



PAUSE TO LEAD FORWARD

The Paradoxical Leadership Breakthrough

Kevin Cashman

The demanding pace for global leaders has never been more challenging.

Digitally connected every moment, we are increasingly tied to a 24-hour global clock. This is the “new normal.”

We are expected to perform continually in the face of global crises and multifaceted pressures, including downsizing, mergers and the accompanying stresses and expectations. The list of demands, personal and professional, never ends. Could it be that going faster and driving harder are not the answers? Could there be another way to sustain high performance? Could it be that the source of our real value as leaders might come from different thinking and different choices rather than from perpetuation of the incessant pace we strain to maintain?

Paying Attention to the Wisdom of Experience

I had the privilege of sharing precious time with a colleague who was terminally ill. Aware of the compressed time, we dove into authentic conversations. I asked, “What would you tell leaders?” He thought for a few moments and responded, “Never forget to slow down, connect with people, and do something meaningful. Never go so fast that you forget love and service make life worth living.” Slow down? Meaning? Love? Service? My colleague’s wisdom and clarity gave me pause.

How often do we miss small but significant moments—opportunities that can unlock our hearts and minds, open us and connect us more deeply with others and the possibility of creating something new and different? Too often, we get carried away by our busy-ness. We are too hyper-active, too reactive to notice hidden, value-creating dynamics waiting beneath the surface within us and around us. Tethered to our smartphones, we are too caught up and distracted to take the time necessary to focus our attention, sort through complexity or locate submerged purpose. In our urgent rush to get “there,” we are going everywhere but being nowhere. Far too busy managing with transactive speed, we rarely step back to lead with transformative significance.

Flipping the VUCA Forces

Borrowing from the Army War College, Bob Johansen, ten-year forecaster and author of *Leaders Make the Future*, has characterized the world we lead in today as a “VUCA world: Volatile; Unpredictable; Complex; Ambiguous.” Our addiction to speed and action, incessant busy-ness, perpetual distractions, and pursuit of the ubiquitous “more” in our 24/7 connected, globally caffeinated culture, conspire to diminish rather than strengthen our leadership capacities. We challenge ourselves to keep up, even hasten the grueling pace, and, frankly, we rationalize that it comes with the territory. Paradoxically, the job of leaders is to bring clarity to all this chaos. No easy task in the VUCA vortex.

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After hearing me talk about VUCA, my colleague John Pike sent me an excerpt from a book he was reading with a note saying, “VUCA! The job of the aircraft carrier hasn’t gotten any easier, and this describes well the way many executives feel.”

Well just imagine that it’s a busy day, and you shrink San Francisco Airport to only one short runway and one ramp and gate. Make planes take off and land at the same time, at half the present time interval, rock the runway from side to side, and require that everyone who leaves in the morning returns that same day. Make equipment so close to the edge of the envelope that it’s fragile. Then turn off the radar to avoid detection, impose strict control on radios, fuel the aircraft in place with their engines running, put an enemy in the air, and scatter live bombs and rockets around. Now wet the whole thing down with saltwater and oil, and man it with 20 year-olds, half of whom have never seen an airplane up close. Oh, and by the way, try not to kill anyone.

Even if we aren’t leaders on aircraft carriers or in other life or death situations, the volatility, unpredictability, complexity, and ambiguity in our lives feels real. Johansen contends that we have “to flip the VUCA forces to terms that create possibilities and redefine VUCA as: Vision; Understanding; Clarity; Agility.” We agree. But, how? Pause—a step back to lead forward—is a transformative, pragmatic, albeit paradoxical principle for sorting through complexity and coming into conscious connection with what is important.

Daniel Vasella, M.D., the innovative chairman of Novartis, the life sciences powerhouse, shared with me, “Pause gives room to oneself and to others. It allows the digestion of things both conceptual and emotional. Pause can be a way to sense-making by bringing together a more integrated, complete picture of what is happening in and around us.”

