



PATHFINDING OUTFITTERS

Sensing Practices I

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Thanks! Presencing Institute

Creating conditions for community to flourish.

John O'Brien adapted materials created by The Presencing Institute to compile this guide. Changes are minor and apply the practices to organizations seeking to work in a person-centered way with people who rely on long-term support and their allies. Links to the original instructions for these practices are included.

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Person-centered work



Person-centered work is a form of **Awareness Based Collective Action** that is guided by **Theory U**,* an approach to social change developed by Otto Scharmer and associates of the Presencing Institute. Change begins with a decision to discover what more is possible at the boundary where people with developmental disabilities meet community life.** Before jumping into action as if what is possible is already known, Theory U encourages a period of **sensing** by engaging informative and inspiring people and places with open mind, open heart, and open will. Sensing involves both welcoming and taking in what is outside us and maintaining awareness of how we are experiencing the possible on the inside. A moment of stillness invites being touched by the highest potential in the situation. This sense of what wants to happen with our help animates learning in action. Organizations that care about quality to make changes to incorporate what people learn in action.

This booklet describes six sensing practices to guide this key phase of person-centered work. Most can be adapted to the virtual environment. Try them out.

*Theory U is far more complex than this sketch. To better understand start at www.presencing.org. There is a short introduction in the context of social invention with people with developmental disabilities at <https://bit.ly/37x3YZ4>

** See John O'Brien & Beth Mount. What More Is Possible? <https://bit.ly/3oG6QvF>

Opponents of sensing

Established beliefs, practices, and structures want to be stable, and sensing can be disruptive. Concerns for right action, questions of power, and accounting for risk have an important place in making change but defensive over-focus can block listening and trap change maker's minds in judgment, their hearts in cynicism, and their wills in fear. These voices show up to distract attention in conversation with others and in self-talk.

Falling into these traps protects against uncertainty and keeps routines and structures stable. The cost is lost knowledge from ignoring new information, failing to understand the situation as others feel it, and missing the learning that can only come from collective awareness of the whole.

Avoiding these traps begins with awareness that attention has been hijacked and turning back to discovery.



The **Voice of Judgment** makes the mind busy sorting: realistic from unrealistic, possible from impossible, right from wrong, and on and on. Turned inward to listen only to itself, the mind rejects whatever fails to confirm current patterns of thinking and activity. The practice of **curiosity quiets and opens the mind** to new thoughts and challenges to what is taken for granted.



The **Voice of Cynicism** drains feeling, meaning and energy by stacking up reasons that desired change can't happen. Common tricks include over-focusing on scarcity, belittling desire for better futures as naive, and denying the possibility of altruism. The practice of **compassion opens the heart**, bringing feeling and embodied knowing alive.



The **Voice of Fear** freezes action and encourages turning away by amplifying a sense of vulnerability and risk. The practice of **courage opens the will**, allowing learning by taking steps into a desirable future and responding to what happens as a result.

Reflecting on level of listening

Pause and reflect for a minute after a meeting or conversation to identify moments of Level 3 or 4 listening and any ways the voices of judgment, cynicism or fear showed up.

Level of Listening	Experience	Result
Listening 1 <i>downloading</i>	Just what I expected.	No change or small changes in understanding. Mostly a repeat of the same ideas and positions.
<i>Open Mind expresses curiosity and quiets the Voice of Judgment</i>		
Listening 2 <i>debating</i>	I became aware of some new facts and ideas that challenged my assumptions and shifted the way I make sense of the situation.	Taking account of new realities; better informed. More aware of assumptions, new ideas and alternative ways to understand current reality.
<i>Open Heart activates compassion and overcomes the Voice of Cynicism</i>		
LISTENING 3 <i>dialogue</i>	I have seen the situation, and my place in it, through the eyes of someone whose experience is different from mine. I have a new sense of how another person experiences the situation and how they feel it. My own feelings resonate with those of someone different from me.	Awareness of real differences in experience and evaluation of the situation; new perspective; better understanding of aspects of the situation that have been hidden or avoided.
<i>Open Will draws on courage and calms the Voice of Fear</i>		
LISTENING 4 <i>collective creativity</i>	I am not the same person now than I was when I entered this conversation. Together we generated understanding and possibilities that did not exist when the conversation started.	A growing sense of the highest possibility in the situation and the contribution I can make.
John O'Brien made this table based on a talk by Otto Scharmer. Watch at www.presencing.org/resource/tools/listen-desc		

Dialogue Walk



Invite someone who shares an interest in person-centered work for a half hour walk.

