

Theory U and Presence

Some practical examples from sailing and leadership to explain the U

The world has turned complex. To be a global leader in this complex world, another quality of leadership is being asked for. We need more than the rational and behavioural approach in which most of us are being educated. We can't solve the global problems we encounter solely by analyzing the problems and modelling the right behaviour to solve them. We need to develop our inner self to become 'whole' . In this article I want to inquire how it's possible to become as effective as a leader as possible by inquiring into a sailing experience I have had. I will advocate a state of consciousness that we call 'Presence'. We all have had 'Presence' experiences but for most of us –including myself- it is difficult to tap into this state of consciousness and to become present deliberately. With examples from my consultancy practice I'll make the bridge to the world of leadership.

Introduction

We all have the experience that we sometimes know and can achieve more than we thought that was possible. I became with my sailing partner World Champion sailing in the Flying Dutchman class. We were the first Dutchmen to achieve this. There were 112 competitors from 18 countries. We were not amongst the favourites neither the best qualified. But we won. (It was almost as if it happened to us. But some people knew it beforehand: my wife wasn't surprised at all and the Secretary of State told us so before she opened the Championships).

From colleagues I hear that they sometimes know what someone else is going to say beforehand. As if they can read the thoughts of their clients. And I know of a coach who senses what his coachee is dealing with before he talks to him. In my consultancy practice I have the experience that sometimes the result of a workshop is phenomenal. What is it that makes the difference?

What intrigues me is how it is possible to become World Champion without being hugely qualified or talented? How is it possible to know in advance what somebody is going to say? What can we learn from these experiences in regard to leadership? I don't presume to have the answers but I hope to raise some of the questions you can answer for yourself to become even more effective as a leader.

Presence

As a management consultant I followed the workshop 'Presencing: Leadership for Profound Innovation and Change' of Otto Scharmer and Joseph Jaworski in Boston. The workshop dealt with the 'U process'. I went there after I had read the book 'Synchronicity' of Joe. I just knew I had to go there. I finished the book Tuesday, convinced them to accept me as a participant, bought a ticket and followed the next Monday the workshop. My journey into self-exploration got a boost.

The first day we were asked the following question:

'What is a story of your own life that describes a time when you glimpsed your own highest potential? What did you see, and how did you feel about what you saw?'

With one of the participants –he would become my coach afterwards- I had to answer this question. 'I've never had that experience' was my opening remark. But he was persistent and he pressed for a better reply. It didn't take long before I told him about my sailing and the World Championships. He asked me what sailing made so special to me. That was easy: because you know before it happens that the wind is going to shift and that you know when to tack. You move effortless, relaxed and fully concentrated at the same time. You're away from the world and one with it. You don't think nor rationalize, you just do. You collaborate together, stimulate each other without judgement. You know what to do but you can't explain why you do it. You don't only sail with your mind but with everything at the same time. That makes sailing marvellous.

Winning was something that happened to us. The rest of the world was surprised and envied us and we even didn't believe it ourselves. Before the price giving went through my head: 'They will find out that we've cheated'. Although I didn't know how we had.

Looking back upon this experience I came to the conclusion that it has to do with 'presencing'.

Scharmer: and by presencing do you mean bringing into presence or you mean pre-sensing?

Varela: Presence: it's to be there where things happen. In that sense of presencing you're present, your presence is there, and your presencing-it's all three possible plays of the word. But it's something that clearly cannot be done if there is a little me there that's saying, "oh I am presencing." The presencing has to exactly coincide with what it is.

From 'Three gestures of becoming aware' Scharmer, 2000

As is clear from this quote out of an interview with Varela it's not so clear what 'Presence' actually means. Scharmer defines it as 'Sensing and bringing into presence one's highest possible future' Brian Arthur says: "Retreat and reflect: allow the inner knowing to emerge"¹, and Walter Link (longtime practitioner of being present) calls it "the optimized response to the moment". In my sailing practice it refers to be one with the elements. To be fully in the here and now knowing what's happening around you.

