

THE VITALITY IMPERATIVE

How **connected leaders**
and their teams achieve more
with less time, money,
and stress

MICKEY CONNOLLY
JIM MOTRONI
RICHARD MCDONALD
*and the entire
Conversant community*

THE VITALITY IMPERATIVE:

It Starts with a Choice

*The prime requirement for achieving any aim,
including quality, is joy in work.*

—W. Edwards Deming

*First and foremost leadership is about being a human being.
The future world will be much more purpose- and values-driven,
so we want leaders that clearly understand this. It's important to make
people feel more comfortable working in situations where the win-win
is not driven just by your shareholder but by all stakeholders,
and that requires a different skill set.*

—Paul Polman, CEO, Unilever

Promises are the uniquely human way of ordering the future.

—Hannah Arendt

Pam is quitting.

“I don’t know what I’ll do next,” she says, “I am leaving because almost anything will be better than this.”

A highly regarded manager at one of the largest corporations in the world, Pam is talented, well-compensated, and has much of her career ahead of her.

“We’ve gone through years of trying to do more with less. It has not worked. We move from acquisitions to layoffs to demanding more from overwhelmed employees who begin to hate their work. I don’t want to be part of that toxic cycle any longer. There has to be a better way to lead an organization.”

Pam's company has experienced sporadic increases in productivity per employee, but they've done it by demanding more output, not improving how work gets done. Productivity numbers are now in rapid decline and high performers are on their way out the door.

Pam's company is learning the hard way that increasing stress is not a sustainable source of productivity improvement.

And Now for Something Completely Different

Susan is not quitting—nor does she want to.

“I love my work, and it's not just because we are so successful,” she says. “I like how we are successful: our CEO actually believes sustainable success needs a smart business model, co-created and implemented by energized employees. Where I used to work, we assessed employee engagement a lot, but it never really improved. Here, we don't just assess engagement—we cause it.”

Like Pam, Susan is talented, well compensated, and has much of her career ahead of her. And she loves her company.

“You know what else I love?” she asks. “Both my daughters say they would be proud to work here.”

So, the billion-dollar question is, what's the difference between Pam and Susan's organizations?

Susan's organization is achieving more with less time, money, and stress. And that is the story of vitality.

What Is Vitality?

The Vitality Imperative is about how work gets done. From our experiences with more than four hundred organizations on six continents, we are now certain that Susan's vitality work culture produces more great achievement with less time, money, and stress than Pam's.

The definition of “vitality” includes “the capacity to live, grow or develop; the presence of intellectual and physical vigor; energy.” What organization wouldn't want those attributes? We've learned that vitality is good for

stockholders, for customers, and for employees—yet it is unusual in large enterprises.

And that is to their detriment. Whoever masters vitality as a source of performance has an extraordinary competitive edge and provides a deeply satisfying life for themselves and the people they lead.

What We Promise You

As you read through this book, we make three promises to you.

First, we promise a fast-moving, quickly valuable reading experience that features:

- *Principles.* Self-evident rules that provoke new thought and action. While the principles come from what we have observed in our work, they are only valid if they fit with how life works. We trust that an introspective look at your life will serve as proof of the validity of what we say.
- *Examples.* Brief descriptions of the principles in action. We will contrast examples that destroy vitality with those that create it.
- *Practices.* Personal and team activities to test the principles and cultivate your personal and organizational effectiveness.

Second, we promise immediate, positive impact in your life if you read with a specific challenge in mind—your personal *vitality imperative*—that shares these characteristics:

- The challenge is important to you and the organization in which you lead.
- It requires resilient, self-supervising performance from people you lead.
- It requires collaboration across organizational boundaries.
- Success or failure is measurable.
- You are *not* already confident that it will turn out well.

At the end of each chapter, we'll invite you to stop and ask yourself, "What do I now see about my *vitality imperative*, and what action will I take?"

Finally, we promise more days when your leadership feels like an energizing privilege and fewer days it feels like a burden. This promise applies wherever

you feel responsible for the success of others: at work, with your family, and in your community.

Of course, our promises only matter if they are relevant to you. So, let's contrast two forms of leadership so that you can decide if *The Vitality Imperative* is worth your time and attention.

Vitality or Not: Different choices for leaders, different experiences for employees

In her foreword, Anne Murray Allen makes the case for vitality. Anne's research fits with our experience over the last thirty years. Energized, committed employees—those who would describe their workplace as exhibiting vitality—create superb, enduring performance. However, creating a Vitality culture is not for the faint of heart and begins with an important choice.

