



**Leader Spotlight**

**Janey Piroli**

*with* **GLAIN ROBERTS-McCABE**



# Janey Piroli

with Glain Roberts-McCabe



*For this month's Leader Spotlight, Glain sits down with long-standing client and now team member, Janey Piroli. Janey recently left her corporate career at PepsiCo to dedicate herself more fully to leadership coaching and to her efforts to bring mindfulness skills into the leadership mainstream. Janey shares the journey that brought her to this transition, why she sees mindfulness as so important to leaders today and some tips on how to get started with this practice.*

**GRM** Janey, you've had a long-standing career in the corporate world, and you've recently made a transition into something new. Tell us about what you are doing now.

**JP** This past year, I made a decision to transition from my corporate career to that of a leadership coach. As part of my transition, I enrolled in the Engage program offered at the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute (SIYLI). This is a non-profit organization created by Google after they experienced their own success launching the Search Inside Yourself program. My desire is to support the effort to bring these skills into the mainstream. They are life skills that we were never taught in school. They are practices that have been around for thousands of years and now, with innovations in neuroscience and technology, we have the research and results to prove their effectiveness.

**GRM** Tell us a bit about your corporate career path leading up to this transition, and what led you to discover mindfulness as a strategy.

**JP** I spent 19 years at PepsiCo, and six years as the Director of Organizational Development, where it was a key aspect of my role to help coach leaders on the behavioural strategies they could put in place to be more effective in their leadership roles.

As I was debriefing leaders on the results of their 360 feedback, or reviewing the deeper details of their personality profiles, the discussion would inevitably take us to the impact of their "derailing" behaviours and what they could do to better manage themselves through these challenging times. There were also many times in those conversations where I thought, "Oh, God, me too!" You see, I had my own derailers to contend with (in fact, we all do). There is a mindfulness practice called "just like me." It involves having a mindset that acknowledges and appreciates that the people you are interacting with have had their ups and downs, triumphs and tears, celebrations and disappointments... "just like me." This is how I often felt.

Then, about seven years ago, when PepsiCo Canada was experiencing an organizational restructure, as we integrated the Frito-Lay Canada and Quaker businesses, derailing behaviours were popping up everywhere and I was not an exception. It was a challenging and difficult time for our HR team given that we were leading the change management charge and going through restructuring ourselves.

Through my career, I was known to most as being a positive, energetic, and lively leader. Unfortunately, I was not granted the gift of a poker face and so it was difficult for me to hide my concern on days when I struggled with my workload, questioned decisions being made, or disagreed with the direction in which the business was heading. What made it more challenging was that I often experienced a physiological reaction. At an extreme, I would feel the temperature rise from my legs up to my shoulders, my heart would begin to race, my thoughts became unclear and my words a bit shaky. I tried my best to suppress my emotions, bury my feelings, hide it all away. Unfortunately, that never worked. (It was about as effective as trying to suppress a geyser on the verge of erupting). I felt disappointed that in my personal life, I had overcome so many challenges and that “resilience” should have been my middle name. Yet here I was in my performance review being told that I needed to develop a higher level of resilience because of the way my “behavior” was being received by others.

Fortunately, I had an Executive Coach who worked with me on my coping strategies. This was the first time it was suggested that I try the simple act of “breathing.” So simple and effective, yet I didn’t really understand it back then.

Enter the practice of mindfulness (although I didn’t have a label for it at the time).



**GRM** Clearly, mindfulness has evolved significantly as a practice for you since then. How did it evolve from there, and what did you learn as you went down the path further with it?

**JP** It wasn't until a few years later that I started attending regular yoga classes. There on the mat, I learned what it meant to "connect with the breath." After a long day, I found solace on this rectangular mat by going inward and focusing my mind and my attention on my breath. With each inhale and each long, deep exhale, I was able to release and let go. I let go of my thoughts, I let go of my day, I became fully in the moment. By the time I left the studio, I felt relaxed, centered, and whole. I soon made the connection that this was a "practice" that could be taken off of the mat and applied to everyday life.

My interest in this area continued to grow over the years as my practice evolved. I will admit that this had much to do with factors outside of the workplace. In my personal life, I found myself supporting an individual who struggled with mental health issues, including depression and suicidal tendencies. It was during this time, that I found my way to a meditation cushion as a strategy to help manage my own emotions. It was here that I began to consciously observe my thoughts and emotions and their effects on my well being.

As that relationship came to a close, many thought I was losing it when I made a decision to do a solo, nine-day silent retreat. Although I didn't reach "enlightenment" during the retreat, I did experience a shift in my state of being. When I returned to the workplace, I realized that I felt different. The pace of the work, the pile of priorities on my desk, the daily demands had not changed, but how I experienced them was very different. I was more calm and peaceful despite what was happening around me. This in turn, led to greater clarity and focus, allowing me to respond in more creative and decisive ways. I was fully present in the moment. This was the 'a-ha' moment for me.

What I learned was that we all have the ability to cultivate an inner capacity to deal with these challenging times. Often, we look to improve the situation by shifting things that are happening outside of us. Real and lasting change comes from the shifts that happen within us.

**GRM** Why do you think it's important for leaders to explore these practices?

**JP** As an Executive Coach, the concern I have regarding the leadership landscape today is the struggle to cope. The statistics paint a very scary picture. Not only are we experiencing higher levels of workplace dissatisfaction, but the rate of mental health issues and leaves are on the rise. Many, including high performers who have a difficult time asking for help, are experiencing burn out. They push themselves so hard that, over time, they exceed their mental and emotional limits.

While I don't proclaim that mindfulness is the complete solution to this very real problem, I do believe that we all have the ability to develop and strengthen our inner capacity to cope and that mindfulness is a tool that will help us get there.



This shift starts at the individual level. As a leader you have the responsibility to ensure that you are effectively taking care of yourself not just physically, but mentally and emotionally too.

**GRM** There can at times be misconception or confusion about mindfulness. Can you speak to this?

**JP** For many there has been confusion over the difference between meditation and mindfulness. Leaders question whether or not they need to sit on a cushion in lotus position for an extended period of time to reap the benefits of the mindfulness.

Very simply, meditation is a dedicated practice where one sits for a period of time and focuses one's attention inward, with the intention of stilling the mind.

Mindfulness on the other hand, is about paying attention to thoughts and emotions in the present moment. It's not necessary to meditate in order to be mindful (although it helps).

Mindfulness practices can very much be "in the moment" practices. One mindful breath to focus your attention and come back to the present moment is a great place to start. As you'll recall, this was the advice I was given a few years ago. The difference is that I now understand the science behind it. The breath activates your parasympathetic nervous system and has the effect of calming you in the moment. For those like me who need to know "why," now you have it!

**GRM** For someone who is interested in a starting place with mindfulness, what is one simple thing that you would suggest?

**JP** My recommendation would be to start with one mindful breath a day. Take this mindful breath when you're feeling stressed, anxious, or overwhelmed—or anytime when you require a significant amount of mental focus and clarity. I find that it really helps me just before important meetings. As a personal reminder, I use the door handle as my cue and take a slow, deep, mindful breath before entering the room.

**GRM** Janey, thank you so much for sharing your personal journey with us. **RL**



**Glain Roberts-McCabe** is passionate about the art of leadership and supporting ambitious mid-career leaders.

She created **The Roundtable** to provide emerging leaders with the navigational skills, tools and savvy needed to manage increases in scope, pressure and leadership complexity.

