



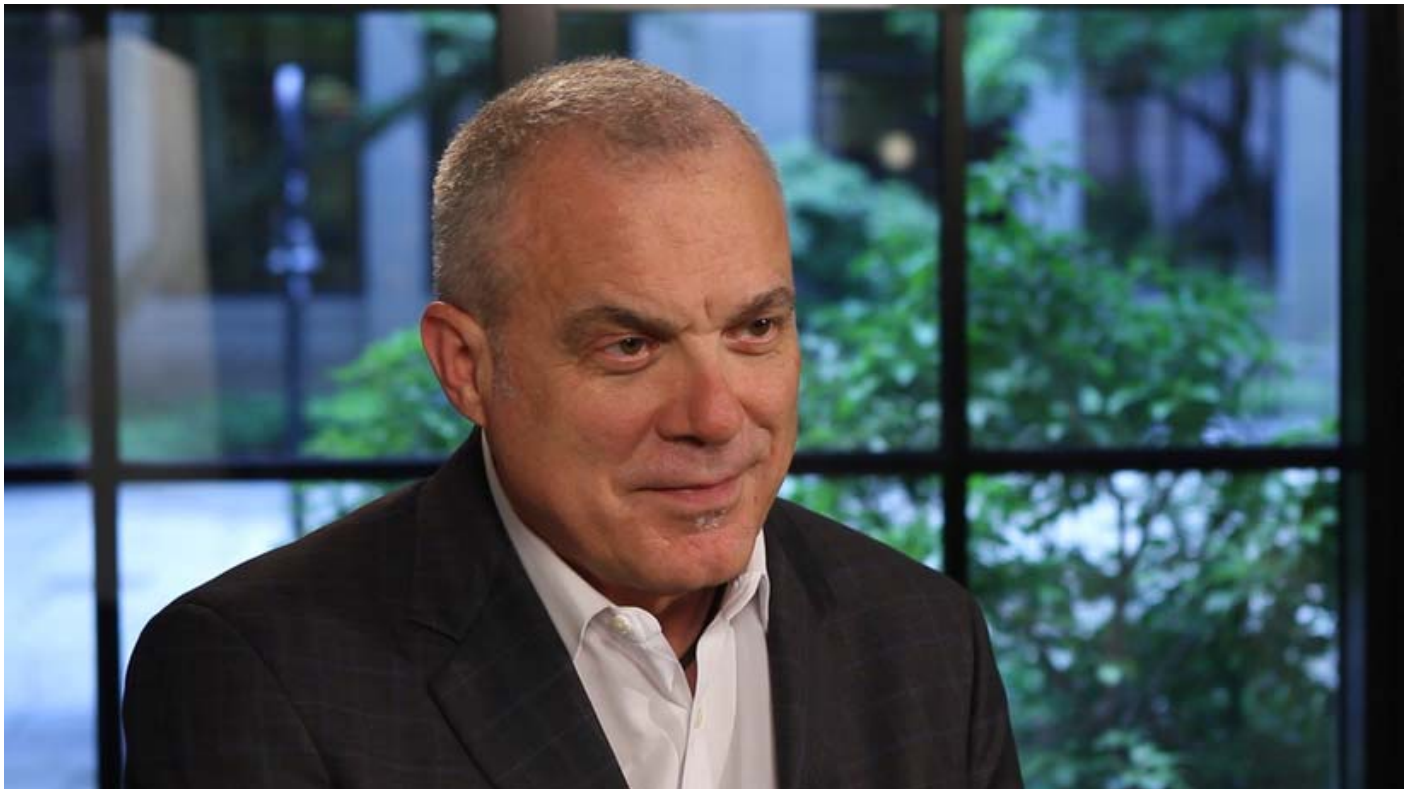
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HUFFPOST

## Mindfulness Is Aetna CEO's Prescription for Success

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Mark Bertolini certainly knows what a bad day looks like. The Aetna CEO has overcome two life altering crises: his son's diagnosis and subsequent miraculous

recovery from a rare form of cancer and his own near death experience from a ski accident that left him in severe chronic pain.

In dealing with these medical tragedies Bertolini has, at times, experienced the ups and downs of the health care system. He brings those experiences with him in leading Aetna's 49,000 employees with his unique sense of mindfulness and empathy.

