

“Presencing” Arrives in Minnesota

by

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Abstract: *Otto Scharmer’s Presencing has attracted considerable attention in Minnesota in recent months. Scharmer, Senior Lecturer at MIT, developed “Presencing,” a means for generating group decisions and innovations, from a theory he calls “Theory U.” Through a presentation of its impact in Minnesota and a re-telling of a Presencing event applied to a significant world problem, readers are introduced to both the theory and the method.*

Introduction

Presencing, an MIT-based approach to complex thinking, has stirred significant interest among a number of Minnesota’s foremost organizational thinkers. On October 24, 2011 a diverse network of organization development experts, management consultants, and management from some of Minnesota’s most well-known businesses and organizations gathered at a sold-out all-day Forum held at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. Concurrent to the gathering in Minnesota, MIT hosted leaders from more than 40 countries.

The focus of the gatherings, Presencing, is described on the Presencing Institute’s web site as an awareness-based social technology designed to support change-makers by “making social technologies available to change makers, innovators, and local communities around the world.”ⁱ Presencing seeks to activate a “generative listening” on the part of group participants so that they might attend to a source of ideas generated from the universal realm of mind. This type of listening is likened to a “holistic perspective that also includes the more subtle mental and intentional spiritual sources of social reality creation.”ⁱⁱ Use of Presencing now bridges numerous industries and sectors. Several organization leaders in Minnesota are now applying Presencing. In this article I summarize the theory behind Presencing, demonstrating its core principles while showing how it has captured the attention of some leading organization development practitioners in Minnesota.

Presencing and HIV/AIDS

In Southern Africa, more than 33 million individuals are infected with HIV. Despite significant efforts during the 1990s and 2000s, little headway had been made by 2000 in stemming the spread of this deadly virus. How could this pandemic be slowed? What strategy could work on such a seeming insoluble problem? One international agency focused on the problem was Oxfam International.

With guidance from an MIT professor applying Presencing, Oxfam’s leadership began to “see” differently. When Oxfam finally realized why existing approaches to the HIV/AIDS pandemic were inappropriate and ineffective it was like a light had been turned on. Oxfam, perhaps the world’s leading agency for addressing the HIV/AIDS, particularly as it relates to Southern Africa’s 33.4 million infected, suddenly saw a complex problem in a way not seen before.

In essence, the Presencing process led the leadership team to an experience of a group awareness. The group awareness included the letting go of previous ideas

about solutions to the pandemic. In an atmosphere of waiting, a new way to see the complexity of the pandemic and its potential solution, something never before suggested to their knowledge, presented itself. As the new idea emerged, it organized their perspective and led them to see the issues of HIV/AIDS as systemic and interconnected with world affairs. They began to realize that treating the problem at the local level, with better education, or access to condoms, would never address the underlying problem. This underlying problem they began to see as due to the large numbers of the area's work force having to relocate in order to earn a living, requiring months of residence away from home. Effectively addressing the pandemic now is understood as requiring a system-wide approach with large-scale changes. Currently journalists around the world routinely describe the epidemic in this systemic way.ⁱⁱⁱ

Presencing in Minnesota

Applications of Presencing use numerous tools. The Institute's web site lists a number of these, including means for conducting Case Studies, Stakeholder Interviews, Sensing Journeys, and strategies for Prototyping.^{iv} During the Minnesota conference attendees practiced forms of creative movement and mind/body awareness methods designed to assist in a Sensing Journey, as well as working with Case Studies in small group settings.

Reactions from attendees were overwhelmingly positive. One veteran organization development consultant stated that she views Presencing as "... a definite evolution in group planning and decision-making, one that has high potential for innovation and complex, systemic problem-solving. It is the next level beyond Collective Mind Mapping and other group-focused strategic planning methods." Interest in the Minnesota network continues to grow. Several events of leaders using and those beginning to use Presencing are scheduled to assist each in their familiarity with its tools and unique approach.

Roots of Presencing

Presencing is the brainchild of MIT Sloan School of Management's Senior Lecturer Otto Scharmer. Scharmer, protégé of world renowned theorist Peter Senge, identifies Presencing as rooted in the traditions of the group awareness of Confucianism, the meditative path of Shambala Buddhism, and the epistemology of Rudolph Steiner. Because of these ties to unusual sources some regard Presencing as a difficult fit for application to corporate and government settings. However, this objection, I believe comes from a lack of seeing Presencing and its underlying theory in terms more common to everyday settings. I expect that those objections will lessen as explanations regarding these sources, such as presented in this article, demonstrate their practicality in more conventional language.

Introducing Theory U

Presencing derives its methods from "Theory U," so termed by Scharmer because his description uses the shape of the letter "U." He describes the U-shaped flow in this way:

In describing the theory we move down one side of the U (connecting us to the world that is outside of our institutional bubble) to the bottom of the

U (connecting us to the world that emerges from within) and up the other side of the U (bringing forth the new into the world). On that journey, at the bottom of the U, lies an inner gate that requires us to drop everything that isn't essential. This process of letting-go (of our old ego and self) and letting-come establishes a subtle connection to a deeper source of knowing. . . Once a group crosses this threshold, nothing remains the same. Individual members and the group as a whole begin to operate with a heightened level of energy and sense of future possibility. Often they then begin to function as an intentional vehicle for an emerging future.^v

Fundamentally Scharmer advocates a new way of consciously attending to a situation, since he asserts that the way we attend determines how a situation unfolds: "I attend this way, therefore it emerges that way."^{vi} Theory U concerns the inner mental processes from which individuals operate, since it is within the person that attending and intending originate. This is a sorely needed balance to those who believe that analyzing and quantifying past data is the only way to gain insight as to how to solve complex problems and do strategic planning. It is not either or, but both—and.

Presencing gives an approach to allow individuals to attend and, consequently, intend, in a more qualitatively significant way so that new perspective can emerge to suggest solutions. This new way of attending and intending comes from leading individuals to a process whereby their heart, mind, and will are ready to interface with the field source of new perspective. Scharmer calls this, "connecting to Source." He continues with more discussion of the interior of the individual:

Across all levels, systems, and sectors we face basically the same problem: the challenges we face require us to become aware and change the inner place from which we operate. As a consequence, we need to learn to attend to both dimensions simultaneously: what we say, see, and do (our visible realm) and the inner place from which we operate (our invisible realm, in which our sources of attention and intention reside and from which they operate). . . the place from which attention (and intention) originates: habits, open mind, open heart, and open will, respectively. Every action by a person, a leader, a group, an organization, or a community can be enacted in these four different ways.^{vii}

World-renowned organizational theorist Peter Senge, provides ongoing support for the development of Presencing. One of Senge's insights concerns mental models and how they can limit thinking that is outside of the boundaries of the model. Presencing in essence is a means for accessing just that type of thinking. As such it may be a solution to the difficulties faced by so many organizations when they realize Einstein's oft-quoted maxim, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

Where to learn more

Readers can access more about Presencing in Minnesota from <http://www.incommons.org/presencing>. More of Scharmer's work can be accessed at the Presencing Institute's web site, www.presencing.com.

ⁱ <http://www.presencing.com/node/118>

ⁱⁱ *ibid.* pp. 13-14

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*, pp. 427-430

^{iv} <http://www.presencing.com/tools>

^v <http://www.presencing.com/node/110>

^{vi} O. Scharmer, "Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges" (Society for Organizational Learning, 1st Edition, Cambridge, MA, 2007) p. 13

^{vii} *ibid.*, pp. 10-11