For most leaders, at first glance, pausing to elevate performance is incongruous with their leadership DNA, especially for the most productive, highest achievers. Over the past thirty years of coaching CEOs, senior teams, and senior leaders around the globe, I have lost track of the number of times a high-achieving leader turned to me and asked, “Kevin how can we step up to achieve more?” To their surprise and discomfort, I often recommend stepping back—pausing—but, because it is antithetical to what they have always done, they insist, “We don’t need to pause more, we need to do more.”

Why would pragmatic, hard-charging, achievement-driven leaders pause in order to accelerate performance and growth? Put simply, that is exactly what is needed to sort through complexity and drive performance to the next level. If leaders today do not step back to gain fresh perspective and to transcend the immediacies of life, we will continue to crash economically, personally, and collectively. Our downside survival and upside innovation depend on it. Certainly, we need to do more to meet the demands of high-performance, complex problems, and innovation, but in today’s world the doing needs to be new and different.

Pause Powers Performance

The Pause Principle is the conscious, intentional process of stepping back, within ourselves and outside of ourselves, to lead forward with greater authenticity, purpose, and contribution. This value-creating methodology engages more examination, higher-order logic, rational analysis, profound questioning, deeper listening, higher-quality presence, broader perspective, greater openness to diverse thinking and input, and ultimately more influential, innovative action. Paradoxically, pause powers purposeful performance. A long list of thought-leaders and scientists validate this transformative principle.

In “Recovering from information overload,” McKinsey Quarterly, January 2011, Derek Dean and Caroline Webb tell us, “senior executives so badly need uninterrupted time to synthesize information from many different sources, reflect on its implications for the organization, apply judgment, make trade-offs, and arrive at good decisions.” In answer to increased demands and information overload, we’ve become experts at multi-tasking, but research shows that our brains cannot focus on more than one thing at a time. We actually lose time in switching and focusing again on each new issue requiring our attention. Productivity suffers. Armed with technological devices, we are not the heroes we think we are. Dean and Webb assert, “Leaders need to establish new norms for a productive way of working.” Focus, filter, forget. Yes, forget. In other words, pause.

Frank Partnoy, author of *Wait: The Art and Science of Delay*, agrees. “Economists label the problem ‘present bias’: we are vulnerable to fast, salient stimulation. Fortunately, there is an antidote: the conscious pause. Scientists have found that although we are prone to snap overreactions, if we take a moment and think about how we are likely to react, we can reduce or even eliminate the negative effects of our quick, hard-wire responses.”

Daniel Kahneman, psychologist, Nobel Prize winner in economic sciences, and author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, has discerned two critical systems that determine the way we think. He counsels us to be careful with our “fast thinking,” the overconfident system that is absolutely sure of opinions, impressions, and judgments. This part of our mind generates ideas quickly without much consideration. This creates limitations, something that’s dangerous in a VUCA world, which requires “slow thinking” and more forward-looking agility at every turn.

W. Brian Arthur, founding head of the Economics Program at the Santa Fe Institute, explains the importance of slowing things down or retreating, as essential for what he calls an inner “knowing” that comes from inside yourself. He says that when faced with a complicated situation, ideally he would “observe, observe, observe and then simply retreat ... You wait and wait and let your experience well up into something appropriate. In a sense, there is no decision-making. What to do becomes obvious.” This inner knowing comes from a place within us so it requires a deeper awareness.

Daniel Goleman, scientist and Emotional Intelligence authority, explains that recent studies of the brain and creativity reveal what happens during moments of insight, or “Aha!” moments. Spikes in gamma activity take place, during which new neural connections are forming. Goleman describes a classic, century-old, four-stage model of creativity that makes sense in light of recent scientific learning and aligns with Webb and Dean, Partnoy, Kahneman, Arthur and others.

