

IS IT POSSIBLE TO SHAPE LEARNING PROCESS THAT TAP INTO THE DEVELOPING FUTURE? CAN THE NATURAL MOVEMENT OF THE ORGANISATION AND ITS ENVIRONMENT BE HARNESSSED IN CHANGE PATHWAYS WITHOUT RESTRICTING IT? CAN NEW INFORMATION AND EXPERIENCES BE INTERPRETED WITHOUT HANGING ONTO PAST INTERPRETATIONS? CAN YOU ORGANISATIONS, TEAMS AND INDIVIDUALS LEARN TO BE ACTIVE CREATORS OF THEIR OWN FUTURE? IN THIS ARTICLE WE PROVIDE A WAY TO DEAL WITH THESE QUESTIONS AND REFLECT ON EXPERIENCES AND DIFFICULTIES FROM PRACTICE.

Developing Next Practices

MARTIJN FRIJTERS AND PAUL KEURSTEN

Development and innovation are currently the order of the day in organisations. Continuing along on the existing road of more of the same is seldom possible for many organisations, teams and also individuals. In many practices, it is often necessary to develop next practices that are different from an extrapolation of the past and that are strongly connected to the future that is developing. Lasting success is particularly possible for organisations, teams and individuals if they are capable of shaping the future in such a way that it does not overtake them. Reacting to developments is not sufficient.

The problem with the future is that it cannot be predicted, planned and controlled. And new practices are not yet known to you; you still have to develop them. You therefore cannot start from a clearly defined and known framework and based on this, set out the steps you must take to get there, teach people how they can do this and then 'roll out' the plan. There is nothing to roll out, only something to shape and develop. This is a situational, interactive and iterative process of knowledge development and knowledge application in practice. We can view such a process as a learning process with unknown outcomes.

Our point of departure is that, even though you don't yet know the future, you can connect with the future that is developing. Many of the ingredients of the future are already present today. So, it is not about learning to predict the future. It is rather about learning to see how the future is taking shape: recognising

which signals are now already visible, giving (new) meanings to these and, based on this, creating new knowledge and taking action. This learning cycle can be followed as an individual, as a group, and as an organisation as a whole, always in relation to one's own ambition, work environment, social environment and professional environment.

