

## Presence

*It's not enough to simply understand intellectually that if we continue on the path we're going on we're going to fall short of our goals ... we have to feel it. When we have a deep enough emotional experience of the impact of a behavior, our life changes permanently.*

Kevin Cashman

*Doing the best at this moment puts you in the best place for the next moment.*

Oprah Winfrey

**W**AS COACHING A SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT AT A LARGE financial institution with a business goal so radical and ambitious it had never before been tried anywhere. My client had been extraordinarily successful, often by sheer energy, will, and force of character. He was viewed as charismatic and inspirational, but was often criticized for being a one-man band.

The goal had been agreed to by my client and his president with little input from others. Wisely, my client recognized that being successful in this goal required a level of ownership and buy-in that his senior team was sorely lacking. He knew it had something to do with him, but no clue as to what to change in order to build this ownership. It seemed that the more he tried to inspire them to step up their game, the more passive they got.

In one of our early conversations, I was feeling a bit stuck. He was expressing his frustration at the unwillingness of a couple of his key players to step up to the plate and didn't see how his leadership precluded their doing so. At one point in the conversation, I stopped in my tracks. Out of nowhere, I simply knew what to do. I experienced a sudden clarity, a sharper awareness. I suggested an experiment. I invited him to stand, to hold his body in an aggressive, forward-leaning stance, and feel what it was like to ask others for their ideas in that stance. Then I requested that he do the same while leaning back, in a receptive stance.

As he did so, the light of recognition came over his face. He sensed in that moment that his words were absolutely incongruous with the message that his body was sending. His words said, "I want your ideas." His body said, more loudly than his words, "This is MY show, and *I'm* going to make it happen. It's about me." He saw in a moment what his people had been watching for years. In that moment, my client realized that he had to shift how he interacted with people. He felt, in the core of his being, that he was inauthentic in his requests and that something deep in him needed to change. That awareness came from the power of presence.

This was one of many experiences of presence I've had as an executive coach. It has become clear to me that presence is in fact central to what it means to coach others from a centered place; be an authentic leader; and have a full, rich, and satisfying life. Presence is a fundamental capacity, inherent in being human. Our work as leaders and coaches provides us a unique opportunity to discover this within ourselves.

## PRESENCE DEMYSTIFIED

There is no magic here; in fact, I intend to begin by thoroughly demystifying presence. So here are some additional examples. By seeing the range of the territory, you can first understand what presence is and then explore what it can show you about leadership, development, and coaching.

- Jerry had decided to let go of a manager, whom he had recently hired and was not working out. Jerry was frustrated, and the manager

was both unproductive and defensive. He had gone way out on a limb for this guy, against the recommendations of almost everyone else in the hiring process, so letting him go was personally difficult. Jerry was conflict averse and had a strong tendency to keep people around, even when they weren't performing well. Confronting this situation also meant confronting his own habits. Jerry had a habitual tendency to tell himself stories to keep from having to hold difficult conversations. ("He just needs a little more time. I can work with him. He'll get this moving.")

In my work with Jerry, he spent considerable time in introspection, letting go of his frustration, recognizing his own contribution to the problem, and working with his emotional state. The story he was telling himself fell away, and it was instantly clear that it was time to take action. Then it became a question of how to hold the difficult conversation rather than what conversation needed to be held.

After this preparation, Jerry met with the manager. With calmness, caring, and candor, he explained that it wasn't going to work. He took responsibility for his own miscalculation and acknowledged that it also was a very difficult situation for the other man, who had relocated his family from the opposite coast. The conversation actually came as a relief to the other, who had felt a bit like a drowning man with few options. They were able to work out an equitable solution with mutual respect.

- There's a US Airways agent named Bob who frequently works behind the counter at the Asheville, North Carolina, airport, from which I frequently depart. As I enter the airport, preoccupied with my day, I scan for Bob, because I know that my day will be different if I find him. Bob is inevitably positive, even upbeat. He makes eye contact, addresses every passenger by name, and asks how people are doing (and he means it). I never fail to notice my own mood shift. After being around Bob, I always feel more alive, lighter somehow, and ready to enjoy my day. I've watched him for years and consistently notice how others lighten up around him. Bob is contagious.

