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# *Wise Leaders Let Go of the Past*

*Veteran business strategist and executive coach John Kuypers describes four ways in which wise leaders learn how to let go of past disappointments and hurts. In so doing, they create for themselves the remarkable ability to 'be present', clear, confident and courageous about What's Important Now...*

A broken marriage, a lost job, financial disaster and the death of a loved one are major wounds that many of us have faced and survived. Letting go of these devastating emotional hurts is not only wise, it's absolutely necessary if you want to work and live passionately in this present moment, unhindered by past regrets, resentments and discouragement.

During major traumas, we are advised that "time heals all wounds." Yet for many, the wounds fester, never quite healing, never quite gone. You can tell if this is true for you if you feel yourself being triggered when reminders of the old wound resurface. You consider remarrying and at the moment of truth, you back out. You consider a riskier career move, and decide to play it safe. You avoid talking about your personal life because you just don't want to go there. These are the wounds that stand out like a naked mountain in the prairie landscape of our minds.

Yet the past haunts us even more relentlessly than in these traumatic events. It colors and influences our day to day lives in subtle and frequent ways. We notice the dishes are in the dishwasher the "wrong" way, or the traffic is unexpectedly backed up, and our irritation reminds us that things are not the way they "should" be. We consider asking our spouse for a favor, and then hesitate out of fear of how they might react. The memory of a previous angry backlash haunts us, distorting our willingness to be true to who we are. When top management exhorts its staff to take risks and have more fun at work, the memory of the person who took such a risk and then hit a career ceiling, reminds us cynically that we must be careful and protective if we are to survive and thrive.

Even great successes can haunt your past. Twenty years ago, I had an amazing year as a baseball player in my local league. I batted .490, well above my normal .300. The next year, the memory of my great success haunted me. Now, everyone expected great

results from me. Could I repeat it? The thought of failing to live up to the high expectations of everyone around me, created an enormous sense of pressure within me. My self-doubt fed on itself, and I finished the next year batting .300, never again quite finding the groove of that one, magical season.

How we make sense of our past failures and successes defines our self-image. Our past boxes us in, limiting our potential. When opportunity knocks in a way that looks bigger than our past, we look the other way. "That big job, that gorgeous man or woman, that financial success, they can't be for me. I've never had them, so how could they be for me?" When disaster strikes, we struggle equally. "How can this divorce, illness, accident, financial ruin be happening to me? I've worked hard and done my best. I don't deserve this disaster."

Letting go of the past is the secret to having a happy, centered life. Whether you are wallowing in a swamp of troubles or surfing on a sea of success, when you let go of the past, you open yourself to performing better and feeling good along the way. Your mind becomes wide open to new possibilities. Your mind is able to accept sudden and unexpected difficulties. Your heart is able to see the best in your new situation. Your body remains calm and healthy, unravaged by soaring and plummeting adrenaline levels. Your spirit remains alive and connected to your purpose, helping you rise above the obstacles of the day. You are balanced in body, mind, heart and soul.

Leaders learn how to let go of the past. I want to outline four ways that have worked for me. However, I want to first emphasize that these techniques only work if a person truly *wants* to let go of the past. Many of us do not want to let go of the past. Holding on to the past serves us. We guard the hurt that someone hurled at us with a watchful and

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resentful eye. We bring that past wound back into today's disagreement, using it to justify what we want. "I did what you wanted last time. Now you owe me!" The past is where we gather and store our "you owe me" points, a powerful way in which we use to the past to leverage other people to do things our way.

When you let go of the past, you give up power over other people. You stop using the past to remind the other person of their shortcomings. You no longer use the past to justify why you have to check up on them, nag them or worry about them. This is the means by which we unwittingly keep other people down, undermining them when they attempt to rise to a new level. "You'll never quit smoking, or eating, or being a lousy mate." Never and always are two words that begin to disappear from your vocabulary when you let go of the past.

