

From ABSENCE to PRESENCE

- Reflections on corporate culture -

Presence is a hot topic in leadership circles worldwide.

Rightfully so.

Would you rather be led by someone who is detached, emotionally unavailable, unaware of their unconscious patterns and motivators, incapable of truly relating or listening, and confined to a small bandwidth of linear thinking....? Or by someone who knows how to engage, listen and relate, who has committed to challenging self-awareness work, who is emotionally warm, and who knows how to hold open a window to genuinely new ideas and streams of intelligence?

Assuming that both have high strategic, organisational and financial competence, the answer is pretty much a no-brainer. Yet corporate cultures are filled with the former types, and it is hardly a surprise to learn that most of the time people leave leaders, not organisations.

At a time when *Presence* is so widely recognised as a key leadership quality, when almost every major business school has a programme on 'Executive Presence', and when lack of *Presence* is frequently cited as an obstacle to high-level promotion, I believe it's timely to look directly at the *Absence* that underpins so much of corporate culture.

Culture is formed around a series of unconscious 'agreements'. These are so woven into the fabric of culture that they become normal – simply the way things are. There is little possibility of change until these agreements are brought into awareness.

I believe that the agreement to function within a cloud of *Absence*, with associated factors of numbness and disconnection, keeps most corporate cultures locked within a much narrower range of performance, effectiveness and innovation than is possible. And that the transition from *Absence* to *Presence* is one of the most enabling movements of all for individuals, teams and whole organisations.

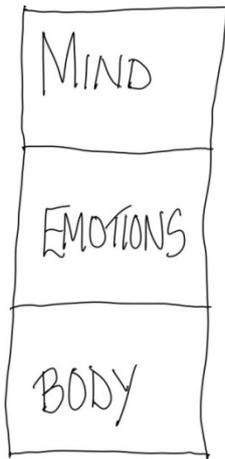
I will address the agreement of *Absence* in several key areas.

Connection to Self

When you ask someone how they are doing in any particular moment, there are at least three basic possible dimensions of the answer, three fundamental layers of our humanity:

- 1) My body – what kind of physical sensations do I feel right now? How much do I actually *feel* my body? (which is quite different from thinking about it)
- 2) What is happening in the emotional part of me? What kinds of feelings are moving through me?
- 3) My mental processes – thinking, remembering, imaging, etc.

Yet the first response is almost always a series of thought processes. While these may contain some valuable insights, they invariably also serve to maintain a disconnection from body and emotion.



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1) What is happening in my body right now?

As children we lived in a 100% physical world, meaning that our moment-to-moment life was experienced as a continual stream of physical sensations, with varying degrees of intensity. As a natural part of development, sometimes accelerated by traumatic events, we had to reduce this intensity. We did this through two simple and very effective physical mechanisms – we tensed our body, and we restricted our breathing. These two actions allowed us to manage degrees of emotional and physical intensity that we could not assimilate or integrate at the time. Essential as this strategy was, the big downside was the gradual reduction of life energy and aliveness.

Think for a moment about the times when you have an experience of coming home deeply to your body. This may occur after a good massage or a yoga class, during intimate physical contact, during a sport, or being in nature, or listening to music.....those 'special' moments when you literally and metaphorically breathe deeper, when your whole body softens, when you feel more tenderly alive to yourself and to the world around you.

And then consider:

- During how much of your average day are you in contact with this dimension of yourself?
- How much of your day are you walking around without really *feeling* your body, except when it is in pain?
- If you exercise, are you 'doing something to your body'? Or are you living *in* your body and really feeling it?

I believe that this estrangement from our bodies is a core part of the *Absence* within which we have come to live, and that we have come to accept as normal.

The body is an extraordinary organism, an ocean of constantly changing physical sensations and processes, many of which are closely connected to our emotional life. When someone asks "How are you?", re-sensitising ourselves, re-training ourselves to feel into our body is an essential part of connection to self.

¹ This is adapted from a model originating with the pioneering work of spiritual teacher Thomas Hübl
www.thomashuebl.com

Sometimes, after a good massage, you may notice that your shoulders have dropped several centimetres. Only then do you realise that you walk through your day with your shoulders up around your neck. That is a simple and literal example of an unconscious 'agreement' of *Absence*, forgotten and normalised until we have a direct experience of our shoulders dropping.