- A few years ago, after filling my tank with gas at our local station, I pulled over to the side of the highway with a nagging suspicion

that I hadn't replaced the filler cap. I looked and was shocked to see the entire nozzle and gas hose hanging from the side of my car! I'm not proud of this, but my first instinct was to take the hose and throw it in the weeds and drive off. Then I remembered a time when a colleague did the same thing, and the entire gas station flooded with gasoline from the broken pump. I visualized my local BP station engulfed in hundred-foot-high sheets of flame, and the stakes suddenly went way up. I also realized that if I threw the hose in the bushes, I would never be able to look my kids in the eye again and tell them not to lie.

This was an existential moment, with a very clear choice between following my baser but nonetheless seductive instincts, or the values I'd always espoused. I experienced that familiar "deer in the headlights" paralysis, knowing that my values were on the line and that either choice had real consequences. I stood, not knowing what I was going to do. Then it became absolutely clear that there was no real choice. I loaded the twelve-foot, heavy, smelly hose in the passenger seat and headed back to face the music.

- Most of us remember starkly and clearly, wherever we lived in the world, the morning of September 11, 2001. (I was lingering over breakfast with my parents, who were about to leave to drive home three days after my daughter got married at our retreat center.) We each heard, or saw, the news at a particular moment. At some point soon after that moment, we had a realization that something fundamental had changed. How we each interpreted that change depended on many factors: where we live, our cultural assumptions and beliefs, our personality and orientation in life. But before our interpretation kicked in to provide our own meaning from those difficult events, the world seemed to stop. Our internal world shifted; we became aware of a larger truth, and we could never go back to being the same. This too was a moment of presence.

These examples provide wide-ranging examples of experiences involving presence. The commonalities may not yet be readily apparent. While you may not have named your own experiences of presence as such, we've all had them, and we've witnessed them in others. Some of yours may have been large and dramatic, like the

events surrounding 9/11, while others may have been matter-of-fact and practical, like my client's conversation with his manager.

Given this range, let's explore what presence is, and how it's relevant to your work as a team leader, coach, or executive.

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#### EXERCISE 1.1.

#### *Experiences of Presence*

- Consider times when you have had an experience of presence. Remember a time in nature when you felt moved by a waterfall, a sunset, or a grand view. What was that feeling like? What specifically did you experience within yourself?
- Remember a time when you felt a spontaneous wave of affection or love for a spouse, a child, or another person. What happened in that experience?
- Remember a time when you were confronted with a choice, the choice said something about you, and there was no place to pass the buck. What was your experience in that precise moment when you knew the implications of your decision but not what you were going to do?
- Recall a time when you were being with someone who was upset, perhaps a crying child, perhaps an upset employee, or as the first person at the scene of an accident. Intuitively, perhaps, you understood that being calm was central to how you could help. Somehow your calm presence helped another. How did you access that calm?
- Remember where you were on the morning of 9/11. Consider anything that seemed to come sharply into focus that morning. Was there anything that touched you, that you suddenly perceived differently, or that emerged as more important than previously?

These are examples of presence. And, I suspect that with a minimum of diligence, you were able to identify something for each question.

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## SO, WHAT IS PRESENCE?

*Presence* turns out to be a devilishly slippery and challenging word to define. Other writers have approached it in a variety of ways. As you look at the following descriptions from gifted observers, notice what reactions you have. Is this something you want more of? What strikes you about the definitions?

“Presence means bringing yourself when you coach: your values, passion, creativity, emotion, and discerning judgment—to any given moment with a client.”<sup>1</sup>

“Presence ... a deep listening; of being open beyond one’s preconceptions and historical ways of making sense.”<sup>2</sup>

“The ability to connect authentically with the thoughts and feelings of others, in order to motivate and inspire them toward a desired outcome.”<sup>3</sup>

These descriptions generally describe what we are doing. They assert that *presence* is largely a verb. Presence, in these views, lends itself to the development of skills and techniques and is useful for bringing resourcefulness and a certain quality of being to relationships with others. I can imagine that being with someone who is doing what these writers describe might lead to an experience of openness, of being listened to in a profoundly different way. The descriptions imply what we can do in order to produce simultaneous authenticity and a different way of being with others. That’s practical.

