

PRESENT MOMENT LEADERSHIP

INFLUENCING PEOPLE QUICKLY... ONE MOMENT AT A TIME

By John Kuypers

“By the yard, it’s hard. By the inch, it’s a cinch!” For business leaders who want people to change for the good of the company, focusing on the here and now may be the best strategy of all. Leaders build trust and influence by noticing and altering the two key ways in which they inadvertently break down trust.

An ambitious young president took over the helm of a small and highly successful consumer products company. A sophisticated marketer, this leader quickly set about to take the company to the next level by eliminating their grass-roots, street-level promotions that he viewed as inefficient and costly. He quickly hired a new advertising agency and a new vice-president of marketing. Then he hit a wall of resistance.

His key sales and marketing staff disagreed with him. No matter how he explained the wisdom of his intentions and the way in which his approach would lead to faster growth, they resisted. When he began ordering certain projects, morale plummeted. After a year of frustration and stalled growth, he began looking for new ways to get his team unstuck. **“After all,” he lamented, “I can’t fire everybody.”**

By happenstance, this president stumbled onto a concept called “being present”. He was the father of an autistic child and this technique was being used with remarkable success to influence positive behavior changes in withdrawn autistic children. To be present, he learned, was to be totally accepting of the child as he is *now*. If the child spins a plate, you spin a plate. If he claps, you clap. With time, the child begins to feel accepted. Once he feels accepted, he feels safe. **Feeling safe, the theory went, leads to a willingness to change.** By contrast, applying pressure on the child to change, actually *inhibits* change.

He decided to apply this principle with his staff. He stopped trying to convince them to do things his way.

He became curious about their ideas, listening intently and going along with their ideas much further than he ever could have accepted before. To his great surprise, his people began to actively explore his ideas. They began to incorporate many of them into their work. Within three months, morale and performance made a major turnaround, just in time to successfully meet a head-on challenge from a new competitor.

This leader discovered the first core principle of an innovative new way to influence people called “Present Moment Leadership”: **If you want someone to change, you must first accept them as they are now.** *Acceptance* is based on a well-established principle of psychology known as “The Paradoxical Theory of Change.” *“Change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what he is -- to be fully invested in his current positions.”*¹ This principle is being successfully used with autistic children² and with Alzheimer’s patients.³

Leaders who focus on the present moment, know how to connect *this* present moment with their goals and vision. Michael Eisner, CEO of Disney Corporation, attributes his company’s enduring success to applying this first core principle: *“A company like ours*

¹ Dr. Arnold Beisser, *Gestalt Therapy Now*, Shepherd & Fagan, 1970

² Go to www.son-rise.org, The Autism Treatment Center of America

³ Go to www.vfvalidation.org, The Validation Training Institute

*must create an atmosphere in which people feel safe to fail.*⁴ People feel safe when they feel accepted in spite of their faults and mistakes.

Bosses are uniquely positioned to create this safety zone, for obvious reasons. However, being accepting of others puts leaders themselves at risk. They face the very real possibility that a person or situation *will not* change. This can be an unnerving prospect for leaders who see change as crucial to their success. **Therefore, the first principle of acceptance leads to the second principle of Present Moment Leadership: resistance.**

Present moment leaders can only be accepting of others, if they are deeply confident that they will *resist* the resulting pressure to cave in on their own core beliefs about what's right. They *accept* that other people have the right to their own choices. They *resist* letting other people pressure them out of their own choices. **By accepting others while being true to their own beliefs and choices, present moment leaders create the paradox that leads to high levels of trust.**

I have a CEO client who struggled for one and a half years with the intrusive habits of a valuable senior partner, who tended to take over meetings and overrule decisions. My client tried various ways to *pressure* him to change his habits. Occasionally, his partner would agree to "change". Two days later, his partner's habits re-appeared like the proverbial spots on a leopard. My client began instead to focus on how to *accept* that his partner might never change. Three months later, he succeeded. That very same week, he saw a new way to restructure both his own job, and that of his partner. He expected huge objections from his partner and mentally prepared himself to resist, that is, to be tough, even to the point of resigning his own position. To his delight, his partner welcomed the plan and a major obstacle to a productive and positive work climate was resolved.

Was it a coincidence that his plan was welcomed? Or was my client simply "slow" at figuring out a solution? I don't believe so. A leader who is present, is centered and clear. **His plan had no "punitive" element in it, nor did his words, tone of voice or demeanor communicate reprisal.** He believed it to be a good plan, for the good of all involved, and his partner received it in that way.

Leaders communicate the safety message in the present moment by being non-judgmental in attitude, word & deed. A boss gives feedback to a subordinate, pointing out her shortfalls while barely concealing his disdain for the effort itself. What's the message? *Trying and failing is not safe.* A leader promises time off and unspecified future recognition if his team will work long and hard on a key project.

⁴ Michael Eisner, *Managing a Creative Organization*, 1996, *The Book of Leadership Wisdom*, edited by Peter Krass, 1999

Business goes sour and he shrugs off his commitment. **What's the message? *The leader's word is not trustworthy.*** A group leader asks for opinions: "Don't you agree that we should do it this way?" What's the message? *Disagreeing is neither wise nor welcome.*

What leaders say and do in these moments either builds trust or breaks down trust. Trust is the key ingredient that influences people to follow a leader towards a common goal for the good of the enterprise. Wise leaders know that they cannot truly *force* anyone to change. They may achieve temporary behavior changes, using incentives and/or penalties, but these will be done resentfully, compliantly and are likely to stop as soon as the pressure tactic is removed.

Leading change in the present moment can feel slow. It often takes time for a leader to be truly accepting. Subordinates also need time to deal with the fact that just because the boss accepts their mistakes and views, doesn't mean the boss is going to change course. The only fact that helps leaders accept this slowness is the awareness that the traditional "fast" way hasn't been working for months or even years.

Present moment leadership could be the dullest terrific idea to come along in quite awhile. Does anything exciting ever happen in the present moment? Are companies bought and sold, do stock prices double, are annual profit targets hit? No. These major events are merely the sum total of thousands of daily events that lead to a year of success...or failure. Harold Geneen, the legendary CEO of IT&T from 1958 to 1979, wrote, "*Everyone reads the same book and yet one manager will get a 40% effort out of his management team and the other will get 80%, and it will depend upon the manager himself and the hundreds of little things done every day that reveal character.*"⁵

Present moment leadership is for leaders who want their people to succeed because it was their own idea, for their own reasons. These leaders ask themselves, in every present moment challenge, do I accept? Or do I resist? When they choose wisely, they do *what's important now*, and rapidly reap the rewards of a productive, flexible and self-motivated workforce.

What kind of leader are you? Take the Influential Leader Audit at www.winleadership.com. John Kuypers is the president of W.I.N. Leadership, an executive coaching and leadership development firm that helps leaders influence people to change for the good of the organization. He is the creator of *The W.I.N. Way of Present Moment Leadership*, a set of twelve trust-building strategies. He is the author of the personal leadership book, "**What's Important Now**," and is a former marketing & sales vice president and investment banker. John can be contacted at john@winleadership.com or at (905) 381-0341.

⁵ Harold S. Geneen, *Leadership*, 1984, *Ibid*