Leaders and philosophers have differed for ages on how to best produce results through others. These can be summed up in two models:

1. *The Superior Leader*: Put superior people in charge and follow their instructions.
2. *The Connected Leader*: Put the most connected people in charge and count on them to understand challenges, inspire commitment, and coordinate contribution.

The Superior Leader Model

The Superior Leader approach is, at best, benevolent domination. Many leaders have produced significant value doing exactly this. The results, however, are rarely sustainable after the organization grows enough to require self-supervising work. There are exceptions, but they tend to feature unusual competitive advantages like a unique technology, market opportunity, or a creatively disruptive business model—and even those eventually deteriorate.

Riccardo Muti, a world-renowned musician and conductor, serves as a good example. Muti is said to have musical perception so refined that his hearing is insured for millions of dollars. Currently, he is the music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and has held important posts in Florence, Philadelphia, Salzburg, London, and Milan. “Muti is brilliant,” says a fellow musician. “Not only his instructions are clear, but also the sanction: what will happen if you don’t do what he tells you to do. It works to a certain point.”

Despite Muti’s brilliance, his tenure at Milan’s famed Teatro alla Scala, known internationally as La Scala, ended badly. In 2005, nearly all of the seven hundred employees of La Scala signed a letter of no confidence to Muti. The letter said, among other things, “You are using us as instruments, not as partners.”

Muti resigned, citing “staff hostility.” He contributed to La Scala with years of musical excellence, and yet, he reached the limits of his way of leading. La Scala was ready to move on without him.

The Connected Leader Model

By contrast, the Connected Leader approach largely depends on leaders with unique gifts in the art of connection. These are women and men who intuitively grasp how to connect people to each other and reality in a way that reveals opportunity and inspires high performance. They tend to spearhead times of surprising achievement that leave people feeling proud and deeply satisfied.

Greg Merten, an influential leader at Hewlett-Packard from 1972–2003, is a great example of a Connected Leader. For much of his time at HP, Greg was a senior vice president responsible for Inkjet supplies. He oversaw operations in the United States, Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Greg felt strongly that a large multinational group of employees and supply-chain partners could operate as a community held together by shared purpose, values, and learning. During his tenure, the business results were extraordinary and turnover of high-performing employees was very low. When he retired, the employees of the HP site in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico engraved the following words on a parting gift:

Thanks, Greg:

For caring more than others thought was wise,

For dreaming more than others thought was practical,

For risking more than others thought was safe,

And for expecting more than others thought was possible.

Those are the words of a community of people who felt connected, cared for, and challenged to do great things.

As HP has since shown, you can damage and lose such vitality. Historically, the problem with the Connected Leader model is that it is dependent upon the presence of unusually gifted people. When those people depart, the deterioration of vitality often begins.

With *The Vitality Imperative*, we make connected leadership learnable. The principles and practices serve those who choose the Connected Leader approach to organizational success. It is an important choice between two very different methods of control: the personal brilliance of a few or the connected contribution of many—a choice that can literally change the entire course of an organization.

As one executive told us, “I got to a place in the growth of this company where I needed to change. We had succeeded because a few of us were smart, vigilant, and demanding. That was our era of ‘hands-on control.’ However, as we got bigger there was a lot of unsupervised work going on and hands-on control was not enough. We’ve spent the last few years changing how we lead so the company continues to grow. These Vitality principles have helped us enter the era of ‘remote control.’ It has been uncomfortable, sometimes difficult, and well worth it. We are getting more done with less time, money, and stress.”

The Damaging Impact of the Superior Leader Model

We have analyzed thousands of employee surveys across the world and conducted live interviews with employees on six continents. We have discovered that when the Superior Leader approach has outlived its value, the employee experience includes three damaging impacts: fear, mechanics, and manipulation.

1. *Fear* of embarrassment, fear of failure, fear of retribution, and general fear of disappointing someone in a position of power. When people experience fear, they tend to avoid conflict and suppress open dialogue. That lack of candor, as we will discuss later, is a major cause of waste, stress, and mistrust. Criticism and threat feel normal.
2. *Mechanics* are the rule. Rather than feeling supported by processes that make the right thing easy, people report how bureaucratic rules and habits keep them from getting work done. They feel dominated by out-of-date processes and measures that impede contribution. Those processes seem to lack a living spirit because they make employees feel like inanimate objects rather than human beings who want to help.
3. *Manipulation* results in widespread mistrust in the communication coming from leadership. Authenticity feels like the exception, not the norm. Leaders are falsely positive instead of open and honest about the problems facing the company and them personally. Leaders lecture employees about better behavior instead of demonstrating the behavior themselves. The company makes brand promises in marketing campaigns that feel nothing like how it operates day-to-day.

