

The Power of Pause

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In this fast-paced world, many people want to develop a better understanding of the ability to pause in order to learn how we can build this competency. Some of the words we often hear support the need for pausing in our lives:

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

A senior executive worn out at the pace of his day wanted to have more room to actually connect to his work rather than just quickly cross off items on his lengthy 'To Do List'. He moved from task to task barely recognizing that one had ended and another had begun in the whirlwind of his day. He did not know how to slow down. He produced results 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. 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.

The dictionary provides some helpful insight into the cultural challenges associated with the word 'pause' as it includes words in its definition such as: to delay, wait, hesitate, doubt or be uncertain. These are not necessarily words that our culture reveres and pausing can be viewed as something that delays action or forward movement or success. Pausing can be interpreted as a lack of decisiveness or a sense of being unsure. Coaches need to take into consideration both what frightens people about slowing down as well as how our culture holds this construct. Together these two forces create resistance in the ability to value and build this competency as an individual or as a society.

The first practice for this senior executive 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 started to build his ability to pause. Through this, he felt more complete at the end of the day and 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 coaching work, a very critical product is the client's ability to 'self-correct', that is, to know when they are behaving in a way that is not consistent with their intentions and to bring themselves back to a way of being that is more in alignment with what matters to them. The ability to self-correct first requires the ability to pause ... to actually observe what is occurring in this moment ... to discern what is required, not based on what we planned, but on what is actually going on.

Our actions without pausing, observing, and reflecting are primarily driven out of reflex or 'doing what we have always done'. These actions stem from what we have always done in the past and our related interpretations, ways of being, and reflexes. Coaching programs tend to focus on new ways of being, new competencies, how we hope to be with others and ourselves in the future. However, the past can exert 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.

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 something to support these future intentions. 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 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.

Cultivating the 'Pause Competency' supports our ability to observe, self-correct and check to see that our actions are supporting our intentions. There are four components associated with building or strengthening this competency as detailed below. The related observed behaviours that most strongly 'show up' tend to be those that most need to be addressed initially. Focusing on the elements in the chart below will enable focus on specific pause components and help design ways to build this competency.

BUILDING THE PAUSE COMPETENCY

Components of Pause Competency	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 in specific situations or locations • getting to know 50%, 25%, 150% of regular speed versus just one speed • what pace is really 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 • 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 alone

There are many practices that can support making shifts in these four components and practices can touch more than one item 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 to go get your coffee (pace, connectedness)
- Acknowledging accomplishments (openness, connectedness)
- Completion practice already cited (connectedness, pace, openness)

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.