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CULTIVATING PRESENCING EMBODIMENT:

Five Orientational Modes for Improvising Collective Leading

Bobby Ricketts

Adjunct Professor UMass (Boston)

Abstract: This article explores Presencing Embodiment, a dynamic state of heightened sensory, emotional, and relational awareness, where individuals align perception, intention, and action in real time. This state fosters adaptive engagement with the present moment and deepens the potential for co-creative participation. Drawing on sensory input from both internal and external sources, Presencing Embodiment cultivates a deep, felt awareness that enables real-time responsiveness, creativity, and collaboration, allowing individuals and groups to navigate complexity and co-create emergent possibilities. Inspired by the developmental strategies of improvising musicians, the author draws upon extensive improvisational music performance experience to synthesize key theoretical frameworks—including Gunnlaugson’s *Dynamic Presencing* (2020), Ericsson’s *Deliberate Practice* (1993), Gallagher and Zahavi’s *Phenomenological Embodiment* (2012), Stacey’s *Emergence in Complex Systems* (2001), Csikszentmihalyi’s *Flow Theory* (1996), and Scharmer’s *Theory U* (2009). From this synthesis, five orientational modes are identified: Co-Creation, Embracing the Unknown, Deep Listening, Embodied Awareness, and Playfulness. Grounded in the context of improvisational music ensemble performance, these modes foster the capacities that enhance Presencing Embodiment. The article discusses how these modes, though originating in music, are applicable across domains such as leadership and education. Engaging with these modes enables practitioners to deepen their attunement to themselves, others, and the environment, fostering resilience, creativity, and adaptive leadership. Through the synthesis of lived musical experience and theory, the article presents a framework for enhancing collective capabilities to co-create transformative outcomes.

Key words: Leadership development, presencing, embodied leadership, transformative leadership, creative leadership

I. Introduction

This article addresses the challenge of fostering and enhancing collective, emergent leadership by drawing practical insights from music improvisation-based embodiment practices. By examining the developmental strategies and performance capabilities of master-level improvising musicians, I explore how their responsiveness, attunement, and co-creative interaction can model practices to deepen Presencing Embodiment for practitioners across various domains. Presencing Embodiment serves as a critical foundation for Presencing Leadership, which is relational, emergent, and rooted in collective action. Through these improvisational principles and practices, leadership is reframed as a co-creative and emergent process, transforming how it is enacted in contexts beyond music. In this process, perception begins to emerge not only as a byproduct of experience, but as a primary site of practice—a place where attention, relationship, and adaptive capacity converge in real time.

The challenges of leadership, particularly in organizational and team settings, often stem from the difficulty of fostering collective awareness, adaptability, and transformation. Traditional, top-down models frequently hinder the development of collaborative and co-creative dynamics (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). This article examines how the practice methodologies and performance capabilities of masterful improvisational music ensembles can inform Presencing Embodiment, a core element of Presencing Leadership. In striving for mastery, musicians in these settings organically develop heightened capacities for attunement, co-creation, and leadership (Ricketts, 2020). These embodied skills emerge as a natural by-product of the musicians' sustained engagement in ensemble improvisation and are foundational for Presencing Leadership, which thrives on collective attunement and intuitive participation.

II. Reframing Leadership: From Directive to Collaborative

Presencing Leadership redefines leadership as relational and emergent, emphasizing distributed authority and the collective alignment of a group. This dynamic approach aligns with Gunnlaugson's (2020) practice of *Dynamic Presencing*, where leadership emerges organically from shared energy and intuitive engagement among participants as a way of being together. This stands in contrast to traditional, top-down leadership structures, which prioritize control over collective alignment and mutual engagement.

To illustrate how the principles of collaborative improvisational music performance manifest in practice, I will recount a pivotal moment during a rehearsal in Lagos, Nigeria. In this instance, deep listening, intuitive attunement, and collective resonance transformed a group of musicians into a cohesive, unified ensemble. This narrative highlights how the embodied capabilities of masterful improvisational musicians—cultivated through sensory engagement and adaptive responsiveness—can offer profound insights into the relational and emergent dynamics of Presencing Embodiment.

II. 1. The Emergence of Collective Awareness: An Anecdote from Lagos

"Do you feel it?"

I was in Lagos, Nigeria, coaching an ad hoc group of the country's finest musicians, aiming to transform them into a cohesive unit for our upcoming performances. During one rehearsal, we reached an intangible milestone: something in the music shifted, creating a qualitative space where each player's unique expression could emerge freely. In that magic moment, a distinct new essence materialized—suddenly, we were a band. It felt as though we had spent weeks on the road together, rather than just a few hours in a rehearsal facility. The moment had an almost palpable sound effect: "*Oomph*." We were there.

I stopped the music to confirm: "Do you feel it?"

The musicians smiled, nodding as they exchanged glances. I turned to our small, supportive crew observing the session. "Do *you* feel it?" I asked. Everyone nodded in agreement. "Beautiful—hold on to that. Let's break for fifteen."

Two subtle yet key distinctions are embedded in my choice of words. I didn't ask, "*Can you hear it?*" Instead, I asked, "*Do you feel it?*"

First, this phrasing underscores that what we were striving to create sonically for the ear also resonated beyond auditory perception, engaging deeper sensory and emotional experiences. Second, the question didn't seem odd to anyone present. For musicians like us, it is natural to understand that the sounds we craft intentionally resonate physically, emotionally, spiritually, and beyond.

The phenomenon of felt sense in music is vividly demonstrated through dance, where movement translates sound into embodied expression, and sound, in turn, drives movement. Dancers synchronize with musical elements through bodily action, blending auditory and kinesthetic awareness to create a holistic sensory experience (Barnstaple, 2020; Van der Schyff & Schiavio, 2017).

II. 2. Engaging Deeper Realms of Experience

The shift to engaging deeper realms of experience is integral to cultivating Presencing Embodiment. This practice enables practitioners to attune to the present moment, align with collective dynamics, and perform with authenticity and impact. Sensory experiences resonate across the body, fostering heightened awareness that directly supports this process.

In music, as in dance, sensory resonance facilitates a profound attunement to the present moment, allowing practitioners to transcend intellectual understanding and fully engage with their experiences. While the phrase "fully engage with experience" may sound lyrical, its implication is critical: to truly engage means to perceive and understand in ways that

extend beyond the intellectual. This capacity to embody and project felt energy forms the foundation for generative connection and transformative action within collectives (Gallagher, 2005; Colombetti, 2014).

For those of us who live to create music together, "embodied engagement" and "sensory resonance"—although often expressed more informally, as in “Do you feel it?”—are not abstract concepts but actionable states of being that can be practiced and realized in real-time.

Back in Lagos, each musician entered the music-making process with their own assumptions and expectations. My initial aim was to establish an intentional, supportive space where we could shed ego, bias, personal ambition, and other limiting tendencies, allowing our most authentic, open, and vulnerable performing selves to emerge in a shared exploration of sound. This endeavor aligns with the generative process of co-creation (Scharmer, 2009), where each individual's unique contributions are nurtured to produce outcomes far beyond what any one of us could achieve alone.

Reaching that elevated state of collective awareness, my instinct was that taking a short pause would help us retain the essence of the experience. While extending the moment might have deepened our collective flow and allowed further exploration of this state in action, I trusted that we would return to it. Pausing after acknowledging that we felt “it”—and implicitly agreeing that “it” was an essential quality to access—was a deliberate move to test our ability to re-establish this heightened state of embodied collective awareness.

Decades of practice and performance preparation have taught me that this kind of “risk” is an essential component of mastery. The most effective way to verify that a skill—here, the willful capability to access deeper, collective attunement—has been acquired, maintained, or extended is through deliberate repetition under varied conditions, assessing performance efficacy along the way. Put simply: we must practice deliberately.