We are not saying that these leaders are committed to fear, mechanics, and manipulation; we are saying that the Superior Leader approach frequently generates these experiences as the enterprise outgrows the personal brilliance of its leaders. If any of your associates are reporting these types of experiences, it is good evidence that Vitality is at risk or already seriously damaged in your organization.

The Positive Impact of the Connected Leader Model

Employees of a Connected Leader organization report very different things than those of a Superior Leader organization. The former group reports a culture of energized high performance, which is *The Vitality Imperative* in action. When asked what explains their energy, commitment, and success, they report three things:

1. *Community* is a sense of belonging, rooted in common values and common purpose—the experience of being “in this together,” and looking out for one another on the journey to a shared achievement. In a genuine high-performance community, our differences combined with trust produce brilliance. Whereas most leaders only think about trust when it is at risk, Vitality leaders create trust ahead of time so there is always more trust in the relational bank when they need to make a withdrawal.
2. *Contribution* means making a meaningful difference. The enjoyment of contribution is deeply human. Have you ever stopped in the middle of mowing a lawn and admired the difference between the short grass and the long grass? We all love being valuable and leaving things better than we found them. When vitality is the norm, people report feeling like the solution rather than the problem. They feel recognized for their contributions and believe that their leaders work to make the right thing easy and the wrong thing hard in support of those contributions.
3. *Choice* is the victory of commitment over compliance. Each of us chooses to be devoted or not; it cannot be demanded. When vitality is present, people report thoroughly understanding strategy and priorities and personally choose to support success. They report a personal relationship to organizational values and adopt them as their own. This deep clarity and ownership lead to more decision-making discretion. Colleagues feel trusted, and it takes less time to get things done. Connected leaders have the awareness and skill needed to inspire committed choice rather than merely demand compliance.

Vital organizations reliably achieve more with less time, money, and stress. When that energized performance is present, people report experiences of community, contribution, and choice.

Betting on vitality, however, requires different awareness and skill than betting on personal brilliance and position power. For the last twenty-five years, we have appreciated that awareness and skill in leaders around the world, and we now know this: there is a design to vitality, and a committed leader can learn the design and put it to work—both personally and organizationally.

Fanning the Flame of Vitality

Eons ago, humans valued fire and yet could not create it. When lightning struck (literally), people captured the fire and tended to it carefully to keep it available for warmth, protection, and cooking. Keepers of the flame sustained the precious resource. When the fire went out, it was gone until lightning struck again. Eventually, we learned to create fire, not just catch it, and the human experience was transformed.

Vitality is a bit like that. Most leaders are grateful when it strikes but are not all that great at conjuring it at will. From our research into vitality, leaders who reliably create and fan the flame of vitality have organized their awareness and skills into seven promises that are divided into two categories: igniting vitality and sustaining it over time.

In our experience, the defining difference between those who employ the Superior Leader model and those who champion the Connected Leader model is the willingness to engage with and keep these seven vital promises.

Igniting the Fire

Igniting the fire of vitality takes creating the right conditions. Just as you can't start a fire in the rain without the proper spark or without combustible materials, you cannot create vitality in an organization without inviting connection. This takes intention and commitment. In our experience, there are four key elements that create an environment conducive to igniting vitality:

- 1. Presence: Awareness without prejudice**

Presence is to vitality what oxygen is to fire. Each of the other promises depends on the quality of presence. So, cultivating presence is a crucial act of leadership.

- 2. Empathy: The power to appreciate the purposes, worries, and circumstances of others**

Leadership without empathy is ill-informed at best and bullying at worst. Empathy is not "soft." It is courageous, skillful, and wise to quickly comprehend the world of another and all influence depends on it.

- 3. Purpose: The mutual resolve of a community**

Authentic purpose lowers supervision costs while improving performance. It is not only logical, but felt emotionally and physically. We will share ways to locate the intersection between the deep personal purposes of individuals and the important purposes of an enterprise.

- 4. Authenticity: Accelerating achievement through truth**

Living true to ourselves and to our word sounds right and yet doing so can be a major challenge. Authenticity, however, is not just a moral imperative, it is also a skill. We will explore how a well-told truth creates connection and turns conflict into useful intelligence.

Sustaining the Fire

Igniting vitality in an organization is not enough, however. If not sustained, cared for, and fed, vitality will eventually blow out. In our experience, there are three more promises that must be kept to sustain vitality in an organization once it has been ignited:

5. Wonder: Fueling the fire and keeping our best day in front of us

Creativity and innovation rest on wonder. In this book, we will show how practices that combine curiosity and possibility free us from imaginary limits and inspire fresh thinking.