Walk side-by-side. Use a timer to divide the available time in half so that partners have equal time to practice listening. Each takes about 15 minutes holding these questions and listening to the answers. Honor silences, they are as worthy of holding attention as speech is.

- Share two or three experiences that have brought you to where you are in your work. (Start with an experience in childhood or adolescence if you can recall one.)
- Talk about one or two “angels” —helpers and mentors on your work journey so far. What have you learned from each of them?
- Where do you feel the future in your work right now?

Take two minutes at the end of the walk to use the guide on the facing page to reflect on your Level of Listening and to journal: *What I want to remember from our dialogue walk?*

To hold space means that we are willing to walk alongside another person in whatever journey they're on without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome. When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts and let go of judgment and control.

–Heather Plett

Dialogue Interview

A Dialogue Interview is a reflective conversation open to insights into the experience and understanding of the person giving the interview. Open as well to relating in a way that allows seeds of new possibility to emerge. The listener is authentically interested in the other's perspective and thinking and willing to follow what develops in the moment. The listener's intention is to build trust with those affected by change and discover the highest purpose that can be served in the situation.



See through another's eyes

Be mindful

- Your purpose is to bring out the best in the person who is giving you the interview. Suspend your Voice of Judgment and open your heart to the person so you can begin to see their situation through their eyes.
- Figure out a few open ended questions to initiate and guide the conversation. Then go with the flow, access your ignorance by attending to and trusting questions that occur to you and finding good moments to ask them.
- Follow the conversation as it develops. Let go of any anxiety about being in control so the person giving the interview has space to discover new connections and, perhaps, for moments of shared thinking.
- Make the most of presence –quiet, appreciative openness to the person in front of you– and silence. Don't interrupt moments of silence, but stay present. Notice and let go of distractions that take you out of the conversation.
- Listen for and welcome glimpses into the best future possibility for the person who is giving you the interview and for the whole situation you share with them.

Based on Dialogue Interview instructions at www.presencing.org/resource/tools/dialogue-interview-desc

Steps

- You are not there to sell or persuade but to listen and learn. Be clear about the importance of this person's potential contribution to understanding the work of strengthening person-centered practice.
- Take 30-45 minutes for the interview.
- Choose or frame a few open ended questions and choose a question to start the conversation. Let the conversation develop; don't get stuck in prepared questions.
- Take a moment of stillness before the interview to center yourselves on the dialogue.
- Enjoy the conversation, even when some of it may be challenging or difficult to hear.
- Take 2 minutes to journal. Record ideas and insights you want to remember.

Possible Questions

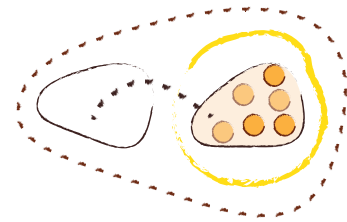
- What moved you to set out (to take this job, join this particular organization, follow this path)? What were you seeking to accomplish?
- Thinking about the situation of people who require supports...
 - ... what gives you hope
 - ... what gives you concern
- When big challenges faced you in the past, what helped you to deal with them?
- What has been some of your most important learning about leadership for meaningful change?
- What future possibilities do you think it is most important to invest in?
- What are the biggest challenges you (and/or your organization) face now? What do you think is the source of these challenges?
- What breaks your heart?
- What keeps you awake?
- What questions hold the most interest for you now?

Learning Journey

A Learning Journey is an opportunity to widen the horizon of possibility by visiting places outside your usual experience. Visiting community builders and people who are finding new paths to rich lives in community. You have the chance to explore different approaches to common purposes and, perhaps, to see the benefits of transformed supports. You get new ideas to adapt and try.

Consider learning journeys to...

- Community building initiatives outside the world of disability.
- Organizations that share a common purpose and have developed innovative approaches to individualize support to people living in their own homes, holding community jobs, participating alongside other citizens in community life and engaging in lifelong learning.
- Organizations with contrasting approaches to assisting people with complex or challenging needs to take contributing community roles.
- Organizations engaged in transformational change.
- Organizations that have invented effective forms of developing direct support workers.



