Interview

with Otto Scharmer

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.