The Power of Now in Leadership

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In many ways leadership can seem like firefighting. On almost any day a seemingly constant stream of problems, difficulties, and impediments can flow into a leader’s life. At times it seems that any sort of focus on the “big picture” is impossible because so many nitty-gritty issues have to be dealt with. Yet, even in the face of such a negative onslaught of responsibility, it is still possible to maintain both your sanity and your focus.

Recently a source of thought has come to light that arms leaders to better cope with the vicissitudes of daily pressure. A number of writers have shed light upon the balance needed to handle the day-to-day pressure that leadership entails. Among these writers is one whose initial premises may strike leaders as asymmetrical. However, upon deeper analysis, the thoughts of philosopher Eckhart Tolle ring true and provide a balm to the chafed spirits of leaders experiencing daily friction.

Eckhart Tolle was once a university teacher who experienced the debilitating effects of depression. After agonizing over the value of life, Tolle returned to the land of the living. As part of his search for life’s meaning he came upon a simple yet revolutionary concept. We lose our very lives by squandering the present moment—the “now”—in search of future concerns. In all too many instances people spend virtually endless amounts of time worrying about things yet to be or ruminating about past wrongs. These activities may be natural but they are not productive. Indeed, every minute that we spend recycling ghostlike thoughts about the past or future is a waste of time. Our lives are lived in the present yet we lose the very essence of being by daydreaming about our fears and ourselves.

In Tolle’s work The Power of Now a view of life is outlined that may serve leaders well in their pursuit of balance and productivity. In sifting through this fine work a leader may well come away with a very different view of both their life and their work. What follows are twelve precepts drawn form this seminal work. Each thought is aimed at commonly experienced leadership pitfalls & ways in which to convert them into strengths. Hopefully, these words and suggestions will ring a bell of mindfulness with readers. If so they have served well as beacons toward greater fulfillment on the job, at home, and in life in general.

1. **Material wealth & Reputation are Not of Greater Value than Serenity:** Look at people who purport to be successful. Does their job title, big house, or fancycar mark them as balanced and successful? Not really—as the measure of success is in the service you perform and the balance in your life. Is a person successful if they cannot leave work pressures behind when they go home? Is a person who slaves away for seventy hours per week truly winning anything? Measure your success not by material rewards but rather via what help & service you can give to others. If you look at every
problem as an opportunity to give good service your perception of both the issues and yourself will change for the better.

2. **When you are focused on the present moment you can function—When you are trapped by spinning thoughts of the past or future, you cannot:** If you try to solve a complicated problem with a spinning mind you will fail. Think of your mind as an extension of your capacities. It is not in control of you but rather a part of the array of resources that you possess. When our minds recycle thoughts they spin their wheels just like a car stuck in the snow. If you are thinking in this way put aside the task and let answers come to you when you are more relaxed. The more you can focus upon the present the better your functionality at a given task will be. Our minds can be great tools or handicaps. Our attitudes go a long way toward determining which one it will be for us.

1. **When we give way to distracting thoughts we lose control of the present:** Your mind can be like a chattering monkey, leaping from tree to tree without purpose. In such a state you will think about an array of fears, concerns, issues, or anxiety inducers without being able to focus or rest. When we engage in such “thought attacks” we exhaust ourselves. Such thinking loses the present moment and provides no real solutions for the underlying fears. When you start to engage in such redundant thinking break away from it. Stop, and say to yourself, “What am I doing?” Then focus your mental energies on someone or something soothing. Think about the mountain lake you will be hiking to on your next vacation. Consider the beautiful face of your spouse. Remember the friends that you have. You can also engage in meditation of simple breath counting to get your focus back on the present moment. Do not succumb to your mind attacks—do not allow yourself to sacrifice the “now” for the sake of fear.

2. **Watch the way you think:** It is amazing how little very bright people analyze the way they think. This is a great weakness. Knowing how you typically react or process is a key to your own balance and your ability to serve others. If, for example, you realize that you rely upon dispassionate analysis to reach decisions you may have uncovered the reason why you are always at odds with passionate people. Your mental operations are a part of your life and those of the people you interact with. You should at least understand yourself before you try to understand & lead others.