Discover new possibilities in a wider social field

Be mindful

- Your purpose is to expand your sense of what is possible and how the new comes to be. Suspend the Voice of Judgment and the Voice of Cynicism and access your sense of curiosity, appreciation and wonder.
- A Learning Journey expands the social field by connecting your change team to others with a similar sense of purpose who act in a different context.
- Practice three forms of listening...
 - ... listening to others; allowing what others have to offer to touch and influence you
 - ... listening to yourself; attending to what is emerging within you as you experience the work of a different organization.
 - ... listening to the emerging whole: tuning in to what the wider social field is showing you about your highest purpose and how to move deeper into it.
- Take what you hear and see as a starting point and improvise questions that deepen your understanding.
- Listen for and welcome glimpses into the best future possibility for those you meet and for the whole situation you share with them.

Based on Sensing Journeys. Instructions at www.presencing.org/resource/tools/sensing-journeys-desc

Steps

- Identify organizations that will provide the change team with a new sense of what is possible and different approaches to move toward those possibilities. Choose two or three and identify what the change team wants to learn from each, based on reviewing available information. Draft some questions for initial orientation.
- Arrange for each chosen site to host small teams of 3-5 change team members for a day or two. The purpose is to understand what people and families the host supports are experiencing as they move into their own highest purpose and the host's way of working.
- Arrange a schedule with the host that will let the visitors meet a variety of people and experience and learn from as much of the organization's work as possible in the time available.
- Travel to the host's location. Make individual and team time to renew intentions for the visit.
- Team members observe and trust their intuition to ask simple, authentic questions that arise from the moment. Practice deep listening to hold the space for conversations with the hosts.
- Make time for individual and group reflection on the visit. If the visit lasts more than one day, make time at the end of each day. Consider using the Reflection pages that follow this one.
- Bring what you have learned back to the whole change team.

Possible questions

- What has been most important in clarifying and growing commitment to individualized supports?
- What have been the most important sources of energy and creativity in moving toward individualized supports?
- What have been the most important milestones on your journey so far?
- What issues or challenges are you facing that hold back further movement? Why do you think these challenges exist?
- If you could change just two things about the system that would better support transformation, what would you change and why?

Sharing place and time

Sharing place and time allows you to immerse yourself in a different environment from another person's vantage point. You observe and construct a rich account of the setting and experience of a person who offers the gift of sharing their space.

Consider sharing place and time with...

- People who rely on long-term support who have benefited from individualized supports and live in their own homes, hold real jobs, are engaged in learning or are civically active.
- People in group settings: group homes, day programs, community experience programs.
- People in more restrictive settings: nursing homes, institutions.
- Families who provide substantial assistance to people who qualify for long-term support.
- Direct support workers in group and individualized services.

Pay particular attention to sharing time and space with people who are usually without voice.



Sense place and time

Be mindful

- Your purpose is to learn what you can from sharing a brief time with others in a place that shapes their everyday life experience. You are constructing a story of the interaction of person and place, the ways this setting supports or inhibits the person's expression of their best, most capable self.
- Make the most of presence –quiet, respectful openness to the person in place. Let impressions come to you and take form inside you. Don't feel you need to make things happen, but let the place happen to you by observing as quietly as you can. Experience the external shape and flow of place and time rather than interview to learn about people's description of their experience.
- You can't know what another person is experiencing but you can do your best to take the perspective of another's role. Put yourself in the position of a person receiving service or a direct support worker and access your thinking, feeling and imagining.
- Be open to glimpses into the best future possibility for the person and place and to the qualities of place that make this possibility visible.
- Be open to notice whatever about the place, activities and interactions might cover up the person's capacities and hold back development of their best self. Don't let the Voice of Judgment distract you from experiencing what is there as fully as you can. Notice any explanations you supply to justify or excuse what you are seeing: judgments about the difficulty of supporting the person, the inadequacy of funding, etc.

