

Practice Presence

Press the Pause Button for Better Outcomes



Philanthropy's
Reflective Practices:
a project to help you
build what you bring
to your work

Think of presence at work as a method to process your own internal reactions and signals before you jump to help (or inadvertently hurt) others.

Not unlike that counterintuitive flight instruction to put your oxygen mask on before helping someone else, practicing presence suggests that you will get to better outcomes by processing your own internal reactions and signals before you jump into stressful situations with teammates, colleagues or partners. William Kahn, Boston University organizational theorist, writes about presence at work as a time when “one’s thoughts, feelings and beliefs are accessible within the context of role performance.” Everyone we interviewed talked about such moments of presence as key to facing challenges as well as learning to shift strategies.

Practicing presence can boost your job satisfaction and performance because it helps you connect with others in a more meaningful way. Through that connection, you are more likely to take risks, to contribute ideas and to make the effort to move things forward—all increasing the likelihood of better outcomes.

 ***Presence creates conditions of trust and safety that allow difficult conversations to be engaged and worked through such that individuals learn and grow and their systems become ‘unstuck.’” —William Kahn***

While we aspire to be fully present in the work, and recognize the cost of not doing so, we still can find ourselves resisting the shift in behavior it requires. Why? Practitioners talk about feeling pressure to be perfect in delivery and performance. That can lead to covering over one’s vulnerabilities, whether it’s about reactivity and hot buttons, skill deficits, or just plain confusion about what is going on in the moment of a conversation. By not being present with one’s imperfections and discomforts, learning is limited for the individual and often for the group.

There is no one way to practice presence. When we interviewed Janis Reischmann, executive director at the Hau’oli Mau Loa Foundation, about how she approaches her own practice, she summarized her view this way: “It’s not magic. It’s intentionality.” With that in mind, we next highlight three ways to be more intentional in the way you practice presence: Manage Your Pinches, Lean Into a Consultative Stance, and Learn a Contemplative Practice.

Learn From Your Pinches

Learning to be present and manage the feelings that come with challenging moments and experience them as data to learn from—rather than fighting or fleeing—can help us stay open to new information that feels threatening in the moment. **Staying in an open, flexible state of mind when we are experiencing what feels like criticism or divergent views enables us to remain in a place of possibility.** We can even, over time and practice, reflect and adjust actions in real time. By learning how to do that, we remain part of the solution. This connects to both ancient wisdom and recent action research about preparing the body to be present.

The Learning as Leadership team suggests that we start by paying attention to the actual physical reaction or “pinch” in those moments. We all have body signals. Is it a flushed face? How about faster breathing? Do you catch yourself revving up to go on the offensive? Do you feel numb and shut down? These signs are “gifts” from your body to your mind that it is time to listen deeply before saying anything more. In our lunch table case, it might give you an opportunity to ask whether you are unconsciously reading a threat to your self-worth in the situation. Noah Nuer writes that of course **others can’t really pinch us. We pinch ourselves through learned and personal experiences.** Staying present to the unique sensitivities that cause reactions in us is valuable if we want to stay present, respond productively and learn from others. If we change our response, we change our reality.

June Wilson, executive director emeritus of the Quixote Foundation, brought her years as a dancer and choreographer to practicing presence, including paying attention to her own physical signs of discomfort. If something is too hard to process and is distracting her from being fully present, she advocates “taking a moment to pause” in the conversation, which stops her from “immediately jumping to reaction or interpretation.” To aid deeper conversations about racial equity inside her organization, she brought in consultants to help staff learn to pay attention to their physical reactions even though it was uncomfortable at times.

““ After all, many of us were uncomfortable navigating a conversation on race, so being uncomfortable exploring concepts physically, emotionally and experientially was not all that surprising. It helped us see things differently, work differently, approach our grantees differently, and engage with each other differently.” —June Wilson

Lean Into a Consultative Stance

How do you describe what you do differently when you are fully present? Dr. Kathleen Pogue White, an organizational consultant and executive coach, invites practitioners at the Annie E. Casey Fellows program to distinguish between taking up a helping or “consultative stance” and occupying a “reactive stance.” **In the consultative stance, you are helping yourself and others advance thinking or action. In a reactive stance, you are protecting or holding your own agenda but not learning or building on what is going on around you.** Good consultation requires staying curious, asking questions, and looking for opportunities to join with the other person even though you may have different points of view.

As we interviewed philanthropy practitioners about their reflection methods, we heard many examples of how they shifted from a default reactive stance to a consultative one.

For Janis Reischmann, consultative stances have helped her be more intentional about managing the power dynamics of philanthropy. When there is a difficult or contentious gathering, Janis takes time to repeat what she thinks she heard at the end of the meeting. “There is a lot going on in the room,” she says, “all that ‘below-the-waterline’ stuff. There’s a chance people will say, ‘What? That’s not what’s going on at all!’ But it’s worse if they just leave feeling less understood.” She has observed that her personal style of interaction—enthusiastic and engaged—can be a liability in certain situations where power and authority can shape a conversation in ways the other person didn’t intend. Janis uses a personal prompt to make space during the conversation. “I put my fingers over my mouth, in a ‘hmm’ pose. It’s a quieting technique, a mental and physical reminder to give someone room and listen more carefully.”