I propose a different, broader, and more inclusive definition of *presence*. I suggest that presence includes every one of these pragmatic definitions. However, if we limit our concept of presence to its applicability, we are depriving ourselves of something profoundly significant.

Here’s a broader definition that I offer: *Presence is a state of awareness, in the moment, characterized by the felt experience of timelessness, connectedness, and a larger truth.*

- Presence is a *state*, not a verb. It’s subjective, personal, internal.
- It’s *in the moment*, meaning right now. This moment. And this one.
- Our felt experience of *time* changes radically. Future concerns and past memories drop away, and there is only this moment.
- We experience ourselves as *connected* to others, to ourselves, to our environment and circumstances.
- Presence brings us into direct experience of a *larger truth*. This might mean seeing clearly and directly who we are, who another person is, how we fit into a bigger picture, what the situation really is, what is possible for us, or what choices are available to us.

## P R E S E N C E

Presence is a state of awareness, in the moment, characterized by the felt experience of timelessness, connectedness, and a larger truth.

This definition is, I believe, more inclusive of a wide range of experiences than the useful descriptions of other writers. It is true that presence serves our efficacy as a leader and a developer of people; *Presence-Based Coaching* offers practical, tested wisdom about bringing this experience of presence into the domain of work.

It's also true that presence opens the door to a radically accelerated pathway for our own development. The state of presence turns out to be a central and essential element in the capacity for learning itself. Working with presence opens the floodgates to an ever deepening experience of yourself that will touch every area of your life.

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### EXERCISE 1.2.

#### *Presence Now*

Let's experience presence. Here are two quick experiments that you can do. Read the directions through for each exercise until familiar, and then do the exercise without reading.

First, sit in a comfortable chair, without distractions. Close your eyes. Relax. Now, notice the short space between your thoughts. Notice that there is a moment of stillness between the end of one thought and the beginning of the next. Bring your attention to that stillness. Watch, expectantly, for the beginning of the next thought, like a cat waiting, with total alertness, for a mouse to emerge. That moment, between thoughts, is presence.

Then, sit in front of something that moves you: a picture of a loved one, a view of nature, a special work of art. Close your eyes, and visualize it. Consider what it means to you. Hold it in your mind's eye, concentrating on the image. Now slowly open your eyes, and look at the object *as if you were seeing it for the first time*. Simply let yourself feel, with freshness and curiosity, this thing that you're seeing anew.

So, what did you notice? What did you feel? That's presence.

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## IMPLICATIONS OF PRESENCE

Presence itself is an inner state, a fleeting kind of awareness that often lasts for only a moment. For now, let's explore some of the implications of this state, given the previous anecdotes, and see how they might bring this definition to life and establish useful meaning and grounding for our work together. A little later in this chapter, I tie this back into coaching.

*Presence reveals a larger context.* Sometimes our perspective shifts suddenly, and we clearly see a larger truth that somehow had eluded us. We can resist this (as in the wonderful Gary Larson cartoon with two cowboys in a defensive circle of covered wagons, flaming arrows coming in from all sides. One cowboy turns to the other and says, "Hey! They're lighting their arrows! Can they DO that?") Or we can allow this expanded perspective to call us to something new. Leaders who make decisions with a more inclusive view are less likely to fall into the trap of myopic, symptom-driven decision making.

*Presence unveils new possibilities for action.* Through the direct view of a more inclusive context, we see things clearly and expansively. This felt experience can illuminate new actions. On the morning of 9/11, in each individual's moment of realization, his or her world changed. Some people, like Pat Tillman, the National Football League star, were moved to enlist. Others responded by donating blood. My wife and I called neighbors and friends to join us around a bonfire, realizing the precious and fleeting nature of our community. Each of these decisions was taken as a meaningful, chosen response to a felt experience.

