Creating the Contemplative Organization: Lessons from the Field

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for

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society

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The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society

is a non-profit organization which works to integrate contemplative awareness into contemporary life in order to help create a more just, compassionate and reflective society.

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Contemplative Organization</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sites Visited</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs with Justice</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sounds True</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windhorse Associates</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflections on the Findings</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I: Resource Guide to Practices</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II: Research/Interview Questions</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive Summary

“Beyond bringing individual [contemplative] practices into the organizational context, [we are] cultivating organizational methods and processes that create a mindful, present, authentic, focused, honest, and listening organization that is more effective in achieving its mission.”

-- Simon Greer, Jobs With Justice

This is a report of the findings from “action research” visits conducted at three organizations during 2003-2004. The study was designed as a follow-up to the Contemplative Net Project interviews, during which the theme of “Contemplative Organization” emerged. A Contemplative Organization is one which attempts to integrate contemplative awareness into all aspects of the work environment.

Because the Contemplative Net interviews were conducted primarily with executive directors of organizations, this study was intended to obtain an “on the ground” perspective of how such an organization functions. Through the use of ethnographic methodology, we explored the following research questions with employees at each location:

- What are the ways in which organizations attempt to bring contemplative practices into their everyday work environments?

- Does this impact the culture of the organization? If so, how? If not, what stays the same? What are the obstacles to cultural shifts? What factors support a cultural shift?

- How do people at various levels in the organization (management, staff, service recipients or consumers) experience this process?

- What are the “best practices” of these organizations? What are the contexts in which these practices are optimized?

- Why does an organization choose to do this? What are the advantages and organizational benefits? What are the limitations?

The following page summarizes the best practices we identified at each of the three research sites.
Contemplative Organizations: Best Practices

Sounds True
*Publisher/Retailer of Audio Products (for-profit)*

1. Re-define the bottom line.
2. Respect difference; don’t get too attached to forms.
3. Infuse communications with mindfulness.
4. Create physical space for both reflection and community.
5. Good business and financial practices are an opportunity for reflection and awareness.
6. Disseminate contemplative values through leaders and at a grassroots level.
7. Don’t take yourself too seriously!

Windhorse Associates
*Mental Health Care Treatment (nonprofit)*

1. Ten skills of Basic Attendance.
2. Group Contemplative Practice and moment of silence
3. Create feedback loops for mindful decision making.
4. Use practices that support the mind/body connection.
5. Work with “Space Awareness.”

Jobs with Justice/24
*Economic Justice Organization (nonprofit)*

1. Encourage people to define and use contemplative practices in ways that make sense for them.
2. Focus on sustainability.
3. Hold regular staff retreat days.
4. Align personal vision with organizational mission.
5. Build visioning and reflection into every step of work.
Introduction

During the past decade, a growing number of companies and organizations have discovered the advantages of offering their staff a chance to learn about meditation, yoga, and other contemplative practices. A recent study by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (the Center) found that 135 companies and organizations offer such benefits (Duerr 2004). Undoubtedly, there are many more.

Research (Davidson RJ, Kabat-Zinn J, et al 2003) and anecdotal evidence (Der Hovanesian 2003) indicate that employees who take up these practices tend to experience less stress and more job satisfaction and productivity. This is no small matter in a time when stress-related ailments cost companies about $200 billion a year in increased absenteeism, tardiness, and the loss of talented workers, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health. (Der Hovanesian 2003).

Some companies and organizations are taking the idea of meditation in the workplace one step further and are experimenting with the creation of a different kind of workplace, one that is based upon values such as reflection, awareness, and compassion. At these workplaces, the use of contemplative practices goes beyond stress reduction, and is integrated into many levels of the daily work, including meetings, decision making, strategic planning, team communication, and the work itself. We have called this the “Contemplative Organization.”

Examples of this kind of workplace are often found in religious or faith-based settings. At organizations like the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Contemplative Outreach, Ltd, and Parallax Press (publishers of Buddhist books), employees share in meditation and contemplative prayer time during the work day, and often use the insights from these practices to frame their interactions.

But even companies whose focus is not exclusively spiritual are finding ways to create contemplative organizations. The three workplaces featured in this study are based in fields that aren’t known for a contemplative approach to work: publishing/retail, health care, and labor organizing. Two of the organizations (Sounds True and Jobs with Justice) were founded with a secular perspective. The third, Windhorse Associates, was originally based in the teachings of Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (the organization has since transitioned to become a nondenominational workplace).

Through research visits to these three workplaces, we wanted to deepen our knowledge and understanding of the Contemplative Organization and, in a cooperative process with employees, to explore these questions:

- What are the ways in which organizations attempt to bring contemplative practices into their everyday work environments?
Does this impact the culture of the organization? If so, how? If not, what stays the same? What are the obstacles to a cultural shift? What factors support a cultural shift?

How do people at various levels in the organization (management, staff, service recipients or consumers) experience this process?

What are the “best practices” of these organizations? What are the contexts in which these practices are optimized?

Why does an organization choose to do this? What are the advantages and organizational benefits? What are the limitations?

In this report, we present the findings from these research visits, followed by reflections. We hope that the strategies identified here will be useful to other organizations who want to take a similar path, and will provide affirmation and a sense of community to those already on it.

The Contemplative Organization

During the past decade, there has been an increasing interest in workplace spirituality and a growing body of literature addressing the issue (Briskin 1998; Burack 1999; Conlin 1999; Mitroff and Denton 1999; Neal, Lichtenstein, and Banner 1999). However, the sub-category of contemplative practice in the workplace has been far less frequently explored (Duerr 2004; Schaefer and Darling 1997).

The idea of the “Contemplative Organization” as an organizational type originated from a study conducted by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (Duerr 2004). In that study, interviews with 84 founders and directors of organizations revealed that 32% of them brought contemplative practices into their workplace with the intention of creating a more reflective environment. In these workplaces, meditation and other practices were not simply offered as peripheral benefits to employees, but were incorporated into the structure of daily work and decision making processes.

The Greyston Foundation offers a good example of a Contemplative Organization. Greyston, a nonprofit organization which provides comprehensive social services in Yonkers, NY, was founded in 1982 as an experiment in exploring the connections between Buddhist teachings and social change. Charles Lief, president of Greyston, summarized the elements that are part of the culture of a Contemplative Organization:

How does an organization that professes to be built upon core spiritual values or values of engaged social action actually manifest? How is it any different from an organization that doesn’t make that kind of overt statement?...We spend time and we spend money on encouraging personal spiritual exploration. We are an organization that finds it acceptable within the work day for people to explore
their own contemplative practice...Institutional norms here are things like working with the Native American practice of council as a way of conducting meetings, and having periods of meditation or silence before and after we start events...We do encourage people to figure out ways of integrating their own spiritual practice into the work that they are doing, and are fairly flexible about helping people do that kind of work.

Two other sources provided inspiration for identifying the Contemplative Organization as a viable organizational model: the work of Peter Senge and colleagues on the “Learning Organization” (1990), and empirical research by Ian Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton, summarized in their book A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America (1999).

In Senge’s book The Fifth Discipline (1999), a Learning Organization is defined as one in which “people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire...where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 3). One of the disciplines of a Learning Organization is the ability to identify mental models - deeply ingrained assumptions that influence how we think the world works. Senge notes the importance of developing awareness of how these models impact our decisions and behaviors. This capacity to reflect on one’s beliefs and actions, both individually and in the collective context of a team or organization, is core to the concept of the Learning Organization.

Mitroff and Denton (1999), in their study on the prevalence of spirituality in the corporate world, found that the most important elements of spirituality among employees are: the ability of employees to realize their full potential as a person; being associated with a good organization or an ethical organization; interesting work; making money; and having good colleagues and serving humankind. Mitroff and Denton identified five distinct models as to how spirituality can be practiced in the workplace:

- The Religion-Based Organization — brings religion into the workplace in overt ways and is usually directly affiliated with an organized religion, such as the Mormon-owned AgReserves, Inc., the largest producer of nuts in America.
- The Evolutionary Organization — begins its life with a strong association or identification with a particular religion and over time evolves to a more ecumenical position, like the YMCA.
- The Recovering Organization — adopts the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous as a way of fostering spirituality.
- The Socially-Responsible Organization — occurs when the founders are guided by strong spiritual principles which they apply directly to their business for the betterment of society, like Ben & Jerry’s.
- The Values-Based Organization — is guided by general philosophical principles or values of its founders that are not aligned or associated with a particular religion or even with spirituality.

A Contemplative Organization, as we have formulated the model, may include elements of all of the above, but its distinguishing characteristic is an emphasis on valuing reflection and awareness in the workplace. These values are cultivated
through the regular use of practices such as meditation, yoga, council circle, and the use of silence to begin meetings.

We have purposefully avoided using the phrase “spirituality in the workplace” because we believe that contemplative awareness is a capacity that can be developed by people who do and don’t necessarily identify themselves as “spiritual.” Skills of reflection can be applied in any setting, not only religious or spiritual ones.

Based on our analysis of the Contemplative Net interviews, we postulated that a Contemplative Organization has five characteristics:

- Incorporates contemplative practices into all aspects of work
- Embodies its values
- Moves between cycles of action and reflection
- Balances process with product
- Has an organizational structure that reflects a contemplative philosophy.

Sites Visited

Three site visits were conducted between May 2003 and February 2004:

1. Sounds True, Boulder, CO (for-profit business)
2. Windhorse, Northampton, MA (non-profit healthcare facility)
3. Jobs With Justice, NY office (Economic Justice)

Two criteria were used to choose sites:

- Contemplative practices and philosophy should be present within the structure of the work environment, e.g. work time allotted for contemplative practices together, practices such as council circle sometimes used for meetings, etc.

- Person in a lead management position (i.e. executive director) agrees that the organization is making an explicit attempt to integrate contemplative values in the workplace.

One site (Jobs with Justice) was chosen because we had met the executive director, Simon Greer, through our Contemplative Net interview study. The other two sites were workplaces we were familiar with through our network of associates at the Center. All three agreed to take part in the study and to host our researchers for two days.
Research Design

This study was based on the ethnographic field research approach - an experiential process in which the researchers take part in and observe the daily life of a culture (or particular aspect of a culture) in an effort to describe and understand people's actions and values. Ethnographic methodology was chosen for this study for two reasons:

- We wanted to hear from people at all levels of the organization about their experience of a contemplative workplace - senior management, middle management, staff, volunteers, and service recipients or consumers when applicable.
- We wanted to involve employees in a participatory and reflective process to assist them in identifying key elements of their own organizational culture

Methodology

A research team of two people from the Center (Maia Duerr and Gina M. Nortonsmith) visited each site for two full work days. (In the case of the Windhorse visit, these days were spread out over a two-week period of time.) Additionally, the research team sometimes spent informal, casual time after work with the research participants. The use of two researchers introduced a greater degree of reliability to the study. Researchers could compare and cross-check each other observations and interpretations.

The following methodologies, from the repertoire of ethnographic field research, were used at each site:

**Participant observation:** Primary field technique in which the researcher takes part in the activities of an individual or group in order to observe, describe, and analyze their actions. This can take many forms; for example, at Sounds True, one of us spent part of a day working alongside employees in the company’s warehouse.

**Semi-structured interviews:** Interviews using open-ended questions that allow interviewee responses to lead the flow of conversation. We used an interview guide (see Appendix II), but often deviated from it as the employee spoke of what was meaningful to them.

**“Naturalistic” Interviews:** “On the go” informal interviews that most often take place in the subject's lived environment (at home, work, or play). Interview is often open-ended and exploratory and can generate background for use in more structured interviewing. For example, at Jobs with Justice, we spoke with employees while riding on the subway with them to a “door-knocking” trip.
Photo Essay Interviews: Research participants were asked to use disposable cameras to document the people, places, and objects in their work environment that were meaningful to them. Later during the site visit, the researchers asked participants to tell the story behind each photo. Many of the photos included in this report were taken by employees.

Folk Taxonomy: Technique for describing how people categorize or classify people, ideas or other phenomena and how they are connected. We asked for organizational charts, and at the introductory meeting, we asked people to describe how their work units were organized, e.g. teams, departments, etc.

Our own subjective impressions actually became part of the data, as for example when we our participation in the frenzied work pace at Jobs with Justice helped us to understand more about the unique pressures of their jobs.

After returning from “the field” with an extensive collection of notes, interviews, and photographs, the researchers engaged in their own reflective process to discern the main themes and best practices. A draft of the initial findings was then sent to each research site. Participants were invited to send their comments and corrections. Comments were received from Windhorse and Sounds True, and then integrated into the final report.

The three site reports in this section all follow the same format:

- Background
- The Research Visit
- Employee Demographics
- Core Values
- Themes
- Best Practices
- Summary

In each case, we have attempted to paint a vivid, detailed picture of the overall organizational culture (especially in the sections on Core Values and Themes) before moving on to a description of the “Best Practices” used to cultivate a contemplative environment in that particular setting.
Jobs with Justice, New York City

50 Broadway, 24th floor
New York, NY 10004
newyorkjwj@mindspring.com

Number of employees: 9 at JwJ (17 including New York Unemployment Project employees)
Budget (2003): $400,000
Co-Executive Directors: Simon Greer and Adrienne Shropshire

Mission statement: New York Jobs with Justice is a dynamic coalition of New York City labor, community, religious, and student groups taking concrete action to level the playing field by building power for poor and working class people. Jobs with Justice works to re-establish basic freedoms in the workplace, while promoting social, racial, and economic justice and demanding an end to corporate greed and economic inequality.
Background
Jobs with Justice (JwJ), founded in 1987, is made up of coalitions in over 40 cities in 29 states in all regions of the United States. JwJ is comprised of both member organizations and thousands of individual activists who sign the Jobs with Justice pledge to “be there” five times a year for someone else’s economic struggle as well as their own.

As JwJ’s literature states, “First and foremost, Jobs with Justice is about action. Action wins concrete victories. Creative direct action empowers activists. Collective action builds the relationships that make coalitions work.” JwJ has its work cut out – today, the average CEO makes 531 times more than the typical working person, more than one in four New Yorkers under the age of 65 has no health insurance, and more than one out of five New Yorkers live in poverty.

During the past year, some of the victories of the NYC Jobs with Justice office have included:

- Working with local labor unions to successfully defend and expand workers’ rights to organize at Verizon, Linens of Europe, Premier Health Systems, and other NYC companies. According to the Village Voice, “The agreement marks a tremendous victory not only for UNITE! and NYJWJ, but for the labor movement as a whole...It is a powerful example of what can happen when labor, community and political leaders, and at least one progressive industry leader come together and decide that humane working conditions and freedom to join a union ought to be a basic right for all workers.”
- Convening a coalition of student and labor organizations to reverse a discriminatory tuition hike against immigrant students at the City’s 19 public universities in the CUNY system.
- TRADES (Trade Unions and Residents for Apprenticeship Development and Economic Success), a project of JwJ, won $500 million in contracts from the

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| 1. Encourage people to define and use contemplative practices in ways that make sense for them.
2. Focus on sustainability.
3. Hold regular staff retreat days.
4. Align personal vision with organizational mission.
5. Build visioning and reflection into every step of work. |
Housing Authority to help create career-track apprenticeship jobs for residents.

But, according to the JwJ annual report, “What stands out more than one particular campaign or organizational breakthrough is the progress we’ve made in forging a model of coalition building that works.”

The New York JwJ office opened in 1991. During the past two years, the organization has undergone a complete revamping under the leadership of Simon Greer who was hired as Executive Director in 2002. Simon, one of our Contemplative Net interviewees, came to JwJ after many years as a labor and community organizer. He arrived with a vision of building an economic justice organization that would include contemplative and reflective elements—a fairly radical idea in this field.

At first glance, the NYC JwJ office is an unlikely setting for a Contemplative Organization. JwJ is located in the heart of Wall Street and about three short blocks from Ground Zero, the site of the World Trade Center. On the Broadway street level, taxis, trucks, and pedestrian traffic fly by. JwJ is one nexus of the NY labor scene as well, a collection of groups that work day and night to fight for the rights of their constituents. The pace of life and work moves fast here.