3. **Feel your emotions—do not cut yourself off from feelings:** In leadership there is a school of thought that decisions require purely rational analysis. In reality, people are emotional creatures. Purely emotive thinking drives so much of our lives. If leaders fail to realize that much of what they deal with is emotionality they may miss the whole point of being a leader. The group that you supervise will experience the full gamut of emotions. The angry people you deal with are demonstrating emotionally charged behavior. Colleagues will come to you with their emotional issues. Your life will be awash with emotions. Therefore, consider your emotional pedigree. What makes you happy, sad, loving, and afraid? In knowing your emotional intelligence you set the stage for greater productivity and balance.

4. **Make it a habit to ask yourself, “What’s going on inside me at this moment?”**—Many educators and leaders are familiar with the concept of metacognition. Thinking about your thought processes can be a reflective action. If you can derive insights into how you think, you may be in a better position to think well. If, for example, you can become aware of the triggers that set off tension in you it may be possible to put an emotional safety in place so that they do not fire.
Periodically, during your day, it can be beneficial to pause for a few moments and ask yourself, “How am I doing right now?” If you never take the time to check your own feelings they may eventually overwhelm you either emotionally or physically. Asking yourself how you are doing is a simple way to retain balance and an awareness of the here-and-now.

5. Always say yes to the present moment: What have you gained by worrying your life away. Of course, some present moments are far more enjoyable than others. Most people would prefer to spend time with people they love than with those who are angry or upset with them. Only a masochist would confuse pain for pleasure. However, the difficult moments in our lives can go a long way toward shaping our characters. If we can overcome the adversities that naturally occur in life, we have taken a giant step toward enhancing our personal resilience. Through strength in time of crisis comes the moral fiber to lead. Most people can handle a situation that is simple. Only a true leader can captain a ship during a terrible storm.

6. Say yes to life and see how it begins to work for rather than against you: When we struggle against present realities we lose on many fronts. To begin, life is what it is. Our hopes and dreams cannot supercede reality. If we wish to choose unhappiness because the reality of the world is not what we would wish it to be we are destined to suffer. Conversely, if we accept the world for what it is and attempt to make it better—we will prosper. Refusing to accept reality harms us and everyone around us. You cannot lead if you wear blinders or see only false images of your mind. You lead by seeing life for what it is, grasping its potentialities, and making the best of every moment that you can.

7. Power over others is weakness disguised as strength: Having power over others is not leadership but rather tyranny. Leaders are not that concerned with flexing their power muscles. They simply do not have time for such egotistical displays. No, leadership rests in having authority that derives from the consent of the governed. Power and authority do not always go together. Be aware of the fact that when you operate form solely a power base, you are living in a dream world. In such a circumstance you have sacrificed all hope of establishing a long-term positive legacy. No, use power sparingly and with justice. Concern yourself with service & growth—then authority will flow to you.

8. If not now—when? —If you are unable to act today, what makes you think you will be able to tomorrow? If you cannot seize this present moment to live in balance & happiness, why will other moments be different? Life is passing each of us by at this very moment. How much of it are you willing to lose due to your decision to ruminate about things long gone or not yet here? This is the moment to live. Now is the time to serve and be happy. What is so important that it can derail you on this journey?

9. When you create a problem, you create pain: Every problem contains the seeds of pain within itself. When we make problems a reality we harm others and ourselves as well. The mistakes we make that lead to difficulties for others will be remembered. If you are a problem solver you will be blessed by the masses. On the other hand, if your actions are typically problematic, you will be seen as an impediment to peace. As a leader you must always remember that even in the most difficult circumstance your actions should improve the situation or at least not make it worse. In order to do this deed of healing you will need to be focused on the here-and-now and not thinking about other times & places.
10. It is not uncommon for people to spend their whole life waiting to start living: What will your personal legacy be? Would you be happy if people said this about you, “She never seemed contented. I doubt that she ever was able to simply let go and live.” Your life is too precious a gift to throw it away in the name of daydreaming. When you lose today you have lost a great deal. Every time you are unable to focus on what a child says to you, what your spouse is trying to tell you, or the world around you because you were not paying attention—you die a little bit. How can you lead others when you cannot even take charge of your own mind? Seek to establish balance inside yourself before you attempt to exert control of the external world.


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