



R. Adam Engle was at the vanguard of the mindful movement when he helped bring the Dalai Lama to Boulder in 1997.
Jonathan Castner/For BizWest

Business minded: Dalai Lama, Naropa at heart of national movement toward workplace mindfulness

by **Tom Locke** on October 2, 2015

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[LinkedIn](#)

[E-mail](#)

Stress.

Sponsor Generated Content

Wealth Transfers: You Shouldn't Take the Emotion Out of Your Decisions

We find ourselves in the middle of one of the greatest wealth transfer periods of all time. Those with wealth must decide whether they want to make transfers, and if they do, they must decide how much, to whom, when and in what structure?



You're bombarded by smartphone calls, emails, texts and news headlines. Your mind is a bucking horse. Deadlines, quotas and clients pop in and out of your thoughts like pesky flies. The kicker? You're at home. But your mind isn't.

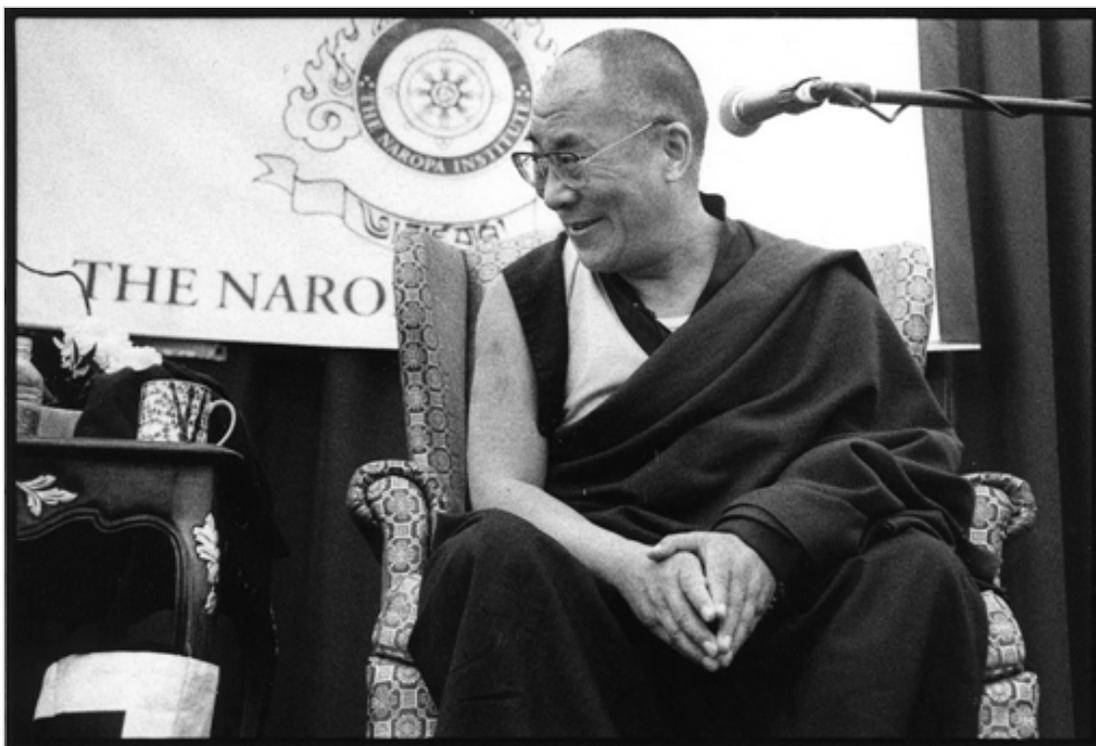
What does this have to do with Northern Colorado and the Dalai Lama? Lots — if you connect the dots.

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, canceled his Oct. 20-21 visit to Boulder because of health reasons, according to the University of Colorado Boulder, a co-sponsor of the visit. The Office of Tibet will consider rescheduling the visit, CU said on Sept. 25.

Regardless, his role and that of Northern Colorado in the workplace mindfulness movement are important to note as mindfulness continues to gain traction.

