

# Rita Devassy and Mindful Leadership



amy j. BORN

As a long-time Evergreen resident and contributor to Colorado Serenity, Amy has interviewed many local characters over the years. If you are one or know one who'd like to be featured, Amy would love to talk to you. She also writes for fun and profit as a freelancer, helping businesses and professionals enhance their online presence through website content, blogging and more. You can find her at [bornwriting.com](http://bornwriting.com)

Rita Devassy grew up in India. At 19 she moved to the U.S. to attend Indiana University, with the dream of becoming a CEO. She earned a bachelor's degree in business management from Indiana University and then earned a second bachelor's degree in computer and information science from Purdue. She started her career at Motorola outside of Chicago, working on cellular infrastructure in the days when cell phones were just taking off.

"Work was amazing. Bluetooth was just being talked about as an idea. It was an exciting time and it was invigorating to be part of it," says Rita. While the work was fulfilling and she was moving up, she struggled a bit in this male dominated field. "The people part was the hardest part for me. Women were in

the minority and the corporate culture created an environment I was not used to. Many of my coworkers were young male engineers and there was a lot of competition. I wanted to have a connection, be helpful, have conversations, have fun and laugh."

As she was advancing at Motorola, she and her husband, Phil, were trying to have a child. "When that didn't happen, I had an identity crisis: Women want to be mothers. Now what? If I'm not a mother, does that make me meaningless?" she recalls. "That's when I started my mindfulness practice. And in the quiet space of meditation, the question that surfaced was, 'Who am I?'"

She discovered during meditation that there is always an observer watching inside

who is separate from all the roles we take on or imagine for ourselves. "If I drop the labels (engineer, manager, wife, mother), that presence is still there." Understanding that this presence is not a separate thing was significant in her mindfulness journey and led her to explore how personal and professional roles meet.

A big piece of any mindfulness practice, Rita explains, revolves around allowing things to be just as they are. She made peace with the fact that she would not be a mother. "I have my part to play, although it might not fit into the traditional idea." When something doesn't work out the way you hoped it would, she says, the important thing is to determine what you are learning from the situation. "Everything is asking questions, nudging us to pay attention. Be present to what is happening, rather than what didn't happen."



Rita left Motorola for opportunities with other companies, eventually landing at Gogo, Inc. She rose into leadership positions along the way and in doing so, her perspective shifted. "I became more responsible for my own behavior because I was now responsible for these other individuals. I asked myself, 'What can I do differently so it benefits my team and my company?' It was no longer about me." Managers and leaders, she says, have to pay attention to what is happening around them, but change starts with them.

As her career progressed, however, she discovered a price for her success. "Work was nonstop and exhausting. It took all of my energy to be present for my job. I worked so many hours that Phil asked if my job was more important to me than he was," she says. That got her to look at where she was putting her attention. "Rather than simply saying this is how it is, I chose to have a conversation. Can we get through the next few months?" Despite that, the situation kept getting worse. The stress she felt at home affected how she responded to incidents at work. "Things felt threatening. I wondered, 'Can I trust this person? What's his agenda?' I started being reactive. My fight-or-flight stress response kicked in."

She started paying attention to what triggered those reactions and looked for ways to shift and respond differently and she noticed something. "I became the person people would come to and talk about how they were not happy with the culture. They would often say, 'It's just a job,' and I would say, 'It's not just a job, it's your life!' It's the place we were choosing to spend the majority of our time. We were with each other more than our families."

At that point, Rita knew she had a choice. She could continue to climb the corporate ladder or follow her calling to do work that would help people. "I wanted to find a way to give leaders the opportunity to make corporate culture authentic." She knew it was time, and she resigned.

Through the Authentic Leadership Program at Naropa University, Rita confirmed that her own mindfulness practice had helped her navigate a high-pressure career and made her a better leader. Now living in Genesee, she runs her business, Deva Seed, to help others become effective, successful and fulfilled leaders in both their business and personal lives. Her goal is to bring humanity back into corporate culture through connection and active engagement.

