

Developing the Quality of **Restraint**

By Scott Weighart, Bates, Director of Learning and Development

Have you ever found yourself in the middle of a meeting feeling frustrated with a conversation that seemed to be going in circles? Or perhaps it was a one-on-one conversation where someone was sharing an idea after you've already made up your mind? Or maybe you're a person who wants to focus on the big picture and results while others seem to love getting way too deep into the weeds or debating process?

These are just a few situations that can trigger any number of responses, including shutting people down, tuning people out, or venting your emotions. High-energy, go-go, get-it-done people often find the pace of discussion and decision making is maddeningly slow. And in these situations, our frustration and impatience can be written all over our faces.

In our research on executive presence, we've found many leaders face this challenge. It's associated with one of 15 qualities of a leader we measure in the research-based model - Restraint. We define Restraint as "the ability to display a calm disposition, characterized by reasonableness and by avoidance of emotional extremes or impulsiveness."

Over the last year and a half, we've used the Bates Executive Presence Index (or Bates ExPI™) to assess the executive presence of over 1,000 leaders and quite a few leadership teams as well. I've analyzed hundreds of these assessments and been struck by how frequently Restraint is one of the lower-rated facets in the model.

Why would that be? One thought is that many leaders have risen in the ranks because they are driven, decisive individuals whose "action bias" has helped them get things done. As one HR business partner told me recently, many leaders think "it's all about working hard and being technically proficient. They think, 'If we just work the crank harder, we'll get ahead.'" That thinking is absolutely right—up to a point. However, the more senior you get, the very qualities that helped you advance can start working against you. An action bias can start to feel to others as impulsive or dominating, leaving little room for others to share their ideas or concerns. If you don't slow down, ask questions, and show that you can discuss hot topics with cool deliberation, then you're going to shut down dialogue. When you do, people may start to perceive that you're lacking in any number of qualities of Executive Presence, including Concern, Humility, Composure, Resonance, and Inclusiveness. Those qualities are all

important when you're trying to improve engagement, drive change, or get everyone aligned around an important goal.

So how can we develop the quality of Restraint if it's a quality that is not "showing up" strongly in the eyes of others? I'll share a few strategies in a moment, but they all have one thing in common: *We're looking to find ways to increase the time between the **stimulus** and the **response**.* Most leaders are quick thinkers—to the point where they often may be a step or two ahead of others. And quite a few leaders absolutely pride themselves on "telling it like it is" and "shooting from the hip." Those qualities definitely have their place, but the goal is to use that action bias deliberately rather than having it be the default reaction in all situations.

Here are five tips that can help:

1. **Understand your triggers**

We all have stuff that sets it off, and it can vary quite a bit from one leader to the next. For one person, it might be watching a dozen people attempt to copyedit a PowerPoint together. For another, it could be hearing a dumb idea. For still others, it might be when people mistakes or insist on doing the wrong thing the right way. I sometimes recommend writing down a "hierarchy of triggers," becoming more aware of what sets you off. Separate the mild triggers from the moderate ones and the major ones. Then come up with specific statements you can say when those events happen—planning ahead so you can respond constructively rather than shutting people down.

2. **Remember A-B-C-D: Ask, Breathe, Count, and Drink (or "Defer")**

Of course, we can't anticipate everything that might trigger us. So another option when we feel our temperature is to remember to take these four steps: A-B-C-D for Ask, Breathe, Count and Drink. So when someone says something that pushes your buttons, you should:

- Ask – Ask a question or two to buy yourself time rather than blurting out your opinion.
- Breathe – Take a few seconds to breathe—concentrate on noticing your breathing.
- Count – Count up to 5 or 10, allowing time to consider how to respond constructively
- Drink – No, not alcohol! Take a drink of water or tea to buy a little more time.

Alternatively, the D can stand for "Defer." In other words, consider buying time for yourself by deferring your response to later: If you're worked up by an email, don't respond to it before you have taken a walk or talked it through with a colleague. If someone pushes your buttons at a meeting, tell them that you'll get back to them later with your thoughts about it. All of these steps create much more time between stimulus and response, increasing your chances of responding with a ready-aim-shoot approach rather than shooting first.

3. Ask neutral, clarifying questions—not loaded questions

To build on the previous point, don't ask just any question. It needs to be a neutral, clarifying question that not only buys you time: It also will help you clarify what others are thinking, feeling, and planning to do. Recently I gave ExPI feedback to someone struggling with Restraint, and we realized that he does ask questions, but they tend to underscore why others' ideas won't work. Far better to ask questions about what informed the person's idea or what they're hoping it will accomplish, for example.

4. Strike when the iron is *cold*.

There's an old expression: "Strike when the iron is hot." With Restraint, you're better off doing the opposite. Sharing your thoughts when you're frustrated, angry, or irritated often backfires. An alternative is to buy yourself some time and defer offering your feedback. You might say, "Don, you've given me a few things to think about. I want to take some time to mull them over so I can be as helpful to you as possible. Can we schedule a follow-up conversation tomorrow at 10 to discuss this further?" This will give you time to cool off and think about how you can share your feelings or thoughts more deliberately.

5. Use a trusted advisor to give you feedback.

If you're lacking in Restraint, it's probably a quality that you learned early in life. As such, it may not be a "quick fix." As you work on improving it over time, consider enlisting the support of a trusted advisor who sees you in action regularly. This person may be able to help you understand whether your responses are appropriately calm, deliberate, and assertive without being aggressive. An advisor may even be able to signal you nonverbally "in the moment" to make you aware if you need to dial it down.

Experiment with ways to increase that time between the stimulus and response. By curbing your action bias and your default tendency of sharing what you think rather than waiting and listening, you'll create room for more and better dialogue with everyone you need to influence.