JwJ’s offices are on the 24th floor, which it shares with the New York Unemployment Project (NYUP, pronounced “Nigh-Up”). NYUP, founded in 2001, is an organization of low-income and unemployed New Yorkers “building power to fight for family sustaining jobs and expanded, accessible income support for all New Yorkers.” Over the past few months, both organizations have forged a close working partnership and also share a co-director (Adrienne). They now call themselves “24” now (after the floor) and use the term “Vision 24” to describe their shared goals and work. Because the term “24” is how they referred to themselves as a collective, we will use that term along with “JwJ” in this report.

During the time that Simon has served as director, the JwJ budget has increased from $90,000 to $400,000 and the staff increased from two to nine. (With the new partnership with NYUP, the total staff number is 17.) As a result, nearly all the staff is new, resulting in “very little institutional memory of anything,” as one employee said. Gradually, a more cohesive sense of team is forming. JwJ receives about half of its income from foundation money, with the remainder coming from individual donors and contributions from member organizations.

In the time that Simon has been director, he has initiated a number of practices intended to support more reflection in the workplace. These are the practices that the 24 staff named for us:

- “Good News” - at the start of a meeting, sitting with one other person and sharing some good news or progress that you’ve experienced in your work (or life)
- Yoga (weekly group session)
- Sitting meditation (weekly group session)
Quarterly staff retreats with reflective and contemplative exercises; monthly “mini” retreats in the office
Cigarette breaks on the “smoking porch”
Parties and drinking after large events and rallies
Lunch/hanging out in the office

The Research Visit
Maia and Gina spent two full workdays with the “24” staff in February 2004. During our days at the office, we attended planning and organizing meetings, ate lunch with staff, and assisted on work projects when invited and appropriate. We went along with organizers on a “door-knocking” trip to East Harlem, and we helped to make phone calls encouraging clergy members to support a campaign to raise New York’s minimum wage. On the second day of our visit, we participated in one of 24’s monthly staff retreat days.

On the first morning, we met with the entire 24 staff to collect demographic information and to conduct a group inquiry of their general impressions about working for the organization. Because we knew that our second day would be taken up by the staff retreat, we shipped disposable cameras to the group a few days before our visit, along with instructions for the Photo Essay exercise. When we arrived on Thursday, we picked up the cameras, had the photos developed, and then invited people to tell us the stories behind them.

In contrast to our visits at the other two organizations in this study, we found it much more difficult to conduct sit-down interviews with the 24 staff. We ended up engaging in shorter conversations literally “on the run” with a number of people. In one case, a staff person shared the moments of a typical day as she was answering phones and doing work at her desk. In another case, the conversation took place on the subway train from the JwJ office to an East Harlem neighborhood to do door-knocking. As a result, the reader will note that this report has fewer direct quotes than the other two.

Our own background and involvement with social justice issues helped us to establish rapport with many of the staff. When employees found out that one of us (Gina) was a plaintiff in the historic same-sex marriage suit in Massachusetts, they had many questions about the case and thanked her for doing that work.
Employee demographics
Number of employees: 17 (includes all staff of the three organizations that make up “24” - Jobs with Justice, New York Unemployment Project, and Common Ground).

Gender

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Age

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Nine out of the 17 present said they have their own personal contemplative practices. Practices they named:

- Kickboxing
- Pottery
- Journal writing
- Gym
- Photography
- Tango
- Prayer (Shabbat)
- Martial arts
- Writing exercises
Core Values

Prior to our visit, we asked Ng’ethe, the director of training and education, if Jobs with Justice has a set of core work values. He told us that this isn’t really the case, so at our introductory meeting with the full staff, we changed our usual group interview question and asked, “How does working here resonate with your own value system?”

Some responses from the large group:

- Recognizing the experiences of others as valuable and important.
- Reflecting on how work and organizing is done.
- Building trust and thoughtfulness before an action takes place.
- Working on “bread and butter” issues.
- Building relationships is essential; we are not just “moving on to the next thing” but continuing to work with a group after organizing.
- Winning is not just about crunching numbers (how many doors knocked, how many people reached), but about how we think about relationships with people.

For most, this was the second or third organizing job they had. They noted that many of the above qualities were lacking in previous organizations in which they had worked. They also noted some other differences at the 24 workplace:

- Yoga and reflective retreats; the chance to bring the “whole person” into work.
- At other workplaces, there was a clear division of labor; organizers did nothing else but organizing. Here, everyone has a part in all kinds of work, including issue analysis, strategy, long-term planning, team building.
- Values - “Here we pick up for each other, pitch in if someone is overwhelmed.”

One of JwJ’s brochures features a quote which perhaps best captures the spirit of their work and the values the staff try to hold:

“When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize that the moral arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Themes
These are some of the themes that emerged from the research team’s field observations, participation in the work days, and interviews with JwJ’s employees.

1. In the range of NYC economic justice groups, JwJ/24 plays the role of a reflective and “thoughtful” organization.
One employee said that JwJ/24 is one of the few organizations that is taking time to look at the “beast” - the systemic causes of economic injustice - and at the same time stays in close touch with the day-to-day realities of its constituents. This is a rare combination in this field.

There are a range of organizations and agencies that work in labor organizing and economic justice, and all of them fill different niches. On one end of the spectrum, “think tanks” conduct research and make policy recommendations, but are often distant from the realities of everyday life. One staff person spoke about the difficulty of working with this kind of organization:

“They fly in [to our office] and a bunch of white men talk to us about issues, but not in a way that is helpful to our work. We need to frame these issues - like NAFTA, free trade - in a way that people we talk to, the working poor, low-income people, can understand how it relates to their lives. These guys don’t understand that. They are doing good work, but it’s not the kind of work that’s always helpful here.”

On the other end of the spectrum, membership organizations like unions need to be responsive to the needs of their members, who are often in danger of losing their jobs, benefits, and even homes. They are under more pressure to do short-term emergency fixes and usually don’t have the time to consider long-term strategic approaches.

JwJ/24 fills a role in the middle of that spectrum. Being a coalition organization gives JwJ/24 more leeway to take time to think about these issues and strategize sustainable ways of addressing them. At the same time, it stays in touch with constituents such as workers and students, and works to communicate and educate about issues in a way that is relevant to their lives. Staff speak about this as a “new way to organize,” one that is more effective because it involves cultivating and keeping relationships.

The 24 staff also takes time to reflect on their own approach and strategy, a process which has been supported by the time that is allowed to evaluate their work during retreat days. Some of the questions we heard them contemplating: In our outreach efforts, how much do we need to teach people about issues, and how much do we elicit from their own life experiences? Is there a contradiction between the two? If we see that people are missing information and need to be educated in order to take action, how much can we play the role of teachers rather than passively guiding their process?
“It’s a challenge to be an organization that’s very thoughtful and works with other organizations that aren’t so thoughtful.”

2. In a New York Minute...

We began to understand the phrase “a New York minute” during our visit. The internal clock is faster here, and every moment of each day was filled with meetings, appointments, phone calls, and conversations. At one meeting we attended, three of the four people participating were eating their lunch. They talked about who would facilitate the discussion and decided that the one person without food in her mouth would lead.

In many ways, the 24 office atmosphere felt almost “corporate” to us, with its emphasis on campaigns, goals, objectives, and outcomes, and the degree to which people are required to track and account for their time. Each employee is required to keep a weekly work plan and a daily report where they list the “top 3 goals for the week,” the “top three tasks for today,” and a summary of the day’s results. These individual goals are tied to organizational goals and objectives, which are generated at staff retreat days.

Numbers are significant here too. Staff track how many calls they make for various campaigns, how many doors they have knocked on “door knocking” trips to neighborhoods, and how many people they’ve come into contact with.

The physical space of the office feels quite dense. Nearly every inch of wall space is covered with posters, flyers, and large sheets of paper with notes from planning or evaluation meetings from campaigns, action plans, often in both English and Spanish. Desks and files are overflowing with papers. The office is lived in and comfortable, with recycled office furniture and chairs.

There is no one space in the 24 office that is set aside for reflection. The closest thing to it is the “smoker’s porch,” a small ledge on the 24th floor where people gather for a cigarette break. (One person told us, “I wish I had a contemplative practice that
didn’t make me sick!”). The ledge space, half inside the building and half outside, overlooks other offices in the Wall Street area, and is barely large enough for five people to stand. Simon’s office, with a window overlooking skyscrapers and the Hudson River, feels like the most peaceful, spacious place in the office. Simon told us that people occasionally knock on his door and ask if they can just sit there for a few minutes, even though it’s not called a “meditation area.”

The idea of taking time to reflect and slow down is foreign to this kind of organizational culture. One person shared that he feels guilty when he takes one day a week to work at home in a quieter setting, because there is such a strong sense of always having to “do” things.

3. “Picking up for each other”
The heavy emphasis on action and time management is balanced by people really watching out for each other and encouraging co-workers to take care of themselves. As they say, they “pick up for each other” and pitch in when one person is overwhelmed. Organizing is hard work. People recognize this and are open in sharing with one another the frustrations of door knocking, unanswered phone calls, and other challenges of their workday. Some of this might be rooted in the “I’ll Be There” pledge which is an intrinsic part of JwJ’s organizational culture:

“I’ll be there...
Because I believe in dignity, fairness, honesty, respect, and freedom, I’ll be there...
Standing up for justice in our communities and at work;
Supporting the rights of all New Yorkers to have a good job, quality health care, and affordable education;
Defending the right to organize and join a union free of employer intimidation;
Taking action to protect and expand the rights of New York’s immigrant workers;
Demanding honesty, transparency, and accountability from corporations and an end to corporate greed.”

The office has the feeling of simultaneously being full of high energy but also a relaxed place to work. The staff are a boisterous, spirited group who had a great deal of fun with the camera exercise, often bursting into laughter as they posed for pictures with each other.
4. Conflict as metaphor.
Much of JwJ’s language, in both its written materials and in the meetings and conversations we were privy to, uses the metaphors related to conflict to describe its work. Phrases and words such as “victories,” “enemy,” “fight the right,” and “opposition” are commonly used. At their December retreat, one process that the group did was to “sketch the status of the opposition.”

One person noted that much of the current work the staff is doing around issue analysis and organizing is putting them on the offense to the Right rather than the defense, particularly around the issue of the role of the fundamentalist Christian Right.

While this framing of the work seems to energize some people, it has a different effect on others. Some staff are thinking about how this construct works in terms of their long term sustainability, both as individual organizers and as an organization. There is recognition that some degree of conflict and tension is necessary in this kind of work - an effective action usually involves confronting and putting pressure on an employer or other entity with power and resources to share that power more equitably.

But at the same time, some people gravitate toward a more positive framing of the work. The NY JwJ purpose statement does include some proactive, positive language: “NY Jobs with Justice seeks to re-align the balance of power in New York City so that the structures and practices that regulate and comprise corporate behavior as well as determine the allocation of public resources are dictated by values of compassion, honesty, fairness, responsibility, respect and freedom.”

This dialectic between construction and deconstruction, “building up” and “tearing down,” is one that a number of staff is actively engaged in.

“The way I work is to build things up rather than tear them down...I believe more in bringing the Left up than bringing the Right down.”
Jobs with Justice’s Best Practices

1. Encourage people to define and use contemplative practices in ways that make sense for them.

Of the three organizations we visited, 24 was, by far, the most ethnically diverse group of employees, as well as the youngest. All the staff of both JwJ and NYUP is in their 20s, with the exception of the three directors, Simon, Adrienne, and Ng’ethe, who are in their 30s. As a group, they are politically aware, intellectually progressive, and unequivocally urban. Some of the ways they relax include getting together in the smoking area, meeting for drinks after work, and holding house music parties (although apparently not enough, because at staff retreat day we attended, someone suggested they needed to do more celebrating and music together outside of work).

In combination with these demographics, labor and community organizers, in general, tend to have a long-standing and deep-seated mistrust of organized religion. This is rooted in many years of history of the role of organized religion in relation to oppressed and marginalized people. While there are notable exceptions, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., churches and organized religions have often been complicit with this oppression, and sometimes have taken part in or perpetrated it. Practices associated with these religions, such as contemplative prayer, can suffer from “guilt by association” and are subject to suspicion in such a setting.

All of these factors together create a challenging environment in which to introduce and integrate contemplative practices. When we initially interviewed Simon for the Contemplative Net project a year earlier, he told us about using a moment of silence at the beginning of meetings. But on the first morning at JwJ when we asked the group what practices they used, they mentioned the practice of sharing “good news” with each other at the start of meetings, but not the moment of silence. Later, we asked Simon about this change. He said that they had decided to switch because it felt like he was imposing something on people that they didn’t really want. A number of people would chat or giggle during the “silent” time, so it made sense to make it a more interactive process. He talked about the larger challenge of introducing practices into an entirely different work culture. In fact, the phrase “contemplative practice” is rarely, if ever used here. People are much more likely to appreciate the ways in which these exercises have helped them to think more deeply about what they do and how they work, and use words like “thoughtfulness” and “sustainability.”
Recently, Simon has introduced more “traditional” contemplative practices, such as a meditation group on Monday mornings and a yoga class on Tuesday afternoons. Both of these groups are optional, and Simon sought out someone to lead the meditation group who had a background in activism who he felt could relate well to the staff.

Rather than focusing on staff participation in specific contemplative practices, the strategy at JwJ is to introduce a range of experiences and exercises that, as a whole, create a more reflective way to do organizing work. These include a number of the practices that are described in the following sections, such as regular staff retreat days, alignment exercises, etc. Another practice that seemed to be frequently used was journaling. At the end of the retreat day, Ng’ethe invited everyone to take a few moments to become quiet and then journal on their answers to two questions: “I am feeling...” “24 would be a ‘10’ if...”

Staff can plug into the practices in whatever way works for them. One woman had listed yoga class on her weekly work plan. She told us, “This group counts as work time. It’s all part of keeping this work sustainable. It doesn’t make sense to work your organizers into the ground. Doing this is a way to take care of ourselves, and keep us ‘whole people.’” Another person told us that while he was glad to see yoga and meditation being offered in the office, he preferred to take time outside of the office to go to the gym for exercise. He noted, “Part of having a sustainable work environment is being able to leave and not feeling the pressure of work on your shoulders when you walk out the door.”

“Maybe this is my personality, but if my boss encourages me to participate in a meditation, part of me thinks, ‘Eh, I don’t really want to do it.’ It’s nice to be reminded of it, but the stuff that is more valuable to me, personally, are things like the exercises in active listening we did last week. This was enormously valuable...That, for me, is very concrete. It’s a little more linear. Then I don’t feel like, ‘Oh, somebody is trying to impose their spiritual ideology on me.’”

2. Focus on sustainability.

In an environment where contemplative practices aren’t the norm and weren’t part of the original founding vision of an organization, it becomes important that they are used in the service of other important personal and organizational goals. With 24, the “hook” seems to be the idea of “sustainability,” a word that many staff used in their conversations with us.

In an organizational context, sustainability can mean looking at how social change work goes beyond short-term fixes and can have long-term impact. During our visit, one of the big news stories was the overthrow of President Aristides in Haiti. Simon noted how hard many progressive and human rights groups had worked to get Aristides elected, and how the impact of that change had eroded over time and now was apparently gone. In such a world, he wondered aloud, how can we work to help both people and social structures to transform, and have these processes be mutually reinforcing?
On an individual level, sustainability can mean thinking about how can staff do the challenging work of organizing without “grinding ourselves down.” While we were out on a door-knocking trip with two of the staff, they explained the “10% Rule” of organizing to us: 80% of folks contacted won’t be interested, or won’t be available. 10% will outright reject you, even slam the door in your face. But all you need to develop and mobilize a movement and shift power is that last 10%. As an organizer, you have to be willing to accept and move beyond the 90% failure rate in order to persist to get to those 10%. In such a setting, practices that focus on sustainability make a lot of sense.

Another element of sustainability is about creating “alternative space for people to get politicized,” in the words of one organizer. One of JwJ’s projects, MOVE (Mobilizing and Organizing Voices for Equality) is designed to do just that. Through MOVE, JwJ is trying to create structures and events for individuals and organizations to gather and build community, celebrate victories, and support labor, community, and student campaigns. MOVE uses formats such as coffeehouses and “social justice karaoke” to engage more diverse communities to show up and “ignite the fight for worker’s rights.” At the day-long retreat we attended, there was a noticeable increase in the group’s energy and a burst of ideas and laughter when people brainstormed about more ideas like this.

