

# ***Relational Presence: Key to Masterful Communication***

By Joanne Greene

You know it when it happens. Sometimes, probably not as often as you'd like, you genuinely communicate. You're right there in the moment, truly listening. When you speak, there's no self-consciousness or fear. The words flow easily; your thoughts are heard and accepted without judgment. There's relief and a sense of satisfaction. At that moment, unknowingly, you've achieved something now identified as ***Relational Presence***.

We're all familiar with a range of techniques designed to maximize communication. We know how to make eye contact, nod at appropriate times, and reiterate what we think the other person is trying to say.

In bedrooms and boardrooms around the world people are cocking their heads to the side, saying things like, "I'm hearing some anger in your voice..." or "You've really been working hard at that." That's a step in the right direction as long as the assessment is accurate and the person responds positively. Yet even with all the latest approaches, far too little real communication is taking place. Our minds wander. We're attached to our agendas. We doodle, fidget and waste precious time.

## **Introducing Relational Presence**

*Relational Presence (RP)* is the capacity to be absolutely engaged with another human being while speaking or listening to him. Rather than playing the part of being fully attuned, one is actually just being with the other person in a relaxed, neutral state.

*When addressing a group or leading a meeting, being in RP means acknowledging each person simply by being with her and allowing the connection, the relationship at that moment, to be more important than the content. It sets the stage for the most productive information exchange imaginable by laying a foundation of trust and empowerment.*

Chances are you've attended or even led team-building workshops featuring exercises designed to break down our barriers and create common bonds. We do everything we can to build strong teams, yet we come up short. In ropes courses and blind walks in the woods, people cling to their defenses and continue to play the roles that have become familiar, if not safe. When dialogue begins, we revert to our old habits of interrupting, vying for position, creating the right impression. A month after the workshop, participants forget what they've learned and have no tools with which to practice the skills they were taught on the off-site.

Lee Glickstein, founder of **Speaking Circles International**, is the author of *Be Heard Now! Tap Into Your Inner Speaker and Communicate with Ease* (Broadway Books and Sounds True Audiotapes). He's created a step-by-step way for individuals to isolate and harness their capacity for communication mastery and team-building without wasting a second.

"In business, Relational Presence has simplified all my communications since I no longer try to sell or persuade," said Glickstein. "Since relationships are at the core of all successful business interaction, it's important to be authentic and present, easily

express oneself and tell the hard truth, and to inspire others to do the same. Team members must get on the same page and see one another as allies and collaborators, rather than as threats or adversaries.”

### **Performance Pressure**

Twenty-five years ago Glickstein was a stand-up comic who worked to develop this relational approach as a means of addressing his crippling stage fright. He went on to become an innovator in the field of “humor as healing”, eventually serving as Director of the Humor in Medicine Program at the California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco.

“Performance pressure is universal,” said Glickstein. “Far too many business people sabotage themselves when making presentations, leading meetings, or simply trying to make a point.” Glickstein’s work evolved into a network of support teams called Speaking Circles® offered through Speaking Circles International which Lee founded in 1989. The magic ingredient, known as Relational Presence or RP, is now benefiting organizations as a team-building and leadership communication tool.

Developing these RP skills is akin to exercising one’s muscles – muscles that were naturally strong when we were infants and hadn’t yet acquired spoken language. As we became socialized, we lost our ability to simply be present and open for genuine communication. We learned to be self-conscious and mistrustful, adopting coping patterns that actually prevent the development of relationships. The effectiveness of the RP approach is that it can be practiced and deployed at a moment’s notice, bringing everyone on the team back into the present to truly hear and communicate with one another.

### **Deploying Relational Presence**

The training industry has certainly evolved with the advent of technology and new discoveries. Over the years the focus has been on moving through the workbook, the transparencies and, more recently, the Power Point slides. Most trainers relied on a book of ice-breakers to eliminate barriers to communication and help participants transition to the present. There were subtle ways of getting a distracted or reluctant group member to refocus on the activity, but attention was never paid to helping trainers enter into relationship with audience members.

Most of us have the experience of sitting in a meeting while the speaker struggles to maintain attention. Everyone seems to be caught up in their Blackberries and yesterday’s sales notes.

Now, trainers who employ RP start groups off by having everyone breathe for a few seconds. There’s no particular mode of breathing that’s demonstrated; rather, it’s a chance to slow down the mental chatter and tune in to the here and now. “When the trainer breathes fully right from the start,” says Glickstein, “within minutes participants make the shift and visibly relax. They respond to the trainer by heightening their focus and exhibiting a readiness to engage.”

