Chapter 14

Theory U and Emergent Innovation:
Presencing as a Method of Bringing Forth Profoundly New Knowledge and Realities

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ABSTRACT

One of the big challenges in the field of innovation is to create something radically new and at the same time something that has been “waited for,” although nobody has explicitly known or seen it, something that—despite its newness—appears just in the right time at the right place (“kairos”) and organically fits in the existing environment (be it a market, an organization, a culture, or society). This chapter introduces an alternative approach to innovation and presents both its theoretical foundation and a concrete well-proven innovation process: Emergent Innovation. Besides other concepts from the fields of innovation, cognitive science, and epistemology, this approach is based on C. O. Scharmer’s Theory U. It is shown that a new kind of “cognition and epistemology of potentiality” is necessary in order to accomplish such processes as “learning from the future” and “listening to the future as it emerges.” It involves a whole new set of cognitive abilities, attitudes, and epistemological virtues, such as radical openness, deep observation, and understanding skills, reframing, etc. The second part of this chapter presents the Emergent Innovation approach that applies these theoretical concepts in a concrete process design. It is a socio-epistemological innovation technology bringing forth profoundly new knowledge and innovations having the qualities explicated above. The practical concepts, the implications, as well as the learnings for Theory U are discussed.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4793-0.ch014
INTRODUCTION

Self-transcending knowledge—the ability to sense and presence the emerging opportunities, to see the coming-into-being of the new—is usually associated with artists, not business managers. For example, there are three ways to look at a painter and her work: … third, one can watch the painter before she lifts a brush, as she considers the blank canvas… The artist in front of her blank canvas senses the emergent painting, much as Michelangelo, talking about his famous sculpture of David, sensed the emergent figure: “David was already in the stone. I just took away everything that wasn’t David.” The ability to see a David where others just see rock is what distinguishes the truly great artist. The same applies to leaders. (Scharmer, 2007, p. 137f)

What is profound innovation and how can it be brought about? These are the questions guiding not only this chapter, but—to some extent—also C.O. Scharmer’s (2007) Theory U. In our days, the notion of innovation seems to be omnipresent in business, politics, science and technology, and even in the social and cultural context (consider the field of “social innovation”; Thackara, 2005). However, taking a closer look reveals that innovation is a widely misunderstood and misused notion that is invoked whenever something seemingly new is presented or discussed. In the first part, this chapter aims at clarifying these misunderstandings in order to develop an alternative approach to innovation which focuses on one of the most difficult issues in this field. It concerns the following dilemma: On the one hand one expects from most innovations that they are radically new; i.e., they break with previous patterns and offer a completely new experience, service, or perspective. On the other hand, in many cases, the users, the organizations, or the market are not capable of dealing with this radical newness, because it does not fit anything that has been known so far. As an implication this innovation is “too new” and is not accepted by potential users, because it is simply “too far out”. Hence, there is a tension between a really radically new perspective and the way it fits into already existing structures.

One of the reasons for this problem of not being able to emotionally accept or cognitively “understand” such a radical innovation lies in the fact that it is—in most cases—the result of rather unstructured processes of knowledge creation, such as “wild brainstormings”, “out-of-the-box” thinking exercises, or creativity workshops (Kelley, 2004; Sternberg, 1999). The outcomes of such processes are not only “crazy” ideas, but sometimes really interesting radically new insights potentially leading to radical innovations. As stated above, in many cases their problem is that they do not fit anywhere, as they do not have any “connection points”—neither to the market nor to the organization having generated these so-called innovations.

The aim of this chapter is to develop a possible way out of this dilemma by introducing the concept of Emergent Innovation. This socio-epistemological innovation technology draws on C.O. Scharmer’s (2007) Theory U and shows how it can be successfully applied and developed further in the context of innovation processes. By elaborating on an alternative epistemology having its focus on cultivating potentialities that want to break forth or emerge, Emergent Innovation offers an alternative approach by suggesting “radical innovation from within”, from the core of the object or phenomenon of innovation.

In the second part, this chapter develops the theoretical foundations for such a perspective on innovation. We refer to this type of innovation as profound or emergent innovation: it is a radical yet organic innovation, because it has (been) developed out of the potentialities of the core of the innovation object. In a second step, a process and design for applying these theoretical principles in a concrete innovation process design is presented.

Finally, we sketch the concept of Enabling Spaces (Peschl & Fundneider, 2011). These spaces
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