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Meditation leader Sandy Behnken led a Mindfulness session for General Mills employees.

Elizabeth Flores, Star Tribune

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Marturano was a senior leader in General Mills' law department when she discovered mindfulness. In the early 2000s, she was working on General Mills' mega-buyout of crosstown rival Pillsbury. "The deal from hell," she said. "It ended up being far more complex and took much longer to do than expected."

While Marturano was working on it, her mother and father died.

"I'm not a new-agey person," she said. "I'm Italian and from New Jersey and I went to law school in New York and wanted to be involved in corporate deals." But something seemed lost, something seemed missing.

So, she went on an executive retreat, six days at an Arizona resort to learn the meditation techniques of Jon Kabat-Zinn, now a professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts' medical school. He dubbed his approach "mindfulness."

For Marturano, it was an awakening.

While she would eventually become a certified mindfulness teacher through U-Mass, at first she was a "closet meditator," telling no one at General Mills. Then she began to spread the word. Mindfulness could be a tool for the company's leaders — and eventually all employees — to clarify their thinking, increasing personal fulfillment and workplace productivity.

General Mills gave her the green light to set up a program in 2006. Marturano retired in 2011 to take the corporate meditation message further with the Institute for Mindful Leadership, a New Jersey-based nonprofit she created in 2010 that provides training to companies and their employees. She still does some training at General Mills.

The company's mindfulness program is voluntary, and it has trained 500 employees and 90 senior leaders. Its offerings vary. There's a four-day retreat for officers, directors and senior managers; two-day training for new managers; and a two-hour class for seven consecutive weeks, which is open to all employees. Then there are weekly meditation sessions such as the one Behnken led last Tuesday.

She's a 22-year General Mills veteran who works in "continuous improvement," which looks for ways to eliminate waste and improve corporate efficiency. She undertook mindfulness training about four years ago and is now a regular meditation practitioner. "We talk about the brain as a muscle," she said, "and this is how you exercise your brain."

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