

# Chapter 81

## Theory U and Team Performance: Presence, Participation, and Productivity

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter applies Scharmer's Theory U to team performance, productivity, and learning. Key topics covered include counterproductive thought patterns, or habits, and how they can be overcome; the complementary notions of collective presence and authenticity; and the critical contributions of shared reflection and dialogue to team learning and evolution. These and other elements of Scharmer's Theory U enable extraordinary collaborative effort and confer team advantages in terms of innovation, competitiveness, and sustainability. Strategies presented for promoting team evolution help readers to see how Theory U might be put into practice in their respective organisations and communities.*

### PART 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines of Claus Otto Scharmer's essential ideas pertaining to Theory U,<sup>1</sup> focusing on counterproductive thought patterns or habits and how they can be overcome. One counterproductive thought pattern, for example, is de-sensing. De-sensing is an unwitting perceptual bias that acts as a kind of filter to exclude useful information and leads us to overlook or discount our observations or those of others. Thus, if de-sensing occurs beyond our awareness and remains unchecked, problem-solving and decision-making are undermined. This may be of little consequence for minor matters, but may have catastrophic consequences

in urgent situations and for complex issues where the impacts of decisions and courses of action are less immediate or obvious. De-sensing and other negative thought processes and how they may be counteracted are discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. For now, it should be evident that Theory U concepts, principles, and strategies are clearly relevant to leaders of teams, organisations, communities, and even nations. As we will see, however, these same concepts, principles, and strategies apply to groups and teams, influencing performance, productivity, and learning.

Also covered in this chapter are the complementary notions of presence and authenticity, qualities that lead to richer experience and more

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lucrative problem-solving than techniques or approaches many might use. The individual who is fully present and authentic has access to insights, observations, and interpretations to which many people are closed. Scharmer notes, “The most important tool in that new Theory U leadership technology is your capacity to access your authentic self.”<sup>2</sup> This Theory U technology is organic and emergent. It is a natural process arising from inherent potentials that we possess. Less logical, systematic, or methodical than problem-solving and decision-making strategies with which readers may be familiar, Theory U concepts, principles, and strategies do not lend themselves easily to “packaging”. Thus, readers are advised to be cautious when offered “off-the-shelf” Theory U training packages. That said, Scharmer’s ideas are powerful and can be translated into practical problem-solving and decision-making strategies.

One intention of this chapter is to help readers learn how to develop presence and tap into the vast potential of their authenticity.<sup>3</sup> Amongst other benefits, presence and authenticity contribute to learning and change. So, Theory U as conceived here is an evolutionary process: through applying its concepts, principles, and strategies, individuals and organisations can attain their fullest potential; leaders can become more effective. When working well, this Theory U process leads to sensing (the constructive counterpart to de-sensing). With heightened sensing capacity, individuals attain greater foresight, the ability to detect emerging possibilities. Effective leaders sense threats and opportunities arising over the horizon and take appropriate action to position their organisations to contend with challenge and capitalise upon prospects before other leaders. This affords obvious advantages in terms of innovation, competitiveness, and sustainability. It should be noted, here, that *decisiveness* is not necessarily a function of Theory U leadership thinking. While the Theory U leader will likely exhibit greater intuition and insight than her counterparts, she will refrain

from making decisions prematurely or merely to be perceived as decisive. Right decisions in the long run are the outcomes of Theory U leadership thinking, not convenient ones. It is development of the capacity for organic foresight, rather than the application of formulas and recipes, that makes the Theory U leader effective.

As indicated by the title, this chapter applies Scharmer’s work to the group context and envisages Theory U as a means for achieving Collective Intelligence (Hays, 2009a; 2010a; 2010b). This is an important extension to Scharmer’s work. While no doubt Scharmer intends his work to apply to the collective (organisations, institutions, communities)—himself a veteran member of the Organisational Learning (Reynolds and Ablett, 1998; Thomas and Allen, 2006; Wang and Ahmed, 2003) cadre—Theory U is generally understood as an individual process or of most relevance to leaders, a point made as well by Mahy and Bubna-Litic in this volume. Examined closely are how the processes introduced above operate at the team level, and link with other collective processes, including shared reflection and dialogue, to enable extraordinary collaborative effort. It is particularly important to understand and improve teamwork and collaboration because many of the problems of today far exceed the knowledge and skill that any one person might possess. And the diverse needs of a large collective may surpass a given leader’s capacity, no matter how enlightened she is.<sup>4</sup>

With an emphasis on collective striving, this chapter adapts notions of shared or distributed leadership (Bligh et al, 2006; