# Presencing:

# Illuminating the Blind Spot of Leadership

### Foundations for a Social Technology of Freedom[1]

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## Introduction

The purpose of this book is to lay out the foundation for a new social science and technology that incorporates an attention-based view. This approach illuminates the architecture of attention that people use when creating and enacting their worlds.

### A Blind Spot

There is a blind spot in the social sciences as well as in our everyday social experience. This blind spot concerns the inner place from which an action—what we do—originates. We are usually well aware of *what* we do and what others do; we also have some understanding of the process: *how* we do things, the processes we and others use when we act. And yet, there is a blind spot: usually we are unable to answer the question "Where does our action come from?" The blind spot concerns the (inner) *source* from which we operate when we do what we do—the quality of attention that we use to relate to the world.

I first began thinking about this blind spot when talking with the former CEO of Hanover Insurance, Bill O'Brien. He told me that his greatest insight after years of conducting corporate change and organizational learning projects was that "the success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor." That sentence struck a chord. What counts is not only *what* leaders do and *how* they do it, but the *inner place* from which they operate.

I also realized that organizations, institutions, and societies as a whole have this blind spot—not only individuals. Maybe, it occurred to me, what really sets successful organizations and societies apart has to do with that dimension Bill O'Brien was talking about: the inner place from which a person, an organization, or a system operates.

This book is based on my post-doctoral research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1994 through 2002. It integrates 130 interviews with thought leaders in organization, strategy, cognition, and leadership around the world, as well as the results of various action learning and research projects with leaders of companies and grass-roots movements in the United States, Europe, and Japan (including those of Glaxo, SmithKline, Federal Express, Shell Oil, Fujitsu, and McKinsey & Company).

In participating in and observing these projects I realized that there is a piece missing from current social learning theory. Virtually all established learning theories and practices are based on the Kolb type of experiential learning: learning based on reflecting the experiences of the past. However, in working with various leadership teams across sectors and industries I realized that leaders cannot meet the challenges they face by operating on a past-driven learning cycle. I sensed that leaders and organizations needed a different learning cycle that would allow people to sense what wants to emerge and then to actualize it. I wondered whether there could be a cycle based on learning from the not-yet-embodied experiences of

the future—from our sensing of an emerging future—rather than from the experiences of the past.

Such a theory did not exist. Also, a number of people considered the question misleading rather than helpful. The only way to learn, these individuals argued, is from the experiences of the past. Learning from the future is neither possible nor a useful task to pursue, they said: it contributes to creating confusion rather than clarity. I argue that we cannot solve many of today's most pressing challenges by limiting ourselves to the answers and experiences of the past.

**An Archeology of Social Fields**

This book explores and maps the topography of this invisible territory. I refer to this invisible territory as a 'field' because a field is, as every farmer knows, a living system—just as the earth is a living organism. I grew up on a farm in northern Germany. One of the first things my father, one of the pioneers of biodynamic farming in Germany, taught me, was that the living quality of the soil is the most important thing in agriculture. Each field, he explained to me, has two aspects: the visible, which is what we see above the surface; and the invisible, which is what we find below the surface. The quality of the yield—the visible result—is a function of the quality of the soil, of those elements of the field that are invisible to the eye.

My thinking about social fields starts exactly at that point that my father emphasized: that fields are the *grounding condition*, the living soil from which grows that which *later on* becomes visible to the eye. And just as every good farmer focuses all his attention on sustaining and enhancing the quality of the soil, every good organizational leader focuses all her attention on sustaining and enhancing the quality of the social field that she is responsible for.

Each Sunday my parents took me and my brothers and sister on a *Feldgang*—a field walk—across the fields of our farm. Once in a while my father would stop and pick up a piece of soil or maybe dig a little below the surface so that we could see the different types and structures of soil. The living quality of the soil, he explained, was contingent upon a whole host of living entities—such as earthworms—whose work is necessary for the soil and the earth to breathe and to evolve as a living system.

Very much in the same spirit, this book is a about a field walk across *social fields.* And just as we did during the *Feldgang* when we were kids, once in a while in this book we will stop and pick up a little piece of data that we want to pay attention to in order to better understand the subtle textures, structures, and principles that are involved in the co-evolution of social fields.

The issue in working with social fields is that we haven't yet learned how to see below the surface, how to decipher the subtle structures and principles of the territory underneath. We

haven't got the proper methods and tools yet that would allow us to dig beneath the surface to learn what otherwise would remain invisible.  And yet, as every practitioner or experienced consultant knows, it is this invisible territory that is the most important when it comes to creating the conditions for high performance in teams, organizations, and larger ecologies.  As McKinsey's Jonathan Day once summarized when I interviewed him about his experience in helping major global corporations go through fundamental change processes: "What's most important is invisible to the eye."