2) What is happening in my emotions right now?

Here we encounter an equivalent, if not greater level of numbing and *Absence*, constantly reinforced by the strategies that we needed to develop in our younger lives to reduce the intensity of our emotional world and/or to protect ourselves when outer protection was absent.

The human emotional structure has five primary emotions:

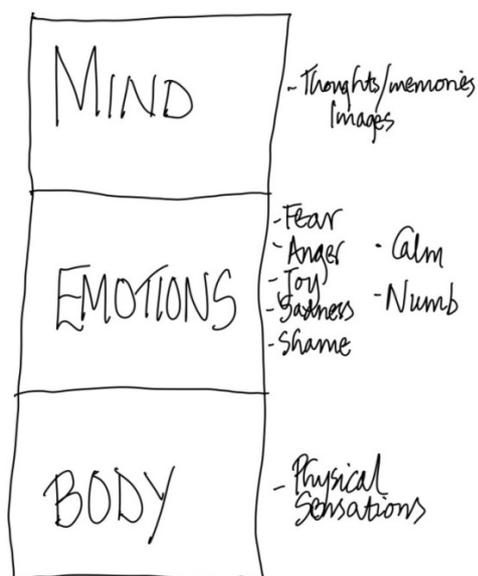
Fear – Anger – Joy – Sadness – Shame

Each of these five primary emotions has many shades and many degrees. For instance, Fear starts as mild anxiety, and goes right through to pure terror. Anger starts as mild irritation and so on. Sometimes we are simply calm, feeling present and connected without any strong emotion. And sometimes we recognise we feel a kind of numbness – there is probably emotion inside, but it is surrounded by a bit of a fog.

Here we might notice that immediately our minds start to say things like “wow, so many *negative* emotions, only one *positive*” or “why would I want to feel fear or sadness?” etc. And thus we meet the core of our emotional numbing and *Absence*. To cut ourselves from emotion is to cut ourselves from core life energy, to become dry and distant.

In breaking through emotional *Absence* it is essential to be *true*, *precise* and *unconditional*. If I ask you how you are, and you check carefully, perhaps you will recognise “well, I notice a kind of numbness in me right now”, or “I feel a tension in my stomach, and if I carefully bring my awareness to it, I sense a feeling of anxiety”.

If I am *Present* and open enough as you do this then I will also be able to feel this in you. If I acknowledge this, and together we share this kind of relational moment we are already entering a much more connected and *Presence* filled level of relating.



This may sound simple, yet experience shows that we are here in one of the most challenging areas of all – such is our inherent difficulty in allowing ourselves to *feel*.

Two major reframes are needed:

- We have to break free of the idea that there are positive or negative emotions
- There is absolutely no need whatsoever to fix or change an emotion (which is anyway impossible). Judging and/or trying to ‘fix’ our emotions is one of the primary ways we cut ourselves off from life and from vitality.

And here are some of the ways we distance ourselves from emotion:

- “I feel that...”
 - This will always lead to a thought, not a feeling.
- “I feel sad/happy/fearful because....”
 - Although it will certainly be important later to connect thought and feeling, doing so immediately is another way of ‘exiting’ from direct contact with emotion.
- “I feel hurt” or “I feel pain”
 - These are generalised words. When someone uses them we need to dive deeper into what actual emotion is present.
- “I feel inadequate”
 - That is a thought. An emotion most certainly accompanies it, but we have to learn the precision of discerning what is thought, what is emotion.

We commonly hear the phrase ‘paralysed by fear’. Actually, unless you are frozen because your life is genuinely in danger, no-one is ever paralysed by fear. What paralyses us is not feeling the fear. Whenever someone allows themselves to actually feel fear, a lot of life-energy flows, and from this, as with any emotion, a new release of intelligence. And I have yet to meet a team or culture in which fear is not strongly in the atmosphere, given the increasing instability and uncertainty all around us.

Each of these, and many others, simply enables the fabric of *Absence*.

To counter this, we need to choose together the long and mature developmental path of being able, step by step, to ‘host’ emotions more unconditionally within ourselves, and in our relational fields. This does not mean collapsing helplessly into them, or expressing them chaotically into our environment. It means creating more and more relationships and group scenarios in which, *when appropriate*, whatever is arising in the individual or group emotional experience can be unconditionally acknowledged, felt, and precisely articulated.