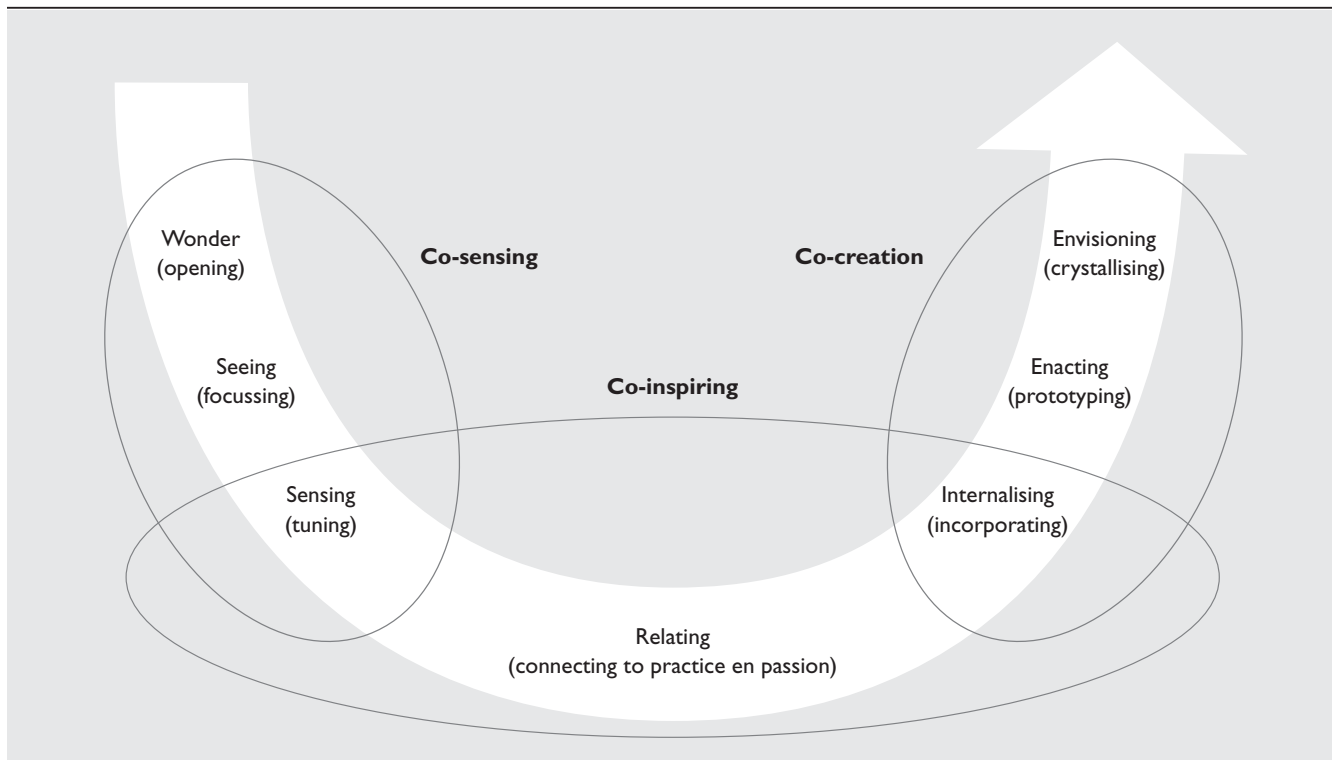
In 2001, we worked out a model for this approach, building strongly on the work of Otto Scharmer (Keursten and Frijters, 2001). Since that time we have worked and experimented with this approach. In this article we examine more closely the model from 2001, based on these practical experiences. We will describe core situations and dilemmas we encountered and will formulate learnings. To begin with, we will briefly summarize and update the core concepts which formed the basis for our work on learning from the future.

DEVELOPING NEXT PRACTICES AS LEARNING FROM THE FUTURE

We consider the development of new practices as a learning process in which those involved:

- actively search for developments and new meanings ,
- connect these to the here-and-now and to their ambitions, and
- from start to experiment and in so doing, create a new direction and practice.

We call this approach 'learning from the future'. This indicates that the starting point for learning does not lie in the present or in the past, but in the future. In this type of learning, you



start from the future which is unfolding and actively take part in this development. The essence of learning from the future is in connecting the developing future to the practice of today. Central to this is learning to see concrete possibilities for innovation in the here-and-now. Possibilities that can immediately be exploited, that can provide new angles and solutions. These are possibilities we often do not see if we use the eyes of today, but which we can see if we look with the eyes of the developing future.

So it is all about:

- learning to see developments and patterns in developments by looking from new perspectives and thereby seeing new opportunities,
- developing new knowledge from this new perspective that enables to take unusual actions.

It differentiates itself herein from learning which builds on the past. Learning from the future is orientated towards innovation and breaks with the dominant way of thinking from the past. This is almost impossible to do on your own; interaction with others combined with the different points of view of different people is often necessary in order to discover new perspectives.

Based on interviews with over 150 scientists, entrepreneurs and social leaders, Scharmer and others have developed a U-model which beautifully illustrates the essence of learning from the future (see fig. 1, based on Jaworski & Scharmer, 2000; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, Flowers, 2004). It also provides a useful starting point for implementing these processes within organisations.

Core elements in this process are (see also Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers, 2004):

- Postponing meaning and judgement:
 - observing without directly drawing conclusions; actively keeping apparently unrelated information consciously in your awareness so that new and fresh ways of understanding the situation eventually evolve;
 - recognising and examining our own assumptions and judgements; cultivating the ability to be more conscious of our thoughts (often our thoughts hold us, instead of us holding our thoughts);
 - dealing and coping with lack of clarity, uncertainty, anxiety and the insecurity that comes with this.

