

Presencing – A Social Technology of Freedom

Interview with Dr. Claus Otto Scharmer¹

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¹ *The interview was conducted by Werner A. Leeb after a workshop on presencing in March 2002 in Austria. Otto Scharmer is a lecturer and co-founder of the MIT Leadership Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as well as a visiting professor at the Helsinki School of Economics. He also is a co-founder of the Global Institute for Responsible Leadership.*

Question: *Dr. Scharmer, what issues are you working on and researching now?*

Scharmer: I'm working on the question of why today, all over the world, we're facing a massive failure of institutions—they're "crashing" in practically all parts of society. No matter where you look, the need for major change is evident, but at the same time it's also clear that this needed change isn't taking place. Everyone wants change, everybody talks about change—and yet, more often than not we see nothing much happening. Instead, we follow the pattern of "more of the same"! For increasingly larger parts of society we're collectively producing results that no one actually wants. My question is: why is this so? And what can we do in order to sense the future and bring it into the present—into the now?

Question: *Why does this particular subject appeal so much to you?*

Scharmer: Two experiences were instrumental for me. As an activist in the European Peace Movement in the 1980s, I experienced the omnipotence of the Cold War system, materialized in the form of the Berlin Wall, first-hand and on both sides of the East-West border throughout Europe. The fall of the Wall and the opening of the Iron Curtain in 1989 taught me how shaky the foundation can be on which the apparent irrevocability of a contemporary system is based. The ground of stability on which we're standing is often only a thin skin wrapped over the sphere of chaos and "becoming." The question is: what is it, now that the East-West conflict of the 20th century is over, that characterizes the basic conflict of the 21st century? What is, then, the Iron Curtain of the 21st century? The Iron Curtain of our current era, I believe, is the "prison" formed by our collective institutional behavior patterns. We are being held tightly as never before in the grip of our past and our old patterns. How do we escape from this viselike grip?

The other experience that affected me was my work with management teams from a variety of companies and industries. What fascinated me was seeing how decision-makers everywhere are being confronted with the same challenges, and that for a company to deal successfully with these challenges a new ability to learn is required: a learning that is not based on reflecting the past, but rather on feeling, tuning in to, and "bringing-into-the-present" all future possibilities. This I refer to as "presencing."

Question: *In which situations, or with which problem areas or questions, can you provide concrete help to people or organizations with presencing?*

Scharmer: Presencing is based on an inner change of location. Presencing means: liberating one's perception from the "prison" of the past and then letting it operate from the field of the future. This means that you literally shift the place from which your perception operates to another vantage point. In practical terms, presencing means that you link yourself in a very real way with your "highest future possibility" and that you let it come into the present. Presencing is always relevant when past-driven reality no longer brings you forward, and when you have the feeling that you have to begin again on a completely new footing in order to progress. For example, my colleagues Adam Kahane, Joe Jaworski, Katrin Käufer, Ursula Versteegen, and I use the presencing approach to facilitate profound innovation and change processes both within companies and across societal systems.

Question: *Are you bound to a specific intellectual tradition?*

Scharmer: I've been influenced by many schools of thought, the German and Anglo-Saxon intellectual spheres, but also the Gandhist tradition of Southern Asia and the Buddhist-Confucian and Daoist tradition of Eastern Asia. My first two intellectual teachers were the

Gandhi-inspired peace researcher Johan Galtung, and the management researcher Ekkehard Kappler, both of whom were inspired by critical theory. Here at MIT I joined the 20th-century movement of action research in working with Peter Senge, Ed Schein, Bill Torbert, Bill Isaacs, and others. Philosophically I am inspired and influenced by the work of Heidegger and Nietzsche: Nietzsche viewed science from the perspective of the artist, and art from the perspective of life. That's why he is still important despite being so misunderstood throughout the 20th century. This interest in an enhanced notion of science also links me with the work of Bohm, Beuys, Goethe, and Steiner. What I'm really working on is a *social technology of freedom*, a method for producing a common capacity for acting from full presence in the "now."

Question: *To what degree is the subject of presencing a continuation or further development of the ideas of Peter Senge?*

Scharmer: Peter Senge's first book, *The Fifth Discipline*, brought the concept of organizational learning to a global audience. The new book that Senge, Joseph Jaworski, Betty Sue Flowers, and I have just finished expands on this approach in three directions: first, by *widening* the perspectives of teams and organizations to encompass overall socio-economic systems; second, by *deepening* the perspectives in regard to the personal depth experience and consciousness development, meaning to explicitly consider the spiritual dimension of social processes; and third, in view of the underlying learning theory, by an *expansion* of the old Kolb learning cycles—learning through reflecting on the past—through presencing, through the "becoming-present" of the highest future possibility. My forthcoming book on presencing outlines the methodological and theoretical foundations of this approach.

Question: *If the future can be "pre-sensed," then to what extent is our future open? What role does coincidence play?*

Scharmer: Presencing is the ability to act in such a way that the actions we perform originate in the coming-into-presence of the future. When acting on this level, we let go of our "small selves" and turn into vehicles for the coming-into-being of a deep evolutionary stream. How do we do this? By carrying out a certain inner work, an inner work that is related to a three-fold reversal process: turning one's thinking away from judging to exploring; the reversal of feeling away from emotional reaction to appreciation and seeing with the heart; and a reshaping of the will away from hard ego intentionality to a softer, more future-receptive will that the philosopher Martin Buber refers to as "Grand Will." The opening to future possibilities requires such reversals, that is, an inversion [*Umstülpung*] of the mental-emotional-intentional field structure. Is such a future open? Yes, every future is fundamentally open—the future is potentiality. Closure comes into play with the past, and then when this past, which continues on, juts into the present.

Question: *How far is today's "tough" management ready to go to address and get involved with subjects like spirituality and ethics?*

Scharmer: Everyday spirituality and ethics are just as powerful forces for change today as high-tech advances, globalization, and networked structures. This doesn't mean, though, that everyone accepts them. That's the beautiful thing about life—that we humans have to decide on our own what to accept or not to accept. In this sense, the question of ethics and spirituality is in the highest degree a personal one. I would agree, though, with something your question appears to be driving at—that we're dealing today with a "localized" culture clash in every organization: between those who want to lead through a technology of control, and those who seek to do this through a technology of freedom. These are two fundamentally

opposed perspectives that are colliding full-force in almost every organization and larger social system on earth.

Question: *Do you see business or socio-cultural differences between the USA and Europe? To what extent can the presencing approach be transferred to “good old Europe”?*

Scharmer: In America there is definitely a much greater openness to the spiritual dimension of leadership. What is new is “good” and not, as it often is in Europe, something that has to justify itself. But what I’m saying now is directed at the mainstream culture of the functional elites. When you speak with “normal people” you actually encounter the same thing everywhere: a much greater openness than you ever expected.

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