Preface

Over the past decade, Otto Scharmer’s Theory U has inspired important change across a broad assortment of international business and community contexts. Although a growing community of scholar-practitioners have leveraged the wisdom and insight of Theory U to push the boundaries of traditional leadership and management thinking, to date very little has been written academically in response to the theory and its applications in business contexts.

We are excited about the generative possibilities in this omission, and are pleased to present *Perspectives on Theory U: Insights from the Field*, a cross-section of current existing research on Theory U from leading academic and practitioner voices across different university and consulting contexts. This book attempts to *broaden* the existing conversations on Theory U, inviting new perspectives, critical analysis, and a chance to reflexively engage with and further legitimate the work that has played a formative role in our professional and personal lives. As a part of this vision, we have also selected contributions and reflections on Theory U in action, as our intention with this book is that it does not succumb to the academic path of least resistance and become a purely intellectual book, but rather offers key critical and vitalizing perspectives that sustain our greater community of scholar-practitioners in the years ahead. In this way, this book has offered our contributors a context for *deepening* our individual and collective understanding of this work and our relationship to it. We have invited authors to explore their current reflections with Theory U to set aside uninterrupted periods of time to open their minds, hearts, and wills as a basis for connecting with their clearest articulation of further developments of Theory U.

In spite of the important developments of Scharmer’s work, but particularly since the publication of Theory U, a peer-reviewed academic volume of scholar-practitioners’ accounts has not been published until now. In *Perspectives on Theory U: Insights from the Field*, we are pleased to share our authors’ engagements with their inquiry and reflections on presencing approaches to leadership and management. For some time now, we have sensed a strong and timely need for providing an overview of the current thinking of Theory U from the perspectives of researchers and practitioners in the current global presencing academic community. In this volume, we bring together approaches that draw upon specific aspects of the theory with different interpretations as well as contexts and present them in a common format, in turn making this research more accessible to faculty members, researchers, and consultants within leadership and management contexts. Our intention here is to raise further awareness of the applicability of Theory U to our colleagues, students, and international business communities, further illustrating how Scharmer and colleagues’ research has informed, enriched, and is currently influencing new business thought. In effect, this book is the first to map out current academic voices and perspectives on Theory U through writings on the experiences, challenges, and promise of this work. Additionally, *Perspectives on Theory U: Insights from the Field* outlines current approaches and blind spots within various contexts and the emerging field as a whole.
OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In the chapter entitled “Traveling the U: Contemplative Practices for Consciousness Development for Corporate and Social Transformation,” Patricia and John Hardman (Regenerative Organizations, USA) present a rationale for engaging in contemplative practices within the context of organization to foster a regenerative leadership. They offer a series of detailed meditation practices that reflect different stages of the U process including the development of creative ideas and prototyping innovation.

In the chapter “Leading from the Source: Exploring the Bottom of the U,” Karp and Mortensen (Oslo School of Management, Norway) investigate how leaders can be better equipped to engage in acts of leadership. The authors introduce a framework to help leaders to get to know, and connect to, their own source and willpower, as well as assisting teachers and coaches that aim to foster leadership development.

In “Presencing Our Absencing: A Collective Reflective Practice Using Scharmer’s “U” Model,” Cox (Independent Clinical Psychologist and Consultant, New York) focuses on the resistance that frequently arises within group participants using Scharmer’s Theory U methodology. Cox presents a method for releasing groups from the negative impacts of their egos on their conversations and increase the group’s capacity for collective presencing.

In the chapter entitled “Accessing the Blind Spot,” Nicolaides (University of Georgia, USA) and McCallum (Le Moyne College, New York, USA) argue that the facilitator/leader must have reached a post-conventional stage of consciousness to roughly gauge participants’ developmental capacities and to create the appropriate scaffolds, exercises, and practices for moving into the collective state of openness and presencing.

In her chapter “Presencing as Being in Care: Extending Theory U through a Relational Framework,” Southern (Saybrook University, USA) offers the concept of Being in Care to further understand our nature of relational being and to explore how deep encounters with “the other” are critical for integrating the different world views and experiences into collective learning and transformation.

