

EXTRAORDINARY CONVERSATIONS: THE UNIVERSAL U

The frame of reference we will use below is the result of the work of Otto Scharmer in his Theory U. We can relate to the “U” as a blueprint or, even better, an *archetype* that is quite universal in social processes. We will use this pattern beyond the specific methodology devised by Scharmer that we saw in Chapter 1. This was a discovery that emerged for me progressively in conversations with other people in the social field, quite independently from anything that Scharmer has done or said.

In the weeks and months following my own training through the Global Presencing Classroom in 2007¹ I was often on calls with friends or networks of people involved in various tools for individual, group, or social change. When we happened to have a working knowledge of Theory U in common, new understanding would arise of the universal essence of what Theory U calls Open Mind, Open Heart, and Open Will. In other places I have shown how applicable the seven steps of the U are to Twelve Step, Nonviolent Communication, or Focused Conversation (of Technology of Participation) processes. Here the process will be extended to some examples of social technology—Consensus Decision Making, World Café, and Future Search.

Let us try to envision what “collectively going through the U” looks for an organization or community. Let us choose the example of a network deciding to work collectively at addressing large landscape conservation, and let us look at just one step in this process. It could be how to address the preservation of some threatened species, the establishment of easements through private land that would favor migration of a species in critical parts of its habitat, the forming of natural preserves, and so on.

In order to tackle any similar issues we need to have a sample of key stakeholders. One possible way to look at these is offered by M. Weisbord and S. Janoff. This can be thought of the people who **AREIN** the room, or people who have:

- **A**: authority to act
- **R**: resources, such as contacts and/or money
- **E**: expertise in the issues at hand
- **I**: information about the topic that no others have

¹ <https://www.presencing.org/aboutus/presencing-institute/what-we-do>.

- **N**: need to be involved because they will be affected by the decisions.²

In any of the above situations, securing the best possible results means inviting a variety of stakeholders from the one, or better two or three sectors. In the last instance these could be scientists, nonprofit agencies that advocate for one aspect or another of landscape protection, representatives of local governments, public agencies that regulate one aspect or another of land use and environmental protection, landowners, representatives of the logging industry, lumber mills, trade associations, chambers of commerce, tourism initiatives, and so forth. Once this eclectic crowd has been convened, it becomes obvious that none but the most extraordinary conversation could generate positive results. This is precisely the conversation that would allow the group to progressively move through the Open Mind, Open Heart, and Open Will, to the point of collective presencing (see Figure 20).

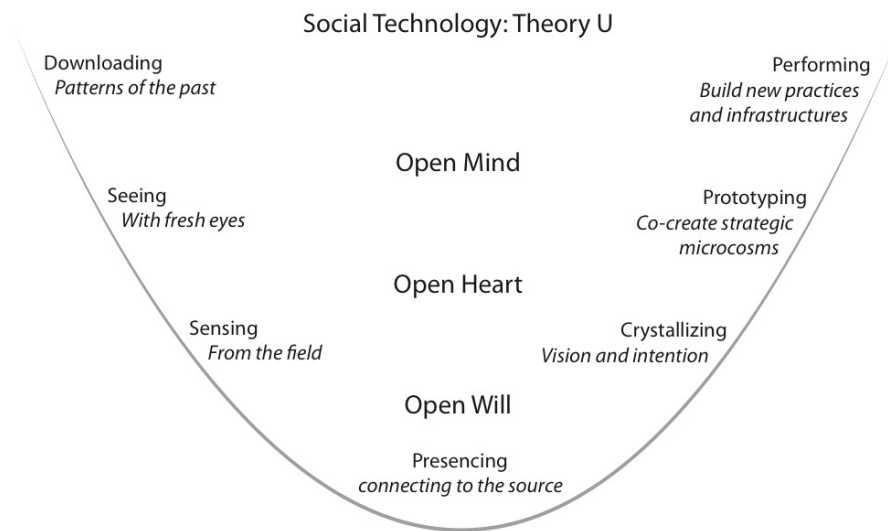


Figure 20: *Theory U*: Going through the Open Mind, Open Heart, Open Will (modified from Scharmer, *Theory U*)

Going Through the U

In a first stage of the process we need to overcome the silos mentality, the natural tendency to see things according to sectoral and organizational perspectives with their accompanying blind spots. An environmental organization tends to thrive in advocacy but not know how to look at the

² Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, *Don't Just Do Something, Stand There; Ten Principles for Leading Meetings That Matter* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2007), 17.

economic perspective of a problem; the reverse is most often true for businesses or trade associations. Government agencies may look at the problem from the purely bureaucratic perspective of existing policies and regulations. Only bringing these groups together can allow us to generate a larger tapestry of information that highlights the interconnections of all the elements of a situation. The assembled stakeholders will go through the Open Mind by collectively enriching and rounding off everybody's perspective. This is a stage of new learning, of truly *seeing*. At this stage the participants are encouraged to refrain from interpreting, countering, responding to each other's perspectives.