The dialogues

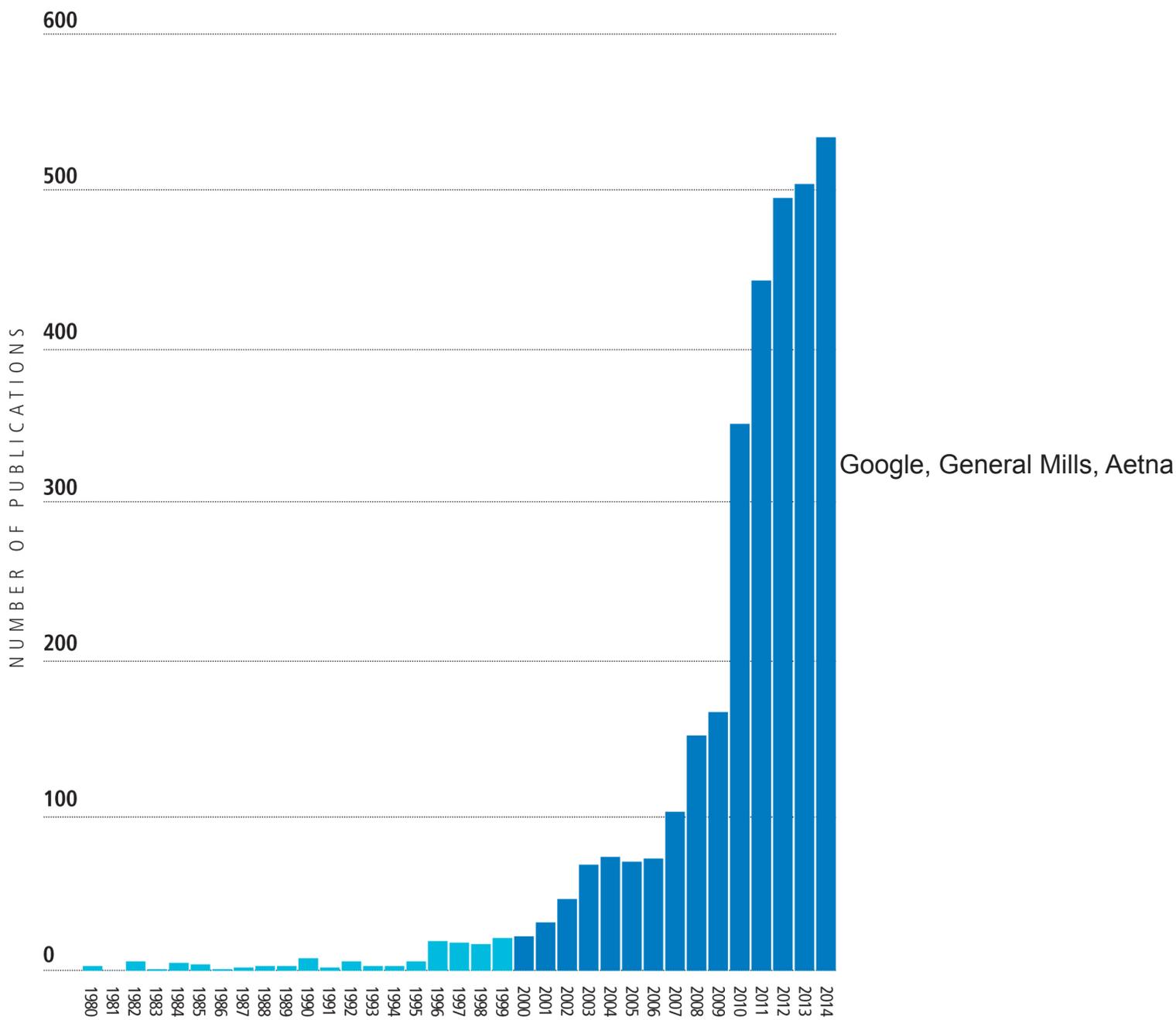
The Dalai Lama has been conducting formal dialogues with scientists since 1987, thanks largely to efforts by Boulder County resident R. Adam Engle and the Mind and Life Institute, which Engle co-founded in 1990. MLI — which moved from Boulder to Hadley, Mass., with Engle's retirement in 2012 — expanded its mission beyond the dialogues and into research in 1998, and it and the Dalai Lama helped sow the seeds for the outgrowth of scientific articles about the benefits of meditation. The research has spawned interest in using mindfulness programs in the workplace, and those programs are used to address stress and other issues plaguing organizations.



Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, last visited Boulder in 1997, speaking at both Naropa University and the University of Colorado. Courtesy Dona Laurita

Mindfulness journal publications by year, 1980-2014

The chart below indicates a conservative estimate based on articles reviewed individually for relevance and included in the AMRA database



SOURCE: FIGURE BORROWED WITH PERMISSION FROM DAVID S. BLACK, PH.D., M.P.H.

and other large, well-recognized companies have offered mindfulness programs to help address problems such as stress, burnout, disengagement, turnover, lack of teamwork, lack of creativity, low emotional IQ and more.

The Dalai Lama has had an “immense role” in bringing the practice of mindfulness to “every aspect of our lives, including (the) workplace,” said an email from Tenzin Tashi, media chief of the Tibetan Association of Colorado, which had been the other co-sponsor of the Oct. 20-21 visit.

Mac McGoldrick, a professor in the philosophy department at Colorado State University, said the Dalai Lama has been at the forefront of bringing mindfulness meditation to science and business.

