

THEORY U - INPUT

INTRODUCTION

Our world is currently facing crises at various levels. Many structures are falling apart and a new world is emerging. Surviving this complexity requires adopting new modes of thoughts, tuning our collective instruments and adapting our mindsets to a deeper level of operating (Otto Scharmer et al.). While the 20th century models of management and leadership pay attention to objective structures and systems (“what leaders do”) and recognize the role of relationships in leadership (“how they do it”), they have an important blind spot which Scharmer refers to as “source”- that is the “interior condition” or inner place from which leaders operate (their consciousness). In Theory U, Scharmer outlines a journey to illuminate this blindspot: a journey from reacting to the past to sensing and seizing emerging opportunities as they arise from the current complexity.

MAIN IDEAS

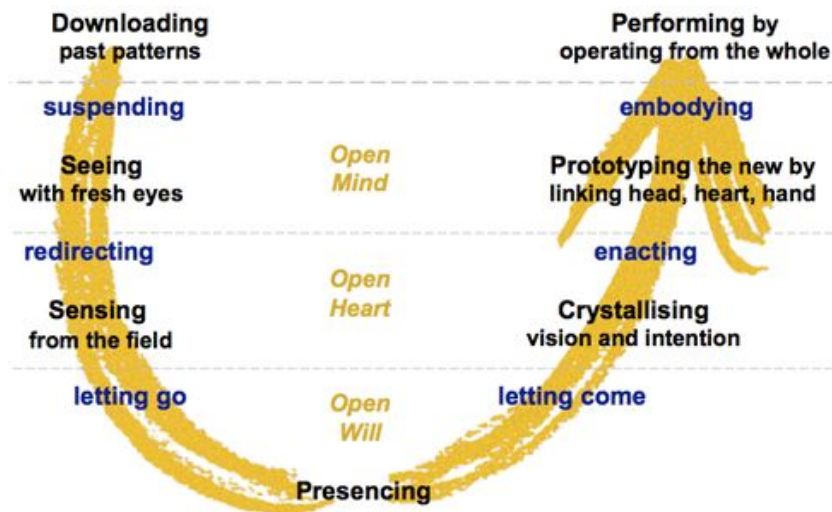
Theory U is an approach that applies transformational thinking for effective change. It invites leaders and organizations to move beyond the conventional models of thinking and operating and come up with new and creative solutions that capitalize on their internal and external collective capabilities and resources.

The model embraces non conventional schools of thought beyond the mainstream literature on leadership theories. Theory U’s approach to managing complex change is centered around introspection and awareness to break away from unproductive patterns that limit creativity and start learning from the future as it emerges.

A U-shaped journey

In Theory U, Scharmer identifies seven different elements of attention and action, each with a different source. At the beginning of the journey, we reside at the upper left of the “U” (see figure in next page). As we start learning and adapting to the changes around us, we move (back and forth) along the U through different levels of understanding. As we reach the bottom, we have the possibility to bring our knowledge up the right side of the U - out into the world. The steps generate a very different outcome and result in the world:

1. **“Downloading”** – At this state, we store data (just like a computer) without allowing the facts to change us. We base everything we know on our past experiences. We simply listen expecting to know what we will hear. We follow traditional social conventions. Our interactions are generic, and not individualized. This level generates very little energy, but feels safe.
2. **“Seeing”** – We embark on the “U” the moment we start paying attention and begin to open up our mind through appreciative inquiry rather than judgmental reaction. This is when we start seeing reality with fresh eyes. We observe, examine data and compare it to what we already know, instead of immediately storing it. At this level, we view others as individuals, we debate viewpoints, we analyze information and question the rules. This view from outside opens our mind and generates energy. A key quality for that stage is curiosity.



3. **“Sensing”** – Our attention deepens at this state as we begin to perceive the context and sense things from within (sensing what is usually unspoken). We tune in to emerging patterns that inform future possibilities. We recognize our responsibility in the relationship and find commonalities with others. We move from a rational debate to a dialogue that opens our heart and changes us. A key quality for opening up our heart is compassion.
4. **“Presencing”** - (a term blending two words “presence” and “sensing”) At the bottom of the U, we let go of the past (old intentions and identities) and bring into the present our future. We connect to “the place within... where attention and intention originate”, to our inner sources of creativity and will. Presencing demands an openness of will, of intuition, of intention, a kind of living in the “not-knowing”. The core for that stage is courage because it is a space of vulnerability. Generative listening plays a central role in the movement happening in the left part of the U process. It allows individuals to actively listen to others, develop empathy and turn their insights into action. In fact, as we’re going down the left side of the U, there is a flow of letting go: we are opening up our mind to not knowing, our heart to not understanding other people and our will to trusting our intuition, and we’re opening all of those in order to be able to let come. This radical letting go allows us as individuals and organizations to let new things come, and then new ideas crystallize and we co-create.
5. **“Crystallizing”** – At this stage, we start to ascend the right side of the U, to share with the world our authentic self. We start developing ideas and articulating our vision and intentions. We share our insights, learn, and listen to others’ reactions without the fear of failure. We recognize that alone we cannot have all the answers and view this stage as an opportunity to learn and develop.
6. **“Prototyping”** – This level is action-oriented. We are in rapid experimentation mode, we create sketches and prototypes to bring our vision to life. We also accept failure, terminate options that do not work. We continuously learn how to improve our plans.
7. **“Performing”** – Back at the top of the U. We are embodying what we learned, are inspired to share it with others and are able to act in an instant to capitalize on emerging opportunities.

