

Presencing Principles: Reflections On Practice

Paper prepared for:

Presencing-In-Action Lab I
Presencing Institute, Cambridge, MA
October 27-30, 2010

DRAFT 1.0

Otto Scharmer
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Presencing Institute

www.presencing.com

*The U is applied in three ways: (1) as a process template (observe, observe; connect to sources of inner knowing; act from what emerges and in response to prototype feedback); (2) as a set of principles and practices (chapter 21, Theory U); (3) and as a living connection to what is emerging from the NOW. We need all three. The process template is useful, but without the other two it can easily turn into another straitjacket resulting from downloading. All presencing connects to the power of what wants to emerge through us. The following points and principles reflect some of my own past learning experiences and is directed to my colleagues in the Presencing-In-Action Lab. Comments and suggested improvements are most welcome!*¹

1. PRACTICE THE U – DON’T PREACH IT. Listen to others and to what life calls you to do. Don’t begin by preaching about the U. Instead: listen, connect, and listen some more. Use the U as a tool to deepen connections to others, to yourself, to the whole. Connect with people where they are – look for the cracks in their context and then be helpful.

2. BECOME A BLACKBELT OBSERVER AND LISTENER (horizontal alignment). The U process extends the essence of science – “let the data talk to you” – from the exterior realm (third-person view) to the more subtle levels of human experience (second- and first-person views). Thus, “letting the data talk to you” is applied not only to objective exterior data (through the open mind) but also to the empathic inter-subjective data (through the open heart) and to the trans-subjective realm of self-knowledge (through the open will). Attending to all three types of data requires the cultivation of observation and listening skills. The impact of the deeper levels of listening is profound: they function like a welding flame on the process of social reality creation. If cultivated, they can melt the walls of habitual interaction that keep us separate – separate from the world, from each other, and from ourselves.

3. CONNECT TO YOUR INTENTION AND OPERATE AS AN INSTRUMENT (vertical alignment). Brian Arthur once said to me: “Intention is not a powerful force. It’s the *only* force.” Connecting to the intention of our life’s journey establishes a vertical alignment and deepens our experience: “Who Am I?” and “What Am I Here For?” The more I can connect to that deeper place – to what is essential for me – the more I can clarify what I want to be in service of, the better I can act as an instrument for that emerging future to come into being.

4. WHEN REALITY OPENS UP, BE FULLY PRESENT WITH IT – AND THEN ACT FROM THE NOW. Applying both alignments (vertical and horizontal) takes you into situations where reality begins to open up. When you feel time beginning to slow down and a crack to the emerging future opening up, give it your full attention, be fully present with it, and then *act* from the *now* – operate from the impulse that emerges from that opening. Put differently, when you find yourself in a situation where you begin to connect

¹ Send comments or suggested improvements to my email address: scharmer@mit.edu. Thanks!

with a significant future opportunity, first say YES, then DO it, and only then ask whether it's possible.

5. FOLLOW YOUR HEART – DO WHAT YOU LOVE, LOVE WHAT YOU DO. “The only way to do great work is to do what you love” (Steve Jobs). Doing what you love and loving what you do is the only reliable way to connect to your emerging future path. Make sure that you have at least a few small projects or activities in your portfolio of things that you love doing. The more this element is missing, the more you are in danger of losing your way and ending up living someone else's life.

6. ALWAYS BE IN DIALOGUE WITH THE UNIVERSE. “The universe is a helpful place” (Alan Webber) is an important guiding principle. It means that the universe tries to provide feedback to you that is helpful. Sometimes you need to ignore the feedback because it doesn't speak to your deeper ideas. But when it does speak to your intentions, always stay open to *evolving* your idea as needed and as suggested by the feedback you are receiving from your environment.

7. CREATE A LEVEL 4 HOLDING SPACE THAT SUPPORTS YOUR JOURNEY. The most important tool of presencing is your Self – your capacity to access your highest future possibility. How can you best nurture that capacity? Create a holding place for it. One way to do that is through a daily cultivation practice—a moment of stillness or contemplation in which you filter out all the noise from outside and from within (VoJ, VoC, VoF) in order to connect to what is most essential to you. Another way is through a circle of friends who support one another through level 4 listening, by attending to the deeper calling and journey of their personal lives and their work.

8. BALANCE YOUR TALKING-DOING RATIO. If you want to act as an instrument, make sure that you “cover your currency”: for every word about ethics, perform one act or deed. For every word about spirituality or source, perform three.

9. IDENTIFY THE CRACK—THE OPENING TO THE FUTURE—AND UNDERSTAND THE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES FOR INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE. Connect with where people are and understand the imperatives of strategic institutional change. Find areas where the strategic imperatives for institutional change match what people have real energy for. When devising intervention strategies, connect with and follow the flow of energy rather than saying “let's fix the system.” You never want to “fix a system” because it puts you against the collective energy field. Instead, you want to align with, enchant, and be enchanted by the already existing and further emerging energy field of the future. You want to be in love with that energy, with that field of the future.

10. USE DIFFERENT LANGUAGES WITH DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS – CONNECT TO THEM FIRST IN TERMS OF WHAT THEY CARE ABOUT. Innovation in complex systems requires us to be multilingual, to connect to the various stakeholders in the system about the issues that *they* care about and that matter to *them*. Complex problems require complex solutions. That means that the currently popular

single-focus approaches are almost certain to fail. Instead we need to master the art of broadening and deepening the definition as long as necessary to get all the relevant parties – which need each other to change the existing system – committed to participate.