Withholding from forming judgments and criticisms is what allows a shift towards the stage of the Open Heart. From the jungle of facts, new relationships, patterns, and themes emerge. Stakeholder groups will realize that this was only possible by breaking the boundaries of the silo perspectives. In a build-up of trustful relationships, in which no one is judging others, individuals and stakeholder groups start to see the part they play in a complex and challenging situation. Collectively encouraging this taking of responsibility is the skill of a well-designed process, carried out by experienced facilitators.

At each step of the process trust and openness are heightened. Seeing challenges in a fuller perspective; realizing the limitations imposed on our perception of a situation when we are only immersed in a stakeholder perspective; experiencing the goodwill of those we traditionally perceive as adversaries or enemies; coming to the conclusion that nothing looks as easy as we thought; maybe reaching the point of thinking that our preferred solutions are not that desirable after all. . . . This is the stage of *sensing*. It will facilitate the next stage of the Open Will leading to Presencing.

When all previous ideas, perceptions, and assumptions are loosened, it is easier to imagine an open field of inquiry. Most, if not all, processes using the U will guide participants to a clear understanding of a common ground from which it is possible to operate, together with the recognition of differences that for the time being cannot be addressed, knowing that the field of operation can be widened in the measure that trust is enhanced by the results that can be reached first.

At the stage of the Open Will, the stakeholders will typically brainstorm loosely ideas for action from which will be selected those that all stakeholders see suitable, most immediately reachable, most efficient in terms of the investment of energy that they require, most strategic, and so on. This process may take many iterations. Success is manifested when a highly

satisfying solution has been reached that no given stakeholder could have generated on their own. Even though the scenario at this stage is just an outline, participants have the feeling of being completely aligned with the group, while they are allowed to retain complete personal and organizational independence. This is what presencing allows.

Presencing

Processes that allow the stage of presencing are those in which perspectives coming from past thinking are placed on hold, and we can collectively listen to a future that wants to emerge.

Through presencing the letting go of the past makes room for allowing the new; in Otto Scharmer's words, "letting come." Whether we are fundamentally anchored in the past or whether we allow the future to influence us and our decisions is much more determining for the paradigm of transformation than our political persuasions. The political arena typically operates from the second level, that of change through reform, not that of transformation; very often it approaches complex problems as if they were complicated (see Figure 1 in Introduction). It most often resists presencing in name of favored, predetermined options.

Moving to the Other Side of the U

After the act of collective presencing, thoughts and ideas need to be given form and direction, and the experience of a new way of operating becomes integral part of the organizational culture. These are the stages of crystallizing, prototyping, and performing. At the first stage of *crystallizing*, the group starts giving form to ideas, determining what can be done and how.

Prototyping introduces the step of experimenting with the new ideas, of testing possibilities of change without placing the whole at risk. Prototyping means supporting initiatives at a small scale in places where they have the best possibilities to succeed. These initiatives will receive resources and manpower to succeed from the organizational environment; they will not operate in a vacuum. Once successful, prototyping can be scaled throughout the organization.

Imagine then an organization in which all the previous steps up to prototyping are held on an ongoing basis and change happens in a holistic way. All the steps leading to prototyping now need to be supported so that the culture becomes that of a learning organization or community at the stage of performing. New practices and structures need to be integrated in the

internal culture so that the U process is part and parcel of a continuum that supports change on a regular basis.

The process of journeying through the layers of consciousness on one side (Open Mind, Open Heart, and Open Will on the way down), presencing at the center and emerging on the other side (crystallizing, prototyping, and performing) is present in Twelve Step or Nonviolent Communication. In those approaches the moment of presencing is not recognized as such; we could call it the silent, elusive moment of greatest change, a moment that is present only in the consciousness of the beholders, not in a structured step of the process. In Twelve Step presencing appears at the utmost humbling of the personality of the addict trying to overcome old habits (step 9 of making amends). In recognizing one's behavior, how it has affected self and others, and in being willing to offer apologies, the person in recovery touches the place where the utmost vulnerability and seeming powerlessness shifts into a truer power, heretofore unknown.

