

**Wisdom and mindfulness
as tools of organisational
practice at Google™**

Rich Fernandez

Rich Fernandez, Ph.D., Senior
People Development Lead, Google



Bronwen: *Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and your career before you arrived at Google?*

Rich: I'm trained as a psychologist, with a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology and a Master's degree in Organisational Psychology. I had always wanted to work within organisations on leadership and

Bronwen Rees interviews Rich Fernandez, Senior People Development Lead at Google on the relationship between wisdom and mindfulness, new technology and people development. Throughout this wide-ranging conversation, he shows how the insights from ancient wisdom traditions, when translated into a contemporary language and technological framework can both penetrate and shape a world-renowned company. According to him, we are at the cusp of a major shift, and this intersection between wisdom, technology and people can create space for clarity, insight and ethical decision-making.

learning, people development and organisational development, almost as long as I can remember. As a human development practitioner I've always been interested in how people can express their highest potential and excel. I started off in colleges and universities as a career counsellor and working in the personal counselling centres but that quickly transitioned to working within larger organisations, initially in the career development space. That means that that I would help employees in large organisations with everything from career advice and counselling to assessing their strengths and their skills, the way they fit or did not fit with certain roles, and how to realise their

goals, both near and mid and long-term. I also did quite a bit of coaching with managers and leaders so it became something of an executive coaching endeavour as well. I did this for over a decade in

financial services companies: JP Morgan Chase for eight years; and the Bank of America for a few years.

Then, I became very interested in the technology sector, and eventually went to eBay. I was there for almost four years, where I looked after what's called 'talent management,' which is helping develop the next generation of leaders, thinking about succession planning, succession management, performance management and high potential development. Key focus areas for that role include the assessment and development of leaders who demonstrate high potential and are emergent leaders within the organisation. I did that for a couple of years and then went on to lead the learning and organisation development team working with the executive staff there on everything from the learning and leadership agenda to organisation development and change, employee engagement, performance management, and the alignment of people, leadership and strategy.

My career continued to kind of grow and scale up to addressing the needs of leaders, moving up to more and more senior leaders and then addressing issues of large scale organisational culture and change. A couple of years ago I moved on to Google as Director of Executive Development and in my current role at Google I serve as People Development lead for our well-being programmes and content, focusing on employee well-being.

Bronwen: *So where and when did your interest in wisdom and mindfulness develop?*

Rich: I always had an interest in wisdom and mindfulness throughout my whole adult life and career. Since at least my university days, if not before, I had always been a close reader of eastern philosophy and practised aspects of it myself. My way in was through the martial arts, in particular Tai Chi and classical Shaolin Kung Fu in which I trained for many years and received a first degree black belt. I also actively practise meditation and yoga. So that's just been a through line for my whole adult life, a sort of foundational practice for me. It's how I understood myself in the world and what I use to anchor myself.

Bronwen: *How helpful have you found this in your working life?*

Rich: Wisdom and mindfulness have always been personal practices, as a core way in which I connect myself in the world. But it's also what you might call a sort of 'practised well-being' since I always found it to be extremely grounding and just very helpful in many different domains of life. Calmness and mental clarity, better decision making,

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enhanced creativity, greater emotional intelligence and emotional regulation all flow directly from consistent mindfulness practice.

About four or five years ago, I chanced upon a forum called Wisdom 2.0. This was a conference where technology leaders (that is founders of technology companies) and people who were deeply interested in technology were coming together with meditation teachers such as Jon Kabat-Zinn, Jack Kornfield and Joan Halifax, and neuroscientists

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to have a very robust discussion about how to live with meaning, wisdom, purpose and compassion in a technological age. That was really a kind of an epiphany for me because I realised, that what I had been experiencing and interpreting as personal pursuit was in fact much more broad than that – it represented a sort of a cultural shift broadly as within organisations. Ever since I’ve been integrating mindfulness practices with organisational practice, with leadership, with learning, towards a vision of the way we understand change and human dynamics within organisations.

Bronwen: *Had you been making those connections implicitly before?*

Rich: I would say I had been doing them implicitly, yes, and non-consciously. People would always say, ‘Well, you’re so calm, you have such great energy’, and I didn’t really pay much attention to that other than say ‘Thank you,’ and ‘Yeah, I try to take care of myself.’

So what I started doing was just integrating these practices consciously into my work with leaders and teams at eBay. I started bringing in some of the teachers to the workplace and what I found was there was huge appetite for it amongst the employees. The first was Michael Carroll, a very senior meditation teacher, who wrote *The Mindful Leader* and *Awake at Work*, which integrated mindfulness and meditation principles in working life. I remember on this first occasion sitting in the courtyard having lunch at our eBay campus and saying, ‘Look Michael, I so appreciate you coming out here (he had flown across the US from his home in Philadelphia to join us in Silicon Valley). I don’t know how this is going to go. I’m hoping we get 20 or 30 people who will be really engaged but I really don’t know, we could get 50.’ Well, Bronwen, we had 200 people show up that day. That was a very unusual thing – it was the middle of the week and the middle of the work day (i.e. right after lunch). People stayed for 90 minutes, in which they learned about and practised meditation, and discussed all sorts of wisdom-related topics of personal import to them.