In “Promoting Presence in Professional Practice: A Core Reflection Approach for Moving Through the U,” Korthagen, Hoekstra, and Meijer (Utrecht University, The Netherlands) explore how Theory U can be used in coaching for supporting transformational learning. Korthagen, Hoekstra, and Meijer present a coaching approach called Core Reflection and argue that coaching and professional learning processes must shift from reflection on the past towards awareness of our ideal future and awareness of one’s inner and outer reality in the here-and-now.

In “Setting the Context for Transformation towards Authentic Leadership and Co-Creation,” Darsø (Department of Education, Aarhus University, Denmark) presents a new educational approach for developing authentic leadership and co-creation based on Theory U. Sustaining her arguments with empirical material and practical examples from an executive Masters education, Darsø makes a case for management faculty to create pedagogical and social learning spaces that honor uncertainty, emergence, authentic leadership, and co-creation.

O’Fallon et al. ’s chapter “Theory U in Applied Transformative Development” gives a review of learning with GTC, a cohort-based transformative leadership development program that is informed by an integrates Theory U, at Pacific Integral. They examine the theoretical underpinnings of Theory U and share practical learning and research from their experiences.

In their chapter on “Deep Presencing Leadership Coaching: Building Capacity for Sensing, Enacting, and Embodying Emerging Selves and Futures in the Face of Organizational Crisis,” Gunlagson (Université Laval, Canada) and Walker (Concordia University, Canada) propose deep presencing as a means
for expanding leader’s experiences of self that allows more flexibility, ingenuity, and courage to sense, articulate, and bring forth creative change. Deep presencing in the coaching relationship is presented as a context for developmental evolution for fostering capacities for witnessing and creative engagement.

In “Theory U and Team Performance: Presence, Participation, and Productivity,” Hays (Swinburne University of Technology, Australia) applies Scharmer’s work to the group context and envisions Theory U as a means for achieving Collective Intelligence. Hays examines how Theory U operates at the team level and through other collective processes, such as shared reflection and dialogue. Moreover, strategies and teaching examples drawn from the author’s work in promoting team evolution around the globe are shared to help the readers to see how Theory U might be put into practice within their respective organizations and communities.

In the chapter “Aligning with the Emergent Future,” Guttenstein (ADIEWA Center, Canada), Lindsay (ADIEWA Center, Canada), and Baron (Université Laval, Canada) propose a synthesis of recent theoretical and scientific literature that helps make sense of the presencing process and the unexpected dimensions of reality that can be accessed. The authors stress the importance of supporting the empowerment and deep inner work of those who wish to facilitate presencing and work at the bottom of the U. They present principles and emergent practices for fostering people’s abilities to slow down, to create a deep group field, and to experience presencing per se.

Hartley’s (Organizational Learning and Development, Canada) chapter “Opening Space through Contemplative Practices: How Facilitators Foster a Field of Collective Learning” compares and contrasts Scharmer’s Theory U with a grounded theory developed through extensive interviews with facilitators at the Shambhala Institute for Authentic Leadership summer program. Hartley describes four consecutive sets of practice illustrating how the facilitator creates an external environment conducive to emergent group learning.

In their chapter on the application of the Theory U in the creation of a Creative Living Lab, Schweikert, Meissner, and Wolf (Lucerne University, Switzerland) discuss and explain why and how Theory U, the Living Lab approach, and systemic action research were integrated and applied to rejuvenate an interdisciplinary program at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts.

Peschl and Fundneider offer their chapter “Theory U and Emergent Innovation: Presencing as a Method of Bringing Forth Profoundly New Knowledge and Realities” and introduce an alternative approach to innovation and present both its theoretical foundation and a concrete well-proven innovation process: Emergent Innovation.

Statler and Guillet reframe Scharmer’s Theory U as an attempt to develop practical wisdom by applying certain European philosophical concepts. Specifically, this chapter traces out a genealogy of social sculpture, Schwungspiel, poetic creation, and spiritual science, and suggests that Scharmer’s work integrates these concepts into a pragmatic pedagogy that has implications for business practice as well as business education.

