Chapter 2

Leading from the Source: Exploring the Bottom of the U

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors ask how a leader should connect to his or her source, and how to couple this connection to acts of taking leadership. Connecting to one’s source of leadership means taking a stand on a defined set of questions. It involves process and content and may be understood as an on-going process of individuation, self-reflection, and development – a leader’s attempt to create, and recreate, his- or her-self. This is the self that regulates the interior condition of the intervener, on which the success of the intervention depends. In addition, if leaders and change agents want to develop they must train their will. The will is the innermost essence of people’s selves; therefore, the discovery of the will means the discovery of people’s true beings, which is the key to leading from the source.

INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, Otto Scharmer’s Theory U has inspired people across a broad range of international business and community contexts. The purpose of the theory is to delineate a social technology of transformational change that will allow those aiming to take leadership to meet their challenges, including those in their individual lives. Scharmer’s book (2007) on the subject, Theory U, Leading from the Future as it Emerges, is hence written for leaders and change activists – individuals who initiate change or innovation – and, we will add, any leaders who wish to engage in leadership. Scharmer’s message is that they have to learn how to operate from the highest possible future, rather than being stuck in the patterns of past experiences.

His U process is hence designed to pull leaders and change agents into an emerging possibility,
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allowing them to operate from that altered state rather than reacting to the past. He says that in order to do so they have to become aware of their blind spot in leadership and everyday life. This blind spot is the source of leadership and Scharmer argues that leaders and change agents aspiring to take leadership need to connect to the source from which they operate, that it what “theory U” attempts to explore: “the inner place or source from which a person or a social system operates“ (Scharmer 2007, p. 22).

This chapter builds on Scharmer’s work as presented in his book on *Theory U* and we will explore the topic further. We do this by asking what connecting to a leadership source means for the practising leader or change agent. How should one connect to any kind of source and what is this source? We therefore intend to deepen the reader’s understanding of the leadership source, and we will do this by exploring the phenomenon at the bottom of the U, i.e. the acts of taking leadership. Scharmer (2007, p. 7) says that: “what counts is not only what leaders do and how they do it but their ‘interior condition’, the inner place from which they operate or their source from which all they actions originate.” To shift the inner place from which a leader operates is the essence of leadership, according to Scharmer. To do so, certainly many leaders need to find their source, and we argue that for a leader to find his or her source, the understanding of the leadership process itself must be altered.

It is not leadership per se which is interesting, but the deliberate act of taking leadership. “We know far too much about leaders and far too little about leadership”, James MacGregor Burns wrote in 1978 (p. 1), which invited the academic world to explore the phenomenon of leadership further. Since Burns, many scholars have done so, and many agree that leadership is ultimately a social process (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992). Within this tradition the leader is described as just one of several persons with possibilities to influence a group, and leadership is understood as a series of interaction processes where leaders may or may not influence followers (e.g. Crevani, Lindgren & Packendorff, 2010; Smirich & Morgan, 1982). Understanding leadership as process means emphasising the interaction between people and studying such interactions from the perspective of social flows (Wood, 2005). In such flows, power is tilted in favour of those who assume leadership so that leaders and followers can work toward common objectives. These power tilts are dynamic and are, among other things, we will argue, a function of a leader’s ability to connect to his or her source.

How then should a leader, a change agent, or someone aiming to take leadership, connect to his or her source, and how should he or she relate this connection to acts of leadership? We will argue that a person aiming to take leadership must muster the self-awareness and willpower necessary to deal with challenging situations, and mobilise these qualities when leadership is called for. In particular, we will discuss the energy of willpower, as we regard this as the most important driving force in human beings, and in acts of leadership. The will is the innermost essence of people, and the discovery of the will means the discovery of one’s true being, and hence, one’s self. In this regard, we will develop Scharmer’s thoughts on the will.

This chapter therefore has several objectives. The first, and prime, objective is to build on Scharmer’s U Theory by investigating of how practising leaders or change agents will be better equipped to engage in acts of leadership by connecting to their leadership source. We want to further comprehend this source, and we have suggested a framework that may help leaders to get to know, and connect to, their own source and willpower. Our second objective is to conceptualize and further detail the Theory U, making it accessible to practising leaders and change agents aiming to take more leadership, professionally and personally. We also want to provide a framework to leadership developers and coaches engaged in
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