*Presence lays bare our freedom of choice.* The gas hose dilemma provides a wonderful example of the immediacy of choice in the moment. I was acutely aware of the decision and the implications of each alternative. I could face an embarrassing confession (and, in my mind, the potential liability for the largest conflagration the small town of Weaverville had ever seen) or do penance with a lifetime of reflection on my hypocrisy. There was no one else to pass the buck to, and time stopped as I realized it was all up to me. Ultimately when the chips are down, each of us performs in the moment, or we don't. Being aware of that moment of choice results from presence.

*Presence provides an intelligent moment.* Presence produces a feeling of waking up. Things come into sharp focus, and we immediately



experience more energy, alertness, and resourcefulness. We can see this in every example set out in this chapter. In that moment, there's nothing else. The fuzziness in which we spend most of our hours drops away, and things are suddenly clear and elemental.

*Presence is an invitation.* Bob, the US Airways guy, is so clearly and visibly in a different mood from most other people in airports that it calls us up short. His mood is so stable and contagious that he opens a new possibility for everyone around him. He is an invitation into a shared state of happiness. His presence confronts people with a clear choice: in that moment, they can become happier, or get onto the plane feeling like a grump. The invitation is there, and my experience with Bob is that it's easier to accept than decline.

*Presence is the opening to fulfillment.* The present is the only moment in which we can actually have joy and fulfillment. We think about happiness like this: it will come when we get the perfect house, the next promotion, a new job, the latest iPod, or a bigger paycheck. Those beliefs, well conditioned by our marketing culture, defer our happiness to a perpetually future circumstance. Presence opens us to joy now.

#### SOME IMPLICATIONS OF PRESENCE

- Presence reveals a larger context.
- Presence unveils new possibilities for action.
- Presence lays bare our freedom of choice.
- Presence provides an intelligent moment.
- Presence is an invitation.
- Presence is the opening to fulfillment.

Let's explore how the characteristics of presence might be relevant to the development of a number of essential leadership traits:

- *Agility:* A commitment to considering the implications and context for decisions, and discovering new possibilities for action, is critical. On an organizational level, this engenders agile, responsive, innovative cultures. On an individual level, this is a recipe for fast-track development and learning.
- *Accountability:* Any meaningful definition of business and personal efficacy must include both measurable results and the

## LEADERSHIP TRAITS SUPPORTED BY PRESENCE

- Agility
- Accountability
- Resourcefulness
- Resilience
- Authenticity
- Vitality

effects of those results on colleagues, employees, customers, communities, and ultimately the whole of life on earth. Presence makes us accountable to considering an ever-larger context for every decision we make.

- *Resourcefulness*: Presence invites us out of habitual ways of doing things and into the real possibilities available every moment of every day. It's about choice—about living life as a creative, generative process. If we are interested in building a culture of innovation and creativity, we must begin with ourselves.
- *Resilience*: Presence is foundational to leader resilience. The experience of presence is antidotal to the grinding effects of stress and unpredictability, and feeling overwhelmed, that tire even our best leaders over time. In the present moment, we find a respite to which we can turn, over and over, in order to become more resourceful and less caught up in things that pull us away from ourselves.
- *Authenticity*: Presence is a central attribute in authenticity. The presence of an authentic leader is an invitation to join in something that is ennobling, that is greater and more worthwhile. If we are looking to address retention, motivation, and organizational effectiveness, what better way to do so than to be the kind of leader people want to follow?
- *Vitality*: Rather than experiencing “slow death” at work as so many people do, presence invites us to wake up.<sup>4</sup> When present, we can see that every moment is an opportunity to learn something, to experience our energy and aliveness. Presence opens us to a full experience of our lives and our connectedness to the people and environment around us.

The cultivation of presence as a business or nonprofit leader, an educator, or coach is inextricably linked to efficacy. Presence allows us to make choices grounded in an understanding of the implications of our decisions and to become bolder in choosing new courses of action that we might habitually avoid. Presence therefore is fundamental to enduring human change and development. It is central to our creativity and resourcefulness as professionals and is a major factor in how we are perceived and received by others.

