

Creating Confident Organizations

A CEO to CEO Quarterly Newsletter



FROM THE DESK OF BOB WILSON

Being Where You Are

Dear Fellow CEO:

Leaders are faced with multiple pressures and the need to deal with them on the run. The balls of multiple tasks are juggled, pressures from deadlines loom and, all the while, the good leader touches them all moving forward towards the goals laid out for the organization. The forward motion while navigating through the seeming never-ending bombardment of things to do, people to see and places to go leaves the leader always needing to look ahead. How else can he bring the organization where it needs to go unless he's always thinking about the future and acting in the present to get there?

That was the philosophy that drove my thinking about business from my first days as a manager many years ago. You can't get to the future unless you are able to envision what it looks like and start planning and acting in ways to get there. That, at least, was my excuse for some of my behavior.

Since last quarter's newsletter, I've witnessed two different first-hand examples of the cost of thinking and acting in the future rather than being where one is. The scenarios and their consequences were remarkably similar. They involved leaders who are smart, genuinely good people, who were in meetings with their teams. As the meetings progressed, the individual leaders were each working on other tasks not related to the purpose of the meeting. In both instances, the people around them knew the leaders in question were mentally moving in and out of the meetings in which they were purportedly involved. In both cases, the leaders would sometimes be surprised to hear their name, asking others to bring them up to speed, like the classroom daydreamer. In both cases, it seemed the leaders were engaged in thinking about / working on important items relating to the future of their businesses. In both cases, all of the people around them felt disrespected and dispossessed of their own commitments to the success of the meeting at hand. In both cases, the leaders in question had no idea of the impact their own behavior on the people they were trying to lead. Nor did they have any idea of the impact on how they were viewed as leaders as a result. The body language of the other participants was consistent in both cases: sighs, rolled eyes, looks of resignation; overall they exhibited the behaviors of forced disengagement.

And I realized these were the same responses I'd seen other people give me. I wanted to cry for what I know I'd done (and probably sometimes still do). What could I have been thinking? I wanted to scream at both leaders, "Can't you see what you're doing? Can't you see how you're hurting what you're working so hard to accomplish?" But, first, I had to look in the mirror and do some thinking.

Unfortunately, if I had criticized / questioned me, I wouldn't have responded well to the criticism / questions. I would probably have excused the behavior by saying, "Responding to emails or going through reports at meetings doesn't bother *my* folks. They know that's just me." That's what I would have said – but it sure wasn't what I saw in the body language of those whose feelings I would have known. Hmmm.

To digress... I've always had a hard time living in the present. Wherever I'm at, my mind has always raced to things on the horizon, things that haven't yet happened. I love to think about those things for which I feel the need to prepare. It seems the excitement of becoming always holds more interest than the act of being. The meetings I've described helped me realize just how much I've likely been hurt by my own behavior over the years. How? It's obvious (when you take an objective viewpoint) that the people we spend time with recognize when we're not with them. They realize immediately when we're in our own worlds traveling somewhere in the future. We're not focusing on our conversations and instead, are thinking about someplace / something else. At that point, we are going out of our way to undermine our leadership. When we're not mentally with the people we lead and whose efforts we look to command, those people have no recourse but to question if we care about them. I'm not sure if there is an easier way to lose their respect. When we can't simply be with the people we're with, our actions are diminishing what they see as their value to us as people. What could be worse? There may not be an easier way to lose followers.

I've chronicled my own foibles in these pages many times in the past. Suffice it to say I've always had people issues. An inability to operate in the present may have been the source of some of the worst of them.



My first recollection of becoming aware of the problem was in dealing with my middle son Brandon. At two or three he'd sit on my lap and if he wasn't commanding all of my attention, he'd pull my face nose-to-nose with his and demand, "Daddy, look at me while I'm talking to you!" While Brandon was the most direct at pointing out this particular sin, I think I gradually got the message from all three of my boys. They taught me that when I spent time with them, we'd all have a better time when I was there.

What does it mean to "be there"? For me, it meant that when I was with the boys I'd consciously erase everything from my mind about work (or whatever else was on it) to spend that time with them – no intrusions, no cell phone, no work thoughts – just time to be dad and son(s) or family. I know they provided me with my first successful lessons in living in the moment. I'm not always successful in this, but I've truly made the effort over the years.

Dana, my wife, was the next place for me to get better at this piece of being human. Since before we had children we believed in the Saturday night date. Being there was the only place to be, so on Saturday nights, I did pretty good. It was the rest of the week where I'd find myself nodding and smiling and thinking about something else and eventually getting caught not being able to answer a question that proved I wasn't there. The place in which I then found myself then, was trouble. Being there with Dana is a work in progress but I think I've come a long way in our 27 years of marriage. I may be real good at multi-tasking but our relationship tends to go downhill fast whenever I try to do more than being with my wife at once.

Bringing employees into the organization presented another set of "being there" challenges. Over the years, I've learned when someone engages me in communication at Advisa, it makes sense for me to finish the sentence I'm typing and then turn all of my attention to whomever I'm interacting with. No matter what's on the docket, that effort will not be served if I'm typing, reading, or doing any kind of multi-tasking that takes me away from giving all of my attention to the person that wants it. I'll never be perfect, but I'm at least aware of the damage I can do when those around me don't get my full attention whenever they expect to receive it.

The interesting thing about being there for all of us is that we're always there when we're with clients or those we're trying to woo in some way. They demand all of our attention because we want them to be happy with us. We want them to know that we care about them and their concerns. Our cell phones are off. We listen with our faces. We're not typing or reading emails. We are there 100% because we care and we want them to know that.

That's what makes it so hard for employees (or family members) to witness their leaders not being there when the leader spends time with them. It sends a signal to the employee (or the spouse, or the child, or the friend) when we're obviously thinking about something else; or take a call; or read an email; or go through a report; or riffle through papers. We're saying to the person that we're with, "You just don't matter as much as what I'm doing right now and I'm OK with your knowing that." And that's a dirty rotten shame. It undercuts everything we are trying to do as leaders. Nothing matters more to the people who look to us to lead them than the knowledge that regardless of anything else, we care about them as people. Everyone wants to matter to the world around them and especially to those who they should matter to – their family, their company, their team.

If you do care about the people you're with, be there with them – every minute of every day. I'm not saying it's easy because it sure isn't for me. But, if you do care, and you want to lead, you owe it to your people and to yourself to be where you are. I think both you and the world will benefit from the effort.

Thanks for reading and I hope you found this note helpful.

Sincerely

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