



BRUCE BALANCE
ACTIVATING LEADERSHIP

The Gift of Presence



Using Presence to enhance and guide coaching conversations

Maintaining a state of presence enables you to pre-sense what is about to happen and what is about to be said.

Importantly, it can enable you to pre-sense what needs to be said, or even not said.

Presence:
A Gift That Keeps Giving

The activity of coaching is actually a very intimate one. Whilst the reason or driver for the session will differ between clients, the coaching engagement is invariably a one-on-one interaction between two parties where dialogue is exchanged, insights are revealed and new possibilities are explored.

Often it is against a backdrop of an emergent (or possibly even unidentified) issue or problem.

The relationship established between the coach and the coaching counterpart can play a crucial role in determining the real issue to be addressed as well as working towards setting goals congruent with this issue. When a coaching counterpart is unsure of the intent of a coaching session (or of coaching in general), is unaware of why they are there, or is unwilling to allow themselves to “go with the flow” of the coaching encounter, then it becomes vital that the coach quickly and effectively establishes presence at the outset.

This presence needs to be maintained throughout the coaching encounter, no easy task when many distractions can exist!

These distractions could be in the form of the environment and surroundings in which the coaching activity is taking place or it could be in the form of the baggage that the coaching counterpart has brought with them to the session.

It could also be in the form of the baggage that the coach has brought with them: what happened just prior to the session; what’s coming up after the session; “I need to check the parking meter!”; “I’m not sure this client is getting value from this”.

The Chatter in Our Head

Whilst we can never be fully aware of what “chatter” is going on inside the head of the coaching counterpart, we can be aware of the “chatter” going on inside our own head.

It’s what you do with this “chatter” that will help you establish and maintain presence.

Once we are aware of the “chatter” we need to discreetly acknowledge it and then “park it”. It’s not going to serve you or the coaching counterpart now, so why spend thought and energy trying to listen to it? If anything, it’s going to distract you from the conversation taking place and will lead you on a path divergent to where your attention and focus needs to be.

Others have described this as the challenge of maintaining focus:

“Maintaining focus is not a matter of never losing focus, but a matter of shortening the periods of time in which you lose focus. The best goal for learning focus is to become good at coming back.”¹

But come back to what? And how do I come back? And how do I know I’m there when I am back?

Letting Presence Do The Driving

The key to answering these pivotal questions is to imagine yourself on a journey. It’s a journey where you know where you started out from but you’re not sure where you will end up. However, you do have a general direction in which you’ll be seeking to travel.

Now, the vehicle in which you are travelling is presence. Presence will take you to where you *need* to go. It will also enable you to take the coaching counterpart to where they *need to get to*.

Additionally, it will allow you both to remain on the most appropriate path throughout the journey and ensure that you ask the right question at the right time (“why not turn down here?”), use the right tool at the right instant (“lets use the street directory instead of the GPS”) and allow silence to do the driving that it needs to (“I’ll keep quiet and let them negotiate these tricky corners”).

Importantly, when you have presence you have an ability to pre-sense what is about to happen and what is about to be said. This proves invaluable in being able to work with (as opposed merely for or against) your coaching counterpart and is crucial to maintaining focus on the conversation taking place.

As described in the excellent book, *Presence – Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, when presence is attained “in a sense there is no decision making. What to do just becomes obvious and what is achieved depends on where you’re coming from and who you are as a person.”²

By establishing a state of presence prior to the coaching encounter, you allow yourself to be open to all of the possibilities that are about to unfold in the coaching that is about to take place. You also give yourself permission to have gratitude for what you have to

offer and for the insights into yourself that you will invariably receive during a coaching encounter.

To allow yourself to pre-sense the coaching conversation and in particular your role and contribution to that conversation, will enable you to clear your mind, de-clutter your thoughts and be open to what is about to unfold.

How to Establish Presence

But the question remains; how do I establish presence?

Whilst establishing presence is becoming easier for me to achieve, it remains a challenge to explain and describe.

Undoubtedly presence can be about stillness, calmness, being balanced and relaxed and having clarity of thought. It can be all of these things ... and more. It can be only some of these things ... and much less! Importantly, presence can be found during a situation verging on chaos; when all surrounding you is noise, chatter, distractions and disorder.

The key thing is “all surrounding you”. This noise and distraction is not part of you and is not of you. You have made the conscious decision to not be part of it. You are both within and without all that surrounds you.

The Elements of Presence

The key elements existing when presence is achieved are a sense of clarity of purpose, a strong understanding of your intent for what you are about to do and a firm belief in that what you are doing is what you are meant to be doing.

Steady, rhythmic and focused breathing is also a vital ingredient to attaining and maintaining presence.

Even as I write this piece my presence is prominent. And this is despite the numerous and significant potential distractions that surround me in the form of three young, house-bound children on school vacation pushing each other's buttons in the room next to me!

Presence: A Gift That Keeps Giving

When you attain presence in what ever you are doing it will bring many gifts.

The gift of presence was highlighted to me during a recent coaching engagement.

The coaching counterpart, whilst a pleasant and non-confrontational person, always had an air of distraction surrounding him. Forever one to make excuses about being late or not following through with our agreed action plans, my coaching counterpart was a regular source of potential frustration.

On this particular occasion, I had planned to meet him as scheduled to follow up on his progress at being better able to manage his priorities. As I was making my way to the planned meeting venue I was giving thought to the coaching engagement that was about to unfold. I imagined myself in the session and began anticipating the excuses presented and the distractions and the frustrations that this would play out for me.

So not only was I anticipating his behaviour but also my response to that behaviour.

And to flip this around, I imagined my initial state of presence and then visualised his response to that.

I also focused on my breathing and allowed myself to relax into the possibilities of what could play out as opposed to seeing it as a potential hindrance. My calmness rose and I felt myself gain a great sense of being steady and certain.

Just then, as I stepped into the elevator, I came face to face with my coaching counterpart. Well not quite face to face as he had his buried, as usual, in his Blackberry. Presently he noticed me and nervously said, "I'll be finished with this shortly. They never stop, these things!"

I simply smiled and allowed myself not to comment or to join him in his distraction. Instead I remained silent and focused on maintaining my rising sense of presence. As we walked together to our meeting room, me in silent contemplation, and he in feverish Blackberry-fuelled distraction, I noted the difference in our states.

When we settled in our room I sat and gently focused on my breathing and it was as if my sense of presence was emanating from me.

My coaching counterpart, by now having switched off his Blackberry, appeared to notice the contrast between our two states – or at least he

noticed a marked difference in "where he was at" and where I "was". He immediately sat upright in his seat and looked at me.

It was as if he was not just looking at me but looking beyond me and around me.

I was sensing that I had established a presence in the room that was both within me and without me. We continued to sit there momentarily, me focused on my breathing and he trying to take in what he was beginning to experience.

It was quite a powerful moment and the shift in energy was very noticeable. Slowly he began to change his posture and the hardness in his body slipped away. His breathing became noticeably more relaxed and his eyes softened as the calmness returned to his face. I had in fact never seen him like that before.

It was as if I'd noticed him for the first time; it was certainly in a new light that I was now looking at him. I'm not sure he knew what had happened to him, nor do I know whether he was actually aware of it.

He looked at me and smiled. "Can we begin?" he said.

¹ W. Timothy Gallwey, *"The Inner Game of Work: Overcoming Mental Obstacles for Maximum Performance"* (Great Britain; Orion Business, 2000)

² Peter Senge et al, *"Presence – Human Purpose and the Field of the Future"* (Doubleday, 2004), p 89

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