Can A Single Weekend Of Meditation Make You A Better Leader?

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On an early morning this past June, a small group of influential leaders in tech, finance and entertainment from around the globe hiked up to one of Sedona’s famous vortexes. When they reached the trail’s peak, they settled wordlessly onto the red dirt in silent meditation.
They were gathered here for Mela, a new retreat that invites a select group of entrepreneurs, executives, investors and creatives of all meditation experience level to practice with living masters of meditation, build lasting relationships with peers and return refreshed with an expanded perspective.

In terms of efficiency hacks, it sounds almost too good to be true that with the right peers, instruction and mindset to support you, lasting personal and professional transformation can happen in as little as a long weekend.

But that’s exactly what the new meditation retreat program, hosted by The Path’s founder, Dina Kaplan, proposes.
The Benefits Of Mindful Leadership

Meditation has crossed from West Coast crunch into mainstream popularity among the professional elite in recent years as research documents what practitioners already know: Meditating regularly can transform the way you think.

According to research by psychologist Amishi Jha, sitting for as little as 10-12 minutes a day augments your brain’s ability to pay attention, your mental resilience, and your working memory capacity. Studies have also shown that the type of meditation you practice can physically change corresponding parts of your mind.

For leaders who are constantly looking for ways to hack their bodies and minds to perform better, meditation seems like a no-brainer.

But solidifying a regular and fruitful meditation practice can be difficult, especially for executives with a full plate of responsibilities and for those unused to the ascetic delights of roughing it at a traditional meditation retreat.
The Divine Is In The Details

As self-described meditation retreat junkie, Kaplan explains, “I started Mela because the first meditation retreat I went on was extraordinarily powerful — it actually changed my life! — but the conditions were super rough. We were in India, and there was no toilet paper, no soap (not a great combination!) and no air conditioning, and it was 110 degrees outside.

“I kept thinking about other entrepreneurs I wanted to share the retreat with, but I wasn’t sure they would be open to living in conditions like this.”

Since then, Kaplan says she has found her mission: to spread Buddhist wisdom in beautiful settings and in a way that people would feel cared for in body and mind, with no excuse not to participate.

“With Mela, we hand-select people from around the world and bring them into a truly transformative experience.”

In spiritually glamorous locations like Sedona, Arizona, Mela eases participants into a higher realm with the help of master teachers like Sharon Salzberg and Will Kabat-Zinn.

In between meditation sessions, the group is treated to luxuriously thoughtful experiences, reminiscent of an expensive destination wedding, but where every guest you might be seated next to is a fascinating conversation partner and a kindred spirit.

“We’re curating for kindness and impact, and it shows. Each person on the retreat is leaning into their careers and wants to have impact on the world ... But the people who join are also really open. And kind. And ready to meet other mindful people,” Kaplan says.

Participants might be lulled into a state of repose by Mela’s sumptuous details, including accommodations at the stunning Enchantment Resort, all-organic meals, and surprise musical guests scattered throughout the weekend. But there is still a lot of work to be done.
The retreat packs in about 13.5 hours of programming a day, with the same basic routine: An early morning meditation, followed by a hike, a series of sitting and walking meditations and dharma talks and a restorative evening activity.

Free and mealtime is thoughtfully executed, with assigned seating and intimate conversation starters aimed at to enhance reflection among like minds.

This where Mela truly differs from other meditation retreats. Instead of only focusing inward, participants are reflecting deeply with the community around them for essentially every waking hour of the day.

**Retreat To Reinforce Mindfulness In Real Life**

At her inaugural event, Kaplan invited several co-hosts, who themselves have forged their own relationship with leadership supported by their meditation practice.

Patrick McKenna, an entrepreneur and early-stage tech investor based in San Francisco, signed on to co-host. “The challenge at Mela for me was to both engage with people and remain in a focused mindful state,” he says.

“This is more like everyday life. Can you have dinner with friends talking about news of the day and remain present? Can you discuss your work or get to know someone new without falling to your default posture?
“Mela gave me many opportunities to experience going back and forth,” McKenna says. “It's hard and it takes practice, so I learned a lot about how my mind and attitude changes from minute to minute.”

It was this focus on a directly applicable practice, by leaders for leaders, that captured the interest of both long-time meditators and those new to the practice.

Organizers paid copious attention to dietary preferences, served fully organic meals and provided assigned seating and customized prompts to facilitate deeper conversation. Guests were also surprised with gifts to support their wellness and meditation practice throughout the retreat. DEXX NEGRON
Daniel Hoffer, Managing Director at Autotech Ventures in Menlo Park, Calif., says the combination of spiritual practice alongside the promise of professional networking surprised him.

“It very actively facilitated conscious connection among the people who attended as well as practical guidance on how to benefit most from meditation. The spiritual benefit was much greater than I had anticipated,” Hoffer says.

“I very quickly lost my sense of time, he explains. “After only 24 hours I felt like I had been there a week. I was also struck by the level of emotional intimacy and vulnerability that the participants quickly achieved with each other. People opened up to each other deeply and authentically in a way that is unusual and really special.”

**Lasting Lessons Of Conscious Leadership**

In the months since the retreat, the participants surveyed, even those that hadn’t been able to keep a meditation practice prior to the retreat, reported that they’ve been able to stick with mindfulness and meditation in a way they didn’t feel committed to before.

And, they say, the effects have been noticeable.
“My background is in tech startups, where the natural inclination is to react as quickly as possible to new and changing conditions,” says Brian Wang, product manager at Eaze and founder of Fitocracy in the Bay Area. “Sometimes this can be useful when speed is the only thing that matters, but it usually leads to short-term optimizations at the cost of long-term success.”

After his experience at Mela, Wang says, “I aim to take measured, thoughtful approaches while still maintaining speed.” His mindfulness meditation practice has been a large part in helping him hold that line.

Evan Mendelsohn is the co-founder of Tipsy Elves, a company that specializes in holiday apparel that has been featured on ABC’s Shark Tank. He was able to apply meditative lessons in subtle, effective ways. “The concept of *short moments, many times* is something I’ve tapped into since I’ve returned from Mela. “The idea that you can have small meditative moments throughout the day — and it doesn’t necessarily need to be long session on a cushion.”

Mendelsohn has been able to tap into that feeling regularly while working. “The biggest impact and the piece that stays with me is knowing that the state of mind I felt during Mela is always attainable through meditation. It’s ultimately a choice and knowing that... the feelings from Mela can be replicated in my daily life (at my choosing) is really empowering.”