11. IF YOU WANT TO CHANGE OTHERS (OTHER STAKEHOLDERS), YOU NEED TO BE OPEN TO CHANGING YOURSELF FIRST. If you want to change the behavior of other players in the system and cannot force them (through the mechanism of hierarchy) or give them sufficient incentives (through bribery or in another way), then the only mechanism left is the quality of your relationship to them. That's what you must rely on. To change your target of change you need to open up to being changed yourself. Only by doing that will you build the quality of relationship that you can use to effect change at a later stage.

12. CO-INITIATE THROUGH LOCAL LEADERSHIP FROM THE HEART. All successful ventures and multi-stakeholder projects are built on the same currency: one or a few local leaders who are highly credible in their own communities because people know they are willing to give their lives to accomplish the common goal. It is that kind of leadership from the heart that constitutes the most critical currency for connecting highly diverse groups of players and stakeholders—and for helping them to discover common ground. If that local leadership does not exist, if instead the leadership comes from, say, an international consulting company, your project is likely to quickly get into trouble.

13. USE SENSING JOURNEYS THAT HELP PEOPLE TO SEE THE SYSTEM FROM THE EDGES AND USE COLLECTIVE SENSING MECHANISMS TO SEE THE SYSTEM FROM THE WHOLE. The movement of co-sensing starts with multiple sensing journeys to the edges of the system in order to get people to empathize and see the system from other angles, particularly from the view of the most marginalized members. These practices include (1) sensing journeys, (2) shadowing practices, and (3) dialogue interviews. Such activities are synthesized through collective sensing mechanisms in which the participants learn to see the system from the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders and from the perspective of the whole. Methods and tools for collective sensing sessions include (1) speaking by stepping in the shoes of various stakeholders, (2) personal story telling, (3) systems thinking, (4) scenario thinking, (5) modeling, (6) constellation practices, (7) world café, (8) social presencing theater.

14. CREATE HOLDING SPACES THAT SUPPORT THE TEAM AT THE TOP (AND THE EMERGING LEADERS) TO LEAD THEIR INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATION JOURNEY. Many of the above points focus on engaging the frontline and the edges of the system. A second focal point is necessary as well: to help the team at the top to rise to the occasion, and to help emerging leaders throughout the organization become a force of change on that transformation journey. This support can be given in many forms. But it usually involves a parallel learning structure that allows the leadership teams to reflect on the bigger picture, connect to their individual and collective journeys, connect to their sources of self, prioritize what they want to focus on individually and collectively, and learn by doing and helping each other to lead and innovate (peer coaching, case clinics).

15. **PROTOTYPE BY BEING PRESENT AND ACTING FROM THE NOW** (getting a toe-hold). Prototyping is not a thing but a process. What counts in that process is that you stop worrying about what you don't know and start acting on what you do know.

Prototyping is not complicated. It's simple. You only need to know two things: (1) the big idea, the general direction that you are moving , and (2) the immediate next step – the toe-hold that you look for when rock climbing, where you can place your foot next. That's all that counts. Almost everything else (both the past and the general future, which are the cause most of our worries, thoughts, and everyday attention) is a waste of energy. In the prototyping process we try to tune out all these worries and try to tune in to the real experience of taking the next step and attending to what is emerging from it—and then continue to build on that momentum, going with the flow.

When prototypes fail, it's mostly not a failure of the process but a failure of not following through on the process. To create the conditions for the process to work requires (1) a dedicated place (a shelter from the noise), (2) a dedicated core group that is aligned around the same intention, (3) a network of supportive stakeholders and users from throughout the larger system, (4) a concrete “0.8 prototype” that elicits feedback from partners throughout the system, (5) a never-ending resolve by the core group to push forward while integrating the valuable feedback from stakeholders (“dialogue with the universe”), (6) a mechanism that allows new partners to join the team, (7) regular review sessions that look at all the prototypes, conclude what has been learned, kill what isn't working, and strengthen what is working and looks like a gateway to future possibilities.

16. **CO-EVOLVE THE LARGER SYSTEM BY USING THE PROTOTYPES AS SEEDS FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE THROUGH LINKING MICRO-LEVEL CHANGES WITH MESO- AND MACRO-LEVEL LEADERSHIP.** The micro and frontline prototype initiatives are the seeds that key leaders throughout the system (from both the meso level such as hospital leadership and the macro level such as ministry leadership) can support and plant in other parts of the system. Making this work requires dedicated new cross-functional, cross-level, and cross-institutional leadership structures that pull together key practitioners and decisionmakers around specific topics and hands-on innovation initiatives (example: regional delivery units in the health system of Namibia that focus on maternal health).

17. **NEVER GIVE UP. NEVER GIVE UP. NEVER GIVE UP.** Every profound journey of innovation and renewal takes an enormous amount of perseverance. Important ideas, before being born into the real world, often begin with many years of failed effort on the part of the innovators. The key is: never give up. Always figure out what you can learn from failure, get back on your feet, and try again. Allowing yourself to be discouraged by failed efforts in the past is a waste of energy. It leads to being trapped in your own (and other people's) VoJ, VoC, and VoF. Doing this kind of work requires a lot of courage: the courage to jump into the space of nothingness, the courage to let go and to connect to what emerges from that nothingness. That courage is an important quality that connects us with the deeper dimensions of our being—who we really are. It's a courage that resides in the trust that we are not alone. Or, as I heard the other day from an experienced change agent and executive: “The collective always delivers.”