Facilitating a collective transformation

Just like individuals, organizations can also transform themselves by following the U-shaped path. In this setting, the essence of leadership is the capacity to facilitate a movement from one mindset to another. This implies:

- paying attention to the mindsets from which actions originate
- facilitating safe collective practices that enable a transformation of awareness
- establishing a safe place where people can support each other as they engage in self-exploration
- letting go of manipulation and control
- setting a framework for developing increased collaboration and thoughtful action
- focusing on methods and tools that help individuals see, sense, and create together in a way that transforms old patterns and actualizes future possibilities

The most important tool of this transformation is in the leader's interior, mainly his capacity to shift the inner place from which he personally operates. The benefits of this journey can be experienced across the entire organization, with adaptive and collaborative innovative solutions being generated to address even the most complex challenges.

Finally, Theory U is a theory of social change that comes about through a radical level of attention: not just attention to the present and to our learning from the past, but also listening to the future.

IGNATIAN NOTE

While the theory may sound a bit strange at first, it is a useful tool for leaders inspired by the Ignatian tradition. It provides a language to help a mixed diverse team understand key Ignatian concepts. We can make several connections between this theory and Ignatian concepts like vulnerability, inner freedom, discernment of Spirits, being companions of Jesus, Ignatian imagination, gratitude, reflection and action, etc.

While Theory U is not explicitly based on religious beliefs, it suggests our capacity to foresee what emerges from the future. Ignatian spirituality, in turn, has the conviction that God wants to communicate with us, and that we can discern the will of God. God manifests in experience, in all creation (Javier Montes).

To complement the presented model. We invite you to read a document published in [Cristianisme i Justícia \(CiJ\)](#) called "Taking stock of reality, taking responsibility for reality, taking charge of reality" by José Laguna. In this document, Laguna presents and develops these three moments in the knowledge of reality taken from Ignacio Ellacuría's work. He uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to exemplify these three moments. In the words of Laguna himself: "As we will see directly, the parable does not say only that we need to pour oil and wine on the wounds of those assaulted; it also teaches that we need to know how to view reality in such a way that suffering moves us to compassion; it shows us that we need to share our mounts so as not to fall into paternalistic types of aid, and that we need to create suitable lodgings, that is, "domestic" structures committed to solidarity and permanence. Only so do we create an itinerary which, if we follow it, leads to a new social, economic, and political order: another world that is possible, from the side of the victims."

In the following page you will find a summary table of the ideas in the booklet from CiJ but if you are interested in reading the whole document you will see it in the resources section.

STEP	BIBLE PASSAGE	SUMMARY OF IDEAS
Taking Stock of Reality	A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he traveled, came where he was. When he saw him,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Honesty about what is real – Removing the neo-liberal “blindness” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The rhetoric of the evident (indignation) vs. the demagoguery of complexity. • The rhetoric of the possible (poetry) vs. the absolute present. – The pedagogy of consuming vs. the invisibility of non-consumers. – “Visibilizing” stories of mutual recognition. – Seeing, understanding, acting.
Taking Responsibility of Reality	he was moved with compassion, came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He set him on his own animal,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Suffering-with – Abolishing asymmetries between helper and helped. – Not perverting compassion (no pity, no spectacle). – Drawing close, to the point of become impure. – Assuming the risks and consequences of commitment. – Being guests vs. colonizers. – Finding the right balance between “providing assistance” and “changing structures”. – Letting ourselves be “led” by the victims.
Taking Charge of Reality	and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, «Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return». (Luke 10, 30-35)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Domestic “utopias” – Lives that produce happiness. – Alternative readings of reality – Cutting back economically. – Not making either knowledge or culture into merchandise. – Recovering spirituality as contemplation and compassion.

EXPECTED LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

1. Introducing Otto Scharmer’s Theory U
2. Inviting deeper levels of attention to initiate complex change

“Leadership is about being better able to listen to the whole than anyone else can.”

Otto Scharmer