

How to Redirect Performance Pressure To Engage Your Audience

By Lee Glickstein

There's nothing more crucial to success in business than bringing a receptive and commanding presence into every meeting, whether one-on-one or with groups. Trainers need to motivate their participants; executives need to inspire their people; employees need to influence those they interact with. Everyone in the organization must be aware of any weaknesses in how they habitually present themselves that get in the way of being fully seen, heard and responded to. And most importantly, we all need to know how to get and keep the attention we need to be fully successful.

The best way to be fully seen and heard is to pay attention to how you engage with individuals in the first moment of eye contact, *before* a word is spoken. This first impression is the "moment of truth" where snap decisions are made about your authenticity and worth. With a group, this first moment happens again and again, every time you make eye contact with another person. In a one-on-one meeting, these moments happen each time you are about to verbalize a thought or idea; each time you ask or answer a question.

The mistake most communicators make is to place immediate priority on the content of the communication rather than on the human connection through which the information flows. There is often a subtle performance pressure to take command of the moment and not waste time. But the trade-off is that you aren't being fully seen and heard when you bypass the human-to-human element; you are losing influence no matter how brilliant your content.

It would seem that the alternative is to spend a lot of time you don't have to "loosen up" your listeners and yourself with, for instance, a typical icebreaker.

No!

The great communicators know that responding masterfully in a moment of truth *requires as little as a second of silence*. And if you have as many as 60 such critical moments in a workday, the investment of one minute a day toward full engagement makes the difference between an adequate communicator and a fabulously successful one.

What that moment of truth asks of you is to stop, be still, be silent, breathe, drop agenda, be neutrally receptive (go easy on social smiles or nods), and notice your positive regard for the person. We call this essential power place "Relational Presence."

It is the habitual strategies we've developed to "power through" such pressure that makes it difficult at first for us to tolerate the natural silences that define the rhythm and tone of masterful communication. Practicing Relational Presence will bring up every bit of performance pressure you may have. In the end, however, you will find an inner strength reflected in your external presence filled with power, confidence and competence.

Dealing with resistance in the moment of truth

Max is an in-house trainer for a Fortune 500 retail clothing chain. It was his job to orient new clerks and cashiers to the customer service culture and procedures of the

company. At trainings, he'd stand in front of the group of predominantly young employees, his heart pounding, and work hard to take command. He was often distressed by what he saw as disinterest and disrespect in the group, which caused him to ratchet up his energy and power through the resistance. He eventually got his points across but he felt totally drained at the end of every day. He didn't feel he was long for the job.

What Max learned in **Relational Presence Training** reminded him of what his high school football coach had worked with him on years before. A third-string quarterback, Max remembered the coach stressing that the difference between a good QB and a great one has little to do with arm strength or accuracy. Greatness shows up in how he "sees the whole field" in the moment before he throws a pass-- or perhaps chooses *not* to throw the pass. With snarling 250-pounders bearing down on him, he often literally has less than a second to make that decision. The coach told him that in that moment of truth, the great quarterbacks "stop time," get quiet, breathe, see everything all at once with no pressure to make anything happen. The sports vernacular is that they "let the game come to them." As a result, the action a quarterback takes is less a decision than a natural flow of events that he becomes part of.

Max realized that standing in front of a group of resistant trainees was bringing out exactly the same performance pressure to make something happen he'd faced as a young quarterback. But now the Training gave him copious practice and support to slow down that moment, see it in stop action, recognize internally what assumptions and unexamined reactions were in the way of full engagement with his groups, and drop those habits.

Applying full engagement

Now when Max stands up in front of a new group his heart still pounds, but instead of rushing into the information, he takes a full breath of silence and regards his audience with respect. His excitement now feels pleasant and appropriate to him. Instead of grabbing command of the group, he lets them come to him. He finds a receptive face and starts by conversationally relating a vignette from his life when he was a new and stressed-out clerk. The rest of the training flows from there.

"I never have to raise my voice anymore. When someone asks a challenging question, instead of reacting defensively as I used to, I stop, take a breath, relax, and 'see the whole field.' The answer comes naturally and clearly. Sometimes I even ask someone else in the group if they would like to respond, and when they do, they are always on the money!

"The extra time these silences take might add up to a minute every hour, tops. And they set a tone of mutual respect and pleasant learning that allows at least 15 more minutes of important information to be transmitted and digested than when I used to 'take command.'

"I love my work," smiles Max.

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Speaking Circles International offers keynotes and *Relational Presence* training to trainers, teams, and organizations. Its mission is to develop fully engaged, masterful communicators and transform organizations into listening cultures.