



Experienced with individuals at the Board of Directors, “C” Chair, Executive and Senior Management levels, Janet assists executives in adopting effective habits of perception and behavior to lead and accelerate corporate strategies. Typical engagements address executive development in the following areas: articulate and inspire through clarity of vision, enable respectful challenge, debate, and catalyze synergy for strategic business choices, risk/reward critical thinking about investments and shareholder value, plan leader succession and architect sustainable cultural/strategic change.

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*“Leaders are problem solvers by talent and temperament, and by choice.” Harlan Cleveland*

As an enterprise leader, you want people to demonstrate Agility, yet your behavior likely telegraphs a value placed on Control. Of course, Control that inspires consistent quality, reliable responsiveness, and trustworthy relationships produces a well-respected brand. I'm hearing a simple formula in my head, shared recently by Chief Revenue Officer: visibility plus credibility equals profitability. The downside of Control occurs when trying to control circumstances, events, and relationships that feel chaotic. When you respond through Control, your actions speak louder than your words, limiting other people's confidence to respond agilely.

In our 2012 study of what keeps executive leaders awake at night, the most frequently declared tension was between Control and Agility. All recognized the value of each quality and that their ability to sustain calm and centered thinking amid chaos requires emotional stamina and courage. When others must envision, create, and implement the solutions to thorny problems, most often out of the eyesight and reach of the leader, the demand for that emotional stamina and courage grows exponentially. Choosing the solution to pursue relied upon an unwavering belief in another person(s) to deploy their best thinking and capabilities. Unanticipated disruptions always occur and demand that people persevere and demonstrate Agility to adjust actions spontaneously, which allows the flow to solutions to sustain. Instead of controlling decisions and actions, leaders realized the importance of being agile with curiosity and wonder, to listen and fully receive the perspective and expertise of others that filled out the picture of what was actually occurring. Agility becomes the resource to break through bias, assumption, preference, and habits that mask seeing the problem most clearly and stimulating relevant and timely solutions.

Pause and reflect on how you perceive your workforce's capability to navigate thorny, complex problems. The central idea offered here focuses on how you answer this question: "How do I learn to tolerate the tension that is present and use curiosity and wonder to discover the rest of the story?" There is a line between the two states of being: the tension of presence. When I started working with this idea, I explored each dilemma as a polarity and then as a paradox, which was utterly unsatisfying. This kind

of dualistic thinking, getting caught in the pendulum swinging between two states of being, didn't work to generate new solutions. Leaders who try to reconcile this tension waste a lot of time. They end up focusing attention and energy on stopping the swinging rather than seeking valuable solutions that arise using a bit of each quality in a ratio that matches the thorny problem seeking a new, more useful solution.

As the dictionary defines, Agility means using the ability to think, understand and move quickly and easily. Control is the power of influence to direct the mindset, behaviors, and actions of others. How do you foster freedom, turning what appeared to be damaging disrespect, i.e., over-controlling and distracted presence, into a resource for perceiving what change to invite? Answer this question, and you can generate a more desirable state: momentum toward desired Agility that trusts your leaders to respond appropriately to the situation because you granted them authority to act on their best judgment, knowledge, and capability.



Examining problems more deeply through the lens of either of the tension qualities gives a giant playground to determine what solutions to thorny issues could be. There's always a ratio between the two that works. When we can physically stand somewhere between them, feel both of them and sense what's valuable and what's not known or misunderstood, we stay alert to what's happening right before us, and we will make better decisions. As we shift our mindset, we think about resources differently. Ultimately, a more deliberate decision-making process mitigates many things that cause expensive rework and emotional frustration for all involved.

### Three Ideas for the Tension of Presence: Control and Agility

1. **Notice the influence of your presence.** Pay attention to how others respond to you in every conversation: their energy, attitude, language, and pace. When you show up in only partial presence, distracted by something else that's going on, you're not getting the message your employees intend to send to you. The unintended consequence of thinking you're controlling the chaos around you and getting stuff done is leaving them in the dark. They not only don't think you trust them, but they also don't think you respect their thinking. And the worst-case scenario, they don't do anything, let alone try to do something, to generate solutions to the problem in the way of the project you're trying to deliver. Partial

presence doesn't do it. You need to stop and pause what you're doing to receive the message entirely. And by the way, the great benefit to you is your team members feel your respect for them. They will also trust you to bring their problems to you when there's a big issue they can't handle, and they must have your input for it. That happens because every step along the way, you are fully present in a conversation with them. Don't be the reason you are surprised by a breakdown because you created the barrier to learning about bad news.

2. **Choose to express optimistic thinking.** When you are creating that trusting, respectful environment, you're also bringing optimistic thinking. In other words, imagine a meeting where you probably heard yourself show up and say, "Okay, what's the return-to-green plan here? Why do we have so many things in yellow and red?" Imagine if you'd started the meeting a little differently and said, "Let's acknowledge the things that are in green right now, and I want to hear what everyone here is most proud of in our progress." And then say, "Given that success, what could we apply to the things in yellow? What's the priority you want to bring?" And then, "All right, what can I contribute to help you get through the things in red and return those to green?" Adopting optimism for thinking and expressing elevates your faith in the team's resourceful, capable, and creative wholeness. That's received this way in their heads: "Look, I believe in all of you. I know you have what it takes to deliver on this result, and let's celebrate that and build on it." Instead of seeing the gap, you're seeing the wholeness of the team you worked so hard to put together. That permits the team to be agile, and you do not have to micromanage to control chaos.
3. **Practice pause for habit change.** The minute you think you need to jump in on a conversation, soften your gaze and take a breath, to pause. It could be just a smile on your face. Maybe you push your chair back an inch or two. Whatever your form of pause is, the purpose of that skill is to short-circuit your habit of jumping in and rescuing, having the idea, or anticipating what others might want from you. Ask a question instead, particularly one you don't know the answer to and couldn't possibly understand because that answer lives inside the other person, and you most definitely want to learn what they think, understand, and are available to pursue. The first skill for valuable curiosity? Pause. With diligent practice, you'll see people change around you and realize that your confidence means they have permission to be agile, and you get out of the controlling-the-chaos business.

If you follow these three practices, you will utterly transform the experience of this tension and learn to invite others to embody a helpful balance between Control and Agility that you confidently trust will be appropriate for any context.