

Member's Quarterly

Fall 2020 Edition

Ask the Expert

'Being Present' in Every Conversation: A Prerequisite for Effective Leaders

How to perfect the art of communication



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Q: We seem to be hearing a lot about the importance of being 'fully present'. What's this all about and how do we get there?

A: Fully present leaders are not just more effective communicators – they are often better leaders. But what is it about being fully present that makes such a difference and how can we become present too?

What does it mean to 'be present'?

'Being present' is about being fully in the moment. Whether it's an intimate conversation with one or a briefing for many, the most effective leaders commit to being present in the moment, paying full attention with their body and mind (thoughts, emotions and feelings). It also means not making assumptions, passing judgement or jumping to conclusions (and being sufficiently self-aware to notice when you may be doing it). In the process, these leaders build the deep awareness and personal connections so essential to effective communications and leadership.

What leadership behaviours are key to being present?

Leaders who are fully present do (and don't do) several things. First, they set aside distractions and interruptions and bring their full attention to the conversation – that's a given. More importantly, they bring their focus and discipline to noticing when their own mind is wandering or jumping to conclusions and bring themselves back to the person in front of them. Much like a 'full-contact sport', it requires you to be all in, fully in the moment. Easier to say than do! Once you master the skill, you'll see how much of a difference it makes in interpersonal communications. It brings positive feedback from those around you. That's the power of a leader being present.

In sharp contrast, you can also see, hear and feel it when a leader is not fully present, and the interpersonal connection is broken (or wasn't made at the outset). Mentally, they might be miles away, preparing for their next meeting or rehashing the one they just had. They may be looking right at you, but wrapped up in how they're going to respond before you've finished speaking. As you likely know from experience, it's hard to be (and feel) seen or heard when you're on the receiving end of that kind of connection.

How can you be more present?

If you're keen to be more present, here's what you can do to get started. Begin by observing your own behaviours for a few days and doing a little self-assessment:

- How and when are you fully present in a conversation, building meaningful connections?
- How and when are you not? What's the impact in each case?
- What do you notice about your behaviours and patterns in the moment?

Then add it up: what behaviours, habits and defaults enable you to be present and connected in the moment and which ones hold you back?

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- For example, are you always trying to multi-task, distracting you from being fully present?
- Are your focusing skills weak, making it difficult for you to be present?
- Are you inclined to be a 'fixer', jumping ahead to solve a problem before the person has even finished speaking?

Choose one concrete area to focus on, determine your first step and set a clear intention to practice it consistently. Here are a few examples:

- You may choose to do less of something that distracts you. Always checking emails during conversations? Challenge yourself to break the pattern by turning off your phone and devices to focus.
- Alternately, you may want to do even more of what's already serving you. If you're an active listener, use those skills to best advantage, such as when you notice you've lost the thread in a conversation because your mind is wandering.
- You may also be ready to build a skill that will help you become more present. If staying focused is an issue, mindfulness is a great way to train yourself to return to the present when your mind wanders. You'll find some simple, free tools and apps here: <http://www.freemindfulness.org/download>.

Once you've chosen an area to focus on, challenge yourself to do it for a week (or longer) and see what happens.

The most effective leaders and communicators are known for their ability to connect deeply and powerfully with those they lead. They do it by being present. By taking the time to assess your ability to be present and practicing some simple techniques, you too can train yourself to be present and do it well. As you do, you'll be enhancing the quality and effectiveness of your leadership as well as your interpersonal communications.

Michelle Lane is a leadership effectiveness consultant and coach with more than 35 years of diverse leadership experience in the public, private and non-profit sectors. Michelle can be reached at mlane@vibrantleaders.ca.