Doing versus being

Most of the time we live in our heads. We are in a 'doing mode'. '[...] the doing/driven mode is goal-oriented, motivated to reduce the gap between how things are and how we would like them to be' as Zindal Segal² states. The 'being mode' is the opposite and difficult to explain in words. '[...] the

focus of the being mode is "accepting" and "allowing" what is, without any immediate pressure to change it.' I experienced this profoundly during a workshop I attended last year in Brazil.

The workshop started late. Not all the participants were there and some of them had a more relaxed attitude than I have as a Westerner. I had travelled a long way to get there and had arrived in time. I was feeling restless and somewhat annoyed that not all participants were there yet and that "they didn't feel the same responsibility and dedication as I did." I was in the 'doing mode': there was a gap between how things were and how I wanted them to be.

Walter -the facilitator- asked us to try to be 'present'. We gazed at him in surprise. What did he mean? "We can wait for the others and feeling annoyed and uncomfortable or we can enjoy the moment. Look around you, feel what there is to feel and hear what there is to hear. What's here that wants to be seen and felt?" We sat in silence and we started to pay attention to ourselves and to our surroundings. I began to recognise what he meant: we were at a beautiful place in Brazil, in the middle of the jungle, close to a waterfall and we sat together with remarkable people. At the same time I sensed that I was feeling tense. When I dived deeper into this feeling it transformed into anticipation, into joy and being grateful that I was in the opportunity to be in this marvellous place with these people. The workshop became marvellous.

The doing mode isn't wrong. But it comes quite often with a negative feeling. The things are not as we would like them to be and we are not always in the position to change this. Feeling bad hinders us to perceive accurately what we truly experience. We don't receive all the information there is and if we don't take care our situation will deteriorate further.

It's tempting to sail in a doing mode: you want results and usually better results than you have at a certain moment during a race: sail-races are won by the one who makes the least mistakes. So you will always make mistakes during a race. This might result in negative thought patterns: 'That was pretty stupid, I shouldn't have done that. Last time I did the same and it didn't work out, I knew it' etc. You're sailing in your head and don't experience any more the moment. An exercise to get back into 'being mode' during sailing is to tell yourself constantly with how much heel you are sailing³. You rate your heel every few seconds on a scale of 1 to 10. You don't aim for a score or try to keep it constant. You will heighten your consciousness and experience more. You don't rationalize or think, you just observe. You start to *know* again that the jib should be eased an inch and that you have to bear away a few degrees to go faster. Meditation has the same effect but is a bit difficult while sailing.

Most leaders are in a 'doing mode'. This won't help them solving global problems. The world has become too complex. But it is almost counterintuitive to let go when you strive for results in our short-term focussed shareholder value world.

Preparing the field

During a meeting with the authors of this book Alain Gauthier stressed the importance to have the 'preliminary conditions right' for being present. For most people it's not easy to let go, to surrender and to have a look what's there to emerge. We are too pre-occupied with ourselves, anxious

to get the results we think we would like to see (or have to show to our shareholders) or emotionally involved in something we have just experienced. These conditions will differ among individuals and groups. So what preparation do *you* need to be able to let go and to become truly present?

I will focus upon three approaches that might help you to become more present:

1. Optimize the preliminary conditions
2. The U-process
3. Develop your inner self

1 Optimize the preliminary conditions

The conditions that allowed us to be present during the world championships were diverse. It started a year earlier when we became North American Champion. That was the first title we won together and it gave a boost to our self-confidence, especially because the Americans *treat* you as a Champion. Besides that we prepared the boat well, were fastest during the Dutch Nationals, but ripped our genoa and we were reminded that we had to prepare the boat even better. Before the Worlds we took Holidays separately with our families to relax and to let the stress come out from our busy working lives. Maybe a last decisive part to prepare the (battle) field was my company sponsoring the T-shirts of all the competitors. It gave us a lot of pleasure that everybody walked in the clothing with the same sponsor name as was written on our boat. Several opponents refused to wear the shirts...