Much of 24’s planning work is analytical and intellectually rigorous. One primary tool is the causal analysis, created for each campaign. Each causal analysis involves hours of research and group discussions on issues such as “Dismantling the Corporate-Christian-Conservative Confluence,” which explores how religious values are distorted in the service of a right-wing, corporate agenda. Staff identify factors such as who is responsible, who benefits, who suffers, and the effectiveness of past organizing approaches. Some staff expressed a desire to work in other creative modes and inject more movement and art into these processes.

“There are only 15 of us and 24 hours in a day. How do we make the change in the world that we want to see? The problem in front of us is so huge. It’s tough to remember that the day-to-day work may get you there some day.”

“Our goal is to create a sustainable movement - but even the goal to be sustainable isn’t always sustainable!”
3. Hold regular staff retreat days.
One of the initiatives that Simon introduced is regular retreat days for the entire JwJ/NYUP staff. These days are usually held monthly, with multi-day retreats happening quarterly. In December, 2003, the staff held a major three-day visioning retreat at an off-site location. When we visited the office in February 2004, they had their first day-long retreat since December, and people often referred back to the insights and strategy that came from that time together. One said, “The retreat we did in December was phenomenal!”

These retreat days provide an opportunity for the entire staff to take time off from their busy organizing duties and come together to participate in a number of exercises intended to help evaluate their progress and reflect on their approach to work. Ng’ethe was the facilitator for the February retreat day that we attended. At the start of the day, he explained that there were two main objectives for this retreat: to “realign ourselves” with the visions generated from the December retreat, and to check in on progress for the quarter.

Retreat days aren’t always welcomed with open arms, at least at first take. One staff person, in the midst of making her plans for the week, was reminded that Friday was a staff retreat day. She responded with a tone of frustration, “Damn, I forgot!” When another was asked how she and others felt about staff retreats, she noticed that people tend to complain or dread them before they happen - but once there, people seem to “drop into the space.” She said she was “grateful “for the December retreat even though it was hard to take whole days away from work and the computer.

“This morning [retreat day], I got in the office at a quarter of 8 and knew I had at least 8 hours of work to do, I’m not going to get that done today. But tomorrow and Sunday and Monday and Tuesday I’ll probably feel a lot better about the next month. [These retreat days are] like investing in the next month of time. Helps me to understand what I’m really trying to accomplish. It has proven very valuable in the last year and a half to be given the space and also forced to take a step back and plan my work out very carefully.”

4. Align personal vision with organizational mission.
Most of the retreat day that we participated in focused on the theme of “Alignment,” which Ng’ethe spoke of as both organizational and internal – “So you can attune yourself to best achieve the things you want in your life.” He noted the importance of recognizing goals and dreams in your life that may not be in alignment with being at 24, and how those places of non-alignment can divert energy from one’s work.

A number of reflective and contemplative exercises were used throughout the day to explore this idea of alignment. Here are three of them:

1) “How Much Do You Value the Truth?”
Everyone was asked to fill out this 17-question survey, which started with the introduction, “Being truthful isn’t easy when we feel we’ve got something to lose or when we feel we are not in control...Reflect on those moments where you were
challenged to be truthful and instead decided to tell the person what they wanted to hear by saying “yes.”

Ng’ethe explained that the purpose of the exercise was to see where people were “authentic and in alignment.” He invited them to share insights they had from completing the exercise. One person observed, “I think a lot of times we lie to people and say, “Sure, that’s a good idea, I’ll be there [referring to the JwJ pledge about showing up at other people’s rallies]. But inside, you think, ‘That’s a really stupid idea.’” Another person wondered if it was possible to find a response that was somewhere between brutal honesty and total avoidance, one that would help move a conversation in a more honest direction.

2) Listening to Yourself
In this exercise, everyone was invited to reflect on and answer four questions:

1. Thinking about all the visions we had about how to change New York and the world, what grabs you most about this vision? Why?

2. What repels you the most about this vision? What do you find the least interesting and why?

3. What causes you anxiety, worry, or fear about this vision?

4. What must happen (organizationally and personally) or what do you need in order to be able to live with this vision?

First, people were invited to closer their eyes and take some time to listen to their own thoughts and feelings, and then to write these thoughts down. Next, they were asked to pick a partner to share what they had written with each other, practicing active listening (a skill the group had received instruction during the previous week). The idea behind this exercise was to identify three levels of change and action: personal issues; interpersonal issues; and organizational change.

3) Group Reflection
Ng’ethe invited the group to come back together and answer the following questions: What are we aligned with? What is going well? What feels unaligned?
This is essentially an organizational application of a facilitation tool called the “Plus/Delta” chart, often used at the end of meetings and events to evaluate their effectiveness. The facilitator asks for people to name what went well about the meeting and suggestions for change that would improve future meetings. (Delta, ∆, is the Greek symbol for “change.”)

5. Build visioning and reflection into every step of work.
We watched how carefully 24 staff were required to plan for and track their time. As we noted earlier in the theme section, each person is required to keep a weekly work plan and a daily report where they list the “top 3 goals for the week,” the “top three tasks for today,” and a summary of the day’s results. These individual goals are tied to organizational goals and objectives, generated at staff retreat days. Staff track how many calls they make for various campaigns, how many doors they have knocked on “door knocking” trips to neighborhoods, and how many people they’ve come into contact with.

The organization as a whole, and individual staff, are in a constant cycle of planning and evaluation, both through these written forms and through the vehicles of regular retreats and supervision. There is a great deal of focus on intention, both personal and organizational, and how the two relate. People hold each other accountable for their planning and ideas, and frequently ask each other for more details about the strategies they design.

The second half of the retreat day we attended was devoted to an evaluation of first quarter activities and progress toward program and project goals. Each evaluation was accompanied by a rating of progress (from 1 - 10), the rationale for that rating, and a “Spark!” - which stands for “Special Projects to Accelerate Results Quickly!” These are actions or components of a plan that are intended to increase effectiveness and get people more invested and involved.

Our initial assumption was that staff might perceive all this paperwork and these processes as onerous busywork. However, we noticed that for at least some of the staff, these requirements are used as reflective tools that help them to be more thoughtful about how they spend their time and energy. Again, the theme of “sustainability” seems to be a key to motivate people to take part in these exercises with appreciation rather than resentment.

“We try to be goal-oriented instead of task-oriented. If you only focus on tasks, you lose sight of why you’re doing things. We have a one-year vision and a ten-year vision. If we do all the things we say we are going to do, we can see how we are making these visions happen.”

“Sometimes with a smaller operation, it feels not as necessary to do that long-term visioning...But another argument is that it’s even more necessary when you’re resources are really limited, you have to be very careful about what you do and how you do it. I appreciate it a lot...it helps me get through the day and the week if I don’t have anxiety like ’Oh my god, I’ve got this huge project and I have no idea how it’s going to happen.’ For my personal well-being it makes a big difference.”
Summary
While many of the practices at JwJ/24 don’t initially appear to fall in the category of traditional “contemplative practices,” it’s important to remember that in this organization’s context, this is a bold step. The 24/7 nonstop work culture of labor and community organizing; resistance to organized religion, and by association, practices such as contemplative prayer and meditation.
Additionally, JwJ/24, unlike the other organizations we visited, was not founded with the intention to integrate contemplative principles with work. The challenge in this setting is how to weave contemplative practices and create a culture of reflection into a field and work environment that, traditionally, is diametrically the opposite. As one employee said,

“When I tell the folks that I work with outside this organization that in December we did a three-day retreat, two weeks later the organizing staff did a full day retreat, and now we’re doing another retreat, they’re appalled. And surprised. Somehow they think that means that we’re just playing around, that we’re so stuck on thinking things through that we don’t do anything. Particularly in the labor movement…”

As a result, JwJ/24 has the feel of a Contemplative Organization that is still in the “ripening” phase. Organizational structural support for supporting employees’ reflective lives is still in an early phase. There is “newness” to this approach, and many employees are still feeling the way into it. One said,

“This personal development, vision, and values alignment stuff is new enough that I don’t think we’ve tested it. A year from now if we have this conversation, I might say, ‘Wow, I feel more satisfied with my work because once a quarter we do this re-alignment stuff or we talk about what our vision is.’ I don’t know if I’m going to feel that way.”

But one of the most recently hired employees said that it felt very integrated to her, compared to her previous job, and she appreciated how “everyone is always striving to do better.”

The image of branches from two different kinds of trees being grafted together came to us near the end of the visit. A contemplative approach is definitely not the “norm” for the economic justice/community organizing field. In trying to introduce it here, one encounters a tradition and environment that values speed, constant action, doing huge amounts of work with little time and resources, and working without a stop to stand up for people’s rights. This group is busy, goal-oriented, and always in motion, as evidenced by the fast pace that left us, the researchers, near exhaustion at the end of each day!

As one staff said, “I feel like we’re trying to figure out how we fit this [contemplative practices, personal transformation work] in, into time, into physical space. It does feel like it’s pasted on, an add-on.” Simon said that he found this image of “grafting” helpful - he noted that very often, social change movements and organized religion have not been in alliance with each other, and the role of spirituality in justice work.
is not always clear. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi have been the notable exceptions.

And yet in many ways, reflective practices can be a powerful complement for this kind of work. So many of the skills that a good organizer needs can be supported by contemplative practice - the ability to listen receptively rather than imposing one’s agenda on others; the patience and persistence to deal with long-term outcome rather than immediate results; the importance of bringing one’s whole self into the work (body, heart, mind, and spirit) in a way that infuses organizing campaigns with the energy and spirit they need to be effective. So this experiment in “grafting” at JwJ may well turn out to produce some beautiful fruit.

In Simon’s initial interview for the Contemplative Net Project shortly after he started as JwJ’s executive director, he told us,

“We’ve been striving to be a contemplative organization, and our work has improved because of it. To understand the significance of this, you need to know a little bit about what Jobs for Justice is and what we do. It’s a coalition of labor community where religious institute, organizations try to build power to expand worker’s rights and fight for economic justice in New York City. We believe in an organizing model that’s about doing direct action and creating tension. So tension and confrontation are key to what we do. When I got here in April, it was a small organization where spirituality or the contemplative would be tossed out as touchy-feely, or cheesy. And at the same time, the work was ineffective.

In my yoga practice, from time to time, I’m in downward dog and I have an ‘Oh, that’s the answer to that thing I’ve been trying to figure out,’ one of those a-ha moments. More often, it’s something I’ll observe over the stretch of time, like I don’t lose my temper as much as I used to...It’s not an ‘a-ha,’ it’s more of a long-term benefit. [I believe that] organizational contemplative practices can have the same kind of an impact. Beyond bringing those individual practices into the organizational context, it means cultivating organizational methods and processes that create a mindful, present, authentic, focused, honest, and listening organization that is more effective in achieving its mission.”
Mission statement:
From our first day in business, the Sounds True mission has been to disseminate spiritual wisdom. In a sense, we serve as a teaching company that embraces the world’s major spiritual traditions and the arts and humanities, as embodied by the leading authors, teachers, and experts of our times. Through their voices, we offer you the opportunity to pursue a lifetime of learning.
Background
Sounds True, founded in 1985, is a for-profit business that produces and sells audio and video products featuring wisdom teachings from spiritual leaders of all traditions. Since its inception, the company has served more than 300,000 customers. In 2002, it registered $9 million in sales. In 2003, Sounds True was a recipient of the Willis Harman Spirit at Work Award, given annually to companies that “have implemented specific policies, programs, or practices that explicitly nurture spirituality in their organizations.”
Sounds True offers over 400 titles about spiritual traditions, meditation, psychology, creativity, health and healing, self-discovery, relationships, and more. Their audio and video tapes bring important new ideas in a compact, undiluted form to an ever-growing audience - often years before the information is presented in books. Authors and teachers who have recorded for Sounds True have included Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Thich Nhat Hanh, Huston Smith, Jack Kornfield, Alice Walker, Ram Dass, Jean Shinoda Bolen, Caroline Myss, and hundreds of others.

Organizationally, the company is comprised of seven departments or teams which are responsible for a variety of tasks including writing catalog copy, recording and producing tapes, customer service, accounting, warehouse packaging and shipping. The warehouse is physically separate from the main building, located about half a mile away.

Sounds True employees tend to stay around for a long time - over 50% of them have worked there for more than three years - and for the most part they express a high level of satisfaction with their jobs.

Best Practices at Sounds True

1. Re-define the bottom line.
2. Respect difference; don’t get too attached to forms.
3. Infuse communications with mindfulness.
4. Create physical space for both reflection and community
5. Good business and financial practices are an opportunity for reflection and awareness.
6. Disseminate contemplative values through leaders and at a grassroots level.
7. Don’t take yourself too seriously!
The Sounds True workplace offers a number of opportunities for its 47 employees to nurture their “authentic” selves, with contemplative practices and perspectives providing a foundation for this process. One of the company’s “core values” is to “honor and include a contemplative dimension in the workplace...we strive to practice mindfulness in every aspect of our work.” Organizational practices that support this value include:

- 15-minute period for group reflection/meditation daily (optional)
- meditation room available for use at any time
- use of silence to begin company meetings (full staff and within teams)
- yoga classes on-site
- management training and techniques grounded in contemplative perspectives (e.g. Marshall Rosenberg’s Non-Violent Communication)

The form these practices take varies from department to department. While many teams and groups begin their meetings with “a minute” (of silence), the warehouse group and the financial team do not.

Sounds True is also “dedicated to enjoying the process of the work itself, aware of the opportunity that exists at work for celebration, personal growth, and the acknowledgment of the everyday sacred.” The company strives to create this kind of work atmosphere through offering its employees a number of benefits, including:

- On-site gym and massage therapy
- Profit-sharing plan
- Pets-welcome-at-work policy
- Flex-time work schedules, when possible
- “Breaking Bread” - numerous opportunities to come together around food and build community
- Time off for community/volunteer service

**The Research Visit**

The Center for Contemplative Mind research team (Maia Duerr and Gina M. Smith) spent two full work days at Sounds True in June, 2003. When the Sounds True softball team was in need of two players for a game one night during the research visit, Maia and Gina switched gears, pitched in, and shared more informal time with a small group of employees (unfortunately, the team lost!).

During the two days at the office, Maia and Gina spent time with employees in different departments, including the warehouse, the
marketing team, the creative team, the financial team, and customer service. We attended team meetings, joined in the group meditation time, relaxed in the kitchen, and worked alongside people when invited and appropriate. In addition, we conducted ten informal interviews that lasted between 15 - 45 minutes each (see interview questions in appendix).

On the first morning of the visit, we met with the entire Sounds True staff to collect demographic information and to conduct a group inquiry of their general impressions about working at the company. We also invited people to take disposable cameras and photograph the people, places, and things that were meaningful to them in the work environment. On the second day, we brought the photos back and asked them to tell us the story behind their pictures.

### Employee Demographics
Number of employees: 47 (and 12 canines!)

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Individual contemplative practices named:

- Sitting meditation
- Tai Chi
- Washing dishes
- Artistic endeavors
- Time in nature
- Hiking
- Yoga
- Mantra practice
- Exercise
- Praying
- Softball!

Sounds True Core Values

1. Sounds True is both mission-driven and profit-driven
Sounds True is a mission-driven company, dedicated to making transformative spiritual teachings widely available. Knowing that we need to be financially healthy in order to fulfill our mission, we pay attention to financial realities and are determined to generate annual profits.

2. We build workplace community
By prioritizing monthly all-company meetings, all-company events, community rituals, and open forums for dialogue, we actively build workplace community and create opportunities for people to foster authentic connections with one another.

3. We encourage authenticity in the workplace
While being respectful of others, employees are invited to bring their “authentic self” to work - their creativity, their ideas, their voice, their feelings, their sense of humor. We do not have a dress code, and we encourage people to feel comfortable at work.

4. Open communication
Information, strategy, and financial data are freely and openly shared with the conviction that an accurately informed staff can best contribute to the growth and health of Sounds True. Information about individual compensation is confidential, however all other information is shared throughout the organization, including the financial reports of the company via open book management.

5. Animals are welcome
Because we feel that the presence of animals benefits our work environment, dogs (and other well-behaved animals) are welcome at Sounds True as long as their owner takes complete responsibility for their behavior at all times.

6. We place a high value on creativity, innovation, and ideas
Sounds True is a “work-in-progress”, and our success depends on our ability to continually experiment and fine-tune our efforts by trying new things, inventing new products, developing new systems. Creativity, innovation, and new ideas are recognized and highly valued.

7. Opportunities exist for flexible work schedules
Acknowledging the importance of flexibility in attracting and retaining talented and creative people, Sounds True offers employees (in departments where the work flow permits) the opportunity to creatively structure their work schedules in exchange for superior job performance and responsible communication with
8. Teams determine the best way to reach their goals
Individual teams are given the freedom to organize and execute the work of their
department under the stewardship of the Publisher and within the limits of budgetary
constraints and performance goals. Managers, while maintaining clarity of expectations,
are encouraged to empower their employees to work with as much autonomy as possible.

9. We honor and include a contemplative dimension in the workplace
At Sounds True, we strive to practice mindfulness in every aspect of our work.
Additionally, we offer ongoing training in the practice of mindfulness in the workplace.
Recognizing the importance of silence, inward attention, and being centered, Sounds
True begins its all-company meetings with a minute of silence, maintains a meditation
room on-site, and offers a 15-minute period for reflection at 11:00 am each day.

10. We reach out to a diverse community
We are committed to donating our products to people who would otherwise not have
access to our titles. We are also committed to creating opportunities for employees to
volunteer in the community on paid time.

11. We strive to protect and preserve the Earth
Aware of the impact of our business activities on the environment, we continuously strive
to minimize waste, and recycle all office paper, products, and packaging to the
maximum extent. We also strive to use recycled goods whenever possible and not cost-
prohibitive.

12. We have a relationship with our customers that is based on integrity
We are dedicated to doing everything we can so that all Sounds True customers --
including external customers, internal customers (co-workers), and vendors -- are
completely satisfied with their Sounds True experience. We listen to customer feedback
and actively seek out customer responses via surveys, polls, and bounce-back cards. We
pour our heart and talents into crafting high-quality programs and we honor our
customers by creating sales copy and advertisements that accurately reflect the content
of our titles and by shipping orders accurately and within stated time frames.

13. We take time for kindness, have fun, and get a lot done
We attempt to find a balance between working hard and achieving performance goals,
enjoying our workplace community and each other, and taking the extra time to be kind
and thoughtful towards one another.

14. We acknowledge that every person in the organization carries wisdom
We acknowledge that the wisdom of the Organization is held by all Sounds True
employees, regardless of title or position, and we strive to find ways for every person to
give input into the creation of our products, our company culture and our systems.

15. We encourage people to speak up and propose solutions
Sounds True gets better each year because employees speak their minds and offer
suggestions. All employees are encouraged to find appropriate avenues for
communicating their opinions and suggesting solutions.

16. We encourage people to listen deeply
Realizing how listening to each other builds understanding and integrates the wisdom of
the group, we strive to listen attentively and deeply in all workplace exchanges.
17. We honor individual differences and diversity
Sounds True is founded on the principle that humanity benefits when we share wisdom across cultural boundaries. Wanting to create a rich and diverse workplace culture, we honor cultural diversity and we are determined that no one at Sounds True is disrespected (under any circumstances and particularly) on the basis of race, creed, religion, physical ability, or sexual orientation. We also acknowledge that people have different learning and communication styles, and we strive to understand and respect our differences.

18. We strive for clarity of expectations
Knowing that misunderstandings often occur because of a lack of clarity, we strive to clearly articulate job responsibilities and expectations and to communicate with each other when responsibilities or expectations change.

19. We encourage people to realize their creative potential
Through training opportunities and creating an environment where people are encouraged to develop new skills, Sounds True supports its employees in realizing their creative potential.

20. Employees participate in profit-sharing and ownership
Through an Employee Stock Ownership Plan and a quarterly profit sharing plan, the employees of Sounds True have the opportunity to share in the growth and financial success of Sounds True.
Alignment With Values

We asked the large group, “Which of these values do you feel you are able to live up to with ease? Which of them take more effort to live up to?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values that we uphold with relative ease</th>
<th>Values that take more effort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Animals are welcome</td>
<td>Profit - putting a price on spiritual products, selling in a spiritual business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to have relationships with customers based in integrity - this is good business policy too</td>
<td>Clear expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place for contemplation - meditation room always available</td>
<td>Language about people with creativity is inflated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lots of diversity</td>
<td>Wisdom - is it always listened to?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lots of authenticity</td>
<td>Deep listening is a difficult skill to acquire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of community</td>
<td>Hard to hear everyone’s idea and implement them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun - “We do have a lot of fun!”</td>
<td>Balance between work and fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth-friendly</td>
<td>Communicating and having community outside our own teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to both mission-driven and profit-driven, or at least to aspire to it.</td>
<td>Hard to physically connect with people in the warehouse</td>
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</tbody>
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Themes
These are some of the themes that emerged from the research team’s field observations, participation in the work days, and interviews with Sounds True employees.

1) Diversity
We heard a number of people use the word “diversity” to describe the Sounds True workplace. At first we weren’t sure what they meant. But then it became clear that they were referring to the underlying principle that seems to make Sounds True a rewarding workplace for most people: they feel encouraged to come to work and “show up as all of who they are” (a phrase used by a number of people we interviewed). This hold true for the Buddhist meditator as much as for the company’s
“resident Republican.” There’s a healthy sense of humor at Sounds True - most people don’t hold the idea of spirituality too seriously, which seems to allow room for those at all places of the spiritual spectrum to be themselves. There was also no apparent judgment of people having a contemplative practice or not. The bottom line at Sounds True, as far as employees are concerned, is respect for each other.

“For me, above and beyond the contemplative or spiritual part, [what’s important] is bringing my full self to work. That’s the thing that allows me to be spiritual. It’s not like, ‘You can be spiritual here.’ It’s ‘bring your full self to work’ and I’m a spiritual being. It’s an outgrowth of that intention, of wanting people to be who they are here. That let’s you off the hook of saying that you’re ‘spiritual’ or ‘contemplative’ or whatever. It just says, ‘We allow for that by allowing our employees to be authentic.’”

“One employee has been here forever and he’s just about as far removed from any spiritual practice as you can imagine, and we adore him! It’s good, because we’re not all clones of each other. If you look at what we feel and believe, we’re pretty diverse.”

“There are certainly people here that you wouldn’t think of as outwardly ‘new age-y,’ they’re not vibing some kind of ‘I’m alternative and different.’ I think it is amazing that there really is quite a bit of diversity around that here. It’s very unique.”

2) Being all of who you are at work can be a messy process!
A workplace that allows you to bring all the parts of you to your job can also bring up many more personal issues. This is not always a pleasant or easy process, individually or collectively. The integration of contemplative practices and other interpersonal techniques allows for people to “work through” these issues, and there is far less separation between one’s job and one’s personal life. Some people love this chance to work on their personal issues within the workplace, others feel it’s inappropriate,
and others focus on the difference between what people say they value and how they actually behave, especially company leaders.

To deal with this spectrum of perspectives, Sounds True organizational culture - from the CEO through nearly all the staff - has adopted a stance of allowing people to engage with these practices as much or as little as they feel comfortable. Good communication skills are emphasized, and training in this area is provided. Even so, in the course of the company’s history, there have been a small number of employees who very early on decided this wasn’t the right work environment for them and they subsequently quit.

“It’s not easy to be mindful all the time...It’s easier to hide out and not be challenged, like in my old job. It was easier to get mad and go home and be mad at people and not like them, because then I didn’t have to be engaged with them. I didn’t have to go up and say what was bothering me about the relationship, or apologize. So it really calls you to be a more mindful and better human being.”

“Sometimes, it is easier to go into a corporate setting where there’s structure. You know, you talk about work, and this is how you dress, and this is how your office is. It’s easier in some ways for some people to operate in that structure. There have been employees who just can’t work here. They’re here for two weeks and they’re gone. I think they’re used to a lot of structure. We do our absolute best to provide good job descriptions and help people be good managers, but I think that a lot of people aren’t used to ‘what does that mean that I can just be myself, or that all these people are just being themselves?!’”

3) The Hearth
Every workplace has a physical location that acts as a magnet for employees; this location often takes on significant emotional symbolism as well. At Sounds True, nearly everyone told us stories about the kitchen as gathering place - one person even called it “the Hearth.” The kitchen and the activities that take place in it - cooking clubs, bread baking, staff parties - were the primary way that people had a sense of community across different teams and departments.

There’s a contemplative aspect to this - Sounds True CEO Tami Simon told a story about how the kitchen came to play such a key role. In the process of planning for the company’s new office building several years ago, Tami wanted to put a stove in the staff kitchen. The architect told her, “Businesses don’t have stoves. Nobody has
enough time to cook or bake. They all use microwaves.” But Tami thought that someone “might want to bake a potato or something,” felt it was important, and insisted that a stove be installed. Since then, the kitchen has become the central gathering place of the company - a place where people hang around and talk to each other much longer than the time it takes to microwave a potato. As a result, many in-depth lunchtime discussions, exchanges of ideas, and community building have taken place while breaking bread together.

“I feel so much community in the kitchen. It’s a hub of community and an extension of that sense of family that I personally feel here, cooking and eating together. The fact that they put in such a cool, complete kitchen says a lot about trying to extend that sense of community.”

“The lunch room is a great place for community. In a home, traditionally, the stove is the hearth, the place of warmth. At parties, people always gather in the kitchen. Here at Sounds True, it’s also a really great place to talk to Tami. She’s out of her ‘boss office.’ When she’s in the kitchen it feels like a really safe space to talk with her. I can see how a lot of ideas would come out of there.”

4) The Crisis
Several years ago, Sounds True went through a business crisis that continues to imprint the organizational culture. The company was, in a sense, a victim of its own success, as it grew very quickly without having the infrastructure or business savvy at that time to support this growth. This resulted in having to lay off a large number of employees in 2000.

This period of learning and humility resulted in some important lessons: there’s no substitute for good business practices and skills, like financial planning, management, and tracking; and being a spiritual person is no guarantee of success. In fact, employees observed, sometimes contemplative or spiritual rhetoric can be an excuse for not dealing with the nuts and bolts of running a business, like having an effective budget. From that lesson has come a reframing of the role of business and financial practices in the company, with many of the employees that we interviewed
considering awareness of the company’s financial goals as a kind of mindfulness practice.

A number of the individuals hired in this new phase do not profess to have a contemplative practice, though they are supportive of the organization’s mission and values. At the time they were hired, priority was placed on their business acumen rather than their spiritual or contemplative background. Employees that we spoke with generally saw this transition to bring in more business and finance professionals as a positive move, but it is not unanimously. One person told us that he saw the company focusing more on finances and less on its core values. His observation was that the contemplative aspects were being “dampened” since the hiring of department leaders without a contemplative perspective.

“Very few of us came with any management training or skills...We are not necessarily that skilled in some of the people things, in terms of how decisions roll out that affect people’s lives. We have not, in the past, been so skillful in delivering that information and handling it in a way that was really aware of the human impact.”

5) Different experiences across teams
The experience of a contemplative organization varies depending on the department or team. At Sounds True, employees in the customer service and the warehouse had a very different experience of the workplace than did members of the creative and marketing teams, and their interpretation of contemplative or spiritual practices was also different. Because of the nature of their work and their job schedules, customer service and warehouse employees have less ability to benefit from the workplace flexibility and other perks that other departments get. Sounds True managers try to be sensitive to this dynamic to ensure that some departments do not feel excluded from these opportunities or from the organizational culture.

“Many of the things that are so great at Sounds True - like flexible work times - people who work in the Customer Service department don’t get to participate in. I imagine they may have great ideas about how to make things different.”
Sounds True’s Best Practices

1. Re-define the bottom line.
Sounds True’s core beliefs are rooted in Tami Simon’s initial inspiration for the company - she knew that, for her, the most important thing was not to make a lot of money, but to have time in her life for what was meaningful to her. This laid the foundation for the entire company to operate on a bottom line that encompasses employee satisfaction equally with profit. Sounds True can be said to operate on the “triple bottom line” principle that socially responsible businesses are adopting: economic value, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility. But in addition, Sounds True expands on this understanding to include the physical, spiritual, and emotional wellbeing of its own employees - a goal that is supported through the creation of a contemplative work environment.

One warehouse employee described her efforts to create a contemplative and open atmosphere in their department. To her, this meant creating a place that can include people’s happiness, sadness, anger, and other emotions. She said it is not uncommon to see someone upset or crying. “We all just accept that we are going to cry, and we are going to do our job. If we need to take 15 minutes to talk, we will do that. If you are having a bad emotional day, [we say] just go home, because you are going to mess everything up. Most places are about the bottom line, just getting it done... but we are willing to do whatever it takes to make the whole person happy.” She noted that this takes much effort.

One key to supporting this re-defined bottom line is that Sounds True has private investors rather than being a publicly owned company. The shareholders are employees and a number of other investors who support Sounds True’s mission and values. Tami noted that it would be more of a challenge to justify a contemplative workplace when you have to answer to larger numbers of investors who are interested only in a financial bottom line.

“We all affect the bottom line, and we all have an effect on the company being successful.”

“We’ve been stable in our growth and we make some money, but not a huge amount of money. I go to a conference like Spirit in Business and
people ask about how to measure if spirituality in business has an effect on productivity and efficiency. I don’t know if those are the best measures. What it’s brought us is much more sweetness, people caring about each other. And that effects how long people stay around.” (Tami)

2. Respect difference; don’t get too attached to forms.
“Contemplation” and “spirituality” can take many different forms for people. At Sounds True, contemplative practice is broadly defined and interpreted, allowing everyone room to find their place in relation to it. Some of these forms of practice include a 15-minute group reflection/meditation time at 11 am each day, yoga classes, and silence at the start of meetings. On an individual basis, people usually decorate their office areas to reflect their own spiritual interests. We saw desk areas adorned by Buddhist and Hindu art as well as Christian symbols. A large United States flag was posted on one office door. One cluster of employees enjoyed trying out new kinds of incense in their offices.

Nearly all the organizational practices offered are optional, or if they are a standard part of a meeting structure - such as the moment of silence to begin team meetings - there is an acknowledgment that people can do whatever they would like within that moment of (prayer, meditation, reflection, spacing out!).

The warehouse team has infrequent contact with the people in the main Sounds True building, and is a tightly knit group. For many of them, the most meaningful way to balance their work and lives and help reduce stress is not meditation, but more physical activities like playing basketball together on breaks, using the gym, going fishing, or playing on the company softball team. One of the shipping department employees described the warehouse staff as being comprised of a lot of athletes who like to do physical activities together to increase their sense of teamwork and community.

“It’s hard for me to incorporate that kind of stuff [silence to start meetings], because I don’t come from that culture. Maybe I just need to be a little more open to it. Like, the way I’m dressed right now, in my t-shirt and sweat pants from my bike ride, is not how I dressed when I first got here and I was still wearing slacks and a button-down shirt because I didn’t feel comfortable dressing any other way at work. So for me, it’s been a breaking-in process.”

“People can do whatever they wish with the silence - they can raise concerns before silence begins and ask for thoughts, prayers, or energy to be directed towards those concerned.”

“I don’t think that everyone who comes here has to be a meditator. I’m not even sure if meditation works! I’ve never been one to say to people, ‘Are you a spiritual practitioner?’ in an interview. But I have said things like, ‘What do you think of our core aspirations and what will you contribute to them?’”
“If you respect each other and you feel respected, then you can implement a lot of these other more spiritual things in a workplace without having to say they’re called something ‘new age-y.’”

3. Infuse communications with mindfulness.

Contemplative practice doesn’t stop at the meditation cushion. In a successful Contemplative Organization, the ability to communicate with mindfulness and care is essential. At Sounds True, this is especially true because, as noted, in an organizational culture that encourages people to bring their full selves into the workplace, situations and people who push the envelope will inevitably arise. This can be a source of friction or tension. What kinds of self expression are acceptable, what are not? How do you handle a situation where one person, in being their “authentic self,” is offensive to another person? A key to working with these tensions is supporting the use of skillful, direct communication.

