

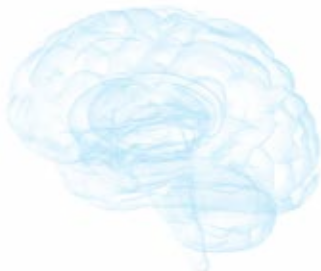


## THREE REASONS

# Why Leaders Need Brain Breaks

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By Peter DeWitt, EdD



Winter is upon us, and the holidays are now in our rearview mirror. Unfortunately, the lofty goals we set last summer may also seem far, far away, and the people who promised to be on board are in a midyear slump, and feeling a bit tired. There is no better time than now to get that work-life balance in order. We know that work-life balance is often a subject for those in school leadership, but it seems that more people talk about it than ever put it into practice.

A couple of years ago I was experiencing increased stress and anxiety, and work-life balance was something I thought about but did little to shift the balance from work to

In fact, most times I felt a little strange for trying it at all. However, this time I was sitting in a hotel room in Texas and realized I needed to make some life changes, because my body was breaking down.



life. My travel schedule had me on the road about 47 weeks a year, and this particular week in June of 2018 was a stressful one. Four states in four days, which meant working by day and flying by night. As much as I love what I do, the stress of it all was getting to me, and I was out of balance when it came to my personal and professional life.

That was the time that I knew I needed a brain break of some sort. The interesting thing is that it took utter exhaustion to teach me that I needed to find a better way to live life. What was equally interesting is that brain breaks were not new for me. As a principal, in a school of caring adults, we used brain breaks to help our students with their anxiety-related behavior. It's strange to see the importance of brain breaks with students, but not see them as important for us as adults. So, I began making a change to increase the number of brain breaks I used in my life.

## MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION

During that stressful week in the month of June, I began a path to consistently practice meditation and mindfulness. I use the word "consistently," because I had spent years trying it from time to time in the comfort of my hotel rooms but I always worried I was doing it wrong.

Mindfulness is when we practice being focused on one issue at a time in our daily lives. It usually means that we are focusing on something positive where we show gratitude for our lives or we just focus on being present in the moment with whom-ever we may be talking with, which is not easy to do with 24/7 media coming at us, smartphones with sounds that go off every time we receive a message, and our laptops

that seem to call us because we have paperwork that must be finished. Eisler (2018) writes, "Mindfulness is all about being aware, which of course includes the practice of meditation. When you are being actively mindful, you are noticing and paying attention to your thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and movements, and also to the effects you have on those around you."

Meditation is a bit deeper. Meditation is when we take a few minutes or even an hour to focus inward and practice breathing. Yes, that thing we do unconsciously throughout our days is something we should also practice to do at a deeper level. Eisler states that meditation is an intentional practice, where you focus inward to increase calmness, concentration, and emotional balance. It means we proactively, and consciously, take a deep breath in and follow it as it leaves us. It reminds me of times when I was a teacher and would recite, "In with the good air, and out with the bad air," with my students. In 2018 Pew Research showed that 40 percent of adults meditated regularly as opposed to 14 percent just the year before.

Our ten minutes of meditation and mindfulness teaches us how to transfer those moments of relaxation into our daily lives. Think of it as the ultimate way to go from surface to

deep, and then onto transfer-level learning. Surface level is when we begin taking our brain breaks, deep is when we are able to focus on one area for ten minutes or so at a time, and transfer is when we find ourselves more focused in our jobs and in our personal lives. For example, it means that we can go from being a part of a conversation to an active listener where we are not distracted and can ask deeper questions of the person in the conversation with us.

School leaders do not have to practice mindfulness and meditation, but research shows that the job of a school administrator is more stressful than ever, so finding some method for taking a brain break every day is vital to their success. Not only are leaders experiencing an increased amount of job stress; they are also highly at risk of job burnout. Not paying attention to the stress that happens around them can lead to medical issues, marital issues, and unhealthy habits. Mindfulness may not sound like a bad alternative, eh?

## TIME OUT FOR LEADERS

The reality is that school leaders do not have to have a hefty travel schedule to experience stress and anxiety. As a former school principal I remember the sleepless nights, or at best, the nights where I woke up at 2:00 a.m. worrying about issues that many times worked out to not be a big deal at all. What's worse is that leaders are often seen as stoic figures who should never let stress or anxiety get to them, so therefore they hide it all so no one knows the stress that they are under.

There are numerous benefits for taking brain breaks, timeouts, or sitting in a quiet space for ten minutes to practice meditation. It increases attention spans, calms us down, and helps create more focus. In fact, there are at least three reasons why we should all think about how to step away from the job for a few moments, find a place to take a brain break, and learn how to breathe all over again. Those reasons are job overload, increasing the ability to have a deeper focus in relationships, and developing healthy habits.

**JOB OVERLOAD**

In a ten-year study for the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), Fuller et al. found that job duties for principals have had a significant increase. This is a very delicate balance for many reasons, and I have constantly been witness to how job overload can impact self-efficacy.