It's important that you inquire into yourself what conditions you need to allow you to be present. In my sailing I need self-confidence, be optimally prepared, relaxed and I like to tease a little. That's not so much different in my work. What is added to it is the need of an emotional connection with the people I am working with. I want to become a temporarily 'one of them'. This means for example that I conduct interviews before a workshop or meeting. In these interviews I listen deeply and help them to inquire into themselves or the topic they are dealing with. If appropriate I give feedback to build the relationship and to strengthen our bond. In this way I get a notion how they will react to feedback during the workshop and when things become more personal. Besides that they become acquainted with how it is to work with me. And if they don't reject me upfront I am feeling much better and confident...

These interviews help them to become into a 'being mode' as well. They enter a different field themselves by thinking of questions they usually don't think about. Most people are not being listened to intensely. If they have the experience that somebody is really interested in them they will open up. They must know that they are being understood and must be able to be in a different kind of relationship with me and each other. The field must be prepared before people can let go.

Optimize your team conditions

To solve complex problems you have to work together in a team. It's not only important to be in a being mode yourself but ideally your team should be in this mode. There is a lot of literature about 'high performance

teams⁴. Models like the one of Katzenbach: forming, storming, norming and performing are very valuable. But 'mutual trust' is the most important one according to me to reach together a state of presence. I wasn't best friends with my sailing partner. We hardly visited each other's birthday parties. What was important is that we grew to trust each other and that we lifted each other to higher performance.

To trust each other you have to build a 'container': a secure set of ground rules how you want to work together. You must create conditions for each other so that the other –and yourself– can excel by being totally present. What worked for us was to divide the accountabilities: my partner was accountable for the speed of the boat and I was accountable for the direction we were heading. Because of these accountabilities we knew where we were supposed to focus upon. We got some own 'playing ground' and room to experiment in. He got room to put in his engineering and analytical skills and I could experiment with my sensing and strategic competencies. At the same time we stretched each other by giving feedback and confronting each other with 'reality': 'boats at the right of us seem to have more favourable wind' or 'ITA 10 is pointing a bit higher than we are'. But we never questioned each other's skills or competencies. During the championships we didn't have any argument. We knew when we needed to tack and we knew what to do to go faster.

In a work environment it's no different. It helps when you formulate certain ground rules together how you want to work with each other.

In the preparation of workshops we pay attention to building the container and bringing people in the right mindset. With instruments like a 360 degrees feedback tool the participants get (anonymous) feedback from their subordinates, peers, bosses and clients. This gives them more insight how they are perceived. Most people long for this information but at the same time they are afraid to ask it directly. With these kind of instruments people start to open up and are willing to learn. They break down their own barriers of seeing themselves as they always have seen themselves.

What ground rules do *you* need to establish with your people?

2 The U process

Otto Scharmer and his colleagues interviewed more than 150 top scientists, musicians, artists and entrepreneurs over the past 20 years. He distilled from these interviews the U-process.

“The U-Process is simultaneously a cutting-edge technology and a distillation of ancient wisdom. It is a process that many creative people— business and social entrepreneurs, inventors, artists—use when they generate breakthroughs. The U-Process takes what has previously been an individual, tacit, intuitive, and largely un-replicable practice, and embodies it in a methodology that can be used collectively and consciously to open up and make visible concrete fields of opportunity.”⁵

I would like to clarify this process by my sailing experience. The model of the U process helped me to understand what happened during and before the world championships. At the end of each step I'll show how the