6. Timing: The victory of evolution over revolution

Revolution is an act of desperation for people who have been bad at evolution. When we are good at seeing and acting on what it is time for, we create less resistance and more cooperation. We will share what we have learned about timing and how it builds organizational agility.

7. Surprising Results: Making a meaningful, continual, and energizing difference

Vitality grows in cycles of surprise. When people produce valuable results beyond their own expectations, there is widespread, energizing delight. The key is designing and delivering short cycles of surprise, and we will show you how.

This book will explore each of these promises and show how, together, those promises ignite and sustain community, contribution, and choice. The image below summarizes our offer. If it is attractive to you, then we welcome you as a fellow traveler and ask that you read on.



Throughout the book, we will invite you to visit ***thevitalityimperative.com***, an online resource intended to be a “reader’s companion” that supports and deepens your exploration of these ideas.

PROMISE #1

PRESENCE:

Awareness without Prejudice

It is easy to miss valuable “weak signals” often hidden amid the noise.

—McKinsey Quarterly

The greatest gift you can give another is the purity of your attention.

—Richard Moss

We cannot change what we are not aware of, and once we are aware, we cannot help but change.

—Sheryl Sandberg, COO Facebook

In 1986, a 14-year-old violinist named Midori Goto, known simply by her first name, performed Leonard Bernstein’s *Serenade* in her debut with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at the Tanglewood music festival. As Bernstein himself conducted this challenging piece, the E string on Midori’s violin snapped. She turned gracefully to the concertmaster, took his violin, and resumed her play. Moments later, the same string snapped on the replacement violin, and again she turned to the concertmaster, took yet another violin, and returned seamlessly to the performance.

In spite of the disruptions, *The New York Times*’ John Rockwell termed Midori’s performance “near perfect.” When the piece ended, amid wild cheers and applause, Bernstein knelt and kissed her hand in honor of her poise and musicianship. Her capacity to be present amid the mayhem was

remarkable. We think every one of us can learn to be as poised as Midori through the power of presence.

How Does Presence Produce “More with Less”?

Presence is as crucial to vitality as oxygen is to fire.

Presence dictates how much of our mental, emotional, and physical talents are available to us at a given moment. Many leaders tell us about precious days when they were especially perceptive and effective, operating at the top of their talents. If you want to spend a greater percentage of life experiencing those kinds of days, then get very interested in presence.

By presence we do not mean charisma; we mean awareness. How well leaders are connected to a given moment governs their impact per unit of time, money, and stress. More fully, presence is the ability to be aware intellectually, emotionally, and physically without prejudice—that is, any preconception that pollutes our awareness. There are big stakes here because both insight and action are correlated to awareness. If you miss the moment, you’ll miss the signals crucial to your success. The quality of your future is directly correlated with the quality of your presence.

Practicing presence is not common. Common practices and wise ones, however, can be different, and quite often are. In our conversations with people around the world, we hear that there is “not enough time” for such new pursuits. Typical solutions to the not-enough-time dilemma often make things worse. We hurry, multitask, and give shallow attention to each moment as we rush toward the next one. Meeting agendas feature many subjects, but few things are resolved.

The outcome? Maximum effort and minimum impact. As a result, impatience increases and effectiveness declines, leaving even more to be done.

We think it is time for the victory of presence over this irrational cycle of waste.

The victory of presence has major benefits to community, contribution, and choice:

- Increased trust
- Better judgment and decision making

- Noticing “weak signals” that others miss
- Greater safety, fewer injuries
- Greater peace of mind and enjoyment of work

If you care about those benefits, then there is good news: presence is improvable.

A leader’s ability to make a meaningful difference rises and falls with the quality of presence. In this chapter, we will cover the principles of presence, introduce some basic practices to develop presence, and show you how to recover presence when it is lost. Let’s investigate.

Presence Principle #1: Presence is rational, emotional, and physical

All humans think, feel, and act. Noticing that triad of human experience is essential to presence.

Daniel Goleman, in *Vital Lies, Simple Truths*, wrote, “The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice.” If you want to strengthen presence, start by noticing thoughts, emotions, and body movement. Notice your own experience, and notice others’. This deceptively simple practice of awareness improves insight and action, while lack of awareness assures that you are not fully connected to yourself or to others—dangerous territory for a leader.

We sponsor an executive development program called “Credibility, Influence, and Impact.” Leaders from organizations around the world participate, and most report that the work on presence is one of the most valuable parts of the experience. Here is what two of them have to say.