Without the past to constantly remind you of your own past failures and successes, your relationship with yourself also changes. You stop beating yourself up when you mess up. When I began to see how the past was woven into my every present moment, I began to see that I was not just mean to myself, I was downright vicious. I angrily lashed out at myself if I forgot something important at work. I kicked myself mercilessly if I failed to perform to the level that I wanted to at work, on a date or in a social situation. Each time, I reminded myself how I had failed in this way before, and how could I be so unbelievably stupid as to have screwed up again!

When you see how the past hinders you more than helps you, then you will be ready to try these four ways to let go of the past and live more fully in the present.

**1. Look at the worst case scenario.** This is useful when you are hesitating in the face of a moment of truth – to take a new job, enter or leave a serious love relationship or invest a major amount of money. Ask yourself, "Can I live with the worst possible situation that could happen here?" You must actively explore this question, and not just fantasize about the possibilities. Explore in detail how you would survive if your income fell in half as a result of a career or investment decision. Find out what a divorce would cost in time and money. My divorce lawyer once told me of a wealthy client who wanted to leave his wife for a younger woman. The client discovered that the cost of a divorce would be three million dollars. He changed his mind. When you can't go somewhere,

it's usually because your past is hanging over you. Whether that's right for you is the only question that matters.

**2. Life is not fair.** Many of us have deeply engrained beliefs about what life 'should' give us. We marry a good person and treat them well, we expect them to remain loyal to us. We work hard, pour in long hours and expect promotions, job security and to be treated with respect and honor. Yet no matter how much talent, beauty, friends or money that you have, none of these guarantee that you will get what you want. Ultimately, you will be able to let go of the past when you accept that you let the effort you expend be your reward itself, independent from whether you get the outcomes and results that you want. Then you will find it easier to accept that life is indeed, not fair.

**3. Grieve your losses.** Many of our feelings are the past brought forward into this present moment. We remember the hurtful words our spouse or co-worker said, and instantly feel angry or sad. This roller coaster of emotions can be released permanently, if you can feel your feelings deeply in the moment that the event is actually occurring, and express those feelings safely at that time. When a close friend of mine died unexpectedly of a heart attack at the age of forty-one, my grief lasted for nearly three weeks. I suffered in a way unlike anything I had ever experienced, reeling from the enormity of my sense of loss. Then it was over and I have felt peaceful about it since. This same experience held true for me in recovering from the breakup of a major love relationship.

**4. Be Grateful.** This is the simplest, yet most difficult technique that I can offer you. The simplicity of being grateful is in its unfailing logic. Of course you can be grateful for the happy times with your former lover, your former larger bank account and your former health and beauty. Of course you can be grateful that you have food on your plate, clothes on your back and someone somewhere who loves you. Yet this does very little for you emotionally. As long as you still feel pain around your past loss, you have not let it go. True gratitude emerges with humility – the secret ingredient to healing our deepest wounds by fully severing the link between our sense of self-worth and the people, passions and possessions around us. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "If you have even one more chair than you need, get rid of it." When things, lovers,

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position and abilities no longer define you, then you can find the jewels buried in the dust of your past failings, and genuinely feel grateful for them.

Ultimately, letting go of the past becomes important so you can live in the present. In the present moment, you are safe and secure, even as you are open and vulnerable. Like when you're in love, thoughts and feelings about past hurts and wounds simply vanish. Your creativity, warmth and inherent desire to be a good and loving person blossoms. Not only are you able to perform better, you feel deeply fulfilled and satisfied that in this present moment, you are good enough.

John Kuypers is the president of W.I.N. Leadership, an executive coaching & leadership development firm. He is the creator of the W.I.N. Way of Present Moment Leadership that helps executives lead by making numerous small, high impact changes to their leadership style. John is the author of the personal leadership book, ***What's Important Now***. He can be reached at [www.winleadership.com](http://www.winleadership.com)