In improvisational music ensemble performance, collective awareness is often measured through the felt sense shared by the group, signaled by immediate, affirmative responses to a question like, “Do you feel it?” Intuitive recognition of mutual attunement serves as the first indicator of collective alignment. Consistently replicating this experience under varied conditions further confirms its depth and stability.

By revisiting this heightened state of awareness in future sessions, we could refine our collective awareness through sensory resonance and adaptive responsiveness, strengthening our ability to perform as a symbiotic ensemble. This process is inherent to improvisation, where feedback loops from the music itself provide real-time validation of the group’s

collective dynamics.

II. 3. Leveraging Deliberate Practice

These insights align closely with Ericsson's (1993) framework of *Deliberate Practice*, a methodology for skill acquisition modeled on the practice habits of musicians who achieve mastery. From a theoretical perspective, Deliberate Practice emphasizes purposeful, focused repetition, where skills are refined through sustained effort, continuous assessment, and the meticulous testing of abilities under varied conditions. In the context of our rehearsal, an adaptation of Ericsson's concept allowed us to confirm and extend a newly developed capacity for collective awareness by deliberately pausing, stepping away from the state, and then re-engaging while adapting to the group's shifting dynamics. While we risked losing what we had gained, even that potential loss would have offered a valuable lesson for the group.

In our case, this new state of collective being—and the embodied confidence that we could replicate and enhance it—suddenly provided clarity and meaning to everything that had come before. Every step we had taken during the rehearsal process now made sense—most importantly, to the group as a whole. Until then, the path I had charted through method, intention, and presence-based leadership may have felt somewhat ambiguous to the uninitiated. The group had placed their faith in me almost by default, and now that faith had been affirmed. Any doubts about where we were headed creatively, or skepticism about our methodology, dissolved in that moment. It was a moment of knowing: knowing that no matter where the unfolding journey took us, we would face it together and be okay.

This kind of collective knowing arises from the dynamic, embodied interactions within a group, where intuition and tacit knowledge converge in real-time collaboration, enabling emergent creativity and action (Gunnlaugson, 2020; Sawyer, 2017). A shared faith in our mission had been established. The brief pause in the rehearsal created a necessary space for each of us to internalize this new awareness, with its subtle yet transformational effects, and reflect on its significance for our ongoing preparations. I could see the difference throughout the room—people standing taller, walking more confidently, and breathing more easily. An atmosphere of increased joviality had emerged.

This shift was not merely a change in body language or mood; it reflected a deeper, embodied awareness—a collective attunement that demonstrated the transformative power of Presencing Embodiment. We had moved beyond a concern for individual contributions to enter a unified state where collective energy and shared intentions guided us forward. This moment of mutual attunement marked a profound shift in how we, as musicians, related to

the music, and it underscored the power of co-creation in collective action.

The ability to sense and respond to shared intentions in real time is a foundational element of Presencing Embodiment. It is where participant engagement aligns to form a coherent whole, enabling collective energy to generate emergent possibilities.

III. Co-Creation & Collective Awareness: *Key Elements of Transformative Practices*

This breakthrough of collective awareness demonstrates that we—as a group, including you and I—can co-create meaning and direction. My musician colleagues and I shared an intuitive sense of unified discernment that transcended individual being and aligned with an emergent future. The shift in sensory awareness illuminated our mutual trust and faith in the ongoing process, even without certainty about the precise outcome. This new state of awareness—one that helped “make sense” of the journey—reflected an unfolding attunement, where the efforts of each ensemble member merged into a coherent whole. I observed how the musicians listened—not just with their ears, but with their bodies, emotions, and intuition. It was through this alignment that co-creative potential revealed itself—not simply as collective effort coalescing, but as an emergent capacity grounded in presence, perception, and relational awareness.

The pause provided space for the mind, body, and emotions to synchronize, allowing a deeper understanding and integration of what had just taken place. Our shared, albeit not yet fully defined, intuitive knowing about the journey ahead highlighted the interplay of sensory dynamics: embodied trust, the emergence of shared meaning, and the early crystallization of collective coherence. These elements scaffold transformative practices that foster Presencing Embodiment.

What facilitated the emergence of this new state? The music had sounded great from the first downbeat—these were, after all, highly accomplished musicians. Yet, I sensed we could evolve beyond polished professionalism to reach something more profound and transcendent.

While vamping on a particular section of music that intuitively felt like a loose prototype of what I hoped would emerge, I began to suggest subtle tweaks in the musical interplay. The bass and kick drum needed to complement each other rather than compete for space. The harmonic frequencies between the keyboard and guitar roles could be distributed more effectively. The coordination of rhythmic phrases required adjustment to ensure the riffs complemented or counterpointed each other more purposefully.

These adjustments reflect and necessitate a specific mode of analytical and relational

listening (Raelin, 2011). While holistic attunement engages the emergent *we-space* (Gunnlaugson & Brabant, 2016), focused listening homes in on the intricate dynamics of the collective soundscape. The dynamic interplay between broad attunement and focused listening is fundamental to Presencing Embodiment. This synergy balances collective awareness with individual contributions, fostering a collaborative environment. Both forms of attunement—one expansive, the other precise—along with sensitivity to their dynamic relationship, are integral to Presencing Embodiment. When integrated, practitioners can navigate the subtleties of interaction within the broader relational field, ensuring that adaptive refinements align with the group’s embodied resonance (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012). Extending analytical and relational engagement into the embodied dimension unlocks a more integrated and nuanced awareness, central to accessing the full potential of Deep Listening (Ricketts, 2020).

Throughout the process, I listened attentively to identify potential blind spots in the collective performance while also validating each musician’s creative autonomy. This approach enabled them to respond to my input in ways that aligned with their individual musical strengths and personalities as they unfolded. The more we played together, the more layers of ourselves we revealed to one another. This multidimensional process—encompassing emotional vulnerability, focused analytical adjustments, holistic relational sensory awareness, and intentional practice—exemplifies how improvising musicians leverage embodied awareness and incremental development to uncover emergent possibilities.

This iterative process of exploration, where individuals remain grounded—albeit dynamically—in their authenticity while co-creating, reflects foundational principles for enhancing Presencing Embodiment. Through these dynamics, where each individual contribution is refined and integrated, the group collectively reaches its fullest potential for generative collaboration.

At this stage, my objective was to establish an embodied baseline of collective awareness that could be leveraged for adaptation across the diverse musical contexts of our repertoire. I sought to guide the group to this shared “place” so that we could, together, explore new possibilities beyond it. To facilitate this onward journey, I recognized the need to shift from a central leadership role to a more distributed form of leadership. This transition not only lightened my own burden but also allowed for greater freedom within the performance. Relinquishing control would ultimately empower the ensemble, enabling us to fully embrace the collaborative spirit of Presencing Embodiment.

The experience in Lagos not only highlights the emergent dynamics of collective

awareness within an improvisational music setting but also lays the groundwork for applying these dynamics to broader domains, particularly in leadership and collaboration (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). In improvisational music ensemble performance, collective awareness is nurtured through shared, embodied experiences involving sensory attunement, adaptive responsiveness, and trust (Scharmer, 2009; Gunnlaugson, 2020). While deeply rooted in improvisational music, the practices and dynamics described in the Lagos anecdote reflect universal principles of human connection, creativity, and agency—principles essential to transformative leadership and collaborative work across any field (Raelin, 2011).

This shift toward collective awareness, as demonstrated in improvisational music performance, points to a deeper, relational understanding of embodiment. To fully comprehend how these dynamics emerge, it is crucial to explore embodiment as a process that extends beyond the physical body. Embodiment encompasses how we relate to our environment, interact with others, and engage with our own sense of self. It is through this relational process that Presencing Embodiment is cultivated—a foundational pillar for transformative practices in both creative and leadership contexts.

III. 2 Embodiment and Presencing: A Relational Process

Embodiment refers to experiencing the world through both physical and subtle senses, encompassing the holistic interplay of mind, body, emotion, spirit, and social context in shaping this experience. As Lakoff and Johnson (1999) proposed, cognitive processes are fundamentally shaped by bodily experiences, introducing the concept of the “embodied mind.” More recent theories have expanded this understanding, framing embodiment as a dynamic, relational process that emerges through continuous interaction with the environment and others (Fuchs, 2018; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012).

This broader perspective, advanced by scholars such as Sheets-Johnstone (2011) and Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (2016), posits that cognition is not merely influenced by bodily sensations but is actively constituted through movements, emotions, and social engagements. Embodiment involves implicit, automatic, pre-reflective bodily knowledge and tacit awareness that shape experience and cognition, often operating below the level of conscious thought. Contemporary embodiment theories emphasize the interdependence of this multidimensional experience, highlighting its formation through personal histories and collective social contexts (Colombetti, 2014; Barrett, 2017).

Presencing Embodiment, by contrast, refers to the conscious cultivation of a state of being that integrates the body’s sensory experiences with a heightened awareness of the

present moment. This concept underscores an embodied presence that transcends intellectual analysis, fostering a deeper connection to the self, others, and the environment. Presencing involves accessing a deeper awareness and intelligence that lies beyond habitual thought patterns and behaviors (Gunnlaugson, 2020; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013). In this sense, Presencing Embodiment reflects the ability to engage this heightened awareness through embodied experiences, encompassing physical sensations, emotions, and intuition.

The term “embodied experiences” here refers to lived experiences of being in the body, where cognition, perception, and action are rooted in physicality. It acknowledges that physical sensations, emotional states, and social interactions are central to shaping how we think, create, and relate to the world (Johnson, 2007; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 2016). In the context of Presencing Embodiment, embodied experience serves as the raw material for cultivating the awareness and presence that presencing seeks to enhance. The interplay between physical, emotional, and social dimensions of experience forms the foundation for deeper awareness and transformative action. These potentials are more fully realized when practitioners consciously engage with their embodied aspects.

The Lagos anecdote exemplifies Presencing Embodiment in action. Through emotional, physical, and auditory sensing, this experience demonstrates the capacity of a group to engage the *we-space*—an intersubjective space arising when individuals come together with shared intention or purpose (Gunnlaugson & Brabant, 2016). Within this collective field, the musicians and I accessed a deeper level of awareness, sensing and responding to each other's subtle cues. The moment of crossing this threshold was physically palpable—felt through emotions, heart rate, and intuition—enabling us to register and build upon emergent qualities in our co-created musical performance. My question, “Do you feel it?” underscores the importance of collectively acknowledging embodied awareness in the moment, a practice that fosters access to more profound levels of consciousness through the senses and intuition.

This decisive moment represents more than a fleeting instance of Presencing Embodiment; it serves as a constellating event—a formative experience that can anchor and inform subsequent practice. Presencing Embodiment is not simply about accessing heightened awareness in isolated moments; it involves cultivating a sustained practice of being fully present and embodied in each moment. This requires the intentional development of embodied cognition through regular training—what I propose as *Deliberate Practice*—and focused attention to sensory, emotional, and bodily sensations. Music is an ideal medium for this: sound carries frequencies that are both physically felt and heard, reverberating in an environment and evoking emotional responses. For musicians, music at its best not only

sounds good but also *feels* good—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

While an initial experience of Presencing Embodiment may feel profound, the ultimate goal is to integrate this way of being into everyday life and interactions. Achieving this level of integration necessitates a shift from a *pro-ethos* concentration—emphasizing individual attitudes, beliefs, and achievements—toward an *empathic-generative* approach. This shift focuses on shared intention, mutual understanding, and collective well-being. It involves moving from prioritizing personal agendas to considering the collective impact of embodied awareness and how collaboration can harness this awareness to achieve desired outcomes. This transition reorients attention from the individual self to the *eco-self*, recognizing the interconnectedness of individuals with the larger systems in which they exist (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013).

III. 3. From Sensory Awareness to Social Connection

Self-awareness and adaptive fluency are essential for facilitating the shift from personal to collective awareness. These qualities provide the stability and intuitive responsiveness necessary for engaging effectively with collective dynamics. For improvisational musicians, this shift is supported by advanced proficiency in our craft, enabling us to direct focus outward toward relational dynamics and shared goals without losing track of our individual performance capabilities. This fluid ability to navigate between personal and collective awareness is critical for cultivating generative co-creation, where each individual's refined contribution integrates seamlessly into the larger whole. In this way, developing individual skills lays the foundation for transformative collective interaction.

This integration of individual and collective awareness underpins a core principle of Presencing Embodiment (Gunnlaugson, 2020): by refining individual capabilities and aligning them with the collective, practitioners unlock the transformative potential of generative fields. These dynamics are vividly illustrated in improvisational music ensemble performance, where the interplay between individual musicians, the ensemble, and the resulting co-created outcome demonstrates the power of this integration. Generative fields give rise to emergent phenomena—such as shared intuition, amplified creativity, and synergistic action—that enable outcomes surpassing the sum of individual or collective efforts. As scholars of emergence and systems thinking suggest, these generative dynamics occur when relational interactions create a whole that is qualitatively distinct and more impactful than the simple aggregation of its parts (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Sawyer, 2006; Johnson, 2001).

These theoretical perspectives highlight the profound interconnection between

embodied experience, cognition, and social engagement, reinforcing how Presencing Embodiment arises through ongoing interaction with our environment and collective dynamics. By deepening our understanding of these processes, we can cultivate practices that enhance individual and collective transformation. Through engagement with generative fields of presence, this integrated approach demonstrates how practitioners can unlock the transformative potential inherent in collective awareness, fostering a dynamic where individual proficiency amplifies the collective's creative capacity.

Thus, the true power of collaboration lies not simply in its mechanics but in the intentional cultivation of presence, embodied awareness, and mutual attunement. This shift from transactional coordination to transformational connection—where the collective transcends its constraints—unlocks new creative potential.

The event described in the opening Lagos anecdote marked the beginning of a collective culture characterized by a felt sense of trust and mutual understanding among co-creators, enabling vulnerability and risk-taking in our playing. We were ready to explore the *place beyond the place* (Meadows, 2008), where new possibilities and potentials could be realized. It was an embodied, physical, and emotional benchmark—a moment of "knowing" that became our north star as we worked through the rest of the concert repertoire.

The underlying, informal, and intuitive framework of this collaboration was value-based. Initially, it required dissolving the inherent hierarchy and power structures within the group. The musicians understood that my name was on the marquee, that I had scouted and selected each of them from among several capable candidates, and that they were being paid to participate. Yet, such executive and administrative roles hold little weight onstage. In live improvisational music ensemble performance, leadership is not defined by formal titles but by the dynamic flow of skills, intuition, and collaboration.

As the formal leader, I naturally bore the responsibility of honoring all stakeholders—musicians, audience, technical crew, concert promoters, sponsors, venue owners, and local media. However, I've learned that facilitating conditions where I can release these practical concerns and focus on artistry is vital. In doing so, everyone thrives. This reflects the principle of distributed leadership, where leadership arises organically through collective collaboration rather than hierarchy.

After dissolving hierarchical structures, the next step is nurturing a collaborative, generative, co-creative *we-space*. Within this fertile space, everyone feels heard, valued, and comfortable enough to let go of ego- and angst-driven agendas. Here, there is room for fun, laughter, and love—elements that are not separate from the practical realities of the music

business but essential for maintaining a balanced and thriving creative environment.

Finally, I am energized by the potential for emergence—where something new, unexpected, or profound materializes from the ways musicians engage with each other and the music we co-create. Allowing for emergence requires embracing and even thriving in a state of not-knowing. This is why improvisational musicians practice and why we cultivate creative confidence: to prepare ourselves for traversing uncharted territory.