The connection has received national attention. A November 2014 cover article in *Scientific American* said that in 2000 the Dalai Lama “launched the subdiscipline of ‘contemplative neuroscience’ by inviting scientists to study the brain activity of expert Buddhist meditators — defined as having more than 10,000 hours of practice.” It noted that in 2005 he spoke to the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience and asked what relation there might be between Buddhism and modern science.

Engle emphasized the strong connection between the Dalai Lama, MLI and workplace mindfulness trends. In a Sept. 7 email, he wrote, “The growth in mindfulness programs in the workplace is a direct and planned result of the strategy of MLI to consciously create it, first by developing and supporting the research community which produced the data, which then created the demand for these practices in education and business. So in this sense we can definitely give HHDL (His Holiness the Dalai Lama) and MLI much of the credit for the explosive growth of mindfulness in the workplace.”

The flood of scientific articles, increased national media exposure and implementation of programs by large, prestigious companies has changed the climate of acceptability for trying such programs.

Related content

[Area’s mindfulness ties go back decades](#)

[Science and mindfulness: are they compatible?](#)

[Business mindfulness: Terminology at a glance](#)

Northern Colorado examples

Sovrn Holdings Inc., a Boulder-based 118-employee online advertising technology firm, is among those dipping its toes into mindfulness training, which it offered as part of a new monthly wellness program.

“In the workplace, what we’re trying to do is allow people to achieve better focus,” said Sarah Innocenzi, Sovrn’s vice president for people. The idea, she said, is to “calm your mind and clear your mind” so that employees will be “more satisfied and more productive at work.”

Bret Scofield, one Sovrn employee, said the company’s mindfulness programs made her aware of her problem with “microslicing” — jumping from one activity to another. “It was focused on getting away from that because it’s such a productivity suck,” she said.

Fort Collins Housing Authority chief executive Julie Brewen, an eight-year meditator, launched a mindfulness program last year partly because of surveys showing that the FCHA’s 70 or so employees were having problems with post-work time and energy.

She started with a well-received two-hour presentation by Michael Carroll, author of “Awake at Work,” and two months later began a program she designed with Fort Collins instructor Jon Barbieri, owner of JDB & Associates. The voluntary program was unusual in its intensity: one paid work hour every business day for a month, starting at 8:30 a.m.

Voucher program manager Traci McGraw participated. She had been having trouble unwinding after work, partly because of at-work dealings with homeless people, so she decided to give it a try.

Fort Collins-based New Belgium Brewery hired Barbieri for a program last fall and liked it enough to ask him back this fall. The New Belgium program was far less intense — an hour a week for six weeks — but more in line with a typical business program.

“We participated and benefited from the program,” said Laura Latendresse, health and wellness specialist for New Belgium. “People gave us really good feedback on it, and that it improved their lives at home and at work.”

Google a leader

Mindfulness also is part of the culture at the Boulder offices of Mountain View, Calif.-based technology firm Google Inc. (Nasdaq: GOOG). A meditation room will be part of a new campus that will have 1,500 employees in three buildings by 2018, compared with 300 employees now, according to Boulder-based regional sales manager Quentin Finney.

Through the efforts of Google engineer Chade-Meng Tan, a program of neuroscience, mindfulness and emotional intelligence first was taught in 2007 at Google. A few years ago, Google gifted the intellectual property to a new nonprofit, Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute (SIYLI, pronounced “silly”), and Google remains a client of SIYLI, said Finney. SIYLI offers a two-day training followed by about four weeks of participation to integrate that learning.

In a Google program called gPause, 35 out of more than 70 Google offices globally have daily meditation sittings. In Boulder the sittings are 20 minutes long, and 15 to 20 people regularly meditate during the lunch hour in a room near the cafeteria.

Bill Duane, an executive in well-being at Google, sees gPause as a complementary follow-up to the SIYLI training. “The idea of gPause is that in addition to getting information, you need to actually do practice over time to get the benefits of meditation,” he said in an email.

Call to action

What’s driving it all? “Our default position (for the mind) is wandering and anxiety,” said retired Fort Collins resident Rich Shannon. Mindfulness meditation “allows us to spend more time being focused.”

Businesses are turning to mindfulness “in their best interests, and they’re doing it for two reasons,” he said. One is avoiding employee burnout, and the other is fostering employees who are creative rather than frozen by stress, which is tied to accelerating change, soaring complexity and ever-present work-ensnaring smartphones.

“The burnout is not just in the middle ranks of corporations,” Shannon said. “CEOs are being fried.”

Growing evidence shows that workers are under extreme stress, which is linked to negative mental and physical health, said Lauren Menger, a Ph.D. candidate in occupational health psychology at CSU.

Employers are adjusting. Michael Gayner, executive director of the Shambhala Mountain Center northwest of Fort Collins, said they are eyeing new models through which enhanced productivity is not a matter of “squeezing things out of people” but of employees “offering everything they have.”

