



PRESENCE OF MIND: “NOT KNOWING” MAY LEAD TO NEW ANSWERS

BY KRIS GIRRELL



**Presence:
An Exploration of
Profound Change
in People,
Organizations, and
Society**

by Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers

When was the last time you were in a meeting and someone said, “Stop thinking so much!” or “I don’t want you to come up with a quick answer to this problem!”? It doesn’t happen often, but according to a book by Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers, maybe it should.

Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society (Currency, 2006) is a profound book that hasn’t made it onto Oprah’s list yet and, as a result, might not have the kind of popularity it deserves in the working world. It presents a fascinating perspective about the process of tuning into the greater wisdom of the group and the world around us in decision-making, leadership, and life in general.

Letting Go, Letting Come

Presence struck a chord with me, as I have struggled to find the words to express the application of Einstein’s principle that the level of understanding that leads to the awareness of a problem is not the level of understanding required to solve that problem. If that is true, then where does that jump in understanding come from?

The common short answer is that when we discuss our problem with another person or group, we have access to the group’s knowledge and ideas. This often reaches beyond our

own knowledge limits. Many times, a group can come up with an answer when an individual cannot. There are also times that neither the individual nor group has the answer. At these times, we need to trust that there is an answer—even if we don’t have it yet—and a process to find it.

This can be a difficult concept for leaders who believe we must have all the answers. That’s what makes a leader effective and successful, right? Often, as leaders, we are asked to make decisions with far too little information or when we simply feel underprepared. And in certain situations, we may not have any experience at all. It is in these times that we need to draw on a greater source than our own knowing.

Senge and his colleagues describe this process as “letting go” and “letting come”—letting go of our preconceived answers and allowing the greater wisdom of the collective world to come into us. We can then begin to see an answer emerge. The crucial element in this process is getting to a point where you have let go of all of your answers and your need to be the source of the answers. Somewhat akin to the old Zen story of the master who fills the student’s teacup to overflowing to demonstrate that it is not until the student empties his cup (his mind) that the teacher can begin to put in new ideas.

The Ultimate Source of Knowing

It may sound metaphysical, but it is a powerful process. Here’s how to give it a try: Next time you face a dilemma—personal, work, or family—catch yourself in the moment of “not knowing.” It is important to admit out loud that you don’t know. It is our “knowing”

that gets in the way, and the admission of not knowing that opens the door. Instead of seeing not knowing as the end of the line, see it as the beginning of discovery.

Next, try looking at the situation from the outside in. How does it look from another’s perspective? How does it fit into the world? What might be “wanting to happen” if you weren’t there? Ask all the questions that don’t make sense (remembering that if it made sense, it would fit within your “already known” answer set). Try starting a sentence without knowing the end of it, and the answer may come as you speak. For example, say, “It’s obvious that what I really need to do is ...” “Run headlong into the end of the sentence without thinking—thinking, after all, is the enemy of the process of “letting come.”

Throughout the millennia, scientists and philosophers have asserted that there exists a collective wisdom that is far greater than anything any one person can surmise. The great Zen masters teach that everything that is known and yet to be known already exists in the present; we just can’t see it. What if you could tap into that source of wisdom? What questions would you ask? Which questions, decisions, and dilemmas would you no longer avoid out of fear of not knowing the answer first? This process might just be the key to unlock that source—the ultimate source of knowing. ■

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