The purpose of the field walk is to learn to see what so far has largely remained invisible: the full process of *coming-into-being* of social action, the creation of a social reality. Just as the plant starts growing long before we see the sprout above the soil surface, the coming-into-being of social reality starts before people behave and interact. This invisible territory beneath the surface is what I explore and describe throughout this book.
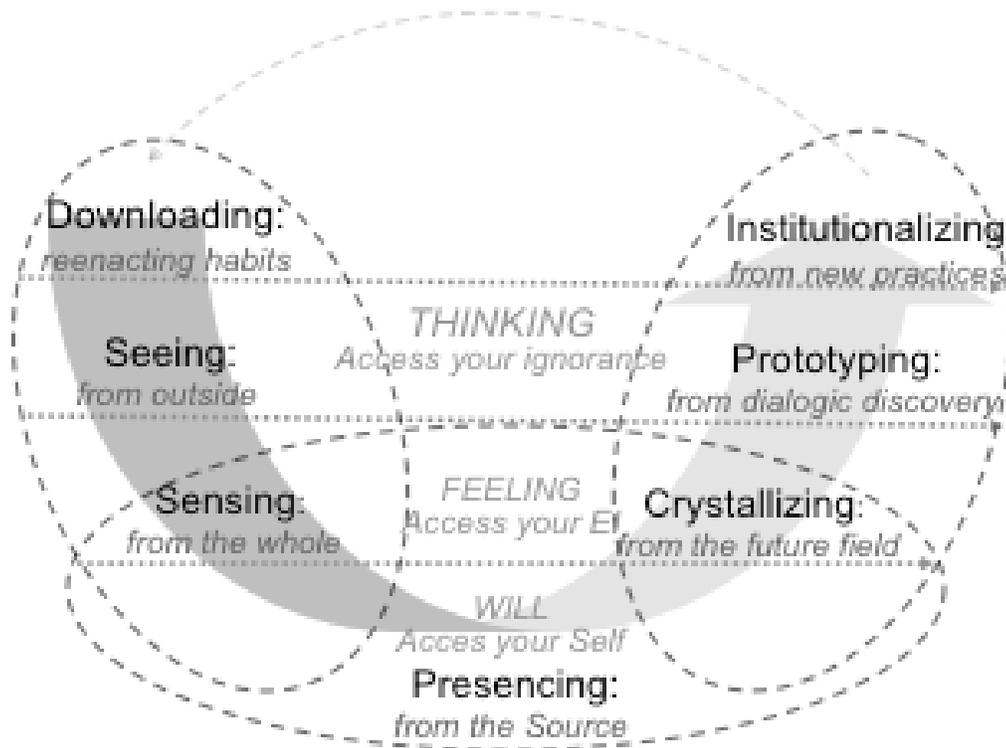
**Seven Archetypal Field Structures of Attention**

The unit of analysis, to use social science terminology, that I focus on concerns the 'field structure of attention.' In my research I found that the attention of the actor, group, or organization is exactly the blind spot that corresponds to the invisible quality of the field underneath the surface. The term 'field structure of attention' allows me to get my arms around a surface layer of social fields that is still somewhat accessible to scientific observation. Just as my father taught me that the most vital layer of the soil is right at the surface, where the ground is permeated by light and air, in social fields the corresponding area is where the light of consciousness—our attention—meets and is permeated by that which normally is in the background of our awareness—the *structure* based upon which we pay attention to the world. Each field structure of attention embodies a particular type of relationship between the self and the world. Each one makes visible what otherwise is not: the deeper tacit ground out of which social systems are enacted moment by moment.

I have identified seven archetypal field structures of attention that map the territory of the blind spot (see figure 1).  They are:

1.  Downloading: projecting habits of thought  (seeing 0)
2.  Seeing: precise observation from outside (seeing 1)
3.  Sensing: perception from within the field/whole (seeing 2)
4.  Presencing: perception from the source/highest future possibility (seeing 3)
5.  Crystallizing vision and intent (seeing/acting from the future field)
6.  Prototyping living examples and microcosms (in dialogue with emerging environments)
7.  Embodying the new in practices, routines, and infrastructures.

Figure 1: The U-Process of Presencing: Seven Field Structures of Attention

These seven field structures of attention describe seven different ways of relating the self to the world.  The texture of most of these field structures of attention will be quite familiar to the reader.  The one probably least familiar is that of *presencing*, a term that blends the two words "pre-sensing" and "presence." It means to pre-sense and bring into presence one's highest future potential. Every human being and social system has the potential to activate this deeper capacity. And yet, although most people have had small pockets of this experience in their lives, they are quick to add that this level of operating is not only very difficult to sustain but also seems almost impossible to perform on a collective, or institutional, level. In most organizations, people spend the most time in the mode of downloading, not in the mode of sensing or presencing the best future potential.

In spite of that, most leaders and managers say that they do not intend to repeat the patterns and mistakes of the past. What is missing, though, is the social leadership technology that would allow them to shift from learning from the past to learning from presencing emerging futures.

**The U-Process: Towards a Social Technology of Freedom**

The essence of this book is an initial sketch of this new social technology—a social technology of freedom. The core of this technology revolves around illuminating the blind spot by learning to use one's self as the vehicle for the coming-into-being of one's future potential. Viewed from this angle, leadership is the capacity *to shift the inner place from which a system operates.* And the most important tool in this leadership work is the leader him- or herself, and his or her capacity to make that shift first.