Nick Deychakiwsky of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation has developed his own prompt for staying in a consultative stance: tracking a conversation’s “time of possession,” the measure in football for how long each team has the ball. **“I ask myself, ‘How much time did I spend talking?’” he says. “The higher my time of possession, the less I’m going to learn and be successful at an essential part of my real job of staying curious and being a learner.** I try to keep an open mind: willing to listen, considering various points of view, understanding context and where people are coming from. I’m aware of my imperfections doing it. I catch myself formulating answers instead of listening ... oops, don’t do that. I try to examine my own behavior in conversations. Where am I doing things that might be an irritant to others? What do I do when I talk more than I should because I am nervous about a situation with a grantee?”

Andrew Merz, a trustee of the Padosi Foundation and former director of contemplative programs at the Hemera Foundation, tells us about adapting a consultative stance he learned from his training as an interfaith hospital chaplain. “Contrary to the images that might come to mind—solemn priests giving last rites or quoting scripture at the bedside, for instance—at its core chaplaincy is a relational practice of presence and reflection.” At first, Andrew wasn’t sure

how this would work as a program officer. Would it make him seem too interested or too soft? Then the “aha” moment arrived. In a phone meeting with a new grantee, he heard tension in the grantee’s voice and asked if it was “indicating that there was something important that he wasn’t allowing himself to say.” The new grantee acknowledged not wanting to alienate Andrew by asking for the money he really needed to get the job done. On his end, Andrew acknowledged feeling tension because he didn’t know whether the foundation could respond to the request.

“Being present to everything in the field of experience means taking the risk of naming the elephant in the room or asking the uncomfortable question—turning towards, not away,”

he says. “What struck me about the interaction was how our nascent relationship instantly changed. The relief was palpable, as if we’d opened a window and let more oxygen into the room. We could *really* talk.”

Part of being fully present is knowing how and whether to explore the other person’s reaction to what you are saying or doing. “I’ve been in many experiences when I’m the only queer person in the room and I experience something that is deeply offensive,” says Darren Walker, the Ford Foundation president. “When people make blatantly homophobic, racist or sexist comments, it’s critical to respond and engage. You frontally take on what you heard ... I decided never to ascribe an evil intention, even though I know that some comments were evil-intended. I choose to take the high road in order to engage: *I’m sure I didn’t hear you right. I can’t imagine that what you said meant to be ...* Most often it gave the other person a chance to recalibrate what they said or did.”

Resist the Temptation to Be an Explainer

Me? Reactive? Here are a few messages that are likely to make others defensive:

- Outshine: *Let me fine-tune your thought.*
- Criticize: *Let me show you why I think your idea makes no sense/has failed/is incomplete/is off the mark and why I have a better idea.*
- Avoid: *Let’s find the bright side and not go to the conflict.*


If you’d like to restore collaborative communication, find your consultative stance:

- Appreciate and explore the differences: *I like your reframe. Let’s see where the differences in our thinking might be.*
- Partner and go for a stretch: *I’m sure that you have already thought of this, but ...*
- Appreciate and connect to a “teaching point”: *I like your thinking. I think my ideas connect to yours in this way ...*

Learn a Contemplative Practice

For our purposes, a contemplative practice is a routine that creates time for reflection with an intention to grow the mind's perspective on what is happening around it. There are myriad practices—some involve sitting and paying attention to the breath; others are more active, including walking in silence, tai chi, yoga and other physical endeavors. In all these practices, you are using the body to teach the “inevitably wandering mind” to come home to the present moment. Practitioners report that contemplation creates greater self-awareness by helping them observe and detach from their thoughts to create space for greater compassion and connections to others and the world around them.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, scientist, writer and meditation teacher, describes contemplative practice as “paying attention, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally.” Paying attention could include noticing one's breath, emotions and thoughts (and pinches). Kara Laverde, deputy director of People and Organizational Potential at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, reflected on the importance of this practice for philanthropy.

 ***The nonjudgmental aspect of presence is an interesting area to explore for philanthropy practitioners. When and how do you let go of your agenda and goals to truly listen and partner?***
—Kara Laverde

Courtney Bourns found the core training of mindfulness very helpful in her role as senior program officer at Henry P. Kendall Foundation. “I find teachings about contemplative practice a helpful metaphor for the most important aspect of my work in philanthropy: it's about allowing things to happen, letting things go but not abnegating all authority. **It's helped me pay attention to the questions of Where can I let go more? and Where do I need to lean into the tension more?** Your role is to facilitate and support other people acting in a certain direction. The trick is to realize that is your role and it is not to take over and have the direct action.”

