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Time and time again, senior executives are challenged to transcend their personal limitations. This often relates to the way their behavior is perceived. They may be brusque with people, or somewhat disorganized, or easily distracted, or they may act out of their depth in some other way. They discover they must change if they hope to keep the loyalty of the rest of the enterprise. They have to learn to communicate and make decisions in new ways that may feel uncomfortable at first.

To grow in this way, leaders need to think of themselves in terms of the whole person: the intellect, the emotions, the relationships, and even — or perhaps especially — the physical body. That's one of the insights inherent in a form of organizational intervention known as social presencing theater (SPT). With roots in contemplative practice, dance choreography, and organizational culture work, this practice is yielding insights into the nature of managerial prowess. It gives leaders a way to think about the relationships

that have formed in the enterprise around them, their own unconscious role in reinforcing those relationships (even if they're destructive), and the example they as leaders set for others. All these elements have to adapt and shift in unison.

An SPT session is like a human sculpture, in which members of the organization arrange themselves as a model of the system they work within. They are assigned to play the part of one another onstage, and to stand and move in ways that evoke the unspoken but real tensions and connections of the enterprise. Suddenly, they see who's not communicating with whom (but needs to be), which supposed allies (who claim to share the same goals) actually oppose each other, and where the isolation and frustration points prevent high-performance work from getting done.

Several methods similar to SPT exist, going back to the psychodrama methods developed by Austrian psychiatrist Jacob L. Moreno in the early 1900s. Today, C. Otto Scharmer and Arawana Hayashi are prominent among researchers in the field. Scharmer, originally from Germany, is a senior lecturer at MIT and a Thousand Talents Program profes-

sor at Tsinghua University. He is the author of *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* (Berrett-Koehler, 2009, rev. 2016), which presents a theory of leadership transformation based on the relationship between awareness and action. Hayashi is a choreographer and *acharya* (teacher) of meditation affiliated with the Shambhala tradition of Buddhism. A pioneer in the use of body awareness to facilitate leadership development, she is credited as the main developer of social presencing theater.

Scharmer and Hayashi are co-founders of the Presencing Institute, a global action research network created with, among others, Peter Senge, the influential organizational

they're not equipped for the challenges they're facing. Are the challenges really tougher than they were in the past?

SCHARMER: Certainly there is a higher level of global scale and interdependence. Businesses and governments collectively create results that no one wants — in terms of environmental destruction or economic inequity. People are burned out, or they feel a lack of real connection or anxiety in some profound way. Whether or not that's different, many decision makers are aware that a different approach to business and government is necessary. But they don't know exactly how to change their approach, and the professional

Two new skills are required to achieve this. One is bringing the right kind of stakeholders together in each local community: nongovernmental organizations, businesses, government. The second is applying process and leadership techniques that allow all of these stakeholders to work together effectively, focused on the well-being of everyone in the system, not just their silo.

S+B: Some leaders have a knack for this. But you're talking about broadening the skill to a much larger group of people.

SCHARMER: That's exactly right. One of the main problems of leadership, particularly in the United States, is that it's seen as an attribute of individuals. It should be seen as the capacity of a *system* to sense and actualize emerging future possibilities. In other words, you need to activate collective leadership capacity. If you're a business executive, for instance, you cannot be successful without influencing the behavior of other stakeholders, inside and outside your company. Many of them cannot be controlled through your hierarchy. That means the most important mechanism you have is the quality of your relationships. You build that through a higher quality of listening and conversation. These so-called soft skills are even more relevant when you deal in complex global activities.

And if we, as a society, continue going through disruption, then these skills are essential. Major systems will be reinvented in the face of the ecological, economic, and political crises going on today. There is also arguably a spiritual crisis: People feel a disconnect from the possibilities of the future. They experience this disconnect as burnout, depression, and

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learning theorist. Scharmer and Hayashi also co-created (along with six others) an MIT MOOC (massive open online course) called *Leading from the Emerging Future*, designed for people seeking to be at the forefront of profound environmental, social, and personal transformation. The course has attracted 100,000 registered users since 2015. Scharmer and Hayashi met with *strategy+business* at MIT in Cambridge, Mass., in late 2016, and updated the interview with us in mid-2017.