What I am offering here is about all of life. Widely used, the tools and practices presented in this book will lead to better leaders in corporations, associations, and nonprofits. I am also deeply committed to seeing stronger educators in our schools and coaches in all walks of life who are able to support their clients in becoming more compassionate, grounded, and powerful contributors.

## PRESENCE AND THE PRODUCTS OF COACHING

I presume that, given the title of the book, you're reading this because you have a commitment to the learning and development of others, whether or not you actually call yourself a coach. Right?

I define *coaching* broadly as *that part of a relationship in which one person is primarily dedicated to serving the long-term development of competence, self-generation, and aliveness in the other.*<sup>5</sup> Coaching is a central and critically important activity for any leader in any organization who sees himself or herself as working with and through others. It is unlikely that anyone reading this book doesn't fundamentally understand coaching as a component of what you do.

This definition excludes group coaching. Although presence is just as relevant to group coaching as to individual coaching, it's my desire to keep this conversation focused on the essential elements.

### COACHING

Coaching is that part of a relationship in which one person is primarily dedicated to serving the long-term development of competence, self-generation, and aliveness in the other.

These will be much simpler to see and apply to one-on-one conversations than to group conversations. I will leave it to practitioners to make the easy extrapolation into other contexts.

My definition of coaching also excludes one-on-one interactions that are not dedicated to the learning and development of one partner. Thus, I exclude supervisory interventions and other conversations that are driven by organizational goals and priorities rather than the learning and development of an individual. Although presence is clearly relevant to those conversations as well, there are additional complexities that are beyond the limited scope of this book.

With these caveats, I hold that coaching is something that all business leaders and educators do, whether or not coaching is included in their job title. Coaching in a business context is intended to support others in developing competence in behaviors that are effective and authentic and produce results. At the same time, coaching seeks to develop the ability of people to contribute, to be competent learners who drive their own development, and to find fulfillment.

I distinguish three essential products of coaching:<sup>6</sup>

- *Observable competency in fulfilling the client's commitments.* The client's specific commitments will generally determine much of the focus of coaching. Resulting competencies will be observable by both the client and others.
- *The capacity for self-generation.* We explore this in more depth in the next chapter. For now, I assert that the capacity for, and ownership of, one's own ongoing learning and development is a central product of coaching. This often provides benefits far beyond the original outcomes sought from coaching.
- *The experience of greater aliveness, fulfillment, and joy.* Presence-based coaching puts us in much more direct contact with our moment-by-moment experience. Increased sensitivity and awareness of our own experience are the keys to the intangible rewards that we seek in our lives. This too predictably results from skillful coaching.

Presence is central to each of these three products. As coaches concerned with both the efficacy and fulfillment of ourselves and of our clients, it follows that we should be acutely interested in the development of presence.

### THE PRODUCTS OF COACHING

- Observable competency in fulfilling commitments
- The capacity for self-generation
- The experience of greater aliveness

Presence is not something we can produce in others by a reliable magic wand or a carefully practiced set of techniques. We're not in control of others, and we can't manipulate others into presence.

I suspect that if you picked up this book, you are already onto the notion that your own development is inseparable from your efficacy as a developer of others. It's not just a matter of modeling, although that too has a role. I'm saying that your way of being is fundamental to your ability to produce genuine new shifts, insights, and behaviors with those you coach. The coach is an instrument for the client's development.

Presence is an invitation. When we are present, we stand as an invitation. Coaching begins with our own inside work; it is through this development of the capacity for presence in ourselves that we evoke the experience of presence in others. *Presence-Based Coaching* will help you to greatly increase your capacity for the presence that is fundamental to developing yourself and others.

Then, and only secondarily, you can explore coaching moves that make it more likely that your clients will also experience presence in a way that is liberating and leads to the possibility of new actions.