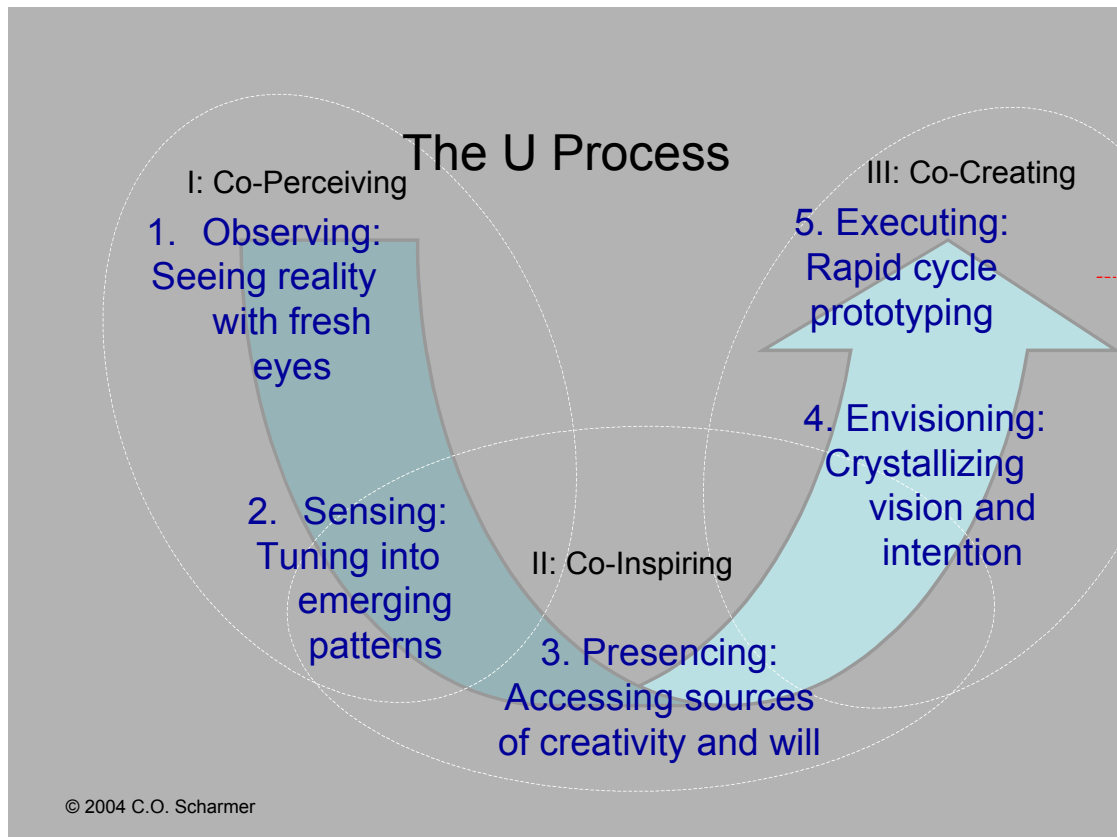
process works for me in my consultancy practice. How it can help you to become more effective.

The U process:

The process whereby we learn to 'presence' an emerging whole, to become what George Bernard Shaw called 'a force of nature'.

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The U process involves 5 different steps or stages.



Step 1: Observing: Seeing reality with fresh eyes

The first step is observing and suspending your judgement. Two years after we became World Champion we sailed the Europeans in Italy. The races were being held at Elba, the small island in the Mediterranean. Our preparation was somewhat less than two years earlier but the boat, the sails and we remained the same. We became twenty-third: the worst (and last) race we had ever sailed together. Only in the car driving back to Holland it became clear to me: 'there was tidal current!'. During the practice race and the races itself we noticed that our speed was very unpredictable. Sometimes we were fast and at other times we were real slow. We didn't understand it at all. We stood by and looked at it. Somewhere in my youth I had learned that there isn't any current in the

Mediterranean. While we were sailing I was convinced that there wasn't any and I didn't pay attention to it. Our results were bad, our self-confidence deteriorated and we didn't really trust each other any more.

The first step in the U process is to suspend your judgement and see what there is to see. We were led by our assumed knowledge and were not open to what was happening around us. We were not connected to nature and sailed in our heads.