- Seeing the whole picture:
 - looking at how the whole fits together instead of looking at separate elements;
 - seeing yourself as a part of the whole you are looking at (the duality between the observer and the observed disappears) and thereby also seeing your own contribution to how the whole takes shape;
 - starting from the awareness that you yourself are (partly) the cause of problems, you can discover new possibilities to realise what you really want;
 - looking at the generative process which underlies what we see: turning our attention to the source of what we can now see (more than on the object itself).
- Sensing:
 - by consciously connecting yourself with the reality as it develops and seeing yourself as a part of this without imposing old frameworks, you become more and more able to sense what is happening;
 - you develop a view of the developments connected with who you are and what you want;
 - taking position according to your vision of what is coming and from there setting your course. In this process, the clarity about what is happening grows.
- Connecting:
 - breaking free from everyday routines and behaviours and letting go of control; acting spontaneously, doing what you instinctively feel is necessary;
 - connecting yourself to the whole based on the questions: what is my potential and what part can I play? What do we/I want to realise, what is our/my intention?
- Experimenting (prototyping):
 - enacting your intention by actively experimenting; through this active experimentation we learn to better know and recognise what the essentials are;
 - the iterative process of modelling, simulating, connecting with others, adjusting, crystallising;
 - being open to feedback and also continuing to observe yourself without overreacting to every dissenting signal.

This is no easy process. It demands quite a lot: a high level of consciousness, dealing with uncertainty and not knowing, combining new perspectives with current reality, and dealing with yourself. The last can be the hardest: the confrontation with your own limits, habits and beliefs, and the observation that some of them are not helpful for new futures.

EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS

It is all well and good that this can be written down like this and also that the future can be conceptualised in a schematic process. However, how is it in reality where things never neatly follow a diagram? Our experiences are mixed. It continues to be a case of searching and experimenting. Sometimes a breakthrough can be reached, sometimes not. One moment there is a lot of energy and inspiration, another moment these fade away. In this paragraph, we share our experiences and the lesson we have learnt from these experiences.

WHAT DOES THIS EXPERIENCE TEACH US?

- The method we followed on the first day (the left side of the U) appeared to work well in freeing people and arousing enthusiasm, but it was still insufficient to really assimilate new perspectives. Back in one's own practice, that new perspective and switching between different perspectives are less easy. The current thinking in everyday practice quickly becomes dominant again. Probably there is also the effect we all recognise when you come across something new which appeals to you. Initially you notice in particular the positive aspects (what a beautiful house, I can already picture us living there) but on the second encounter, the practical objections come to the fore (it is much further to drive to work, the garden is actually rather small, ...).
- Working out a scenario yourself is a learning process in which you practice envisaging the possibilities of that scenario and to deal with practical issues from that perspective. It also creates ownership: by working out the details it becomes increasingly your own perspective. That makes it powerful and at the same time inhibits the access of others to the scenario.
- A dilemma arises: at the start of developing a new scenario you need people who have ideas about it and are able to think these through. The generating of ideas succeeds mainly if you also believe in that scenario. At the same time there is a risk that this forming of groups on the basis of affinity leads to polarisation; the preferences and the differences become more explicit.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR IMPLEMENTING EARNING FROM THE FUTURE?

Changing perspective just once is not enough. More interactions and more frequent changes are necessary. That is something which most of us are not used to, but it is this flexibility in thinking from various perspectives, which is of impor-

Case I: transport control at the Dutch Railways

In the setting of a beautiful estate in the woods we were able to work for two days on innovation. The future of transport control was going to change drastically and the group wanted to have maximum influence on the changes which were certainly going to take place. On the first day, intensive discussions were held in the garden about the developments in and around the NS [Dutch Railways]. The focus on these developments helped in letting go of the daily reality, the daily demand on production and solutions in the here-and-now. The developments which people saw around the NS were subsequently linked to the personal ideas about roles: what is our contribution now? What contribution do we want to make in the future?

