

REMAINING IN THE ZONE

(Being Present)

PRESENCE DEFINED

The secret to creating impact with others is presence. Simply put, presence is a state of mind that is free from distraction. Your level of presence is the extent to which your mind is not occupied with thoughts unrelated to the project at hand. Consider if you have experienced the following:

Have you ever been talking to someone who was listening to you . . . and then suddenly they weren't listening to you? They may even have been looking at you and nodding their heads as you spoke, but didn't you know when their attention was elsewhere?

Have you talked with someone on the phone while they were doing something else at the same time? Even though you couldn't see them, hasn't it been obvious when you did not have their total attention?

These are both instances of distraction or low presence.

Now recall your experience of what it feels like to talk to someone who was not really listening to you. If you are like most people, you probably find that distracted behaviour to be rude at best and angering at worst.

DISTRACTIONS

A distracted state of mind creates irritation in other people. You know how incredibly annoying it can be to talk with someone whose mind has wandered. Yet we do the same thing to people constantly because we have accepted the notion that the way to be efficient and get more done is to do several tasks at once. In fact, effectiveness comes from just the opposite approach.

LESSONS FROM LIFE

Imagine a two year-old is looking for attention and you are busy. As they tug on your trouser leg you say "Later, kid, I'm busy" without looking up from your work. Do they respond with "Oh sure, I understand?" Not a chance! To take care of a two year-old you have to drop what you are doing, get down eyeball to eyeball and give them your undivided attention for about five seconds. If you do this, you'll buy yourself some time. You may get a few minutes and you may get an hour but if children don't get your complete attention, they will pull on you for the rest of their natural life!

It is no different if they are twenty-two or sixty-two. Mostly what people want to know is that you "got it" - that whatever they had to say actually got through to you and this cannot happen if you are distracted. The only difference between dealing with children and adults is that kids are more honest - they will not pretend that they have your attention if your mind is wandering. Adults are usually more polite but no less observant.

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PRESENCE AND PRODUCTIVITY

The truth is that you can really only concentrate on one thing at a time anyway. When you are talking with another person, there is nothing you can do at that same moment about finishing the schedule. If your mind is occupied with extraneous thoughts your attention is not fully with the person in front of you. Even if they do not call you on it, they will notice and keep coming back again and again trying to get through to you.

So the secret to productivity is to drop distractions, focus your attention, handle one item at a time and move on to the next project. Presence (or lack of distraction) will enable you to more accurately assess the situation and quickly deal with it in a more effective way.

A NATURAL STATE

Presence is not something unnatural - all of us are born with high presence. Little babies have high presence because their heads aren't yet cluttered with thoughts - they only know how to deal with what is right in front of them at the moment. This sounds too simple but look at what happens when you bring a newborn baby into a room. Everyone's attention shifts to the baby. People start to smile and forget about their own problems for a few minutes. The baby is not doing anything - just being there - yet everyone around feels a little better.

This demonstrates the power presence has to make others feel more positive. High presence is our birthright, but it is also something we can easily lose sight of as the pace of business speeds up, our lives become increasingly complex and we take on more "responsibilities."

It is unrealistic to think that you can always operate without distractions, but you can at least start to be aware of distracting thoughts when they start to clutter your mind. One way to tell is that this is happening when people you are talking with start to get restless or when you see a glazed look in their eyes. When your attention wanders, so will theirs.

The good news is that simply becoming aware of the fact that you are distracted will start to put you back on track. When you notice that you are becoming distracted, just gently let go of whatever stray thoughts are in your head and bring your attention back to the task at hand. Your increased presence will make your audience feel better-served and bring more impact to your message.