### **Employee Satisfaction**

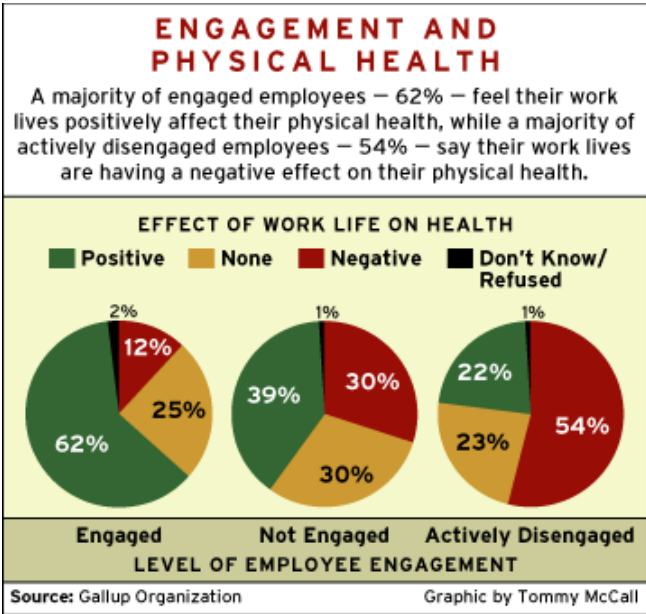
One of the more pressing problems facing employers today is employee satisfaction. It’s so strongly linked to workers’ physical and psychological well-being that it’s had significant impact on the rising cost of health care.

### The Three Types of Employees

- 1 ENGAGED** employees work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company. They drive innovation and move the organization forward.
- 2 NOT-ENGAGED** employees are essentially "checked out." They're sleepwalking through their workday, putting time -- but not energy or passion -- into their work.
- 3 ACTIVELY DISENGAGED** employees aren't just unhappy at work; they're busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish.

\*Steve Crabtree, Gallup Management Journal, January 13, 2005

A recent Gallup Management Journal Employee Engagement Index survey looked at these connections and, regardless of job type, there turn out to be big differences according to employees' engagement levels. Among engaged employees, 62% felt that their work lives positively affect their physical health. A majority of the disengaged employees, 52%, said their work lives negatively impact their health.



\*Steve Crabtree, Gallup Management Journal, January 13, 2005

Gallup asked employees to name the greatest factor in maintaining a sense of comfort and well-being at work and the most common responses related to communication and interpersonal dynamics among workers. While exercise programs and generous leave policies certainly make employees feel and probably perform better, the biggest stress-buster is a work environment that encourages open, respectful, and positive relationships among coworkers.

Relational Presence training, by its very nature, accomplishes these goals.

## **Productivity**

It's generally agreed that employee retention and productivity improve when managers communicate more frequently and more effectively with their people. Over-appreciation is not much of a problem in the workplace, yet, when asked, many employees will say that they don't feel their perspective is valued or their opinions regarded seriously. Email is a perfectly adequate means of transmitting information if relationship isn't important. A reason to have a meeting, with team members gathered face-to-face, is the added opportunity of enabling coworkers to connect.

That very connection and validation gives rise to increased employee satisfaction, renewed creativity and, ultimately, a boost in productivity. It may be a revolutionary concept to think of employees as human beings who need to be heard, feel valued, and be involved in the decision-making that directly impacts them. It may also be a revolution whose time has come.

Relational Presence is not a technique and doesn't lend itself to a list of tips. Rather, its practice evokes quantum leap in communication skills – laying the foundation for genuine, bottom-line teamwork. This is a transformational approach to developing an expansive attitude of positive regard, in-house and with clients and customers. Once the base of authentic clarity takes root, each person can be trusted to express his or her best in a naturally effective style.

While listening techniques such as "eye contact", "active listening" and "mirroring" certainly open doors to communication, they don't address the core complaint by employees that their *presence itself* isn't valued.

In a corporate setting, Relational Presence training addresses this underlying issue and, at minimum, creates an environment where all participants feel that someone is listening to them. If the CEO or department head practices RP, it surely resonates and rings true right on through the organization.

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**Speaking Circles International** offers keynotes, workshops and seminars to trainers, teams, and organizations. Its mission is to develop fully engaged, masterful communicators and transform organizations into listening cultures. For information visit [www.speakingcirclesinternational.com](http://www.speakingcirclesinternational.com).