Marturano acknowledges the roots of her teachings. "I've learned a great deal from studying with some wonderful Buddhist teachers over the years," she says. "I'm very careful to retain the integrity of mindfulness itself. I am certainly not

Leadership' rankings (up from 14th in 2010)

reinventing the wheel.” Nor are General Mills, Google, Aetna or Target trying to convert their employees to some new religion. Instead, it seems that eastern wisdom – stripped of its religiosity and backed by scientific research – is becoming an accepted part of the corporate mainstream.

The trend looks set to continue. In addition to Marturano's institute, Tan from Google has founded the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute, which is also looking to bring the training to other companies. Meanwhile, people such as Muthana from YogaAt.com will continue taking on new clients, including the advertising group Omnicom and the electronics maker NEC.

These contradictions – Buddhist teachers who aren't Buddhists, corporations with spiritual communities, capitalism embracing traditions that shun materialism – are perhaps unsurprising in the modern age. Just as General Mills products are sold around the globe, feeding people from India to Indiana, so too the fundamental tenets of the world's great religions are freely traded in every corner of the earth. The result is that the people who work hard to make high-margin, low-calorie breakfast cereals are at the same time striving to improve their spiritual equilibrium and even get a taste of enlightenment. “There is no work-life balance,” Marturano says. “We have one life. What's most important is that you be awake for it.”

David Gelles is the FT's US M&A correspondent

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