

## **Learn by illuminating the blind spot**

By Ime Aznar, Contributor  
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*First of two parts*

Is it possible to bring into being profound collective changes that will lead to a shift in the way we understand, and create, the world as we know it? In *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* (published by the Society for Organizational Learning, 2004), authors Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers, affirm that it is indeed possible for global change to happen, and for people to learn to “access, individually and collectively, our deepest capacity to sense and shape the future.”

Dr. C. Otto Scharmer, one of the authors of the book, was in Manila recently for the book launch, and to give two leadership workshops for Filipino leaders. The workshops, called *Presence – Harnessing the Hidden Intelligence in the Individual and Organizations*, were two different events: a two-day Leadership Retreat held at the Meralco Management & Leadership Development Centre, and a one-day workshop in UP Diliman. The activities were organized by KARANGALAN, in partnership with Global Leadership Initiative (GLI), Center for Alternative Development Initiatives (CADI), Organizational Change Consultants International, Inc. (OCCI), and [www.truthforce.info](http://www.truthforce.info).

### **The two different sources of learning**

Dr. Scharmer received his Ph.D. in Economics and Management from Witten/Herdecke University in Germany ten years ago. From there, he went to MIT in Boston to expand his knowledge and experience in the fields of leadership and organizational learning. Within this period of ten years, Dr. Scharmer shares, his main insight was that “there are two different sources of learning, or two different learning cycles.”

First, there is learning through reflection on the experiences of the past. This method is fairly common and it’s where all the great organizational learning methods are built on. But according to Dr. Scharmer, “the challenges that we are facing as a society today are of the kind that cannot be overcome with the use of just our past learnings.” Experiential learnings may be incomplete, or inappropriate, or are sometimes the very obstacles to the shaping of solutions. The second source

of learning, therefore, has nothing to do with the past, but with “the future that is wanting to emerge.”

### **Intelligence of the heart**

Based on the results of Dr. Scharmer’s (and his co-authors’) interviews with 150 thought leaders—leading thinkers on knowledge and leadership, like inventors, entrepreneurs, scientists, social leaders, and academics—“many of the ones who had created significant innovations in their work were actually operating on the second source of knowledge.” This intelligence, or knowledge source, could be referred to as emotional intelligence, or the intelligence of the heart.

There is a method that allows leaders to link with the incipient force, the emerging future, in order to bring the possibility that they *sense*, into reality. Dr. Scharmer and his co-authors reveal that “our effectiveness as leaders depends not only on *what* we do and *how* we do it, but also on the *inner place* from where we operate, both individually and collectively.” The significance of this inner place is considered to be a blind spot in leadership research. “We don’t see and pay attention to this inner place, yet this is what matters most,” Dr. Scharmer says.

The book, *Presence*, points to the fact that there is a new view of knowledge and leadership that is emerging, and it is one that “emphasizes the quality of awareness and attention as the primary driver for high performance and creativity within and around social systems.” The book embraces a “perspective on leadership and social change that is based on the capacity of humans to illuminate the blind spot.”

### **Stuck in patterns**

Individuals and organizations today are stuck in patterns where solutions are arrived at through the process of *downloading*, or taking an existing framework and applying it to the situation at hand. With downloading, people simply react to the past, leading to the creation of results that nobody really wants. No profound change actually happens, and even the future becomes blocked because leaders keep on looking at the past, and basing their actions on past experience.

There is a need for a process that will take us deeper, and allow us to “see, sense, and realize new possibilities in ourselves, our institutions and organizations, and in society itself.” This process is what the book teaches. The authors believe that we are capable of creating an awareness of the whole, and that we can see and act such that the whole evolves, and our highest possibilities are realized.

*To be continued...*

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*(Conclusion)*

To bring a possibility into reality, leaders must link the *present* with the future that they are *sensing* (presencing), or the future that wants to emerge. Dr. Scharmer outlines this creative process in three steps: the open mind, the open heart, and the open will.

### **The open mind**

“Change initiatives fail because leaders are unable to see the reality,” Dr. Scharmer reveals. An open mind is related to a person’s power to see. People have to learn to see with fresh eyes, to suspend judgment, and to “observe, observe, observe.” This is the very opposite of *downloading*. It is opening up and immersing oneself in the context of one’s experience.

Francesco Varela, one of the leading cognition scientists, told Dr. Scharmer about an experiment with newborn kittens. The newborn cats, blind at birth, were bundled in pairs of two, putting one kitten on top of the other. The top cats and the bottom cats were doing the same movement in space, but only the bottom cats were doing the legwork, the upper cats were getting the free ride. The result: only the lower cats learned how to see, the upper cats remained blind.

Perception, therefore, is an experience. “It is an activity where you have to perform, where the whole organism must activate its senses and go out into the world,” Scharmer explains. He further ventures to say that “the way many organizations are organized, they are like the upper cats; Others tell them what the reality is, then they implement it.” But if a person or an organization truly wants to create innovations, to make new things, they have to use their own senses. Scharmer believes that for change initiatives to be effective, individuals and organizations must “go out there themselves, get out of their bubble, and move out into the context that is relevant.”

## **The open heart**

We can operate from the emerging future, by accessing a different source of intelligence—what was earlier referred to as the intelligence of the open heart. To do this, people must retreat and reflect, or go to an “inner place of stillness, then listen and make sense of it.”

As we do this, there are two important questions that we must ask ourselves. The “two root questions of creativity” are: Who is my Self? And What is my Work? The Self, with a capital S, is not the “current ego, but a person’s highest future possibility.” Work, with a capital W, is not the “current job, but a person’s real calling or higher purpose.” Dr. Scharmer observed that “the people who are highly creative in their lives were not born different; the only difference between people who are creative and those who are not is that creative people create a place in their everyday lives that allows them to link up with these two root questions.”

“Majority of the most creative people that I interviewed actually have a practice—meditation, going out into nature, creating a place of silence, prayer,” Dr. Scharmer reveals. When people connect with their inner place, they are able to perform effectively throughout the day, amidst all the clutter of everyday life. People have to deal with stressful events, one way or the other. Scharmer explains, “We can actually control some of these, but not all; *But* what we can control is the inner place from where we operate when we’re responding to the chaos.”

## **The open will**

When we have learned to see, and have learned to access an inner source of knowing, ideas will come next. As they come, it is important to “act in an instant, or bring them into action very quickly.” Dr. Scharmer calls this “prototyping,” or “building a landing strip for the future.” He advises people and organizations to “start doing something before your head figures it out.”

By accessing this “intelligence of the hands,” we learn to do something, even if we fail. We can learn more effectively by doing, and when we get feedback about our work. He advises people to actually “do something in order to fail, and then you iterate, iterate, iterate.”

The important thing is to just build this *landing strip*, then help will come. It’s all about believing, taking a risk, then going boldly into an unknown territory. “Once you make a commitment, or develop an intention, then and only then will the doors open and the right people will begin to show up,” he says emphatically. According

to Dr. Scharmer, this source of help is available to us much more than we usually think.

To help execute powerful changes in the world, individuals and organizations are urged to “create living microcosms of the future, in certain areas where we can prototype the future that we want to have.” Once these places are there, more positive things can be built around them. This is society’s great task.

As individuals, we can begin by actually doing our work. Dr. Scharmer believes that people should connect what they do in their jobs or everyday work (work with a small w), with their real Work (with the big W). “Do what you love and love what you do,” he says, “it’s not always easy, but it’s a journey.”

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