S+B: The current interest in deep personal interventions such as social presencing theater suggests that leaders are beginning to realize

schools don't teach the personal skills you need to address these challenges successfully.

For example, the government of Scotland, which is considered an innovator in public-sector practices, is trying to address the problem of income inequality in its communities by changing the way services are delivered. Government representatives are going directly to local communities and helping activate the capacity of people and groups who live there. They call that process asset-based community development (ABCD). ABCD requires complex community development practices — as opposed to each government agency operating in a silo and managing its local groups directly.

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maybe the risk of suicide. The old business models, which in many cases were based on continued marginal innovation, won't work in this context. Business leaders need to step back, look at themselves and their current reality from new angles, and then prototype new approaches. That's what we have used social presencing theater for.

A Map of Emotional Experience

S+B: How do you define social presencing theater?

SCHARMER: It is a method for helping organizations and larger social systems get in touch with the knowledge they already have about the deep interpersonal structures that inhibit real change from happening. It's not the only method, but it's one that we have found very effective. Business leaders often lack a map of the emotional experience in a situation — who is in the center, who is ignored, where the blind spots are. Social presencing theater creates a shared map that people can use as a reference point in visualizing some of the deeper systemic issues that inhibit progress. People feel a stronger emotional connection to the system as a whole. The method shows where

groups are stuck today, where they could be going tomorrow, and what the real issues are in moving from here to there.

HAYASHI: We ask the individuals involved in a difficult situation to come into a room and express their part of it by making a shape with their body. They don't play themselves — they volunteer for the roles

crushing feeling." Or "I am very far away from everyone and ignored."

Then the second person comes in, finds a place in the room relative to the first person, makes his or her body shape, and offers a sentence. Then the next person, and the next. Each one has to make a decision about how big or small to be, and what vertical level to occupy. They can stand on a chair if they want, lie

“Business leaders often lack a map of the emotional experience in a situation — who is in the center, who is ignored.”

of others, including key people in the organization; departments; and categories of people like suppliers, union members, and customers.

After the first participant poses in the body shape he or she has chosen, we ask, "If your body shape had something to say about this person, what would that be?" The reply is one sentence from the perspective of the role being played: "I am just settling into this company." Or "I don't know where to look." Or "There's a

flat on the ground, or sit in the middle. They decide where in the sculpture they belong: In the center? In the periphery? Which direction are they looking? Sometimes people feel so disconnected, they stand in a far corner of the sculpture, not even in the playing field.

After all the players have entered the current reality sculpture and spoken their sentences, we give them a chance to adjust to fit one another's presence. They go through a little

reflective process: seeing where in the sculpture they are, getting a deeper sense of their experience, letting go of any thoughts or plans, and remaining in an open space of not knowing and of possibility.

Lots of thoughts are coming up and we try to suspend them — that is, consider them and let them go without reaction or judgment. We ask participants to feel their physical body, the space they're in, and their relationships with one another, without too much analysis. Sooner or later, somewhere in the sculpture, someone starts to move. They might stretch or adjust their shape, or perhaps move up to somebody else and put a hand on their shoulder. You can't predict what that first motion will be, but it sets everyone else in motion. They all move for a bit and then they crystallize into another sculpture, with different positions. The shift is based on a body-knowing rather than on a head-knowing. This new sculpture offers insights, surprises, and more clarity into the possibilities for change.

S+B: Because they're becoming more aware of themselves?

HAYASHI: Maybe. Maybe it's that they're a little more honest. Or maybe they are simply expressing their own sense of affection and appreciation for life.