In Lagos, the group's capacity for Presencing Embodiment became the guiding force for our co-creative processes throughout the remainder of our time together. By prioritizing the collective experience and embracing our interconnectedness, we accessed a deeper level of awareness. This enabled us to transcend polished professionalism and achieve a more meaningful and impactful level of artistic expressiveness than we had previously imagined.

III. 4. From Sensory Awareness to Collective Transformation

Embodiment theory (Gallagher, 2005) suggests that the body and its senses play a crucial role in shaping emotions, thoughts, and behaviors—a principle that applies directly to music performance. The auditory and physical sensations involved in playing music can evoke a range of emotions, influencing musicians' intuitive and cognitive reasoning as well as their actions (Van Der Schyff & Schiavio, 2017). For instance, the physical act of playing a musical instrument—such as feeling the vibrations of strings on a guitar or the pressure of keys on a piano—can foster a state of flow and embodiment, encouraging greater creativity and improvisation. Similarly, the aesthetic qualities of music can elicit powerful emotional responses in both performers and audiences, shaping cognitive processing and behavior (Scherer & Zentner, 2001). Recognizing the role of sensory experiences in music performance allows musicians to harness these elements to enhance their emotional and cognitive states, resulting in more engaging and impactful performances.

Building on the importance of sensory experiences in music performance and their impact on emotional and cognitive states (Van Der Schyff et al., 2018; Scherer & Zentner, 2001), it is vital to explore how these experiences can extend beyond music to enhance Presencing Embodiment. By modeling phenomena observed in improvisational music ensemble performance—such as prioritizing sensory experiences and embodied practices—leaders and practitioners can cultivate interconnectedness, trust, and mutual understanding within organizational cultures. This approach enables collectives to tap into deeper levels of awareness and generate outcomes with more profound and far-reaching impact.

The Lagos experience deepened as we continually tuned into each other's

contributions. The music guided us—each moment building on the next, transcending individual skill to create something greater. Roles became fluid, with each musician stepping forward or retreating as needed, trusting the group's energy to lead. It was not about controlling the outcome but allowing the soundscapes to emerge organically, staying open to whatever came next. We embraced a state of not-knowing, where every note, chord, and beat invited discovery of the emerging future. In this spirit of openness, we co-created musical moments that were more profound than any of us could have planned.

As our connection strengthened, our awareness attuned to the subtle shifts in the room—emotions, energies, and small gestures that conveyed everything we needed to know. In responding to each other's contributions, we weren't merely hearing the music; we were feeling its energy, its impact, and its potential. This shared awareness brought our improvisational performance to life repeatedly.

At the heart of this process was embodied presence, manifesting through every aspect of our being. We aligned on multiple levels—physically rocking to the beat, emotionally expressing through our faces, closing our eyes to connect more intimately with the music's spirituality—all while nurturing the space for the music to flow freely. Guided by sonic expression, there was no impulse for rigid structure or control—only a unified presence of authentic selves fully engaged in the act of co-creation.

And through it all, there was room for play. We weren't afraid to venture into new territory, make mistakes, or allow the music to take us to unexpected places. It wasn't about striving for perfection—it was about embracing the joy of discovery. The process of listening, letting go, trusting, responding, adapting, and co-creating together was transformative. It didn't just enrich our connection to one another; it intensified our love for the music, for the moments of its unfolding, and for the collective energy that resonated to the core of our being. What emerged was something far greater than the sum of its parts—a shared, generative space where our collective energy transcended individual limits.

I recount this journey because it represents the manifestation of ideas that began crystallizing some fifteen years ago while serving as a television musical director. In that role, I functioned as an instrument of a top-down organizational culture, grappling with the creative constraints imposed by commercial expectations, tight deadlines, and budgeted resources. These experiences ultimately led to the unfolding of a more transformative philosophical vision—one that redefined how I approached my craft, not just as a skillset but as a way of being.

IV. Five Exploratory Modes for Cultivating Presencing Embodiment

IV. 1 The Compounding Legacy of Practice

Decades of creative endeavor have revealed a profound truth: when I cultivate ways of being that allow my artistry and creativity to thrive, the effects ripple far beyond the immediate outcomes. What I create or co-create with others does not merely touch its intended audience; it resonates, transforms, and returns, often in unexpected ways. Over time, this reciprocal process compounds into a living legacy—a dynamic interplay between what is offered to the world and what the world reflects back, often in ways that deeply influence my life. This observation underscores how such ways of being—rooted in Presencing Embodiment—nurture the conditions necessary for creativity to amplify and flourish, enabling what is created in the present to have a lasting impact. When rooted in Presencing Embodiment, these ways of being catalyze generative collaboration and collective action that transcend immediate outcomes, unfolding and extending their impact across contexts and time.

Ericsson's concept of deliberate practice provides a structured approach for practitioners to develop Presencing Embodiment by emphasizing sustained effort and feedback in acquiring and refining skills. By contrast, Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow highlights the essential role of deep engagement and presence in maintaining the developmental processes critical to cultivating Presencing Embodiment. Both principles align with processes that have been instrumental in my development as a musician and artist. Together, these concepts offer a framework for the ongoing evolution of Presencing Embodiment, enabling practitioners to refine and extend their creative and leadership capacities through sustained, immersive engagement and focused practice (Ericsson, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

IV.2 Deliberate Practice in Flow

These insights transcend the domain of music. Building on the concept of embodied presence in improvisational music performance and its profound emotional, cognitive, and spiritual impact (Van Der Schyff et al., 2018; Scherer & Zentner, 2001), it becomes essential to explore how these sensory and embodied experiences can inform the cultivation of Presencing Embodiment in non-musical contexts. The spontaneity of improvisational music performance draws on a foundation of deliberate practice: focused repetition, cultivated awareness, and disciplined flexibility that enables masterful musicians to remain fluid and attuned in real time.

Flow emerges when preparation meets the immediacy of the moment through presence. It is a state of immersive engagement, where perception, action, and awareness cohere moment to moment. For improvising musicians, flow isn't accidental—it is invited through sustained attention, relational sensitivity, and dynamic interaction. In this way, flow becomes both a felt experience and a functional capacity, deepening trust, dissolving hesitation, and allowing co-creative possibilities to unfold.

By prioritizing these approaches, leaders and practitioners can foster deeper levels of collective awareness, enabling more resonant and generative outcomes across diverse fields (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). In this regard, the relational and emergent dynamics observed in improvisational music ensembles offer valuable insight into creating environments of mutual trust, engagement, and collaboration—key elements in fostering Presencing Embodiment. These dynamics provide a living model of practice that can be adapted across domains, supporting the development of presence-based leadership grounded in attunement, responsiveness, and co-creative flow.

IV.3 Actionable Pathways for Cultivating Presencing Embodiment

As pathways for cultivating and enhancing Presencing Embodiment, I propose five exploratory, orientational modes grounded in improvisational music ensemble performance, as revealed through the Lagos narrative: Co-creation, Embracing The Unknown, Deep Listening, Embodied Awareness, and Playfulness. By "mode," I refer to distinct ways of engaging with the world, each activating dynamic processes that unfold in real time. These modes are not rigid prescriptions; rather, they serve as invitations to explore and experiment. As practitioners deepen their connection to the present moment and the collective dynamics in play, these modes evolve, allowing for continuous adaptation and growth.

Each mode draws inspiration from the culture of improvisational ensemble musicianship, where adaptability, presence, and creative flow are essential. In the musical context, these modes naturally emerge through the collaborative act of creating sound. Outside of music, they function as tools for fostering connection, amplifying creativity, and catalyzing collective action by leveraging embodied qualities such as attunement to shared intentions, emotions, and relational dynamics.