Some foundations have created space to support contemplative practices. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has a “reflection room” and a weekly meditation drop-in session in its Seattle and London offices that started as a pilot by staff interested in contemplative practices. They brought in a consultant to lead a mindfulness program, which has now been running for several years. A staff member in the evaluation unit offered to measure impact of the program: participants reported a 61 percent increase in ability to focus and give full attention to the task at hand, a 69 percent increase in being proactive (rather than reactive), and an 85 percent increase in perception of time to think, innovate, work and plan.

Janna Bilski works in investments at the Ford Foundation and is also a meditation teacher. She guides two weekly half-hour classes for anyone at the Foundation who is interested. She has also started organizing all-staff events focused on highlighting the power of reflective practices with teachers such as Sharon Salzberg and George Mumford to speak about their work. Amy Brown, senior program officer at the Foundation, says, "I do feel like our weekly sessions have strengthened my own ability to advance social justice without getting overwhelmed or disheartened.

“ Janna often describes meditation as a way to cultivate an inner peace that will allow us to more productively engage the storm that is the world around us. I have found that framework useful.”

—Amy Brown

Gihan Perera, a program officer in civic engagement and government, adds, "I want freedom. I pursued it with a vengeance, a striving for justice that was full of all the justified anger, rage and roar of youth against oppression. I found over years and from elders that liberation begins from the inside, and that political consciousness is only true when free of my own personal bias and free of the reactions and illusions of identity.

“ Contemplative practice helps me let go of the small stuff and see the bigger picture, the universal view. It helps me very practically get myself away from toxic conflict, see where I’m overreacting, and see opportunities in situations that I may otherwise see as bleak. I experience GRATITUDE, and find wisdom in daily life. I am finding peace in not thinking I have to figure it all out.” —Gihan Perera

The Nathan Cummings Foundation has a long history of integrating support for contemplative practices into its grantmaking and helping staff and board practice presence together. Taina McField and Isaac Luria, members of the program staff team, note, "If we want to see contemplative practice as a tool, it has to be integrated into the DNA of the organization. We are a new program team, establishing our culture and thinking about how we use these practices in new contexts."

As an example of using contemplative practices to focus their own meetings, they described a high-stakes conversation about a proposed new structure for collaboration across teams to improve impact in a field and to help them be responsive to the moment and to their partners. “As a new team, we risked entering into this conversation in an anxious mode where we experienced scarcity as the overarching paradigm plus a sense of urgency that would make it harder to get to the right decision for the moment.

“ Like many organizations we have deadlines, fears of performance, learned behaviors around approval-seeking from our colleagues, and varied ways of managing our anxiety around that. So, we started with a meditation around gratitude and abundance. It brought the temperature down and we could see the conversation as an opportunity and not just a set of deadlines or risky plans seeking leadership approval to move forward.

We could then turn more thoughtfully to getting the buy-in of the entire organization on our plan. We approached our challenge with more equanimity, advanced the ball and built a plan with trust.”

What's Your Practice for Presence?

Philanthropy practitioners share a few examples. Use this list to invite your colleagues to add more.

- Start each day with a few minutes of silence.
- Meditate for 10 minutes every day.
- Don't open emails in the morning.
- Use my commute for silent reflection.
- Carry a journal and write briefly when I have a reaction (positive or negative) during the day to ask myself what happened and how I felt at the time.
- Schedule regular time for reflection writing.
- Give myself five minutes of quiet time between meetings.
- Before every meeting our board explicitly acknowledges that our meeting is being held on Native lands. It is so simple, but feels so grounding and brings us into the present around principles and values.

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Why This Project?

In philanthropy, you have two big jobs.

Your **first job** is to build deep knowledge about the *what* of the work that you are supporting. You stay current with new knowledge, find networks for ongoing learning, and grow your expertise.

Your **second job** is to put that expertise into play—the *how* of the work:

- How do you nurture generative thinking amid complicated group dynamics and power differentials?
- How do you keep learning alive among colleagues and partners?
- How do you strategize with others when there is no right answer to guide you?
- How do you contribute to the work of diversity, equity and inclusion in your organization or in a field?

Philanthropy's Reflective Practices can help you build what you bring to your second job.

Our goal is to learn and share the tools and skills used by practitioners in philanthropy to improve how they work and get to better outcomes in challenging situations.

PRP Briefs can help you start talking about the “how” of philanthropic work with colleagues, board members and partners. Each brief includes relevant examples, useful frameworks and an exercise that you can use with your team or partner to build what you bring to the work.

Want to Learn More?

Read our recent guide, browse posts from philanthropy colleagues or download the other briefs at www.reflectivepractices.org. Sign up to receive new material as it comes online. Want to build reflective practices inside your organization? Contact Jan Jaffe, project leader for Philanthropy's Reflective Practices (jan@reflectivepractices.org).