

“MAKE CONSCIOUS CHOICES”



Practice presence – the #1 quality in all great leaders – to be better able to handle whatever shows up, moment to moment.

Check out how the San Diego Padres are doing. Pay particular attention to the frequency of and recovery from injuries by the pitching staff. That may tell you something about possibilities to improve the functioning of your own organization.

As reported by the Wall Street Journal (March 18-19 2006), San Diego is one of several baseball teams looking at new conditioning programs to help reduce injuries. The Padres have turned to one regimen whose relevance in business is other than it seems. And that is yoga.

Yes, yoga – originally an exotic activity from India (skinny people in turbans performing pretzel contortions), then a fad for health-conscious women, now going mainstream. We know of one senior manager who gave his direct reports gift certificates for private sessions with his yoga teacher instead of the usual Christmas items from Tiffany’s – promising them that yoga would improve their golf game. Others emphasize the stress-reduction possibilities of yoga. Ironically, in fact, that benefit leads to skepticism in business circles; in Europe, for example, our colleagues tell us that businessmen don’t believe people can be productive in the “blissed-out state” that they assume to be yoga’s goal.

But they’re missing the point. Yoga is not about becoming so serene that you don’t care about such mundane matters as earnings and performance goals. Its focus is awareness: what’s going on in your body; where are you strong or weak, tense or loose; how are you feeling; what’s the quality of your thoughts. And, above all, where are you in relation to other people and things – not where were you yesterday, or where might you be tomorrow; but where are you right now.

In other words, we’re talking about a practice in presence – the number one quality of all great leaders. As one of Betsy’s yoga teachers recently pointed out, the whole point is to “Make conscious choices.”

An excellent example of a leader who prized presence long before the concept appeared on the pop culture agenda is Harry Truman. Thrust into the Presidency upon the unexpected death of Franklin D. Roosevelt in April 1945, Truman immediately had to overcome shock – his and others’ – to lead a country at war. And within four months, he had to make perhaps the most momentous decision of any leader ever: to drop the atom bomb on Hiroshima.

Before we go any further, in the interest of full disclosure, we confide that wrestle with our own habits in our desire to be more present. Bob was a perpetual worrier; if things seemed to be going well, he’d worry about not worrying enough (see our column in the January 2006 issue). Betsy is a champion second-guesser; “shoulda, coulda, woulda” has played over and over in the middle of too many of her nights.

So we're struck by the fact that Harry Truman never lost sleep over his responsibilities, or his decisions. The day that he became President, for example, Truman had spent a boring afternoon presiding, as Vice President, over a session of the Senate. He was on his way to have drinks with Congressional cronies when he was called urgently to the White House. There, Roosevelt's widow broke the news: the President, who had dominated American politics for 13 years, had died in Georgia. After a jury-rigged inauguration, Truman met with the Cabinet he had inherited – all of them emotional, virtually speechless. That very night, Truman heard for the first time about the developing atom bomb. And then, he went home...and went to sleep.

“The job I had in the White House was not so very different from other jobs,” Truman was quoted by Voice of America on June 27, 2002. “I didn't let it worry me. Worrying never does you any good. So I have never worried about things much.”

Second-guessing was also spurned – even when it came to the decision to drop the bomb. As Truman told Merle Miller for the 1973 biography *Plain Speaking*: “A man can't do anything more than (the best he can)...You can't think about how it would be...if you had done another thing. You have to decide.”

That assertion was borne out in the same book by Miller's interview of Dean Acheson, Truman's Secretary of State. Acheson said Truman's greatest quality as President was his ability to decide. “He was not a man who was tortured by second thoughts. Those were luxuries, like self-pity, in which a man in power could not indulge himself.”

Truman's view on second thoughts was summed up in an essay originally aired in 1955 and repeated by NPR on April 4, 2005. Truman wrote: “It has been my policy to obtain the facts – all the facts possible – then to make the decision in the public interest and to carry it out. If the facts justify the decision at the time it is made, it will always be right. A public man...*must live in the present* (emphasis ours); make his decision for the right on the facts as he sees them and then history will take care of itself.” The name of that essay: “A Public Man Must Live in the Present.”

Leaders of organizations or teams are included among those who “must live in the present.” Practice presence, and you'll be buttressed against common problems with such insights as:

- **You're not as interesting as you think.** Conversations, particularly those about problems or conflicts, are complicated when our mental chatter drowns out what is actually being said. Becoming aware of our internal dialogue – our assumptions, biases, judgments – makes it easier for us to listen to and process what is actually being said.
- **You don't have to act on every impulse.** How much time has been wasted in “ready, fire, aim” activities? The stronger your sense of urgency, the more likely you are to be swayed by imagination and fear.
- **It's not all about you.** It's natural to draw on our own experiences, our learning and our hard-won life's lessons. But that can lead to tunnel vision, making it harder for us to let in information and insights from others.

The mechanics of presence are simple, if not easy: calm down; stay curious and open. Make certain your thinking is clear, high-quality. To ensure such mental presence, check in with your body. We all get lost in thought sometimes; our minds take us into

the past (second-guessing) or future (worrying). Fortunately, we are biological beings with five senses that allow us, at any moment, to snap out of a mental fog and be present. So make adjustments in your body to help ensure quality thinking: breathe steadily; unclench your jaw; carefully stretch out tight muscles; sit or stand straight and balanced; plant your feet firmly on the ground.

Finally, don't confuse calm with “blissing out.” Stuff happens, moment to moment, not all of it easy or pleasant. Presence doesn't ensure that we will always be happy. But from the stance of presence, we can effectively deal with whatever shows up. The San Diego Padres, for example, don't expect to end all pitcher injuries; they just want to ensure the best possible recoveries. We, too, can accomplish better outcomes as we, like Harry Truman or Betsy's yoga teacher, “Make conscious choices.”

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