

Review and excerpts from ***Presence***  
By Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, Betty Sue Flowers

***Presence*** is a book that describes a new theory of change and learning as it unfolds through wide-ranging conversations held over a year and a half between organizational learning pioneers Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers. The book introduces the concept of “presence” – an idea borrowed from the natural world, in which the whole is entirely present in any of its parts, and the parts exist as embodiments of the whole.

**New ways of thinking about learning:**

All learning integrates thinking and doing. In reactive learning, thinking is governed by established mental models and doing is governed by established habits of action.

Deeper levels of learning create increasing awareness of the larger whole – both as it is and as it is evolving – and actions that increasingly become part of creating alternative futures.

“We first thought of presence as being fully conscious and aware in the present moment. Then we began to appreciate presence as deep listening, of being open beyond one’s preconceptions and historical ways of making sense. We came to see the importance of letting go of old identities and the need to control and, making choices to serve the evolution of life. **This is awareness that there is an emerging future that depends on us**”.

Learning based on the past suffices when the past is a good guide to the future. But it leaves us blind to profound shifts when whole new forces shaping the future arise.

**Theory U**

Theory U consists of seven capacities and the activities they enable. Each capacity is a gateway to the next activity.

- Suspending – seeing our seeing, transforming perception
- Redirecting – seeing from the whole
- Letting go
- Letting come
- Crystallizing – envisioning what seeks to emerge
- Prototyping – realizing transforming action, enacting living microcosms
- Institutionalizing – embodying the new

**Suspending:** Seeing freshly starts with stopping our habitual ways of thinking and perceiving. Suspending does not require destroying our existing mental models of reality. Rather it entails hanging our assumptions in front of us. As we begin to be aware of our thoughts, they begin to have less influence on what we see.

**Redirection:** Entails turning attention toward the source rather than the object. Redirecting attention toward the source encompasses empathy but goes further. Like the inner work required for learning to suspend, building the capacity for redirecting attention to seeing from the whole is deeply connected to spiritual practices, such as meditation.

**Letting go and letting come:** This is compared to a death and rebirth cycle; letting go and surrendering belong to the death part of this cycle, while the coming into the presence of a different sense of self seems to belong to the early stages of a new birth. Getting to the different place that allows presence to occur begins as we develop a capacity to let go and surrender our perceived need to control. This allows us to open up to what is emerging. In the letting-come stage, the self turns into a source through which the future begins to emerge.

**Crystallizing and Prototyping:** The true nature of an emerging whole can't be fully accessed without engaging in concrete experiments, improvisation, and prototyping. What we begin to intuit starts to become clear and real for us in a totally new way once we consciously make it manifest and stay open to the feedback it elicits. Prototyping means acting on a concept before that concept is complete or perfect.

**Institutionalizing:** Performing and achieving results through new practices and infrastructures.

### Quotes

*As a learning process we can say a bit about what happens when groups complete the whole movement of the "U". Like any learning process, completion means realizing – bringing into reality enduring changes that are both external and internal.*

*Internal changes show up on two levels. First we come to embody a new capacity for action. Learning also creates new domains of meaning. It shifts our awareness and understanding.*

*The difference between good ideas and governing ideas – ideas move from good ideas to governing ideas when they become the foundation of an organization's system of governance – that is, when they become a source of decision-making*

*power. Real governing ideas must be married to processes and norms that enable people to live the organization's values and purpose.*

*Confucian theory of leadership formation rests on the idea that 'if you want to be a leader, you have to be a real human being. You must recognize the true meaning of life before you can become a great leader. You must understand yourself first.'*

### **Internal development**

If you want to be a great leader, you need to enter seven meditative spaces. These seven spaces are: awareness, stopping, calmness, stillness, peace, true thinking, and attainment. These may look like one step but actually, it is a long, long process.

When you reach true calmness of mind, then you'll be able to reach true quietness or stillness. You'll be in a state of peacefulness in which you can truly think. When you can truly think, then you can attain the goals that you're supposed to achieve.

### **Other ideas for developing capacities:**

Not everyone is interested in or capable of spending long periods of time meditating. However, everyone can learn to stop and reflect and listen. There are other experiences in life that prompt us to do just that. For example, if you immerse yourself into situations that are foreign or unfamiliar to you this will help you see how your perspective on reality is just one way of seeing. When you open your mind to learn from novel situations you can let go of your preconceived models and let new ideas come.

Another process that can lead to new insights and perspectives is group dialogue. Being part of a group with some diversity, such as a LEAD group, and engaging in open discussion, reflection, and introspection can help you see reality in new ways.

### **Highest future**

This book reminds us that there is an exciting future that is waiting to emerge through us; a future that is connected to our deepest purpose and desires, and in concert with a larger whole. This future can only emerge to the extent that we are willing and able to let go of the personas we have created, let go of the pain and the illusions of the past, let go of the desire to control, and the fear that holds us back, and then let this future come. It will come as we surrender into commitment:

- Commitment to begin operating from our deepest purpose
- Commitment to focus our attention on our intention
- Commitment to train our actions to be based in the field of the future rather than patterns of the past