Six of Sounds True’s twenty core values make reference to mindful communication and listening. The company places a high degree of importance in investing in this area for all employees, including managers. When we visited in June 2003, they had scheduled a training in Nonviolent Communication, an approach developed by Marshall Rosenberg, to offer people the tools to speak with each other constructively and work through conflicts.

Of the ten people we interviewed, eight mentioned communication skills as a major factor in the workplace. One employee commented that she has applied the communication skills she has learned by working at Sounds True to her relationships outside of work.

One aspect of mindful communication is transparency. Tami Simon told us that she believes transparency is “critical in all aspects of running a business.” She makes it a practice to not keep secrets and to be open as she can with employees. During the time when the company went through its financial and personnel crisis in 2000, she admitted to staff that she thought she had made bad decisions which had contributed to the crisis. Tami’s example has set the tone for the entire company. This can be seen as one of the aspects of contemplative practice - developing a healthy relationship with “not knowing” and with ambiguity.
One warehouse worker said that she used to believe that as a supervisor, she had to know everything and do everything, and if she didn’t she was a bad manager. But now she feels that the opposite is true. She will acknowledge that she doesn’t know something, but will try to find out the answer, or she asks the employee to find out. She noted that this makes both her and the staff happier.

“This is true. I have no idea what we’re doing, does anyone else have some ideas?”

“Thinking before you speak improves openness. This is also a contemplative practice.”

“We’ve had one or two situations where people have been offended by other people’s behavior. That’s where the direct communication comes in. With the allowance of being who you are has to also come being open to someone else’s feedback, to listen to them if they say something like, ‘Could you not use that language in front of me?’”

“When I came here, I committed to being here. I said, ‘I am taking this job because I’m going to be here for five to ten years.’ It’s made a difference in the way I look at people and the way I treat those relationships. If there is a conflict, I try to clean it up right away, or I meditate on it or talk to someone to get at my feelings about that. Sounds True offers the space to do that. It is expected that you will be mindful and respectful of each other, and that if you have a problem with someone, the first thing you do is talk to him about it.”

4. Create physical space for both reflection and community.

It’s important to create physical spaces for contemplation, meditation, and for community bonding (these won’t necessarily be the same space). A relatively small number of employees at Sounds True attend the group meditation time on the days we visited. But at many other times of the day, we noticed shoes outside the door. One woman in the customer service department used the meditation room to prepare for a difficult meeting; she said she found that it helped her to remain calm and to remember everything she needed to say. She suggested that creating a room on site dedicated solely to meditation or quiet time is important, even if an employee rarely uses it - simply providing a space that’s available for reflection shows caring on the part of the company leadership.

These spaces can be created intentionally by company or organizational leaders, but there should also be room and encouragement for spontaneous contemplative spaces to emerge. An altar - even if it is not called that - provides a place for people to share photos of family, friends, loved ones, animal companions. This helps to build a sense of community and a way for people to share symbols of what is important in their life, both in and outside of the workplace.
“Sounds True supports people by allowing us to have the space for the gym. It’s not just about spiritual products and meditation, but the bigger picture of taking care of yourself in all ways. I think the gym is an extension of that.”

“I love the altar, in particular. People put things on there that are meaningful for them, like pictures of spiritual teachers or families. It really embodies the elements of spirituality and contemplation here.”

“This little area represents being alone here, if you want to. It evolved as something unspoken...if you’re at the bench over there, you’re more
approachable, but if you’re at this bench, people assume you want some quiet time.”

5. Good business and financial practices are an opportunity for reflection and awareness.
Often, organizations that started with a spiritual orientation or have a founder with this perspective tend to see finances, money, and other material concerns as unrelated to spirituality, or even incompatible with it. Sounds True learned the hard way that this dichotomy can sink a company - particularly a for-profit one. During the company’s financial crisis, there were a significant number of employee lay-offs. Prior to this period, almost none of the Sounds True staff were trained or skilled in accounting practices, financial and business analysis, or management techniques. The crisis was a wake-up call to bring in people with expertise in these areas and to integrate these practices into the organizational culture.

Practices like open books management and employee stockholder options have been keys to making the transition from what one employee called a “crazy” company to more financial and organizational stability. Sounds True managers and staff have found ways to think of these practices as an integral part of a mission-driven contemplative organization rather than antithetical to it. Some of the staff we interviewed talked about making a practice of looking at the profit and sales graph that is posted prominently in the kitchen to be aware of how the company was doing. An accountant told us that he views his mindful attention to detail on the balance sheet as a part of keeping things running smoothly. Perhaps a corollary from Buddhist teachings is the idea that the practice of precepts and conduct (sila) is the foundation of stability, and must be in place before the other fruits of meditation practice become manifest.

“There can be a spiritual aversion to looking at money. At one point, there were more people here like that. It was painful to a lot of people, and we had to get the message across that understanding money is good! That was a big switch for us.”

6. Disseminate contemplative values through leaders and at a grassroots level.
Successful integration of contemplative values in the workplace begins with leadership. One employee spoke of how important CEO Tami Simon’s influence is on
the company: “She’s created a place that is a reflection of herself. It inspires creativity because she is very creative; it inspires exploration because she explores; it inspires openness because she’s always questioning herself.”

But paradoxically, while it’s important to have leaders who hold contemplative values, those ideas and practices shouldn’t be imposed from top-down. One key to the successful embracing of contemplative values into the organizational culture at Sounds True was for more people than just Tami to model them. Another important factor was creating an organizational structure where power and decision-making were de-centralized and distributed through more levels of management. One of the lessons of the Crisis period for Tami was that she learned to become, in her words, a “star” in the constellation of Sounds True rather than the “sun.”

Tami and the management staff also created channels for communication so that ideas initiated by employees could be adopted and implemented, e.g. the staff’s suggestion to build a gym.

“There was something very organic about the way the gym unfolded, something unique. It wasn’t like the executive committee said, ‘We want a gym for a benefit for the employees.’ It was more like the employees came together and said ‘We want this for us, and we’re going to make it happen.’”

7. Don’t take yourself too seriously!
One of the biggest challenges of being a contemplative or spiritually-oriented organization is saying that you are one! There is always a difference between aspiration and reality. This can, at times, be a source of frustration for some Sounds True employees. The degree to which a company falls short of these ideals, and the extent to which language describing the company is “inflated” to make it seem closer to the ideal than the reality, are factors in this frustration. One employee questioned if the company leaders really lived up to the idea that “every person in the organization carries wisdom,” because that person had witnessed others whose ideas were not listened to. But others appreciate the attempt. As one employee said, “I’d rather work in a place that has these aspirations and falls a little short than one that doesn’t even try or care about them.”

One important element in counteracting this tendency is recognizing that there is no endpoint in the process of creating a Contemplative Organization - there is always room for improvement. This is explicitly named in the core values - “Sounds True is a ‘work-in-progress’, and our success depends on our ability to continually experiment
and fine-tune our efforts by trying new things, inventing new products, developing new systems.”

Finding a balance between work and reflection, between the profound and the profane, is another key to successful integration. At Sounds True, we witnessed many healthy doses of humor, irreverence, and not taking oneself or the company too seriously as a “spiritual” or “contemplative” organization. It was very clear here that the workplace is not a monastery! The meditation room is located right off of a busy hallway and in back of several offices. Sitting in it, we could hear the sounds of people working, talking, and laughing.

“Companies should know that they won’t become perfect with contemplative practice.”

“It’s hard to practice what you preach, because we’re still people. And when you have a lot of creative folks, you have a lot of egos. It helps to have some awareness, but it’s not necessarily easy. Another shadow side can be believing your own ‘shit’ too much, believing that we’re ‘spiritual.’ It’s easy to get sucked into that without doing the hard work to make sure that happens. It’s easy to get caught up in your own glamour. If you claim to be something, you have a responsibility to work at it. That’s where the challenge comes in.”

“I’ve found spiritual communities to not be very satisfying because there’s always a rule on how you have to be. Even if it’s being open, you have to be open. Perhaps because this is a workplace, it seems to me like there is more balance and it is less limiting, because you have to allow people to get their work done. It’s not just about sitting in a circle and talking about your feelings. There is a product. I think that might counter that limiting factor. I don’t think anyone expects anyone else to be a saint. We do expect each other to be open to someone discussing their emotions. We just try to be as honest as we can and trust others we work with to do the same. It’s always a work in progress.”
Summary
Sounds True has several elements working in its favor to support its operating as a Contemplative Organization - a founder who has clearly set the tone for embracing contemplative values in a broad way; a product line that draws employees who have an openness to these concepts; and the financial backing of private investors and employee shareholders who support the company’s core values.

Even so, Sounds True has had to navigate through the challenges that face such an organization, and after 18 years, it serves as a “seasoned” example of integrating contemplative values in the workplace. One lesson that the company seems to have incorporated especially well is an understanding of both the potential and the limitations of contemplative practice in the workplace. The result is a work environment where morale is generally high, humor is in abundance, and employees tend to stay for the long term - all this in addition to being a fiscally responsible and profitable company.

“The word that I use now when I talk about what we’re trying to do at Sounds True is ‘love.’ I think it means more to people than spirit. It’s more emotional, it has a feeling quality to it. ‘Spirit’ sounds like religion or it’s abstract. ‘Contemplative’ is a nice word, but it sounds like you have to be quiet and it doesn’t necessarily fit with business activities. But everybody gets this idea of ‘love.’ We’re going to treat each other in loving ways, we’re going to communicate with each other with love, we’re going to put love into our work, we’re going to put our loving selves into what we’re doing.”

Tami Simon, CEO, Sounds True

The Sounds True Difference
We asked employees to tell us how their work experience at Sounds True differed from previous jobs they had held. Some of their responses:
Accounting Team employee: “At Sounds True, there is lots of open communication, which helps a lot. I feel like we’re all part of one team, it feels like we’re all steering the ship. It’s not as high pressure as my last job...It gives me more of a chance to enjoy my life outside of work.”

Creative Team employee: “[When I first started here] I was struck by what an unusual balance it was, between people who really were authentically friendly and warm. It was a very comfortable atmosphere, people dressed the way they wanted to dress and the offices felt comfortable. And at the same time, it felt very professional, like people were good at what they did and cared about it a lot, and worked hard.”

Warehouse employee: Described the two jobs as “night and day” experiences. At her last job, she was exhausted by the end of the day and needed to rest a half hour before doing anything else. Here, she is proud of the work and her crew. She gets tired on this job too, but not exhausted mentally.

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**Postscript**

We sent the report back to the Sounds True staff for their reflections and corrections. We received these comments:

“I think it’s interesting that back in June, we were really looking at “how do we be mindful *and* be for-profit?” and when all was said and done we had one of our best financial years ever!!! Perhaps that is worth mentioning to Gina and Maia...?”

“I thought this was interesting as well! We did have a good year indeed with very low turnover and high morale!”
Windhorse Associates

Windhorse Associates
Northampton, MA
www.windhorseassociates.org

Date founded: 1981 in Boulder, CO; 1993 in Northampton
Number of employees: 28

Budget: $1,163,000 (2003)
Interim Co-Executive Directors:
Michael Herrick and Victoria Yoshen

Mission statement: Windhorse Associates, Inc., is a coalition of professionals, consumers, and family members committed to providing a comprehensive range of services to disturbed individuals and their families. Our treatment approach is based upon the recognition that significant recovery from major mental disturbances is possible when catalyzed by authentic therapeutic relationships in home settings. To promote recovery, each individual treatment program is designed to attend to the physical, social, mental, and spiritual aspects of the whole person.
Background

“Windhorse” refers to a mythic horse, famous throughout central Asia, who rides in the sky and is the symbol of a person’s energy and discipline to uplift himself. Windhorse is literally an energy in the body and mind, which can be aroused in the service of healing an illness or overcoming depression. (Podvoll, 2003, p. 224)

Windhorse Associates, founded in 1981, is a nonprofit treatment and education organization with a “whole person” approach to recovery from serious psychiatric disturbances. The first Windhorse center was established in Boulder, Colorado, by Naropa Institute faculty members Jeff and Molly Fortuna and Dr. Edward Podvoll, psychiatrist and author of The Seduction of Madness (reprinted in 2003 under the title Recovering Sanity). Through their work at Naropa, the founders developed the skills of mindfulness and awareness which they integrated with their approach to assisting persons with psychiatric disabilities.

Windhorse has strong roots in the Tibetan Buddhist Shambhala tradition and the teachings of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and much of its treatment philosophy and practices are derived from these teachings. The cultivation of mindful attention to body, mind, and environment and the development of compassion continue to be core values of the Windhorse philosophy of healing. The Northampton center was incorporated as a private, nonprofit, nondenominational healthcare organization in 1993.

Windhorse’s treatment approach is unique among mental health providers and has been documented in the Journal of Contemplative Psychotherapy and as segment in the Visionaries documentary series aired on PBS. The treatment focus is client-centered and extends beyond symptoms to encompass all aspects of the person’s situation, including their environmental, physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual well-being. The goal of this integrative approach is to optimize medication

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<th>Best Practices at Windhorse</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Ten skills of Basic Attendance.</td>
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<td>2. Group Contemplative Practice and moment of silence</td>
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<td>3. Create feedback loops for mindful decision making.</td>
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<td>4. Use practices that support the mind/body connection.</td>
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<td>5. Work with space awareness.</td>
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regimes within the context of other practices such as good nutrition, stress reduction, rest, and exercise.

Another unique aspect of Windhorse is the concept of “mutual recovery.” This is a fundamental assumption that treatment is an opportunity for everyone’s recovery and learning, not just the client. The entire Windhorse community - clients, clinicians, administrative staff, volunteers, and board members - is envisioned as being on a collective healing journey.

Clients in the residential program live in the community in home-like environments, often a private apartment shared with a live-in staff housemate. The team is the essential unit at Windhorse. Teams are usually comprised of the client, team leader, team counselor, nurse, psychotherapist, and housemate; the specific make-up depends on the client’s needs. Some teams also include a peer counselor. Team members meet regularly with the client, often using Basic Attendance shifts (see more about Basic Attendance in the Core Values section). Family members are included as collaborators in treatment, and supported in their own healing journey.

Windhorse receives most of its funding from private payments; there is very little insurance money to cover the kinds of treatment it designs for clients. The Windhorse approach takes time and intensive staffing and, as one employee notes, “Managed care is not about taking time.” Board members do fundraising to make some financial aid available to clients and their families, but accessibility to treatment for those who can’t afford it is an issue that staff, board, and the larger Windhorse community are grappling with.

The core of Windhorse’s work with clients is based on contemplative practice and awareness. That philosophy is extended to employees as well, and is expressed in this description of “Benefits of Group Contemplative Practice:”

“We share commonly held beliefs about the benefits that contemplative practice can bring us in our work at Windhorse: reduced stress, greater calm and peacefulness in the midst of chaos, increased ability to concentrate, awareness of the breath which develops the ability to be present. We say that meditation is the ground of our work because we rely on it to stay healthy and stay open to often difficult and challenging growth experiences.”

The Windhorse staff is invited to participate in a variety of practices in the workplace:

- GCP - Group Contemplative Practice, half-hour mindfulness meditation time, offered four times a week, are open to staff as part of training - open to staff only
- Tonglen: Sending/taking practice
- Silent “moment” before and at the end of meetings
- Ending meetings ten minutes before their “official” end time to give people space to transition
- Yoga group weekly
• Community Council Circle four times a year; Family Council; council style check-ins frequently used at team meetings
• Maitri practice (space awareness)
• Tending to space (keeping spaces neat)
• Basic Attendance skills

The Research Visit
Because Windhorse is located in the same town as The Center for Contemplative Mind (Northampton, MA), the research team took advantage of this proximity to visit with the staff over a more extended period of time. Maia and Gina spent a combined total of five days with the Windhorse staff during a two-week period in November 2003.