The discussion and the possibilities which emerged were so inspiring that on the very same day new perspectives on the future took shape, initial steps towards scenarios which were partially near and partially far away from the present reality. The perspective which was furthest away seemed to bring the most

enthusiasm and inspiration: “that is what we are really good at”, “that is where our added value lies”.

On the following day, the future scenarios were elaborated in groups. These groups were formed on the basis of affinity. After the presentation of the details, the mood swung around, The vista which on the first day had seemed the most inspiring was now much less positively greeted: “That is still in the future”, “that is too far removed from the present reality”, “that is not yet possible in this company.” The working groups saw their own scenario as the most desirable and realistic: support and belief in the perspectives which were really innovative with respect to the present practice seemed mainly to come from those who had worked out the details. They had already ‘lived’ the scenario for a short time. But the fear that this would not be well received back in their own organisation, and the disbelief in the possibilities strongly influenced the mood of the day. The tendency was to strategically build further on the current practice; more of the same after all ...

tance in shaping an unpredictable future. It demands a series of interventions taking the aforementioned points into consideration:

- An initial one in which you help people to open up for new perspectives, create enthusiasm and make connections based on affinity;
- A second one in which, per scenario, you help the each scenario group to strengthen the connection between their scenario and the present practice (integrating the first and second visit to an attractive new house);
- A third one in which, after a scenario is worked out in more detail, you facilitate the interaction between groups that have worked on different scenarios: through investigating each others scenario and through critical and generative dialogue, each scenario is being refined. (This is not yet the moment to make a choice for the most appealing one);
- A fourth one in which concrete situations in the current practice are examined and worked out based on the thinking of all the scenarios in order to think through the consequences of each scenario for the here-and-now (in mixed groups).

WHAT DOES THIS EXPERIENCE TEACH US?

Postponing meaning and judgement is very difficult. Whatever colleagues say is first regarded from one’s own point of view. “The theory determines what we see”.

In order to learn to see one’s own views, it is necessary to examine the moment at which people get into a disagreement. Here lies the chance to learn; what is the assumption I am making here which determines what I see and how I react? The awareness of this assumption is the start of a personal learning process. A third person to guide this process is indispensable. Precisely because you are yourself strongly connected to your assumptions, of which you are often not aware, reflection is necessary to be freed from them. Through the reflection you learn to see the ‘map’ which you always see. By becoming aware that you see the map and not the landscape, you can let go of your assumptions and there is room for another reality. The third person thus supports the conversation especially in cases of disagreement (a situation in which people cling onto their own theory or map), by providing the possibility of learning to see one’s own assumptions. This third person hereby also supports the possibility of a further-reaching connection; one that goes beyond the discussion.

Case 2: Renewing NS Opleidingen [Dutch Railways Training Institute]: postponing judgements and exploring perspectives

NS Opleidingen was at the start of a transformation process. In the starting phase, dialogue meetings were held to look together at developments and to explore the meaning of these. On each occasion, six people would meet for a good conversation about the work, the customer, the organisation and the future. Every-time, a mix from the entire organisation was present; learning consultants, designers, trainers, managers, staff and members of the support teams. The atmosphere was good; everyone felt welcome to make a contribution. Also, the word had spread: previous participants talked positively about their meeting, which made more people wanting to get involved.

Central questions in each conversation were:

- Which important developments do we see in the NS (our client) and the environment?
- Which products and services will we deliver in the future in line with these developments?
- To which questions can we already respond well?
- To which questions do we presently not have a good answer?
- What is characteristic about how we do things?
- What are typical NS Opleidingen reflexes?
- What is characteristic of our behaviour towards the customer?
- What images/characterisations do customers have about NS Opleidingen?
- What images/characterisations do you have yourself about NS Opleidingen?

