Perspectives on Theory U

Insights from the Field

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Misc

PRESENCING THEORY U: AN INTERVIEW WITH OTTO SCHARMER

Dr. C. Otto Scharmer is a Senior Lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and founding chair of the Presencing Institute. Scharmer chairs the MIT IDEAS program and helps groups of diverse stakeholders from business, government, and civil society to innovate at the level of the whole system. He co-founded the Global Well-Being and Gross National Happiness (GNH) Lab, which links innovators from Bhutan, Brazil, Europe, and the United States in order to innovate in ways that go beyond improving GDP. He has worked with governments in Africa, Asia, and Europe, and has delivered award-winning leadership and innovation programs for companies, including Daimler, Eileen Fisher, PriceWaterhouse, Fujitsu, Google, and Natura. He also is a Vice Chair of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on New Leadership Models. Scharmer introduced the concept of "presencing"—learning from the emerging future—in his bestselling books Theory U and Presence (the latter co-authored with P. Senge, J. Jaworski, and B. S. Flowers), which have been translated into 15 languages. His new book, Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies (co-authored with Katrin Kaufer) applies Theory U to the current transformation of capitalism and self. He holds a Ph.D. in economics and management from Witten-Herdecke University in Germany. More information about Scharmer and his work can be found at www.presencing.com and www.ottoscharmer.com.

INTERVIEW

Olen: It's a pleasure to finally get the chance to speak with you about your work, Otto. For some time now, we have been looking forward to having our book play a role in further clarifying and advancing the academic conversation around Theory U. I would like to begin by acknowledging the importance of Theory U and presencing as a landmark development in your work with broader implications, particularly within the fields of management and leadership. Now that you have been working with Theory U for the better part of a decade across different sectors of societies, what developments are you noticing as a practitioner as you move forward and look back? To put this a bit more provocatively, how might Theory U save the business world?

   Otto: First of all, I would like to say that I applaud and support the initiative of your book, which is to do something I have always aspired to do but was never able to really put my full attention on—in other words, to not only apply this new approach but also reflect on it and bring it into the critical consideration and reflection in a more academic way. The project is completing something that I started

with many others: taking the beginning fruits of these efforts, many of which have been in the trenches, into a more deliberate and reflected stage of knowledge creation. I think the first time that I presented Theory U to an academic audience was at the Academy of Management meeting back in 1999. It took more than a decade to move from that beginning to a refined methodology that has been tested in a variety of systems, sectors, and cultures and currently has enough data points to draw conclusions from.

In the early stages, the most important feedback I received from people was that I was onto something significant. The first time it happened, in Austria, I was at a conference and led a session where I knew that there was a very experienced change leader in the audience. I was quite interested in his perspective, but he did not contribute to the discussion. So after the session I went over to him and asked, "What do you think?" He paused, went inward, and then he said that what I presented had not been completely new to him. He then said, "But I just didn't know that I know." I could tell from the way he said that that he had been touched quite deeply in some way. I saw a similar reaction in others and noticed people going quiet because it was so important to them that they didn't want to spoil the experience by talking. After noticing this time and again, particularly from experienced practitioners, I knew that I was onto something with this work. For me as an action researcher, the highest aspiration is not to create another fancy concept but to articulate a deeper level of knowing that resonates with our best experiences and moments of relationship, which are often not fully accessible because they are in a subconscious realm. What I want to do is help people gain access to and learn to work from the deeper levels of knowing and being. The feedback that I just mentioned helped me to keep going. But it is only now that we see a whole field of application emerging, which is connected with various other related methodologies. So to answer your last question, I don't think that the world needs some exterior intervention that claims to save business and so on. What can save business and society already exists, but we need to attend to it more mindfully, and that is what I try to do with Theory U and presencing.

Olen: As you look back over that period and reflect on your experiences in the field, do you get a clearer sense that this level of deeper knowing and being has become more accessible through your work with people?

