Chapter 1
Traveling the U:
Contemplative Practices for
Consciousness Development for
Corporate and Social Transformation

John Hardman
Regenerative Organizations, USA

Patricia Hardman
Regenerative Organizations, USA

ABSTRACT

Otto Scharmer’s Theory U is not difficult to grasp conceptually. Not so easy to enable is the effective capacity to activate the U’s enormous potential to shift individuals and organizations from a mindset entrenched in a business-as-usual paradigm to one of creativity, disruptive innovation, and sustainable repositioning. Does a systematic process exist that may facilitate the suspension of Scharmer’s notions of judgment, cynicism, and fear so that organizations may free up a more effective range of human faculties in order to solve problems and drive change? The authors propose that such a process is indeed available and can be found in contemplative practices of purposeful meditation. In this chapter, they offer a series of meditations designed to work at each level of the U. This begins with a contemplative practice intended to help suspend habitual patterns of thinking or “downloading,” the first stage in the U, followed by meditations focusing and integrating the heart and will. This initial phase of the process expands the individual’s capacity to truly “let go” old ways of thinking and to make possible the co-creative state of “presencing.” This stage, the downswing of the U, is followed by a collective meditation designed to facilitate the “letting come” or upswing of the U, which translates into the creative, collaborative crystallization of new ideas, leading to prototyping and mainstreaming of innovations.

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INTRODUCTION

Taking even one step in mindfulness can benefit all beings on Earth. -Thich Nhat Hanh

This paper presents a rationale for engaging in contemplative practices within the context of organizations as a means for consciousness development and, more specifically, to activate the stages of Otto Scharmer’s Theory U (2007). Following a brief review of Scharmer’s and the authors’ work on what they have defined as the regenerative leadership framework, four meditation practices are presented. Each of these have been designed specifically to help individuals and groups open minds, hearts, and wills, through an integrative process that fosters the co-creative state, presencing, that Scharmer argues is a pre-condition for engaging desirable futures as they emerge.

THEORY U: A BRIEF REVIEW

Over the past decade, Otto Scharmer’s growing body of work has made a significant contribution to shifting our attention from the objective to the subjective dimension of human experience, and has shed considerable light on how this dimension informs our behaviors as individuals and as a society. In 2002, Scharmer et al. noted that:

We believe that an important blind spot in 20th-century philosophy, social science, and management science lies in not seeing the full process of social reality formation. We see what we do. We also form theories about how we do things. But we are usually unaware of the place from which we operate when we act. (p. 6, emphasis in the original)

In the same paper, Scharmer reports on a conversation he held on consciousness development as a process with Master Huai-Chin Nan, a noted Chinese Taoist-Buddhist-Confucian scholar and teacher, who affirmed that:

What has been lacking in the 20th century is a central cultural [unifying] thought…. We have not gotten into the center: What is human nature? Where does life come from? What is life for? Where does consciousness come from? No one can answer those questions today. (p. 7)

Scharmer et al. (2002) framed these questions within a conceptualization of leadership that attempted to shift our focus of how we perceive reality. If we accept their assertion that the economic foundations of the world have been transformed from stable to dynamic patterns, “characterized by forming, configuring, locking in, and decaying of structures” (p. 3), then the nature of what we conceive as leadership must change accordingly. In this new environment, “real power comes from recognizing the patterns of change,” and by developing and deploying the capacity “to sense and seize emerging business opportunities” (p. 3).

This initial conceptualization of the need to develop a deeper awareness of dynamic patterns was made more tangible through his collaboration with colleagues at MIT on the practice of presencing (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004), a groundbreaking approach to increasing personal and team effectiveness through a more intuitive, holistic approach to change management. In the meantime, Scharmer had been writing what came to be his seminal Theory U (2007), a volume ten years in the making, where he laid the groundwork for the appearance of a viable global exit strategy from the increasingly obsolete model of business-as-usual (BUA). Business-as-usual is understood here as the single-minded pursuit of profit under the assumption of the availability of unlimited resources to support expansion, a notion British economist Tim Jackson (2009) has challenged by proposing that in the current environment we must consider a new paradigm based on prosper-
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