Roger Henderson was a successful senior engineering manager at Ball Aerospace when his career took a turn. Roger’s interest in the design principles underlying human performance led him to become a director of talent development and a valued coach for senior executives at Ball. He says:

I now see the mental, emotional, and physical components of presence as fundamental to personnel development. These three pinpoint precise aspects of the human experience and allow for focused attention. Leaving even one of these areas unattended hampers

growth. The development process accelerates simply by having people go from unaware to aware in all three areas. We discover thoughts, moods, and physical habits that impede progress. We easily identify useful actions to take because an aware leader sees things an unaware leader cannot. Many of the people I coach are very talented, very successful, and all it takes is an increase in this triple awareness for performance to improve.

An executive in charge of corporate affairs in a Fortune Global 500 company told us what he thinks about the three parts of presence:

Working from the components of presence has changed how we manage media relations, investor relations, all internal and external communication. We were unaware of how unbalanced our approach was—mainly intellectual and very little emotional and physical. No wonder we got unsatisfactory results: we were only connecting to one-third of how people receive a communication. We still make sure the logic is clear. Now, we also research the emotions important to us and our audience, plus the impact on the physical circumstances in which people live and work. When we weave all that in, our communication is less formal, more human, and produces more of the results we want.

To echo Daniel Goleman, if you notice what you previously failed to notice, you will think and do things you could never do before. When you notice thoughts, emotions, and physical activity, you start the presence improvement journey.

Presence Principle #2: The first act of leadership is presence

Presence is where leadership begins. The present is the *only* place we envision the future, learn from the past, and cause progress. When our presence is compromised, so is our leadership.

“Back when I did not have a senior executive position, I found out that many people thought of me as introverted. Since I became CEO that now is interpreted as aloof,” one CEO told us. “Also, before people thought of me as someone who asked challenging questions. Now I hear that I’m intimidating. I know my ability to lead is damaged if people think I’m aloof and intimidating.”

Near the launch of his tenure, our friend made a simple change to fix this perception: whenever he's in the elevator or moving through the office, he puts his smartphone away and greets anyone he sees.

“Really being with people is something I’ve had to cultivate because it is more comfortable and automatic for me to be with the smartphone and answer a few messages,” he said. “The results have been encouraging. I hear that people actually think of me as a colleague who cares about who they are, not just what they do. Also, people open up more and tell me things I did not know—very useful.”

When someone is headfirst in their smartphone, answering a text, or otherwise distracted while you’re speaking to them, what thoughts do you have? How do you feel? How does your body react?

Now, compare your reactions to a time when someone was devoted to and focused on understanding you. What were your thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations?

This reveals a simple truth: When you are fully present in a conversation, people feel honored by your attention, relationships are strengthened, and candor is increased. The faith people have in your judgment improves, too.

Much is written about trust in organizations. To build trust, start by giving someone your wholehearted, undivided attention. Pick someone today, and give it a try. Make being fully present in this moment your first act of leadership.

Presence Principle #3: All improvement begins with what is present

An executive in the restaurant business once told us, “You know how you can waste a lot of food? Just add ingredients to a dish without knowing what is already in it.”

If you want to improve a strategy, a process, or any kind of performance, first understand how the work is currently done. You will discover that it rarely, if ever, fits your preconceptions. Be present, be curious, and be ready for surprise. Whatever you do, don’t try to fix the dish until you know what is in it.

Jim Reinhart is the chief operating officer at QTS, a fast-growing, world-class leader in data center management. We first experienced Jim's commitment to starting with what is present when he was an executive at Capital One sponsoring supply-chain improvements involving internal and supplier processes. When Jim announced workshops to map out how the supply chain was already functioning, many thought that was a waste of time.

Jim heard the fears and criticisms and made a simple request: "Let's try one workshop and see what we get. We need unprecedented results, so I think we need to try something unprecedented. If we get no value, we will rethink the approach." Jim's credibility was sufficient for the many skeptics to give it a try.

In that first workshop, a group representing the whole supply chain, many of whom compete with one another, convened to map out how the work gets done. Reinhart did not want to "fix the dish" until everyone understood what was in it already. The only assignment was to carefully document the process of work entering the system and moving to successful execution. This was the first time all these citizens of the Capital One system were present simultaneously, and they got to see the work through each other's eyes.

As everyone became mutually aware of how the work was done, the workshop facilitators asked people to report what they saw, how they felt, and what they thought about the emerging picture. They were coached to listen, learn, and let go of prejudice.

One of the people who originally doubted the value of the workshop said, "I was surprised by how open and honest people became and how much people cared about their work. We never had those kinds of conversations, and we never had results like that either."

