

Networks and Innovations: Developments in Social Technology

In the last ten to twenty years, social technology has entered an exponential phase of development. The second edition of *The Change Handbook* (2007) lists sixty-one social technology approaches presently available.⁴ Its previous edition, published eight years earlier, counted only eighteen processes. And many are still not listed; Theory U, which we will discuss next, is a point in case.

Facilitators often mix and blend approaches. An event may start with a World Café, continue with an Open Space, and end with a Future Search conference, to offer just one example. And the use of social technology has extended from the organizational level to addressing the goals of extended networks of organizations coming from all sectors of society.

Otto Scharmer's Theory U has offered an overarching understanding of the principles at work not only in social technology but also in the twelve steps, nonviolent communication, and the entire set of experiential tools of transformation that now constellate American culture.⁵ Basically, Otto Scharmer saw that in the process of collective transformation and emergence, we must pass through three successive steps: the transformation of the way we think, the way we feel, and the way we act. Scharmer has called these stages open mind, open heart, and open will. When the three have been achieved, we collectively step into a new reality in which new, unforeseen possibilities emerge that meet the agreement of all stakeholders and that free tremendous energy for implementation.

Let us examine the situation of an organization (a public agency, a business, a corporation, a nonprofit organization, or a network), and let us consider as its stakeholders not only those who work within the organization but also all those who have a stake in its work. Stakeholders for a corporation that imports third-world food products are not only the corporation's employees, management, and suppliers but also its consumers, the third-world producers, the NGOs that work in those countries in relation to food production, environmental organizations, and so forth.

When all the significant stakeholders in a situation are called to express their views in a conversational format that encourages true dialogue, people can finally start to see the tapestry of elements that contribute to form a situation of conflict and dissonance, or of harmony and progress. Clarity is reached about the complexity of factors that contribute to a given group dynamic. This is the stage of the open mind in which all contributions are welcome, and debate is channeled toward positive outcomes.

From the first level of the open mind, the participants can start to see patterns emerging and realize that they have unconsciously been part of the patterns. Reality will appear in all its complexity, showing participants the one-sidedness of their previous judgments. This stage may be overwhelming, but it is a precondition for loosening previous perceptions and allowing the new to form.

Individuals and groups are later encouraged to take responsibility for their part in the collective patterns. Each stakeholder group can understand with empathy the perspectives of the other stakeholder groups. This is what encourages connection between stakeholders at the level of feelings and what Scharmer calls the work of the open heart. Only after this stage has been experienced can visions and options for action emerge. When the

process is completed, a shift takes place that allows the participants to acknowledge a common ground from which they can operate, allied with a new enthusiasm and desire for moving into concerted action through the open will. Going through this stage means being able to let go of predetermined solutions or favored outcomes.

The open will sets the stage for something new that can finally emerge through presencing (from presence and sensing). All individuals have now reached a willingness to let go of everything that ties them to the past and to trust the process and the wisdom that is present in the whole. Presencing is a space in which the past is put on hold, and the participants can collectively listen to the future that wants to emerge. Letting go makes room for a process of allowing or, in Scharmer's words, "letting come."

Presencing is an all-encompassing experience; any single individual can apprehend only some facets of it. Following are examples of individual perceptions. "When I am part of a social field that crosses the threshold at the bottom of the *U*, it feels as if I am participating in the birth of a new world. It is a profound, quieting experience; I feel as if I've been touched by eternal beauty. There is a deep opening of my higher Self," offers Betty Sue Flowers. For Joseph Jaworski, "moving through the bottom of the *U* is becoming aware of the incredible beauty of life itself, of becoming re-enchanted with the world ... When the sort of commitment you are talking about happens, you feel as if you're fulfilling your destiny, but you also feel as if you're freer than you've ever been in your life. It's a huge paradox." Otto Scharmer echoes them: "For me, the core of Presencing is waking up together—waking up to who we really are by linking with and acting from our highest future Self—and by using the Self as a vehicle for bringing forth new worlds."⁶ In these words we can sense how deeply spiritual a process can be that does not

originate from a religious or spiritual doctrine, or from a desire for spiritual experience.

After presencing, the group moves into the implementation of the process. At the stage of crystallizing, what emerges as an insight, a simple place of openness, almost a place of vacuum in the idea of presencing, needs to acquire focus and direction. Ideas need to be built upon and solidified, and key players need to find each other and determine what forms their initiatives should take.

At the next stage, *Theory U* introduces the idea of prototyping, which means nurturing and sustaining pilot initiatives for testing concrete ideas on a small scale and offering all of these the needed support in order to later integrate the practices on larger scales. When pilot initiatives are successful, change is then brought to the level of the entire organization.

When this holistic way of working is integrated at each step of the way in the organization, we can talk about performing. This word means more than integrating the new; it extends to ensuring that the processes described earlier are sustained on an ongoing basis, that they become the internal culture of the organization. For that purpose, the organization must set in place structures and processes that allow it to operate in a new way.