The suggestion is to prototype ways—variable from practitioner to practitioner—to integrate the various modes into daily interactions, focusing on one mode at a time. This process can be viewed as a movement from crystallization to prototyping and, ultimately, to performance (Scharmer, 2009): first crystallizing the essential features, core themes, and

questions, then testing them in low-stakes situations, and finally integrating them into higher-stakes environments. For me, this reflects back into my work with music creation and performance, my graduate students, and business clients—as new qualities of Presencing Embodiment capability are refined.

Daily interactions offer low-stakes opportunities for experimentation. At this small scale, every personal encounter becomes a chance for Co-creation; the simplest plan for action can Embrace The Unknown as a fertile field of possibility; a random conversation opens space for Deep Listening; a solitary walk in nature invites exploration of Embodied Awareness; and a mindset of Playfulness reminds me that, although I take my creative, artistic, and professional pursuits seriously, I also make room for spontaneity, exploration, and the unexpected joys that naturally emerge.

Through sustained experimentation with these exploratory modes, I've observed that this simple approach allows for the gradual internalization of enhanced or newly emerging Presencing Embodiment capabilities. These capacities build from the ground up—starting in low-stakes environments and becoming more refined and transferable in higher-stakes settings over time. Although Co-creation is the central and foundational mode, the other modes—Embracing The Unknown, Deep Listening, Embodied Awareness, and Playfulness—enhance and enrich its application. Each mode uniquely contributes to aligning with the present moment, allowing practitioners to act with compassion, empathy, spontaneity, and intention. Combined, the modes work synergistically, creating an ecosystem where benefits emerge organically.

Exploration with and through these five exploratory modes is intended to cultivate and extend Presencing Embodiment as a skill that evolves over time, through focused practice and sustained engagement. Each mode facilitates this journey, enabling practitioners to navigate collective dynamics and respond with embodied presence in the moment. Continued experimentation with these modes seems to further the acquisition of Presencing Embodiment skill and its ongoing maintenance and refinement. The ultimate aim is that by working through the Five Exploratory Modes for Cultivating Presencing Embodiment, practitioners will be open to transformative shifts in their approaches to collaboration, creativity, and collective impact, leading to more resonant and impactful outcomes in personal, professional, and organizational settings.

V. The Five Exploratory Modes: Core Themes and Features

V. 1. Co-creation

As an exploratory mode, Co-creation is foundational to cultivating Presencing Embodiment. It involves the collective process through which participants shape the emerging future. This real-time interaction thrives on mutual responsiveness, shared intention, and openness to novel outcomes that could not exist through individual effort alone. Rooted in dynamic relational fields, Co-creation emphasizes intuition, collaboration, and adaptability, enabling personal contributions to guide the unfolding of creative possibilities (Scharmer, 2009). By embracing this mode, practitioners engage deeply with the present moment, fostering collective participation and unleashing the potential for emergent, creative outcomes (Gunnlaugson & Brabant, 2016).

In improvisational music ensemble performance, Co-creation is an active, dynamic process where both the "creation" and the "co"—the mutual effort—are integral. Rather than adhering entirely to pre-composed structures—for example, we all know what's going to happen when we hear Beethoven's Fifth—an improvisational group essentially co-authors the music as it emerges in real-time performance, with each member contributing their expertise and intuition to the unfolding creation. This generative, collaborative process relies on trust, openness, and embodied awareness, allowing each musician's contribution to evolve through mutual responsiveness, while continually stretching the boundaries of individual creativity (Ricketts, 2020).

Similarly, in non-musical domains such as leadership or education, Co-creation flourishes when participants bring their unique contributions to the table, generating new ideas and solutions through collective engagement. This deepens attunement to both the self and relational dynamics, enhancing the presence necessary for collective flow (Heifetz et al., 2009).

The exploration of Co-creation can be understood through three interconnected dynamic processes that continually support its embodiment: the relational field (or we-space), discerning the new, and emergence. These processes form the foundation of Co-creation, enabling participants to navigate and contribute to the evolving collaborative endeavor (Gunnlaugson & Brabant, 2016).

V.2. The Relational Field or We-Space

The relational field, or we-space, is the dynamic, shared space where individual contributions interweave and mutually shape the emerging creation. In improvisational music performance, this becomes evident when each musician's decisions and intentions influence the collective sound, while the collective energy, in turn, informs each musician's intuition.

The we-space emerges when participants gather with a shared purpose, allowing individual inputs to guide the collective direction (Gunnlaugson & Brabant, 2016). This shared dynamic space facilitates deep attunement and synchrony among participants, whether in music, leadership, or collaborative projects.

In my experience in Lagos, the relational field shifted as the group aligned around a shared purpose, moving beyond personal expression to create something far more complex and generative than any one participant could have envisioned alone. Prototyping Co-creation in everyday, low-stakes interactions—such as brainstorming sessions, group planning, or casual exchanges—offers opportunities to test and refine collaborative processes. These small-scale interactions provide a space for experimenting with mutual responsiveness and building trust, which can then scale up to support more complex collaborations (Schön, 1987).

V.3. Discerning the New

Discerning the new involves recognizing and crystallizing latent possibilities as they emerge. In improvisational music ensemble performance, this process requires openness to the emerging future, as musicians listen not only to what is being played but also to what has yet to unfold. This dynamic is grounded in embodied expertise and intuition, where performers remain present and responsive, creating space for something entirely new to emerge (Ricketts, 2020).

Discerning the new requires practitioners to leave behind habitual responses, engaging fully with the present moment and the group's collective energy. Meadows (2008) captures this idea, describing 'the place beyond the place'—a liminal threshold where releasing habitual responses opens the way for the arrival of the unprecedented—something that redefines what is possible—as the group's intentions converge, preparing the ground for what wants to become.

By using low-risk environments to prototype conditions for unanticipated outcomes to take shape, practitioners can experiment with emergent dynamics and observe how they influence the unfolding process. These iterative experiments allow for the refinement of intuition and responsiveness within the group, enabling practitioners to adapt and integrate new possibilities effectively (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

V. 4. Emergence

Emergence refers to the spontaneous arising of new patterns and possibilities as

individuals engage with one another. In an improvisational music ensemble, emergence occurs as each musician's offering of rhythm, melody, and harmony interlaces to form a cohesive whole—one that transcends any single player's input. Emergence is a property of complex systems, where interactions between parts create something greater than the sum of their components (Goldstein, 1999). Similarly, in Co-creation, emergence unfolds as participants' collective energy and engagement lead to new, unforeseen directions. In leadership, education, and collaboration, this process can guide teams toward innovative solutions that no individual could have anticipated. Whether in music or organizational contexts, emergence underscores the importance of remaining fully present in the unfolding process and trusting in the collaborative potential of the group.

Prototyping Co-creation allows practitioners to embrace the unpredictability of emergent processes while staying grounded in shared goals. Through iterative experiments, groups can gradually expand the scale and complexity of their collaborative efforts, cultivating trust and responsiveness (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Engaging with Co-creation as an exploratory mode is essential for cultivating Presencing Embodiment. This mode fosters deep engagement, mutual responsiveness, and collective flow, facilitating creative breakthroughs that arise from real-time group interaction. The core principles of Co-creation extend across diverse fields, including leadership, education, and organizational dynamics. When practitioners embrace Co-creation, they actively participate in shaping the future, generating novel solutions and directions that cannot be achieved through individual efforts alone. By embodying this practice, practitioners enhance their attunement to the relational field and deepen their embodied presence, resulting in transformative outcomes (Scharmer, 2009; Eisenberg, 2001).

Co-creation, as an exploratory mode, goes beyond collaboration; it involves actively engaging with and contributing to the emergent dynamics of the present moment. By integrating the practice of Co-creation into real-life contexts, individuals and groups can navigate complexity, foster trust, and generate innovative possibilities. This mode builds resilience, adaptability, and creativity, enabling practitioners to remain present in the unfolding dynamics of the world around them. In doing so, Co-creation opens pathways for personal and collective transformation, allowing creative potential to emerge and flourish in ways that transcend individual capacity (Scharmer, 2009; Eisenberg, 2001).