Two of the conversation rules we agreed on beforehand were;

- Build on each other. When you want to speak, indicate which of the points you want to expand on or relate to. This connects, both in terms of content as well as between the participants.
- Do not argue about images/perceptions. When talking about perceptions you easily enter into discussion. People don't agree with the image that the other has sketched. It doesn't make any sense to debate about perceptions; they are always true, they exist whether you share them or not. It is important to know them and understand where they originate from.

These rules were very valuable. Often there was a tendency to get into an argument. The now explicit perceptions often confronted others with realities they did not know (or wanted to know) or which they interpreted very differently. The colleagues one had worked with on a daily basis sometimes appeared to have very different views. And valuing and examining these views, not judging but connecting to different views, is not easy. Intervening in this seemed to be necessary every time, and this created learning moments for all. Eventually, this resulted in succeeding to allow different views to exist alongside each other and to making them visible to everyone. In this way people also learnt to lead such conversations with colleagues and clients and to examine together the meaning of differing perceptions in a non-judgmental way.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR IMPLEMENTING LEARNING FROM THE FUTURE?

It is necessary to learn to see differences and to dare to allow them to emerge. Based on this, an open and future oriented dialogue becomes possible.

This learning is a personal process that happens in interaction with others. It seems slow but has a large impact because it is irreversible. If you have seen your own assumptions, you are aware of them and have the possibility to examine new assumptions which make another reality possible. If you take this step too quickly, no room is made for the future and there is a strong likelihood that the future will be more of the same and that the usual patterns will continue to exist.

In implementing this process, a third person (facilitator) is much needed. He supports the individual reflection on assumptions as well as the relationship between the people in the discussion. He must be able to put underlying views into words, take people out of the discussion and bring them to reflection.

The move the facilitator must be able to support is that of debate to dialogue. In this move, uncertainty arises; if my assumption is merely an assumption, and this is also the case for the assumption of the other; what then is true? The facilitator must allow this uncertainty to exist without it being a hindrance.

Case 3: Renewal of NS Opleidingen: sensing and connecting with reality as it unfolds.

We met weekly in a room with a view on the railway line. The setting couldn't have been more appropriate: while the trains rolled past we were busy elaborating a future scenario. The working group was supported by their peers and facilitated (with time) by the organization.

One of the participants, whom we will call Peter, became more and more passionate. Initially rather reserved and not without scepticism, he nevertheless got into it. The future scenario really started to come alive for him and in exploring practical consequences, he went further than anyone else. His energy and activity grew because he had gradually started to believe in the new future. His influence and the possibility that this future could become a reality inspired him strongly. He interviewed people, introduced new ideas in real projects and advanced his propositions all the way to the highest leader. He had really connected himself to this future and was already experiencing it, mostly by doing a lot. He stepped into the new future and so began to also see it. Some colleagues of Peter were less enthusiastic. They regularly sent replacements and didn't link up with the interim products. They did not experience any challenging tension between the future scenario and the present reality. They did not believe in it: first see, then believe. The future both as a concept and as an image did not have any appeal for them: it didn't exist. Moreover there was scepticism. The real choices about the future had after all already been made, of this they were convinced.

WHAT DOES THIS EXPERIENCE TEACH US?

A personal connection is a requirement for learning from the future. At the same time, this connection cannot be forced. This demands a special skill from the leaders and facilitators; you can only invite and entice participants to connect. Pressure and control do not work in the creation of a future.

Allowing the future to evolve by doing is the only way to make contact with it. Peter is a good example of this. He is entrepreneurial: seeks others, takes a position and organises activities. Without this activity everything remains just an idea. For Peter, this offers a personal positioning with respect to the future; it becomes his future. In short, personal involvement is essential. As a representative for a group of stakeholders, you will not

engage to develop an inspiring future but will react and test. You cannot take part as a functionary or replacement, only as an individual acting from your own convictions, motivations and creativity. As a facilitator you can invite and entice. The choice to really step on board lies with the person. It is important to ask this and to make it explicit so that you know where you stand with each other. In this phase of the process, a tricky dilemma becomes visible. The natural tendency in uncertainty is to stand still and watch, to see what will happen. This however only produces the sense that you remain an outsider and without influence. You don't experience by acting yourself which makes the future remain abstract. The future can only be found by doing, by actively exploring, especially in times of uncertainty.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR IMPLEMENTING LEARNING FROM THE FUTURE?

