

Are you paying attention?

or rather, what are you paying attention to....

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I'm afraid I wasn't listening

How often do you find you tune out of the conversation and, suddenly, you have lost track of where you are and it looks like it is your turn to speak. It's happened to me 3 times today already, and I spend my working life as an Executive Coach whose primary aim is all about giving extra-ordinary levels of attention to enable clients to discover what really matters to them. I won't be too hard on myself though, because it's such a common failing - and perhaps better to realise you've wandered off script at the time, and pull yourself back, than to find it's become an unappealing habit you can't get out of.

Children crave attention. We get that, and who can resist the two year old who takes your face in both hands and pulls it towards them, demanding that you listen to them. As adults, I don't think the desire to be heard is much less intense, but of course it can't often be quite so directly expressed. In polite company, the lack of attention has to be internalised, often buried, and then results in other kinds of attention seeking behaviour - either that, or a little piece of us dies, as our ideas go unvoiced, our opinions unheard, and our thoughts stay firmly as unprocessed thoughts.

Which is why the best leaders have an amazing capacity to give you attention. Of course, we are beginning to cotton on to this, and so mindfulness has become a big thing - quite often because a serious lack of mindfulness is peppering our very existence.

"If you aspire to be a great leader, be present"

so say Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter writing in Harvard Business Review.

They tell the story of the director in a multinational pharma company who'd been receiving poor grades (360 perhaps?) for engagement and leadership effectiveness. Although he tried to change, nothing seemed to work. As his frustration grew, he started tracking the time he spent with each of his direct reports — and every time he received bad feedback, he pulled out his data and exclaimed, "But look how much time I spend with everyone!" Things improved when he began a daily 10-minute mindfulness practice. After a couple of months, people found him more engaging, nicer to work with, and more inspiring. (Wouldn't you like to receive that kind of feedback?!) He was surprised and elated by the results. The real surprise? When he pulled out his time-tracking spreadsheet, he saw that he was spending, on average, 21% less time with his people. The difference? He was actually there. He came to understand that, even though he was in the same room with someone, he wasn't always fully present. Like most of us, he let himself become preoccupied with other activities or let his mind drift to other things. And, most of all, he'd listen to his inner voice when someone was talking. Because of his lack of presence, people felt unheard and frustrated.

Hougaard and Carter explain that to truly engage other human beings and create meaningful connections, we need to silence our inner voices and be fully present — and being more mindful can help. In their research for a forthcoming book, *The Mind of the Leader*, they surveyed more than 1,000 leaders and found a direct correlation between leaders' mindfulness and the well-being and performance of their people. In other words, the more a leader is present with their people, the better they will perform.

Four Tips and Strategies to help you be more present.

Be Here Now - it takes discipline and skill to stay mentally focused

Plan for Presence - build in time to be with people - earlier in the day

Do Less, Be More - the old "we're human beings" idea

Embodied Presence - stay grounded, literally feeling the floor beneath you

They remind us that the act of sitting up and opening up has a positive effect on the chemistry of our brains. It cultivates our capacity for higher-functioning thought processes. Being grounded and in touch with our body posture gives us access to wisdom that comes from heightened awareness, compassion that comes from increased openness, and confidence that comes from the strength of vertical alignment.

Hougaard and Carter cite another survey of 2,000 employees conducted by Bain & Company. They found that among 33 leadership traits — including creating compelling objectives, expressing ideas clearly, and being receptive to input — the ability to be mindfully present (also called "Centeredness") is the most essential of all.

So whatever you have on this week, and whomever you are doing it with, try and pay a bit more attention, heart, mind, and soul, and you may be pleasantly surprised at the result...

Leadership Lessons in a Waistcoat

And in case you missed it, we all got a bit carried away with the World Cup, and the very real possibility that England, for once, might be very present right to the end (as opposed to exiting early on, as seems to be our norm). The theme of servant leadership modelled by England Coach, Gareth Southgate, was picked up by many a commentary. Read the article by Neil Hudson of the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity (LICC).

Quote Unquote

Parker J Palmer describes five interlocking habits of the heart . . . deeply ingrained patterns of receiving, interpreting, and responding to experience that involve our intellects, emotions, self-images, and concepts of meaning and purpose. These five habits, taken together, are crucial to sustaining a democracy. *Healing the Heart of Democracy* (Jossey-Bass: 2014, ©2011), 6-7, 44-46. and adapted by Richard Rohr.

- We must understand that we are all in this together. Ecologists, economists, ethicists, philosophers of science, and religious and secular leaders have all given voice to this theme. . . .
- We must develop an appreciation of the value of "otherness." . . . reminds us of the ancient tradition of hospitality to the stranger. . . .
- We must cultivate the ability to hold tension in life-giving ways...when we allow [these] tensions to expand our hearts, they can open us to new understandings of ourselves and our world, enhancing our lives and allowing us to enhance the lives of others. . . .
- We must generate a sense of personal voice and agency. Insight and energy give rise to new life as we speak and act, expressing our version of truth while checking & correcting it against that of others..
- We must strengthen our capacity to create community. . . . the steady companionship of two or three kindred spirits can kindle the courage we need to speak and act as citizens.