

Skills on and off the Meditation Cushion

by Lisa Hoffman

Would the situation spin out of control? It was a strategic planning retreat for a nonprofit with a big mission and a \$300,000 budget. One board member funded a third of the budget with a \$100,000 annual gift. He is, of course, the board's most opinionated member, and the others always hesitate to take him on.

My job was to guide the planning session, neutralize his impact, enable other board members to step up, and to do it all with the utmost tact. Landmines abounded.

By midday, I thought the retreat was going reasonably well, but wasn't completely sure. As board members began working in small groups, the executive director gestured me into the hallway and burst into tears.

Board retreats always involve an incredible range of action on many levels. Moving the session forward, and tracking group and individual dynamics, side conversations, and body language requires an odd combination of single-minded focus and a panoramic sweep of perception.

Not for the faint of heart, which is true of so many situations.

From complicated family visits to throwing a birthday party involving groups of friends who have never met, many life situations call for this combination of skills. Over the years, meditation has sharpened my ability to slip back and forth between a laser focus and a wide view. You need *and* develop these skills when you meditate.

One approach to meditation involves focusing on the breath while letting thoughts and feelings rise and pass. When you notice you are making your to-do list or planning your next novel, you simply come back to your breath. With this simple act, you are cultivating your ability to focus at will. You can rely on this strength when inundated with distractions -- whether they are internal, or the stack of work you've brought home, the ringing telephone, overdue bills, and the siren call of a Netflix DVD.

Another style of meditation is simply open awareness -- the Zen practice of Shikintaza. It is awareness of everything around you as you meditate -- the breathing of your neighbor, the whirl of the air conditioner, the rumble of a hungry belly, the sound of traffic outside. You are engaged in a rich symphony of experience, but not caught in any one element.

The skills of focusing at will and open awareness create a supple flexibility -- the ability to respond to the changing needs and demands of people and situations, including you. One moment you need to track a large group, the next moment you need to focus in on one member crying out for attention. And you are having your own thoughts and feelings at the same time.

The foundation of these skills is fundamental to meditation -- meeting the present moment exactly as it is. Noticing what that moment calls for and responding. I always find this experience satisfying -- even when the present moment is painful.

The executive director was weeping because this was the first time the board of directors had ever actively taken responsibility for the organization's future.

Needless to say, shifting my focus at that point was the easiest part of the retreat.

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