
HOW DO LEADERS DEVELOP GREATER PRESENCE?

(DON'T BELIEVE WHAT YOU READ IN BOOKS)

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Leadership presence can seem intangible, but like money in the bank it is a highly valuable and flexible asset.

Much that is written about leadership presence is too narrow. It focuses largely on what I call leadership presentation. How leaders “present themselves” does contribute to their presence, but I contend that there are two other components which are often overlooked. As the word presence suggests, one of these dimensions is about “being present”. The other is about what leaders “make present” for others. And interestingly, if leaders get right the latter two they make redundant most of the conventional advice about how to present themselves.

I once attended a conference dinner where Prime Minister Bob Hawke was the guest speaker. The event was a pretty staid and formal affair, and most of the attendees were a hardened bunch of politicians, functionaries and activists. Bob Hawke arrived very late with TV cameras and lights in tow, and he was suddenly mobbed at the door. The enthusiastic melee was so sustained that it took him twenty minutes of hand-shaking to move from the door to the stage. There was now such a crush of people around the front of the room, with suited gents and elegant women whooping loudly and standing on tables to get a better view, that two thirds of the back of the room was vacated. I was shocked – I had only ever experienced such delirium at rock concerts. Bob’s speech was gleefully received but not particularly memorable. His arrival was unforgettable! Charisma and

magnetism are a real thing, can be an amazing asset, and some individuals and leaders do have it. However, the rest of us are very unwise to try to copy it or to equate it exclusively with leadership presence. Bob Hawke loved attention and attracted lots of it, but his love of other people and significant achievements on their behalf were also a big part of his leadership presence.

With Conservative Chancellor Angela Merkel from Germany, I notice that when her hand starts shaking uncontrollably markets start to shake too at the prospect of losing a stable influence in a world stocked high with puerile attention seekers as leaders. I have never thought of Angela Merkel as charismatic or magnetic. Descriptors such as substantive and gravitas seem more appropriate for her. But she has been a major presence and contributor in world affairs, featured as Time Magazine Person of the Year 2015 and guest speaker at the 2019 graduation ceremony at Harvard University. The problem of focusing too much on characteristics such as charisma, is that it excludes all the different ways that leadership can present itself. When I was researching this article, I did not find compassion on any of the lists of characteristics recommended by the experts, yet Jacinda Ardern from New Zealand has acquired global influence based on her displays of just that quality.

Most public leaders and organizational leaders put a lot of work into how they present themselves. It is a good idea to be diligent about it. It is very helpful to learn how to communicate well, to display confidence and appear trustworthy, to show empathy and relate well, to be on top of detail and appear intelligent, to be organized, have a plan and seem decisive. Paying attention to how we present ourselves is all part of how we gain informal authority to lead others. It can also contribute to gaining formal leadership roles, whether it is winning an election or getting a promotion. We want to present as credible, having expertise and likely to succeed, as a champion for our people, as having integrity and sharing their values, capable of resolving conflicts and nurturing cooperation. Winning the hearts and minds of our people and inspiring their loyalty to follow us and our

decisions, relies on the dance between leadership presentation and informal authorization. Leaders know they are always being watched and evaluated by others. But this authorization to lead does not automatically guarantee that leadership will be exercised.

Presentation is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to leadership presence. Perhaps more critical is whether the leader is actually present. I don't mean their physical attendance, but whether they are tuned in, paying attention and aware of others and what is really happening. If presentation is about how a leader shows up, then being present is about whether the leader has shown up. Our body might be anchored in the room but our thinking and awareness have taken flight. Many leaders are unaware of how often they are distracted and absent from events and others, because they rarely pay attention to whether they are paying attention. Some leaders are even strangers to themselves. It is very difficult to be influential and high performing if you are not present. And it is very difficult for others to recognize any leadership presence if you are not there. It can be unsettling for others too, unless they are comatose themselves. Some unfriendly analysts have suggested that Australia's current Prime Minister Scott Morrison is banking on this effect. Normally however, if an actor in a play or a soloist in a concert performs with automaticity, the play or concert will fall flat and the attendees will be underwhelmed. During his later glam-rock period, I always thought it was superfluous to announce that the great Elvis Presley had left the building.