Sovrn’s Innocenzi talks along those inspirational lines when describing her company as one with a “pick up the trash” value in which everyone is accountable. “I think it creates a culture of passion,” she said.

First Steps

What’s the best way to choose a mindfulness instructor and program? Susan Skjei, Authentic Leadership Center director at Boulder-based Naropa University, recommended first “determining what your goals are and how they relate to your business goals.”

If the goal is stress reduction, then a program such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction is great, said Skjei. MBSR has an instructor certification process and frequently has appeared on CBS-TV’s “60 Minutes” and in other national media.

However, said Skjei, if the goal is to help people communicate and operate within teams, then that requires different skills and “can have much more benefit to the company.”

Team-level mindfulness can include starting a meeting with a minute of silence or ending it with evaluation of how the meeting went, said Skjei, whose center at Naropa offers a 16-week program as well as consulting and customized programs.

Barbieri recommends introducing the mindfulness topic over time before a program begins. Whether a program is right for a company “totally has to do with leadership and management,” he said.

Boulder resident and veteran trainer Michelle Auerbach emphasized that mindfulness is not just about tackling stress.

“It’s stress, communication, knowing your strengths and weaknesses, leadership, and emotional and intellectual resilience, intuition,” she said.

It’s also about lowering costs of turnover and disengagement. To replace someone at the top costs four times that person’s salary; to replace a middle manager costs 150 percent of yearly salary; and a disengaged employee costs \$3,400 for every \$10,000 in salary, Auerbach said.

Participation

But what if participation in a program and follow-through after the program are low? Is a program worth it?

At the FCHA, 19 employees participated out of 70, for a 27 percent participation rate.

At Sovrn, Innocenzi said she’s learned that non-program variables can affect participation, and intends to offer a greater variety and convenience of times and keep the offerings — regardless of participation.

At New Belgium, Latendresse estimated that 12 employees started the mindfulness program and eight finished, making for a participation rate of 6 percent. That might seem low, but it was enough for her to schedule Barbieri again, particularly since “people really liked the way that he guided the meditation.”

What’s high enough participation to make a difference in an organization? Auerbach cited research from sociologist Everett Rogers, who showed that adopters of a new innovation or idea could be divided into innovators (2.5 percent), early adopters (13.5 percent), early majority (34 percent), late majority (34 percent) and laggards (16 percent). So, she said, even with only 2.5 percent participation, a company still gets the innovators. If a company gets both innovators and early adaptors, that’s perfect, according to Auerbach, who has partnered with Google’s Finney to form Pause i/O, a Boulder-based company that will offer a two-day SIYLI program in Denver in January.

Long-term implementation

Still, initial participation is one thing; long-term implementation is another.

CSU’s McGoldrick guessed that only 5 percent to 10 percent of the students in his meditation classes are still meditating.

At Sovrn, Innocenzi meditated 10 minutes a day for a short period, but found it hard to do every day. She still does some deep breathing and focusing, she said, “to try to get myself in a better place.”

Sovrn’s Scofield said mindfulness training made her conscious of microslicing, but she found it tough to stop microslicing after discontinuing meditation. “Once you’re not going to the guided sessions, it’s very difficult to discipline yourself to meditate every day,” she said. Still, she has the discipline to run every day, for a total of nine to 10 hours a week.

What’s the difference? Barbieri may have part of the answer.

“We have a particular rhythm of being busy all the time,” he said. To sit down, meditate, and listen to your mind is swimming against the stream in American culture, he added. “We’re going against how we’re being trained and what our culture is right now,” Barbieri said. “We’re doers.”

The Dalai Lama talks about “how to be,” not “how to do.”

Even so, tips can prove helpful. Support is very important, and that can mean establishing a learning support group, using mindfulness phone apps or getting a mindfulness coach, said Skjei.

Auerbach said one strategy is to listen to a mindfulness audio book while driving. Also, SIYLI offers different mindfulness practices besides sitting meditation, including walking meditation, journaling, and more.

Mindfulness also can be practiced without taking time out of the day. “Open-awareness meditation” can be done while driving a car, Auerbach said. Several of her clients meditate while waiting at red lights.

Greater intensity of initial training might also help long-term implementation. A study of the intense FCHA program showed that seven months after the program, seven out of 12 respondents had

meditated within the previous two weeks. That translates to a 58 percent follow-up rate.

The FCHA was able to change its collaborative culture with changes such as silence to open meetings and a new common language regarding workflow interruptions, Brewen said.

National award

As it turned out, the FCHA's program won a national award of merit for administrative innovation from the 20,000-member National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials.

If McGraw's results are any indication, the award was merited. Meditation initially was much harder than she had anticipated, she said, but the program's consistency and intensity "definitely" had more of an impact than a once-a-week program would.

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[LinkedIn](#)

[E-mail](#)

Comments