V. 5. Embracing the Unknown

Embracing the Unknown as an exploratory mode involves conscious engagement

with uncertainty and ambiguity, reframed as a generative field for creative emergence (Eisenberg, 2001). For improvising musicians, the practice is foundational, releasing preconceptions and habitual responses to cultivate fertile ground for spontaneous creation. In this mode, musicians actively embrace risk, navigating the unknown through the embodied mastery of their craft, which enables intuitive responsiveness in real time. This approach challenges musicians to view performance not as the execution of a predetermined design, but as participation in a dynamic, relational field of layered unfolding (Ricketts, 2020).

For practitioners across fields, the capacity to Embrace the Unknown rests on deep trust in foundational skills and an openness to what cannot be fully anticipated. As Schön (1987) notes, navigating complexity requires "reflection-in-action"—a disciplined presence that allows the practitioner to respond fluidly while letting go of the need for control. The unknown is encountered as a space of generative potential, rather than a disruption to avoid or resist. By relinquishing attachment to preconceived ideas, individuals can engage the field with presence and adaptability, allowing new patterns and schemas to emerge. This capacity is particularly relevant for leadership, where the unknown often represents a rich source of innovative and transformative solutions (Heifetz et al., 2009).

At the heart of Embracing the Unknown lies the release of the illusion of control, enabling greater fluidity in response to emergent dynamics. In improvisational music performance, this involves trusting technical skills and intuition to respond to the moment, allowing musical sound to unfold organically without rigid expectations. Similarly, practitioners in non-musical contexts can adopt this mindset by letting go of the need to dictate outcomes and remaining open to the organic evolution of ideas and solutions (Schön, 1987). This flexibility is vital in fields such as organizational leadership and education, where resisting premature clarity and attending to the edges of creative possibility support real-time innovation and adaptive response.

Crucially, remaining in this space—individually or collectively—requires a shared orientation toward discovery. As Bohm (1996) suggests, a common purpose offers coherence without constriction. In improvisational music performance, this shared purpose enables members of the ensemble to move beyond personal creative instincts and sustain collective flow amid ambiguity. In broader contexts, a clear, shared purpose aligns teams or communities around a flexible but meaningful center—allowing uncertainty to function as a medium for alignment and co-creation (Heifetz et al., 2009).

As the ground is prepared for what wants to become, Embracing the Unknown calls for a deeper trust in unfolding. Here, a willingness to release control does not equate to

retreating from engagement. Scharmer (2009) describes this orientation as "letting go to let come," a principle of emergent leadership in which uncertainty becomes a field of possibility rather than a condition to control. This stance enables individuals and groups to approach the unknown as a creative catalyst—meeting the present moment with discernment, intuition, and agency, and in doing so, opening conditions for innovation and unanticipated insight.

Through the lens of improvisational music, Embracing the Unknown reveals how performing musicians navigate uncertainty and complexity in real time, listening for the space between notes, responding to shifts in tempo, and attuning to unspoken cues. In this mode, experimentation and exploration become essential tools for navigating what has not yet taken form. Research across domains confirms that environments which welcome ambiguity as a condition for creative risk and shared discovery enable individuals to contribute more fully and adaptively to emerging situations (Proyer et al., 2013).

Embracing the Unknown transforms how we approach the emerging future and plays a vital role in cultivating Presencing Embodiment. It empowers practitioners to confidently venture into uncharted territory, drawing on presence and intuition to navigate new challenges. Engaging this exploratory mode creates space for collective emergence, enabling attunement, adaptability, and discernment to unfold as moment-to-moment perceptual capacities—fluid, relational, and responsive to context. These qualities quietly prepare us to meet what follows with increased receptivity and relational sensitivity.

V. 6. Deep Listening

Improvising musicians engage in Deep Listening by attuning to the sound, silence, and subtle emotional, physical, and intuitive dynamics within the group. This practice moves beyond hearing alone; it invites the whole self into the act of listening, integrating multiple perceptual channels into a unified awareness. Through this heightened attentiveness, musicians remain fully present, responsive to relational shifts and unfolding possibilities. Within an improvisational music ensemble, Deep Listening supports real-time co-creation, where individual contributions interweave, and collective flow emerges through a dynamic exchange of presence and perception (Scharmer, 2009).

Our rehearsal in Lagos exemplified Deep Listening. As the group released assumptions about what might unfold, a deeper attentiveness emerged—subtle, embodied, and immediate. The question, "Do you feel it?" marked this shift: an affirmation that we were no longer just hearing—we were sensing into a shared field of presence. In this space, sound carried more than melody or rhythm; it moved through us, revealing emotion, shifting relational tone, transmitting intention. Sometimes it landed as a thump in the chest, a tremble

in the gut, a sudden catch in the throat. It was its own mode of perception. Listening extended beyond the ears—through skin and breath, bones and fingertips, through the instruments we held and the vibrations that touched us, moved us. What emerged from each musician arose in dialogue with the whole, allowing the music to evolve beyond preconception. This was listening through sound and silence—feeling, sensing, and intuiting the ensemble’s dynamic interior—in a manner aligned with Gunnlaugson’s (2020) practice of Dynamic Presencing: a disciplined, moment-to-moment way of attuning to the unfolding relational field through embodied awareness, subtle perception, and presence-guided responsiveness.

Pauline Oliveros (2005) describes Deep Listening as listening with the whole self, encompassing auditory, emotional, physical, and intuitive awareness. This expanded sensitivity enables the listener to take in not only sound but also silence, movement, and emotional resonance, fostering deeper connections to the self and the collective. In practice, this orientation nurtures openness to what is emerging, enabling participants to respond in ways that sustain the unfolding creative process.

Deep Listening supports Presencing Embodiment by cultivating presence in the relational field. It invites practitioners to notice what is unfolding—whether in a musical ensemble, leadership context, or collaborative setting—and to sense how their presence shapes the dynamics of the collective. This heightened sensitivity helps detect subtle cues and emergent possibilities, creating conditions where both individual and shared potential can be realized (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Engaging in Deep Listening during smaller-scale interactions—whether in rehearsals, meetings, or casual conversations—offers a space to rehearse presence. It’s where we prototype responses, refine how we relate, and build the perceptual capacity to attune more precisely over time. Just as registering subtle shifts in sound can guide an ensemble toward new creative spaces, Deep Listening in other domains sharpens awareness of relational cues, allowing new possibilities for interaction and insight to take shape. This kind of iterative engagement aligns with Prototype Methodology and the principles of Presencing Embodiment, where small, low-stakes actions are tested, tuned, and gradually extended into more complex environments (Scharmer, 2009; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007).

Deep Listening invites leaders, educators, and creatives to engage more fully with team dynamics and collaborative processes. For leaders, it reveals underlying tensions, aspirations, and unspoken needs—opening space for more grounded and responsive leadership. Educators who listen deeply can sense shifts in students’ emotional and cognitive

engagement, shaping learning environments that support curiosity, trust, and growth. In creative contexts, Deep Listening fosters attuned collaboration, allowing groups to co-create work that resonates through alignment with the deeper coherence of the collective (Raelin, 2011; Meadows, 2008).

As an exploratory mode, Deep Listening opens a lived pathway into Presencing Embodiment. It invites us into full presence with the moment, into attunement with relational dynamics, and into readiness for what may arise through the collective. Rooted in real-time engagement with others and the surrounding environment, this mode strengthens the perceptual clarity and responsiveness essential for navigating both individual and collective transformation (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012). As we listen more deeply, we begin to notice how perception itself lives in the body—how presence is felt, not only sensed, and how awareness begins to take on weight, texture, and form.

