

THE PRACTICE OF PRESENCE

After founding a community in Holland, the pilgrims came to America to perfect that community. Instead, as Nathaniel Philbrick's book *Mayflower* shows, the earnest idealists reenacted their deepest cultural dramas: building stockades, making war, and assuming superiority. The story raises questions about organizational life: How do we talk across difference, nurture innovation, and welcome outsiders?

Experiences with clients suggest one answer: we create and reform systems, organizations and communities through dialogue, and the essence of dialogue is presence. What does presence look and sound like? Here are glimpses.

At a recent meeting, Mary confronted colleagues with a breach in a written charter they had agreed to. The group's "guidelines for dialogue" invite members to "openly disagree" and then "jointly design ways to work out disagreements." These guidelines may have made it easier for Mary to confront peers, but it also took courage. Unlike the pilgrims, who got stuck in unproductive patterns, Mary decided for the sake of the group's larger purpose to speak up and trust her colleagues to stay present with each other and the problem.

After Mary spoke, there was a surprised silence that seemed to say, "we need a minute; how uncomfortable; we don't know what to do."

I've found that often the best next step is for a leader or facilitator to implicitly acknowledge this vulnerable place by asking, "what does the group need?" or "what needs to happen now?" These questions invite joint design of a way forward.

The group did find one, and their experience of staying in dialogue strengthened them. Later in the same meeting, Mary's colleague Tony raised a second difficult issue, and again the group accepted the difficulty and worked their way forward. I've seen such "presence moments" grow into a practice or discipline, with group members learning to improve and support this practice.

While leading a tense meeting of the same group, I thought I heard Orin suggest a group hug. Orin is a scientist, a man of facts and proof, so I said I wasn't sure I had heard him correctly. "We should do a group poll," he said, meaning a straw poll to test consensus. When I shared my mistake, we had a good laugh. I had typed him, the sober scientist, and was incredulous that he might *dare* break my mental model. Taking myself very seriously, I had also "heard" my own touchiness about facilitators who harmonize with group hugs. Our laughter brought us fresh opportunity to listen, laugh at the mind's tricks, and not type cast others or ourselves.

How do we encourage these moments of presence? In *Presence*, Senge and his colleagues suggest a model: suspend old mental maps, see the whole (not just our tiny part), let a new vision come, then invite it to crystallize. I do not think we make presence by formula. To me, it is a practice, and any practice—dialogue, music, love—begins and is sustained through intention. A Mayan sacred book says, "We did not put our ideas together. We put our purposes together. And we agreed. Then we decided."

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On presence in dialogue

"... a group becomes a generative microcosm when it connects deeply with its real purpose."

"Through genuine engagement within teams or groups...we discover [the answers] hidden in plain sight...alive within our everyday collective experience."

"Solidarity, compassion, care, love—all of the different modes of being together—appear when the self is decentered...Not just me, but the 'usness' in us."

—Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, et al. *Presence, An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*

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