How do successful leaders maintain, or even enhance, both effectiveness and personal connections in the virtual workplace? This question has been top of mind for many executives since the COVID-19 crisis abruptly forced them and their teams out of traditional office settings. Because many companies plan to maintain virtual workplaces for the foreseeable future, tackling the challenges is an ongoing imperative.

Research suggests that the answer to the question lies in the mind-body connection. A study conducted by Awaris (a company that focuses on leadership development and scientifically proven mindfulness-based interventions) and BCG found that the leaders who have adjusted well to the new environment have a deep, intuitive understanding of their own neurobiology and physiology. (See the sidebar “About the Study.”) Because they are in touch with what their minds and bodies are feeling, they are able to balance several pairs of qualities: physiological activation and recovery, attention and awareness, and cognitive connection and empathetic presence. When these qualities are in balance, leaders can promote effectiveness and personal connections, for themselves and for their team members.

All leaders can cultivate mind-body skills to systematically recover from stress, train awareness, and enhance their presence. Indeed, our study demonstrated the efficacy of several basic mindfulness practices in building personal qualities that are essential for leadership in the virtual workplace and in any crisis situation. By adopting these practices, leaders can fare better during the current crisis and build their resilience for future challenges.

Remote Workers Are Often Effective, but Well-Being Suffers

Many people have touted the success of the virtual workplace by citing reports of increased effectiveness. Indeed, 50% of executives participating in the leadership development program said that they were more effective (in terms of getting things done)
when working from home during the crisis than they were in the traditional workplace. Even so, a substantial number—33%—reported that they were less effective working from home.

Effectiveness, while important, is only part of the story. Other factors, in particular well-being and team-wide collaboration, are equally important. Several aspects of well-being—reducing stress levels, maintaining personal connections, and setting boundaries for the workday—appear to be challenging for many leaders. Of the participants in the leadership development program, 66% reported that they observed an increase in overall stress levels in the virtual workplace and 81% found that people struggled to set boundaries and to disconnect from work. Taken together, the findings suggest that the loss of personal connections and work-life boundaries can exert tremendous pressure on the emotional well-being of leaders and their teams in the virtual workplace.

The data on emotional well-being should be of concern to companies as they proceed with plans to continue virtual operations over the coming months. More than ever, organizations need to support leaders in maintaining well-being as they manage teams during the pandemic. Indeed, BCG’s COVID-19 Employee Sentiment Survey found a correlation between mental health and productivity: people who have experienced better mental health during the pandemic than before it are about two times more likely to maintain or improve their productivity on collaborative tasks than those who have experienced worse mental health.

We believe that mindfulness offers a solution. Leaders who engaged in the ten-week programs were able to increase their emotional, psychological, and social well-being. (See Exhibit 1.) Mindfulness improved their ability to balance stress and recovery, increase awareness, and enhance emotional presence—allowing them to achieve an inner balance that promotes overall well-being. It’s important to note that this measure was taken during what was, in many locations, a difficult phase of the COVID-19 crisis.

ABOUT THE STUDY

The data and many of the crisis-related insights we present were derived from two programs convened remotely during the pandemic:

- A ten-week mindfulness program that included more than 300 participants. Participants were based in Europe, North America, South America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia and work in financial services, consumer goods, and professional services. There were 12 groups of participants. Groups began the program between mid-April and mid-May 2020.

- A leadership development program in which 14 groups of senior leaders and managers participated, for a total of 250 participants; groups ranged in size from 10 to 40 people. Participants were based in Europe, North America, South America, East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. The program comprised seven sessions held from April to June or May to July 2020. The sessions were designed to help leaders better understand their neurobiology and to inspire them to establish a personal mindfulness routine, including the practices outlined in this article.

To track impact, we conducted a large number of scientific tests with approximately 170 program participants before and after the programs. All of the tests, in which participants self-report answers, have been scientifically validated in studies published in peer-reviewed journals.
Achieving Equilibrium in Three Pairs of Qualities

Each of the six qualities comprising the following three pairs is fundamental to our humanity. The challenge, particularly in the virtual workplace, is to strike a balance that promotes performance without sacrificing well-being.

PHYSIOLOGICAL ACTIVATION AND RECOVERY

Stress—a well-developed and life-saving biological mechanism to respond to danger—affects people physiologically via the autonomic nervous system. When a person perceives danger, the sympathetic nervous system is automatically activated, triggering a fight-or-flight response. (For example, vision narrows and blood flows away from brain into the legs and arms.) This happens before a person consciously processes a trigger as a source of stress.

Overloading on negative information is a major trigger of stress, which, in addition to health and financial concerns, explains why many people have perceived higher stress levels in recent months. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, people were already consuming massive amounts of information from news sites, social media, and email—we estimate 200,000 words per day, extrapolating from data compiled in a 2009 study by the University of California, San Diego.

One strategy for reducing stress in a crisis is to be conscious of the information we are consuming, or what we are otherwise paying attention to, so that we can focus on the positive and avoid being consumed by the negative. Coupled with this, we can promote recovery from stress through self-compassion. Being compassionate helps us avoid falling into a typical vicious cycle in which feeling stress induces a higher level of self-criticism and more stress. In other words, the solution is not to try to stop thinking about stress but to acknowledge the feelings induced in a nonjudgmental way and then to understand and manage the triggers.

