From the Wichita Business Journal:

How leaders can react calmly under stress

Aug 7, 2015, 7:20am CDT

Earlier in my career, it was fashionable to pretend that stress was a good thing.

The stress (caused by fear) is what makes us run from a charging buffalo, people said. Stress in the workplace can help us be more efficient and effective, we were told, providing an energy boost that improves focus and productivity.

Talking about how stressed and overworked you were was like working crazy hours — a way to be noticed by the boss, and advance in your career.

I never bought it. I have never had to run from a charging buffalo.

Stress is your body’s response to a perceived threat. Cortisol increases, adrenaline increases, and all the blood rushes out of your brain. Your reptilian, dumbed-down brain responds with fight or flight. How could this possibly improve your work product, allow you to make good decisions or contribute to positive results?

Perhaps fight or flight was the best we could do thousands of years ago, but I like to think evolution isn’t over. We can control how we react to challenging situations. Remaining calm under all circumstances is the best way to stay focused on a goal, complete a difficult task or motivate a team.

How can we remain calm?

Practice helps. One practice that helps to maintain calm is "mindfulness." According to David Gelles' book, Mindful Work, "[M]indfulness is about increasing our awareness of what’s happening in our minds, throughout our bodies, and in the world around us. It is about noticing these things, and also accepting them as they are, rather than making ourselves crazy by wishing things were different."

It’s about focusing on this moment. Not on yesterday. Not on tomorrow. Not on the email that just showed up.

Mindfulness is cropping up not just in ashrams or meditation centers. Companies big and small are investing in mindfulness training and promoting the practice of mindfulness.
Our CPA firm, Kaufman Rossin, recently completed a study with Amishi Jha, associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami. The study focused on the effects of mindfulness on attention, productivity and stress levels.

Our HR director Joy Batteen told me, “The mindfulness training gave our professionals the tools to pay better attention and increase awareness. Participants found they experienced less stress during our real crunch time and felt the benefits in their focus and productivity.”

You know how to breathe, don’t you?

I use breathing techniques to remain calm, and so can you.

In my yoga practice, I have learned the importance of breath control to open tight areas of the body, stretch further into new postures, and focus the mind in the moment. Off the yoga mat, I use breathing techniques all the time — to help me fall asleep, for example.

Kate Holcombe wrote in Yoga Journal: “One of the primary reasons that pranayama techniques that foster a long, smooth exhale...are so beneficial is because, when practiced correctly, they can support the parasympathetic nervous system and activate what is commonly known as the ‘relaxation response,’ reducing stress and its effects on your body and mind. As a result, your resilience in the face of challenge or adversity increases, and your mind becomes more focused and still.”

Try this practice

This isn’t difficult stuff to do, and it’s amazing how much benefit you’ll feel when you try some of these techniques. Here are three I use all the time.

**Use long, deep conscious breathing anytime, to calm the mind and body.** Sit tall, either on the floor or in your chair. Close your eyes, keep your mouth closed, and inhale deeply and slowly. Exhale deeply and slowly. Try doing this for one minute, then maybe three or five minutes. There’s a great app timer app called i-Qi Timer that lets you choose a gong sound to end your meditation. You can also use long, deep breathing as a pause in a difficult conversation, but I recommend keeping your eyes open.

**Breathe louder than your thoughts with “victorious breath.”** This breath overpowers my thoughts, so any anxiety, worry or even anger dissipates. Sit tall. Keeping your mouth closed, constrict the back of your throat and breathe in deeply through your nose, making a snoring sound in your throat. Keep your mouth closed and exhale. Breathe in and out, long deep breaths, making a Darth Vader sound. Make it loud enough to drown out the voices in your head. Keep going for ten rounds.

**Try segmented breathing to manage your moods.** Keeping your mouth closed, breathe in for four counts. Hold the breath in for four counts. Then exhale for four counts. Continue the sequence 10 times or more. This specific pattern — four counts in, four counts out — is said to give clarity and alertness. If you’re looking for energizing and uplifting, try four counts in, one count out.

Stress isn’t useful, unless a buffalo is chasing you. And it doesn’t come from the outside. It’s your reaction to your environment. Choose to react calmly.