Windhorse employees are accustomed to having researchers as part of their surroundings; others have studied the effectiveness of their clinical approach with clients. Our research focus was different in that we wanted to learn how contemplative practices affected the way staff worked and related to each other, and the kind of office environment it cultivated.

The organization had just moved into its new office space in September, so at the time of our visit, people were still settling in and defining how various rooms and spaces would be used. This would turn out to be a prominent theme in our findings.

During our time at the office, we attended a number of meetings (the all-staff meeting, a steering committee meeting, a housemate meeting) joined in the group practices like GCP and yoga, and shared lunch and other informal moments with staff. In addition, we conducted 11 informal interviews that lasted between 15 – 45 minutes each (see interview questions in appendix).

On the first morning of the visit, we met with the entire Windhorse staff to collect demographic information and to conduct a group inquiry about their general impressions about working at the organization. We also invited people to take cameras and to photograph the people, places, and things that were meaningful to them in the work environment. During the course of our visit, we brought the photos back and asked them to tell us the story behind their pictures.
**Employee Demographics**

Number of employees: 28 (not all present at this meeting)

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Eighteen employees (out of the 26 present) said they have their own personal contemplative practices. Practices named:

- Sitting meditation
- Sufi practice
- Zen
- Vipassana
- Walking meditation
- Tibetan mindfulness meditation
- Music
- Yoga
- Running
- Painting
- Breathwork
- Mindful weight training
- Authentic movement
- Contact improvisation
- Small ceremonies
- Rosary
- Martial arts
Core Values
Windhorse does not have a set of core working values, per se, but we soon realized that Basic Attendance serves this purpose. This set of ten skills was developed by Dr. Edward Podvoll, the founder of the original Windhorse program in Boulder, in collaboration with other Windhorse clinicians, and came out of his own life experience as well as his Buddhist practice in the Shambhala tradition. According to text on the Windhorse website:

“Basic Attendance is a fundamental skill practiced by Windhorse clinicians in the course of daily activities which is used to focus awareness on the immediate needs of the moment. Basic Attendance has the integrative effect of gently grounding attention in physical reality and strengthening the empathic bond between client and staff. The practice of Basic Attendance cultivates the moments of clarity, humor, and relaxation found in even the most confused state. These ‘islands of clarity’, when recognized and valued, become the seeds of recovery.”

One person who has been affiliated with Windhorse for eight years noted that the Basic Attendance skills are specific to working with clients, but have also served as a philosophy for working with each other. While the skills are most often used in reference to individuals, they can also be seen as ways people relate to the organizational structure and to each other.

10 Skills of Basic Attendance

1. **Being Present:** Basic mindfulness-awareness in the present moment.

2. **Letting In:** Deep empathic resonance. Cultivated through *tonglen* practice.

3. **Bringing Home:** Basic synchronization of body, mind, and environment. Focus on the level of household.

4. **Letting Be:** Dropping therapeutic ambition and accepting a person as they are.

5. **Bringing Along:** Inviting and encouraging a person to venture out into the world/community. Can include sharing our own world (i.e. family, home) with client.

6. **Recognizing:** Noticing and encouraging “islands of clarity”. Everyone has a basic spark of intelligence and wakefulness and a history of expressing it. We can focus on this rather than pathology and failure.

7. **Finding Energy:** Finding a passionate point of sensory contact with the world. Opening to beauty.

8. **Leaning In:** Encouraging people to take responsibility for their own lives. Discipline and exertion.
9. Discovering Friendship: Relationship becomes genuine, more than just therapeutic. We call this the “therapist-friend dilemma”.

10. Mutual Learning: Doing basic attendance is not just a way to help others recover. It provides opportunities for our own personal growth, i.e. recovery.

The first morning that we met with the full staff, we asked, “Which of these values do you feel you are able to live up to with ease? Which of them take more effort to live up to?” This question sparked a group reflection on the relationship between the two skills of “Letting Be” and “Leaning In,” and how this played out in their work life.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values that we uphold with relative ease</th>
<th>Values that take more effort</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Letting Be</td>
<td>• Leaning In</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Being Present</td>
<td>“Leaning In requires great skill - this is the space where one’s own agenda can most manifest.”</td>
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“Letting Be and Being With is our default position.”

Several people noted that as an organization, Windhorse tends to operate primarily in Letting Be mode - accepting a person or situation just as it is and dropping “therapeutic ambition,” or in the case of the organization, dropping ideas or expectations about the way the organization “should be.” The group noted that the skill of Letting Be was very similar to meditation, a practice that most were familiar with. Some expressed occasional frustration with this default mode, and wanted to have more of a sense of “things moving forward,” e.g. making decisions.

Leaning In, on the other hand, is a more outward directed energy that asks for a person or the organization to take responsibility for itself and facilitates change. This can be tricky territory. As one person remarked, “Leaning In requires great skill - this is the space where one’s own agenda can most manifest.” She pointed out that there is a need to have a strong relationship with the person so that Leaning In is truly collaborative work, and doesn’t become controlling.

People noted a tension between Letting Be and Leaning In. Several people noted that ideally, Windhorse is trying to create a dialectic between those two aspects. One person said that Recognizing - noticing and encouraging “islands of clarity” - is a key skill in working with this dialectic.
Themes
These are some of the themes that emerged from our field observations, participation in the work days, and interviews with Windhorse employees.

1) What counts as contemplative practice? What role does Buddhism play?
At the first morning meeting in which we introduced ourselves to the staff, there was a great deal of interest in our definition of contemplative practice. Later, it became apparent that this is a relevant issue at Windhorse and people were curious about how we have dealt with it at the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. Interviews and informal discussions with staff revealed some tension in the organization about the role of contemplative practice and how it is defined.

Everyone seems to appreciate the Windhorse approach to working with clients on their journey toward recovery, and how different it is from the standard mental health system approach. Staff respect the various backgrounds that clients come from and do not expect clients to meditate or engage in other contemplative practices. In contrast, there is an expectation that clinical staff must have a practice, although there are a number of questions around this issue, including: “What is required of us as employees?” “What counts as practice?” “How ‘Buddhist’ do these practices need to be?” “How much room is there for other practices and traditions?” There seems to be degree of tension present around these questions.

There appear to be at least two contingents in the organization: one that feels it is important to stay true to the organization’s Tibetan Buddhist roots and defines contemplative practice fairly narrowly within that context; another which has a broader view of what “contemplative” means and for whom the definition is more open.

For many staff in the first group, work is seen as an opportunity to make practice manifest. One employee who had been a Zen monk in Korea for several years found that he wanted to keep those principles alive when he returned to the life of a layperson. This was a big reason why he chose to work at Windhorse. Another, also a Buddhist practitioner, said that before he worked at Windhorse, “My life was not really happy professionally, but [when I started working here] it was almost as if my life was coming together...Now I have a workplace that fits my personal beliefs and practices.”

Others, who do not identify as Buddhists and for whom meditation is not a central part of their life, see the work environment differently and express a wish to define spirituality in their own personal way. Clinical staff, who are required in their job description to have a contemplative practice, also tended to have different perspectives from administrative staff. These divisions do not seem to be antagonistic, but they do exist.
“Because the roots of Windhorse were based on this philosophy, sometimes it seems to me that there is a little push towards Buddhism.”

“One of the things that seems most challenging is that we have a history...we have a tradition that we came from...The history of this goes back to the people who started it, Shambhala Buddhist practitioners who were trained at Naropa, who had no qualms about saying “We’re doing Buddhist practice.” We’re not in Boulder anymore. So the challenge is how to redefine or broaden the definition of what contemplative practice is so that we’re recognizing all kinds of traditions and practices that accomplish the same thing. If we open it up too much, we may lose something really important, but if we don’t open it up, then people feel excluded.”

“I have my own ways of how to stay centered, and it’s not currently sitting [meditation] or any of the things I heard you describe. So to me it’s interesting, it’s a tension that the organization holds, that I happen to be sitting on one side of.”

“I think there is some feeling in this agency about having a ‘common practice.’ We all manage to continue to navigate and not to have a big blow up...When Windhorse came to Northampton, we made a new mission statement which involved some non-Buddhist planners, so whether we can teach Windhorse and practice Windhorse without its whole history is kind of weird, uncertain. I think that uncertainty still persists.”

On an individual basis, several people seem to work with this tension by trying to hold “practice” with lightness:

“We do a moment of silence at the beginning of every meeting...It’s supposed to be relaxing, but we get into this “position.” I just try not to do that. I try to be relaxed and comfortable, because that’s what ‘the moment’ is about. I try to watch that kind of stuff...Sometimes there is this whole ‘this is the way’ belief and that can be a little frustrating.”

“I’m certainly interested in Buddhism. But I prefer to do it at my own speed and my own pace, take my own little steps, and dip my toes into the water before I dive in...I’m a very practical person in that...I like to know how it’s going to work before I get there. That’s been my path, fairly different than a lot of people.”

2) Everything is up for negotiation! An organization in transition.
In 2002, after 10 years of leadership, Windhorse founders and co-directors Jeff and Molly Fortuna decided it was time to move on and left their positions. This has led to a tremendous period of change for the Windhorse, which is still rippling through the organization. Initially, the board conducted a search for a new executive director, but it soon became apparent that the organization had to clarify its own needs and directions before bringing in someone new. Two current employees, Victoria and Michael, stepped forward with a proposal to act as interim co-directors for a two-year
period. Because they have risen up from the ranks of their peers, a collaborative and fluid model of leadership is emerging. But within this model, there is plenty of room for clarifying how decisions are made and how leadership is held.

We observed this transitional energy emerging almost from the moment we stepped in the door. Within the first hour of our arrival, three people told us about the conversations revolving around the “Sacred Space” room (also known as the “Common Room”) and how it would be used and decorated. Some of the questions were specifically about the room but metaphorically applied to the organization as a whole in this phase of its existence:

- How do we use space?
- What kind of language do we use to name space? (“Sacred Space” vs. “Common Room”)
- Who gets to decide?
- Who decides who decides? What is Windhorse’s decision making structure?

Other changes are in the mix as well. In the past two years, the staff has nearly doubled in size. One person told us that the organizational chart “used to fit on one page, and it had everybody’s name on it. Now it needs two pages, one for the board, one for the staff, and instead of names, now it only lists job titles…We moved into really thinking of it beyond the person.”

Contemplative practices and reflective tools play a key role in exploring how to navigate the issues that arise from these transitions. Many people we spoke with named Council Circle process as an important forum for letting voices be heard.

“The whole organization changed so much when Jeff and Molly left. Jeff and Molly were, in theory, like mom and dad. They pretty much started this program. When they said something, it was pretty much not questioned—it was just we did what they said. When they left, we were suddenly like kids running around without their parents, going, ‘whee!’ And then we had this period of mourning, ‘Now they’re gone, what are we going to do? Are we lost or are we okay?’ And when that subsided we had a period of leadership…but it’s not back to the same level that it was…It’s been a big transition.”

“We have co-directors here. There is a hierarchy, yes, but we also care what people think, and it works really well that way. But people need to make these decisions, financially and business-wise.”
“There is still a level of hierarchy in this business, there has to be. Not to have that [when Jeff and Molly departed] kind of left us dangling. We needed to make sure the world didn’t see us as a free radical floating around in the universe, because we’re radical enough as it is.”

3) Windhorse is a community that has congealed into an organization. Windhorse initially arose out of a very simple, but radical idea - that the healing relationship is the key component in “recovering sanity.” The emphasis on mutual recovery, relationships, and community, all present in Dr. Podvoll’s original vision, are the foundations of the Windhorse philosophy.

Over the years, as the organization has developed beyond an idea and grown into an actual program, the challenge has been how to construct an infrastructure around the idea of relationships and community. This has meant taking a naturally fluid concept and fitting it into the complexities of management and supervision issues, accountability to state and federal health agencies, and financial realities. All this has resulted in more formality around personnel, paperwork, etc. One person who knew Ed Podvoll well said, “He never had this in mind!”

Even so, much of that fluidity still exists and the emphasis on relationship continues. Because one of Windhorse’s main goals is to assist people to relate to others and to their environment in a healthy, functional way, many of the practices are relational, such as Council Practice and many of the Basic Attendance skills.

Intuition is also highly valued and very present here. Additionally, people tend to feel that they can try on different roles, and don’t need to be trapped in one particular role in the organization. One person started as the front office manager, then left after three years to go on a month-long retreat. When he returned, he worked as a housemate with a client. Eventually, he ended up as the bookkeeper.

“It’s been amazing to work in a place where they assume you’re going to grow and learn, and you don’t have to know it all.”

“I was intuitively called to knock at the door. I was working at another mental health organization and...I decided not to stay there. I went on unemployment and was looking for something else. I actually knew someone who had been a housemate here and even though she didn’t have the best experience, I just came in the door...The front desk person said, ‘There aren’t really any jobs here, but send in your resume.’ It just felt like a really good place.”
4) Is it a job or a calling?
There are different “generations” of staff here, ranging from a few months to nearly ten years of employment and, along with that, different interpretations of the Windhorse mission and perceptions of the job. The first generation, a number of who are still here, began with the original Windhorse vision and worked alongside the founders. For this group, the Buddhist connection seems especially meaningful and there is a sense of viewing one’s work as a manifestation of one’s practice. Those hired a few years after Windhorse’s Northampton beginnings (in 1993) comprise a “second” generation, still familiar with the founding principles and community but one step removed from the origins. A third generation is now emerging, with more employees who don’t identify themselves as Buddhist. This has given rise to the question “Is Windhorse a calling or a job?” – one that never would have been asked in the early years of the organization, when the unspoken assumption was that work was a manifestation of one’s meditation practice and went beyond a mere paycheck.

One person, who had worked in corporations and then made a big career change to come to Windhorse a few years ago said that she never imagined that she would find a place like Windhorse. She always thought she’d have to create it herself. Another person on the clinical staff responded that for her, it’s a calling, but also sometimes a job, in that it’s important for her to draw boundaries around it and what she takes home. She said, “In many ways, it’s both.” Another clinician said that “calling” didn’t feel like quite the right word, but she did feel that it resonated with who she is.

“I believe that it was a calling in that I really believe that in my life I’ll end up in the right place. It’s definitely part of my path, my spiritual practice that I can be in this place. I don’t know how long I can be here, because this is hard work and intense work. It’s very dynamic and fascinating, but it can be very hard at times.”

 “[This job is] a calling. If I was doing it for the money, I wouldn’t be here!”

“There are only a few of us now that are on the Buddhist path. In general, it’s changing, it’s getting more eclectic. Sometimes I want it to be more contemplative and there are other people who don’t want that because it scares them and they don’t like it. So there we are and we’re trying to live together. I have to come this way and they have to come that way so we can have some basic sanity together.”

5. Authenticity and “Realness”
The nature of work at Windhorse, with clients who are sometimes in extreme mental states (staff do not use psychiatric diagnostic terms such as “psychotic” or
“schizophrenic”), can be very intense. In order to cultivate the kind of recovery that is the goal of treatment here, people are called to a high degree of authenticity and honesty in their interactions, both with clients and with each other. Issues are usually “out in the open.” We noticed this right away in our conversations and interviews with staff; people were very willing to talk to us about both what they loved about the organization and where the tensions were.

“I don’t think there are any huge, dark secrets here, because we are so open. I don’t think there’s anyone who’s got trouble with how things are here, although tensions certainly do happen.”

“It’s very intense to have difficulties in a relationship. I think it’s more intense when you working with extreme states and are trying to create authentic relationships, which is what we’re trying to do here. Which means we’re not trying to be nice, or setting boundaries, or just making things work. Instead, I really state my needs and what I need from that other person...People are usually trying to make things copasetic or not starting a fight. We do that too - we hope sincerely not to always be in the thick of things - but as much as possible, we are being sincere”.

“I remember at a Conference, there was a panel of clients and J. was one of them. It was a really fascinating experience. I asked this question of the panel: ‘What do you all think of this mutual recovery process -- we’re working on ourselves as much as we’re working on you?’ J. was the only one who spoke. He said, ‘I’m paying a lot of money here and I don’t want you working on your problems, I want you to work on my problems.’ ...I think that there was something very real to him, something funny, but something very real.”
Windhorse’s Best Practices

1. Ten Skills of Basic Attendance.
Basic Attendance is at the cornerstone of the Windhorse treatment approach. But as we noted earlier, Windhorse staff also apply these skills to their work with each other. Basic Attendance is so fundamental to the organization that initially when we asked about group practices, no one brought it up. It was only near the end of our first meeting with the entire staff that one person noticed this and speculated that Basic Attendance was so much a part of their work approach that they didn’t think of it as something separate.