He understands the challenges people face when they have to rely on a broken health care system, and he's focused on improving the system so others won't ever experience what he knew during those exasperating years. Bertolini became CEO of Aetna in 2010 and Chairman in 2011, a path that surprises even him. It was never his goal to lead a Fortune 50 company, but this position, like many other things in his life, seems almost like divine intervention.

Bertolini first tried mindfulness and eastern wellness philosophies when he was at his wit's end recovering from his 2004 ski accident. "I was in terrible pain and taking seven different narcotics," Bertolini said. "I didn't see hope continuing life that way. Someone suggested craniosacral therapy."

He was skeptical but desperate, a combination that leads many on their initial path into alternative therapies. It was that open-mindedness that turned out to be the gateway to healing his body...and his mind. He began to try other alternative healing options like acupuncture, yoga and meditation. He says, "Within several months, I was feeling really good and was able to get off all my pain meds." He never looked back and mindfulness is now at the core of who he is.

Before he began craniosacral massage therapy, the only time he'd seen alternative or complementary therapy was when his son Eric was in the hospital and received Reiki (a Japanese technique for healing through energy work). The Reiki therapist asked Bertolini if he'd like to try it. He did, but says, "It actually bothered me." He was completely unfamiliar with any alternative methods of healing and had never even had a massage.

Craniosacral therapy proved to be Bertolini's gateway into the realm of mindfulness and other forms of care. Next up, he tried acupuncture, yoga and meditation, which he found benefited him personally. He felt the need to share this knowledge and experience with Aetna employees, and the resulting programs have had positive

effects both on the health of employees *and* the soaring value of the stock. Since Bertolini has been at the helm, Aetna's stock price has multiplied more than six times.

Soon after becoming CEO, Bertolini began Aetna's mindfulness-based wellness programs with a study. He says, "We measured heart rate variability to establish stress levels for approximately 250 employees. We put them into quintiles and the highest quintile of stress was spending upwards of \$2,000 a year more on health care costs than the average. We invested in 12 weeks of yoga and mindfulness training in a set of practices established with eMindful and Gary Kraftsow of the American Viniyoga Institute. At the end of that study we saw dramatic drops in heart rate variability and an increase in presenteeism and productivity. The employee's journals were the most compelling part; they led us on our discovery to see exactly what factors were causing high stress levels."

The study and journals showed that stressors for employees focused mainly on their pay and benefits. To address this issue, in 2015 Aetna raised the minimum wage for its employees, increasing wages for more than 5,700 employees, while enhancing health benefits for thousands of employees at the same time. Bertolini says, "We decided that we needed to raise our minimum wage from \$12 to \$16 hour and we saw that this change directly impacted their health benefits. So, we agreed to erase that health benefits cost if they agreed to take care of themselves through company programs and health initiatives. We call this the Aetna Social Compact."

They also learned that those stressors were causing anxiety and lack of sleep. Bertolini is an advocate of a good night's sleep and wanted to show the importance of getting at least 7 hours of sleep per night. His goal was to take away their financial worries with the new hourly rate, so Aetna began incentivizing employees to sleep better. For every 20 nights that employees slept those 7 hours, they would receive \$25, and could receive up to \$300 over the course of the year for this incentive. The program was completely voluntary and on the honor system, and more than 15,000 employees have taken advantage of this incentive over the past three years.

### ***The Value of Investing in Good Health***

Bertolini says, "It's critical to invest in the human machine in trying to eliminate stressors to build resiliency. In our world, the only thing that's going to happen with

change is that it's going to get faster and the organizations that have capable people need to have them be resilient in order to be able to make it and change, adapt and move forward. Part of creating change in an organization is creating this resiliency."

Recently, Aetna built a Mindfulness Center at their corporate headquarters in Hartford, Connecticut, because they wanted to have a place for people to practice mindfulness inside the building. They even have some pet therapy, where pet therapists come in with animals and employees line up to spend time with the pets. But Bertolini notes that while the center is new, Aetna has had a Chief Mindfulness Officer (Andy Lee) for more than three years. Lee's focus is to continue to enhance the mindfulness programs for Aetna employees, while also promoting the use of mindfulness programs among Aetna's customers.

"What makes this all work was not *my* ideas; these were indicators from the study and the journals," Bertolini said "But I kicked it off and gave the organization permission to invest in each other and create resiliency and build a mission-oriented business around people, planet and profits - in that order."

