Chapter 6

Promoting Presence in Professional Practice: A Core Reflection Approach for Moving through the U

Fred A. J. Korthagen
Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Annemarieke Hoekstra
Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, Canada

Paulien C. Meijer
Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This contribution focuses on the connection between Scharmer’s Theory U and individual coaching. How can Theory U be used in coaching for supporting transformational learning in coachees? First, the authors present an approach called Core Reflection. In this approach, Theory U is linked to specific levels of reflection and awareness, described by the so-called “onion model.” Through the use of Core Reflection, the personal and professional aspects of both inner processes and performance become connected. Two research studies on the use of coaching based on Core Reflection with teachers show its strong impact on practitioners, clarifying how it can promote deep learning and strengths-based performance, even in situations experienced by the coachee as problematic. The authors conclude that the Core Reflection approach is a practical and effective method for helping people move through Scharmer’s U model and for transformational learning. The research also sheds light on an overlooked area within Theory U: The illumination of people’s core qualities.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent contributions on the theory of presence by Senge et al. (2004) and Scharmer’s (2007) Theory U have drawn much attention within various professional domains. In this chapter, we discuss how Theory U can be connected to individual coaching aimed at supporting transformational learning in coachees. In a variety of professional domains it is common that during coaching, coachees bring in professional situations they experience as problematic. To date, Scharmer has not elaborated so much how a coach can promote a shift in the coachee from such problematic experiences to the bottom of the U, and then upwards. This paper will describe a concrete coaching approach that enhances such a shift and we will link this to Theory U. This coaching approach is based on the use of Core Reflection and applicable to all professions and many coaching situations. We will describe the theoretical foundations of the Core Reflection approach and two research studies that yield insight into the processes and outcomes resulting from coaching based on Core Reflection. In the final section of our paper we will argue that the Core Reflection approach is a practical and effective tool for helping people transition through the U, and develop the competence for transformational learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cognition, Emotion and Motivation

Theory U emphasizes the importance of “an open mind, an open heart and an open will” (Scharmer, 2007, p. 41) as the basis for reflection and action. This concurs with a variety of research studies from different fields showing that professional performance is not only grounded in rational thinking, but that affective and motivational factors also play an important role. In this section we will discuss the role that cognition, emotion, and motivation play in professional behavior.

A great deal of professional behavior is so-called immediate behavior (Dolk, 1997), that is, behavior that occurs as an immediate reaction to unexpected, non-routine situations. In such situations, there is often little time for reflection (Eraut, 1995; Schön, 1987), and ‘downloading behavior’ occurs, mediated by what the psychologist Epstein (1990) named the experiential system in human beings. In this experiential system, rapid information processing takes place, which is to a large degree based on emotions and images. This system is linked to physical responses and automatic processes. It is holistic, which means that the world is experienced in interconnected wholes, directing behavior in an often unconscious way (Lazarus, 1991). Many of these unconscious or only partly conscious behavioral tendencies, such as basic fight, flight and freeze responses, are patterns that have developed in the person at a young age (Rothschild, 2000). Epstein’s theory emphasizes the connections between thinking, feeling and behavior within the experiential system. His theory is supported by neurophysiological research. Brain specialists such as Immordano-Yang and Damasio (2007) conclude that most human functioning takes place through processes in which thinking and feeling are strongly intertwined. We can conclude that not all sources of behavior are rational and conscious, but many are non-rational or unconscious.

In addition, it is important to note that not only feelings and emotions play an important role in directing behavior. In their Self-Determination Theory, Ryan and Deci (2002) emphasize that people’s behavior is strongly influenced by their psychological needs, such as the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These are motivational factors, representing a somewhat different dimension than feelings and emotions.
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