

Self-Awareness in Action: Cultivating Greater Executive Presence

*“We don’t see things as they are.
We see things as we are.”*

—Anais Nin

The greatest leaders, speakers and actors exude a presence that leaves a memorable impression both on and off the stage. This quality of presence unites and inspires others. As a nursing leader, your success is dependent on your ability to show up powerfully and confidently to set the vision and enlist the enthusiasm and commitment of others. This requires being self-aware, speaking with clarity, keeping your composure in the heat of the moment and letting team members sense your confidence in them as well as yourself. It’s sending the signal: “Let’s work together. We can do this!”

VUCA, mindfulness, and leadership presence

VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) is an acronym to describe the state of the world in which we live. We are constantly sensing and reacting to what is going on around us. This environmental context requires us to be present—to ourselves and others in the moment—to avoid being swept up in the mood, pace and intensity of what is happening externally. Leaders are trained to study data, seek information and monitor situations that emerge. However, if we focus our attention exclusively on what’s happening externally, we will gain information but miss essential cues about our internal condition. The nature of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity can trigger reactivity because we can’t control what is happening. Emotional triggers consist of thoughts, feelings and events that seem to trigger an automatic response from us. Triggers can range from the minor (irritating email, non-verbal behavior) to the major (a professional failure, high-stakes conflict) to the traumatic (violence, death). When triggered, stress hormones flood our nervous system and our hearts and thoughts race wildly. For many nurse leaders, experiencing this continual state of reactivity is the norm. They believe their impatience, fragmented attention, exhaustion and tight shoulders are the inevitable results of their responsibilities and they forge ahead. They tell themselves they’ll take time off when the project is complete or budget variances are reduced. Or, when the new team member gets up to speed or after construction is finished. They endure with head down, full steam ahead while their inner state is on high alert—invisible to them but very visible to others—which compromises their leadership presence.

The McKinsey Leadership Project, sponsored by the McKinsey & Company consultancy, set out to help professional women at McKinsey and elsewhere to learn what drives and sustains successful female leaders. I like their definition of presence: “Presence happens when you align your intention (what you really want to have happen) with your attention (what you choose to focus on) and your emotions (how you experience the moment).” Presence is also how people feel when they are around you. This includes how safe they feel, what you bring out in them, how you listen, how and what you share of yourself. In short, leadership presence is the ability to engage, connect and influence.

Some think of presence as charisma, communication skills or dressing for success. Some think it’s something you are born with. Although these understandings fall short, we do know presence when we encounter it. Presence is a dynamic sense of being fully present in body, mind and heart. Diana Booher, CEO of Booher Research, a communication training firm, said, “It’s not about who you are, but how you are.” We take notice of people with presence. They are confident and comfortable in their own skin. When someone is comfortable, they invite comfort from others that in turn facilitates creativity and collaboration. The good news is that presence is something you can develop and great leaders work on it every day.

Our internal state is transmitted to others. When we are fully present, our state of optimism, curiosity and calmness becomes available to others. We often can’t know solutions to the complex, intractable problems we are facing in this VUCA world. Yet, we can reduce the anxiety and stress within ourselves, and through our presence, in the team around us. Leaders with presence begin with a sense of purpose rather than a list of objectives. This requires mindful thinking and mindful action. (See Figure 1 for a reflection using mindfulness.) Mindful leaders are self-aware, know their triggers and move towards responsiveness, rather than reactivity. And, that makes them more effective in their relationships at work. Through their mindfulness, they stay curious and open, so they can consider ideas radically different from their own without the attachment to being right or having all the answers. This makes them more flexible, and more effective in the VUCA world. These mindful leaders don’t shy away from making decisions and taking action when the need arises. They know when it’s best to delegate, when to give their teams space to be creative and productive without micromanagement.

When you are a leader, you are always on stage. Mindfulness helps you show up and perform at your best when the moment

really counts. Mindfulness allows you to sense yourself—quickly. If a question is raised as you speak, or an objection is made, notice how you react. You might contract your shoulders, tighten your jaw or clench your fingers. Knowing this is happening allows you to return yourself back to a productive place. This in turn, changes the energy around you and invites others to also relax. Actors take this type of exercise to another level by combining breathing with imagery and intentions that will help them perform at their best. The best way to describe this activity is “breathing in I feel curious” and “breathing out I feel grounded.”

Realizing potential: a case study

Recently, I coached a nurse executive (Janet, not her real name) who is smart, ambitious and committed to doing the best work possible. She always has worked hard and moved quickly through the nursing leadership ranks. However, in spite of her stellar operational track record, she received feedback from her boss that she wasn't demonstrating enough leadership presence with direct reports, other executives and the board. When senior executives were assessed during a CEO succession planning process, the organization's board chair expressed concerns, noting “I'm not sure how she would represent us as the external face of the organization. I know she is mission driven and talented operationally...but she seems distracted.” Nobody questioned her work ethic. Janet's boss knew she wouldn't realize her full potential as a leader without executive presence and suggested executive coaching. She accepted the feedback, recognized the need to shift something if she wanted to be considered for other executive positions, and started a coaching engagement. Her goals were to strengthen her leadership voice and presence, increase her capacity to deal with constant change and be seen as a potential CEO successor.

As an executive coach, my job is to assist clients to gain self-awareness, see new choices, shift mindset and practice new behaviors that are more expansive and effective. Change requires being able to observe ourselves doing what isn't working, and knowing what an alternative might be. Then, we must interrupt our well-honed habits and, in the present moment, replace an old behavior with a new one. Janet and I got to work.