Otto: Well, you know, many people have told me so, but it is difficult to assess. If I look at the experiences I'm having, I would say yes. But if I step back and look at the larger field, then I would probably acknowledge that there are many other factors that contributed as well. When I started this research in the late 1990s, I remember a moment in January 2000 when I met with Francisco Varela in his office in Paris. He pointed me to a recent publication on neuroscience and mindfulness and said, "Now you can talk about linking science and mindfulness and even begin to publish about that." That was totally impossible 5 or 10 years earlier. Around these years, 1999-2000, something shifted. It's amazing how much more open the conversation is now to bringing in this dimension of mindfulness and awareness.

Another example, recently at the World Economic Forum in Davos, I was invited to three sessions. One was on multi-stakeholder innovation work, which used to be the innovative edge and is completely mainstream now, so there were no issues. The second one was on transforming capitalism, and that, of course, was much more contested. Telling Wall Street bankers that their banks need to be broken up isn't really popular in this crowd. The most interesting session was the third one, which was on mindful leadership. It was immediately oversubscribed, and the process was structured around a 40-minute guided meditation—not talking about mindfulness but doing it. Davos is not known to be very innovative, but this positive reception of presence and mindful leadership tells you that something has shifted. These notions are beginning to become mainstream in ways that was not the case 5 or 10 years ago.

How much Presencing and Theory U contributed to that, I can't tell. Did it contribute? Definitely, along with other approaches, and one thing I often hear is "Hey, what you did is create a language for us to talk about some things that we always experienced and knew were important but couldn't bring up in a conversation because we had no words for it." So basically Theory U as an awareness- or consciousness-based evolutionary framework of systems change allows you to speak about the source dimension or the inner place from which we operate, and to make this more explicit in the conversation than before. Another thing that I often hear and that applies to my practice is that it allows people to use it as a meta-framework in which they integrate other methods and tools, because theoreticians of course all create their own approach and then leave it to the practitioner to integrate other concepts and frames. The practical integration is something that theoreticians usually leave practitioners alone with. Being an action researcher, I'm not just a theoretician but also a practitioner, which means that I want to integrate different methods into my practical work all the time. That's one way that I use Theory U as a meta-framework. It allows you to integrate other methodologies. And you know, this gives you some sort of a broader framework for using different methods and tools in a particular process or intervention.

So yes, I think that there has been some contribution from Theory U and Presencing. But it is also true that we are part of a much larger opening at a disruptive moment in history. That's how I have always looked at Theory U. I don't need to preach Theory U because Theory U is in a sense already there, and Presencing is already there: the moment when we access our deeper levels of humanity and attend to what's dying and what's wanting to be born. It's already embodied in the best leadership and in the creative and collective practice that we see all around us. So you don't need to preach it to people; you just need to help them to become aware that it's already there. In that regard of course these two things that I just described—the framework on the one hand and the deeper level of being that you see becoming more accessible around us, on the other hand—are just two sides of the same coin.

Olen: I appreciate hearing your perspective on mindfulness and your reflections on the way in which your work has evolved out of a more tacit place of experience and offers a language and framework to engage a dimension of people's experience that is already active. I think it's definitely serving an important function because, as discoveries arise within the field and for practitioners, there's a need to try to make meaning from this and put it into some kind of context that we can understand. Now in terms of Presencing, you've mentioned that it's implicit within leadership, within different contexts of practice. I'm wondering if your thinking has evolved about the methods of Presencing itself. This is a question that has come up as one of the main threads in the book, and something that concerns several authors who are trying to look more deeply at contributing new perspectives and insights around what is involved with the Presencing process—for example, in the context of a conversation.