And she's not alone in this. Companies such as Google, GE and Aetna have successfully introduced mindfulness. "It affects the bottom line. Stress leads to illness and unhappy, disengaged employees," Rita says. "We can shift how we pay attention to ourselves and what is happening in the moment."

Rita works one-on-one with business leaders to help them incorporate mindfulness from a secular perspective into how they live and lead. She distinguishes the formal prac-

tice (meditation) from the informal practice, which is how you apply it in your daily life. "I teach people to create habits so mindfulness becomes a way of life," she explains. "For example, what do you do when you get to work? Do you hop out of the car right away? What if, instead, you paused for a moment and took a breath, slowing down the pace and being intentional about how you start and end things. These are the aspects of

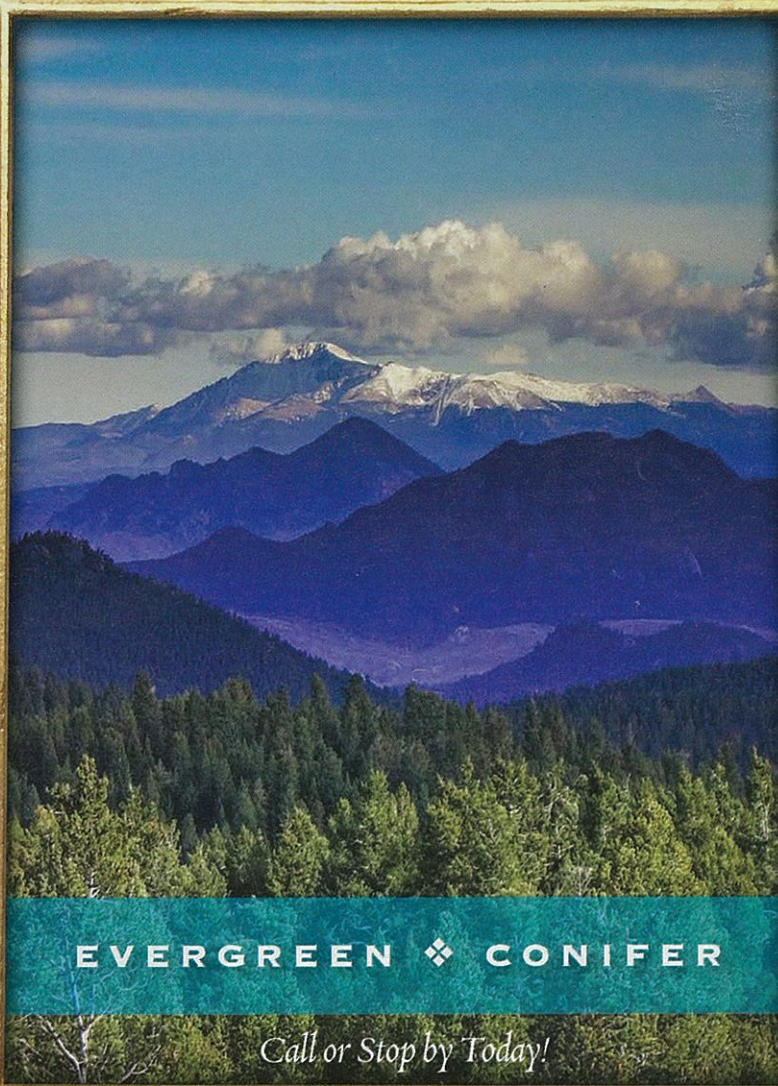
your life that you can control. The pace of life isn't going to slow down. We have a lot filling up our days. What can change is how you receive or experience it. You can show up as the calm, centered person. It's a choice."

Mindfulness is not a one-time fix. "It's called a 'practice.' It is about developing awareness, evaluating alternatives intentionally, and shifting attention to the choices you make," says Rita.

In addition to individual coaching, Rita hosts workshops through Deva Seed, and also for other organizations and events. Her next workshop, "Master your Communication Skills Through Mindfulness," is June 22. Information on the workshop and all of Rita's services is at [devaseed.com](http://devaseed.com) or email her at [rita@devaseed.com](mailto:rita@devaseed.com)

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