The seven field structures of attention and their underlying principles apply to the evolution of *all* systems (individuals, groups, institutions, ecosystems, and so forth). They provide a method for producing a common capacity to act from full presence in the "now." They also introduce a language to articulate a universal social grammar for bringing forth new worlds.[1]

Presencing is both an individual and a collective phenomenon. The point of the presencing theory is that, for a social system to go through a profound process of transformation, the process must cross a subtle threshold, a threshold that throughout the book is referred to as the eye of the needle. The eye of the needle is the Self—our highest future possibility, both individually and collectively.

The U-process of presencing involves moving through three fundamentally different gestures of awareness:

> opening up to the world outside: becoming one with the world *(sensing),*

> opening up to the world inside: becoming one with one's deepest source of future potential *(presencing),* and

> bringing the future potential into reality *(actualizing).*

Whenever I have seen a group going through the deep process of presencing—that is, shifting the place of operating to their deepest source of creativity—three things happen from an experiential point of view:

> a transformation of social space: decentering and collapsing social boundaries;
> a transformation of social time: slowing down to stillness; and
> a transformation of self: collapsing the boundaries of the ego ("self") and bringing into reality one's highest future potential ("Self").

The noticeable outcomes of this process include a heightened level of self, energy, and commitment; significant long-term changes; and an ongoing field reality that can be tapped and activated later.

At the bottom of the U there is a point of inversion (*Umstülpung*), which is referred to as *the point* of presencing or the eye of the needle. As we approach that deep threshold, as

economist Brian Arthur once put it, "everything that is not essential has to go away." And yet the entire *process* of presencing includes not only crossing this deep threshold, but also the opening process that is before and the co-creation process that follows, involving all seven spaces or field structures of attention listed above.

The process of modernization over the past centuries has led separate disciplines to use each of the three gestures and their underlying methodologies described above. Disciplines that use the first gesture include those that require precise observation (science, phenomenology, creative arts). Disciplines that use the second gesture include the contemplative and meditative traditions of the world that focus on exploring one's deep essence (Buddhist, Daoist, Confucianist, Hinduist, Shamanist, and Western meditation practices). Disciplines that use the third gesture include engineering and design, architecture, and the creative arts. While the developments of the past largely revolved around differentiating and separating these three bodies of methodology, I believe that the developments of the future will result from reintegrating all three gestures into a new synthesis of science, art, and the praxis of bringing forth new worlds.

### Leadership as Collective Meditation in Action

Changing one's method of leadership, when defined as shifting the place from which a system operates, involves a deep cultivation and inversion (*Umstülpung*) of one's quality of attention. The thresholds that mark the gates between the field structures of attention on the left arm of the U involve:

the inversion of thinking: from being bound by judgmental reactions to opening up one's thoughts as a gateway to perception and apprehension ("access your ignorance")

the inversion of feeling: from being bound by emotional reactions to opening up one's heart as a gateway to sensing—to enhanced perception and apprehension ("access your emotional intelligence")

the inversion of will: from being bound by old intentions and identities to letting go of them and opening up to one's higher self as gateway to presencing the new that wants to emerge ("access your Self").

### Dialogic Action Research: Interweaving the First-, Second-, and Third-Person Views

The methods deployed in the field walk ahead are three: dialogue, phenomenology, and action research. All three methods look at the same key issue, the constitution of knowledge, reality, and self. All three follow the dictum of Kurt Lewin, the founder of action research: "You cannot understand a system unless you change it." But each method has a different point of departure: phenomenology uses the first-person point of view (individual consciousness); dialogue uses the second-person point of view (fields of conversation); and action research uses the third-person point of view (enactment of institutional patterns and structures). These three perspectives will interweave and grow together as the field walk unfolds.

## Structure

The first part of the field walk deals with different aspects of the blind spot. The blind spot is described in terms of experience (the self), leadership (source of action), organizational learning (learning from the future rather than the past), systems theory (deep field conditions from which social systems arise), as well as capitalism and democracy. For each aspect I would make the same point: that there is a blind spot in the current theory and practice of leading, learning, and change—and that the blind spot concerns the deeper source, the inner place from which an individual or a system operates.

The second part of the field walk explores illuminating the blind spot. This journey highlights some key insights of the 130 "thought leaders" I interviewed and plumbs the depths of various transformational change processes. The seven chapters of the second part feature the seven different architectures of attention, seven ways of relating to the world.

The third part of the field walk crystallizes the learnings of the field exploration into something that I hope readers will find useful in their own lives. The methods and tools offered in this section include twelve principles, a field theory of listening and dialogue, and a field theory of institutional evolution. I close with a proposal for reinventing the 21st-century university based on the principles and practices outlined throughout this book.

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**Websites**:
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[1] I thank Reinhard Kahl for suggesting this expression to me.