Otto: That's interesting. In the 1990s when I started, I remember the first time I presented the framework in a meeting with practitioners in 1995 or 1996. I think that the conversation framework in 1995 and the general Presencing framework in 1996. In those early days it really was mostly conceptual, and it was almost like convincing people that there is a fourth level of cognition and being and awareness. You needed them to give examples and bring people to story-sharing sessions and make them aware that they have experiences like that in the pockets of their lives. That was the texture early on. What I find today is different. I'll give you a quick example: I have had "level 4" experiences myself, and my own question is not whether it exists or not. My own question as a participant in such a workshop is, what does it mean now? How can I access it in a more reliable and more sustained way, and even in more challenging situations where normally I would revert to old mental behaviors? More important,

how can we do that on a collective level? Not only in face-to-face experiences, but in widely distributed systems change efforts.

That is the main focus of my most recent research. So what do we do with that? How can I apply that in my work and in everyday life, and how do we do that as groups and maybe as larger systems? How can Presencing be applied to the current crisis and transformation of capitalism and self? That has been the main focus of my journey these past few years and results now in the new book that is coming out in July 2013. It describes the evolution of capitalism and self. How to transform the old ego-system awareness-based frames into something that is eco-system awareness-based has been a main area of my own research and practical experimentation. I think one of the bottlenecks that's holding us back is that we have a group of people that are excited about Presencing and deeper levels of awareness and consciousness but are gravitating toward the personal level and social entrepreneurship. Then you have a second group, made up of institutional leaders, and a third group of people who think about and write about the transformation of capitalism and who often have very little practical experience and exposure to mindfulness and Presencing-type experiences. What I am trying to do is create a research field, a Presencing-based action research field, that brings these three communities together. That's a little bit like swimming upstream because these groups have very little tradition or experience crossing boundaries into other communities. Yet if you look at the challenges we face, there is no other way.

Olen: I'd like to return to a point that you noticed in the '90s, when you started to bring Presencing to groups or to individuals, that people were able to relate to it through their own experiences or by analogy, let's say through sport or peak or flow experiences. I know when I teach aspects of your work to MBA students, most intuitively grasp and have had experiences that relate to this fourth level that you point out. I also appreciate your reflections around where you're growing this on the three levels: moving from individual groups through institutional groups and larger systems and trying to pull together these communities into a larger conversation. This initiative is really important for giving traction to what is happening on micro levels. On the micro level, you have often referred to Varela's work around the three gestures of becoming aware via suspension, redirection, and letting go into letting come. You often refer to this method when sharing what Presencing is, and I was hoping you could elaborate a bit more on the methodology. What kinds of practices and/or ways of adjusting or navigating our attention can help people understand better what you mean by Presencing? We can relate to this through analogies and metaphor, but it would be useful to have some more clarification on how you are approaching Presencing through this method, which is not always clear experientially.

Otto: OK, I would make two or three points. The first one is, with the U process, you see a plurality of methodological underpinnings across all three stages or movements: co-sensing, presencing, and co-creating or prototyping. Each one draws on different bodies of knowledge and method. What is important to me and what I see sometimes being missed is that people gravitate to one and then say this is it. For example, with presencing, it's all about this presencing moment. For some people that's true. There is something very special and unique that begins to emerge; yet, in my view, it's too narrow. If you reduce the U process to what happens at the bottom of the U you will miss what really matters, which is much earlier. But it is true that what's bothering us today at the beginning of the century is that we face challenges at a collective level that require us to let go and to let come. We don't know how to do it and it's a collective predicament. How to engage systems and communities and complex systems in this process of going down and then going up the U is the question that I wanted to explore, and my first point is that we need to contemplate all three movements. It's not just exploring the bottom of the U, at least the way I see it. Originally, I thought that is was really important to have all three different bodies of

