

College of Business Book Review by Terry Kinnear

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

Authors: Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers

Publisher: Doubleday

Publication: 2005

Length: 289 pages

Price: \$27.95

Reading time: 6 hours

Reading rating: 4 (1 = very hard, 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 3 (1 = average, 4 = outstanding)

"Presence" addresses the dramatic change needed in our dangerously imbalanced world. Attention is placed on this larger whole, but the necessity of learning and change within individuals, groups, business organizations, and beyond is stressed.

The concept, presence, is rooted in the natural world and refers to the whole as being "entirely present in any of its parts." The authors' view is that nature, the organizations within which we work, and all other institutions cannot be understood as being "assembled from replaceable parts," but only as related, dynamic living systems.

Transformational changes in awareness, learning and subsequent innovation are necessary if "the conditions for life on the planet" are to improve. These call for actions that serve the whole, as it is and as it is evolving, recognizing decisions become part of creating a desirable future. Deeper levels of learning that individuals and organizations typically practice are imperative.

"Presence" reminds us of the human tendency to accept one form of reality. Alternatively, we can more fully understand ourselves and what drives our thinking and seeing. We must cease being influenced by "habitual ways," both individually and collectively, and see reality with multiple possibilities. The impetus for this is whether we want to change how we live and work, especially in terms of the natural environment.

The book continues with emphasis on the Self. To develop awareness of the world and ourselves, the authors quote Michael Ray as asking, "What is my Work?" Individually, as well as at the organizational level, we must confront matters such as the purpose of our existence. Do we choose to engage in efforts that are "life-destroying or life-enhancing?"

Third, the book attends to actualizing change, largely through realizing connections with forces beyond ourselves through visioning. A vision, to the authors, must be of practical value and not some lofty notion of a future.

Finally, dramatic change requires a leader to have a "cultivated self." Based on Confucian work, a leader must be a genuine human being, deeply understanding the Self and recognizing life's meaning. The leader acts on the basis of wisdom and addresses

underlying causes, not symptoms, of difficulties. Every choice made has effects and if the current health of the world is to be transformed there must be acceptance and understanding of the ability to enhance the world systemically.

"Presence" is influenced by Buddhism and other Eastern thought and practice; it is rich in the work and thinking of individuals ranging from Albert Einstein to Dee Hock, Visa's first CEO, and Nelson Mandela.

Visa is used to illustrate a favorable change in defining banking and payment systems, while Nazi Germany reflects a movement intent on serving a very different kind of future. Attention to real business, governmental, religious and other organized efforts enhances understanding of the book's purpose.

Diagrams, however, are mixed in value. They range from elementary to being underdeveloped and there does not appear to be logic to when and where illustrations are presented.

This is not an easy book to read. Its purpose is definable, but the underlying processes of transformational change are still being developed and clarified. There is much offered that is abstract, including concepts used throughout the book.

In conclusion, "Presence" is consistent with contemporary thinking about multiple realities, realizing the constraints of our assumptions, and the need for businesses to go beyond serving themselves or a narrowly defined environment. This book will be only useful to readers who are sensing something amiss with their larger purpose in life and their organizations.

Terry Kinnear is associate professor of management in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. His current professional interests include virtually all topics addressing the well being of people in the workplace. For previously reviewed books, visit the Internet at www.wcu.edu/cob/.