



White Paper

# How Leaders Become Cultural Catalysts: Using Purposeful Presence in the Field to Ignite Positive Change





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## Purpose

*Influence the shift from a traditional mental model of leadership to a model of purposeful leadership, focusing on the leader's intentional actions during every workforce engagement.*

*Establish that a framework for focused and purposeful leadership, utilizing intentional engagement techniques, has significant ROI for the organization.*

*Advocate for the adoption of focused leadership, a need for support to implement and sustain for positive organizational culture change.*

In the shadow of the global pandemic, the business environment continues to evolve at an incredible rate. Staffing, retention, quiet quitting, supply chain, AI (artificial intelligence), climate, wellness, and work-life balance are all themes that have continued to show up in our media feeds and conversations over the past few years. Traditional management roles and hierarchical working relationship are being challenged. It's not surprising that the cultural characteristic most highly correlated with high performance is adaptability – an organization's ability to respond to changing markets and new competitive environments.

This responsiveness, along with agility (proactively making changes to better compete) and the ability to learn and innovate, creates resiliency that keeps organizations alive and thriving.

Change, and how organizations embrace it, is a common thread. The concept of change management and organizational change is not new. But our environment continues to evolve much faster than our behaviors, culture, and management systems. Leadership is continually challenged to maximize their connection to the workforce specifically where the efforts are most effective – at the front line. This is where leaders' purposeful presence comes in.

▶ *Leaders' purposeful presence at the place where the work happens has the greatest potential to drive positive results, enhance employee performance, and foster a culture of continuous learning and development.*

Focusing on a leader's purposeful presence as a strategic initiative creates a resilient and agile workforce that thrives in today's complex business environment.



## Unpacking Purposeful Presence

As complexity increases, leaders have less time and seemingly more things to accomplish. A traditional or directive approach of communication via team meetings, digital methods (emails, texts), and front-line tours often becomes an easy default to meet performance goals. The fallout is that leadership continues to struggle to make true and sincere connections with those performing the work. Although a “tell” or directive method has its place in organizations, shifting to a more engaged, connected style with myriad advantages, particularly given today’s workplace and workforce realities (more demands, less engagement). Leaders’ purposeful presence has become not only necessary at the front line but also, in fact, critical.

### Shifting Paradigms, Catalyzing Culture

Mental models or paradigms exist at both a personal level and an organizational level. The prevailing paradigm in business has been that leaders are teachers/experts and workers are learners/listeners: a top-down approach. Purposeful presence shifts that paradigm, challenging current assumptions and beliefs, not only those of leaders but also of the workforce. We call this paradigm shift a Moment of (Safety) Transformation.

Change is painful, and our mental models/paradigms play a central role in how we perceive and experience the world. But paradigm shifts are necessary for big change – these are the eureka, aha moments and are surprising and abrupt.

They are so powerful because they are created or occur from within, not transferred from someone else. These moments of insight cannot be told or taught, only experienced.



*Leaders must understand that each front-line engagement provides an opportunity to create eureka moments — to shift paradigms to co-create greatness and meaningful change.*

Purposeful presence is the enabler, and it requires an intentional practice in key communication skills and self-reflection based on three key elements:

**1. Presence and Personal Mastery:** Can the leader be present enough in the moment to respond appropriately within the engagement? Does the leader have the ability to “hold space” — in other words, be fully present, attentive, and nonjudgmental?

**2. Powerful Questions:** Does the leader have the ability to use powerful solution-based questions that prompt a solutions-based, appreciative dialogue?

**3. Intentional Listening:** Most important, does the leader have the ability to intentionally listen in such a way that he/she connects to the audience and knows which skills to use to reach the necessary outcome? lead to disastrous

## 1. Developing Personal Mastery and Purposeful Presence

Successful leadership influence starts with each leader. It doesn’t rely on how much knowledge or expertise leaders can transfer, but rather who they are, how they show up, and their willingness and ability to self-reflect. Their role is to:

- Recognize the part they play in the organizational relationship
- Understand their purpose
- Approach each worker-facing session prepared to demonstrate empathy
- Practice intentional listening
- Partner with their workforce to co-create powerful shifts both personally and organizationally





Commonly referred to as “personal mastery,” a key element in this domain is the ability of leaders to be self-aware, recognizing their role in the workforce’s success. Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization* (Doubleday, 2006), defines personal mastery as “the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively” but goes on to state “few organizations encourage the growth of their people in this manner.” The concept of personal mastery is at the core of having a learning mindset, as well as being a learning organization.

At the heart of personal mastery is the ability of leaders to develop their “purposeful presence” — their ability to fully focus and be present in the workplace interaction and to make the workforce feel seen, heard, and understood. Purposeful presence also refers to leaders’ self-awareness and ability to manage their own biases, assumptions, and distractions during a face-to-face discussion, as well as their willingness and ability to solicit and accept upward feedback from the workforce. This is not something leaders can just step into without context, understanding, and a willingness to examine their own leadership paradigms. Purposeful presence is essential to build trust, relationships, and create environments conducive to meaningful exchanges and transformative change.

## 2. Using Powerful Questions to Co-Create the Impossible Future

A common misconception, especially for those coming into leadership roles for the first time, is that leaders know best, and it is their responsibility to direct, teach, or tell the workforce what is necessary for success. Traditional management models are based on the premise that knowledge is power, and the typical transmission approach assumes the receiver is passive. We see these models prevail in teaching approaches, workshops, and executive education, as well as in traditional management models within organizations.

But eureka moments occur as the leader coaxes and nudges, allowing the workforce to find the answer themselves. To co-create what we may feel is an impossible future, the leader must hold the workforce capable.

▶ *Holding others capable subscribes to the idea that potential comes from within and requires leaders to suspend their biases or mental models to get past the beliefs, perceptions, and current reality that keeps the workforce stuck.*







This is where things can get uncomfortable, but this adage holds true: *“There is no growth in the comfort zone and no comfort in the growth zone.”*

Personal mastery requires an intentional practice in key communication skills. This includes the leader’s ability to ask powerful and solution-focused questions—an essential skill in the specific skill sets necessary to facilitate change and growth.

Resource after resource is available to support the power of asking questions. When in front of clients, or in learning opportunities, we routinely hear a rote response to the question “How do we engage better?”: “Ask open-ended questions.” But when you listen in at the front line, the meeting rooms, or wherever work is being done, it is rare to hear powerful open-ended questions being asked. The gap between knowing what we need to do and what we actually do is significant. Purposeful presence requires intentional focus and practice. A simple yet powerful question we can

ask ourselves is how much time we spend intentionally focused on exactly this: asking powerful questions. *“The quality of an answer is determined by the quality of the question”* (Mateo Askapour, source unknown).

### 3. Practicing Intentional Listening To Spur Rich Dialogue With Two-Way Feedback

Like asking powerful questions, listening is also a skill set we spend little time practicing or being intentional about. It seems simple, but a lot gets in the way of listening. For one, we often react to the speaker’s words by connecting to our own experiences (“autobiographical listening”) instead of allowing the speaker to complete his/her thoughts. In fact, intentional listening is actually more than just listening. It’s a collaborative conversation where dialogue, questions, and, especially, feedback flow organically.

In leadership, feedback is one of the critical tasks necessary for organizational success, yet few individuals in leadership

roles have had formal training or coaching in feedback delivery. Honing an intentional listening practice is what ensures that this feedback-rich dialogue remain rich, with information, perspectives, and ideas flowing both ways, rather than succumbing to the leader’s view of the dialogue.

Our *expectations create our reality*. Our current perceptions of feedback are informed by our past experiences.

▶ *Creating and being engaged in these rich, organic conversations require intentional listening, the suspension of bias, and the willingness to trust that it is not only the leaders’ expectations that will drive the future success of the organization but also our willingness to engage and involve our entire workforce.*





### Purposeful Presence Return on Investment (ROI)

When leaders are invested in purposeful presence, the practice of asking powerful questions intended to evoke thought, reflection, and growth grows beyond the front line, supporting the organization. When powerful questions are paired with intentional listening, the leader begins to hear both what is and is not being said. He/she taps into the deeper and more complex messaging that arises and opens the greatest pathways for alignment, innovation, adaptation, and future excellence.

Practicing purposeful presence and prioritizing these short, front-line-focused engagements brings positive impact and ROI to the organization in various ways.

- **Develop leadership skills.** Leaders who focus on their purposeful presence, embrace feedback-informed learning, and are willing to challenge their own assumptions and biases will go through a journey of self-discovery and self-reflection and be in service to others. The ultimate result is the ability to hold others capable and co-create future possibilities that otherwise may not have been conceptualized or visualized. Developing the skill sets necessary for engagement, collaboration, solution-based questioning and listening will benefit leaders, their teams, and the organization, prompting positive change.

- **Retain top talent.** Top talent has the option to go anywhere they want. Engagement surveys continually speak to the growing number of employees who are disengaged. Gallup's 2023 engagement survey indicated a

further 2% decline in engagement rates, compared to its 2020 results. Workers desire multiple elements, including competitive compensation, concern for well-being, and work-life balance; however, this list also includes career growth opportunities, having meaningful work and impact, transparent communication, and a positive work culture. A leader's purposeful presence supports the open and transparent communication necessary for a positive, inclusive work culture and engages the workforce as part of a supportive and collaborative team.

- **Build a learning culture.** To establish and maintain competitive advantage, the only sustainable action is the organization's ability to learn faster than the competition. The "learning organization" is a concept first described by Peter Senge as an organization where people continuously learn and enhance their capabilities to create and problem-solve, enabling continual improvement. Through purposeful presence, leaders set the tone and pave the way for a learning culture to flourish.

▶ *In a virtuous circle, the leaders' own willingness to learn and grow makes them receptive to and appreciate upward feedback, which in turn encourages and supports more feedback, flowing both ways. This is how an organization learns and sustains continuous learning as part of its culture.*



- **Drive organizational change.** Finally, leaders' purposeful presence drives organizational change in two ways: by empowering individuals to share their knowledge and feedback upward and by encouraging them to become vested in the organization's success. When leaders actively engage in collaboration and communication, trust is built. Through trust, and within a culture of learning and continuous improvement, individuals within the organization are more willing to not only offer ideas but also be part of the solution.

**Being a purposefully present leader is a path without an end. It is not for those who are fearful of growth.**

Purposeful presence is for leaders who are committed to making a difference—to being cultural catalysts who create focused, positive change in the organizational culture. It is a feedback-rich experience based on trust and rapport. The key role of this present leadership is holding the workforce capable while allowing them to feel

seen, heard, and understood. Intentional engagement empowers others to act and is active itself. It is the ability, not just the willingness, to ask powerful questions, listen intentionally, and allow a rich, generative feedback dialogue to develop.

It all starts when leaders are purposefully present at the place where work happens. Leaders are responsible for creating and shifting organizational culture, demonstrating what is expected and tolerated within an organization. They must be willing to learn and grow as a leader and to be open to feedback. The most effective leaders are receptive and appreciative of upward feedback, and a feedback-rich culture is led by leaders with a growth mindset.

**What is the impossible future you envision for your organization?** Make it possible by teaching and cultivating purposeful presence among your leaders. See how it engages your workforce, catalyzes your culture, and enables you to bring vision to life.

Connect with Us

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