knowledge and methods integrated in a way that hangs together. "Sensing" is what is underrated most often. Presencing is "cool" and it fits the deeper current of humanity today for the right reasons, but the sensing part is just as important. So talking about methods, I would say that Theory U is something simple. It's phenomenology applied to systems reality, not systems science. It's the reality of our systems. That's why sensing matters. It's about awakening the collective brain and how you do that by creating the neural connections. That is what the sensing journeys do. I use the analogy of musical instruments like the cello or violin: without the body of the instrument, there is no really good sound. You need the body of the violin. What is that body in the case of the system? It's the collective body of experience; it's the experience that we share with each other. That's what the sensing infrastructure does. Many people say, Hey I can't make progress with the prototype, so how is this working at the bottom of the U.? I find if you miss the first stages you don't need to talk about all these other things because it's already too late. Sensing is underrated because it's not practical in the way that prototyping is. Sensing is much more subtle. So that's one observation. It's really all three movements that count, and we are particularly missing the enabling sensing infrastructures. That is what is holding us back on a societal level.

What is amplifying the crisis that we are in? We are lacking not sense-making but infrastructure for co-sensing. Today there are huge activities on sense-making. But where does that happen? In silos separated from each other. In each institution, each actor, each system, each organized group is making sense in its own little silo, and then people talk with each other about their conclusions, but not in terms of sensing or co-sensing. So developing eco-system infrastructures for co-sensing is, I believe, the biggest leverage point for societal change. And yet it's very difficult because it's underrated.

So the co-sensing movement is based on applying phenomenology to systems transformation. And that means connecting with experience, becoming aware getting to another level of awareness, waking up to the full variety of our senses and activating the common sense in a community by activating all of these senses. And not only on an abstract cognitive level, where all system thinking is stepping back. The Theory U system thinking is the opposite; you are stepping in rather than stepping back. You're immersing yourself in a microcosm, creating a different field of connection, which in itself is a vehicle for the future to emerge.

In terms of the Presencing moments now, what is it that I have learned? I think that for me it has become simpler. Although in reality it is complex, today I think about it more from a practitioner's point of view, which is not about how can I engineer an outcome but about how can I create the enabling conditions that allow a real moment of Presencing to occur. When I used the word Presence in the early days, people often heard "Pre-sensing," which is not what I meant. Presencing connects us to the essence of our own being, of who we are. It also, in a different way, in an old German translation, means connecting to the being surrounding us. Presencing is not about predicting the future. It's not about speculating about tomorrow, it's about becoming more open and present to what wants to emerge from the now. How is one to do that? What has been clarified for me is that that can happen in many situations and that two primary conditions must exist: the first one is a holding space imbued with a deep unconditional love and listening. The holding space practically means unconditional love and listening to each other. So no judgment, no cynicism, complete open mind and heart. That is the first condition, but interestingly it is not sufficient. Something is missing, and what that? The second element is the courage to go to the edge where something in you is dying and something else is wanting to be born through you.

Olen: Can you speak more about this courage?

Otto: That of course relates to the open will, having the courage to go right to the edge, where the old is dying and something else—something that we maybe can feel but do not know—wants to happen. It is something that is not entirely us, it is something that is beginning to emerge through us.

Olen: You have spoken and written about the role of the authentic self. How do you perceive the authentic self in the context of this courageous move that you spoke of?

Otto: Yes, the authentic self is something that is being born or accessed in that space of letting go and letting come. If you have the courage to let go and to move into the space of emergence, then the authentic self begins to operate through you or becomes accessible to you.

Olen: Would you say in your own experience that this way of knowing becomes more accessible in the moment, that the quality of knowing is maybe less of a courageous move for someone who is more present and embodying this knowing?

Otto: Are you asking whether the capacity to let go and let come evolves or changes with the development of one's self? Whether you go through stages or whether it is more dependent on the context?

Olen: In part yes. I mean, have you noticed that groups or organizations have a more collective capacity to access this authentic self, to be capable of doing the work of Presencing?