Personal engagement and experience is essential for these learning processes. To this end activities must be organised which elicit doing, creating and connecting to people outside your direct peer group. Think of: creating a project proposal with a heterogeneous team, designing a new work flow after a merger, designing a new product. This also demands dealing with uncertainty. It is precisely because you are prepared to let go of your own views that you are open to others. But you don't know beforehand what you will encounter. It is then when uncertainty is high and you need to keep on exploring and moving.

This is not easy for facilitators to implement. It is possible to stimulate and support it. You can entice people and challenge them to allow the uncertainty to exist. You can create safe environments for experimentation. You can set up situations that allow for coincidence but without determining beforehand what will happen. The demands made on the facilitator are the same as those made on the participants.

I have also experienced this personally. Every year I walk to Santiago de Compostela with a friend. It happens regularly that we don't know precisely where we are anymore. Then we stop and look at the map. Using the map we try to determine our location. This usually leads to discussion but seldom to any certainty about where we actually are. It is often only when we decide to carry on walking in order "to see" that what we have seen on the map becomes clear. In moving and shifting we begin to understand how our route runs. We seldom discover this solely by looking at the map. Our route unwinds as we take it, as we walk it. If we stay still, the uncertainty remains and we do not see where the route is leading.

Case 4: ROC in Amsterdam; next practices in examination

In a lovely hotel in Amsterdam we came together with 22 people in the morning. The hotel was run entirely by students of the hotel school. This created a pleasant atmosphere which was characteristic of young people who are given the space to experiment and to learn a profession. This was precisely what our group stood for. All participants worked in same large educational organisation, the task now was to explore together the future of how examination is dealt with in education.

The beautiful and large room seemed to be unsuitably furnished for us. For our interactive process we wanted to be able to easily work in small groups but the huge heavy table in the middle was really hampering this.

After an introduction about examination we did our best under the circumstances and nevertheless divided into four groups in four corners of the room in order to discuss our impressions. Different perceptions about the future of examination were laid out side by side in a calm and reflective conversation. Our own context was also not forgotten. Tensions were regularly named which arose from different interests; interests with respect to the field of work, the teacher, the student, the directors and the Ministry. These conversations were written down as directly and literally as possible on flipchart sheets.

After one hour, all of these sheets were laid on the ground; the room unfortunately had no facilities for hanging up the sheets. This resulted in the border around the entire room being covered with huge flipchart sheets, in all colours and handwriting.

The group was by now fairly free from the daily reality of meetings, teaching, writing policies and consulting. More jokes were being made and now and then, someone would call out something through the room to someone else on the other side. The atmosphere was looser, more cheerful and more open.

Thereafter, the participants paired up and discussed with each other as they walked past all the sheets.

First of all we gave meaning to all the information:

- What is striking? What are the essential issues? Where are tensions? Where is the strength which is already present? Where are the challenges?

And after that we searched for core questions and core dilemmas:

- What are the crucial questions which our educational organisation is facing? What are the core dilemmas?

Then we enlarged the duos to groups of four and in sharing the answers to the first questions we started to search for direction;

- What are the most important directions which we as an educational organisation could follow in our development? What are the points of departure for these directions?

Finally, we together made a choice for four possible directions. After the lunch, we would come to grips with working out each of the different directions. This offered the possibility of better understanding the consequences of these directions.

After lunch, we set to work in four groups. Everyone chose to participate in a group based on preference and/or curiosity. The groups set off with the following questions:

- What do the various points of departure mean?
- What is the identity of our educational organisation within each window?
- What value do we offer with respect to relevant questions in that window?
- How do we connect to our environment from this window?
- What does this mean for the products and services which we offer? Which particular competences does that require?