### ***Letting Go***

When asked about work/life balance for a high profile CEO, Bertolini says, "Corporations today are social ecosystems and require us to be in those ecosystems. The lines between work and personal lives really don't exist today. You need to spend your time where you need to spend the time and be fully present wherever that is." He adds that his mindfulness practice has helped him realize a couple important things:

1. The journey is really an internal one and everything that exists and needs to exist is inside.
2. Meditation is really a practice of losing attachment. Most people think that when you sit in meditation you have this darkness that engulfs you and you have to go to this place to get enlightened. Yet for people who feel that they can't quiet their mind, that's exactly what the whole exercise is about. The constant thoughts coming in are things you're attached to; so by recognizing these thoughts that come in and giving them the appropriate amount of introspection and interest and then letting go you begin the practice of losing attachment. If you do it enough, those things tend to go

away because they're not important anymore. By letting go to attachment, we can be present, clear minded and live life to the fullest both at work and at play.

### ***Being Present & Listening***

Bertolini has significantly improved his ability to be present and when asked about common problems that entrepreneurs face, Bertolini says, “ It’s difficult for entrepreneurs to give up of the attachment to their original idea, which doesn’t allow them to be present, to learn or think about what’s next because they are so wrapped up in their original idea.”

Bertolini says that being present is critical and allows him to “take in the reality of the world around me and process information where my work becomes better for that knowledge, then I can make my idea better and move it forward. If you look at really successful entrepreneurs, they’ve looked at the market, listened to it, reacted to it. They are focused and present enough to understand. With so many things going on, whether in a small or large organization you can get frozen by attempting to process it all instead of being present, listening and focusing on what really matters.”

### ***The Power of Even Just a Few Deep Breaths:***

Bertolini still suffers from neuropathic pain in his left arm. Since long-form meditation isn’t always an option, he can tap into a meditative state quickly, even in just a few deep, well intentioned breaths.

He says, “I still have intense pain from my left ear to left fingertips most of the day, but when it becomes a distraction I can take one deep breath and much like prana (Sanskrit word for breath, life force), pull the pain up, then exhale a breath out while pushing the pain out. One more breathe in and then out releases the pain. That’s my personal technique, realizing that by being present and understanding that my pain is actually not in my arm, it’s in my spine looking for feedback from my arm. It’s actually conditioning my arm to be painful in order to protect it. When I realize that and use breath in a way to push my pain out, I can eliminate the vast majority of the discomfort.”

### ***Mindful Collaborations***

It's easy to see the evolution of Bertolini's mindfulness in his leadership style, and the gifts of collaboration that have been built as a result. He says, "This is why being present is so important. In retrospect, things we've done seem like they fit into this beautifully constructed and thoroughly thought out plan when actually none of it happened that way." Other CEOs – including those that Bertolini meets with as part of his participation with the Center for Higher Ambition Leadership - have asked him who helped Aetna with some of the company's well-aligned collaborations, such as with Meals on Wheels. Bertolini responded and chuckled that it wasn't a grand plan, but rather the beauty of listening and being present.

Ellie Hollander, CEO of Meals on Wheels, heard one of Bertolini's speeches and approached him saying that she could help his efforts. Bertolini took her up on that immediately and Aetna made a significant financial investment to help Meals on Wheels leverage technology for their volunteers to look at mobility, senility, access to food and water, safety and other issues. "If the Meals on Wheels recipient is an Aetna member and they've given permission, Aetna can contact them and help take care of their problem," Bertolini says. "It's not just about the meals, it's about the social interaction and other nonclinical needs people have." Meals on Wheels serves 2 million people in homes 4-5 days a week, which can provide a lot of valuable feedback Aetna can use in order to better serve their members.

This is just one example, as Aetna and the Aetna Foundation support hundreds of nonprofits across the country that focus on nutrition and exercise. One other form of listening that Bertolini does well is on Twitter. Although his daughter, who is a social media professional, told him not to do it, he went ahead and opened a personal account. She then offered him sage advice that he takes to heart. He says, "She taught me to utilize the platform for listening and then chiming in where I can make a difference; emphasizing that it's not a place to argue. So in order to do that well, you have to have an ethical center that says I should engage here and be helpful." As most who are active on Twitter can attest, Bertolini adds, "There's no way to explain and make everything right, so I have to let some of it go by knowing where I can make a difference."

So, while Bertolini knows what a bad day looks like, he also knows what great days look like, and he empowers himself to live in that space while encouraging others to consider doing the same. His mindfulness fuels his drive to keep people healthy while

fixing the broken system. This is the type of leadership that can make a real shift in the business sector; whether in small companies or big enterprise.

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