

THE POWER OF PAUSE

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In this fast-paced world, many people long for more time, more space, a slowed down life, or just a few moments of quiet. We want it. Badly. And we keep hoping that it will arrive. Maybe this weekend? Maybe this summer? Maybe a quiet ten minutes at lunch-time?

Most of us don't realize that the ability to pause is just that: an ability. One that we may not possess. In order to bring some quiet to our lives, we actually need to develop a better understanding of the specific abilities that we would need to build in our lives. As coaches, we often hear words from clients that support the need for pausing:

- I'm too busy.
- I don't have enough time.
- There aren't enough hours in the day.
- Things need to slow down.
- I think I'm burned out.

A senior executive worn out at the pace of his day wanted to have more room to connect to his work rather than just quickly crossing off items on his lengthy 'To Do List' each day. He moved from task to task barely recognizing that one had ended and another had begun in the whirlwind of his demanding, high stress day. He wanted more space. He wanted to speak more slowly. He wanted to take time with people. And he did not know how to slow down. He knew two speeds: On or Off. He produced results each hour but he was burning out while feeling as though he wasn't accomplishing enough. A strong, reliable achiever whose body knew only one very fast speed. During coaching sessions when he would slow down and pause, tears would inevitably fill his eyes. And he would sit quietly not able to speak. No wonder he didn't want to pause during the day. It broke his heart to realize what his frantic pace was doing to him; a pace that had been present for close to thirty years. No wonder he resisted slowing down for it was in pausing that he could really see his current way of being in his work.

This is happening every day to clients, friends, family, colleagues, loved ones, parents, children, and to us too. It is so familiar that it has started to become the "What Is" of our lives. How can we get to know about the ability to pause, what it is, and what it takes to slow down?

The dictionary definition of 'pause' provides helpful insight into the cultural biases that are associated with pausing. Check out the language that is used to describe this word:

pause (pôz)

1. a temporary stop, delay, wait, or rest, especially in speech or action
2. a cessation of activity because of doubt or uncertainty; a momentary hesitation
3. **give pause**, to cause to hesitate or be unsure as from surprise or doubt
4. to make a brief stop or delay; wait; hesitate; rest; linger or tarry

There are certain words that are associated with pausing that we do not hold as positive within our culture. Words such as delay, hesitate, or doubt give us some insight into how pausing can be held as something that delays action, forward movement or success. Pausing can be interpreted as a lack of decisiveness or a sense of being unsure. People do not want to be seen as unsure. Those in leadership positions would sure as hell not want to be described as someone who hesitates or delays. Perhaps someday great leaders will be called reflective, calm, unhurried, and possessed of the ability to pause in the midst of the fray to discern right action. Perhaps someday these descriptions will be valued as necessary for success, contribution and clarity. We are not in this place today although as human consciousness in our organizations continues to widen, these new adjectives are showing up in the hallowed halls of many companies.

However, what exists today in leaders is the need to move fast, decisively, and without hesitation. As coaches, we need to take into consideration both what frightens people about slowing down (per my executive client who always had his eyes well with tears) as well as how our culture holds this construct. Together these two forces create resistance in our ability to 1) value and 2) build this competency in individuals, groups, organizations, or in our society as a whole.

The first practice that I gave this senior leader was small and simple in scale: He was to pause after each item on his To Do List each day and ask himself, 'Does this item feel complete?' If the answer was 'Yes', then he would momentarily acknowledge the accomplishment and move on. If the answer was 'No', then he would take action to complete the item. This small act of completing only took a few seconds for each item but it started to build his ability to pause. An unintended benefit, that I hadn't thought would occur with this small practice, was that he felt more complete at the end of the day and he felt more connected to himself, his work and others throughout the day.

The ability to complete and actually notice the completion is only one of the competencies supported by cultivating the ability to pause. In Integral Coaching® work a very critical competency that is built with clients is the ability to notice when they are behaving in a way that is not consistent with their intentions and the ability to return to a way of being that is more in alignment with what deeply matters to them. This ability to notice when our actions are in disagreement with our intentions first requires the ability to pause ... to actually observe what is occurring in this moment ... to discern what is required in this moment, not based on what we planned or what we are unconsciously carrying out but on what is actually going on. Right here. Right now.