### PRESENCE PAUSE

In the example of Jerry above, presence was essential to the successful resolution of a difficult situation. Jerry had to do his own inner work in order to own his responsibility for the problem, be compassionate with his manager, and bring a graceful end to a situation that was working for neither. In speaking candidly and compassionately, Jerry made it clear that he was going to terminate the current arrangement and invited his manager to join in an exploration of the best possible resolution. The quality of Jerry's presence was sufficiently inviting that the other man responded undefensively and they were able to create a mutually satisfactory solution. This also redounded to the credit of Jerry, and the company.

## CHALLENGES TO PRESENCE

Many factors in the coaching environment and limitations in the coach make maintaining presence quite challenging. If we are to maintain our own presence, toward the end of evoking presence and capability for more effective action in our clients, we must be aware of the challenges as well.

Here are some of the things that make our own maintenance of presence difficult:

### Internal Impediments to Presence

- Our own habits of thought, which tend to run in narrow grooves worn by years of practice
- Our desires to look good, avoid conflict, be perceived as smart, and so forth
- Our investment in maintaining equilibrium in our relationship with the other person
- Our needs to be seen, or to see ourselves, as a particular kind of person or coach

### External Impediments to Presence

- The pressures we feel from organizational agendas or other stakeholders
- External pressures from other stakeholders, such as a boss's agenda for our coaching client
- Organizational goals, cultural attributes, and performance measures that may be dissonant with our clients' interests
- Business drivers of coaching outcomes
- Time factors and pressures
- Dual roles (for example, we're the person's coach and supervisor), which set up internal dissonance
- Contractual limitations on how long we can work with a person or on what can be discussed
- Cultural impediments (for example, our cultural bias toward separating mind and body and valuing thinking over being)

Here's an example of a brief coaching conversation, illustrating how some of these factors might impede the conversation. Like most of the examples and dialogues in this book, this conversation is based on actual coaching conversations. However, the names and particulars have been changed to ensure anonymity, and some of the conversations are composites of several clients. In all cases, they have been edited for clarity and conciseness.

In this conversation, June is an internal coach to Rick, the head of a product division. June is reopening a conversation that she had with Rick a week ago. In the previous conversation, Rick had committed to having a difficult conversation with a direct report with some performance issues. She knows this is a tough situation for Rick.

*This is going to be dicey; I bet it didn't go well. I'm going to start very neutral,* she thinks, before opening the topic with Rick. "So, how did your conversation go with Jim? The one we planned last week, in which you were going to discuss the schedule delays on the development project he's managing for you?"

Rick responds, somewhat tersely, "We held the conversation. That's the best thing I can say. It didn't go well. He was really defensive. I tried to listen to what he was saying, and to empathize, but he didn't react well to my feedback."

*That's predictable,* the coach thinks to herself. *Seems like Jim is always defensive when Rick talks to him about this, but I don't see Rick recognizing that he might be contributing to that.* She asks, "How do you know he didn't react well?"

Rick explains, "He avoided my questions. When I kept probing, he became angry. He gave an excuse for everything that didn't go well with the project. Everything was outside of his control."

*Dang. Here we go again! He's frustrated with Jim, but doesn't see his part.* June feels a little caught by Rick's story and has often experienced Rick as defensive. However, she hasn't shared that perspective with Rick. She asks, "So, do you see any part that you played in his being defensive?"

Rick responds, with some energy, "I figured you'd ask that! Actually, I've tried to see my part, but I don't see how I could have done anything differently. I asked him what he thought,

I asked him where the delays came from, I asked him what he thought he could do differently. I listened to him, I really did. He said there wasn't anything he could do differently. No ownership. Nothing."

*Well, Rick asked a lot of questions. But he never shared his concerns or assessments. He was trying to get Jim to volunteer the problem, but Jim just can't see it. This isn't going well.* She had hoped that Rick would see what he could change, but he wasn't getting it. She feels impatient and frustrated. Distracted, she thought, *Rick's boss is going to ask me how this is going when we get together this afternoon. I really want to coach more in Rick's division, but he has to show people it works. So, I've got to make something happen.*

June asks, "So, what do you see that you could do differently?"

"I make of it that some people just aren't going to be willing to listen to feedback. It feels like beating my head against the wall. I'm really not sure that he's the right person for the job."