V.7. Embodied Awareness

Embodied Awareness, as an exploratory mode, centers the body as a site of real-time knowing. Where other modes emphasize perception, interaction, or uncertainty, this mode draws attention inward—toward sensation, muscular tension, breath, posture, and emotional texture as immediate data. It is through these lived signals that practitioners locate themselves in the moment, refine alignment, and participate more fully in whatever is unfolding. This somatic orientation is foundational to Presencing Embodiment, anchoring awareness in felt experience and allowing intention to arise from within. In improvisational music performance, for example, musicians don't just hear or see one another—they register timing, direction, and energetic momentum through the body, shaping their response from a place of interior attunement (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012).

Central to Embodied Awareness is the capacity to notice how internal states—tension, ease, anticipation, or hesitation—shape the way we move, speak, and relate. Such awareness supports congruence between intention and expression, allowing our actions to emerge in alignment with what the moment calls for (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 2016). In ensemble music performance, for example, this shows up when bodies begin pulsing to the beat—subtly syncing through shared rhythm before any conscious coordination occurs. Coherence becomes physically legible through breath, pacing, and small postural shifts. Practicing this mode means pausing long enough to sense what our body is doing—before default patterns take over. It helps us regulate presence from within, choosing when to lean in, hold back, or move with a group in ways that stabilize shared momentum. Over time, this

embodied steadiness becomes perceptible to others, as trustable responsiveness.

A critical aspect of Embodied Awareness is the ability to sense the field of interaction—not just as interpersonal dynamics, but as a shared atmosphere of movement, tone, and readiness. Practitioners learn to register shifts in energy, posture, breath, and pacing that signal when the group is aligning—or drifting. Responding well requires full presence, a felt connection to the group’s rhythm, and a willingness to follow where the moment leads. In collaborative contexts, this kind of sensitivity builds trust and cohesion—laying the ground for generative flow and shared direction (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Staying grounded in embodied experience helps practitioners move in ways that are not only timely, but resonant—strengthening the group’s capacity to stay connected and adaptive as conditions change.

In improvisational music performance, Embodied Awareness helps musicians register the moment just before a shift—the breath before an entrance, the lean that signals a new direction. These embodied thresholds shape how performers adjust in real time, maintaining cohesion even as the music evolves. Similarly, in leadership and education, this form of sensitivity supports practitioners in sensing inflection points—moments to pause, pivot, or re-engage. Attending to these subtle cues helps guide the group with responsiveness and precision, even amid uncertainty or change (Johnson, 2007).

For practitioners exploring Embodied Awareness, small, everyday interactions offer rich ground for practice. This might involve noticing how a slight shift in posture changes the tone of a conversation, or how breath tightens just before speaking. By experimenting with these embodied cues—pausing, adjusting, or softening—practitioners begin to sense how their internal state shapes the group atmosphere. These micro-adjustments build capacity for centered responsiveness, especially in high-stakes or fast-moving environments. As the practice deepens, awareness extends into the shared field—where subtle shifts are sensed and responded to from within, and where clarity arises through resonance and relational attunement (Gunnlaugson, 2020).

Embodied Awareness lays the groundwork for responsive leadership, collaborative fluency, and creative integrity. By carrying embodied practices into daily routines—meetings, decision-making, conversations—practitioners learn to track how their physical presence influences group rhythm, emotional tone, and shared direction. Such ongoing practice cultivates a grounded kind of presence—authentic, responsive, and rooted in real-time engagement. It enables individuals to act from alignment, listen with their whole system, and sense the larger field in which their choices unfold. Over time, this embodied sensitivity

becomes a resource for collective insight and timely, meaningful contribution (Scharmer, 2009).

More than an inward practice, Embodied Awareness evolves into a participatory relationship with the collective field. By tuning into both bodily signals and shared dynamics, practitioners learn to respond from a presence that supports coherence, adaptability, and real-time creativity. As a core practice for cultivating Presencing Embodiment, Embodied Awareness anchors perception in the body and opens pathways for meaningful participation—where new possibilities emerge through alignment with what is already unfolding. With this orientation in place, practitioners are better able to move with the unexpected—navigating complexity with steadiness, openness, improvisation, and ease.

V. 8. Playfulness

Playfulness, as an exploratory mode for cultivating Presencing Embodiment, invites practitioners to engage their craft and environment with spontaneity, curiosity, and lightness. While other modes engage uncertainty through depth or discipline, Playfulness does so with ease—allowing for experimentation without the pressure of outcome. Rooted in embodied expertise, it doesn't bypass skill or structure, but expands creative boundaries from within the scaffolding that skill and structure provide. In improvisational music performance, for example, musicians draw on technical proficiency to take risks, explore new directions, and let the music lead into uncharted terrain. This willingness to explore — unburdened by fear of failure — creates fertile ground for real-time innovation and unanticipated outcomes to emerge (Bakker et al., 2011).

Playfulness embodies creative freedom that grows from deep familiarity with one's craft. Across fields like music, leadership, and design, it arises through the confidence to explore without rigid expectation. Leaders, for instance, who bring a playful orientation into their teams can foster experimentation, adaptability, and shared risk. When psychological safety is present, individuals are more likely to explore bold ideas without fear of judgment — creating conditions for innovation and co-creative problem-solving (Proyer et al., 2013). Just as musicians use mastery to unlock improvisational possibilities, leaders and creative professionals can draw on their expertise to support exploration, growth, and emergence within collaborative environments.

In an improvisational music ensemble, Playfulness is a dynamic force that animates interaction and invites the unexpected. Musicians embody this mode by attuning to one another's shifts—responding fluidly to evolving patterns in rhythm, melody, and harmony.

This shared Playfulness allows the group to explore ideas that might never surface in more controlled or outcome-driven settings, opening space for creative breakthroughs and generative exchange (Kark, 2011). Similarly, in leadership or creative work, Playfulness fosters the kind of responsiveness that helps teams pivot, adapt, and experiment together, generating solutions that emerge through shared exploration and relational flow.

Playfulness supports embodied presence by inviting practitioners to follow what resonates—physically, emotionally, and relationally—in the moment. It encourages improvisation grounded in sensation and intuitive movement. This orientation enables practitioners to move fluidly with shifting dynamics, cultivating group flow without forcing direction. In such states, individual contributions often spark surprising breakthroughs that carry the collective somewhere unplanned, yet meaningful (Proyer et al., 2013).

Fostering Playfulness in structured or hierarchical environments requires deliberate intention. In many professional settings, it is still perceived as a distraction or dismissed as incompatible with seriousness. For Playfulness to take root, it must be framed and positioned as a driver of creativity and adaptive thinking. Psychological safety is essential: when individuals feel secure enough to take risks and explore without fear of judgment, Playfulness becomes a vital condition for growth and collaborative problem-solving (Duncan, 2002). Without that foundation, it is easily suppressed, limiting innovation and constraining group potential (Moran & Johnstone, 2001).

Playfulness cultivates the capacity to navigate with agility between structured focus and generative openness. This flexibility enables teams to access fresh perspectives, deepen group flow, and move past creative blocks. Whether in a brainstorming session, performance, or team-building exchange, playful engagement invites novel perspectives and adaptive solutions. As individuals and teams engage this mode, they begin to generate new ways of thinking, relating, and creating, often reaching outcomes that would remain inaccessible through conventional problem-solving alone (Kelley & Littman, 2001).

Playfulness encourages creative risk and spontaneous discovery, allowing practitioners to explore unfamiliar terrain with a sense of lightness and trust. When practiced with attentiveness, this mode invites new relational patterns, surprising insights, and energized participation. It contributes to the ongoing cultivation of Presencing Embodiment by loosening rigid habits of thought and behavior, making room for emergence. Playfulness opens pathways that structure alone cannot reach, inviting participation that is present, responsive, and alive.

VI. The Five Exploratory Modes: Reflective Questions

Pairing the five exploratory modes for cultivating Presencing Embodiment with reflective questions highlights their unique pathways for deepening presence and expanding relational creativity:

- Co-creation involves navigating relational dynamics, forging connections that guide the unfolding of creative possibilities.

