

BEING HERE

Making big changes in a business is always difficult. Can managers make it easier by mastering the art of “presence”?

BY EDWARD TEACH

T

HE PACE OF WORK IS ACCELERATING. Competitive pressures come from all over the globe; investors grow ever more demanding; cell phones and the Internet keep everyone connected and on alert, 24/7. People are constantly busy and anxious about the future; they have little time to think. No wonder more and more Americans are looking for relief: witness the rising interest in disciplines that promote calm and reflection, such as yoga, meditation, and certain martial arts.

No wonder, too, that more and more people are promoting such practices in the workplace. Increasingly, consultants and executive coaches stress the benefits of slowing down—of turning off anxious, analytic habits of thinking and tuning in to a contemplative, creative frame of mind. But it isn't easy to slow down. Says Robert Gunn, a founding partner of Accompli, a Princeton, New Jersey-based consultancy: “It's very hard for a leader or executive to drop into what we call presence—or awareness, being, quiet-mindedness, in the moment, whatever term you want.”

But it's in that state of presence that a leader's best qualities come out, adds Gunn. Indeed, his ability to help executives be more “in the moment,” hence open to new insight, is at the core of his business. Gunn's firm typically helps companies achieve some transformational agenda—a reorganization, for example, or streamlining a function. The ends of an engagement are spelled out, whether it's cost reduction, increased market share, revenue growth, and so on. But helping clients find the means to those ends is a little more intangible.



“Our assumption is that clients *always* discover the answer within themselves, as opposed to getting an answer externally,” says Gunn. “This is not to say you don't need analytic work, and sometimes hiring a strategy firm makes a lot of sense. But the change agenda—where you're going, why you need to get there, what it is you're going to do, and how you're going to do it—those four questions clients have to ask, and answer, for themselves.”

What's more, Gunn insists that leaders must be willing to change themselves as well. “They have to be the change they want to see in the institution,” he says, echoing Gandhi's famous admonition: “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Sandra Waddock, a professor of management at Boston College's Carroll School of Management, says that practicing mindfulness can produce substantial pay-offs. “When leaders begin to understand that leadership is really about being in the moment—about getting people to become aware of their own deepest meaning and

When everyone drops into a state of presence, says Gunn, an issue that would normally have required study and further meetings “can be tossed in the room and resolved in 20 minutes.”

what the meaning of the organization is in the world—then you get a very different sense of loyalty, belonging, commitment, and willingness to work hard from people.” Waddock, who recently taught a course called “Leadership and Mindfulness,” says that awareness practices can help leaders cope with the ever-increasing complexity of the decisions they face.

THE PROPER STATE OF MIND

If all this sounds a little mystical, Gunn’s résumé is reassuringly conventional. During much of the 1980s and 1990s, first at A.T. Kearney and then his own firm, Gunn Partners, he helped Fortune 500 companies improve the efficiency of their finance and other staff functions. An expert on shared services, Gunn once helped CFO conduct its annual cost-management survey.

In the mid-1990s, Gunn started to focus on change leadership (there is a significant change-leadership component to SG&A improvement, he points out). At the same time, he was taking lessons from an executive coach. Gunn has also long been interested in Tibetan Buddhism, which emphasizes mindfulness and is “pragmatic and practical,” he says.

Since its founding in 2004, Gunn’s new firm has guided leadership teams in about a dozen large companies. He’s selective about the clients he will take on: “Leading takes a tremendous amount of energy, and that energy comes from willpower. The question is, what’s the fuel for that willpower? What’s your deep, driving purpose? We have to resonate with that purpose.” Accompli looks for executives who are not driven by ego, but talk instead about developing teamwork, cohesiveness, and leaders.

Gunn begins an engagement by helping members of the leadership team clarify their thinking and examine their assumptions. The goal is to get everyone “crystal clear” on the improvement agenda and how they will drive that agenda.

That’s not a fast process; at a large company it can take months for an action plan to evolve. “Every client is nervous at the front end of this,” acknowledges Gunn. “Everybody has been down the path of false starts.”

The right start for Gunn is from a state of presence. At the beginning of a meeting, Gunn may simply ask the managers seated around the table to voice “anything that would prevent them from being right here in the moment with us.” And they do, whether it’s family matters or business concerns or “this guy cut me off in the parking lot this morning.” Another technique he uses to help people reach the proper state of mind is to ask them to acknowledge each other—to give a thank-you, say, for something someone did.

At first, clients rely on Gunn’s long-practiced ability to be in the here and now. “If one person in a meeting is quiet-minded, it’s a little infectious,” he says. What does it feel like to be in that state? “It’s actually accessing what it feels like when you’re on vacation, but doing it in the work world. Everybody in the course of a day finds themselves in that state of mind for a moment. All we’re trying to do is help them access that more easily and more routinely.”

When everyone drops into a state of presence, says Gunn, the meeting can take off. “People get lighthearted. They feel more hopeful, less urgent. There’s a lot of humor and laughter. They notice the clarity of their thinking. The biggest thing you see is an *incredible* pickup of the pace. An issue that would normally have taken a study, a presentation, and offline meetings can be tossed in the room and resolved in 20 minutes.”

BACK IN THE WORLD

When a meeting adjourns and people return to their desks, they may be “stunned” at how noisy and disruptive everything is, admits Gunn. “It feels like

chaos, and you lose faith sometimes—[the faith] that just by maintaining your own presence, you’ll draw people toward you. But that’s in fact what happens.” The discipline of quieting down and staying in the present is a lifelong journey, he notes, “but you can get people over the hump of getting back into the rest of the environment almost immediately.”

What are the hallmarks of leaders who are fully in the present? “Speed of action,” says Gunn. “Boldness of action. Effectiveness of action. Releasing the energy of people in the organization who see their leaders and say, ‘Holy cow, these people really have their act together!’”

And what about the results of such action? Consider Cardinal Health, the giant health-care products and services distributor. In 2004, Cardinal began to change from a holding company with multiple stand-alone businesses to an integrated operating company with three segments. Cardinal’s strategic sourcing team, led by executive vice president Mark Hartman and vice president Bob Wagner, took a lead role in this change. Under Gunn’s guidance, the 25 people on the team learned to access a state of presence, which in turn helped them develop a rapport with purchasing people and earn kudos for “connecting and listening.”

“I was skeptical” of the approach at first, admits Hartman, but he soon became a convert. Gunn, he says, “clearly helped me unleash some creativity.” Thanks in part to an innovative internal marketing effort, Hartman’s sourcing team quickly won wide compliance with its negotiated deals. Eventually, the team produced savings in excess of \$28 million, its year-one target, and it’s well on its way to the \$100 million mark. **CFO**

EDWARD TEACH (EDTEACH@CFO.COM) IS ARTICLES EDITOR OF CFO.

>> For more Insights, visit www.cfo.com/insight