Bronwen: *That must have been quite an experience.*

Rich: This was a Tuesday afternoon in Silicon Valley at about one o'clock and one of the first things Michael did was to have 10 minutes of silence. 10 whole minutes of silence; a room of 200 technology employees in Silicon Valley at one o'clock on a Tuesday sat in silence. That was really something different. So it continued from there, I invited different teachers and began to hold programmes. The biggest one we had was a sports psychologist and meditation teacher named George Mumford, who taught Zen meditation to professional athletes, most notably to Phil Jackson and Michael Jordan of the Chicago Bulls, to the LA Lakers with Kobe Bryant and Shaquille O'Neal. He has also taught it to Premier League soccer players, and to Olympians. He came and he taught how to use mindfulness to cultivate excellence. Over 450 employees came to that one. It was an extraordinary experience.

Bronwen: *So what do you think, from your own experience of meditation, was happening?*

Rich: I would say that we created a space for people to reflect, to pause, and to exercise some deep inquiry into some of their core motivations, values and ways of being. I felt like we were tapping something deep and important and the more I looked into it the more I found that there was tons of neuropsychological science to substantiate the efficacy and positive benefits of these practices. So I continued on and I started speaking about it quite publicly in conferences.

It was then that Google became interested in my work. They were interested in my background certainly and then also that I was an innovative thinker in this space. So they invited me to come and meet with them and offered me a job which was to be the Director of Executive Development with responsibility for the Executive Education platform at Google.

So I did that for about a year and a half and then a final piece began to fall into place when I realised that I was spending a lot of time focused on the leadership agenda and mindfulness. It was becoming more and more obvious that there was a big intersection there. My deepest interest lay in the pure practice of wisdom and mindfulness and in the teaching of this, and so my role evolved to focus more on the well-being, wisdom and mindfulness agenda at Google.

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I have a personal vision statement that I've been using for the past five years or so as a decision rule for practically every decision I make and to guide me in my endeavours. That personal vision statement is: 'The full integration of consciousness in all domains of life.'

So whether that be within yourself, in your family, at home, in your community, at work, amongst your friends, wherever and whoever

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I am with, that is the aspiration. Most importantly, I knew that however much I wanted to facilitate this with others, I had to practise that first for myself, and then to teach and to write about it in terms of my work. That's how I organised myself and so there was an opportunity here at Google really to focus on the wisdom and mindfulness agenda in a robust way because there was appetite for it. So I took on a new role of People Development with lead for our well-being programmes and content, focusing on employee well-being.

This was not an uphill battle by the way. Since then we have developed quite a robust set of mindfulness practices and wisdom practices that we offer broadly. For example, my colleague with whom I share an office is Chade-Meng Tan who wrote the book *Search Inside Yourself*, just released this year. He was an early Google engineer, and he developed a mindfulness based emotional intelligence course.

Bronwen: *So what does this course look like?*

Rich: It's a seven-week course, meeting once a week including one full day at a meditation retreat. It's a mindfulness-based emotional intelligence programme. He is a close colleague and collaborator and it's probably the most well-known programme within Google. We offer other mindfulness programmes as well such as mindfulness-based stress reduction and then we also offer some home grown ones that were developed by Google employees and run by them. Further, there is a video conference meditation group which we call 'meditation hangouts'. We have rooms set aside just specifically for meditation and/or prayer, just as the same way we have mothers' rooms specifically for nursing mothers. There are also the more informal weekly meditation meetings for mindfulness practice that are run by employees for employees. Every week we have many of those in many locations and they range anywhere from 10 minutes to 30 minutes. We even have two engineers who developed their own mindfulness programmes, one is called Neural Self Hacking and the other is called

The Software Engineering of the Mind. We have wellness centres where people can also go for yoga, massage or meditation.

I've also continued the practice of introducing senior meditation teachers to Google. You may be able to see on the wall behind me at my office a photo of Thich Nhat Hahn who visited here. Next to him is Eckhart Tolle whom I personally invited to spend a day here giving a seminar for senior leaders and a public talk to all employees.

So it's an organisation that culturally is very open to mindfulness and wisdom practices.

Bronwen: *How many employees do you have and what sort of percentage of them take this up would you say?*

Rich: Percentage wise we have over 35,000 employees, which does not include our large subsidiary area in Motorola Mobility which is another 17,000. Over 4,000 employees have taken some form of mindfulness or wisdom or well-being related programme to date.