In Nonviolent Communication, at the moment in which two parties have reached full understanding of a situation of conflict—of how both have been affected in their feelings and needs—new possibilities arise. Usual, fixed perspectives are as if momentarily dissolved; new possibilities seem tangible, including new ways of being. The two parties stand at a crossroads, and something completely new can emerge that was hardly thought possible even minutes before. This completely inner, and often neglected, experience of turnaround, to which no name is usually given, is the experience of presencing.

The Quintessential Process of Decision Making

All social processes relating to the U can be related to the quintessential daily act of decision making. One example can illustrate what its dynamics are in daily life, whether it relates to what I will buy, where I will go, what I will eat, who I will meet, what I will do, and so on.

Suppose I am driving towards an intersection and see the light turning from yellow to red, and I have to decide whether I will stop or go through the intersection. This decision will be taken in a universal sequence, though it can be influenced by a great number of variables, and the process may go back and forth in the sequence.

The first step will consist in discerning the *facts*. The list of those given below is far from exhaustive:

- location of the intersection, volume of traffic; cars behind my own, to the sides; and so on
- speed I am traveling; state of the asphalt (dry or wet)
- drivers' record, impact of a possible fine, known presence of police officers in the area
- sense of urgency about what I am doing

The above, especially the information known to myself alone, generates a background of feelings, which is accentuated as I see the transition of the light from yellow to red. And the feelings I carry in the background are affected by what I register of the facts. An example: if my situation at work were precarious, I may be worried and may want to speed through the light and not arrive late to work once more. But if my driver's license record is also precarious, I may be anxious about getting a ticket, compounding the intensity of the feelings. But the list of feelings doesn't stop there; I may have reasons to be excited, angry, giddy, overwhelmed, overstimulated. Based on the facts, the feelings, which may be already present, are intensified.

Based on the information and what my feelings are telling me about this information, I envision a variety of outcomes, even in such brief lapse of time as it takes to stop at or go through the intersection. In the case given above, the decision could go both ways. I may decide that because I don't see a cop, it is worth going through the yellow light even though I risk doing so when it is actually turning red. Or I may feel paralyzed by emotion and decide to stop.

The above sequence is that of information (external and internal) and corresponding feelings. Based on information first (corresponding to *Open Mind*), feelings second (corresponding to *Open Heart*), exploration of alternatives third (corresponding to *Open Will*), I take one of the possible decisions. All of this happens very fast, and I may soon realize that I did not make a good decision. It takes time and training to be able to take good decisions, ones that are not conditioned by strong feelings and last-minute thoughts. If I am not clear about my feelings and needs, the decision will more likely than not be unsatisfying when seen in hindsight. Making the best decisions means being able to have a better understanding of our feelings and what strategies best meet our needs and other people's needs.

Creating a New Way of Relating

What is said here of one person deciding on a single, small issue is still equivalent to the phenomenon of a large group of people or network of

organizations making a decision. Obviously the difficulties increase exponentially.

What social technology does is countercultural to some degree. In passing from the Open Mind to the Open Will, we pass through the critical step of the Open Heart. In our culture and our times, expressing strong emotions, feelings, concerns, gut reactions is not easy, and in many ways the sequence of the steps is often altered in the name of expediency and comfort. Only seldom do we want to dwell at the level of feelings and emotions, because they are uncomfortable, because we do not know how to express them, how to receive them, how to handle them safely. When this is the case, we will often move from a more or less complete view of the facts to a decision that will be influenced by feelings, but only unconsciously. We may very well know somehow that the decision is unsatisfactory and just hope for the best. Since our buy-in is only partial, we know that when the time comes we can pull back and invoke a good reason for the change of mind.

Paradigm of Competition	Paradigm of Inclusion/Participation
Good or bad/right or wrong	Life affirming versus life negating
Needs are most often confused with strategies	Needs are universal and distinct from strategies
Judgment	Evaluation
Majority rule	Large coalitions
Goes most often from mind to action	Seeks to go from Open Mind to Open Heart to Open Will
Debate	Generative Conversation
Victory	Presencing
Works from the past (ideologies)	Works both from the past and from the future that wants to emerge

Table 21: paradigms of competition and inclusion/participation.

Social technology is thus the art of restoring the natural sequence in decision making, rather than the habitual one. In such a simple secret lies the key to its success. From this simplicity, according to the scale of action involved, interventions of growing complexity can be crafted that still hold these simple principles as their core truth.

Table 21 summarizes what we have discussed so far; it compares the paradigm of competition that is a given in our culture with the new, emerging paradigm of inclusion and participation.