Defensiveness disappeared, and people came together to get more done with less.

According to Reinhart, the workshops initially produced more than \$200 million in improvements and the highly present, highly collaborative approach ultimately led to over \$1 billion in savings.

Curious presence is an antidote to bias. We have observed huge, negative impact on profit and loss statements, balance sheets, and cash flows when senior executives operate out of prefabricated biases. Leaders who do not begin by understanding what is present waste time, talent, and money by chasing assumptions. Even successful companies like HP, Toyota, and Xerox have experienced billions of dollars of losses when executives failed to appreciate what was present in their own company and the marketplace before pursuing their own preferred acquisition or high-risk investment.

Reinhart's experience shows that Connected Leaders begin with what is present and end up more informed, trusted, and productive. Superior Leaders, on the other hand, tend to think they already know all they need to know. Which leader do you want to be?

Presence Principle #4: Presence improves performance

If we are aware of what is actually happening around us, we naturally operate at the top of our talent. We notice things others miss and take actions others do not. Savvy leaders can help people be more effective by developing better presence.

To make the point, here is a presence experiment we adapted from W. Timothy Gallwey's creative work in *The Inner Game of Golf*, which is illuminating even if you do not play golf.

Get a putter and three golf balls, and position yourself 10 to 15 feet from a golf hole or a similarly sized target (e.g., business card or a drinking glass on its side). You can do this inside on a rug or carpet. Position the ball, and then follow these steps:

1. Notice thoughts you have about putting the ball into the hole. If you are with a trusted friend tell them the thoughts, such as, "I don't have good hand-eye coordination," or "What will this prove?" If alone, just acknowledge those thoughts to yourself. Then take three deep breaths, noticing the moment when you pass from inhale to exhale.
2. Notice emotions that are present, like, "This is embarrassing," or "I feel foolish." Take three deep breaths, noticing the moment when you pass from inhale to exhale.

3. Place your putter behind the ball so you are ready to putt. Close your eyes and putt the ball toward the hole. Then, with eyes closed, predict where the ball went relative to the hole. For example, “I think it is short of the hole by about three feet and to the right about two feet.” Open your eyes and notice where it actually went.
4. Close your eyes and hit again. Feel the ball as it touches the face of the putter. Predict where it went. Open eyes and check.
5. Take a deep breath, noticing the passage of your breath from in to out. Close your eyes, hit again, and predict the result.
6. Now, just hit a few putts with your eyes open.

All you did is notice your own thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations. What do you notice about the results? Most people find their predictions get more accurate, and so does their putting. This reveals an essential truth: when you notice other people’s thoughts, feelings, and actions, you will find your predictions about them are more accurate, too.

The more we are present, the more naturally our thoughts, emotions, and bodies align with our goals. Effort declines and effectiveness improves. This applies to a lot more than golf. No matter what the subject, presence is key to operating at the top of your talent.

Presence Principle #5: Presence improves with practice

Practicing presence develops our capacity to give our attention rather than have it taken, and cultivating presence produces practical results. The following passage is from the February 15, 2010 edition of *Penn News*. The article uses “mindfulness” for much of what we mean by “presence.”

A University of Pennsylvania-led study in which training was provided to a high-stress U.S. military group preparing for deployment to Iraq has demonstrated a positive link between mindfulness training, or MT, and improvements in mood and working memory. Mindfulness is the ability to be aware and attentive of the present moment without emotional reactivity or volatility.

The study found that the more time participants spent engaging in daily mindfulness exercises, the better their mood, working memory (the cognitive term for complex thought), problem solving, and cognitive control of emotions. The study also suggested that sufficient mindfulness training may protect against functional impairments associated with high-stress challenges that require a tremendous amount of cognitive control, self-awareness, situational awareness, and emotional regulation—something leaders in all complex organizations face.

Presence is not a “soft skill”—it is a hard business asset and worthy of practice. And everyone who relies on your judgment benefits when you strengthen your presence.



Practicing Presence: What you can do to improve

We’ve covered a lot of ideas on the power of presence. If there’s one thing we’ve learned from our time working with busy executives, it’s that we’re quicker to understand ideas than to take action on them. These practices are designed to turn ideas into action.

Knowledge is powerful, but it is not transformative until it is put into practice. At the end of each chapter we will share three to four practices we know improve connected leadership. These practices are designed to help you apply the knowledge you gain so that you can achieve the results you want with less time, money, and stress. Think of them as investments.

When it comes to presence, we suggest you practice in all three areas:

- *Physical:* presence of body
- *Emotional:* presence of emotion
- *Rational:* presence of mind

Presence cannot be forced and occurs most naturally through a mood of relaxed vigilance.