Bronwen: *So there's no problem in filling them?*

Rich: We have long, long waiting lists.

Bronwen: *That shows a real shift in the zeitgeist, because I started a research programme in Europe in 2002 with a team of meditators and therapists trying to do this and we had little success. But clearly it would also depend on the type of company in which you are working. You've obviously tapped into a really rich vein where you are – but maybe you are creating this at the same time?*

Rich: One thing to know about Google is that it is really high performance culture. In other words we have a very robust performance management system. So the expectations are great and then at Google we also aspire to do world-changing things. So wisdom and mindfulness provide some strategies and tools that equip us to be able to sustain that level of performance.

Bronwen: *I'm interested in that because mindfulness is also introduced into all sorts of different contexts isn't it? I've been working with the connection between mindfulness and ethics in organisations, but if the ethics of the company are not aligned with practices of mindfulness, then do you think they can work?*

Rich: Well, you know, there's this expression that we always use in the learning environment within organisations. You can imagine trying in

my profession, in this hardcore, high performance environment, to sell the notion of ‘learning’ – you could easily get brushed off. We have this principle that we call ‘WIIFM’ which stands for ‘What’s In It For Me’ and that’s often the approach you have to take. So rather than, for example, saying we’re creating a mindfulness-based stress reduction course, even if people are interested in it, they might be put off because it’s about fixing stress, and they might not like to acknowledge this to themselves. People in high performance organisations like to think of themselves as high functioning and that’s their self-concept and so anything to accelerate that is going to be what’s going to be attractive to them. So for example instead of a mindfulness course we might call

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this ‘achieving peak performance’ or ‘optimising productivity through mindfulness practice’. The WIIFM concept is really critical because it’s not for the sake of an abstract concept like managing stress or enhancing mindfulness, even of ethics, that people come. They need to see how these practices really relate to day-to-day life or organisational performance. To bring it back to earth, you really have to operate on the principle of WIIFM – what’s in it for me, what’s in it for them.

So a top-down approach to the link between mindfulness and ethics might be difficult – saying that exercising mindfulness means we will have better ethics is a top-down view. So we might say something along the lines that, ‘Mindfulness enables clarity of insight and better decision making’. Then you don’t mention the word ethics within that, but it actually gives employees a little bit more of an incentive to want to engage in the practice and – surprise, surprise, one of the great outcomes as we know with meditation is that it leads to great compassion which in itself leads to ethical action. In the same way, saying, ‘Hey, let’s practise mindfulness so we can develop greater compassion’ would probably not persuade people to engage either. Of course ethics and compassion are good things, but talking in this way is too abstract, sounds preachy and what we call ‘woo-woo’ (a technical term!) and hard for people to get their head around.

Bronwen: *From its Buddhist tradition there is a direct connection between ethics and meditation isn’t there? So do you see mindfulness as a collective transformative mechanism?*

Rich: Yes. I certainly believe that, but again I don’t necessarily go in with that as a selling point because it doesn’t sell very well; it’s not hugely

marketable right? Meditation, mindfulness, wisdom practices and tradition all currently have a marketing problem in our contemporary context. Who wants to sit on a cushion for hours at a time to meditate? It's just unappealing at a conceptual level. Also the moralistic calls for practice, such as: 'Let's all meditate so we can transform society' – these make it unappealing for people to take up these practices. Much of the work is reframing things using science and contemporary, pragmatic paradigms for why these practices will be of benefit to people should they choose to practise them.

And of course, the deep insights from the Buddhist and the Eastern literature and philosophy and history on these connections are at least 2,000 years old and so the core principles, the core truths that they speak to are going to be timeless and are still relevant. However there are rubrics, language and frameworks used by these traditions that are not relevant. Perhaps relevant is not the right word – that aren't resonant today. I'll give you an example, acupuncture, that's been around for thousands of years, but who today really wants to get accurately punctured? I think it's bad marketing.

Bronwen: *I'll tell that to my acupuncturist.*

Rich: Come on, can't we come up with better language and framing for these very valuable practices these days? I mean we are in the information age, we're good at this stuff. So here's an example that I like to talk about to bring it to the modern day. We have the knowledge graph – that's what Google has created; we have the social graph, that's social networking like Facebook and Twitter; we have the interest graph with things like Pinterest or Quora. What about the wisdom graph? What does that mean and where does it exist and how can we integrate it?

Where do we go for our wisdom practices, our mindfulness practices? How do we connect in the digital age? Take Eckhart Tolle, one of our great wisdom teachers – I actually get a lot of his teachings via media quite frankly. I've downloaded many of his books and listen to them on my car ride. I watch Eckhart Tolle TV when he has webcasts. I've also spent time with the man personally, but more of my interactions with him have been through media, digital media. The Buddhists didn't have anything to say about that.

