

## **Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges.**

The Social Technology of Presencing.

C. Otto Scharmer

SOL (The Society for Organizational Learning): Cambridge/MA.

ISBN 10: 0974239054; ISBN 13: 9780974239057

Published in the journal: *Children's Villages*

Today's organizations face complex challenges in fast and global environments. Knowledge and excellence based on past experiences have lost their valid promise for future success. What we learned about organizations, systems, management and processes and what worked for us up till now does not necessarily give answers to the diverse problems of today and less so of tomorrow. And although managers and leaders world wide try to face these challenges, usually with costly organizational changes on structure and process levels and with a high investment in training and human resource development measures, they still draw from the (known) past – for an unknown future.

*Letting go* of the past and the patterns in which one is thinking and acting and creating the *future* from how it *emerges* is the maxim of Theory U. Leaders, argues organization research shooting star C. Otto Scharmer, are like artists in front of a pure canvas – they must sense the painting long before the brush touches the varnish. They must feel and see it emerge, long before it is put on the fabric. Only then it can turn from a mere drawing into a piece of art. Good leaders are creative artists, they know, see and sense by more sources than the traditional ways what is emerging. They can sense the presence (presencing) holistically and can draw from knowledge beyond the past and learn from the *emerging future* for their strategy and actions.

What Peter Senge started with the 5<sup>th</sup> Discipline - to position the leader as a person with her/his whole being into relation to her/his leadership capacity - Scharmer takes us even further: "*The most important Leadership Tool is Your Self. One self is the person or community we have become as a result of a journey that took place in the past. The other self is the person or community we can become as we journey into the future. It is our highest future possibility.*" (p 41)

To activate this vital potential as a leader three preconditions are necessary: an *open mind*, an *open heart*, and an *open will*. The Open Mind – in the maxim of "think outside the box" - is a known claim for change, even if more often difficult to achieve. However the Open Heart touches definitely new sounds and grounds in the organization and change discourse. Open Will ultimately means the "*letting go*" of the *patterns of the past*, needs "*seeing with fresh eyes*" and "*sensing from the field*" what is and what could be. Yes, it is a known paradox that letting go often helps to get what we want than a stubborn clinging to dreams and wishes. But it also goes without saying how difficult to achieve this real notion of letting go is – generations of psychotherapists can fill libraries with this theme alone. Nevertheless, Theory U as a change theory builds exactly on this "art of letting go". Using the U and the layers of accessing deeper and deeper into one's mind, heart and will and asking the questions of "*what am I here for, what is my self, what is my purpose*" on the individual as well as on the organizational/systems' level is the key for creating a *new vision, co-creation* and *performing* in an emerging future.

Scharmer describes these three stages of openness as new intelligences which every leader has to nurture and cultivate like precise instruments helping to create the best possible future. Leadership, he says, "*in its essence is the capacity to shift the inner place from which we operate*" and "*leaders who understand how can build the capacity of their systems to operate differently and release themselves from the exterior determination*". (P. 373) This leads eventually, so Scharmer, to a "*shift from sensing exterior causation to sensing something collective that is emerging from within*".

Reading Theory U is a challenge. It challenges one's traditional beliefs on how a book on organizational theory should be written (yes, I am "*downloading patterns from the past*"). It takes the reader onto a very intimate journey of personal and therapeutic learning about one's understanding of the world and organizations and it shows forms of learning on both the individual as the systems level as inter-linked and necessary dialogue.

What makes the book and Theory U different to one of the new age self help books for leaders and organizations? Scharmer's fundamental knowledge based on more than ten years of research on and in organizations as a senior Lecturer at the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, his work with Peter Senge with whom he founded the Society for Organisational Learning (SoL), his scientific roots in critical theory (and a lot of Heidegger in the bibliography!), and his history as a farmer's son: being grounded to where you are here and now and understanding the bigger cycle simultaneously.

What makes the book so enjoyable is the precise pattern of using one model (the simple U) – and applying this in a variety of settings, directions, stages, e.g.: communication, knowledge, systems and social fields, relationship models, individual and organizational actions, space and much more. Artfully Scharmer interlinks existing theories of organization and systems into Theory U and enables the reader to follow thus on the digital and analog journey to an "*ecosystem of innovation*" where profound change through "*co-creating and co-evolving*" social realities is possible. This opens a wide field for the individual reader's learning and understanding. And it closes the "*split between matter and mind*" and thus "*we gain access to a deeper participation in the process of social reality creation*" (374).

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