By adopting a reflective body-mind practice—such as meditation, yoga, or tai chi—leaders can learn to sense the state of their nervous system and build habits for strategic recovery, including self-compassion.

EXHIBIT 1 | Mindfulness Practice Improves Well-Being

Well-being as measured before and after a ten-week mindfulness program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Before mindfulness program</th>
<th>After mindfulness program</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional well-being</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social well-being</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological well-being</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Awaris and BCG study.

Note: The study measured well-being using 14 questions, as defined in the “Mental Health Continuum,” that addressed emotional well-being (feeling happy, interested, and satisfied), social well-being (feeling part of a larger community), and psychological well-being (feeling good about oneself and having a sense of purpose and meaning). Participants responded on the basis of their experiences during the previous four weeks, using a scale from 0 (low well-being) to 5 (high well-being); mean scores are shown; n=174; all represented values are rounded, but the percentage calculation used data that was not rounded.
Even a simple meditation exercise focused on breathing can be beneficial for relaxing the nervous system and balancing activation and recovery. (See the sidebar “Balancing Your Nervous System.”)

Participants in the mindfulness program reported, on average, a reduction in their perceived stress levels and an increase in self-compassion, even in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. (See Exhibit 2.)

**ATTENTION AND AWARENESS**

From an evolutionary perspective, mammals need two modes of perception to survive: attention and awareness. Consider a mouse that discovers a juicy worm in a hole. It must focus its attention to extract the delicate morsel from the hole and then select and munch the juicy bits. At the same time, however, it must maintain awareness to scan for dangers—is there an eagle overhead looking for its next meal?

Such awareness is much broader than focused attention, taking in the whole environment and making connections (such as between a sound in the trees and a potential danger). This pair of qualities is essential for humans as well.

As the example illustrates, attention and awareness have different characteristics:

- **Attention** apprehends, latches on to, and dissects. It is self-focused. It is commonly rooted in the left half of the brain, which is responsible for the literal and precise understanding of language. It processes a specific piece of information in high resolution.

- **Awareness** sees interconnections, perceives the whole environment and bigger patterns, and is “other focused” or “we focused.” It is commonly rooted

### BALANCING YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Take these steps to understand what the sensations in your body reveal about your personal stress and recovery patterns:

**Step 1: Assess your stress level.** Devote at least two minutes each day to silent meditation. While scanning your body from feet to head, consider these questions:

- Are your face muscles relaxed or tensed? How about your shoulders, neck, and back?

- Is your breathing fast or slow? Are you breathing primarily through the right or left nostril?

- Is your mind calm or restless? Are you ruminating on particular things (especially negative thoughts) or can you observe your thoughts from a distance without getting lost in them?

- For many people, sympathetic stress activation is marked by muscle tension, elevated body temperature, increased heart and breathing rates, inhaling and exhaling primarily through the left nostril, and mental restlessness.

**Step 2: Change your breathing pattern to recover.** If you are experiencing stress, shifting your breathing pattern is a direct and effective way to recover. Breathe deeply into your belly and breathe out in a relaxed way, continuously and effortlessly increasing the length of each outbreath. By maintaining each outbreath for about twice as long as each inbreath, over a period of one to two minutes, you can switch your nervous system from activation to recovery. This change will be accompanied by a profound shift in your perception—broadening it and turning it away from negative thoughts.
in the right half of the brain, which is responsible for the relational and whole understanding of language (such as metaphor, poetry, and humor). It processes a lot of information in low resolution and identifies what to focus on. This quality contributes to emotional intelligence (people’s awareness of, and ability to manage, their own emotions and those of others), which is observable through such skills as nonreactivity (feeling one’s own and other people’s emotions without reacting to change them).

In the virtual workplace, attention tends to dominate over awareness. Many people experience remote work as being primarily task focused. For example, as they enter a video meeting, people typically do not have casual conversations or notice what colleagues are wearing. Because we are focused on effectiveness, we often lose our awareness of the bigger patterns of changes occurring around us. Indeed, numerous studies have found that remote work, while effective, imposes collaborative challenges—an observation that many of us can confirm.

To improve their grasp of the bigger picture of what they are working on and their collaborative skills, leaders need to stop overusing their attention and instead increase their emphasis on awareness, thereby integrating both halves of the brain. Awareness also helps them to be more aware of their own cognitive processes—and to avoid judging others or jumping to conclusions.

We can cultivate mental habits of awareness—feeling and seeing the whole—by pausing from work to look out the window, reflecting, consciously being aware, and moving our body. (See the sidebar “Shifting from Attention to Awareness.”)

At the end of the ten-week mindfulness programs, participants showed a measurable increase in acting with awareness and in nonreactivity, thereby enhancing emotional intelligence. (See Exhibit 3.)

**COGNITIVE CONNECTION AND EMPATHETIC PRESENCE**

Remote workers have numerous ways to connect—such as email, messaging apps, and video meetings. However, these con-
Nections are primarily cognitive, not empathically felt or experienced as if one is truly present. As a result, despite connecting on a cognitive basis, many employees actually feel disconnected from their purpose, their team, and their organization.