Stage 1: Define and frame the problem. In other words, ask great questions. **Stage 2:** Go deep; gather information, focus on data and immerse in ideas. **Stage 3:** Let go. Yes, pause. Walk away and relax. Then, go to **Stage 4:** Execute. Goleman explains that we can’t force “Aha!” moments or gamma spikes because they are random, but we can increase their possibility by setting things up with stages 1 through 3. Stage 3, Letting go is “counterintuitive,” says Goleman, but it’s key.

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Pause Point: Pause to Perform

Take a moment to envision your life at its optimal state of performance. Expand this vision beyond your career to all domains of your life. Imagine your career at its most purposeful and value creating... your key relationships in deep connection and love... your self-awareness genuine and authentic... your creativity and innovation at their peaks... your mind, body, and spirit energized and enlivened.

Then, ask yourself:

- What shifts did I make in myself and my life to get here?
- What new choices did I make to create these possibilities?
- How did I step back to see myself, others, my vocation, and my health in new ways?
- How did I pause more deeply into myself to gain deeper insight and perspective?
- How did I more deeply listen, be present, and connect to others at a new level?
- How did I step back to collaborate more synergistically with others to create the new and the different?
- How did these powerful pauses help me to step forward and perform in new ways?

Go deeply into the questions that have most resonance for you. Take your time. Resist the hyperactive temptation to rush. Slow things down. Pause to sort through the complexity and the fog to get clarity and insight.

Turning Down the Noise and Tuning In

Researchers Micelle Barton and Kathleen Sutcliffe make a hard case for what business leaders can learn from professional firefighters. In “Learning When to Stop Momentum,” MIT Sloan Management Review, the researchers posit, “When engrossed in an action, we tend not to notice small problems that may grow into large ones. To overcome dysfunctional momentum, we have to be interrupted or create an interruption ourselves...points at which we can ask: What’s the story now? Is it the same story as before? If not, how has it changed? And how, if at all, should “we adjust our actions?” They found that “Once we are fully engaged in our plans and activities, “we have a tendency to continue what we’re doing—that is, to resist changing our course even when redirection might be for the best.” Managers tend to consistently execute well-formulated, time-tested approaches, while leaders tend to find new ways to step into changing circumstances. Leaders who pause to develop the agility to dance with VUCA open up possibilities.

My good friend and colleague, Richard Leider is author of *The Power of Purpose*. His life's work "is about living and leading connected to purpose, authenticity, and meaning. He refers to a deep pause as a "purpose moment." A committed practitioner of pause, Richard guides others in pauses small and big. His annual "Back to the Rhythm" expedition in Tanzania is a big pause—one month on a walking safari, off the grid, without cell phones, Internet, or e-mail. The intention: reconnecting with nature, quiet, solitude, and experiencing another way of living as part of a sharing community. Disconnected from the demands of the VUCA world, each member pauses to reconnect with self, to "quiet our own chatter," and listen to others in a simpler place, where it is more conducive to stepping back. By doing so, we connect with our own heart and mind, and really listen to our own voice about what is most important and meaningful so we can then listen more genuinely and contribute more generously to others.

From Management to Leadership

One of the most challenging developmental shifts for executives is the evolution from management effectiveness to leadership excellence. Research has demonstrated that if managers do not make the critical development move to increased interpersonal collaboration and high-order strategic agility, they will plateau in their careers. The transition is from expertise and control

to authenticity and shared purpose. This crucial evolution requires sufficient, intentional pause to build self-awareness, foster team collaboration, and increase strategic innovation.

Pause is a catalytic process that has the potential, if practiced consciously, to bring forth seven transformative shifts from management effectiveness to leadership excellence.

1. Moving from self-centeredness to self-awareness and service.
2. Moving from people dominance and control to people development and liberation.
3. Moving from complexity and confusion to clarity and hope.
4. Moving from a presumption of knowing and expertise to listening and learning.
5. Moving from heroic, unchallenged ideas to collaborative, constructive engagement.
6. Moving from the status quo to curiosity, exploration, synthesis, and innovation.
7. Moving from accuracy and efficiency to purpose and transformation.

