

Revving Up Your Next Staff Meeting with Mindfulness and Self-Care

by Carla Tantillo Philibert with Peggy Collings

Ah, the dreaded staff meeting: It should be a time to reconnect the staff over smiles and shared goals, but instead, you look around and your teachers' eyes are cast down looking over student work and cell phones. They're not being disrespectful; they're overwhelmed with stimuli, deadlines and fatigue, just like the rest of us. What we need is to be present, collectively, so we can build community from a mindful, authentic and whole-hearted place.

As a teacher, I sat through befuddling staff meetings and walked out overwhelmed with information. (Definitely *not* a mindfulness practice—I was *less* present than when I walked in!) Most of these “professional development” meetings were really good examples of how *not* to teach: Stand in front of the room and talk; hope the audience is listening.

So, what's a more mindful way to use those minutes?

- Build consensus
- Foster camaraderie
- Create calm

Building consensus could mean troubleshooting the new science curriculum or tweaking a recurring discipline infraction's consequence. On what issues do you need buy-in from the staff as a whole? A staff meeting can be an opportunity to hear the voices that are often quiet. Facilitate a co-listening discussion—where there is a designated speaker and listener—to be certain there is

equity of voice amongst the group. (And to prevent the “silent majority” that may torpedo an initiative later because they never felt they had any input. These are your grumblers and naysayers. Head 'em off at the pass!)

Fostering camaraderie is plain old fun. The staff that plays together stays together, so encourage a little silliness in those non-contact hours. This could mean a trivia game to get to know new staff members in September or a gentle roast of the retirees in May. The physical education teachers can help plan an obstacle course. The media specialist can model some new educational apps to gamify test prep. Calm can come in redirection and release. Any cooperative games that get staff members out of their seats and working with each other toward a common goal are a great use of meeting time. The dividends are respect, rapport and support. Not bad for a few minutes invested in a game of Yogi Says. (That's just like Simon Says, but with yoga poses.) As long as the staff are engaged, present and laughing, it's a success!

My third suggestion for your next staff meeting is the most serious, but could make the most lasting impression. Lead the staff through some self-care. If you are an administrator or teacher leader, this means you do it with them *and* for them. As a group, take five SELF breaths: **S**low, **E**ven, **L**ong and **F**ull. As they breathe, ask them to engage in some Mindful Listening,

by tuning into a sound or noise in the distance. This prompts them to focus on the present moment and move away from that ever-nagging, multitasking brain. (If your staff is resistant to a shared breathing exercise, you could always let them opt to *not* breathe. Just kidding!)

No matter the roles they play while at the front of their classrooms, staff members all need a break, so give it to them. Stretch together. If yoga isn't part of your school culture, then try a few neck or shoulder rolls. I hear teachers at all levels of education clamoring they “don't have time” to include mindfulness, yoga or movement into their school. These staff members need to know that self-care is an investment, and that belief begins with having them collectively experience activities. The value of this investment will grow over time—just like their 403b accounts—when given frequent deposits during each meeting. Like anything else, these mindfulness practices need to be a priority, **not** the thing that gets dropped off the agenda when the meeting is running longer than anticipated.

Most educators are spouses, parents, children, siblings, coaches and friends. They are caring for others throughout the day and well into the evenings. Their “compassion engines” are revving all day long, to the point their tanks are empty. Show them it is not only permissible to take some time for themselves, but you are encouraging it!

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Simply taking a moment of mindfulness can be an effective calming technique. But, just like any new content or practice,

stillness may be uncomfortable for some. There are guided meditations at the fingertips of any web surfer. However, I would recommend

continued on page 12

Though mindfulness may sound intimidating, all it takes is practice. Many educators and students are new to the practice, so ease into these strategies and expect that it will take some time to feel comfortable with a mindfulness practice. We've paired our Social Emotional Learning competencies for adults and students with related mindfulness attitudes to cultivate. Through regular mindfulness practice, students who were once uncomfortable with and in quiet can come to enjoy and even seek silence.

Mindfulness	Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)
<p>1. Singularity: Focus on a single task at hand. The opposite of multitasking. Being fully present and engaged with one thing at a time. Space to learn and hear what our bodies are telling us. Awareness.</p>	<p>1. Self-Awareness: Identify how you are feeling, and how it may be impacting your physical being. Moving learners from powerless to empowered.</p>
<p>2. Intentionality: Deliberate action moving past tendencies. The opposite of “responding on auto-pilot” or falling back into the same narrative. This requires disciplined habits of mind. Ownership.</p>	<p>2. Self-Regulation: Ability to respond from a place of calm knowing. Finding responsible and resourceful ways of communicating who you are with those around you. Moving learners from impulsivity to intentionally navigating behavioral choices.</p>
<p>3. Non-Judgmentalness: Noticing yourself, (thoughts, words, deeds) and the world around you without evaluation, appraisal or assessment. The opposite of, “This experience or feeling was good or bad.” Neutrality.</p>	<p>3. Social Awareness: Recognition that our actions impact our classmates, school, community and ourselves. Moving learners from a reactive, victimized mindset to a proactive, communal view of the world around them.</p>
<p>4. Space: Creating mental, emotional and physical margins in your life. The space to respond to different personal and social triggers without losing one's center or sacrificing social rapport. The opposite of dysfunctional 'groupthink' or habitual, unconscious reactions to everyday events. Consciousness.</p>	<p>4. Balance Between Self-Efficacy and Social Harmony: Managing vulnerability with a compassionate understanding of one's relationship with SELF and with others. Moving learners from projection, assumption or excessive self-sacrifice to feeling centered, present, and like a valued and contributing member of the world around them.</p>

Source: *Everyday SEL in High School* by Carla Tantillo Philibert

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continued from page 11

easing into self-care with breath work. As I encourage teachers and students to do in my book, *Everyday SEL*, find time to **POP**—Pause and take three breaths, Own what is happening (Are you stressed? Angry? Anxious?) and Practice a solution. “POP” is a skill that must be developed over time. Don’t look for success on your first try. Patiently build a practice over time.

As with **POP**, all of these calming techniques and mindfulness practices can be incorporated into your classroom’s daily routine. Students (and teachers) all need calming strategies, regardless of race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status. Stress does not discriminate! I have found post-recess to be a

perfect time to implement a minute of calm breathing and mindful meditation, lights off and with or without some soft, lyric-free music. Each educator knows the needs of his or her group of students and should feel empowered to implement what methods and times of day will work best for them.

Whether in their classrooms or on their own, some will need encouragement to step out of their own comfort zone to try a new calming technique. If you are the school administrator, this encouragement must come from you! Step into courage and lead by example. You know you’re stressed, too. A little self-care for you couldn’t hurt.



Authors

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