*He's just not getting it!* June begins to feel some self-judgment, and the tension in her gut increases. *I feel stuck. I'm not very good at this. This is wasting Rick's time, and he knows it. And if Rick doesn't begin modeling some new behaviors, this initiative is going to be dead in the water.*

*Maybe Jim really isn't the right person for the job. That could be a way into some new actions for Rick.* "Rick, we have a choice in front of us. Is it more important to you that we look at how your conversation with Jim could have gone differently, or that we explore how you can make the decision about whether Jim is the right person in this director role?"

The conversation continues. But you probably noticed that the ground of the conversation has shifted. June began by working with Rick on his behaviors in difficult conversations, which tend toward the indirect, manipulative technique of asking Jim to identify a behavior. Rick has already identified what he thinks is the problem, but doesn't want to risk speaking out loud. Now they're in a very different conversation. Why the course change?

Two main dynamics are preventing June from being fully present and resourceful with Rick. These dynamics are limiting June, and because of her limitation, neither is getting what they need. First,



there is an internal impediment. June is actually doing the same thing that frustrates her when she sees it in Rick. Her discomfort with directness is keeping her from sharing her assessment, which Rick is apparently not able to discover for himself. Second, there is a significant organizational dynamic that provides an external impediment: the shared hope of June and Rick's boss to bring coaching more into the division. This creates implicit pressure in this conversation to get some kind of results visible to others in the system, a reasonable goal. However, in this moment, that felt pressure expresses itself in June's apparent willingness to accompany Rick on a rather dramatic tangent that may or may not be fruitful, prevents Rick from learning from the present situation, and could potentially cost Jim his job.

June's discomfort with being direct with Rick, and her organizational objectives, are impeding this conversation. If June were able to be present:

- She would recognize her own aversion to directness and make the most useful choice possible for Rick's learning.
- She would recognize the organizational dynamics influencing her view of the conversation and set them aside for now.
- She would be both compassionate and direct with Rick and able to share her assessment candidly with less likelihood of provoking his defensiveness.
- She would bring more presence to her conversation with Rick, which might open up new possibilities for him.

Here's a replay. Let's see how this might go differently if June is more present:

June is preparing to enter the conversation. *I'd better get some results here. I know that Rick's boss wants others to see him doing things differently. Whoa, wait a minute! That pressure's not helpful to me right now. Let's just set that aside. This is now . . . This may be dicey; I bet the conversation didn't go well. Center myself, just be present with Rick. Frame a clear question.* "Rick, let's talk about the conversation with Jim. I know this was going to be a tricky one, and you had the intention to be direct and candid with him. How did you practice directness with Jim?"

Rick responds, “We held the conversation. It didn’t go well. I wasn’t very direct, because he was really defensive. I tried to listen and to empathize, but he really wasn’t open to my feedback.”

*I wonder what Rick was doing that produced this defensiveness? Seems like Jim is always defensive when Rick talks to him. What’s Rick up to here?* She asks, “How do you know he didn’t react well?”

Rick explains, sounding irritated, “He avoided my questions. When I kept probing, he became angry. He gave an excuse for everything that didn’t go well with the project. Everything was outside of his control.”

*Dang. Here we go again! Rick sees Jim as the whole issue.* June notices her own impatience, and some judgment of Rick for not owning his part. She brings herself back. *This is familiar; I’m starting to feel hooked; there’s that tension in my gut, that trapped feeling. Breathe. Stay present. Ahh. That’s better.* “So, Rick, I wonder if you can identify how you contributed to Jim’s defensiveness?”

Rick responds, with some energy, “I don’t see it, June. I asked him what he thought, I asked him where the delays came from, I asked him what he thought he could do differently. I listened to him, I really did. He didn’t own a thing. Nothing. I don’t see what I could have done differently.”