In my consultancy practice I'll try to be as open as possible to what there is to see. At the start of a new assignment I will listen empathically to what is being said. I usually don't make any questionnaires because these limit myself to listen to what the client thinks is really important. I take notes after the interview. As soon as you start to take notes you don't sense anymore what is really going on. You are less connected and you live in the future: 'What do I need to remember tonight? I better write everything down'.

Step 2: Sensing: Tuning into emerging patterns

'Tuning into emerging patterns' is something I experienced the week before the Championships we won. We were training at the site and started to see the patterns in the wind. Wind consists of gusts. Every few minutes the wind increases and shifts a few degrees. After a while it turns back (or not) and decreases again (or not). Before the races we came to understand what the wind was doing these days. We could 'tune into these emerging patterns' literally. We needed only small signs and after a few days we had the idea that we could predict what the wind was going to do. We became more and more sensitive to what was happening around us.

Interviewer: is your *eyesight* outstanding?

Torben: I don't know. I don't know how other people *feel*. (...) *All the senses are important and it's difficult to separate them. There are a lot of things happening that go into your decisions. Your antenna's ready for everything. It's difficult to explain how it works, but spending a lot of time on the water and being used to the surroundings help you to get those decisions right more often than not.*

Excerpt from an interview with Torben Grael from Brazil, the best Olympic sailor ever with five Olympic Medals

During our preparation we did a lot of 'impossible' boat-handling practices. We sailed a very short triangular course in which we had to tack, round buoys, raise the spinnaker, jibe, lower it again and round the buoy to start all over again. The whole course took us only a few minutes. We practiced it till we almost succeeded. In the end we could sail the boat without thinking. We were able to fully concentrate on the 'information' around us: what was the wind doing and what were our main competitors doing (that's predictable too) and what was it that we had to do ourselves.

Letting go is essential in this phase. Don't rationalize but let yourself go and see the patterns that are there to see. You can't control the circumstances so you better look around and learn.

I've experienced that after several interviews –usually seven to ten- a certain pattern emerges what the problem within an organization seems to be. This emerges not so much by deduction or analysis. It is something that is growing inside you. After approximately seven interviews you've heard the different perspectives from the people involved. And you start to see the pattern and how the system operates. You start to understand why people behave as they do and you can empathize with them. It's as if the pieces of the jigsaw fall in their place/you can connect the dots. It's not something outside of yourself. You dive into your own feelings and it's as if you're part of it.

Step 3 Presencing: Retreat and reflect, allow the inner knowing to emerge, connect to source.

Because we were able to tune into the wind patterns we knew what we had to do. At the same time as the wind shifted we tacked (not seconds later when you can read it from the compass, because then you're just too late) and we made maximum gain.

A very special 'presence' moment in which 'our inner knowing emerged' was during the first beat of our last race. It was blowing hard and we sailed close to the wind directly behind one of our main competitors. We were not able to pass him and we had to if we wanted to head the leaderboard. We 'decided' to sail through his wind shadow. Every sailor knows that that isn't possible. The wind behind a boat is being disturbed by the sails. Sailors call this 'foul wind'. But we beared off, went through his wind-shadow, headed up again and ended up in front of him. We tacked and rounded the first buoy of the race in first place. We felt a shiver going through ourselves and through all the competitors. How was this possible? What rationally couldn't happen, happened. We were most surprised ourselves. This was something we hadn't done before and hadn't thought to be possible. We were being led to do it like this. We didn't do this on will power. It was more that it didn't feel right to sail behind him.

After these moments we got nervous and started sailing in our heads again. We began to hesitate, didn't tack and we ended this race in third position. It was enough to win the Championships.

In my work, I am always looking for the smallest intervention possible with the highest leverage. This means that I am contemplating a lot during step 1 and 2 but 'the insight' usually comes only a few hours before action has to be taken. It comes in the car, while meditating or just out of the blue. It takes a lot of trust but by now I know (almost certainly, but my wife knows it for sure) it will be there in time.