We finish by asking each of them to speak one sentence, from their new body shape and place in this second social sculpture. After each one speaks, others can debrief, but only with direct perceptions of what they saw, sensed, or did. "When I saw you turn aside, I felt angry" or "I saw that the customer moved very quickly to the periphery." We wait until this debrief is complete, and then we conduct an

open dialogue about what happened and what it meant.

S+B: What do the shapes and the movement of the bodies tell you?

HAYASHI: One thing I love about the work: It's beautiful. Most of these people don't have any background in dance. But they make gestures and shapes that express so deeply what it is to be a human being with other people. You can feel the groundedness of people, how much they attend to others, how they're listening to one another — or not. It's not like a literal interpretation of body language, where one type of movement is supposed to mean strength and another means weakness, or whatever. It has more to do with the quality with which each person gestures and then waits in his or her shape. The overall sculpture tells you so much about what it is to be a human being in an organization with others; then, with any luck at all, the final sculpture shows you something that's more sane, healthy, and well-connected.

A Company Takes the Stage

S+B: You worked closely with the women's apparel business Eileen Fisher, using social presencing theater to come to an understanding of the company's leadership issues. What happened?

HAYASHI: Some of us in the Presencing Institute got to know this company several years ago when Eileen [founder of the eponymous US\$300 million company] wanted to make some changes. She was coming more into the public eye in terms of sustainability, and she felt a need for more emphasis on the personal development and well-being of everyone working there.

SCHARMER: There were some blind spots in the company. Some departments were energetic and creative, but others were less engaged, including some related to customer service and customer experience.

HAYASHI: The company conducted a social presencing theater session in which people reflected on their relationships with Eileen Fisher herself as well as their relationships with customers. After that workshop, Eileen became more committed to making personal development not only available, but part of the organizational culture in a way that would affect everyone. She was already doing some of this intuitively, but now there were a number of small changes. For example, they paused in meetings for moments of silence; they held sensing journeys across their supply chain, [in which] teams of employees visited suppliers to better understand how they worked; they began explicitly referring to customers as their "community." And so on. They also expanded the communication about cultural values out to everyone in the company, from the IT staff to the store clerks.

More recently, we made a video about this work with Eileen [available on strategy-business.com], and we did another SPT session with Antoinette Klatzky, the cofounder and executive director of the Eileen Fisher Leadership Institute. She and others there had created a curriculum for the Learning Lab, a lifelong learning center sponsored by the institute [and since renamed Eileen Fisher LifeWork]. The curriculum included meditation and arts-based practices, to bring out the whole person. They had offered it not just to full-time employees, but also to oth-

er workers in the companies that supplied [the business] Eileen Fisher. But people didn't seem to be interested in the curriculum the way she had hoped they would be.

So we brought together a small group of people for a social presencing theater session, to look at the relationships between parts of the company and the mission of the Learning Lab. As the sculpture unfolded, some people were positioned closer to the center, which included being closer to the person representing Eileen, while others were farther away, on the periphery. And some of the peripheral figures were lying down on the floor, not easily joining in, not really taking care of themselves. There was a sadness coming to the surface, produced by the way this cluster of people had arranged themselves. They seemed kind of downtrodden, like they didn't have a real place in the company. Then the sculpture shifted, moving into the next phase, representing a potential future, and everyone arranged themselves into a more cohesive overall pattern.

When Eileen saw the characters playing herself and her employees, she said she saw how hard they worked, but also how cut off they could become. Her continuing involvement with the well-being of company employees was strengthened. There were new insights about how to communicate the Learning Lab offerings to people inside the company and to the larger community.

S+B: Do you find that every organization is different, or do the same patterns and dynamics come up repeatedly?

SCHARMER: We're investigating that question now. There is something unique about every organiza-

tion, but there are also recurring patterns that we would like to establish as archetypes.

