Manish Chopra, a mindfulness practitioner who’s a partner at McKinsey and author of The Equanimous Mind, recently came to NYU’s Stern School of Business to speak to students. He began his lecture to a packed auditorium with a question: “Why did you all come here today?”
One student’s hand went up immediately. “Because you’re from McKinsey and I want to work there,” he replied. The audience laughed. At an event where Chopra was going to talk about the benefits of mindfulness and meditation, the student’s honesty was both refreshing and reflective of the mindset of many business school students: They are focused, they are driven, and they want success.

We launched the Mindfulness in Business Initiative (MiB) precisely in order to help students like these leverage their desire for success toward saner, more sustainable, and ethical workplace practices through mindfulness. MiB was founded through Stern’s Leadership Development Program in partnership with NYU’s Global Spiritual Life program. The overall objective of MiB was to plant the mindfulness seed early in MBA students’ lives, equipping them with tools to positively impact others while taking a more fulfilling and balanced approach to their work. One year and many events, courses, and programs later, the MBA students are still just beginning to understand the value of mindfulness in their roles as managers and leaders. Once they’re introduced to the theory and techniques of meditation, mindful pauses, reflective listening, and other mindfulness practices, however, they repeatedly ask for more. The practices not only build students’ skills as future managers and leaders, they also enhance their emotional intelligence and deepen their often-stressful, results-driven lives.

As increasing numbers of businesses, Fortune 500 companies, and CEOs consider mindfulness essential to successful management, we at NYU recognized the need to offer students (and faculty) opportunities to delve deeply into these practices. Being mindfulness practitioners ourselves, we recognized that the most effective way to teach mindfulness is by actually practicing it, not just intellectually grasping the ideas. By asking people to be in touch with their feelings and their bodies, we take them out of their analytical minds and into their felt experiences. That’s why we include opportunities to practice in each of our programmatic offerings and courses. We take our students away from their already established intellectual muscle and force them to develop their emotional muscle, understanding through being and doing rather than thinking.

These practices help deepen students’ emotional intelligence throughout many aspects of their leadership lives, from oral presentation skills to conflict management. When asked which
leadership tools they aim to develop, most MBA students list these “practical skills” as highest on their priority lists. We have found that understanding oneself, one’s triggers, and one’s emotions through mindfulness and meditation enhances one’s ability to master these concrete skill sets.

The first year of our program was met with enthusiasm at every level. Hundreds of MBA students participated in the pilot, and at least 15 faculty and staff members were in attendance at the various programs. Our panel event and conference reached a wide audience of professionals in business, with over 300 in attendance from businesses such as Eileen Fisher, General Mills, and JP Morgan. Our speakers included mindfulness practitioners such as Dan Harris, author of *10% Happier*; Janice Marturano, founder of The Institute for Mindful Leadership; Amishi Jha, University of Miami neuroscientist and researcher; Sharon Salzberg, author of *Real Happiness at Work*; David Gelles, *New York Times* reporter and author of *Mindful Work*; and Jeffrey Walker, JP Morgan chairperson and author of *The Generosity Network*.

In these mini-courses, lectures, and symposiums, students learned the fundamentals of mindfulness leadership, such as clarity, focus, creativity, and compassion. They learned attendant practices that include breath meditation, purposeful pauses, body sensation meditation, open awareness meditation, and mindful communication. They learned to curb multitasking, since allowing the brain to flit back and forth between tasks leads to a reduction (not an increase) in productivity. They learned to “get comfortable with the uncomfortable.” Insecurity, stress, and anxiety cannot be controlled, but a routine mindfulness practice can help. And finally, they learned to become aware of their judgments so that they can see clearly the difference between the truth of any given situation and the cloudiness of their projections or ideas.

The response to the pilot program has been highly favorable. In their evaluations, students told us that the courses made them more self-aware, more focused, and better able to recognize and understand their own thoughts and emotions. Many felt that it made them better leaders, and many expressed the need for continuing the programming. In light of these requests, MiB is continuing to offer formal courses and programs as well as practical, ongoing ways to incorporate mindfulness into the daily lives of our students.
Being more mindful of our behaviors and thoughts can go a long way toward forging a stronger connection with one’s self and with others. Small changes become big changes. In the words of Buddha, “The mind is everything. What you think, you become.” Surely we want our future business leaders to be more mindful of their own thoughts, behaviors, and actions.

Increasing numbers of business schools are joining the ranks of the mindfulness revolution, transforming the lives of the next generation of our business leadership. We at NYU are thrilled to see this development and are excited to see its manifestation in the years to come.

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**Connie Kim** is the Director of Leadership Development at the NYU Stern School of Business. Prior to joining Stern, Connie was a strategic leader in talent management after spending most of her career as a senior leverage finance banker.

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**Yael Shy**, Esq. is the Senior Director of Global Spiritual Life at New York University and the Founder and Director of MindfulNYU, one of the largest campus-wide mindfulness initiatives in the country. She has been practicing meditation since 2001 and teaches regularly at NYU and around the globe.

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