

Inner Toughness, Outer Success

Organizational leaders can help their people adapt to change faster if they slow down and focus on making dozens of daily moment changes, argues author and executive coach John Kuypers. In this article, he describes a leader who embraces the second principle of Present Moment Leadership – Inner Toughness. Leaders focus on a powerful blend of taking tough stands on day to day operating decisions, in a non-judgmental, empathetic way. It's a compelling argument for a new way to lead organizational change...

I had a boss who joined our company as the vice-president of marketing for our \$200 million dollar, 350 employee company. Over the course of three years, including getting promoted to general manager after a year, he led a complete re-invention of our company in a most unusual way.

He changed our product lines. He changed our pricing strategies. He changed the way we did business, taking tough stands with even our largest customers. He changed our advertising strategies. He changed the way we made decisions. He changed our bottom-line, growing it at a healthy level. He refocused how we spent our marketing investment dollars. **Indeed, he totally transformed our company culture, from a free-wheeling, successful company, into a disciplined, even more successful company.**

He accomplished all this change without any fanfare. He never did a major re-structuring. No one was fired. No independent consultants were hired. Yet we changed! **He slowly moved us one moment at a time, one inch at a time.** Before we knew it, we had moved a mile, more real change than I have seen in any company.

Was he the perfect boss, the ideal leader? He had his flaws, just like any boss. But he did one thing very well. **He had tough boundaries.** He took a stand on what he believed was important, and he did it in a very effective way.

Here are three examples of how this leader moved an entire company one moment at a time:

"I won't approve this request unless you deal with these five issues." Much as we wanted to believe that his objections were anchored in "not doing it his way," in fact, they were always grounded in tangible issues. When we challenged him, his explanations made sense even if they seemed insignificant to us. We often felt frustrated at his attention to detail and viewed him as merely putting obstacles in the way of making a fast decision. Only by addressing his objections, did we see that his concerns were often valid. Our respect and willingness to follow his lead grew slowly, then rapidly.

"You are a competent, highly-skilled professional. But I don't see your people growing in the same way. Unless you can demonstrate your ability to train others to your level of skill, I will not promote you to the next level." This one hurt. He was saying that being a great task manager by itself was a career-limiting move. We had to be great *people* managers too. He showed us how he was willing to suffer the short term loss in productivity for the long term gain of having more highly trained staff. Then he walked that talk with us personally.

"If you want this promotion, this is what I want to see from you. Let's find an opportunity specifically designed to help you grow your career." He called these trial balloons. He was rooting for your success yet wanting proof that you could do it before giving you the whole slice of responsibility.

My boss exhibited one-half of a leadership skill that I call *Present Moment Leadership*. He relentlessly focused on the significance of what was happening in each moment and took these moments very seriously. He took a powerful personal stand on the boundaries of what he was willing to support or not support. He did it in a way that honored our right *not* to agree. He did it with remarkable patience, allowing urgent matters to take far more time than any of us would have ever endured. He was willing to pay a price for his convictions. He would not be moved on his core beliefs by any maneuvering we might have attempted on previous bosses. He knew in his own mind 'what's important now', or what I call "W.I.N."

Present moment leadership is paradoxical way of leading people. **By going slower in the beginning, a leader achieves rapid change over a one to three year horizon.** By focusing on *this* moment, *this* decision, *this* disagreement, *this* opportunity, a leader makes dozens of seemingly small but highly intentional changes that influence the way people make decisions and do their jobs.

Present Moment Leadership is low-key, yet its effect is immediate and powerful. At no time, did any of us of

not *feel* the impact of my boss's unusual leadership style. Au contraire. We felt it every day! Nor were we altogether too happy about it in the beginning. We felt he was demanding too much. Making us go unnecessarily slow. Asking for far more detailed analysis than we felt was needed. He even seemed ultra-conservative and a low-risk taker, to our blind eyes.

We wanted to rebel. We wanted to collectively agree that this "new guy" was a problem and if we just waited him out, he would get fired sooner or later. After all, we had just successfully sabotaged the career of his predecessor, by going around him, playing up our morale problems and laying the blame for any difficulties on him to our general manager.

But we could not rebel. He gave us nothing to work with. His intentions were honorable. His tough stands were always based on sound reasoning, much as we wanted to label him with that convenient accusation, "He's *making* us do it his way." He had a clear vision for the business and he always linked his present moment issue to the big-picture vision of where he wanted to take the company. His vision for the company was a good one, and one that we identified with and supported.

When he backed up his strong beliefs consistently with everyone, we began to come around. He took the same stand with his boss as with a junior trainee. He stood up to our largest customer who wanted to us to cave in on certain pricing and discount arrangements. Our water cooler chat confirmed that none of us were getting special treatment or being singled out for this tough approach. **He built trust by being consistent privately and publicly, internally and externally.**

Yet my boss was missing something at that time, something we intuitively knew but found difficult to accurately label. He was so disciplined, he seemed robotic. He rarely smiled. He said the right words but they came out mechanically, as if rehearsed and memorized from years of training programs and self-study. He did not show emotions. Decisions were based on 'fact' and 'right'. Feelings did not seem relevant. We respected him tremendously. We didn't love him, though we grew to like him slowly but surely.

My boss was missing a key ingredient - empathy. **Empathy is a key ingredient in *Present Moment Leadership*.** When a leader takes a tough stand on the many moment-to-moment issues that arise each day, people feel it. They feel frustrated, annoyed, sad and even defeated at times. A leader who embraces the rigorously demanding "tough" side of paying attention to the specifics of the present moment, must also acquire the skill of being empathetic with his or her people.

Empathy is the grease that lets the wheels of change move quickly. Again, this is a paradox. Empathy is most needed exactly when it is most difficult to give – when the leader himself is being accused of being the "problem", and the cause of the pain that people are feeling from the change. Empathy also takes time, and

often right when the need for urgently moving on with things is the highest.

Empathy is a present moment skill. A leader can only empathize *now*, while the person they're dealing with is feeling whatever they are feeling. Academically, empathy seems simple enough. **Empathy is the ability to walk in someone else's shoes, without taking on that person's view of the world.** This latter issue is what makes empathy so challenging. Unless a leader is highly secure, strong boundaries and a deep self-trust, a leader who dares to be empathetic faces the very real risk of allowing their emotions to sway their decisions. For this reason, very few leaders are able to master the delicate balancing act of present moment leadership - by being both tough *and* empathetically accepting of others. **Tough leaders with tough boundaries often shield themselves from the risks of empathizing by staying distant from their people.** They make "announcements" and hold tightly controlled "Q&A" sessions. They issue memos. They avoid personal confrontations and personal dialogues.

Empathy is such a powerful instrument for human change that it is being used with notable success in the fields of Alzheimer patients and autistic children. Alzheimer patients who receive intentional, daily doses of empathy (called *validation* in that field) never deteriorate to the vegetative state¹. Autistic children who receive extensive, full day treatments focused on empathizing with the child, have measurable and even miraculous recoveries from what is often a life sentence of isolation and institutionalization².

When people feel pain, they want to blame someone, and the boss is a convenient target. With blame comes resentment, dull compliance, passive resistance or even covert sabotage such as my colleagues and I dealt out to our previous boss. The only way to break the vicious blame-game cycle is for the leader to face the emotional pain of others while the hurt is fresh³. Empathizing with another person's pain must happen in this present moment. When done with honor and sincerity, the leader provides a powerful means for people to grieve the loss of doing things the "old way", and to accept the present moment tough decision about the "new way".

A leader who exhibits the paradoxical combination of inner toughness and empathetic acceptance is exhibiting *present moment leadership*. They are doing what is most important now, in this very second. They are taking tough stands *now* on decisions that affect the way the organization operates, day in and day out. They are empathizing now with the emotional impact of those decisions, in the very moment in which people

¹ See www.validationvf.org

² See www.son-rise.org

³ See *The Hard Work of Being A Soft Manager*, William H. Peace, Harvard Business Review, December, 2001

are feeling their pain and in the hours and days closely following the decision.