Each group prepared a short presentation in which they could 'lay out' their case for their colleagues.

At two in the afternoon we stopped, full of inspiration about the possible future and enthusiastic that we could achieve so much in such a short time. This morning formed the beginning of a process which continued for a long time.

WHAT DOES THIS TEACH US?

The environment in which work is carried out can strongly contribute to the creativity and good atmosphere. The pleasant entourage which was congruent with the profession of those present (people from an educational organisation surrounded by students), was enormously stimulating. This led to many stories about their own student years and the students were cheerfully received. Telling stories got people into another mood, more relaxed. At the same time, the space forced us to be creative. Because of the physical lay-out, with the huge table for instance being absolutely in the way, we could not create an easy practical setting that matched our process. This demanded flexibility and creativity from the participants; together we had to make something of it.

The flow of the meeting, was directed by carefully formulated questions. These questions (as described above) provided guidance and structure without guiding or limiting possible solutions and directions. They aroused curiosity, energy and ideas.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR IMPLEMENTING LEARNING FROM THE FUTURE?

The space which is worked in must be inspiring for the participants, attractive, prompting stories which are related to the profession of the participants and at the same time limited. The beautiful but impractical lay-out forced flexibility.

An important role and skill of the facilitator is to formulate and structure stimulating questions that create energy, new directions and new connections. The ability to design questions is for a facilitator more important than the ability to formulate answers.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In this article we have shared experiences and reflected on creating next practices. We have reflected on participants and their dilemmas one after the other, on the implementation of the process of learning from the future, on the contribution and the skills of the facilitator and on the physical environment in which to give form to such a process.

The essence of developing next practices arises at the start; postponing meaning and judgement is crucial. If people in organisations allow themselves to be led more by memories and expectations, by achievements and the past, then an organisation loses contact with itself and with the developments in its environment. Then an organisation also loses contact with the possibilities to be creative, to learn and to grow.

Om werkelijk in contact te zijn moeten we lang genoeg bij het huidige moment stilstaan om het in ons op te nemen; lang genoeg om dit huidige moment werkelijk te voelen, het bewust te beleven en het zo beter te leren kennen en begrijpen. Deze vorm van aandacht levert een dieper inzicht in de oorzaken, gevolgen en onderlinge verbondenheid van de gebeurtenissen, zodat we niet langer gevangen zijn in een werkelijkheid die bepaald wordt door de gedachtes en interpretaties die we zelf geschapen hebben (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). [In order to truly be in contact, we must keep still long enough in the present moment in order to assimilate it; long enough to really feel the present moment, to consciously experience it and so to learn to know it and understand it better. This form of attention provides a deeper insight into the causes, consequences and inter-connections of the events so that we are no longer caught in a reality which is determined by the thoughts and interpretations which we have formed ourselves].

This is a process that many are not used to: it is slower than the hectic daily pace; it is more open and more uncertain than what we are used to in result-orientated management; it demands personal entrepreneurship and engagement more than functional involvement; and it demands inspiration and enticement more than directing and control. These are not easy demands and we succeeded sometimes more and sometimes less in taking the fundamental steps with the contractor. For an organisation which wants to transform itself and to ensure that the future does not overtake it but rather that it takes part in the future, it is unavoidable to embrace this enthralling, inspiring and also unmanageable process. We hope that our experiences can be of help in this.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Jaworski J. and C.O. Scharmer (2000). *Leadership in the New Economy: sensing and actualizing emerging futures*. Cambridge society for organisational learning/generation consulting.
- Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, Flowers (2004). *Presence. Exploring profound change in people, organisations and society*. Published by arrangement with Society for Organisational Learning.
- Jon Kabat Zinn (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. Hyperion, New York.
- Frijters en Keursten (2002): *Leren van de toekomst*. [Learning from the future]. In: *Kennis maken, leren in gezelschap*. [In: Making acquaintance, learning in company.] Scriptum, Schiedam.