The diagram of the U is what links together seemingly heterogeneous levels of experience: twelve-step, nonviolent communication, and social technology. Let's trace briefly how. Theory U adds the clarity of the central step of all these approaches, which is generally neglected, since it is the most subtle: presencing.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, steps 1 to 3 ask the recovering addict to turn to the higher power, the stage that corresponds to the open mind. Steps 4 to 7 ask a further ef-

fort culminating in the compilation of a moral inventory—a list of everything that weighs on the soul. Healing can proceed only if the alcoholic allows herself to feel everything that the drug suppressed by opening the heart. Going through steps 8 and 9, which require us to make amends for everything we did under the influence of alcohol, means facing powerlessness and the possibility of self-forgiveness. This is the stage of the open will, which culminates in presencing, when the individual acquires a sense of the working of the higher power.

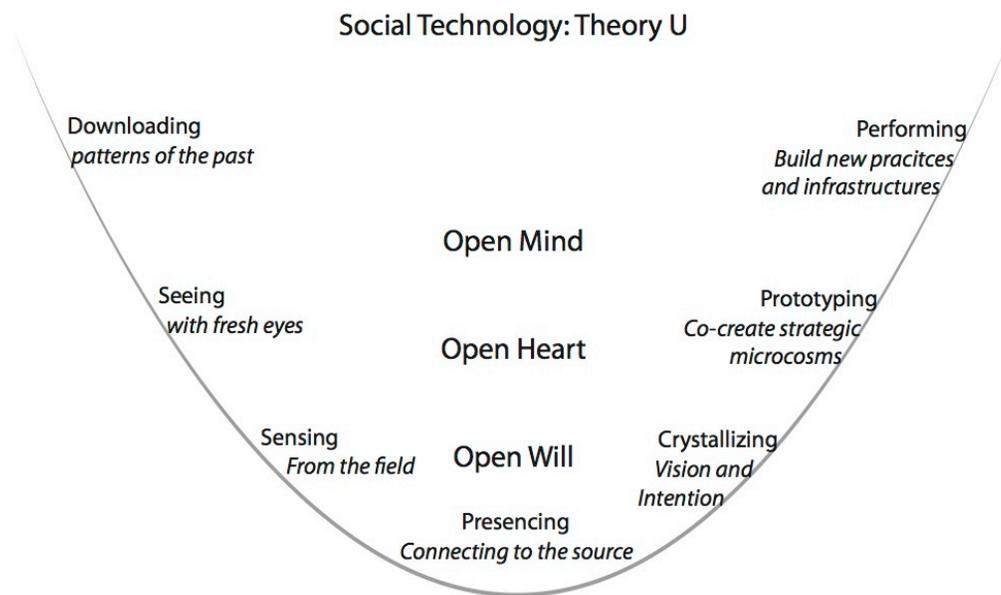


Figure 3.2: Theory U: going through the open mind, open heart, and open will (modified from Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Emerging Future*).

Briefly, the stages that follow are continuing to take personal inventory (step 10), equivalent to crystallizing; turning to prayer and meditation (step 11), the equivalent of prototyping; and taking the message to others (step 12), equivalent to spreading the culture of twelve-step, which corresponds to performing.

The examples of nonviolent communication and focused conversation include

only four steps. The first three correspond to the left side of the U. The fourth is not mentioned but is what makes communication and group conversations effective. The last step is a mix of crystallizing and prototyping. Step 7 (performing) appears only with repeated practice.

The step of the open mind corresponds to observation in NVC; open heart corresponds to feelings; and open will corresponds to needs. When a communication is successful at these levels, an opening occurs, which is experienced in mutual openness and ability to relax and trust (presencing). The participants can then experiment with making requests (crystallizing) and determine which requests they will test in the future (prototyping).

The focused conversation begins with the objective level, an obvious manifestation of the open mind. The open heart is found in the willingness to face the discomfort of the inner reaction in the reflective level. The open will is faced in the interpretive level, in which participants collectively find meaning and create the openness (presencing) for something new to take place. When everybody reaches a new place, action steps can be offered (crystallizing), and among these, some are selected and others rejected (prototyping).

Let us return now to social technology. It is not only the clarity reached in social technology that characterizes the 1990s and the turn of the twentieth century, but also the application of social technology to larger and larger networks, rather than just single organizations. Witness the Global Compact that brought together worldwide leaders from the private and public sectors, unions, and NGOs, in the promotion of socially responsible businesses worldwide.⁷

Sustainable Food Lab is another initiative incorporating more than one hundred businesses, government organizations, and NGOs worldwide, trying prototypes of alternative and sustainable food systems.⁸ Sustainable Food Lab integrates Theory U with approaches from the Society for Organizational Learning. This expanding work of facilitation and integration is now a powerful tool for the emergence of tri-sector partnerships—the working together of public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

Social technology is only the natural continuation and improvement of the processes of deliberation that saw their birth in North America with the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the American Revolution, the Constitutional Convention, and the adoption of the Bill of Rights. In the last two proceedings, a tremendous amount of effort and energy went toward creative compromise. These were compromises that would accommodate large and small states; a strong central government and true federalism; and the different economies of the North and South. This was more than abdication to mere necessity; it was the result of the art of listening with open mind, heart, and will. However, fateful compromise also crept into the Constitution, chiefly in the agreements on slavery.

What originated with the Haudenosaunee, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights has now been revived and metamorphosed in social technology. What we are to contemplate next offers a whole new meaning to governance of and by the people.