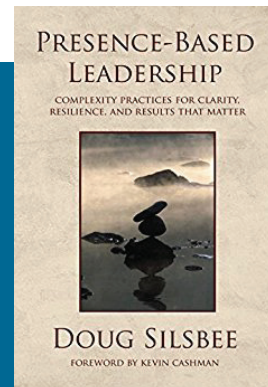


Presence-Based Leadership: Complexity Practices for Clarity, Resilience, and Results that Matter

A book excerpt from by Mobius Senior Expert Doug Silsbee



**“Everyone has been made for some particular work,
and the desire for that work has been put in every heart.”**

– Rumi

PREFACE *At times, in both everyday life and in situations of leadership, complicated no longer describes the environment or the goal. Complex defines the day. What you have always counted on before—yourself, your skills, your proven methods—no longer works sufficiently. You need something new, you realize. But what?*

This book seeks to offer some perspectives on this phenomenon—and on how to develop a deep and authentic leadership presence that is relevant to complexity.

In complexity, cause and effect are not predictable. Other people act in ways that don't make sense to us. Many interrelated factors affect what is emerging, and some things in the system affect others in ways impossible to predict. The harder we drive for results, the more the unanticipated side effects tend to multiply.

In these kinds of environments, the usual ways of leading are often ineffective, even counterproductive. It can be liberating to recognize that we've been spending too much energy in approaches that actually don't work.

What if leading could in fact be both easier and more successful?

To scaffold new actions in our own complex leadership context, the condition of presence is foundational. Presence is an internal state: the awareness of immediacy, stillness, inclusive awareness and possibility. This state enables us to sense the world as it actually is and to sense ourselves as we actually are. A rigorous embrace of reality leads to clarity, resilience and results that matter.

Presence-Based Leadership is the commitment to, and practice of, these principles in situations demanding new solutions, new futures and even new understandings of self.

This has been the hardest, by far, of my three books to write. I've been experimenting with these ideas and practices for many years. This book has been asking me to write it for five. I've tried many ways to say what I wish to say: I wrote a complete first draft, put it on the back burner to simmer, then threw it out. Twice as many words as the contents of this entire book reside in my computer in deleted text files, like the marble a sculptor discards to finally reveal what lies inside the stone. If a sculptor's work is to seek what has always lain within, perhaps my work has been to sense my way into what I feel is so important to express.

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I am aware that this material is itself complex and sometimes elusive. Yet, I'm also convinced that it is of profound importance. Accelerating the capacity of leaders to work through extraordinary complexity with clarity and resilience is one key to resolving the crucial issues of our times.

If I were writing this book three years from now, it would be a different book, just as this one is far different from what I was able to draft three years ago. I know it's not perfect, that it has holes and contradictions and vital pieces missing. I could spend more years refining it: literally every day new things occur to me that I want to add. But, perfect can be the enemy of good, and this is good enough. For now, this is what I know how to say. It's time to get this work out and let it do what it is to do. This book is my safe-to-fail experiment.

Ironically, in the very week I am completing this manuscript, I have received a diagnosis of advanced metastatic cancer. I have worked with everything in this book, in my personal and professional realms, for years. However, this now radically changed context immediately elevates my need to put what I espouse here into practice. You, reading this in what is my future and your present, will likely know more about how this journey plays out for me than I can know now. What I do know now is that my condition presents me with a world-class opportunity to practice.

Oh, by the way. I am white and American. I'm sixty-three. I have a degree in geology. Both my parents have PhDs. I grew up in the era of cheap oil. I am male, basically liberal, and come from a relatively privileged background that has enabled opportunities for travel, education, and meaningful and rewarding work. I'm a husband, a father, a grandfather, and a cancer patient among many other designations.

I offer this brief list (which could be much longer) not at all to establish my qualifications for offering this work. Nor as apology for the limitations that my history and demographics certainly impose on how I view and interpret the world. I offer it simply as disclosure and transparency.

I, like you, write and lead and love from an embodied history that reflects a particular set of circumstances that provide me with both generous capabilities and real limitations. This of course is the human condition.

It is my hope that I can speak into our shared human condition in a way that will be useful and empowering to fellow humans who have different backgrounds and histories than I do.

It is my deepest hope that this work is of some service in a suffering world.

- DOUG SILSBEE, 2018

Whatever the specifics of your leadership context, you are almost assuredly daunted by complexity in some form. While you care passionately, game-changing disruptions make it impossible to plan, distractions abound, and tedious must-do's siphon your attention from what's really important. You are experienced enough to see countless choices and savvy enough to recognize that, while every decision solves some problems, it also creates others. You likely experience some frustration that you, as a competent, smart achiever, are not able more consistently to manage the unruly people and forces in your world towards better outcomes.

