



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H0421C
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
DECEMBER 13, 2017

ARTICLE **LEADERSHIP**

If You Aspire to Be a
Great Leader, Be
Present

by Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter

LEADERSHIP

If You Aspire to Be a Great Leader, Be Present

by Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter

DECEMBER 13, 2017



Joed Barallas/EyeEm/Getty Images

Some years ago, we worked with a director of a multinational pharma company who'd been receiving poor grades for engagement and leadership effectiveness. Although he tried to change, nothing seemed to work. As his frustration grew, he started tracking the time he spent with each of his direct reports — and every time he received bad feedback, he pulled out his data and exclaimed, "But look how much time I spend with everyone!"

Things improved when he began a daily 10-minute [mindfulness practice](#). After a couple of months, people found him more engaging, nicer to work with, and more inspiring. He was surprised and elated by the results. The real surprise? When he pulled out his time-tracking spreadsheet, he saw that he was spending, on average, 21% *less* time with his people.

The difference? He was actually *there*.

He came to understand that, even though he was in the same room with someone, he wasn't always fully present. He let himself become preoccupied with other activities or let his mind drift to other things. And, most of all, he'd listen to his inner voice when someone was talking. Because of his lack of presence, people felt unheard and frustrated.

Our inner voices are the commentaries we lend to our experiences. They often say things like, "I wish he would stop talking." Or, "I know what she's going to say next." Or, "I've heard this all before." Or, "I wonder if Joe has responded to my text."

To truly engage other human beings and create meaningful connections, we need to silence our inner voices and be fully present — and being more mindful can help.

As part of the research for our forthcoming book, [The Mind of the Leader](#), we surveyed more than 1,000 leaders who indicated that a more mindful presence is the optimal strategy to engage their people, create better connections, and improve performance.

Other research bears this out. In a [survey](#) of 2,000 employees, Bain & Company found that among 33 leadership traits — including creating compelling objectives, expressing ideas clearly, and being receptive to input — the ability to be mindfully present (also called *centeredness*) is the most essential of all.

Research also suggests that there's a [direct correlation](#) between leaders' mindfulness and the well-being and performance of their people. In other words, the more a leader is present with their people, the better they will perform.

Based on our work, here are some tips and strategies that may help in your quest to be more present in your daily life.

Be Here Now

Like all CEOs, Dominic Barton, global managing director of McKinsey & Company, has a daily schedule of back-to-back meetings. All of these meetings are important, all include complex information, and most require far-reaching decisions. Under these conditions, being present moment to moment, meeting after meeting, is a challenge. But in Barton's experience, presence is not a choice. It's a necessity.

“When I’m with people during the day, I’m doing my best to be focused, I’m present with them,” he told us. “Part of this is because I get energy from being with people. But the other part is because if you’re not focused, if you’re not present, it’s discouraging to the other people. They lose motivation. If you’re not present, I think you may as well not have the meeting. It can sometimes be difficult to do, but it’s always important.”

The person in front of you does not know what you were dealing with a moment ago, nor should they. It’s your responsibility to show up and be fully present to effectively use the limited time you have with each person you meet.

Barton believes being mindfully present requires discipline and skill. It takes discipline to stay on task, not letting yourself be affected by nagging challenges or distracted by mental chatter. And it requires skill to have the mental ability to stay laser focused and present. When he’s present throughout his day, he finds it deeply gratifying. Being present becomes the cornerstone to getting the most out of every moment with each person.

Plan for Presence

In his decade as CEO of Campbell Soup Company, Doug Conant developed rituals for physically and psychologically connecting with people at all levels in the company, which he called *touchpoints*.

Every morning, Conant allocated a good chunk of his time to walking around the plant, greeting people, and getting to know them. He would memorize their names and the names of their family members. He would take a genuine interest in their lives. He also handwrote letters of gratitude to recognize extraordinary efforts. And when people in the company were having tough times, he wrote them personal messages of encouragement. During his tenure, he sent more than 30,000 such letters.

To Conant, these behaviors were not just strategies to enhance productivity; they were heartfelt efforts to support his people.

Do Less, Be More

Gabrielle Thompson, senior vice president at Cisco, has found that when an employee comes to her with a challenge, sometimes it needs a simple solution. But often, the problem just needs to be heard. “Many situations simply need an ear, not action. Oftentimes, problems don’t need solutions — they need presence and time,” she says. As leaders, having the ability to be fully present and listen with an open mind is often the most powerful way to solve issues.

As a leader, your role can be simply to create the safe space for people to air their frustrations and process their problems. Through mindful presence, you become the container in which they have space to process the issue, without you stepping in to solve, fix, manipulate, or control the situation. Presence in itself can help resolve the issue. This kind of presence not only solves the problem but also creates greater connection and engagement.

Embodied Presence

Loren Shuster, chief people officer at the Lego group, explained that when he has very important meetings or presentations, he takes five minutes to ground himself in his body. He visualizes coming fully alive in each cell of his body. As he explained to us, “When you’re not grounded, when you’re not connected to your body and surrounding environment, you don’t have a strong sense of direction or purpose. You’re just floating. The smallest thing can distract you. This grounding technique helps me clear my mind, recharge my energy, strengthen my instincts, and calm my emotions.”

After this five-minute practice, he walks differently, he talks differently. With more gravitas. With more weight. With more vigor. And as a result, he’s able to be more fully present mentally *and* physically with those around him. It grounds him in the room like a rock.

When we have embodied presence, our posture shifts. Rather than slouching, crossing our arms, and literally closing in on ourselves, we assume a more balanced, uplifted, open, and inclusive posture. This includes sitting up straight, with our arms open.

This shift in posture can influence how we think, behave, and communicate. In the same way that we can catalyze qualities like confidence through assuming a bold posture, we can induce qualities like awareness, focus, inclusion, and compassion through an uplifted, dignified posture.

The act of sitting up and opening up has a positive effect on the chemistry of our brains. It cultivates our capacity for higher-functioning thought processes. It gives us access to wisdom that comes from heightened awareness, compassion that comes from increased openness, and confidence that comes from the strength of vertical alignment.

Rasmus Hougaard is the founder and managing director of [Potential Project](#), a global leadership and organizational development firm serving Microsoft, Accenture, Cisco and hundreds of other organizations. He is publishing his second book [The Mind of the Leader – How to Lead Yourself, Your People and Your Organization for Extraordinary Results](#) with HBR Press in March 2018.

Jacqueline Carter is a partner and the North American Director of Potential Project. She is co-author of [The Mind of the Leader – How to Lead Yourself, Your People and Your Organization for Extraordinary Results](#) (HBR Press, 2018) as well as co-author with Rasmus Hougaard on their first book [One Second Ahead: Enhancing Performance at Work with Mindfulness](#).