To demonstrate, here is a quick experiment. Put a coin on a table. Tense the muscles in your forearms and hands and, with the muscles still tense, pick up the coin. Then, consciously relax your forearms and hands, and pick up the coin.

What do you notice?

Most people report they pick up the coin more easily and quickly the second time. Tension also can be mental (worry) and emotional (anxiety). The first practice is simply relaxing our body, emotions, and mind so that we can more easily pick up what is happening around us physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Now, let's add vigilance. To be vigilant is to be consciously attentive. Have someone toss you five or six colored markers at the same time. What happened? Now, ask the person to pick up the markers and prepare to toss them to you again. This time, however, focus all your attention on one marker, as though catching it earns you \$1 million. Take a breath, relax, and smile as they're tossed. What happened?

If you easily and calmly caught the one marker, even as the other ones flew at you, you experienced the special benefit of relaxed vigilance. Relaxed vigilance takes conscious practice, which you can do throughout the day. The goal of the practice is to:

- *Notice* tension.
- *Breathe* consciously.
- *Relax* your muscles, mind, and emotions.
- *Focus* your attention (give attention rather than have it taken).

You can easily practice that flow in taking the actions we suggest next.

Presence Practice #1: Physical awareness

Physical practices are a convenient fast track to improving presence. While our minds may wander, our body is always right here.

Physical Practice: Move it!

Years ago we met someone who used to work directly with Walt Disney. He told us that whenever creative thinking was needed and missing, Walt would say, “Change the setting!” People would get up and move—maybe go for a walk, find another place to meet, or simply get up and change the configuration of the furniture in the room. Most of the time, new thinking emerged in the new setting.

Movement tends to awaken all our senses, increase presence, and energize thinking.

A few suggestions:

- Have a walking meeting. Grab a notebook or note cards in case someone says something brilliant.
- In the same vein, the next time your own thinking gets stuck, go for a walk. Notice how heavily your feet hit the ground; see if you can step more lightly, then even more lightly. Then, add force to your step and notice the heaviness increase. Then, just enjoy the walk.
- If you are working at your desk, stand up every twenty minutes to stretch, take a few steps, look out a window, and notice something new.

Your *Vitality Imperative*

Earlier, we asked you to keep a real *vitality imperative* in mind as you move through the book. Think of that challenge now. What aspects of it cause you tension? Where is your body taut?

Now, take a deep breath, and as you exhale relax the points of tension in your body.

Any worries?
Notice them, breathe, and relax.

Any stressful emotions?
Notice them, breathe, and relax.

For you, what is most important about your imperative? Give your attention to that thought and read on.

- If you are having a bad day, hike up a moderate hill. It is hard to stay negative during a pleasant uphill walk. Start up the incline and position your body like you are dismayed, fatigued, or beaten (e.g., slumped shoulders). Then, shift to a posture of confidence (e.g., back straight, chest up and out, chin level to the ground). Do both again. Stay with the one you like.
- Do a performance review in an unexpected setting. Ask the other person where he or she would like to go. Go there and have the conversation.
- In general, move frequently while you notice breathing, posture, and details of your environment.

Movement restores the connection between mind, emotion, and body. In his book *Get Up!*, Dr. James Levine says, “Sitting is the new smoking.” Levine maintains that sitting all day is unnatural and to blame for all kinds of ailments. “This is about hard-core productivity. You will make money if your workforce gets up and gets moving. Your kids will get better grades if they get up and get moving,” he says. “The science is not refuted.”

Presence Practice #2: Emotional awareness

To have emotions is to be human. Some people diminish emotion and instead worship logic, which is a big mistake if you work with human beings. Emotions are an animating force that motivate us to decide and act. Brilliant researchers like Dan Lovallo, Nina Mažar, and Dan Ariely have shown that big decisions in companies and personal lives have rich emotional elements. As Ariely says, we are “predictably irrational.”

While some discount emotion, others seem ruled by emotion. Neither extreme leads to organizational Vitality, which, if you recall, is achieving more with less time, money, and stress. When a Vitality leader can wisely honor emotion and not be victimized by it, we call that emotional agility.

Most of us are not skilled at naming or expressing our feelings. Rather, we default to talking about our feelings instead of acting from them with confidence. In the process, we lose the clarity and choice regarding the emotions that animate our actions.

So, for instance, one might say, “I feel that you should have included me in the decision,” rather than, “I felt hurt and insignificant when I was not included in the decision.” The former is a thought; the latter is emotion.