HAYASHI: Some of the dynamics involving leadership attention seem universal. We did a social presencing theater recently with a big multinational company. Two senior employees who had been assigned to overseas roles were peripheral and isolated. No one intended it, but they were ignored and not given as much support as they needed. It happened in such a small way, but it made them completely stuck. And then everyone in the company was so focused on their little group that when they saw the sculpture it was surprising to see how large the whole system was that it represented.

SCHARMER: Sometimes these patterns become clear only in retrospect, long after the session is over. I worked with the Danish healthcare system, which had gone through a process of regionalization, but without the coordination mechanism they needed. The SPT exercise revealed hospitals competing for resources with a lot of self-interest and not much trust. The participants saw this, and they realized that if they wanted to collaborate and share resources, they needed a core process that was focused more on patients.

Two months later, they came back to remap themselves with another SPT. They saw that they needed to connect more effectively not just with patients in the hospital, but with other community members. They needed to go beyond treating the sick, to strengthening their ability to provide health and well-being. By seeing this together, the group created not only a shared map of what currently was going on, but

also a shared vision of the future they wanted to create.

HAYASHI: Some of the most revealing things are the connections that people make that we didn't expect. The word *theater*, derived from the Greek for *to look at*, means a place where something significant can be seen. Here, we see how our small actions as leaders set into motion larger systemic structures that keep some people up and others down in ways we didn't necessarily intend, that marginalize and exclude and disrespect people at times.

The Knowledge in the Body

S+B: You mentioned a feeling of sadness coming to the surface. Does that occur in most of the organizations you work with?

HAYASHI: In almost all of these sessions, there's a power buildup revealed, where some people connect and others are excluded. You feel how counterproductive it is to have some members marginalized. In one social presencing theater we did on youth engagement with sports and clubs, the sculpture highlighted the social divide between kids with resources and lower-income kids, particularly minority kids. You could see how people had made small choices over the years that added up to an incredibly painful split between those with access to these services and those without.

In one of the debriefs, after people talked about needing to design a better outcome, one of the men said, "Maybe collective grieving should be the outcome. Maybe the heart-breaking recognition of social inequality will motivate us to actually engage and do something." It's important, I think, to collectively feel

the heartbreak in a way that leads us to step out of our comfort zones. I don't think sadness is negative. It's a human feeling that we care.

In another company, the leadership was all equal on paper, but one small group put themselves in a kind of power center and other people felt disconnected; they couldn't figure out how to get influence. The SPT exercise made this clear. One of the women in the session said to me, "It was a sad and an unpleasant feeling, but it actually gave me strength and clarity." She was among those who felt shut out; she said now she could figure out how to fit into the dynamics of the top leadership team.

S+B: Is there a link between the physical body awareness of an exercise like this and the ability to move forward emotionally?

HAYASHI: I think so. There is a lot of research now on emotional intelligence, but very little on the knowledge inherent in the body. It's not just sensation; it's connection with other people and with the present. It's so easy to lose that presence; to be lost in thought and completely disconnected from your environment. Your body is walking to the car in a parking lot, but your mind is thinking about what happened yesterday, and these two sensations aren't synchronized. You don't notice the light, or the people standing nearby, or anything about your environment. And that may diminish your ability to act.

Experiences like SPT point to our interconnectedness and the fact that we are always a part of a social body. The body itself is a sensing organ. The signals that it receives are a bit like what Eugene Gendlin, the author of *Focusing* [Everest House, 1978], calls "the felt sense": a quality

of knowing that extends beyond the five senses to body awareness. At this moment, in this office building, the air and the light have a particular quality. It would be different if it were morning on a beach, or if you were interviewing different people. There would be a different texture, a different quality, even if the words were exactly the same.

This way of bringing the body into the conversation isn't all that comfortable for some people. But perhaps when it's successful, it's successful because it's not comfortable. People do not know how to lie or

action — when they transcend boundaries or move past their comfort zone. It is also a way of training yourself to pay attention to the seeds of the future that are already residing in your environment.

