



In the Power of Presence

By Tony V. Zampella

Presence is the possibility of being open and available in each moment. Such openness brings to each moment our whole being: our body and its senses; our mind, perceptions and attitudes; and our intentions and aspiration. We are clear in ways that allow things to bestow themselves on us.

The presence of life exists for us all the time. Strolling through a bookstore, I can pick up a new book, and stumble by chance on other titles that move me and provoke ideas. This romantic version of life is not possible in the same way in our online wanderings.

The serendipity of life is an experience to cherish—not just for our well-being (although that is enough), but because our next opportunity to learn, to grow, to lead, or to innovate is hidden in the subtle details, ready to emerge when the world stops rushing toward us.

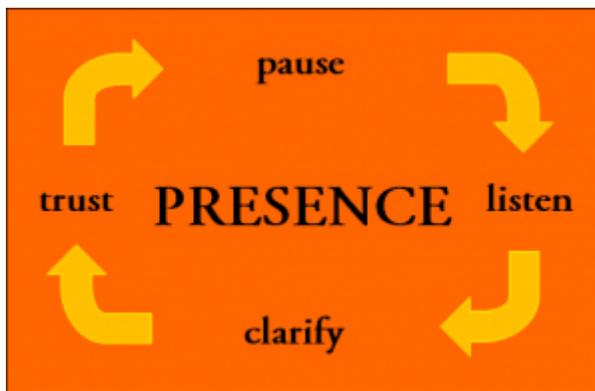
Confusing Presence

We've popularized the term "presence" in such a reductive manner that it resembles a trait, competency, or skill. Whether leadership presence, executive presence, coaching presence, social presence, spiritual presence, or even online presence, it implies an external state (often akin to *being present*) or focused attention, accessed through kinesthetics or kinetics, expressed as chemistry, charisma, or charm.

Our own International Coaching Federation (ICF) describes coaching presence as “the ability to be fully conscious and create [a] spontaneous relationship with the client, employing a style that is open, flexible and confident.”

These external traits may represent an observable part of presence, but they hardly reveal the entire story.

- First, *presence* involves inside-out discovery—openness and awareness, freely accessing our being to hold, express, and connect to the moment fully.
- Second, *presence* is realized, not produced; it is not a skill to improve how we do things, but rather flows from our authentic or natural being.
- Third, there is no formula or gimmick (such as focused eyes, nodding heads, soft gaze, deep breathing, or correct posture) to make it happen.
- Fourth, crudely speaking, *presence* is a *being-in* and *being-with* phenomena that can both taste and animate life.



Presence may look like charisma, but it can also look contemplative.

Writer Lawrence Berger, in a 2015 *New York Times* piece exploring Martin Heidegger’s philosophy, suggests that presence animates us. “When we feel that someone is really listening to us, we feel more alive, we feel our true selves coming to the surface—this is the sense in which worldly presence matters.”

Holding the Moment

Presence first calls us to locate ourselves in the world fully, letting it animate us as we engage it. Presence demands inside-out (first-person) learning and a connection to oneself and others that begins with a willingness to hold the moment.

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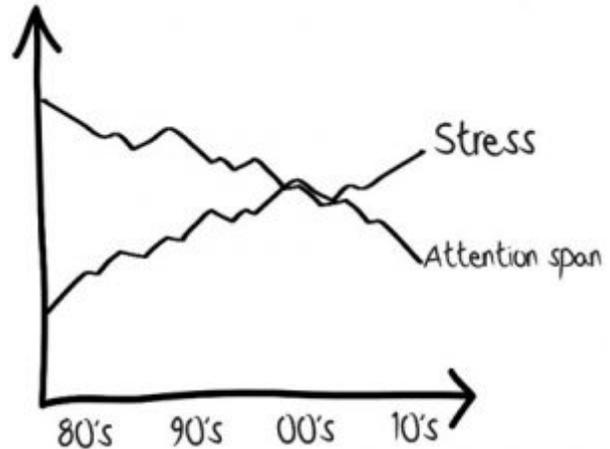
Our **VUCA** (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) work life finds us forgetting how to hold the moment. Leaders and managers deal daily with an onslaught of information and increasing complexity that leads to unpredictable change, all of which assaults our senses. In the last two decades, life beyond work—our recreation and social lives—has shifted almost entirely from the physical to the mental realm.

According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, the average attention span of a human being has dropped from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8 seconds in 2013. This is one second less than the attention span of a goldfish.

Without intentional mental hygiene, we are destined to experience further fragmentation and incoherence.

The hidden source of our distress in business and at all levels of leadership is not bad strategy, old culture, or faulty data; it's our willful disregard of the power that holding the moment plays in quality thinking and listening.

Holding and expanding the moment to receive the world requires mindfulness. Absent this capacity, we find cluttered minds that cloud thoughts, pollute listening, and project "mental overload" onto strategies—all to boost reflexive actions.



To create space and cope with the fallout of change, we can bring mindfulness to a regular pause. By pausing between events, connecting to the floor, breathing, and resting our awareness on ourselves, we can clear our mental clutter. With this regular practice, we will become keen observers, and open ourselves to witnessing and clearing our minds as we engage life.

What Matters Most?

Presence taps our humanity and connects us to others by what matters most.

A person of presence not only moves others but is moved by others, by events, and by life. To receive life in this way constitutes us as generative beings.

Things matter to us. Music transforms our mood. Poetry pries open our heart. Nature lifts us beyond our petty concerns.

A child on the street falls, and we reach over to help; we stumble on graffiti with a powerful message that halts our stride. An older gentleman struggles with an armful of groceries, and we rush to grab a door. A group of teens sings and dances in the subway station, and we pause to listen and pay homage to this unfolding talent.

Presence teaches us what matters most: Being in the presence of something sacred finds the sacred in us; in the presence of intelligence we are insightful; in the presence of art, provoked; and poetry finds us moved to tenderness

Each moment speaks.

Becoming whole invites us to allow events, language, and the presence of beings to alter us—to rearrange our DNA.

Anthony V. Zampella is an educator, activist, leadership coach, writer, and researcher in the field of adult learning and leadership development. His work presents an eclectic fusion of Western business models, generative learning methods, language-action theory and contemplative practices from Eastern wisdom traditions. As an Integral theorist, Tony's interests include the works of Martin Heidegger and Ken Wilber and the practice of Zen Buddhism.

He integrates Western knowledge and Eastern practices to examine the connections between listening and learning in cultivating leadership cultures. Since 1999, Tony has worked as an academic and leadership specialist, designing leadership programs for coaches and consultants, executives and first-time CEOs, and learning and development professionals.

His firm, Zampella Group, is a pioneer in "first-person learning," which is closely related to [triple-loop learning](#), [ontological learning](#), or [transformative learning](#). Distinct from conventional third-person "empirical" learning, and second-person "experiential" learning, first-person learning involves an "existential awareness" that cultivates insight and perceptions that alter mindsets.

Tony writes a regular blog, [Learning Curve](#), for learning and development professionals, and serves on the **Editorial Board** of "[The Philosophy of Coaching, an International Journal](#)."