Knowing how you feel is essential for powerful communication. If you learn to distinguish a rich palette of feelings and express them consciously, you will upgrade your own intelligence and the influence you have on others.

Emotional Practice: Name it

The following is a set of six common emotional “families.” Each family is defined by words that describe the emotion on a continuum from moderate to intense:

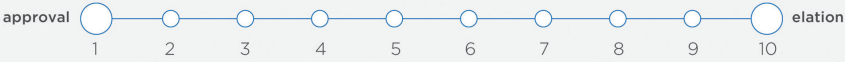
- *Glad:* from approval to elation
- *Sad:* from disappointment to despair
- *Mad:* from disapproval to fury
- *Afraid:* from avoidance to terror
- *Ashamed:* from embarrassed to guilty
- *Content:* from relaxed to serene

Our promise: if you do the 5-minute process below once a day for three weeks, you will dramatically improve your emotional awareness and agility, and people will notice.

1. Name a significant event or experience that happened that day. Anything that the word “significant” brings to mind will work.
2. Scan the emotional families and pick the one that best describes your most prominent emotions regarding the event or experience.
3. Using a 1-10 scale, how moderate or extreme is the emotion? What word or words describe that spot on the continuum?
4. What happened that triggered the emotion?
5. What is most important to you about the situation? What other emotions arise when you consider what is most important to you?

Emotional Families Scale

Glad



Sad



Mad



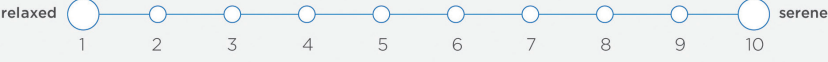
Afraid



Ashamed



Content



6. Of all the emotions that could be triggered by the event, which increase your vitality? Which decrease your vitality?

7. Breathe deeply and relax.

When we name and are present to our experience, we are in the position to compare and choose emotion, which is vital to emotional agility. The more you practice, the better you will get at aligning emotion with your most important purposes.

Presence Practice #3: Rational awareness

The great poet John Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost*, “The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.”

Our minds are active, attempting to make sense of our world. The sense-making work we do can either help or hurt our most important purposes. The more aware we are, the more we have presence of mind.

There are many practices for improving presence of mind. What follows are a tried-and-true few.

Mental Practice: Be for, not against

Most people move through congested areas with their attention on what is in the way. The next time you are in a crowded airport, train station, or shopping mall, focus your mind on a simple thought: “Where are the open spaces?” You will find yourself easily slipping into them.

This simple exercise illustrates the power of focusing on what you are for (open spaces) versus what you are against (people in your way). If we focus only on what we are against, survivalist emotions dominate as we give our attention to what we don’t want versus what we do. Tension rises and mental agility declines. In the presence of what we are for, our minds are fully engaged, relaxed vigilance is easier, tension goes down, and our mental agility goes up.

In an agile mind, what we are against simply informs what we are for rather than distracts from it. For instance, the people in our way in a crowd serve to help us see open spaces rather than present themselves as obstacles.

Your *Vitality Imperative*

Bring to mind the challenge you are using to assess the value of vitality. Make two quick lists:

- What are you for? What values, purposes, results, or opportunities are on your mind?
- What are you against? What criticisms, concerns, impediments, or risks are on your mind?

Then, looking at your “against” list, ask yourself, “What am I for that has me be against that?” If new things come to mind, add to the “for” list. Next:

- Give your relaxed, vigilant interest to each entry on the “for” list. What ideas or actions come to mind?
- Give your relaxed, vigilant interest to the entries on the “against” list. How many of them have been addressed already by focusing on what you are for? What additional ideas or actions come to mind?

Vitality Is Increased When Presence Is Practiced

Practicing presence—and actually getting better at it—is unusual. Those who make the practice habitual have an unusually clear and accurate connection to what is happening, unusual poise under pressure, and better access to their own talents. Also, presence is infectious. Your calm interest in what is actually happening can relax others and make a whole group smarter. In *Social Intelligence*, Goleman said, “We catch each other’s mood like we catch a cold.” The mood of presence is worth catching.

Here are some questions worth considering as you decide whether or not you want to promise presence in your personal and professional life:

- Where and when is it important for me to be fully present?
- How does the quality of my presence help or hurt the connections that build *community*?
- How does my presence help or hurt people making a significant *contribution*?
- How does my presence influence people making a *choice* to do great work?
- How can I develop more presence today? What, if anything, will I do differently?

To advance your mastery of presence, more resources and practices—including those referenced throughout the chapter—can be found at ***thevitalityimperative.com/presence***.

When it comes to being a Vitality leader, presence is the first thing. However, it is not everything, so let’s move on!