Basic Attendance shifts with clients are typically three hours long, and can involve anything from taking a walk in the woods to relaxing at home and listening to music together. During this period of time, the counselor tries to maintain awareness of the ten skills and practice them in relation to the client. One clinician described a Basic Attendance shift with her client:

“When N. and I spend time, he likes to listen to music, more heavier metal, it’s not really my taste. So I’ve spent a lot of time with N. sitting on his couch trying to let this music into my awareness and see how it can be entertaining...I don’t often just sit and listen to music, so he teaches me to sit and allow music to be there without other interruptions and to really appreciate it. I’ve been working with N. for two years and it took me a whole year to settle into that and not be like ‘What are we doing?’ And to realize ‘Oh we’re listening to music!’ And that’s the way it goes. And that’s part of our mutual learning. And it’s sort of playful too”.

In the work setting, Basic Attendance isn’t one technique, but rather a set of principles which permeates everybody’s consciousness in all kinds of interactions. Basic Attendance serves as a “common ground” and a reference point that everyone can share, no matter how they define contemplative practice.

“We’re trying to relate with work and what we’re doing here and being present in the moment with what is as it is...One of the original intentions of the work here was that this is a basic teaching of Buddhism, but I think a basic call of all religions and spiritual traditions is to be of service, to be of benefit, to speak to the higher good of any given situation. We talk a lot about that, and that’s a common ground...In Basic Attendance, the focus is to be of service and the ground beyond that is mindfulness. Every one of those ten skills, if you look at it, is rising out of being present.”
One essential concept embedded in the Basic Attendance skills is **tonglen**, a Tibetan practice that has been translated to mean “sending and receiving” or “giving and taking.” Windhorse literature refers to a passage from Pema Chodron to explain **tonglen**: “We breathe in what is painful and unwanted with the sincere wish that we and others could be free of suffering. As we do so, we drop the story line that goes along with the pain and feel the underlying energy. We completely open our hearts and minds to whatever arises. Exhaling, we send out relief from the pain with the intention that we and others be happy.”

Windhorse staff keep the idea of **tonglen** in the back of their minds and use it as a lens through which to view many of their interactions and issues that arise in the workplace. One clinician talked about how she holds an awareness of **tonglen** with her co-workers and clients:

“I think that people are really always working with their minds and that people are in pain and are suffering someway. Tonglen is a form to work with it, address it, and to move with it. Being in the position that I’m in, I often see where the tensions are and where the conflicts are…. So there’s the suffering, but at the same time, there’s also the basic goodness and they’re always mixing. It’s the interplay of that all the time. I don’t know if people think about that a lot. We’re trying to be truly who we are and sometimes we do it well, and sometimes it’s hard and painful. That’s what I see all the time on a subtle level. That’s what I love about Windhorse is the permission to say that this exists.”

2. **Group Contemplative Practice and the moment of silence.**
One long-time employee noted that there’s more to creating a contemplative organization than simply saying that you want to have one. He said, “What’s important is creating the structures and the space here for that to happen, rather than just saying ‘Let’s have a contemplative attitude.’” At Windhorse, two structures that support reflective space in the workplace are Group Contemplative Practice and a moment of silence.

Windhorse invites all staff to attend a half-hour session of Group Contemplative Practice (GCP), which is offered four times a week. Clinical staff is required to attend at least one GCP a week. All other staff is encouraged to come to GCP, though there are times when people who would like to be there can’t make it, such as the front desk person who needs to stay in the front office area if no one else is available to monitor the lobby. For part-time employees, one GCP a week is counted toward their paid work hours. Full-time employees are compensated for attending up to two GCPs a week.
GCP is held in the Common Room (or the Sacred Space room, depending on who you’re talking to!), which is empty except for a pile of meditation cushions, zabutons (meditation mats), and yoga mats stacked in a corner. A vase of flowers and a small set of meditation hand bells rest on the ledge of one of the room’s windows. When people arrive for GCP, the leader (usually a senior staff person) has set up the cushions and everyone takes a space for themselves. The leader sits in the front of the room and rings the bell three times to signal the start of the period. About halfway through the time, the leader rings the bell twice, then about five minutes later, twice again. This is the signal for people to silently practice tonglen visualization and breathing.

One administrative staff person spoke of how much she appreciated the chance to attend GCP:

“The GCP is a period of time where it doesn’t matter if your phone rings and it doesn’t matter if someone is looking for you because it will wait. You just stop. You’re not only allowed to stop, you’re encouraged...I really think that it would change the productiveness of industry and it changes people’s ability to communicate. If you have something on your mind and you sit with it for a few minutes, whether you sit with it intentionally, or even not intentionally and sitting trying not to be with it, it changes your perspective on a problem or issue.”

Another technique that encourages people to stop, slow down, breathe, and reflect is the moment of silence at the beginning and end of a meeting. Every Windhorse meeting uses this “moment.” Some of the staff also integrate this silence into other kinds of interactions. In one of our interviews, an employee invited the interviewer to share a moment of silence together before beginning, and his responses to the questions were marked by long, thoughtful pauses before answering. He described his experience of the moments of silence:

“It’s amazing to me what that does. It’s probably less than a minute, but at the beginning and end of every meeting it provides this continuum for our awareness. I find when we don’t do that, I feel ‘unglued.’ I feel like somehow we can settle in that moment from chatter-y consciousness to being present.”

The Windhorse community values a collective decision making process. At the same time, some degree of hierarchy is necessary to run the organization effectively and to interact with other entities such as other medical institutions, state agencies, and insurance companies. To balance these two needs, Windhorse draws on contemplative techniques which have the overall effect of creating numerous “feedback loops” between all staff and those in positions of accountability.

The idea of a feedback loop is one of the core concepts in the “Learning Organization” model developed by Peter Senge and others. But as co-director Victoria Yoshen noted, Windhorse began to create these loops - which are essentially avenues for staff to voice their concerns and opinions to those in decision making positions -
not out of any theoretical idea but simply because “people needed to talk to each other.”

The Steering Committee, comprised of directors and one rotating senior clinical staff member, is the main entity for decision making and representing Windhorse to the “outside” world. But the Steering Committee takes much of its guidance from the input it receives through communication vehicles such as the council circles. In fact, much of Windhorse’s organizational structure and communication patterns can be visualized in terms of circles, overlapping and informing each other.

The council circle process is one of the most effective methods for creating a feedback loop. Council circle, which has origins in Native American traditions, involves a group of people sitting in a circle formation. Frequently, a “talking piece” such as a stick or a stone is held by the person speaking and then passed on to the next person. All participants hold the intention to speak and listen “from the heart,” and there is no cross-talk. In addition to quarterly councils with the entire Windhorse community, many smaller meetings make use of it in a modified form. Techniques from Nonviolent Communication (developed by Marshall Rosenberg) are also woven into the mix by several staff who have been trained in it.

Another technique is “The Menu of Decisions,” a circular process in which the Steering Committee starts by asking for the community’s input on an issue that will effect everyone. In the example we witnessed, all staff were invited to complete a survey about their opinions on questions related to the Common Room: Should the objects used to decorate it represent specific spiritual traditions? Should there be chairs in the room? Should people be allowed to eat in the room? Would people be willing to vacuum to keep the space clean?

Staff responses to the questions were discussed by the Steering Committee in relation to making decisions about the use of the room. They try to determine if there is a general consensus on each question; if yes, they will propose a policy or guideline; if not, they may go back to the staff again for more discussion or to brainstorm possible compromises.

Staff responses to each question were unpacked by the Steering Committee. Every conversation revealed more layers of organizational culture. For example, responses to the question about the kinds of decorative objects used in the room seemed to indicate that people were upset about having just one tradition (e.g. Buddhism) be represented. One Steering Committee member suggested that perhaps the larger issue was that people were upset about not knowing what was going on, and were
surprised when they walked in to see Buddhist art on the room without being consulted.

All of these practices call on participants to practice deep listening skills and maintain an open and nonjudgmental attitude. As one person said, “It’s not just the way information is shared, but it’s the attention to what’s happening internally as that information is being given.”

“I come out of women’s circle traditions. There’s actually a song about the power of circles - about being in a circle, not a square, not in lines, not behind each other. You can see each other. There are a lot of circles here in this organization. I love to think of our organizational chart in a circle, or overlapping circles.”

“When you mention that word [feedback], you think of feedback in sound when you get too close to the microphone, and it’s almost an unwelcome thing, an annoying noise. What do we do with that? We adjust something to make it go away. It’s a nice metaphor, because it’s a constant adjustment, and it’s not always nice to get that noise.”

“[Our] supervision meeting…is very open in terms of what you can bring and where the conversation might go. This practice of mindful listening, which comes from council practice, one disconnects from one’s own train of thought response… there’s not a lot of judgment of analysis, but more pure listening. That’s certainly contemplative to me.”

“We all affect each other. There’s nothing that I can do as an administrator that doesn’t affect everybody. So if I’m trying to change something, I usually run it through the steering committee. Maybe it’s just to make sure that the idea is something that people feel comfortable with, if they are, I can go ahead. But if there is resistance, I might need to go the next step to get clearer, make a proposal, working with people to figure out what their concerns are, and then doing it.”

Windhorse values a holistic approach, both in working with clients and in working with each other. In Windhorse language, this means “attention to body, mind, speech, and environment.” Counselors, clinicians, and housemates will do “Body/Mind/Speech” presentations about their clients, talking about interactions and relationships with the client, making observations about the client’s physical appearance (energy level, posture…), mind (mental and emotional state), and speech (verbal and non-verbal interactions).

The approach extends to employees as well. The first morning of our visit, two employees offered a workshop to the full staff on pranayama yogic breathing. Everyone practiced different kinds of breathing, followed by discussion about the benefits for clients. But staff was encouraged to try these techniques out for their
own benefit too. A weekly mid-day yoga class is offered for the whole Windhorse community.

“[The Wellness Nurse] is always trying to bring ways to be more healthy in mind and body. I respect that the body mind connection is so real and you have to cultivate it, so that training is great for us...We’re cultivating our own health, and I truly believe that in order to be of service to other people you have to first be a service to yourself.”

“There’s a lot of talk about what the ‘right’ kind of mental health service would be, and it’s about how we can be compassionate and how we can be respectful and all of that. And that’s absolutely important. The part I don’t hear talked about is how to care for the caretaker, how to create a system that allows people to stay in it -- allowing them to nurture and grow and not give up.”

5. Work with Space Awareness.
Related to this attention to mind, body, and speech, there is another Windhorse principle that is applied to both clients and staff is attention to the physical environment. This principle has its roots in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition and the practice of “Maitri,” or “Space Awareness.” The philosophy behind Maitri is rather esoteric and complex, but essentially boils down to this: “Most approaches to recovery from psychological disturbances focus on addressing internal states of mind. Yet it is a well-know fact that the quality of our environment has a significant impact on our state of mind and behavior” (from a brochure about a Windhorse workshop “Healing from the Outside In”).

Windhorse’s clinical staff takes great care to create spaces inside clients’ homes that are conducive to stable mind states. In the office, this philosophy carries over to the workspace. Several people brought this up in their interviews and talked about how much attention is given to how people relate to their space. When the organization moved into its new offices, a woman of Native American heritage who is part of the Windhorse community was invited to conduct a cleansing ceremony to purify the space. “Sacred spaces” in the office are created spontaneously - at one meeting, people took an office supply box and covered it with a cloth to make an impromptu altar. They set a vase of flowers and stone on top of it, then used the stone as a talking piece during a council-style check-in.
Keeping the common office space neat is also an espoused value, and one that people brought up on the first morning we were with them as a “group practice.” Staff members are asked to sign up on a rotation sheet to clean the kitchen one day every three weeks, but not everyone remembers. A creative way to deal with memory lapses was devised: the Gecko, a small stuffed creature that is placed in the mailbox of the person who is supposed to help clean up the office areas. The Gecko doesn’t always work, but nearly always makes people smile [or grimace, if they don’t want to be reminded].

“We’re always trying to set up the environment. We just started a team to set up the place to be functional beautiful and inspiring. And when the client was there in that situation, things can get a lot more chaotic. We often just stay on the level of just trying to clean up and not often getting to the feng shui level. But as much as possible, we’ll walk into a team meeting at a client’s house and we set up the chairs, we set up a centerpiece, create this makeshift space so there is a particular space for that meeting. The rest of [the house] may be in shambles because of whatever happened in the last 24 hours, but there is that space for that meeting.”

“There are times when we’re all getting into the swing of things and somebody forgets where the gecko is, and nobody know to pass it on to the next person...[But] The great thing about it is that it’s playful and it’s fun. Our sense of the environment and our sense of community fixing up the environment has tremendously improved.”

“It’s very hard to get people to clean up. The gecko just sits!”

Summary
The origins of Windhorse, deeply rooted in Tibetan Buddhist tradition and practices, continue to reverberate through the organization more than 20 years later. These teachings and practices are a kind of deep bedrock upon which the whole organization rests, with values that permeate throughout the organizational culture even to employees who are relatively new and not consciously aware of them. Those who worked with the Windhorse model from the start are aware of them and articulate these principles. But even those staff who are relatively new or don’t ascribe to Tibetan Buddhist teachings notice the difference:

“I could probably make better money somewhere else, but it’s worth it to me to be a valued member of this group and that’s what the contemplative practice gives us, the ability to stop and think. I think it makes our interaction more genuine and more personal.”
There are growing pains as new generations of employees come in who haven’t been steeped in that same tradition and community but who, nonetheless, are drawn to Windhorse because of its commitment to creating a workplace that is a site for mutual learning. Growing pains are also evident as the organization is in transition from the departure of two longtime founding directors. Contemplative forms such as council circle are used as tools to navigate these waters and to strike a balance between the hierarchy needed to run an organization and the desire for a consensus process involving the whole Windhorse community.

Many concepts applied in the Windhorse treatment approach with clients translate well to cultivating a contemplative work environment, such as the ten skills of Basic Attendance. The practices that are encouraged at Windhorse have supported people to learn different ways to respond to a crisis situation in the work setting, whether that crisis involves a client in an extreme emotional state or simply an office “emergency.”

“The whole meditation practice is not so much to think about something, but to think about nothing. That’s really hard for me because multitasking is who I am. If it didn’t show up on the earth before me, then I would have invented multitasking...So sitting in there [at Group Contemplative Practice] trying not to do anything is very hard for me. When I do get in there and do actually mind my breath and get some perspective, I realize no one is going to die if we don’t get the new binders here in time, we’ll figure it out. So it allows me to take a step back...After sitting and breathing and looking at the universe...you realize that we’re out of paper -- so what? It has been really beneficial.”

One consequence of creating this kind of environment is a high employee retention rate. Even with the intense nature of the work itself and the current challenges around organizational structure, most staff seem genuinely committed to working with each other in the context of a reflective community.

“People don’t want to leave much! Our turnover rate, for human services, is unheard of. It doesn’t really exist. People even come back, constantly! The people who are new here are new here because we’ve grown...People don’t say, “Screw it I’m out of here;” they stick around.”

Perhaps the best testimony to the impact that contemplative awareness has on the workplace and the quality of work comes from the people that Windhorse serves, the clients.

“I’ll summarize the difference between [Windhorse and other] organizations...I think I could probably best say that Western psychology is aggressive, judgmental, and stands on separation, while Windhorse has to do with the trust that is already existing in my mind for friendship...It seems like it might be based on the same kind of love...[They help me see that] the kind of compassion and understanding that I want to have comes from within my soul. This is significantly different from Western psychology.”

Client interviewed during research visit
“For decades, we who call ourselves consumer/survivors have demanded radical changes in the way mental illness is viewed and treated. We as a group always attribute our recovery to something other than force and pharmacology, the mainstays of the psychiatric system. We advocate for the human perspective in a way of life that has become increasingly cold and frenetic. We plead for treatment that is based on respect and kindness rather than judgment and pathology. We have not gotten very far. Windhorse Associates is one of the few programs I know of that is translating the words of empowerment into the work of recovery. Kindness takes patience and humanness takes work.”