Q: How can I deepen my connection with others in this moment, allowing our collective creativity to guide the unfolding process?

- Embracing The Unknown challenges us to step into uncertainty with openness, cultivating a mindset that invites innovation and the emergence of new solutions.

Q: How might embracing uncertainty with openness and curiosity shift my awareness of what is taking form?

- Deep Listening enhances our ability to attune to subtle cues within ourselves and the collective, ensuring we respond to unfolding dynamics with presence and care.

Q: How can I tune into the subtle cues within and around me, allowing my response to support attunement and deepen shared flow?

- Embodied Awareness strengthens our capacity to align intention with action, grounding us in felt experience and real-time alignment.

Q: Cueing into my body as a tool for sensing, what new kinds of input or awareness begin to surface?

- Playfulness invites us to engage the unexpected with lightness, encouraging creative breakthroughs and a willingness to move beyond familiar patterns.

Q: How can I bring a sense of lightness and curiosity into this moment, allowing creativity to unfold without attachment to the outcome?

These exploratory modes function as interwoven pathways, each enhancing the others to form a living, dynamic approach to Presencing Embodiment. Together, they cultivate a responsive presence rooted in mutual attunement, bodily awareness, and co-creative movement.

Whether in music, leadership, education, or daily life, these five exploratory modes for cultivating Presencing Embodiment offer more than a framework—they invite ongoing practice. They provide ways to navigate complexity with clarity, enter uncertainty with agency, and participate in shaping outcomes that:

- emerge from alignment with what most deeply matters,
- remain responsive to the relational dynamics of the moment, and
- sustain generative movement over time through attuned, embodied presence.

Through continuous engagement, the exploratory modes help deepen the coherence between self, other, and context, fostering conditions where innovation becomes relational and transformation becomes lived.

VII. Concluding Thoughts

Presencing Embodiment, as a deliberate practice, is dynamic and evolving. It integrates embodied awareness, relational sensitivity, and real-time engagement with the collective field. It unfolds through interaction, improvisation, and intentional choice, emerging in lived moments rather than abstract ideals. This article has explored five improvisational music performance-based orientational modes for cultivating Presencing Embodiment: Co-Creation, Embracing the Unknown, Deep Listening, Embodied Awareness, and Playfulness. Together, these modes provide pathways for deepening presence and amplifying generative capacity. Practitioners who explore these modes can cultivate a more grounded connection to their own lived experience, while enhancing their responsiveness within shared situations.

The insights explored in this article are grounded in field-based practice and informed by a constellation of theoretical frameworks. While Deliberate Practice (Ericsson, 1993), Phenomenological Embodiment (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012), Emergence in Complex Systems (Stacey, 2001), and Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) serve as the primary interpretive lenses—offering language for how focused repetition refines skill, how perception and action arise through lived experience, how group dynamics evolve unpredictably, and how immersive states of engagement unfold—this foundation is further enriched by Gunnlaugson’s Dynamic Presencing (2020) and Scharmer’s Theory U (2009), which frame Presencing Embodiment as both a perceptual discipline and a developmental pathway. Together, these frameworks help name and interpret the patterns observed in improvisational music ensemble practice and performance—while also revealing their relevance across fields such as leadership, education, and collaborative innovation.

Presencing Embodiment invites practitioners to connect their internal awareness with the relational dynamics of the group in real time. When actions arise from this alignment, individuals become more fluid in navigating uncertainty, more responsive to complexity, and

more capable of entering co-creative flow. This shift energizes collective creativity, strengthens trust, and supports generative movement within teams, partnerships, and learning communities.

The practice of Presencing Embodiment carries important considerations for access and adaptation. For individuals affected by trauma or chronic conditions that impact sensory processing, reconnecting with embodied awareness may require trauma-informed approaches that support safety and regulation (Ogden et al., 2006). Cultural context also plays a key role in how these practices are perceived and integrated. In traditions with established somatic or contemplative lineages, embodied engagement may be more readily embraced; in others, it may call for careful adaptation to align with local values and lived experience (Wilson, 2008; Kirmayer et al., 2011). Additionally, abstract concepts such as "emergence" or "relational fields" may feel inaccessible to those without exposure to systems thinking or phenomenological frameworks. Approaches like Theory U (Scharmer, 2009) and Dynamic Presencing (Gunnlaugson, 2020) can serve as useful bridges, translating complex ideas into grounded practices that support attuned action in dynamic, relational settings.

The principles of Presencing Embodiment extend across disciplines, anchoring creative, relational, and adaptive engagement. In improvisational music performance, they enhance co-creativity and deepen emotional resonance within ensembles. Exploratory modes such as Embracing the Unknown and Deep Listening support musicians in attuning more fully to one another and to their audiences, enabling intuitive interplay and emergent expression. In education, particularly in the arts, Embodied Awareness fosters presence, creative risk-taking, and authenticity in student learning. In healthcare, these practices cultivate trust and attunement in therapeutic relationships, while strengthening collaboration and resilience within care teams. In organizational settings, leaders who embody these orientations can help shape adaptive cultures that prioritize creativity, shared sensemaking, and responsive problem-solving.

Presencing Embodiment continues to evolve as a living orientation—one that deepens our capacity to engage physical, emotional, and relational experience with presence and integrity. This integrative approach prepares individuals to meet complexity with attunement, responsiveness, and grounded clarity. Cultivating Presencing Embodiment is an ongoing way of inhabiting the moment, one that invites growth, deepens connection, and helps translate awareness into meaningful action. In doing so, practitioners expand their capacity to lead, to co-create, and to shape resilient, life-giving cultures and communities.

In composing and engaging this work, I found that the very modes I was seeking to

describe began shaping me as I practiced articulating them. What had started as a framework for presence gradually revealed itself as a recalibration of perception itself—not as a solely cognitive process, but as a full-bodied, relational sensitivity to what is taking form. Through the interplay of listening, sensing, and co-creating across diverse, embodied settings—musical, interpersonal, and professional—I came to recognize perception as a living interface where attunement, emergence, and action arise as one. In this light, the five exploratory modes may not merely support embodied leadership—they may perhaps collectively cultivate perceptual fluency. This insight has reframed my own understanding of practice as the refinement of how we perceive and participate in the unfolding relational field.

For me, what began as a way of describing practice has become a deeper way of entering it. As practitioners refine their own perceptual field—through these modes or others—new methods of co-creation and relational intelligence may begin to emerge from within their own domains of expertise.

VIII. References

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BOBBY RICKETTS, MA. A transdisciplinary practitioner, educator, and performing artist, Bobby Ricketts brings a wealth of international experience to his work. His creative engagement spans over five decades across the U.S., Europe, Africa, Japan, and the Middle East. This global perspective informs his exploration of presencing, flow, and co-creation—deepening adaptive capacity and extending human agency.

As adjunct faculty in the Critical and Creative Thinking Graduate Program at the University of Massachusetts Boston, Bobby guides students through reflective, inquiry-based learning that supports navigating complexity with creativity, clarity, and purpose. He teaches “Synthesis of Theory & Practice,” a capstone seminar that helps students clarify voice, integrate learning, and develop original projects connecting theory with lived experience. He also designed and teaches “Design for Living Complexities,” a critical thinking seminar which introduces layered frameworks from systems thinking, design thinking, and critical reflection to help students reframe challenges and generate innovative interventions.

Bobby’s published work includes “Deep Listening at the Eye of the Needle” (2020) in *Advances in Presencing Volume II*. His current research explores how human agency can be amplified through deliberate, perception-driven practices that recalibrate engagement with the present. By tuning perception, refining participation, and aligning action with what most deeply matters, his approach helps individuals and organizations navigate complexity, sense emergent possibilities, and shape meaningful futures in real time. A nine-time Fulbright-Hayes recipient and former U.S. Department of State Arts Envoy, he has led creative development seminars, concerts, and workshops across four continents.