*Here it is. There’s that gut thing again. I’m picking up defensiveness. It’s right here in our conversation. Here’s an opening. Breathe. Be present. Soften. How can I be an example of what we’re talking about?* June notices her energy increasing dramatically, although she feels intensely focused and calm at the same time. “So, Rick, I want to offer my experience. Right now, I notice some tightness in my gut. I’m watching my own reluctance to be direct with you. And I notice your increased energy when you stated so clearly that you did everything that you could.” She pauses and touches her heart, feeling her compassion for Rick. Then, more softly, she asks, “Rick, I’m curious. I’m wondering what you see happening right now in our conversation?”

Rick looks startled and his face tightens. “Well . . . I don’t know.” He pauses. “I see what you’re getting at. I’m being defensive right now. Is that right?”

June can see Rick struggling to understand what she is saying. She feels compassionate, remembering her own struggle

to be more direct with him. She feels her heart soften as she speaks. “You’d have to make that call, Rick. I just noticed that when your energy went up and you were emphatic that there wasn’t anything you could have done differently, I found myself reluctant to share my views with you. It seemed to me that it would have taken a lot of energy to get through to you.”

“I can see that. But, I really don’t see what I could have done differently yesterday.”

“Maybe we’ll get to that. For now, Rick, can you identify where your energy came from?”

“Well, you were asking me questions about what I could have done differently and I didn’t see it. I felt clueless, and somewhat accused. So I guess I got defensive.”

“Thanks, Rick. I can see that. Of course, I don’t see you as clueless. We’re simply exploring for a new way of seeing things. I wonder if this present moment sheds any light on what happened with Jim?”

Rick has that startled look again. “Yeah, it does.” He pauses; June can see his face shifting. His body seems to relax, his shoulders drop, his eyes soften. He looks up and almost smiles. “Yeah. I think I get this now. I was just asking questions of Jim, trying to get him to confess. I was trying to manipulate him into saying it because I didn’t have the courage to tell him what I really thought. He got defensive just like I did. But I was really protecting myself, June.” He pauses. “I could have done that really differently.”

And so forth. We could continue the conversation, but the point is made.

Notice in this second pass through the conversation that things play out very differently. June is working with her own presence. First, she recognizes the potential for the organizational pressures to come into the conversation and consciously chooses to set them aside. Later she recognizes her own discomfort and impatience. And a couple of times, she has to work with herself to bring herself back into presence.

Midstream in the conversation, she speaks about what was going on for her right then. June becomes an invitation into an immediate, present moment of experience. Rick, when he comes into presence,

discovers a new way of seeing his situation. And new actions become possible when he sees the truth more clearly.

We might also notice that once present and in the moment, the organizational dynamic with Rick's boss and bringing coaching into the division doesn't enter into June's thinking process. The quality of presence electrifies the conversation, and the level of energy and engagement in the conversation simply doesn't leave room for it to reenter.

What June does in this conversation is to create a space of presence into which she can invite Rick. Rick discovers a different perspective of what went wrong in his conversation with Jim because he becomes aware of a similar dynamic in the present moment. This illuminates a clearer understanding of what was driving him in the conversation with Jim and what his options might have been.

Developing our presence as a coach, in the face of the challenges of both internal habits and the organizational dynamics at play, requires continual attention and inner work. This is both a requirement for professional efficacy and an invitation into the ongoing process of doing our own professional, and ultimately spiritual, development work.

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## CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Presence is a state of awareness—a felt experience of timelessness, connectedness, and a larger truth.
- We have all had experiences of presence, whether or not we identified them as such, and we can practice and cultivate our access to this state.
- Presence has significant implications for leadership. As leaders, through being present, we will be perceived by others differently, become more resilient and resourceful, and be better able to make decisions from a larger context.
- As coaches and developers of leaders, our capacity for presence affects both our resourcefulness and our ability to authentically and effectively extend presence to our clients.
- Coaching produces observable competency, the capacity for self-generation, and the experience of greater aliveness. Presence is central to all three of these products.

- A number of factors, both in the external environment and in the inner world of the coach, make it difficult to stay present. Building familiarity and attention to our particular challenges to presence is essential to self-mastery.
- Doing our own inner work is both a requirement for professional efficacy and a prerequisite to using presence-based coaching moves in a grounded way with our clients. We must be rigorous about our inner work in order to evoke the best from our clients.