These difficulties can feel personal. They are not.

You have assumed the mantle of leadership at a critical turning point in history. The scale and complexity of the challenges that we collectively face are increasing exponentially, and your training and preparation are insufficient preparation for what you face. The bad news is that it sometimes feels as if you are being asked to be a leader you have not yet become.

The resulting gap between the needs of the moment and your ability to create a new future only means that, realistically, you face conditions different from those you prepared for or could possibly anticipate.

Producing results that matter requires doing things differently—perhaps even radically differently. Learning new ways to do the same things more effectively will not be enough. Rather, it is time to reimagine what leadership itself can be, and to step up in ways that you can't yet see, bringing your whole self to your challenges.

The good news is that complex problems can be seen as powerful catalysts for your ongoing development. Approached wisely, obstacles often accelerate growth. This book intends to focus the energies of those catalysts into fundamental shifts in how you approach your own learning and development. You will develop new ways to perceive and to engage with yourself, allowing you to confront the complexity that already exists, but to do so with less angst, more clarity and greater resilience.

WHY META-COMPETENCIES MATTER

At some point in your career, you began to recognize your limitations.

Since then, you have read books, gotten coached, attended leadership seminars and studied the latest theories and methods. Potent and majestic frameworks like Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey's Immunity to Change, C. Otto Scharmer's Theory U [see Otto's book excerpt on page 46], Bob Anderson's Leadership Circle, and Richard Strozzi-Heckler's Embodied Leadership are but a few of the excellent resources that you may well have integrated into your leadership vernacular.

You are serious about self-improvement, but you've also noticed that every leading-edge approach or tool over time begins to seem partial and incomplete. Change has accelerated, which is one reason why new models appear frequently and with great promise—and the next big challenge still seems to overwhelm our preparedness.

We yearn for something deeper: a bigger view that can help us navigate into the future. Rather than relying on one model, we must draw fluidly from many frameworks in order to discover our own path and to make meaning in ways most helpful for our unique situation. We must deepen our access to innate core capacities that lie deeper than any model or method, rather than hoping for the just-in-time emergence of the just-right tool.

Artist Pablo Picasso had a career spanning decades and artistic periods. He anticipated and revolutionized artistic styles; somehow, he always seemed just ahead of the newest development. While some artists are known for their skill in sculpture and others for watercolor, Picasso moved fluidly from paint to print to clay to collage to mixtures of them all. Like Picasso choosing among many media to best express a truth, the adept leader chooses among numerous models and approaches, yet remains true to an authentic core even while serving diverse constituencies and agendas.

Picasso's search for expression pushed him to experiment and explore. Though he was gifted at many forms of expression, his allegiance to unfettered self-expression was his meta-competency.

A meta-competency is a capability that underpins everything else that we do. It becomes deeply woven

into the fabric of who we are and how we organize and respond to our world. A meta-competency includes and enables other competencies. It is a way of being as much as a way of doing.

This book will help you develop three such overarching meta-competencies. These represent three core processes of organizing ourselves and responding to the world: Sensing (the way we take in information about our world and about ourselves); Being (our inner condition as we process this information moment-by-moment); and Acting (what we think, say, and do, all of which arise out of this internal experience).

Whether you are aware of these fundamental, ongoing processes or not, they are always and actively occurring, including in this very moment. They are constant, never-ending, reliable and life-giving. Presence is in large part about bringing awareness and attention to these core human processes. While they occur in every sentient being, it's one of the many marvelous benefits of being human that you can become aware of these subtle and implicit processes. You can direct your attention to them. And you can intervene in the usually automatic nature of their functioning.

In a leadership context, the inherent human capacity both to direct and to observe your attention itself is immensely pragmatic. With the awareness you are building, you can consciously develop the meta-competencies of:

- **Sensing** yourself and your context in ways that produce clarity
- **Being** so as to invite the inner state of presence in service to your resilience, creativity and fluidity
- **Acting** in order to invite new conditions (both internal to you and external in the world around you) that encourage results that matter.

OUR ROAD MAP

Exploration of the three meta-competencies of Sensing, Being, and Acting will be our road map for exploring Presence-Based Leadership. These three meta-competencies, applied at three levels of scale—Context, Identity, and Soma—provide nine distinguishable perspectives on our moment-by-moment experience of the domain that is called Complexity.

Each perspective, or Pane, is a window into your situation. Each Pane informs a set of perspectives, actions, practices and approaches rich with opportunity for engaging with an out-of-control world in potent and generative new ways.

Each is an important but partial view; each renders your understanding more inclusive and complete. Taken together, they provide a powerful and integrated way for accelerating your development as a leader and for accessing an ever-increasing range of your innate capabilities in service to what you care about.

I have organized this book into four parts.

If you and I do our work together well, this material will prove a pragmatic guide to leadership in situations of Complexity. You will see the world and yourself differently. You will have a coherent map of how leaders grow and develop, some direct experiences that validate and ground that map, pragmatic ideas for how you can accelerate your own development, and safe-to-fail experiments to tweak the situation in which you are leading. All of this advances your leadership towards what you care about most deeply.

Four Parts of the book *Presence-Based Leadership*

PART ONE: FOUNDATIONS	PART TWO: SENSING	PART THREE: BEING	PART FOUR: ACTING
<p>How you became the leader you are (what's wonderful and limiting about that). Orienting yourself on your personal map of the developmental journey.</p>	<p>Making visible how you take in information about yourself and the world. With awareness comes clarity for shaping your response.</p>	<p>Principles and methods for accessing your innate creativity and resilience, and embodying the commitments you care most deeply about.</p>	<p>The expression of your inner work into the world. Rooted in Being, your Acting is less to drive results and more to create the conditions for the results that matter most.</p>
<p><i>Chapter 1 The Territory of Complexity:</i> navigation and support aids for recognizing the domain of Complexity and normalizing your reaction to it.</p> <p><i>Chapter 2 Embodiment, Identity and the Bell Jar:</i> unpacks the lifelong process of development as an unfolding of identity.</p> <p><i>Chapter 3 Realization and the Developmental Edge:</i> exercising the muscle of attention, you begin to recognize the pervasiveness of invisible habits that have made you successful but also limit you.</p> <p><i>Chapter 4 Nine Panes of Leadership:</i> adds three levels of scale—Context, Identity, and Soma—to your exploration, illuminating unconventional possibilities for your creativity and resourcefulness.</p>	<p><i>Chapter 5 Observe the System:</i> provides you with new distinctions for observing the world around you, the Context, in new ways.</p> <p><i>Chapter 6 Recognize Identity at Stake:</i> reflexively defending your identity obscures the clarity of your view of what is going on around you.</p> <p><i>Chapter 7 Attend to Experience:</i> observing your body in the constant process of defending your identity, allows you to recognize and intervene to choose new actions.</p>	<p><i>Chapter 8 Regulate Inner State:</i> the quality and focus of your attention opens radical possibilities for self-mastery.</p> <p><i>Chapter 9 Decouple State from Context:</i> invites you to direct your attention to serve resilience itself.</p> <p><i>Chapter 10 Embody What Matters:</i> explores your embodiment of an intended future.</p>	<p><i>Chapter 11 An Attitude of Curiosity and Experimentation:</i> rather than the oppressive overfocus on problem-solving and results, you explore a brief and simple set of stepping stones for safe-to-fail experiments.</p> <p><i>Chapter 12 Acting for Connection:</i> leadership presence as the key to collaborating, inspiring and influencing.</p> <p><i>Chapter 13 Acting for Fluidity:</i> explores how your own internal fluidity can scale into your relationships and the culture of your context.</p> <p><i>Chapter 14 Acting for Stability:</i> acknowledges a core paradox: the very future you intend requires both conditions of fluidity and also of stability.</p>

**“The human body is
incapable of not practicing.
And what we practice
we become.”**

– Richard Strozzi-Heckler



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Presence-Based Leadership promises

As a result of understanding the meta-competencies in this book and by working with the exercises and practices, you will:

- Increase your capacity to move fluidly among a set of rich and complementary perspectives
- Explore how Complexity challenges your very identity, blinding you to possibilities
- Discover the universal road map that has always shaped your process of lifelong development
- Increase your capacity to observe and self-regulate your internal state
- Deepen your resilience—your capacity to stay creative and resourceful no matter what’s going on around you
- Choose and embody commitments to what you care about, acting in congruence with them
- Develop your leadership presence and the resulting connection and resonance with others
- Act in Complexity, discerning high-leverage actions that scale awareness and create the conditions for what you care about.

* * *

IDENTITY HAS A MIND OF ITS OWN

It can be helpful to think of our Identity as a willful intelligence unto itself. Although we usually are blind to this, as we become more present to ourselves, we also become more able to see how our Identity is impacted by the human systems around us, and how it constantly and skillfully self-organizes in order to preserve itself.

Recognizing Identity

Our Identity develops in a set of conditions to which we adapted through an accumulating set of strengths, behaviors and meaning-making that eventually became ossified as a personality. In fact, because Identity is just “the way we are,” we tend to be blind to it, just as the fish can’t recognize the water it swims in. Identity is our Bell Jar. It has an internal stability, a stasis, that is astoundingly impervious to new information, to self-reflection,

and to change. [See Sarah Hill's work on internal narratives, page 72.]

I offer this brief background on myself as an example both of how Identity develops—and how crucial it is to recognize it as a key driver of our behavior and our meaning-making.

A personal story of Identity formation

I grew up in a family of achievers. PhDs run in my family. I grew up assuming I could do what I wanted in life, and while I often made things considerably harder for myself than they needed to be, I had an underlying basic trust in my capabilities, which got reinforced by putting myself into situations that would be challenging and would require me to figure things out.

Invisibly to me, this sense of capability was reinforced by a world that privileged being white, male, tall, American, heterosexual and educated. As an adult, people assumed I knew what I was talking about (even when I didn't) and extended to me a certain respect that I took for granted. From inside my Bell Jar I was unable to recognize this privilege, even though it shaped me from an early age.

As a skinny, nerdy kid, I was also an easy mark for physical and emotional bullying at school. Several years were excruciating. I learned painfully about being excluded, gave myself nosebleeds to escape the torture of gym class, and practiced being small and inoffensive in order to not be a target.

At the same time, I liked intense experiences. High-

risk adolescent behaviors evolved into a core Identity of adventure and experimentation that demanded constant new experiences that required new skills and capabilities.

It's also true that this Identity (even now) seems to need constant reinforcement. As an intensity junkie, I don't quite know how to orient myself in life without some kind of challenge. One perspective is that I am adventurous; another is that I need continual affirmation of this fundamental sense of self through deeds and the appreciation of others.

I am aware of a strong internal voice that criticizes what I have done or finds it wanting compared to the braver, more noble, or greater accomplishments of others. This voice implores me to do more, to stay busy, to create new things, to write books, to do works in the world. This voice does everything possible to prop up this Identity of mine in ways that have worked acceptably well for over sixty years.

Talking about my Identity also feels a bit self-conscious: like exposing some dirty little secret that is best left in a dark closet in the corner!

I suspect that you, writing or speaking publicly about your own Identity, would also feel some self-consciousness. For the most part, I want to reassure you, our Identities are a useful and worthy phenomenon. It is psychologically necessary to think of ourselves as good people who are well-intentioned, competent and doing the best we can.

Yet it is important to both describe and own our

Practices are intended to be repeated over time as a way of building capacity; their value specifically derives from repetition and consistency. Reading will change you but a little. Practice is how you became who you are, and it is the only way to become who you choose to be. There is no shortcut to embodied learning. Test everything, take nothing at my word. Validate it for yourself. Do the practices. They will change you at the core.

“I, like you, lead and love from an embodied history that reflects a particular set of circumstances that provide me with both generous capabilities and real limitations. This of course is the human condition.”

Identity, including the shadow aspects that drive our incessant and urgent efforts to underpin and perpetuate it. These are particularly difficult to recognize, precisely because they are contrary to the self-image we are working so hard to maintain. I like my adventuresome, experimental self. And I'm not so proud of the insecure, defended aspects of me that self-organize to validate my Identity through the acceptance and appreciation of others.

Recognizing and Sensing our own Identity at work is a fundamental part of making the Complexity system visible. [See also Otto Scharmer's work on page 48 for this phenomena which he calls our blindspot.] As a leader in Complexity, it is convenient to leave out this piece of the puzzle. However, this is perilous indeed: Even when we don't see it, others already have. And, it affects everything. Identity motivates us and propels us through life, it simultaneously and drastically limits our range of possibilities, especially in conditions that require creativity and resilience.

So, please take a look. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Doug Silsbee, Mobius Senior Expert, is a pre-eminent author and thought leader in the fields of Presence-Based Coaching, leadership development and resilience. Doug's ground-breaking work integrates

deep pragmatic experience in organization and leader development on five continents with mindfulness, interpersonal neurobiology, somatics, and developmental psychology. In addition to his latest publication, two additional books, *The Mindful Coach* and *Presence-Based Coaching*, are the basis for a leading-edge coach certification program, accredited by the International Coach Federation (ICF.) Doug is a Master Somatic Coach with the prestigious Strozzi Institute. He is a sought-after speaker for ICF and other international conferences, and has taught at the Brookings Institution, UCLA Executive Education, Georgetown University's Institute for Transformational Leadership, George Mason University, and the Federal Executive Institute.

EXPERIMENT: Describe Your Identity

Take a few minutes to write out a statement of who you are. This should include the things you are proud of, the ways you hope to be seen, your sense of who you are at core. And what are you not so sure about? What do you doubt? How do you organize yourself to perpetuate and validate this Identity? I am...