



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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*“It’s not that I’m so smart, it’s just that I stay with problems longer.” Albert Einstein*

I wonder if you're like me, wondering how we arrived at this moment in society and in workplaces, where people perceive others as walking around as if they're the only one that matters, a bit self-absorbed and unconcerned about how others experience life, let alone their work. Sometimes we hear ourselves use the label "entitled" with a derogatory tone to describe that person's behavior. We want more self-responsibility in the workplace, expecting everyone to understand and act this way without further explanation. The feelings that both words, Entitlement, and Self-Responsibility, evoke for leaders rarely feel grounded and calm, more like activating and intense. As I engaged with leaders to explore the dilemmas caused by both qualities, the tension between them became apparent, requiring many moments to pause and examine examples more carefully. This question emerges in those moments, "When people express either quality in an extreme way, what might be the benefit of Entitlement and the drawback of Self Responsibility?" Unfortunately, when leaders act based on judgmental assumptions about either quality, they often fail to consider the full story of any thorny problem, and flawed decisions result.

Entitlement, as the dictionary defines it, means having a right to a particular privilege or benefit. In the negative connotation often associated with this element, some people see this quality as an unrealistic expectation of having a right to something not earned, e.g., a raise out of cycle, opportunities for promotion, influence, and power beyond explicit authority. This last point is tricky because all senior leaders invite subordinates to be bold and stretch into more contributions. Bold stretching demonstrates readiness in advance of receiving the next level of responsibility. Through this action, leaders expect their team members to embody Self-Responsibility to anticipate and be proactive without being told. Unspoken expectations become central to navigating the tension between these qualities versus the qualities themselves being the issue!

Pause a moment and reflect on how you perceive your workplace. Might you be a leader seeking to retain your high-potential employees and making a mistake just described? The tension between Entitlement and Self-Responsibility has become more acute as most companies simultaneously experience five generations in the workplace.

The generations who are digital natives also benefit from access to information and resources far more quickly than those that came before and feel ready at a pace and scale the earlier generations do not always recognize or appreciate. The conflict that arises shows up in poor engagement scores. The 2023 Gallup report on the Global Workplace reports that 59% of employees are "quiet quitters." This workforce group includes employees filling a seat and watching the clock, feeling disconnected from their employer, stressed, and burnt out, and are therefore minimally productive. It's no wonder they also end up labeled by leaders as behaving "entitled" rather than "responsible."

The central idea offered here is for leaders to answer this question for themselves: "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.

The diagram below introduces a set of everyday tensions that our research with over 250 leaders revealed. The presence of tension tolerated for a little bit longer became a way to see how to foster freedom, turning what appeared to be damaging into a resource for perceiving what change to invite and, through that, generate a more desirable state, e.g., momentum toward desired Self-Responsibility with something new by embracing a dynamic adoption of beneficial Entitlement rather than suffer the destructive effect of paralyzing social norms that no longer produce desired results.



When we put Self-Responsibility and Entitlement on opposite ends of a line, we recognize that sometimes Entitlement is healthy. Inside of companies, Entitlement defines an equitable exchange of value, e.g., a salary and benefits that matches the skills, experience, and mindset to consistently perform effectively. As the feeling of tension arises to contribute something new and different, that requires bravery to speak

up, speak out and step out of the norms. Our best resource is to remember that pause gives more time than it takes. As Einstein said, leaders who stay with a problem in discomfort from a mindset of curiosity and wonder can see that many more than one valuable and worthy answer exists for every situation.

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 useful 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: Entitlement and Self-Responsibility**

1. Be present. Now I know you've heard this before. What matters here is not that you understand the two words, be present. Instead, focus attention on what keeps you from being present, and how is that causing the breakdown of entitlement showing up with people, rather than them taking self-responsibility. Think about the last time your boss was really present with you. What was your reaction to it? The absence of presence has an impact on us because we make a lot of assumptions about whether we are important, whether we matter, whether we're worthy, whether or not we're needing to be entitled because of some invisible expectations mismatch. Yes, that's the hook that's important to give attention. If you're feeling it when people are distracted, and actually not turning and being with you fully, letting go of all the other things, you're interpreting that as, you're something less than, and not worthy of that person's attention. Learn from your own experience and recognize the moments when you're not present and choose to shift in the moment and generate a more open exchange.
2. The step to building and sustaining your muscle to be present arises from noticing what happens when you are not. Tap into your motivation for high engagement and do your part by modeling that experience with yourself. Choose to notice distractions from what's important to give your attention and pause. Even a split-second pause breaks the habit for that moment and affords an opportunity to consider a different choice. With the habit broken you can choose to shift attention to presence with what's important and right in front of your awareness. By the way, it's okay to be distracted, and that's normal, especially in our modern, chaotic world. Noticing and shifting back to presence becomes the muscle you want toned up. The more you do this practice, the easier it becomes to sustain staying present just a little bit longer.
3. Since you want to establish a suitable ratio between the two qualities, usually, seeking a bit more self-responsibility, your next and third practice becomes



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exercising your natural curiosity. Curiosity about how another person perceives and makes meaning of a situation always forwards action more effectively. Allow the element of surprise to live in your mindset so that in listening, you begin to hear the gem, the sparkle, the inner motivation for the other person's choices. Even one little idea that you realize, "Oh, if they pursued that idea, that would make a big difference." Ask about it and make the invitation for more sharing that helps you learn to see the person beyond your assumptions and biases. You have already signaled to that person that you respect them very much because you've chosen to let go of the distractions. At that moment you have a golden opportunity to give an invitation that they care about, and you care about. Inherent in your conversation are the seeds of a win-win formula.

If you'll follow these three practices, you will utterly transform the experience of this tension and learn to invite others to strike a helpful balance between Entitlement and Self-Responsibility appropriate to any context.