We examined the gap between how she was perceived and how she saw herself as a leader with a 360-degree stakeholder interview process. She learned that she holds herself and others to very high performance standards. In a largely unconscious effort to prove her worth and accelerate completion of all the initiatives on her plate, she often dominated her tense and fast-paced team meetings. She interrupted, finishing others' sentences, taking over others' ideas, creating re-work and frustrating team members. She talked fast and sometimes in a disjointed way, leaving team members confused about next steps. A direct report said, “she doesn't yell...but sometimes there is an edge in her voice which

makes me anxious.” Her hyper-driven results orientation added to the stress in the organization, producing costs in performance, workload and the team's ownership of goals. In board meetings, she appeared hesitant and seemed to constantly scribble notes. When she contributed, she tended to ramble.

After some probing, Janet reported feeling stressed, anxious and ungrounded, stating she was “running as fast as she could.” She believed that nervous energy kept her edges sharp, adding “I'm not somebody who can sit still for long.” Observing her body, I noticed her hunched shoulders and contracted upper body posture. An emotional intelligence assessment suggested that when stressed or challenged, she's likely to get stuck in her feelings of distress and disconnect from others. As we unpacked some situations, she began to notice what triggered her emotions and reactive patterns of thoughts and actions. Over time, she began to see how her mindset drove the behavior experienced by others. She had lost her big picture perspective, and with it, her capacity to be as effective as she might. She started a daily practice of reflecting and writing about her internal experience and habits. Janet grew more aware of her underlying anxiety and fear resulting in her over-functioning behavior.

Next, Janet worked to develop the verbal, physical and energetic presence that inspires others to follow. She began to organize her attention and actions around the assumption that her team could solve most of the tactical issues they faced. She realized she didn't have to provide constant motivation and follow-up. She got better at recognizing her anxiety and began to pay attention to what happens to her when intensity builds. She tended to kick into action and start organizing other people, often staying late “until the work was done.” She learned when responding to unanticipated questions from board members, she answered with long-winded, detail-filled responses rather than addressing the strategic issues behind the question. Constricted by fear and anxiety, she didn't notice the subtle changes taking place in people or the shift of energy in the room as she spoke.

In my coaching work with leaders, I ask them to slow down and pay attention to the physical sensations that are easy to miss when running full steam ahead. Sensations, such as tension and temperature, provide rich information, including how we are reacting to our external situation. Mindfulness is a key ingredient in leadership presence, allowing others to experience us as effective, connected, calm, strategic and approachable.

Although initially ambivalent, Janet experimented with attention practices to project a calm and connected internal state. She learned to cultivate mindfulness through regular meditation and breathing practices, using a free app to develop her capacity to reflect and stay present to her moment-to-moment experience. She built in daily routines to keep her physical, mental, emotional and spiritual energy high during the workday and encouraged her

team to do the same. She practiced an alert and relaxed posture she could readily shift into during challenging conversations. And, she watched social psychologist Amy Cuddy's TED talk on body language and read her recent book, *Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges*.

Tapping into your awareness

Read this paragraph and then close your eyes. With awareness, take a full inhale, hold it briefly, and then allow a long, slow and complete exhale through your nose. Be fully present. Sense the breath exiting your nose. Feel your chest and torso settling. At the end of the exhale, notice any areas of tightness or discomfort. Identify three words that describe what you noticed. The experiment asks you to shift your attention from multi-tasking to the present-moment sensations that arise in your body. In any moment, we can choose where to direct our attention. The good news is that we can cultivate the capacity to untangle our internal state from the external VUCA context.

Let's fast-forward a few months. Janet enters the conference room, sensing the audience. She pauses to breathe deeply and notice any places of tightness in her body. She takes her time, leaving the last meeting mentally behind and settling in her body. She senses her urge to interrupt a colleague and lets it pass. As she holds back more and more, she also communicates her confidence in the team's creativity. As she settles her own internal state, team meetings become more relaxed, productive and creative. She asks questions, sitting back in her chair rather than leaning forward, and allows pauses and silence where previously every moment had been pressured and packed full. By managing her fear, she learned how to respond effectively to the board chair's interruptions when she responded to a question. Now, she pauses, reminds herself to not take his interruptions personally, considers the key points of her message and explains it clearly, concisely and confidently.

We could attribute Janet's improved executive presence to her learned non-verbal communication techniques, better self-care and presentation skills. However, it is more accurate to say that she became a more skillful leader. Her increased leadership presence built connection and confidence, and the perception of greater competence from those who see her in action.

Practicing presence

One of my favorite things about presence is that you can practice anytime, anywhere. Try practicing walking with purpose. When you walk into a meeting, tune into your feet, observe your stride and breath. When you pay attention at this level, you'll often notice how hunched your shoulders are, how fast you are walking and how your mind is racing. By bringing attention to how your feet hit the ground you naturally slow down, breathe deeper and

Figure 1: Being Mindful—A Reflection

Consider these questions:

- How does my internal state reflect the external conditions in which I lead?
- What could support me to untangle my internal state from the external conditions?
- How can I cultivate greater mindfulness?
- What support or resources do I need?
- How might I extend my presence to be a resource to others?

are just a bit more present as you enter your next meeting. Try it and see what you notice!

In summary, cultivating great leadership presence is an inside-out job. It's helpful to have an external coach or other trusted advisor as a guide and thought partner. And, lastly, although you may admire or even compare yourself to other leaders, remember Judy Garland's words: "Never be a second-rate version of someone else, be a first-rate version of yourself." ■

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