

Essential Elements of Relational Presence®

Relational Presence is the state of experiencing connection with one's audience without agenda, or even a need for words, in any given moment. It is a foundation for powerful connected communication, where speaker and audience feel as if they are participating in a joint activity, rather than a disconnected experience of a speaker talking "at" an audience.

The relationally-present speaker seeks to non-verbally invite each audience member to join them in a sense of belonging or connection.

The state of Relational Presence can be accessed in a number of ways, but the simplest is through soft-focused eye contact (often referred to as Eye Gaze). Eye Gaze usually contains elements of awareness of seeing the other(s), being seen by the other(s) and of the fact that seeing and being seen are happening at the same time - the quality of being in relationship – "I", "thou" and "we."

An intrapersonal connection is constructed through sustained, relaxed eye contact with any audience member. The speaker seeks to make "real" eye contact with the audience member, seeing them as an individual; they look to create an active speaker-listener relationship characterized by heightened awareness of the connection. In this relationship, the speaker does their best to remain open, authentic and available and creates the quality of listening they desire, both in themselves and in the audience. When eye contact is not possible, Relational Presence can also be accessed and cultivated through other senses including particular ways of listening.

The experience of Facilitators and participants is that the degree to which an individual's expression will resonate with the listener is dependent on the extent to which the speaker is in Relational Presence with the audience.

The experience also drives psychological processes that can support many benefits. These include easing public speaking anxieties, finding comfort in natural silence, expressing with greater clarity, noticing a pre-existing natural connection with all listeners in a room, compelling rapt attention and developing natural storytelling abilities.

Research Basis of Relational Presence

Research suggests that the practice of Relational Presence, in holding the speaker in the present moment with their listener/s, may limit habitual and automatic self-critical or anxious mindsets, and create a "temporary state of non-judgmental, non-reactive, present centered attention and awareness."² This practice has been shown to promote a state of physical and mental well-being by removing the often negative and inaccurate internal reflections of oneself³ and modulate self-referencing neural networks, so that direct experiencing of the world is promoted over one's internal, possibly critical and negative, narrative.²

Present-moment centered practices, like Relational Presence are also associated with increased parasympathetic tone⁴ and thus lessened 'fight or flight' sympathetic nervous system responses and activity. Relational Presence may also foster entrainment – a synchronization of brain activity governing cognitive and emotional processes between speaker and listener.⁵ The soothing nature of this interaction and attunement may bring the speaker and listener into synchronous cortical activation and autonomic states that promote relaxation, a sense of well-being and promote understanding.⁶ This state has also been proposed to invoke neural circuitry and hormones, including oxytocin, that promote attachment and reduce stress.⁷

References

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