

Search Inside Yourself:

How Google Brought Mindfulness & Emotional Intelligence to the Forefront.

By Tiffany Missiha

I am a rational person; I feel a lot, but I am also very rational. I want (maybe even need) to understand the why, the how, the purpose of something to really ‘get it’, believe it, buy into it, and most importantly, do it. Mindfulness has always been one of those things where intuitively I understood the ‘why’, but still had trouble understanding the ‘how’, or potentially believing in the ‘how’. If you’ve read my previous piece about Culture Change, you might know by now that I am not one for buzzwords. I like to break things apart, chew them up, throw them around, and then put them back together in a way that makes sense to me. This is what I’ve done for mindfulness and emotional intelligence... with a little help from a Jolly Good Fellow (which nobody can deny).

No seriously, Jolly Good Fellow (which nobody can deny), also known as Chade-Meng Tan, an ex-Software Engineer now-Emotional Intelligence guru, is the leader of the Search Inside Yourself personal development programme at Google. On the 24th of April, Tan addressed a room of 650 people congregated in London to hear him speak of his work. And yes, that really is his job title!



Chade-Meng arguably does live up to his official role title: an undeniably jolly fellow with a smile plastered from ear to ear, a light energy both physically and in his speech, with a grounded certainty and belief in his work. Chade-Meng tells us that engineers at Google get one day per week where they can ‘do whatever we want’. I get it: creating the time and space for creativity and passion. That is where the best innovation and outcomes happen. Chade-Meng decided to use this gift of free time to write a book about Emotional Intelligence (EI) titled ‘Search Inside Yourself’.

He starts by telling us an interesting point about emotions; we tend to believe that emotions dominate and take control over our rational minds. But with practice and habit, we can become masters of our emotions. In the same way that horses are powerful creatures that can knock us to the ground, with skill and practice we can become masterful riders that in effect are in control of our horses.

Tan defines EI as a collection of emotional skills. And therefore EI is trainable (*not learnable*). In the same way learning about physical activity doesn’t actually make you physically fit, learning about EI doesn’t make us any more emotional intelligent. By *doing*, we train our malleable and plastic brains to function differently. What we think, do, and pay attention to changes the structure and functioning of our brains.

How to train Emotional Intelligence:

1. Attention Training- being able to calm the mind *on demand*.

Tan says that attention training creates the ability to access the space, or moment, between stimulus and response, leading to more choices being available to us and therefore more control over our responses.

With increasingly high pressures, little time, and constant demands pulling you left, right and centre, having the ability to be calm on demand allows for better decision making once you have gained that space and clarity to be and think. Not to mention a calmer mind means less perceived stress and worry, and therefore lower cortisol, better health, and fewer sick days.

Tan says that to train your attention you must learn to practice mindfulness, ‘to pay attention, in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally’ (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). So what? We hear it all the time and it sounds like a ‘nice’ but hard thing to do. Tan shares an interesting analogy to offer some perspective: when we train for physical fitness, we lift weights, which over time builds strength and we end up doing things we could never do before. A bicep curl in itself won’t do much at all - it is just a movement. What makes it effective is repetition, practice, and consistency. Mindfulness works in the same way. Every time you bring your attention back to some point of focus, you are doing another bicep curl. Eventually, with time and practice, you gain mastery and strength over your attention, allowing you to better calm the mind on demand. Both examples show how simple acts can lead to successful outcomes.

2. Self-Knowledge and Self-Mastery

Tan argues that we gain self-knowledge and self-mastery by ‘seeing emotions in high resolution’, that is, when we are attuned to emotions as they arise in real time, and when they change and shift. Through this we can develop emotional awareness which helps us to make more accurate self-assessments of our emotional experiences and therefore our lives and state of being as a whole.

What I found most interesting was this: Tan differentiates between emotions existentially vs. experientially. “I am angry” is a state of existential being. “I am experiencing anger” is a physiological experience. He shares a good metaphor: emotions are clouds in the sky- they are fundamentally *not* the sky. As such, emotions can cloud us and create a lack of clarity. In this same vein, we *are not* our feelings, nor are we our thoughts. We *experience* feelings and *have* thoughts. How liberating is it to realise that our human spirit can dissociate from the tyranny of our thoughts and emotions, should we ever chose? Emotional resolution helps increase self-mastery to shift from *being* an emotion to *experiencing* an emotion. It is through this dissociation from emotion that we can gain more clarity and space to make better choices both in life and at work.



3. Create Useful Mental Habits

Tan asks us to do a simple task: in silence, find a person in the room who you don’t know and think to yourself ‘I wish for him/her to be happy’. Admittedly, I probably did a little eye rolling at first, but then did it. And noticed afterwards that the corners of my mouth started to lift. Tan says that a simple habit develops into our character, and our character defines us. By doing simple acts consistently, they come habitual; giving kindness creates a kind character. Giving kindness nurtures relationships. Nurtured relationships are more effective and have more potential in enabling better team performance.

Tan draws his talk to a conclusion with a bold statement. He says that in one or two generations we will solve the problem of world peace through mindfulness and emotional intelligence. He tells the fascinating story about how physical fitness came to be- starting from a few passionately interested students and researchers many moons ago studying in a small lab at Harvard to what is now a world-wide revolution. Everybody wants to be physically fit, and now we know what it takes, we know why it’s good for us, and it’s achievable. He argues in the same way that emotional intelligence and mindfulness, in one or two generations, will become the norm. Leadership success will be attributed to mindfulness and EI; with the ability to control and calm the mind on demand and to master one’s emotions, to cope better with stress, lead better, make better decisions, and be inspirational. We cannot ignore the benefits of calming our mind on demand, of creating space for more choice, of recognizing that we *are not* our feelings or emotions. **How liberating is it to know that with practice, this is possible?**