Step 4 Envisioning: Crystallizing vision and intention

As soon as you're only motivation is to win races you won't manage. If you are very focussed upon the result of the race you will not win. You're not really open for the elements. You limit yourself too much and don't

notice what's happening around you. Winning in sailing is something you can't control. There are too many factors involved. After the 'presence' experience it became clear to me that it's possible to sail differently.

If my intention is to *learn* when I go out sailing I enjoy sailing better and I get closer to the results I am looking for. But this is difficult. My intention is to be one with the elements but as Varela says: "... it's something that clearly cannot be done if there is a little me there that's saying, "Oh I am presencing." As soon as you look consciously for being present, you're not present anymore. You long for something you experienced in the past and you get angry with yourself not being capable of predicting the wind. If I really have the intention to learn something and to surrender to what will happen, I sometimes come into the groove. But my sailing results are still very unpredictable.

During the strategy workshop it became clear to everybody that their real client was not the leaders of the divisions but the board of management and the advisory board. The team members overcame their individual irritations, co-created a very ambitious strategy in the period after the workshop and had for the first time a mutual strategy they adhered to.

Step 5: Executing: Rapid cycle prototyping

This is something that you do constantly while sailing. With every decision you take, you see the consequences. With every tack or gybe you win or you lose. Every minute you're told if you took the right decision: if you interpreted the information in the right way or not.

This process is not rational. It's not about trying but about execution. You execute and you're open to the effect of your doing. But this is more an affirmation of what you already knew.

In the US we became North American Champion. This was something I knew already after the first tack in the early minutes of the first race (and we still had four races to go). While we tacked the wind shifted 30 degrees and we knew we would win. We were not arrogant or felt superior. We just knew.

We've designed training programs around the U-process. What's remarkable is that the participants have less resistance to change, learn more and realize change within their company without 'being forced' to do so.

Optimizing the conditions so that we dare to let go and the five steps of the U-process help us to set the stage outside ourselves to become present. In the end we have to develop our inner selves.

3 Develop your inner self

'The world is ruled by letting things take their course. It cannot be ruled by interfering.'

Lao Tze in the Tao Te Ching

How to develop yourself so that you are rationally and emotionally convinced that this quote is true and that you start living by it?

The only way is to *experience* it. You can reflect upon it, you can rationalize it but in the end you must feel and experience it. To experience it you have to surrender to the complexity. Surrendering is not doing nothing but it means to let go of any emotional attachment to the final outcome, as Michael Ray⁶ puts it. 'Just do it' (without thinking) as the Nike commercial recommended us in the recent past. But there is a form of contradiction in it: you want to achieve something in a very complex situation and the way to get there is to look what's coming towards you *and* believing that it will come to you (and when it doesn't come the timing wasn't right...). Therefore you need a lot of trust and that's exactly the part what's lacking with us people who want to control the world. I have some experience that if I let go, the solution comes towards me: my colleague tells me a story needed to finish the article, someone sends me out of the blue the missing piece, a television program inspires me or ... Suddenly a lot of 'coincidences' happen to me.

I usually prepare the workshops I facilitate very well. I live by my own guidelines mentioned above under 'preliminary conditions'. I'll interview, give feedback, prepare agenda's and make beautiful PowerPoint presentations. Is it that I optimize the surroundings to be able to be present or do I want to control the situation so that they can't take me by surprise? Both are probably true. I start to become less dependent upon my preparation. I begin to trust myself that I'll be present when needed and know what to do. Lately I got the feedback that I lead meetings with an invisible hand. I interfered when necessary without force or pressure. It was as if they were guided to their solution.

What helps me in my inner journey?

Journaling increases my consciousness of what I am feeling. It helps me to recognize when my Superego (Voice of Judgement, Inner Critic or Anxious Mind) is too present. He usually brings with him a depressive mood. That's something I start to recognize by now.