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What Does Pragmatic Pause Look Like?

Mike Paxton, CEO of Chamilia, reenergizes with regular runs and time with family. He sketches out complex situations by writing them down for clarity and as preparation for stepping forward with new initiatives. Steve Piersanti, founder and president of Berrett-Koehler Publishers, begins every staff meeting with a moment of silence. He intentionally sets meeting agendas so they offer recurring opportunities to pause and thoughtfully consider all aspects of Berrett-Koehler's business. He, too, writes to gather his thoughts, reflect, and gain clarity around decisions.

Dave Rothenberger, M.D., a surgeon at University of Minnesota, has partnered with clinicians across the Fairview Health System to share a powerful pause practice recently established for all surgical procedures, "Brief" is a few moments taken before every surgical procedure to make sure that everyone in the room understands their individual purpose and their shared goal. In addition to reconnecting everyone to a deeper sense of purpose and meaning in their healing mission, "Brief" shifts their mind-set from a hero mentality to a collaborative one and serves the vital objective of increasing the percentages of more positive outcomes.

Karen Kimsey-House, cofounder and CEO of Coaches Training Institute, builds a structure to reflect, connect with vision, purpose, and direction. She takes retreats "to stop, to be, and to reflect," because she returns with expanded vision and new ideas for direction. Rohinish

Hooda, vice president of U.S. sales and marketing for Ethicon Biosurgery, Johnson & Johnson, incorporates a continuous practice of pausing to question and think. His initiative, BIG—Biosurgery Idea Gurus—brings together many people working in different aspects of biosurgery to pause to share ideas and gain broader, different perspectives. Rohinish hopes this collaboration will energize and accelerate innovation.

Pablo Gaito, vice president of human resources at Cargill, has integrated a powerful practice he calls “Five-Minute Synchronization” to help everyone, whether physically in the room or virtually in the room from around the globe, to be present at meetings. It begins with a moment of silence and includes a few minutes of focused, inspired thought. Jeff George, global head of Sandoz, practices meditation daily to balance his drive with deeper connection.

These leaders—conscious, pragmatic practitioners of pause—are shaping new norms. In an article on reshaping the workplace for the New York Times, David Allen contends that we need more space, figuratively and literally, to counter “the dizzying number of [technological] options” that overwhelm us. He says that paradoxically they don’t necessarily make us more productive. In fact, they are paralyzing. There is an antidote, “but it’s not going to come from the usual quarters. To be successful in the new world of work, we need to create a structure for capturing, clarifying, and organizing all the forces that assail us; and to ensure time and space for thinking, reflecting and decision-making.”

Innovation: The New Leadership

Even before Steve Jobs passed away, innovation was the hot topic. Jobs, Apple, the iPad, iPhone, iTunes, Apple retail stores, the apps explosion, Pixar, Disney...almost anything he touched has become the iconic embodiment of creativity and innovation that transformed our lives. In fact, we could say that innovation has become the new leadership. Jobs's resignation as CEO of Apple and his death soon after provoked a global conversation about how to be innovative, how to "think like Steve." Leaders yearn to know how to imbue their organizational cultures with the spirit of innovation evident at Apple, Google, and other continuously innovating entities. Leaders aspire to join Jobs in "making a dent in the universe" in their own unique ways. They want to know not only how to cultivate new ideas but how to foster cultures that take new ideas and turn them into innovations that transform people's lives. As driven as Steve was, he was known for deep inquiry, walks, long sessions listening to music, reading poetry, retreats, and meditation practice.

Pausing for deep inquiry gives us the capacity to challenge the status quo and capitalize on market disruptions. Rather than viewing disruption as threats, we proactively explore possibilities. Pausing for questioning generates learning and innovation, challenges dogma, checks dysfunctional or unproductive momentum, and moves us from "what is" to "what might be." Pausing for persistent inquiry followed by letting go catalyzes synthesis, clarity and connection of seemingly disconnected,

unrelated ideas. Pausing is a methodology for proactively navigating toward openings, and a capacity for turning uncertainty and volatility to an advantage. If innovation is the new leadership, then pause is the new, transformative core competency for innovative breakthrough.