Based on Shadowing. Instructions at www.presencing.org/resource/tools/shadowing-desc

Steps

- Identify places you can learn from and decide on the role that will focus your observation: a person who communicates we don't understand who lives in a group home; a mother who lives with and provides assistance to a person whose behavior can be challenging; a direct support worker who shares a person's home.
 - Make the invitation. Think of a way that suits the person and setting to briefly orient them to your interest in learning by sharing time with them. Be clear that your aim is to understand an ordinary time in the focus person's life, not to evaluate or recommend.
 - Consider the person's schedule and negotiate the times when you could learn the most. It generally works well to share...
 - ... a whole day in a day program, community experience or institutional setting
 - ... time on and off the job when a person has a community job
 - ... a morning and evening or a weekend day where a person lives
 - ... a typical activity when a person is civically involved, maybe more than once.
 - Give yourself 15 minutes or so of quiet before you meet to renew your intentions. Imagine the best possible outcome of the day for yourself and those whose time and space you will share.
 - Be respectful and quietly friendly. As appropriate to the place and activity either find an unobtrusive place to observe or join in as quietly as possible.
 - Don't interrupt what is happening. Converse or ask questions during breaks.
 - If the place and activity allows, make notes.
- Clearly distinguish description of what you see and hear from what you think and feel.
- Schedule time immediately after your observations to reflect. Think about what surprised you; what inspired you; what makes you uncomfortable.
 - Send those who make the sharing possible a thank-you note the next day.

You can observe a lot just by watching.
–Yogi Berra

Stakeholder Interview

A Stakeholder Interview is an opportunity to discover how your work looks from the point of view of the people whose lives are shaped by it, what they value and what they would change.

Consider inviting interviews with...

- People who rely on services.
- Family members.
- Allies.
- Legal guardians.
- Employers and landlords for people the organization supports.
- Direct support workers and front line managers.
- Middle and senior managers.
- Board members.
- Staff from other organizations that serve the people the organization supports.
- Managers in the long-term support system.



*See your work through
other's eyes*

Be mindful

- Your purpose is to learn as much as you can about how this person experiences your organization. Suspend your Voice of Judgment and open your heart to the person so you can see the organization's work through their eyes.
- Figure out a few open ended questions to initiate and guide the conversation. Then go with the flow. Access your ignorance by attending to and trusting questions that occur to you and finding good moments to ask them.
- You are looking for this person's truth about something that also matters to you: the performance of your organization. Notice what you want to disagree with or what makes you uncomfortable in what you hear. Note and then let go of the explanations and justifications that come up in your mind in response to uncomfortable statements. You can also get pulled back into your own mind when you hear something you agree with: come back to the person and listen more closely for what they are saying about how it is for them.
- Make the most of presence –quiet, appreciative openness to the person in front of you– and silence. Don't interrupt moments of silence, but stay present.
- Listen for and welcome glimpses into the best future possibility for the person who is giving you the interview and for the whole situation you share with them.

Based on Stakeholder Interviews. Instructions at <https://www.presencing.org/resource/tools/stakeholder-interview-desc>

Steps

- Make a list of people whose perceptions of your organization will help the work of transformation. Don't forget people who might be easy to overlook. Notice and discuss any reluctance to offer someone an interview.
- Decide whether there will be one or two listeners, who the pairs will be and who will take the lead.
- Make the invitation. Think of a way that suits the person to briefly orient them to the conversation and to the change team's work. Share your reasons for asking this person for an interview. You are there to see your organization's work through that person's eyes.
- Consider the person's convenience and arrange a comfortable, quiet place and set aside 30-60 minutes for the interview.
- Thinking about what you now know about the person, frame a few open ended questions and choose a question to start the conversation. Let the other person's account of your organization's work develop; don't get stuck in prepared questions.
- Give yourself 15 minutes or so of quiet before the interview to renew your intentions.
- Orient the person to the interview by briefly reviewing your invitation to the interview. Get permission to take notes and clarify any concerns about confidentiality, attribution of what the person says and requested follow-up.
- Open your self to the person's perceptions, even when some of what they may be difficult or challenging to hear.
- Schedule time immediately after the interview to reflect on the interview. Consider using the Reflection pages that follow this one.
- Send the person a thank-you note the next day.

Possible Questions

- When our organization is at its best, what does it do for you? What happen for you when our organization provides just exactly what you need, no less, no more?
- How could our organization fail you or let you down? What does or could happen when our support breaks down?
- When you think about the future what would you like to be different for you? How could our organization help with that?
- What worries you or makes you afraid? What do we do that helps? What more could we do?
- What criteria do you use to use to assess the value of what our organization provides for you?
- If we could make two changes to our organization, what changes would make the most positive difference for you?