The book closes with two interviews with Otto Scharmer and Adam Kahane. In “Presencing Theory U: An Interview with Otto Scharmer,” Otto provides an overview perspective on the early development and evolution of Theory U, drawing attention to different practical and theoretical aspects of the model and sharing his reflections from his current work and thinking. Various terms and processes are explored in more depth within the interview, and Otto goes on to share the focus of his current research and how presencing can be applied across a host of different contexts within business, management, and beyond. Otto closes with his reflections on where he envisions this body of work growing in the years ahead.
In the final chapter, “Large-Scale Transformational Processes and Theory U: An Interview with Adam Kahane,” Kahane (Reos Partners, Canada/South Africa) shares with us the challenges and traps he sees in his consulting work internationally. Like Scharmer who observes that most people underestimate the importance of the sensing phase in the U process, Kahane asserts that the most important part of his work consists of opening the mind and tapping into a more discerning rationality and logic. He also invites facilitators to acknowledge and legitimize their own drive for power and to recognize that the U process as an incomplete framework among others that can be tailored depending on the contextual conditions and intentions of the change initiative. Finally, Kahane invites us to accept and to learn how to manage the tension between polarities inherent to transformational work, such as power and love, need for adaptive and transformative changes, self-development and development of one’s concrete practice, and to avoid any theory or perspective that generates a sense of hierarchy and separation with others.

CLOSING EDITORIAL REFLECTIONS

While revising the chapters included in this book, specific divergence and convergence of views appeared worthy of mention. The main divergence of views among the authors concerns the degree to which it is possible to transcend or suspend our ego while we engage in the presencing process, and in turn, optimally serve the whole situation we wish to influence. On the one hand, Karp and Mortensen encourage aspiring leaders to first come in contact with their own source and willpower if they are to find their courage to lead in difficult times. In the same vein, other contributors recommend practices that are oriented toward the expansion (vs. transcendence per se) of one’s way of being in the world (e.g., Hays, Korthagen). On the other hand, Guttenstein, Lindsay, and Baron remind us that Scharmer describes presencing as a self-transcending experience and hold to the view that aspiring leaders can suspend their ego through presencing and benefit from higher states of consciousness to better align with the future that wants to emerge through them. This invitation to transcend one’s ego finds resonance in other contributors to this book, such as Nicolaides and McCallum (who promote the development of a triple-loop awareness in facilitators, a state of consciousness where the ego would be temporarily transcended) and Hardman and Hardman (who describe a meditation designed to open one’s will and to allow the suspension of the ego, which could even be felt as disintegrated). Other authors seem to locate between these poles, for example, Southern argues for embracing our relational self and the fusion of I-Thou horizons, Darsø defines the self in a way that encompasses and goes beyond the ego, and Gunnlaugson and Walker propose deep presencing practices as a means to foster expansion and enhancement of one’s awareness, presence, and experience of self. This divergence of views evokes the long-lasting tension between the dualistic Western conceptualization of the self (to which Scharmer seems to subscribe by distinguishing the small “self,” equated with a self-preserving ego, and the larger “Self,” equated with a more altruistic attitude and moral virtue) and the monistic Eastern understanding of the person as a single embodied consciousness, not separated from itself nor from others. Ken Wilber (2000) proposed an interesting way to resolve that tension by observing that if someone operates predominantly from one stage of ego development (one part of her self) in her daily life, she can access higher states of consciousness momentarily and exceed the limitations of her regular point of view and experience (if not embrace all of what she is in relation to the Whole). However, a lack of consensus remains in the academic community interested in the U-process regarding the optimal role and place of the self and ego.
In another line of thought, a significant convergence of views in the chapters concerns the key role assumed by the facilitators of the U process, especially during the presencing phase, and the incidence of their own developmental journey and capacities on the success of their interventions. For example, Nicolaides and McCallum observe that the U process challenges the cognitive and affective capacities of both its facilitators and participants – calling for, among other things, “a new kind of cognition and epistemology of potentiality” (Peschl and Fundneider). According to Peschl and Fundneider, facilitators would need to have reached post-conventional stages of consciousness to be able to foster the temporary heightening of consciousness associated with presencing and to gauge the participants’ developmental capacities in order to create the appropriate scaffolds, exercises, and practices they might need to move into a collective state of openness and presencing. Guttenstein, Lindsay, and Baron also hold that the facilitators must engage in serious long-term cultivation of their consciousness development and, more specifically, learn how to intentionally access and work from a state of self-transcendent consciousness if they are to be effective in helping others achieve this state. Without referring explicitly to consciousness development in terms of stage or state, Darsø asserts that authenticity, leadership, and co-creation develop together and that facilitators-teachers who convey embodiment and art practices as well as spiritual experiences are needed to foster such development. Finally, Hartley’s grounded theory reveals that the facilitators’ ability to cultivate an internal sense of openness and awareness has a big impact on their capacity to foster a learning environment conducive to authentic experience. These voices resonate with recent reflections held by Joseph Jaworski, the initiator of the learning journey that brought Scharmer to uncover Theory U. In his last book, Source, Jaworski (2012) observes that the developmental journey and capacity of facilitators is crucial for the success of the presencing processes, focusing much less on the development of organizational leaders as he did in his previous work. Jaworski suggests that “the facilitator who commits to disciplined personal practice and deep inner work ‘sets the field’ for the participants and help them learn the way into the deeper territory [of presencing]” (2012, p. 89). Moreover, he observes that the U-process is “[very] delicate” and requires “hard work, sacrifice, selflessness” as well as a “[deep] preparation for those participating and leading the process” (2012, p. 25). Interestingly, the greater attention given to the facilitators, to the servants, who do not have as much power, prestige, or resources as the executives, evokes the central character of Leo in Herman Hesse’s novel Journey to the East, which inspired the concept of Servant Leader with Robert Greenleaf. Indeed, Jaworski’s last book gives the impression that the facilitators of deep transformation processes could be considered as contemporary guardians of wisdom, or as catalysts whose leadership—often unnoticed—plays a significant role in the overall process.