Bronwen: *No, well, I suppose the message will penetrate subliminally some way or another.*

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Rich: Well not even subliminally, I think it's a different form of practice these days. It's contemporary, using a different language and technology that's equally as valid in some ways. Obviously, however, it depends how you do it and there's easy ways to derail using it, simply because of the distractions of being at the computer. At the same time I've had some very deep meditations using media. The Guided Meditation CD is a great example – think of all the technology it takes to get that voice recorded, preserved, easily accessible to you – it will involve lasers and robotics – a lot of sophisticated technology. There's a place for all of this and that has up till now not been really very much a part of the conversation around mindfulness and that's why it's important to continue the enquiry there as well. The universal truths that were developed thousands of years ago are as timeless and true and profound as ever but there is a new evolution happening and the question is how we arrive at mindfulness and wisdom in the context of our contemporary age.

It's just the arc of history, isn't it, Bronwen? Incidentally, the Buddhists didn't invent meditation, it came from the Vedas, but the Vedic practice was confined to high born priests' class – it was only the Brahmins who practised meditation. The Buddha did us all a good favour of popularising it and saying 'No, actually anybody is capable of enlightenment, not just the high priests.' So a shift happened a thousand or two thousand years after the Vedas first articulated the benefits of mindfulness and meditation and now I think another shift is happening.

Bronwen: *The philosopher Jaspers also recognised the importance of what was happening around 2500 years ago in the evolution of human consciousness. He called this period the 'Axial Age'. This was deemed to be a time of a whole spiritual awakening, within great social and political upheaval, not unlike what we are experiencing now. Great spiritual masters such as the Buddha, Socrates and Confucius from different corners of the world all articulated new ways of being in the world, and with it came the emergence of reflexive consciousness which was an ability to reflect on the self as a separate and responsible identity.*

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Rich: Yes, and I think this is such a time as well, because of the unparalleled connectivity, science and insight that we have. I think that's why you're seeing the popularity of things like mindfulness at a place like Google. Quite simply, the way I position it when I talk about it is that we have an evidence-based form of mental conditioning that promotes well-being,

calmness, clarity, insight, innovation, well-being, compassion. There's lots of science now that irrefutably says this is beneficial on multiple fronts. Whether they be time trials or randomised control studies or MRI brain imaging, brainwaves studies – there's just instance after instance of evidence for this.

Bronwen: *So do you feel that, as many commentators talk about, we are moving to an evolution of consciousness?*

Rich: Yes, I strongly believe that we are. I think we're taking an evolutionary leap which parallels the evolutionary leap we're taking in technology and global connectivity. This is apparent through a growth in the critical mass of population and in terms of our interdependencies globally. Clearly, monumental shifts are happening.

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Bronwen: *Would Google perceive itself as a conscious part of that shift?*

Rich: Well I would say that, to use the words of our CEO and founder Larry Page, we have a healthy disregard for the impossible. We believe we can change the world and we show up to work every day with that intent.

Bronwen: *So that's why it works then isn't it?*

Rich: I suppose so. The discipline that many come from and the approach many take is that we're solving the big, big computing, technology, scientific problems. Whether it be self-driving cars or translations or wearable computing, collaboration tools, even hardware these days. With regard to wisdom and mindfulness, I think that we are working to optimise our inner technologies!

Bronwen: *Part of this issue of Interconnections examines the crisis in capitalism since this will be a theme at the Academy of Management this year. Do you see this happening?*

Rich: I don't know that it's at a fail point, if you understand crisis to mean that. If you use crisis just to mean opportunity then I would say that it is along the lines of recalibrating our understanding of our interconnections and interdependencies and our ways of being with ourselves and with each other. So I would see this calibration as one part of an evolutionary shift.

Bronwen: *So if we are talking about conscious evolution, about creating new energy, and this happening through transformations in our workplaces, would you say this has to come from the top-down?*

Rich: Yes and no. Remember some of the programmes are led by employees and they're the ones who show up. I did not introduce these programmes on the authority from our top leaders, I did it because I just thought it would be cool and I preferred to ask for forgiveness rather than permission. I was a senior director at the time when I did that so I did have some degree of decision latitude but I wouldn't say it was top-down mandates from the most senior leaders, I think it's actually much more organic than that. Wisdom resides in each person and often seeks opportunities to emerge. Creating the right conditions for it to emerge is currently not just the role of the individual, but part of the growing of a community and even an organisation. Creating the conditions for wisdom to emerge in our communities and places of work and integrating the practices that promote this emergence represents the evolutionary leap we are currently experiencing.

Reference

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Bronwen: *Thank you so much for your time, and fascinating insights.*