Otto: First I want to say that authentic self is only one term that can be used there. It is a good term because people think they know what it is: it is something that belongs to me, but maybe I am not always authentic, particularly in professional environments and so on. In that way it is a good term. It is also a limiting term to some degree because if you really investigate an experience of presencing there is actually a little bit more going on than just discharging the old self, the problematic self, and putting the authentic self in charge. It is not like that. What is happening is more like an opening process. The field of self that you are operating from is no longer confined in the little prisons of the ego self, which is at the center of your own ego; and when you experience the eco-system awareness self in a moment of presencing you begin to operate based more on the environment and an extended surrounding field. Hence, you are more in synch and more attuned to a situation. For example, people who have a flow or high performance experience all report something that we have also experienced in generative dialogue. That is that we are in the flow together. I no longer can say it is myself or yourself, it is me or you, it is my authentic self or your authentic self; boundaries are opened up between me and you and also between me and we. When we say authentic self sometimes it is imagined too discrete from each other. And in reality when you investigate the experience that we talk about, it is very open and very spherical. You begin to access something unique to you, a deeper dimension of yourself where your own individuality is more present than ever before—at the same time also reaching beyond to some degree, not only the boundaries of your ego but the boundaries of your old system and connecting to something that you cannot fully describe. You can say it is collective. You could make a distinction between authentic self and maybe the even higher evolutionary stages and states that the self can operate from. All of this ought to be explored very consciously, as you mentioned, by bringing in various traditions of research and frameworks of describing the higher post-conventional stages of the self.

Olen: Otto, I agree with you that the data points are still emerging. Could you comment a bit more about what you see going forward for Theory U?

Otto: When we started the Presencing Institute 7 or 8 years ago, we intentionally said that we were not going to create a splash. For a number of years we will do nothing but create and nurture seeds—projects, programs, often on a small scale—because we want to be part of a long-term movement. We wanted to plant seeds and roots in a variety of systems. That really has been the main focus for the past 7 years. Now, I think we see these seeds turning into and linking with a groundswell of awareness-based

transformative change projects around the world that has not been leveraged in any kind of research so far. I think there is a huge opportunity that we can explore together.

Second, we want to create level 4 transformations on the macro and mundo scale. I think that is a big challenge on the table. Third, I believe that we are at an inflection point where more and more changes will come from networks, super empowered and networked individuals. So we are trying to link these frameworks and methods and tools and make them accessible to several society or grassroots level change-makers throughout all systems. In the past we had the rise of the public sector, the private sector, and also the society sector. What I think we will see in the future is the rise of tri-sector co-creative relationships, platforms that link change-makers across all three sectors: society, business, and government. And that is maybe a future role that institutions of higher education can play.

The role that institutions of higher education will have in the future is in question. A huge wave of democratizing access to education through the Internet will open up the question: what is the 2.0 version of institutions of higher education, and what is the new role they should play in our society? I believe in developing new learning and leadership spaces that will allow me to access the deeper levels of my own humanity and creativity in the context of working on concrete challenges in society and linking up with other change-makers across sector boundaries. These kinds of new platforms of collaboration and innovation at the level of the whole system do not yet have a role in today's society; the next generation of institutions of higher education could play that role.

And coming back to your original question that started this conversation. I see 2 missing pieces in our current institutional crisis that institutions of higher education could provide or contribute to. One is the platform that brings these eco-system-wide constellations of stakeholders together; and the second one is the method that helps us to build the kind of the collective leadership capacity to jointly go through a process of co-sensing, presencing, and then co-creating the new.

Those are important leverage points that now are reachable and possible. 10 years ago, it was just a fantasy. Right now, many elements are there; it's just a question of connecting them and of collaborating more intentionally going forward. And that is what I hope your book, as well as my books and other colleagues' contributions will be helpful for.

Olen: An inspiring vision Otto, thank you for sharing today. I am going to close our conversation now on that note, which gives us a preview of where you see your work going and where it has been. Thank you so much.

Otto: Thank you for this collaborative initiative.

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ENDNOTES

[1]   *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies*