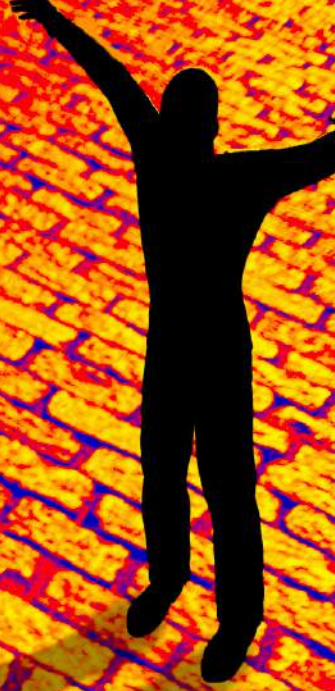


WHITE PAPER

# LEADING WITH PRESENCE

PRESENT LEADERS ARE THE ONLY  
ONES WE FOLLOW WHOLEHEARTEDLY





# Introduction

Roffey Park has been working with organisations and their leaders since 1946 to help them harness their full potential, improve organisational performance and at the same time make working life more fulfilling. Today, more than ever, we believe that organisations need leaders with a multi-faceted approach, that combine “traditional” leadership with approaches that more fully embody the culture and behaviours that they ask of others.

Now in its 17th year, our yearly Management Agenda research reports the views of over 1,700 managers working in organisations from a wide range of sectors. In summary, this year 90% of HR managers identified leadership development as the key means to support business performance and innovation. The research also reaffirms the importance of leaders changing and embodying culture - organisations continue to require leaders who can affect the bottom line through greater people engagement.

Given these points, this white paper aims to outline aspects of a more integrated approach that can develop leaders more capable of responding to today’s pressures. In essence this integrated development approach centres on a single idea or quality – presence.



## Is a 'different' leadership approach needed?

Here are two sides of a well known challenge for those in charge of developing leaders today.

Firstly, organisations expect leaders to have a long list of qualities: clarity of thought, excellent decision making, depth and authenticity, resilience, passion, adaptability in the face of complexity and ambiguity.

The list goes on yet the availability of these super-humans is, perhaps unsurprisingly, limited. Furthermore we see the present ways of building leadership capability in existing recruits often not attaining these levels.

Our research highlights leadership development as the number one focus for organisations in meeting their challenges and billions of pounds are spent on it every year in the UK alone. Yet organisations continue to report that they do not have the breadth and depth of leadership capability that their complex, competitive business environments require. Whilst two-thirds of managers rate leadership skills of their line manager as 'good' or 'very good', one in ten managers report leadership skills of their line manager are 'bad' or 'very bad' and only the minority of leaders get the balance right in building both high support and high challenge organisations. 53 percent of managers are considering a move in the near future with poor management top of the list of reasons for leaving.

When we begin work with a new client we often hear that their previous efforts to develop their leaders just haven't created the desired shifts in behaviour or awareness. Methods may have moved away from traditional training to workplace

application, and creative approaches to delve deeper into leaders' capabilities and motivations, but still the shifts aren't sufficient. We do not wish to trivialise or over simplify a complex and multifaceted issue, or to dismiss the many rigorous attempts to develop leaders as there are many exceptions. Indeed it is from the source of some of those exceptions that we build on here. However, we do see a gap between what organisations want from their leaders and the degree to which this need is being met by the majority of the present approaches to development. In this developmental spinning of wheels we see an opportunity to offer something different. For us that 'something' is to better understand what holds people back from leading with more of their authentic power and presence, particularly when under extreme pressure as leaders often are – we will return to the issue of pressure. Once equipped with this understanding, different means to unlock potential become available.

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## What do we mean by leading with presence?

While there are many definitions and perspectives on presence, we want to explore three topics: power, congruence and resilience.

People can find it hard to admit they need and have power, but we see it as crucial. For many, a way to begin to relate to power more positively can be to become more comfortable with one's own sources of power. Being able to use your power with rather than the all too common form of dominance or power over, may be a further stepping stone in a more collaborative direction. While influence rather than power is undoubtedly a more important outcome for any leader who has ambition to achieve something beyond their own self-interest, power is undeniably an important means to reach it. And here we see a close link to presence.

Among many definitions and categorisations of power (Handy, 1999) personal power often sits somewhere in the list. But what does this mean? Is it those elusive qualities of charisma and gravitas? Perhaps yes, although the assumption with these terms is often that they are born, not learnt, traits – a leader either has them or she does not. We see this differently.

In our experience of developing leaders across many sectors and professions, the meekest, most self-effacing even under-confident leader can dramatically increase his personal presence and, as a result, his influence. We are talking here about something that is on the face of it simple and widely recognised: we need leaders to speak congruently from their heart and their gut as much as from their head.

Whenever any of us make that crucial judgement: “do I want to follow this leader?”, intuitively we usually pick up when a leader is too much in their heads – we aren’t engaged, fired up or convinced. But the result of this lack of alignment and congruence is still surprisingly leading, just not in a helpful way. We experience leaders like this as not entirely present, not fully in the room. And before we know it we find ourselves being led into our heads and away from an embodied, energetic, heartfelt and wise way of being in our lives and our work. Through doing so, we cut ourselves off from the potency and wisdom that can make humans and humanity inspiring and smart. Our experience shows us that this alignment – or congruence – is a deep source of the power we refer to above.

To give an example, Patsy Rodenburg in her book ‘Presence’ talks about circles of energy and where our attention is at in any given moment.

We are born in a second circle, which is where we are connected and paying full attention to ourselves and the other (people or environment). It’s not something we have to develop or learn, it is our natural state that we can return to. When we are present in the moment, then we have presence, this is why actors say never work with children or animals. Not because of the unpredictability, but because their ability to be present can show up even a star. But of course after we’re born, life happens! Over time our experience builds up, and with it all sorts of potential internal logics for spending some, most or even all of our time in a different circle. Because of this, returning to the second circle requires time and effort to relearn what we once found natural but there are some very powerful ways for doing so, which we will come to shortly.

So these two connected elements of power and congruence are at the heart of what we define as presence: the power of our whole being as present and engaged with those around us, achieved by having our intellectual, emotional and embodied faculties integrated and congruent. When leaders have these things in sync, we see leaders creating powerful visions and making good decisions that allow them to move themselves and their followers towards them with energy and conviction.

But there is a third element that we see to presence which is just as important in the pressure of today’s work place: resilience. In our experience, being fully present makes a huge difference to our ability to remain healthy and strong in mind and body whilst leading. But equally, in a virtuous circle, resilience allows us to continue to remain present. Our experience is that by being fully present in ourselves, we get in touch with more of our vital energy and with the deep wisdom in ourselves that helps us to make the tough decisions that are both good for our businesses but also good for sustaining ourselves.

While you may relate to the perspective offered above and even feel they are quite obvious, the journey to strengthening and aligning the different facets of our being so that we are more present requires a considerable effort of development. First though, we want to offer a further analysis of why and how a deepened presence can be the best antidote for the challenges leaders face today.

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# How does this help with the challenges faced by leaders and organisations?

The leadership challenges that presence can address are part age-old and part new. One underlying challenge that seems universal today can be summed up in one word – pressure. In many of the programmes we run today, a story we hear frequently is of the pressure leaders feel and the debilitating effects of it.

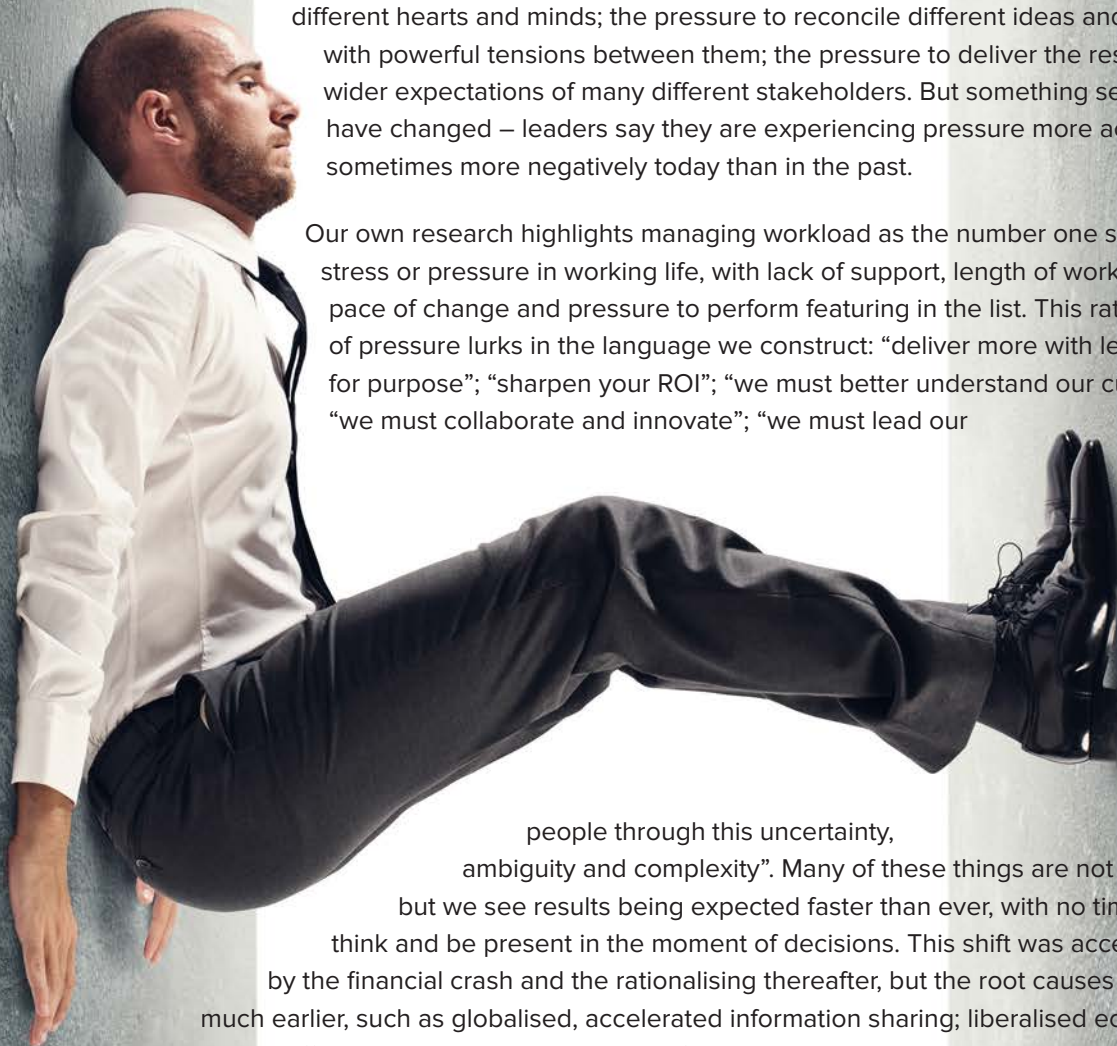
By definition, leaders inevitably experience pressure: the pressure to convey and create an inspiring vision to different hearts and minds; the pressure to reconcile different ideas and priorities with powerful tensions between them; the pressure to deliver the results and wider expectations of many different stakeholders. But something seems to have changed – leaders say they are experiencing pressure more acutely and sometimes more negatively today than in the past.

Our own research highlights managing workload as the number one source of stress or pressure in working life, with lack of support, length of working day, pace of change and pressure to perform featuring in the list. This ratcheting up of pressure lurks in the language we construct: “deliver more with less”; “get fit for purpose”; “sharpen your ROI”; “we must better understand our customers”; “we must collaborate and innovate”; “we must lead our

people through this uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity”. Many of these things are not new but we see results being expected faster than ever, with no time to stop, think and be present in the moment of decisions. This shift was accentuated by the financial crash and the rationalising thereafter, but the root causes began much earlier, such as globalised, accelerated information sharing; liberalised economies; generational differences; and resource scarcity from water to precious minerals and metals.

So what does pressure do to leaders and how can greater presence allow more powerful, productive and thoughtful leadership and action to emerge? To the first question, as you may know, different people perceive and respond to pressure differently. For some, moderate pressure will trigger an intense stress response (we’ll come back to this); others are galvanised by and relish extreme pressure, today’s high performing sportswomen and men being one example.

Whatever your physiological response may be, we see many leaders who want to respond more effectively to the pressures they face, and spend more time in a feeling of flow, acting more consistently out of an authentic



expression of themselves. But our physical and mental habits – the scripts we build up that tend to move us out of Rodenburg’s second circle – need to be understood and worked with differently if leaders are to operate like this more consistently, particularly when the pressure starts to ramp up.

One of the most precious assets of all that we can lose under pressure is the focus of our attention. Goleman (2013) has built upon his pioneering work in emotional intelligence to speak directly to this issue, linking it to recent findings of neuroscience and mindfulness practice. Goleman suggests that leaders need to be more proactive in managing their attention across three domains – self, other and organisation. In contrast, leaders who regularly allow themselves to be bombarded by the physiological stress response for prolonged periods will lose perspective, misunderstand or entirely ignore important data and become exhausted. This exhausted state is partly caused and perpetuated by relying too much on too few parts of the brain for things they are not necessarily well suited to, as Daniel Kahneman illustrates in his book *Thinking fast, Thinking slow*. Furthermore, in this state leaders are barely noticing the rest of their bodies at all, when in fact they offer an enormous resource in the task of leadership.

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## When leaders become more present in themselves we see them making big gains in several areas that help them cope better with a whole host of challenges

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So to the second question – how can being more present help leaders to respond more effectively under pressure? In several ways, we believe. When leaders become more present in themselves we see them making big gains in several areas that help them cope better with a whole host of challenges:

- **Clarity** of thinking and the ability to perceive more of what is occurring with more accuracy
- More **courage**, conviction and sensitivity in handling difficult conversations and conflict
- More **focus** to attend to the highest priorities productively
- More **energy** to remain strong and firm on difficult issues whilst also staying open to different possibilities
- More **passion and conviction** in conveying vision
- As well as all of the above, more **calmness** in leading change

We could explore the source and nature of the challenge of pressure at greater length, and of course there are many other challenges we could point to as being central to the life of today’s leaders too. It hardly matters though, because the ways in which we see this challenge play out for leaders and the ways we know presence can help them respond apply to pretty much any challenge you choose.

# How can you develop leaders with presence?

Having made a case for a different approach, let's look at what this approach actually is. By definition, the building of greater presence cannot simply be a head job.

In the book *Switch* (2012) Chip and Dan Heath develop the metaphor of the Elephant and the Rider, the former being the power and intuition of our emotional being, the latter being the clarity and rationality of our thinking mind. We need both to lead well and they need each other to be at their best. The Rider has great ideas and reasoning, but she needs the power of the Elephant to make it happen. The Elephant has strong instincts and powerful reserves of energy, but their reasons for action may not immediately appear to support what the Rider wants. The analogy applies at many levels, from organisational change, to personal change to leadership, and it connects closely with presence. In this context it is a simple way to explain why and how we work with leaders to develop their presence. Essentially, if the Elephant and the Rider are to be engaged and united in a new direction, work to build presence has two ways in, both of which are needed. We will look at each in turn.

## PHYSICAL PRACTICES

Our patterns of thinking and action are held as much in our bodies as in our minds. This is a core assumption in any somatic or embodied approach to personal development and we see this approach as integral to building more presence. So, for example, when a leader feels attacked in their role, there will be a noticeable physical as well as emotional and psychological response (although some of us have found ways to mask this to some extent). There are different responses, for example: pulling our head back and up and disengaging; contracting into ourselves and literally shrinking in height, breadth and depth; leaning in to do battle. The danger in all of these reactions is that we lose touch with our centre and therefore our strongest presence.

Another key assumption in somatic work is that our centre is where we are at our most resourceful and present – when we feel alignment in our core we are most in touch with our different capacities of mind and body and therefore most able to stay open to possibilities and choose an effective response in the moment. Many practices can be developed to help leaders notice immediately when they lose touch with centre and then find it again in a matter of seconds.

This type of practice is essential in various leadership situations:

- Staying open to different possibilities when our own view is challenged;
- Remaining confident and clear in voicing our own view;
- Handling conflict situations in a way that honours different views and needs;
- Making difficult decisions under pressure.

There are several other physical practices beyond centring but it all begins here. One way that we have found which is incredibly powerful in helping us gain insight into how leaders are (or are not)





present is working with horses in a method known as equine assisted learning. Horses are not only fully present and aware (it's a survival mechanism honed over many thousands of years), they are also tuned into the mental and emotional states of those around them, and they are constantly in a 'dialogue' about "who's in charge here, me or you?" Again an essential survival tool. The subtle and immediate feedback you get is very powerful and often experienced at quite a deep level.

## MENTAL PRACTICES

As well as the physical practices, we need to attend to our mental processes. Busyness and stress, as we have touched on, can wreak havoc with our ability to remain calm, focused, attentive and decisive. There are a few different ways to attend here:

- Understand our default mental patterns under pressure and in response to particular situations, in order that we can notice them quickly when they are triggered and get better at anticipating this with foresight;
- Learn more productive 'scripts' for how we choose to interpret events and situations so that we can remain more open minded to possibilities and make better decisions;
- Develop mindfulness practices, that still our rational, highly (over?) active minds so that we can stop and notice our emotions, our bodies and the wider situation in terms of other people and external data;

As with the physical practices, there are several other tracks to the mental element of developing presence, but these are where we start.

### PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE YOUR PRESENCE

#### At the end of a busy day, take a few moments to stop and reflect:

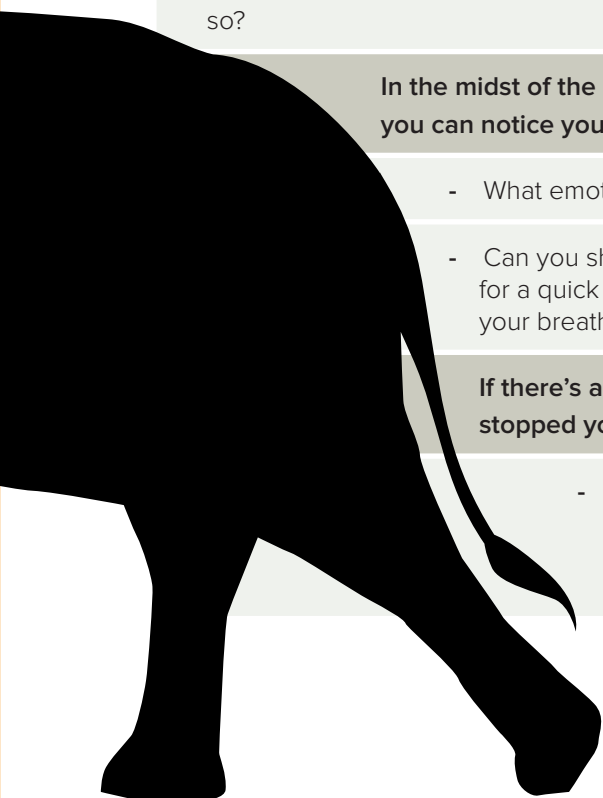
- Were there 'trigger points' in your day when you suspect you became hooked into a habitual mental response, within which you were then less resourceful than you would have liked to be? Do you know how you got there?
- In which moments and situations were you clear and focused under pressure? What allowed you to be so?

#### In the midst of the day, when a moment of challenge lands with you, see how quickly you can notice your emotional, mental and physical response to it:

- What emotions arise in you in that moment? Can you name them to yourself?
- Can you shift your body so that you can feel differently about the situation? Go for a quick walk round the office floor; stand up; or, more inconspicuously, notice your breathing and see if you can deepen and slow it a little;

#### If there's a physical activity you've always wondered about trying out, what's stopped you?

- It could be a martial art, a sport, an exercise routine or a holistic, ancient practice such as yoga. Any one of these can create real benefits to how you are during the working day in terms of keeping you mentally sharp but also more present in your body.



# INTERESTED IN FINDING OUT MORE?

Having read this paper, some things may have resonated with you and we hope that you'll take some time to try the tips outlined here as a way of improving your own leadership practice.

We will be exploring the techniques outlined here in more depth during our Leading with Presence programme. To find out more visit [www.roffeypark.com/lwp](http://www.roffeypark.com/lwp).

And finally, we would welcome your thoughts and ideas on how you improve your own leadership skills.



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# About Roffey Park

Roffey Park is an internationally renowned leadership institute based in the UK and Singapore. We develop people who develop organisations.

With 65 years' experience of leadership, organisational development, human resources and coaching, we provide executive education and research to many of the world's leading companies and organisations.

We offer tailored leadership development programmes, management consultancy and coaching, training courses and research services. Our qualifications are accredited by the University of Sussex.

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