

## Have You Given Your Presence?

by Margaret J. Marcuson

This time of year we often recognize staff and key volunteer leaders with gifts, as well as holiday gatherings. In these uncertain financial times some of these presents and activities may be curtailed. But there's one gift which costs you nothing except your time: the gift of your presence. Those you lead need you to be present with them. When things are more difficult, when a budget crisis threatens or interpersonal conflict looms, it can be tempting to withdraw. But at those times most of all, your presence is vital. Lean into the anxiety you may feel and show up.

What does "presence" do? The position at the top, while not the only one of importance, is unlike any other. The role of leader needs to be fully occupied. People feel calmer when they know the leader is filling the role. They don't expect you to have all the answers or to predict the future, but they need to know you are there. Dr. David Wheeler, the pastor of the church I belong to and an early mentor of mine years ago, is naturally good at this, connecting with both groups and individuals and giving them a sense of his leadership of the congregation. I learned this by watching him early on.

Here are some tips for enhancing your leadership presence:

1. Show up. Don't hide out, even when things are difficult. Make at least a brief (not a token) appearance at key meetings, parties and events. And while you are there, be there. Don't look at your watch or at the door.
2. Be yourself. Authentic presence means you show up as yourself. You don't pretend, or imitate what you think the people want or what your predecessor was. Be in your own skin when you show up. (This doesn't mean you wear whatever you want, however. Dress like a leader.)
3. Be open to them. When we are fully present, we are paying attention not only to ourselves, but to others. Listen without looking over the shoulder of the one who is talking to you. (This doesn't mean you have to let others use all your time. Be judicious.)
4. Be curious. What can you learn about the individuals you are leading, and about the group as a whole, when you make your rounds? A curious attitude enhances the presence of the leader, because people sense we are truly interested.

These tips will be used differently in different organizations, depending on size (some groups are too large to know everyone individually) and function (some groups are focused on interpersonal relationships; others are very task-oriented). Yet whatever your situation, find ways to show up, be yourself, be open and be curious.

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