

## Facet: Intentionality

# Great Leadership Style: The Power of Intentionality

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What does it mean to be an intentional leader? Many people assume it is synonymous with being assertive or decisive. In fact, intentionality is different, though related. It is a directedness toward something. In leadership, intentionality is sustained focus on a goal or initiative, one that has purpose and meaning for the enterprise. People experience an intentional leader as deliberate. They have a plan. It is clear. Everybody understands it. We **know what we're doing and why.**

Data collected from tens of thousands of leaders through our assessment of executive presence shows that leaders could be a lot more intentional. The cost of this lack of intentionality is high for organizations. A lack of intentionality slows down strategic execution – time, money and talent are wasted. People get discouraged, lose momentum and often **stop working on a project altogether. When people aren't clear, things aren't getting done.**

In reviewing feedback on about a thousand leaders, we found intentionality is a gap and ranks **as one of the lower scored “style” elements of executive presence that are critical to driving execution.**

Where is There Room for Improvement?

Specifically, the data show that on average peers, direct reports and managers see room for improvement in three of the six measurements of intentionality.

- The lowest rated among them is whether after discussion, people are clear about next steps. Many people leave meetings unsure of what to do, how it should be done, or when.



- Leaders also get lower ratings in getting people aligned without sacrificing the constructive back and forth. People participating in their meetings feel constrained to discuss or debate.
- **There's also plenty of room for improvement in keeping meetings on track** without being heavy handed or authoritarian. Leaders sometimes grow impatient and cut off debate.

### What Prevents Us from Being More Intentional?

To understand what prevents leaders from being more intentional, we reviewed open ended comments on the surveys. While there are many reasons, a few themes emerged. One is how effective and sophisticated leaders are at meeting management. Many do not run great meetings and in many company cultures, poor meeting management practices are epidemic. It is critical for leaders to know how to create an agenda, set expectations, orchestrate a healthy discussion while keeping it moving, and not forget to finalize with agreement on next steps and who is responsible.

**Another reason why leaders don't show up as intentional** is because they simply feel pressed for time. They may know deep down that an issue is worthy of discussion but they are traveling, called into other meetings, or pulled away on special projects. They perceive these urgent demands as more important. They end up canceling or cutting short team or project meetings.

### Personal Habits that Can Hold Us Back

**We can undermine intentionality with our own bad habits. Sometimes we aren't taking time** to reflect, which means we are not clear ourselves about what needs to be done and why. **We need to carve out time to think and develop a viewpoint. That doesn't mean adopting the attitude that it is "my way or the highway."** Rather, it is cultivating an informed perspective. Our outlook should be informed with all types of data, including what we learn from the **team's input.**

A second habit that can hold us back is launching an initiative and expecting people to just **run with it without a healthy balance of "inspecting what you expect."** Ignoring milestones and markers **is fatal. You're going to get unhappy surprises. Ground intelligence is critical.** Remember to review data, and tune into emotions. Be attentive to how your team feels things are going and ask why.



A third bad habit is allowing your emotions to rule you **when things aren't getting done**. Anger and impatience discourage open dialogue and keep the group from discussing and getting back on track. You may be tempted to shut down discussion and tell people to just do it. Sometimes, this is necessary and it works. You should make the call when it is urgent or **not important to debate**. However, that isn't the only answer to leading with intentionality.

### **Intentionality is Not "Telling"**

**There's nothing autocratic about intentionality. It does not imply a ruthless adherence** to a plan. As a matter of fact, intentional leaders balance focus on a plan with flexibility to execute. You need to lead your team to roll with the unanticipated challenge as it comes **along**. So you need to know what's happening in real time and encourage people to work through it.

**How can you avoid the temptation to "tell"? Let people discuss. Be clear when they have the** decision, and when they are simply recommending. Empower them to make more decisions. Make more time in meetings for back and forth. Let people know if they should speak up. When they do, compliment them for doing so.

Deadlines, Ownership and Accountability

**Every meeting should close with deadlines, owners and accountability. There's nothing that** derails your intentions more than allowing people to drift out of a room because time is up and they are due elsewhere. Before the meeting closes, identify who does what and have people acknowledge it and agree. Not only does it make your life better – it gives the entire group confidence **that we have each other's backs. We're also excited to review progress** next time we meet.

**There's a pretty simple fix if you don't do this now. Leave time on the agenda at the end of** the meeting. Watch the clock, or have a time keeper. Ten minutes before you close, finalize agreements. When members of the team publicly declare they will take care of it, they are **inclined to follow through. You've made a verbal contract. Getting into this habit fosters a** culture of intentionality.

Avenues of Development: Intentionality



When we work with leaders and teams, and they take the ExPI Assessment, we offer them a **written guide to developing 15 qualities of presence including intentionality**. Here's a brief summary of avenues of development found in the *Bates ExPI Development Guide*:

- Clarify mission, goals, objectives and priorities: Create a clear picture of where **you're going and why, and give people reason to care**.
- Slow down to speed up: **Once you've identified these priorities, leave time for** discussion so people can raise questions, discuss sticking points and get clarity.
- Stay attuned to the ebbs and flows: Keep lines of communication open, learn about issues, pay attention to thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Alignment requires sustained effort.
- Become an excellent leader of meetings: You can have the best of intentions but agenda and process trump hopes and wishes every time.
- Cultivate a discipline of intentionality: Leadership is about mindfulness, and if **you're constantly in a rush and don't have time to think you cannot be intentional**. Find quiet time to get clarity yourself about projects and priorities and set your own intentions.

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