To bring more *Presence* means to notice and articulate the mechanisms of disconnection in ourselves and in each other, with full respect for their original function. Doing so is already the beginning of significant melting. Then we may create a safe enough space in our relating, and in our teams, in which we can gradually dip into the rivers of emotion. This is for sure very delicate work, requiring considerable maturity and development in a team and in a leader. He or she needs to be

someone with mature self-awareness in order to create an *unconditional* space for people. While this may sound simple, it is without doubt one of the most challenging and lifelong developmental tasks. It is also one of the most transformational of all.

I have heard from many people who work in very high performing corporate teams who have developed a culture in which most meetings start with a short, yet 100% authentic emotional check-in. “How is each person actually feeling right now?” When a team has developed the maturity to do this, when the leader has created a culture of *unconditional* acceptance of what is said, meaning nothing is thought of as more or less positive or negative than anything else, and when each person simply feels genuinely ‘heard’ or received, several remarkable things usually happen:

- 1) The level of *Presence* in the room massively increases.
- 2) People who were not feeling so great, or very tired, or even resentful of being in the meeting, start to feel their energy/mood completely change – simply because of being heard and received exactly as they are.
- 3) New levels of connectivity open up, which in turn lead to the gateways through which innovation begins to flow.

Similarly, when a leader of a meeting can sense how much emotion is in the room during a discussion, and can pause to make a space for this simply to be expressed and received, the energy and connectedness in the room almost always greatly increases.

Last but not least, I have witnessed hundreds of occasions, both in exercises and real examples, where simply hearing and acknowledging emotion in a person who comes to you with a problem opens up possibilities of movement, and often resolution, far beyond what are arrived at through a first impulse strategy of ‘fixing’.

This may all sound simple, yet it challenges the very core of our habits of *Absence* and opens the door to a radically different experience of *Presence*.

Connection to Others

Listening is one of the most highly prized ‘skills’ of human interaction, and is the subject of many training programmes. I regularly hear that a quality of attention and listening is one of the most significant things a leader can give to ‘followers’. Yet what do we actually mean by ‘listening’?

I believe that if I am really listening to you, I of course hear and digest your words, and at the same time, I *feel your interior*. It’s as if I take you into myself, and your inner emotional landscape with all its layers becomes more directly available to me. My whole nervous system resonates with your emotional interior. This may sometimes include parts that you yourself may not even be including or be in contact with.

We did this all the time as children. Our body/mind systems are hard-wired to feel people and our environment in this way. As children we felt everything that was going on around us, which is exactly part of what became too much at times, particularly when what was going on felt incongruent – a dissonance between what was being said and what was actually going on energetically and emotionally – and/or when the emotions/energies/impulses around were perceived as being unsupportive or threatening.

And when I feel your interior, and you feel mine, and we are each aware of this happening, we can say that only then is there a beginning of actually *relating*, and that everything else is a more or less transactional form of relationship.

In how many interactions is this kind of receptive, attuned listening and relating occurring? How much is our relating imbued with *Absence*, and how much with *Presence*?

Inner Spaciousness and the Gateway to Creativity and Innovation

As many people who practice Mindfulness will have experienced, the more fully and accurately we bring an unconditional feeling-awareness to mind, body and feelings, the more we experience the opening of a kind of interior spaciousness. As we settle gradually more deeply into this, we immerse in a sense of pure *Being* and *Presence*.

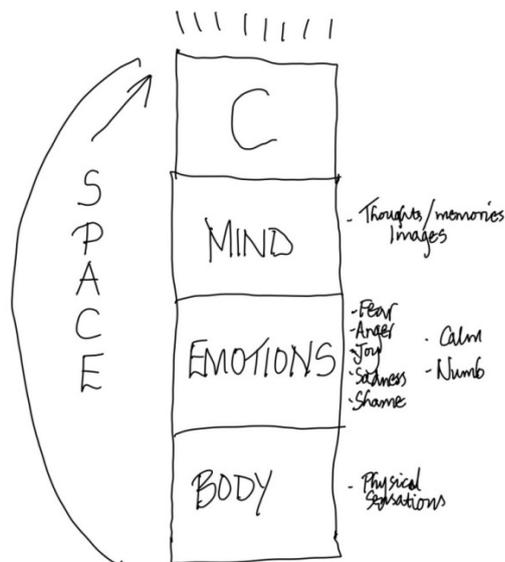
In the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah, they speak of how when we look at a page in a book, that page has two parts to it: The black letters, and the white space behind them. Yet starting from the earliest days of education, our culture teaches us to focus exclusively on the black letters. This may be one of the biggest collective habits or unconscious 'agreements' we have – to live in the black letters, and only fleetingly remember the white page.