Bandura (1977) found that self-efficacy is the confidence we have in our own actions. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis furthered Bandura's work when they found that self-efficacy is context specific. Many people do not realize, however, that Bandura (2000) also found that leadership self-efficacy is present in our practices, and that all leaders double their efforts in areas they feel confident in and slacken their efforts in areas where they lack confidence.

What this means is that leaders are consistently asked to focus on tasks or mandates where they may not feel a sense of efficacy, and that can lead to job burnout, insecurities, or job failure.

In my own professional experi-

ence, I have seen the impact all of this can have on school administrators. One week per month I coach leaders in two different districts in central California. I see 17 teams of leaders over a five-day period. To provide some perspective, in one high school district where I coach teams in four high schools and four middle schools, they have the highest gang population per capita than any other city in California. In the other school district where I coach all principals K-12 plus their district directors, they have a high gang population, are next to a maximum security prison, and have close to a 90 percent poverty rate with high staff and leadership turnover. They all work very hard but are stressed to the maximum because of the duties that come with such demanding jobs.

When I was a new principal I was excited to get the job, but one thing I missed in the contract was the fine line that said, "Duties as assigned." School leaders worldwide have signed contracts with the same wording, but never realize how much job creep will creep into their lives and take over. The

principals that I have been coaching for over two years have seen many duties assigned that they didn't realize existed, and part of my job has been to work with the district to lower the activities and maximize the positive impact of leaders.

**MORE FOCUS**

Research shows that we are bad at multitasking, which is upsetting because we have more ways to multitask than ever before. Our phones are our best friends some days because they allow us to call loved ones and make a connection, but they are bad on other days because they are a tool that everyone can use to find us. What's worse is that when we use our phones to get on social media for a much-needed brain break, it can actually be the exact tool that causes more anxiety because we see colleagues in other schools posting on social media, and we begin to feel that we are not good enough because we are not posting those cool things.

What we need to do is put our devices down, walk away from them,

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and find some quiet in our lives so we can recharge. Research shows that the average adult picks up their phone within ten minutes of waking up every morning. For those of us old enough to remember rotary phones, or even the cordless ones, we did not instantly go pick those up in the first ten minutes of our day.

When we can set down our devices, and take ten minutes for some quiet, we begin to focus on enjoying the quiet and living in that moment. After consistently taking ten and living in the moment, we realize that we need to live in the moment while we visit classrooms, attend meetings, and have one-on-one conversations with people in our personal and professional lives.

### HEALTHY HABITS

About a year ago, when I wrote a blog for *Education Week* about mindfulness, a friend of mine who lives in England commented online that he was worried readers would think they just needed to do ten minutes and life would be great. Clearly, that is not at all what I meant when I posted the blog, but could see why he was concerned. The ten minutes is always

about focusing on being present in the moment. Mindfulness, meditation, and brain breaks are about training ourselves to always go back to the moment we are in.

What I find is that when I can make short-term goals, it usually leads to long-term gains. The ten minutes I practiced led into making better choices for most meals, which led to better choices when working out, which led to more focused workshop presentations, and greater quality one-on-one conversations at work and at home. Ultimately the ten minutes led to a more healthy lifestyle. When leaders find that one thing they can do for ten minutes – mindfulness, meditation, brain breaks, working out, going for a walk without their phone, or going outside to breathe in fresh air – it can lead to better decisions during those stressful and nonstressful moments in life.

### IN THE END

Leaders are more stressed in their

After consistently taking ten and living in the moment, we realize that we need to live in the moment while we visit classrooms, attend meetings, and have one-on-one conversations with people in our personal and professional lives.

jobs than ever. This time of year is often one that is daunting because it gets too cold to go outside, or we experience fewer hours of sunlight each day, but it also creates a great opportunity to become more healthy. We need to actively seek more calm in our lives, and give ourselves permission to step away from our work. It doesn't mean we love our work less. Quite the opposite, actually, because it means we want to be less tired, more inspired, and more authentically connected to home and work.

I get that some people reading about all of this may think that they have to put on a pair of sweatpants, light a candle, and turn off the lights in their office so no one can hear them repeating "Ohm" over and over again, but that is not at all what this practice needs to look like.

It doesn't matter whether leaders replace mindfulness and meditation practices with something that may work better for them such as going to the gym, putting their phones down for an hour, or having an uninterrupted date night with their partner or spouse – it's finally committing to find that work-life balance we often talk about so much.

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Peter DeWitt, EdD, is the author of several books including *Collaborative Leadership: 6 Influences That Matter Most* (Corwin Press, 2016), *Coach It Further: Using the Art of Coaching to Improve School Leadership* (Corwin Press, 2018), and *Instructional Leadership: Creating Practice out of Theory* (Corwin Press, 2020). His work has been adopted at the state level and in universities in North America as well as internationally. He writes the Finding Common Ground blog for *Education Week*, and has been a proud SAANYS member since 2006.