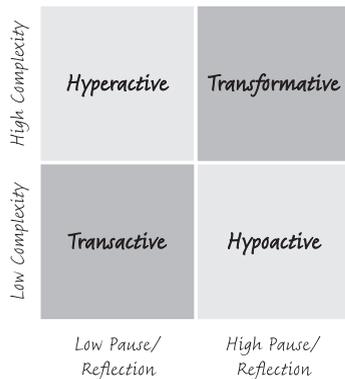
Bringing Clarity to Complexity

As leaders, too often we step forward with action to deal with complexity without first stepping back for the clarity. Our impulse to speed up and take action is driven by our intention to achieve, but our go-to approach—action and transaction—is often futile when dealing with increasing chaos and complexity. Unknowingly, our dedication to speed and action can be counterproductive. As the VUCA forces intensify, we have to consider learning how to step back to get clear so we can step forward with optimal contribution. Learning to bring clarity to complexity is an essential value-creating competency for leaders today.

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Slowing down amid the chaos is no easy task when we are accustomed to being rewarded for speed and action. Tempering our drive to achieve with a commensurate drive to pause is crucial when facing our toughest, complex challenges. The greater the complexity, the deeper the reflective pause required to convert the complex and ambiguous to the clear and meaningful. Pause helps us to move from the transactive and hyperactive to the transformative.

Without sufficient, high-quality pause, the complexity of the VUCA forces becomes overwhelming as we try to cope by accelerating action or transaction. This attempt to manage versus lead our way out of the VUCA vortex seldom is successful. The following model illustrates this essential Pause Principle dynamic:



One of the key developmental shifts for moving from management effectiveness to leadership excellence is moving from the transactive and hyperactive to the transformative by increasing the amount of high-quality pause and reflection, inside and out. If a situation is straightforward and requires action, not reflection, prolonged pause is not appropriate. If we find ourselves in this hypoactive state—dallying a little too long in pause—we need to push ourselves out of pause, or what may be hesitation, by telling ourselves, “Just make the best decision you can, and move on.”

The sweet spot of management effectiveness and leadership excellence is agilely flexing between transaction and transformation depending on the degree of complexity. The developmental challenges are often in our hyperactive or hypoactive states when we are either pausing too little or too much. As one CEO shared, “The key to leadership is knowing precisely when to step forward and when to step back. Reflection is not an end in itself, but rather our unique human capability to process the difficult, the challenging, and the complex.” Management effectiveness involves doing more with greater efficiency and speed, while leadership excellence involves doing differently by slowing down to transform complexity to clarity. Manage in low-complexity situations; lead when facing high-complexity environments.

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Step Back to Lead Forward: Seven Pause Practices

In the course of writing *The Pause Principle: Step Back to Lead Forward*, we conducted interviews and analyzed a multitude of research and case studies. From this work, we have isolated Seven Pause Practices that support the meta-pause principle: Step Back to Lead Forward. Woven through the book, the Seven Pause Practices are the pragmatic ways to breathe life into each growth area: grow self, grow others, and grow cultures of innovation. The applications are unique to each domain. The Seven Pause Practices are:

Pause Practice 1 | **Be On-Purpose.** Meaning inspires us to “go beyond what is,” to contribute something extraordinary. Purpose is the intersection of competency and contribution that aspires to achieve something bigger, something beyond us. Purpose gives context, drive, and meaning to personal growth, talent growth, and growth of innovation. It may be the most important, most far-reaching, transformative pause of all.

Pause Practice 2 | **Question and Listen.** Questions are the probing language of pause, forcing us to step back, reframe, re-vision and reconsider. Questions are the learning links that, over time, connect knowing to wisdom. Questions are the spades of curiosity that allow us to dig deeper foundations for personal, relationship, and creative growth.