The traditional practice of mindfulness has gained a lot of currency in western society over the past twenty years. Many leaders appreciate its' potential for stress management and their well-being, but only some leaders understand its' more radical potential to improve attention, effectiveness and influence. Similarly, many leaders now acknowledge the concept of mindfulness but rarely do the practice for it. This is nice for them, but makes no difference. It is like the current fad to watch hours of cooking shows while relying on Uber Eats. Many

writers and psychologists will now tell you that you can develop the powers of mindfulness without doing any of that dreary old meditation – my advice is to ignore their advice. One of the essential ways that leaders can start to apply mindfulness in the workplace, and to practice being present as a leader, is to learn how to listen well and deeply. When I explore listening with leaders, I introduce them to what I call the Holy Trinity of Listening – “listening to”, “listening for” and “listening from”. Simply listening is a nice place to start because it is so powerful, so subtle and so profound.

One of the great outcomes to emerge from leaders being present and listening really well is that it allows others to show up fully for the leader, and it even allows others to show up fully for themselves. This amazing dynamic brings us to the third dimension of leadership presence, namely, the ability to “make present”. I love the Crowded House song which urges us to “always take the weather with you”. Leaders can do this by being present and they can generate it through their high-quality thinking. Being mindful and present can give leaders direct access to calmness and even stillness, to clarity of insight and an undogmatic certainty, to joy and even love. The blue sky is always there and within reach for them right behind any passing dark clouds. Leaders do not need to conjure up these things or lecture others about them – they become part of their leadership presence which is infectious and then becomes available to others. And being present ourselves without being captured by all our opinions and judgements, can make present a lot of freedom for others to be themselves and to blossom around us.

Leaders can also generate the weather through their fresh, new insights and thinking. It should come as no surprise that actually exercising leadership can develop your leadership presence - although it isn't always that simple! While others may be stumbling around in a gloomy forest, leaders can provide new perspective, new ways of framing the challenge or opportunity, a bigger picture and context, or a deeper ethical framework, which alters the mindset of their

followers and galvanizes activity. Sometimes it is just a powerful question which the leader asks that switches folks from confusion and passivity, to insight and enthusiasm for the challenge. Or the leader names what is really happening or missing or being ignored that is holding the group back. Sometimes it is an intuitive observation which sparks a burst of creativity in the team. Or it is the ability to find courage or humor in a tense situation which can be the act of leadership. A regular AFL football game recently was played while it was snowing. One coach wore a t-shirt himself and demanded his players wear short-sleeve tops – his players laughed their way through a crushing victory over their better credentialed opponents who appeared oppressed by the unusual weather.

Not long after Nelson Mandela was released from his short twenty-seven year stay in jail, he visited Australia to thank people who had supported the anti-apartheid movement. I heard him speak at Melbourne Town Hall. His speech was very formal and long, highly accented with the sentences clipped, and his style was wooden and infuriatingly slow. Yet I genuinely found him riveting! I guess the lesson for me at an obvious level was that presentation isn't everything. At a deeper level, it illustrates that based on who you are being and how you are being, a leader is not bound by many of the rules and expectations about how to present themselves.

Socrates' advice to be true to yourself is still gold. There is much to admire in the current leadership trend to search for an authentic self and to re-create some gold standard known as authentic leadership, as long as it doesn't become the latest prescription for leadership performance or people don't forget that there is no actual script. And if the Buddhists are right there isn't any core, fixed self either – but that is definitely an argument for another day. For now, leaders can just be themselves and have great presence, even if they are not charismatic, scintillating communicators, brilliant minds, fascinating extroverts, or even saintly. For most of us that is really good news!