Present Moment Leadership is rooted in noticing the present moment. A leader who is “present” is a person who has mastered their own mind game. The evidence appears in how mentally clear and focused they are. They are most notable by their excellent listening skills and sharp memories. They listen and remember because their minds are here and now, and not wandering elsewhere.

Present moment leaders are comfortable in their own skin. They know who they are and who they are not. They are not easily derailed by resistance or by emotions. They are not filled with yesterday’s self-doubt or tomorrow’s second-guessing. As a result, these leaders are not afraid to wade deeply into emotional waters, because they trust themselves to stay true to themselves yet are flexible to new information and perspectives. They are sufficiently secure that they will take major personal risks in order to do what is right for the business and yet still do what is right for a given person at a given moment in time.

How does an ordinary leader become a present moment leader? By being completely and unfailingly honest with themselves. They must notice and admit to themselves what their real motives and influences were in making their decisions, speaking their choice of words and acting the way they decided to act. They must notice the impact that their words and actions have on others, and come to peace with this. This means not feeling responsible, defensive or guilty for causing other people’s pain, yet taking ownership of their own actions that are the reasons that others use to explain and justify the pain of accepting change.

Present moment leadership is a paradox. A leader must go slower in order to get faster results. Tough decisions need time to digest. The pain of those decisions also requires time. **A leader who is present-moment focused doesn’t allow their desire for a future state of performance to distort what’s important now.** What’s important now is *this* decision and *this* person’s thoughts and feelings about this decision. Such a leader holds a deep self-trust that the future will arrive *sooner* if the leader does *not* pressure others to change towards that future state quicker than they are ready to absorb. Nonetheless, this leader is very consistent that they themselves are operating now, in a manner consistent with that future state.

Becoming a present moment leader is a journey of simultaneously getting both closer and more separate from other people. The leader is closer to people in that they invest time to listen and to empathize, often at the expense of tasks and to-do lists that are crying out for their attention. Yet the leader is also more separate. The leader is not unduly influenced by politics or emotional

power-plays. They are rock solid, even under heavy pressure.

There is a method to mastering this kind of influential personal leadership. I call it The W.I.N. Way of Present Moment Leadership. The W.I.N. Way is a set of twelve strategies that a leader learns to apply in any given situation as needed, in order to get him or herself centered, clear and present. Only then does the leader make key decisions, enter difficult confrontations and deal with people challenges. Each of these strategies has one goal – to allow the leader to change him or herself at will, in a way that is real and genuine. This is why present moment leadership works. The leader is real. They are the same in private as they are in public. They are human, and admit their mistakes. They take the hit when things go wrong.

A present moment leader does not pressure others to change towards a “better” future. Pressuring is about “motivating” others to do it the leader’s way, using ‘carrots’ such as future career promises and hard sell, or ‘sticks’ such as being ostracized or restructured out of a job. In the present moment, the leader is accepting and “non-judgmental” about other people, even when they are outright resistant to the leader’s way of doing things. In this way, people feel safe to express their views. The leader in turn is flexible, especially about “how” things get done. This allows people to claim ownership of their part of the vision for the enterprise.

The ultimate ‘magic’ in present moment leadership is the safeness to change that people feel under this leadership style. Tough decisions are not “personal.” They are about what is best for the business. Objections and frustrations are not taken personally by the leader, as if there is some kind of political brownie point board. Present moment leaders do not track who was with them and who was against them. That is the past. In the present moment, what’s important is what do I stand for, *and* how can I accept you where you are now?

Present moment leadership is a journey of personal change for leaders. It is powerful as they begin to defend tougher boundaries on core business issues. Yet it is humbling, as they begin to accept the risk of the emotional vulnerability that accompanies empathizing with other people’s pain. The result is a new kind of leadership, one where the leader goes slower in order to win people and results much faster.

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