Meditation works for me although I felt some resistance at first: 'I'll go running that's approximately the same,' was my comment to my coach. He is very patient and lives by the quote of Lao Tze. Because of his patience and the room and attention he gives to me, I started to believe he might be right. I meditate now every day. Sometimes only for ten minutes but it brings me more rest, more creativity and less stress. I feel more independent and at the same time more connected.

I've learned to take my 'sensing' more seriously. A client called me in advance of a workshop. Although she didn't say anything I felt that she hesitated to have me to facilitate the workshop. I took my feeling seriously and took the initiative to talk with one of her directors informally. He turned out to be the one opposing me being there. The workshop became very successful.

Training programs as Sue Cheshire describes in this book (chapter... 'How to transform great leaders into inspirational leaders') help you to get out of your 'comfort zone'. You experience something that you can't integrate in your normal worldview. That makes you think. The experience of the

'Presence' workshop was such an experience me. I was sitting in the plane back home and I was wondering where was this all about? It was great but why? I had forgotten all my books, notes and material at the conference centre so I had to dive into myself what was so great about it. My journey started.

A coach to help you with your journey is recommended. There are a lot of coaches nowadays. But you need someone who has travelled this road before you. My coach says that the essence of coaching can be summarised in the following:

1. To be an open channel and available. Empathize with the one you coach;
2. To be an open field for true nature to present itself;
3. To ask questions that can advance the process of understanding so the 'client' can integrate what he or she experiences.

I've met several coaches who didn't travel the road yet. They are wise, can help you to set a next step but usually don't have the patience to let you discover your own road. They want to achieve results with you for themselves. So if you look for a coach: take your time.

An excerpt from an interview with Tommaso Chieffi, a successful navigator in the America's Cup:

Tommaso says his job isn't just about tactics. "Skippers tend to be fairly tense at the start of a race and when they don't have feedback from the tactician. I am trying to give the skipper calmness to reassure him that he is doing the right things. You have to be a bit of a psychologist also!". Not far from what his countryman did taking statues from inside blocks of stone (Michelangelo), *Tommaso is helping the winner inside every sailor to step forward.*

It's possible to become bigger than you are: to become 'a force of nature'. Winning a championship is great but the best moments are the moments of presence. Instinctively, without hesitation knowing what to do and experiencing that it turns out as what you could only dream of. This is within reach of everybody.

Hein Dijksterhuis, Oegstgeest 2006

'Presence pragmatism'

I like to conclude this article with some hints how to reach a 'presence state' more often. Select for yourself what suits you best:

- Be in time for any meeting
- Listen actively and observe before you react
- Suspend your judgement and be curious
- Be aware of your feelings and dive into them
- Appreciate whatever happens to you and inquire into it

- Meditate and be silent everyday for some time
- Catch the waves (as Sue the author of chapter... always reminds us)
- Stop evaluating yourself while doing: surrender to the action and immerse yourself into it
- See the patterns by letting go and notice the synchronicities just like the wind
- Practice to shift modes: from doing to being and back when necessary
- Make fun
- Start with a 'check in' at the beginning of a meeting: ask people where they come from and how they are doing at the moment
- Challenge yourself by things you hardly dare

"Because of our obsession with how leaders behave and with the interactions of leaders and followers, we forget that in its essence, leadership is about learning how to shape the future... Leadership exists when people are no longer victims of circumstances but participate in creating new circumstances. Leadership is about creating a domain in which human beings continually deepen their understanding of reality and become more capable of participating in the unfolding of the world. Ultimately leadership is about creating new realities."

Peter Senge, SOL 'Synchronicity'

¹ Quotes from the reader of the "Presencing workshop"

² Zindel V. Segal: Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression, The Guilford Press, 2002

³ more exercises to be found in John Whitmore: The Winning Mind: Strategies for successful sailing, Fernhurst Books, 1987

⁴ Harvard Business Review on "Teams that Succeed", Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, 2004

⁵ "The U-Process: A Social Technology for Addressing Highly Complex Challenges" Zaid Hassan and Adam Kahane, 2005

⁶ Michael Ray, Creativity in Business, Broadway Books, 1986