Without the ability to pause, observe, or reflect, our actions, words, and ways of perceiving are primarily driven out of reflex or 'doing what we have always done'. These actions stem from the past and include our related interpretations, ways of being, and reactions. Coaching programs tend to focus on new ways of being, new ways of seeing and new competencies to support how we hope to be with others and ourselves in the future. However, the past exerts a strong influence. It is known, established, and even safe. Our stronger 'behaviour muscles' are driven based on what we have done in the past, how we have interpreted our paths up until now, and the actions that are familiar to us.

How old is your past? How young is your future?

The future is not known and therefore, our weaker 'behaviour muscles' can tend to be those associated with how we wish to be or what we wish to do. We don't know how things will go. We don't know if it will be safe. We don't know if we can do/be the things we hope. The past is reliable. The future is uncertain and in the midst of uncertainty, we can tend to revert to old behaviours. These behaviours are reliable even if they don't support our new intentions for how we want to be.

And so: we need to bring about whatever is required to support this future intentionality. One of these important 'supports' is the ability to pause. Pausing is the 'in-between' step. It lies in-between our old ways and our new ways. It lies between this breath and the next one. It lies in-between a conscious action and an unconscious reaction. It is very difficult (if not impossible) to follow through on the statement, 'I will just stop being one way and start being another' as though we could just trade behaviours. Starting Monday, things are going to be different!

Cultivating the 'Pause Competency' with a client supports their ability to observe and check to see that their actions are supporting their intentions in every step of their Coaching Program. In other words, the ability to pause is necessary in every practice that is designed for a client. Clients need to be able to observe themselves at every stage of development. In some types of work this is called developing the "witness" ability.

How do you build the 'Pause Competency' in yourself and your clients? Through extensive work with clients, students and our own development, we have identified four components that make up this competency: Pace, Space, Openness, and Connectedness.

'PAUSE COMPETENCY' COMPONENTS

Components	Observed Behaviours	Ways To Work With People
Pace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • moving fast; speaking fast • next, next, next orientation • only noticing or looking for what facilitates moving faster • checks watch often 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • slowing down speeds in specific zones (office to coffee machine) • getting to know 50%, 25%, 150% of regular speed to 'slide the speed scale' versus knowing just one speed • what pace is required here?
Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • filling up agenda completely each day • tendency to live such that all time is filled leaving no room for 'new' or for shifts to occur • many back-to-back meetings • last minute cancelled appointments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • creating small windows in the day with 'nothing to do' • engaging in a daily practice of listening to music for 30 minutes • noticing your breath once each hour • becoming more comfortable with 'having time'
Openness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tight, closed, rigid, armoured • desire to keep things sure, controlled, predictable, safe, reliable • not comfortable with 'receiving'; do things for themselves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exploring the unknown • gently acknowledging accomplishments • asking for support • receiving acts of giving from others (receiving a massage)
Connectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • detached and distant • a feeling that life is happening somewhere 'over there' • can feel safe but also lonely, hollow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • get closer to and more fully experience given moments of the day • completion work (already described) • quiet moments with self

There are practices that can support making shifts in these four components and many practices can touch more than one component at the same time as seen below.

Which component do you most need to work on?

Which practices could you undertake?

- Noticing your breath during the day (pace, space, connectedness)
- Sitting quietly for a period of time (pace, connectedness)
- Walking at half speed from your office to the coffee pot (pace, connectedness)
- Acknowledging accomplishments (openness, connectedness)
- Completion practice already cited (connectedness, pace, openness)

Pausing is not a “nice to have.” Pausing is not a “wouldn't that be wonderful if I had the time.” Pausing is a core competency necessary to support any personal and professional development work with people who are interested in bringing about new results and meaningful change that can be sustained over time.



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