And yet, as the uptake of Mindfulness strongly indicates, once we begin to taste that spaciousness, that inner Silence, we know deep in our bones that this is a *good* place to be, that we experience something like a feeling of coming home and a contact with an essential layer of ourselves.

In the spaciousness we recognise that we *have* a mind, but it is not the centre of ourselves. This in itself is a major developmental threshold.

Moreover, that spaciousness is, time and again, the gateway to new insight, new ideas, new project impulses. Here we experience the essence of the phrase "the idea came to me". In corporate group settings, as we move through the stages of '*Presencing*' more and more truthfully, it is remarkable to see what happens as spaciousness opens. Firstly, people sit more and more in a Silence that is not only very comfortable (often to their surprise), but also has a nurturing, life-affirming quality. Fertile ground.

And from here it is usually a very short step to new ideas arriving, the '*C*' signifying creativity (see below), often experienced as a kind of download. The mind *receives*, and as one person voices even a partial fragment of a new idea, it gets picked up and developed in a flowing, organic way. In peak moments it can feel as if there is one flowing, interconnected mind, with each individual a tributary of the flow.



In a 30-strong senior leadership team I worked with recently in the USA (27 men, 3 women), toward the end of the programme many of the team had been through a strong enough process to directly contact, feel and express their fear in small groups. I will never forget how, back in the big group, man after man shared that as they did this, a new level of spaciousness, and then fertile new ideas, sprang up between them. As these sharings occurred in the room I had the strong sense, confirmed by the CEO, that in those moments their whole culture was actually undergoing a true transformation.

Connection to Nature and Beyond

If I am connected to my body, to my emotions, to others, and to inner spaciousness in the ways I have described above, then there is a strong likelihood that my relationship with Nature will also transform. In the culture of *Absence*, Nature is another object. Even when we comment appreciatively on a beautiful landscape, it basically remains an object out there. As *Presence* deepens, then I might walk through a forest or a landscape and start to experience the *Presence* of Nature as a living, breathing organism, profoundly enfolded in mystery, awe, and 'Otherness'. The wind on my face, the rain or sun on my skin may even become a source of quiet rapture.

In the face of this depth, this level of Silence and *Presence*, I may even touch the moment when the only response I have is to bow to something far greater than myself, something far beyond the comprehension of the rational mind. Then I may naturally begin to sense a dimension of consciousness that is more timeless, eternal, and bathed in immanence. That which the timeless meditative and mystical traditions of every culture have always pointed us towards. That which almost everyone tastes at moments, however fleetingly, yet gets easily forgotten in the busy-ness of everyday life.

From *Absence* to *Presence*

And then, as all of these different levels of *Presence* accumulate, I or a group may reach a critical turning point where living from *Presence* starts to become the first priority in life, because the alternative is just not very attractive any more.

Recent research in the field of how people review their life during near-death experiences, and the wonderful account by Nurse Bonnie Ware of the five most frequently heard regrets of people just before they die, tells us unequivocally that what matters most to us is our *humanity*, how we live and relate and love. Infinitely more than possessions, status, power and material life, and all the ways that, mired in the fabric of *Absence*, we desperately try to fill an aching emptiness.

As *Absence* becomes a thing of the past, and more and more people gravitate towards others with a similar priority, we will naturally start to create professional and social cultures that are rooted in *Presence* in which we live, relate, care and love as much of every second of life as possible, both inside and outside work. Because in times that are rapidly becoming more and more volatile, dangerous, uncertain and unpredictable, *Presence* is for sure the most resourceful ground from which to navigate life, and one of the most enabling factors of both high performance and deep satisfaction.

To recover the ability to *feel* ourselves, each other, our environment and the greater mysteries, with all the joy, fear, awe and pain that may arise, is also the pathway to our essential humanity, to that which most deeply connects us to ourselves and to life, and therefore ultimately to a more life-affirming future.

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