There are three main stages, each involving a different group of activities. The first is sensing: seeing the system you're in more clearly, so you can free yourself from your old assumptions and habits. All leaders are sitting in bubbles. The more powerful the organization, the higher up you are, the stronger the bubble that you need to transcend. You

“There's a lot of research now on emotional intelligence, but very little on the knowledge in the body.”

cover up in this realm; they have to be open-minded and willing to stretch themselves, to be direct in connection with one another.

The body has a voice. When you let that voice speak, even for 20 minutes out of your day, you change the things you notice. We call this *embodiment*: the sensation that you live in a particular body, on this big Planet Earth body, and that's where you start every day. That awareness affects your relationships and your decision making. If you are disconnected from your own body, I think you will be disconnected from the social body as well, and from the people around you.

S+B: Tell us about Theory U and how it fits in.

SCHARMER: Theory U is basically the arc through which people travel when they are transforming their own understanding and capacity for

cannot see yourself clearly or reinvent yourself otherwise. We also call this stage "letting go": releasing your old ways of thinking.

There are many ways to do this. For example, you can go to the margins of your system, the places within your influence but outside your comfort zone, and suspend your habits of judgment. Listen with your mind and heart wide open. Access the wonder you feel. You can reflect collectively using techniques such as SPT, scenario planning, storytelling sessions, dialogue, and systems interventions. With any of these, you create a new conceptual map of your situation that shows the systems more clearly and also how each person sees them.

The second stage, after sensing, is presencing: connecting to a deeper level of your own knowledge and aspirations. This is where you develop the story of self and the story of the

future that you want to be a part of. One of the most effective mechanisms used to activate this deeper level of knowing is intentional stillness—as an individual or in a group.

The last stage is prototyping new activity, or learning by doing. This includes design thinking practices, in which you innovate a new product or social approach and learn from it. When you change the

in the workplace. Do you think that is happening?

SCHARMER: It's a great question for all of us, and the answer is profoundly unclear. When you look at just what the media is mirroring back to us about our society and how it is led, you see us moving backward. The older system of global business and politics was, in effect, a system of muddling through

open to prototyping new approaches, and cultivating better relationships across institutional and sector boundaries. If that's our model of enlightened leadership, then there has been tangible progress. There's a whole landscape of collaborative relationships based on these principles that we see emerging worldwide. This movement embodies a shift in the social field from "ego-system awareness" to ecosystem awareness. Personally, I think that this subtle shift may well be the single most important event of our time. Methods like social presencing theater make this shift visible and actionable on the level of groups, organizations, and larger social systems. +

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organization chart of your company, or introduce new types of offerings, or show up differently in the world, you're in this stage. We sometimes call it “letting come,” as in letting a new way of operating come into existence.

S+B: Why wouldn't most leaders want to move directly into the prototyping stage, instead of taking a detour through sensing and presencing?

SCHARMER: If you start with prototyping, you just keep reenacting your old mental models, more of the same. If you face a real situation of disruption, you need to put more effort into getting out of your own bubble and immersing yourself in the places of most potential.

S+B: After all these years of dialogue, systems interventions like Theory U, and other innovations in organizational learning, one would expect to see a rise in the general competence of leadership

with the same old institutional routines. Now those mainstream institutions are challenged by disruptive forces at a large scale: globalization, an unprecedented wave of refugees, technological changes, populist political movements, and the new realities of climate change.

Whenever a social system — a company, or in this case a larger group of mainstream institutions — is disrupted, and the leaders have not developed an inner capacity for curiosity, compassion, and courage, then you will tend to see a closing of the mind and the heart, and a fanatical expression of will. You will see the amplification of prejudice, an increase in public expressions of anger and fear, and a greater tendency to blame others. This is a system of freezing — holding tight to relatively closed points of view. It is the perspective of political extremes.

The alternative response is turning toward problems as opportunities for collaborative learning: leaning into the emerging future, being

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