Genuinely being present with others—on an emotional level—is more difficult in a virtual environment than face-to-face in an office. For example, some of the mechanisms we use to tune into each other’s emotions (including touch and body language) are not available when working remotely. Moreover, because almost the entire workday is spent in front of a screen, many people have lost the sense of human presence—as well as the many collaborative benefits that flow from this. Indeed, BCG’s COVID-19 Employee Sentiment Survey found that employees who reported satisfaction with social connectivity with their colleagues while working remotely are two to three times more likely to have maintained or improved their productivity on collaborative tasks than those who are dissatisfied with their connections.

Leaders transmit presence when they are attentive and sensitive and when they connect emotionally with people around them. Although the concept of presence may seem mysterious, it works through well-known mechanisms. In essence, interpersonal presence is an interplay of several leadership qualities, including two we discussed earlier:

- Awareness—to notice and describe the emotional state of oneself and others
- Nonreactivity—to listen to others with the intention of truly understanding them and not with the intention of reacting or answering straight away
- Being nonjudgmental—so as to not automatically label other people’s emotions and experiences as good or bad
- Accurately describing emotional states—so as to make conscious what is unconscious (for example, precisely identifying and articulating a previously hidden challenge of team dynamics that triggered an emotional response in oneself)

Mindfulness training improves all elements of presence: As shown in Exhibit 3, it improves the ability to act with awareness and nonreactivity. We found that it also improves the abilities to be nonjudgmental and to describe emotional states. (See Exhibit 4.)

To cultivate presence, a leader needs to promote self-awareness of the body’s internal physical state (“interoception”). With self-awareness of one’s body, we improve our ability to get in touch with our own emotions. We also enhance our ability to discern what other people are feeling and to connect on an emotional level. This felt
sense of connection can be achieved virtually, but it requires conscious effort.

By taking a few minutes to “check in” at the start of virtual meetings, leaders can enhance the emotional presence of all team members. (See the sidebar “Promoting Presence Virtually.”)

**EXHIBIT 3 | Mindfulness Practice Enhances Awareness-Based Qualities**

Acting with awareness and nonreactivity as measured before and after a ten-week mindfulness program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Before mindfulness program</th>
<th>After mindfulness program</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acting with awareness</td>
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<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonreactivity</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Awaris and BCG study.

**Note:** The study measured acting with awareness and nonreactivity using the “Five Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire.” Participants responded to four questions that assess five facets of mindfulness (including the two shown above), using a scale of 1 to 5; mean scores are shown; n=172; all represented values are rounded, but the percentage calculation used data that was not rounded.

**EXHIBIT 4 | Mindfulness Practice Enhances Qualities of Presence**

Ability to describe emotional states and be nonjudgmental as measured before and after a ten-week mindfulness program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Before mindfulness program</th>
<th>After mindfulness program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to describe emotional states</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to be nonjudgmental</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Awaris and BCG study.

**Note:** The study measured ability to describe emotional states and nonjudgment of inner experience using the “Five Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire.” Participants responded to four questions that assess five facets of mindfulness (including the two shown above), using a scale of 1 to 5; mean scores are shown; n=172; all represented values are rounded, but the percentage calculation used data that was not rounded.
PROMOTING PRESENCE VIRTUALLY

Take these steps to promote presence, and effectiveness, in a virtual meeting:

**Step 1: Ask participants to connect with their feelings.** At the start of the meeting, invite the participants to pause for 30 to 60 seconds. Ask them to lengthen their outbreaths and check in on the current state of their mind and body.

**Step 2: Conduct a group check-in.** Ask each participant to share a short personal check-in with the group, describing how they feel.

**Step 3: Notice the changes.** At the end of the meeting, ask participants if the check-ins affected the quality or effectiveness of the meeting.

AT MANY COMPANIES, leaders have succeeded in making the virtual workplace effective. But effectiveness is not enough by itself—leaders must also promote deep connections with their teams. To sustain effectiveness and connections, leaders must be able to recover from stress, be aware of the bigger picture of their work, and be emotionally present for their teams. Our study’s findings indicate that mind-body practices have helped leaders enhance these qualities, even in the depths of the COVID-19 crisis. Those leaders who get in touch with their minds and bodies will be better able to help their company succeed during the pandemic and in any other crises that lie ahead.

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About Awaris
Awaris is a leadership development company that combines scientifically proven mindfulness-based interventions with mindset and behavioral changes in the context of complex environments. A major focus of Awaris’s work is the neurophysiological dimension of human behavior: Awaris seeks to deeply understand how humans function and what humans require to work well—individually and in groups. Awaris engages with clients in a variety of ways, including face-to-face training that applies blended learning formats, retreats, and train-the-trainer courses. The company also provides proprietary technology solutions to support leadership development, including self-developed mobile apps and a learning platform. Awaris is based in Germany and has a network of trainers in Asia, Europe, North America, and South America. It has subsidiaries in Austria, the Benelux region, China, France, and the UK.

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