Former client Sally Clay, from the essay “An Experiment in Kindness”

The Windhorse Difference
We asked employees to tell us how their work experience at Windhorse differed from previous jobs they had held.

“Coming from a fairly alternative work background, I felt like I’d come home…I had one job before I got this job, and that job was all about productivity. So then I found this place and I thought, ‘Wow, this is really great, really unusual’… Other jobs [I’ve had] didn’t really ask you to look at yourself. This job requires it. Which is, again, a very comfortable feeling, so I like it.”

[When she first started working here, she noticed that] “people would ask how you were and would stand there to find out. I went home thinking I’ve never met anyone like these people—they actually want to know. They don’t just ask how you are and walk by. I was just shocked by that. That people bothered to ask and bothered to wait for the answer - that was a real eye opener for me.”

“I think [contemplative practices in the workplace] is an incredible idea, especially in the mental health field. My husband works with adolescents and teenagers [in a] boarding program. Both of us get great satisfaction from our work lives, but he doesn’t have the support and openness and compassion that you find here. I think when people start to be aware of their own minds and hearts, it has a way of creating an open space in the workplace that he just doesn’t get. The contrast I often find amazing.”

“It seems like [practice] in the workplace is the kind of thing that really softens the relationships. It seems to me that the resolutions to problems happen more quickly. There’s more capacity for letting go, for resolution and progress.”
Reflections on the Findings

Because this was an exploratory, qualitative study, we did not set out to quantify any variables that might be related to “contemplative organizations.” Nonetheless, one did clearly arise, in anecdotal form. At all three research sites, both managers and staff told us that, in general, they observed that people tend to stay working at such an organization for a longer period of time than comparable work settings. (The caveat is that the person hired should be a good match for this kind of organization; see Lesson #1 below.)

Several elements seem to enter into the creation of a successful Contemplative Organization. In this section, we synthesize quotes and observations from all three research sites into four key lessons for those who are in the process of building a Contemplative Organization, or who would like to. We have also drawn on our own experience at the Center, as well as thoughts from some interviewees in the initial Contemplative Net research study.

Lesson #1: Thoughtfulness about Staffing.
A Contemplative Organization usually begins at one of two starting points:

- From the inception, the founder or director sets the intention to create a contemplative workplace. Sounds True and Windhorse are examples of such a workplace.

- A new director comes into a pre-existing workplace that has had no prior stated intention to be reflective or contemplative. The director introduces the vision of a contemplative workplace and builds it toward that intention. Jobs with Justice is an example of such a setting.

In the first scenario, the director and managers have the luxury of building a team from the ground up. They can hire staff who they believe will be enthusiastic, or at least receptive, to this work approach. In the second scenario, the director needs to start wherever the current staff is in terms of receptivity to contemplative practices in the workplace. He or she will need to figure out skillful strategies for introducing these practices and for dealing with resistance as it arises.

In either case, hiring criteria can be refined as the organization grows and, over time, those doing the hiring may become more proficient in assessing the kinds of employees who will work out well in such a setting.

Some organizations, such as Windhorse and the Center, have written language into job descriptions that states the need for experience with contemplative practices. (At Windhorse, members of the clinical staff are required to have a contemplative practice, but administrative staff are not.) The Windhorse job announcement for clinical staff defines “experience in a contemplative practice” as one of the requirements for the position. The Center includes this criterion in its job
announcements: “Demonstrated commitment to contemplative practice and a contemplative ethos a must.”

Ethical hiring practices and issues related to discrimination based on religious affiliation dictate that such a statement only be included when hiring for a position where knowledge of this subject is essential to performance of the job. Clarity is essential. Windhorse justifies this requirement for its clinical staff through this statement:

It is required that the team leader regularly practice some sort of contemplative discipline that fosters mindfulness of one’s personal situation and experience, and develops environmental awareness. This could be any regular practice of, for example, meditation, prayer, yoga, or martial art. Such an on-going personal discipline helps the team leader to work through counter-transference to the client and the team. It is the quality of our presence that underlies any basic attendance activities...our own health is our major contribution to the sane environment of the Windhorse team.

The managers and employees interviewed at the research sites agreed that working in a Contemplative Organization is not for everyone. Such a workplace creates more opportunities for people to bring their “whole self” into their job, and to explore personal issues with their co-workers. Some people have been hungry for this in their professional lives; others see it as just about as pleasant as a trip to the dentist for a root canal.

The chart on the following page is a summary of comments from staff at these organizations. These characteristics and qualities are a good indication of how the person will fit in with the kind of organizational culture that tends to be created at a Contemplative Organization.
Matching an Employee to a Contemplative Organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likely to Thrive in a Contemplative Organization</th>
<th>Likely to Find the Contemplative Organization a Challenging Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comfort with ambiguity, capacity to be patient with “not knowing,” understands planning as an intuitive process.</td>
<td>High level of need for structure; likes clearly defined and unchanging goals and outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High need for creativity.</td>
<td>Most comfortable with clearly delineated job description and tasks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested in the overlap between personal and work life, “seamlessness.” Sees work as an opportunity for self-betterment and actualization.</td>
<td>Most comfortable with keeping personal life and issues completely separate from job; wants strong boundaries between work life and personal life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong support system outside of the workplace to be able to process issues that may arise.</td>
<td>Workplace is primary support system; intensity of workplace interactions may lead to burnout.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lesson #2: Create Structural Support for Reflection and Contemplation.**
If an organization or company claims that it values reflection but its policies and attitudes undermine that value, building sustainable Contemplative Organization will be a challenge. Directors and managers need to take a step beyond simply saying that meditation is a helpful thing. They’ve got to “walk the walk” and address contemplative values at an organizational level, not just a personal one. This can take the form of creating personnel policies and benefits that encourage people to cultivate this part of their life. There are a number of ways to do this, as demonstrated by the workplaces in this study and at the Center:

- **Provide physical space that is set aside, either some or all of the time, for reflection and community.** This can be a challenge if space in the office is at a premium, but it does make a big difference in employees feeling that the organization values this as a priority. As one employee at Sounds True told us, “Even if I rarely use the meditation room, just the fact that they provide the space shows they care about it.” Another thoughtful gesture is to provide a
table or other designated space in a common area for employees to put objects that are meaningful to them, such as photos of family, loved ones, spiritual teachers; objects from nature (shells, rocks, etc.)-- work projects they are passionate about. Some workplaces call this an “altar” or “table of inspiration”; others avoid the use of those terms.

- **Provide trainings and in-services on a variety of contemplative forms.** All three organizations profiled here offer their staff various opportunities to learn about practices through meditation and yoga classes, training sessions in Nonviolent Communication (NVC), and other workshops on related topics. All these trainings were held during the paid workday and employees were either required or highly encouraged to attend.

- **Creative benefits.** At the Center, staff receive a “retreat benefit,” one week of paid time each year (prorated for part-time staff) to attend a retreat of their choice, and $300 toward the cost. Sounds True provides an on-site gym and massage therapy for its employees.

- **Staff retreat days.** Both Jobs with Justice and the Center schedule regular retreat days for their staff. These days were set aside to give employees a chance to take a break from their usual duties and spend time together in a more reflective context. At The Center, the retreat days are held at the country home of the executive director and often included long periods of sitting and walking meditation. The Jobs with Justice, retreat days are usually held in the office and have more of an organizational development flavor. JwJ employees participate in reflective exercises throughout the retreat day; personal and team goals and objectives are often generated out of these days.

- **Flexible work schedules.** While flexible work schedules at first might not seem related to the creation of a contemplative work atmosphere, they can be an effective way to support employees in maintaining balance between work and life. For example, an employee may want to take a morning yoga class and start work a little later in the day, or may want the option to leave early to observe Shabbat on Friday evenings. Sounds True provides a great deal of flexibility around scheduling; many employees we spoke with there named this as one of the main reasons for their high job satisfaction.

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**Lesson #3: Be Prepared for Complexity.**

Introducing contemplative practice into a workplace will not prevent conflict from arising or difficult issues from coming up. In fact, initially, this shift may very well provide space for conflicts or challenging dynamics that have otherwise been suppressed to come out into the open. Sue Turley, from California Pacific Medical Center’s Integral Healing Center, spoke about the impact of contemplative practice on their workplace in her 2002 Contemplative Net interview:

> Both the strengths and the weaknesses of our interpersonal relationships and our working together as professionals surfaces and then, hence, gives us the
opportunity to choose as an individual and as a community how we’re going to address those and then be able to evaluate whether those choices are having a positive or negative impact.

There are times when it is very difficult and painful because we’re looking at our weaknesses. But generally, the bottom line effect for most people is that it builds trust, and it builds the opportunity for collaboration and collegiality as opposed to having hidden tension and not dealing with it.

As staff become more comfortable with the spaciousness of the office, new challenges can arise. As people open up and bring themselves more fully and honestly and authentically to their work lives, statements can be made or subjects brought up that challenge the boundaries of the container that has been created. This is a direct result of an increased sense of trust and openness in the workplace and will also serve as a means of further expanding and strengthening those bonds.

There is really no way to stop conflict from arising, and any effort to do so will likely in an oppressive and alienating situation for everyone involved. Fear of conflict generally leads to much more suffering than the actual conflict itself, especially if we have skillful ways of engaging in it.

What employers often notice with the integration of contemplative practices is that when difficult issues do arise, they do not result in devastation and turmoil, as might normally happen, but are more skillfully acknowledged, held, and responded to by the group. Staff gradually learn to develop the inner resources that will help them navigate through difficult, trying and stressful situations that arise in the workplace with more ease, comfort, and grace.

At Sounds True, one way that this dynamic is being addressed is by offering employees training in Nonviolent Communication skills (see Appendix I, Resources). Jobs with Justice staff were given instruction in Active Listening skills. Such trainings provide staff with concrete tools to work with conflict effectively when it does arise.

Lesson #4: The Importance of Intention.
Some employers may initiate a program to bring contemplative practice into the workplace with a very concrete sense of what the outcome will be. They may think, “This will make everyone happier and more relaxed,” or, “If we do this contemplative practice stuff, it will stop all of the bickering, tension, and conflict that have arisen in our office.” They may have expectations about productivity or profit margins. Tami Simon, the CEO of Sounds True, told us,
We’ve been stable in our growth and we make some money, but not a huge amount of money. I go to a conference like “Spirit in Business” and people there ask about how to measure if spirituality in business has an effect on productivity and efficiency. I don’t know if those are the best measures. What it’s brought us is much more sweetness, people caring about each other. And that effects how long people stay around.

These expectations speak to a fundamental need to be aware of one’s intention for creating a Contemplative Organization. If there is resistance on the part of staff to these efforts, it may be an indication that the employer’s intention has not been carefully thought through, or clearly communicated.

Depending upon the situation in an office, it is possible that employees may be suspicious of an effort to bring contemplative practice into the workplace. If some people are feeling exploited in their jobs, the effort to bring meditation into the workday may be seen as coercive or insincere. Much of the new research attributing improved focus, equanimity, ease, and concentration to a long-term meditation practice could be interpreted on the part of employees as a self-interested attempt by management to increase productivity. Many of these concerns are justifiable in the eyes of workers based on a history of employers introducing new techniques to increase productivity without a parallel concern for the benefit to the employee.

For employees, no gimmick or ploy imposed by management will ever replace the need for fair pay, decent working conditions, clear job expectations, and respect for their part in the production process. As an employer takes an interest in the wellbeing of his or her employees they should be careful to be doing it for wholesome reasons. The bottom line: creating a contemplative organization is an exploratory process that should be enjoyed and appreciated fundamentally as a process in and of itself, without too much attachment to a certain kind of final product.

In the end, perhaps the most essential step for any employer undertaking this path is to recognize the radical nature of building a contemplative workplace, the inherent paradox of such a mission. Mirabai Bush, executive director of the Center, noted this at a 2003 meeting convened by the Center titled “Inviting the World to Transform”:

The idea of talking about a contemplative organization itself is fairly radical. The word contemplative means being with time, being present with each moment, here, now. It also means being in the temple, the temple being the container for sacred space...[In contrast.] organizations are a collection of people who are usually trying to reach some goals, get something done, and focusing on the future. Bringing those two things together is at the heart of our challenge.
References


Appendix I

Resource Guide to Practices Used by Organizations in this Report

**Meditation and General Resources for Organizational Contemplative Practices**

Center for Contemplative Mind in Society  
199 Main St., 3rd Floor  
Northampton, MA 01060  
413-582-0071  
www.contemplativemind.org

*Organizational Toolbox*: A box of materials - including written instructions, video presentations, digital stories, and other tools such as a mindfulness bell - intended to support the use of contemplative practices in organizations. Contact the Center for availability. The Box offers detailed guidance for taking many of the ideas shared in this report and putting them into action.

**Council Process**


[www.counciltraining.org](http://www.counciltraining.org). Website of the Center for Council Training, affiliated with the Ojai Foundation. Information on training, apprenticeships, written materials, and other resources.

**Nonviolent Communication (NVC)**


[www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org). Website of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, includes an extensive collection of articles and links about NVC.

**Tonglen Practice**


“Training in the Compassion Practices of Tonglen,” online article by Christine Longaker: [http://www.spcare.org/practices/tonglen.html](http://www.spcare.org/practices/tonglen.html)

**Yoga**

_Yoga in the Workplace_ by Trisha Feuerstein, published by the International Association of Yoga Therapists, 2003. Definitive collection of articles and resources (including videotapes and DVDs) about the use of yoga in the workplace; list of practitioners who specialize in teaching yoga in the workplace: [www.iayt.org/workplace.pdf](http://www.iayt.org/workplace.pdf)
Appendix II

Research/Interview Questions

Topics, Themes, and Questions to Consider Throughout

Here’s a list to use as a guide throughout the site visit and in all interactions with research participants. Some topics will be better suited to certain people or certain group exercises, but we’ll probably find an opening to discuss any one of them at any time. Reflections on these questions will come both from informal interviews with the research participants and our own field notes.

General Work Ambience

What does the physical space of the office feel like - Crowded? Trashy? Spacious? Beautiful?

What are the daily rituals of the organization? Staff meetings, coffee breaks, etc.

What are the ways that people congregate informally in or near the workplace, if they do? Going out for coffee, happy hour after work, gathering around the copy machine, etc.

What are the most common gripes and complaints that people have about the organization?

What do they love most about the organization?

General Organizational Dynamics

How do people relate to one another in the workplace? Do there seem to be divisions between certain groups of people? What’s that about?

What makes a Contemplative Organization?
What are the physical indicators that this is a Contemplative Organization? Is there a space set aside for meditation or other contemplative get-togethers? What kind of art (or other cultural artifacts) is on the walls? What else do you see?

What kinds of contemplative practices are used in the work setting? How do people experience these practices? What kinds of impact do these practices have on their work and the office environment?
In what other ways does the organization support a contemplative presence? In its personnel policies? In its meeting structure? Other?

What role, if any, does contemplative awareness/practices have in addressing or dealing with some of the organization’s ‘loaded’ issues, as identified above?

If service recipients or consumers are interviewed, what is their experience of interacting with the organization and its staff? Do they perceive any difference in their contact with the organization or business, compared to other organizations they interact with?

Is everyone expected to buy into the idea of integrating contemplative values into the workplace? What happens if someone disagrees or just doesn’t really get into the whole idea?

Is participation in the practices mandatory, voluntary, or something in between?

What drew people to work here? How is it different from, or similar to, their previous work experiences? How has the organization compared to their expectations? (Especially good to find the newest person in the organization and explore this question with them, and the person who’s been there the longest. Why have they chosen to stay so long?)

At the end of their workday, how do people account for their day? Accomplishments that are different? How do they feel at the end of their workday in a CO rather than any other workplace? How do they prepare for the next day?

What recommendations do you have for organizations that strive to become or want more contemplative practices in their workday???

As we go to different organizations, does it seem that Contemplative Organizations have different stages of ‘being’ e.g. still on the vine, ripened, stale?