Mindfulness a Presence at Davos

By Arianna Huffington, Tribune Media Services on Jan 30, 2013

The World Economic Forum, held in Davos, Switzerland, each year, is typically associated with finding solutions to the big economic problems facing the world. So it was fascinating that the hottest topic at this year’s conference was mindfulness -- with multiple sessions not only devoted to talking about the science of it, but to how to practice it, as well.

This doesn’t mean that the World Economic Forum has given up on finding solutions to our big problems. To the contrary, it’s a sign that there is a growing awareness that in this very interconnected world, we as individuals will have to be a part of those collective solutions. Mindfulness isn’t a silver-bullet answer, but it’s a necessary precursor to finding those answers. And, in fact, it does have very direct relevance on some very tangible problems, like health care costs and productivity.

 Everywhere I turned, mindfulness was the main topic of conversation, embraced and extolled by some people you wouldn’t expect, from big-time investors (PIMCO’s Bill Gross) to Nobel Laureates (Joe Stiglitz). The curious -- and welcome -- effect was that the stars of this year’s forum weren’t the heads of state, foreign ministers, central bankers, billionaire investors or rock star activists. They were people like the Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, described as the "right-hand man for the Dalai Lama" and "the happiest man in the world." Or Amishi Jha, director of contemplative neuroscience for the Mindfulness Research and Practice Initiative at the University of Miami. Or Janice Marturano, who instituted a mindfulness and meditation program at General Mills. She now runs the Institute for
Mindful Leadership, a nonprofit she founded to train corporate professionals in mindfulness. Or Dr. Mark Williams, a professor of clinical psychology at Oxford, where he develops mindfulness-based cognitive therapy techniques to prevent suicide and treat depression. He's also the co-author of "The Mindful Way Through Depression" and "Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World." If Davos is the center, I think it's now safe to say mindfulness has come in from the fringes.

Marturano was among the featured speakers at one of the most popular Davos sessions, "The Mindful Leader." "The science has now caught up to what has been around in many many cultures," she said afterward. And the practice has very obvious and proven benefits for leaders, as well (and thus for all the rest of us).

And we’re certainly in a time in which we need more effective leaders if we’re going to meet the many challenges we're facing. On the eve of this year's conference, the IMF downgraded its forecast for global growth in 2013, and predicted that the EU would actually contract by 0.2 percent. In the U.K., it was confirmed that they are indeed falling into a triple-dip recession, and over here we're limping along with nearly 8 percent unemployment and a job-growth rate at which it would take nearly a decade to reach full employment. Clearly, some solutions are needed.

"Leading today is an incredibly complex responsibility and it can easily become so busy and overscheduled that leaders find themselves lacking in the very skills we most need them to have, the very skills that mindfulness can strengthen-focus, clarity, creativity and compassion," writes Marturano. "Simply put, the training of mindfulness in the context of leadership excellence invites leaders to be more of who they are, more in touch with their personal principles and values, and more guided by their inner wisdom." It's a truth that's being increasingly recognized in the corporate world. In addition to General Mills, which Marturano turned on to mindfulness, about one quarter of U.S. employers now have some kind of stress-reduction programs, including Google, Target and Aetna.

In fact, health care and its skyrocketing costs are areas in which mindfulness has direct benefits. In summarizing some of the sessions devoted to health care (an unprecedented 10 percent) at Davos, Lucy Fielder noted that health care costs now eat up 18 percent of GDP in the U.S., and that "only systemic reform can eventually bring down costs." We must, as one panelist put it, shift from treatment to prevention, from "sick care" to "health care."

According to the World Health Organization, stress costs American businesses an estimated $300 billion annually. And the costs to our health care system might be even higher, given the role stress plays in conditions like heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes.

Even on something as big as climate change, the small practice of mindfulness can have an impact. At the climate sessions in Davos, including one with the European Commissioner for Climate Action, Connie Hedegaard, I was struck by how many speakers and attendees were making the connection between global sustainability and personal sustainability.

As the Buddhist monk Ricard says, "mindfulness cultivates our ability to do things knowing that we're doing them."

The lack of this kind of awareness has played a role in getting us into nearly every crisis we now find ourselves facing. And it's only by cultivating that awareness that we can get ourselves out of these crises and prevent others in the future. Solutions exist, we just have to be able to see them.

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