By exploring the silences and edges of the Theory U, we venture beyond the limits of the dominant Western-scientific worldview and may sometimes experience moments of dizziness or vertigo. Indeed, Hardman and Hardman observe that:

*Theory U is an approach to accessing “the extreme boundaries of human existence” that Scharmer (2007) defines as the blind spots of the “sources of deep emergence” and “sources of primary knowing.” He describes these sources as the “uncharted territory that evolves at the edge of human consciousness” (pp. 107-108), which he considers to be self-transcending and not yet embodied. In order to begin to chart this territory that our rational epistemology is incapable of accessing or even understanding, we must consider other ways of being, knowing and doing.*
As editors, we often ask ourselves: How far can we go (and let the authors go) in re-imagining all together our world, our best possible future, and our means to foster our individual and collective development? In that vein, many contributors of this book felt the need to present new ways of understanding our self (e.g., Darso; Karp and Mortensen), our world (Guttenstein, Lindsay, and Baron), and our relationship (Southern) before presenting their own propositions. Still, much work has to be done to set a new and more viable foundation for our collective redeployment of Theory U.

New sets of innovative as well as ancestral practices are also proposed by the majority of the contributors of the book. Among them, many are at odds with the materialistic-scientific Western worldview that prevails in academia, such as energy practices (e.g., Qi Gong), contemplative practices (e.g., meditation), and shamanic practices (e.g., circle, use of drums) – a rich and courageous offering in relatively uncharted scientific territory.

Ten years ago, exploring the relevance of these practices for leadership and organizational development would have been far less possible than it is today. This possibility might be explained by the greater openness of our civil society to alternative and consciousness-based approaches for personal and collective development. By contrast, a more traditional part of academic culture remains reluctant to embrace or work with the rise of such approaches – like Theory U. Still, we are persuaded by the need to support the greater importance of this paradigm shift underway in leadership and organizational development, hence the impetus for this book.

Olen Gunnlaugson  
Université Laval, Canada  

Charles Baron  
Université Laval, Canada  

Mario Cayer  
Université Laval, Canada  

REFERENCES  