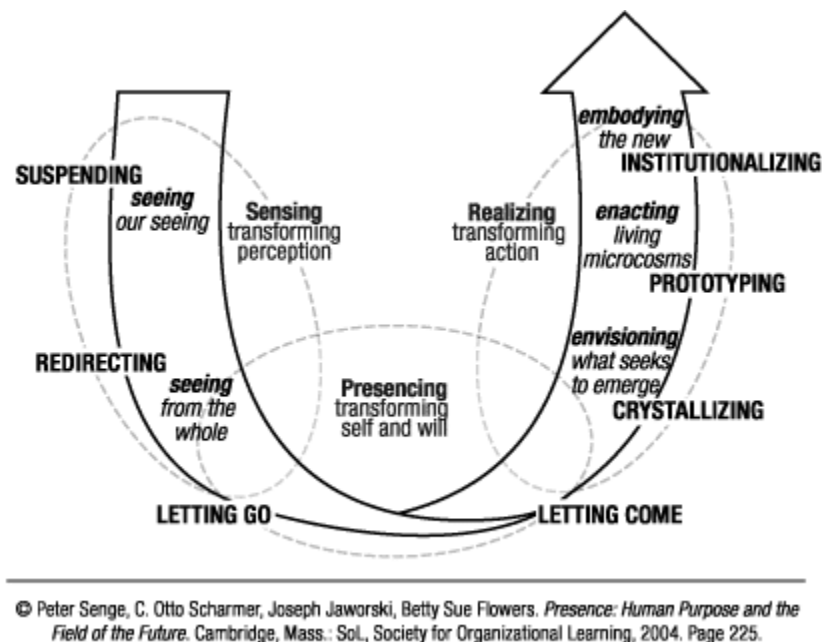


Previewing the U Theory: *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* (2004), Senge, et al
By Caroline Maguire & Garry Hesser

The book takes us on the journey through the creation of the U Theory (also referred to as U movement in the book), a model for attaining deeper levels of thinking that will lead to profound change. We will use the U Theory throughout the class as a model for critical thinking and will apply this theory to the people we meet and other topics we discuss and read about.

Note the process through which this theory is developed. A major goal for reading such a book is to understand this theory and recognize instances of this phenomenon in our personal experiences and the experiences of other individuals, communities and organizations. *Presence* represents a “summarizing” of Senge, Scharmer, Jawoski, and Flowers’ professional “lifetime” of consulting and research with a focus on systems and feedback loops as they have interviewed and consulted with hundreds, maybe thousands of leaders, organizations, communities and governments.



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Senge, Peter; Scharmer, C. Otto; Jaworski, Joseph & Flowers, Betty Sue (2004). Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society. Cambridge, MA: [The Society for Organizational Learning](#).

Reviewed by Rod Rock, Ed.D., Principal, Unionville-Sebewaing Area Elementary School, Unionville, Michigan

As organizational leaders, we first became familiar with Peter Senge through his seminal work, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (1990), in which he conceptualized the five disciplines of learning organizations, including personal mastery, mental models, systems thinking, team learning, and a shared vision. Subsequently, Senge joined with other scholars (Nelda Cambron-McCabe, Timothy Lucas, Bryan Smith, Janis Dutton, and Art Kleiner) to suggest specific strategies for transforming schools into learning organizations, in *Schools that Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education* (2000).

In the process of transforming our schools into professional learning communities, many of us have sought Senge and colleagues' (2000) wise counsel. Along the way, we celebrated our successes, adjusted our practices, and persisted through the trying times. Despite our comprehensive understandings of change processes and our tireless efforts, many of us have struggled mightily, frequently questioned our resolve, and sometimes doubted our capacity to complete these vital journeys. Hence, it is time for us to return to Senge and his colleagues for further guidance.

In his latest book, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*, Senge joined colleagues C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jowarski, and Betty Sue Flowers in sharing their individual and collective stories of self-examination and transformation through which each became *present*, or assumed the required state of mind for leading a sustainable transformation effort. In so doing, each author led, or helped others lead, his or her organization to previously unimagined levels of excellence.

In the first step of the *presencing* process, termed *suspending*, the authors challenged transformational leaders to identify the limits of their thinking, perceiving, and seeing. Herein, leaders come to realize that "most change initiatives that end up going nowhere don't fail because they lack grand vision and noble intentions. They fail because people can't see the reality they face" (p. 29). Essentially, we as leaders, and those we lead, are limited by our experiences, assumptions, and commonly held attitudes, which are rarely challenged or called into question. In order to identify our current realities, we must quiet our minds, carefully choose our words, and change our frames of reference from, "here is what I think," to "here is what has led me to see things this way" (p. 33). This type of thinking requires profound courage and collegial trust as leaders demonstrate the power of disclosing their limits.

Once leaders have identified the realities that they face, they are prepared to *redirect* their thinking by clearly focusing on the generative processes within their organizations. Here, they become aware of the fact that their organization's most pressing problems lie not out there or within the system, but in their persistent thought patterns and the limits of their attitudes and experiences. In order to accomplish this, we as transformational leaders must learn to patiently ask questions that will lead us to understand the patterns in our past failures and work to alleviate the thinking and behaving that led us to our current set of circumstances. An important question to consider at this stage in the process is, "What am I doing—in my actions, thoughts and feelings—to maintain these patterns as they are?" (p. 50).

The next steps are perhaps the most challenging, and likely the most important, *letting go* and *letting come*. In letting go, Senge and colleagues call on transformational leaders to surrender their perceived and expected needs to control. Here again, leaders become consciously aware of their thoughts, thus allowing them to experience a comfortable, almost effortless flow in leading their organizations toward excellence. Herein lies the letting come, or leading according to a higher purpose rather than a tedious set of tasks. At this point, Senge and colleagues inform us of the need to forgo our tendencies to focus on the disconnected parts of our organizations, and to begin focusing on the interconnected wholes, thus enabling leaders to overcome the unintended consequences of incessantly imposing solutions to the symptoms of rather than the actual sources of persistent problems.

Having identified our current realities, recognized the generative processes within our organizations, relinquished the need to control, and initiated a focus on wholes, we as transformational leaders have *crystallized* our intentions, or learned to see our "reality more clearly, without preconceptions or judgments" (p. 136). This realization allows leaders to act decisively and with clear intent by "tapping into and focusing on larger intentions" (p. 141). When this occurs, leaders move from "producing results to encouraging the growth of people who produce results" (p. 145).

The next step in the presencing process is *prototyping*. Here, leaders come to understand that it is only through trial and error, by doing and failing and trying again, that their creative, and perhaps most effective, solutions can manifest themselves. At this point, leaders become less sensitive to criticisms and pressures, instead learning to "listen to and set aside negative reactions" that naturally come with "not [always] getting it right" (p. 152). In acting and failing with a sense of purpose, creative leaders learn to listen to their inner voices, and to act according to the resulting intuition.

Finally, the seven-step process, defined by Senge and colleagues as *The Theory of the U*, comes to fruition in the *institutionalization* step, wherein the presencing process moves from a good idea to a natural way of leading, perceiving, and behaving. According to the authors' research, transformational leaders who realize this complete sense of presence behave according to their instincts, which are directed by a higher purpose, and perpetuated through an ability to see wholes rather than parts.

Packed with guiding ideas and practical examples, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society* serves as a terrific resource for leadership teams as they work collectively to achieve NCLB standards. The authors' comprehensive writing styles and references to literature beyond the educational community provide opportunities for deep reflection in study groups composed of educational leaders, those charged with preparing future leaders, and teams of classroom teachers.

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