Listening is the receptive language of pause. Listening with authenticity opens up doorways to self-knowledge, understanding others, and innovative possibilities; it introduces us to new ways of thinking, behaving, and seeing the world. Listening is the incubator for growing clarity out of complexity; it is the silent, pause-full soul of transformative learning.

Pause Practice 3 | **Risk Experimentation.** Managers minimize risk and experimentation to increase predictability; leaders monitor risk and accelerate experimentation to foster breakthrough. Stepping back to attempt the new and the different establishes the pathway to learning and discovery. If we hold onto the status quo and the tried-and-true, we are left with efficiency as our main source of value creation. However, when we experiment, we have a chance to foster entirely new ways to leverage its potent learning. It challenges how we see ourselves and our world; it is the very essence of discovery. Risking experimentation is pausing at the edgy, uncomfortable intersection of current reality and future reality; leaders create the future through intelligent experimentation.

Pause Practice 4 | **Reflect and Synthesize.** Managers analyze, judge, and decide to manage current realities; leaders reflect and synthesize to create new realities. As leaders, we tend to overanalyze, under-reflect, and under-synthesize. Addicted to speed and action, we become transactive deciders versus transformative synthesizers. Great leaders take the time to incubate analysis to discover higher-order, more strategic, forward-thinking solutions. Reflective synthesis

is equally important for leaders to develop self-awareness, talent awareness, and innovation breakthroughs. Reflection and synthesis hold the keys to unlock the doors of authenticity, transformation, and innovation.

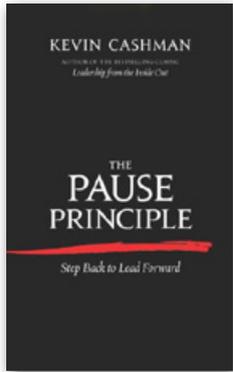
Pause Practice 5 | **Consider Inside-Out and Outside-In Dynamics.** Good leaders look outside themselves for strategic solutions; great leaders look inside themselves and outside themselves for enduring transformation. Pause is a holistic, integrated process of considering dynamic forces within us and outside of us. The more we pause to consider both endogenic and exogenic forces, the more potential personal insight, talent insight, and strategic insight is available. Pausing to more deeply consider internal and external information creates a greater likelihood for profound personal, strategic, interpersonal, and organization growth. Balancing our pause practices “to look inside” and “to look outside” is the pause-through needed for authentic, enduring breakthroughs.

Pause Practice 6 | **Foster Generativity.** A generative leader pauses to prepare the next generation more than he or she pauses for personal success. Generativity is the energy and enthusiasm we get by helping people to surpass us. It is the joy of giving, coaching, mentoring, and stretching people to go beyond us. Generativity is the joy of parents seeing their children elevating themselves; it is the joy of leaders multiplying their impact for future generations. Generative pause fosters a rich atmosphere for human potential to flourish.

Pause Practice 7 | **Be Authentic.** There is no greater influential act than a leader authentically being the change he or she wishes to see in their organization. Once a leader becomes what she wants others to aspire to, the attractive force is irresistible and people rush in to engage and to contribute. Pausing to be more authentic with ourselves, with our people, and with what we aspire to create is critical to enduring value creation. Authenticity gives substance, realness, and value to everything it touches. Managers build dependability through accuracy; leaders build credibility through authenticity.

Our proclivity for split-second, snap decisions in which we do not engage our brain and think things through has serious ramifications. **Armed with the power and practice of pause, we can create better outcomes and a better future.** 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Kevin is a best-selling author, top-ten thought leader, world-class speaker, global CEO coach and pioneer of the “grow the whole person to grow the whole leader” approach to integrated leadership development. He is the founder of Executive to Leader Institute® and the Chief Executive Institute®. He also founded LeaderSource, recognized as one of the top three leadership development programs globally. In 2006, LeaderSource joined Korn/Ferry International, where Kevin is now Senior Partner, CEO and Executive Development.

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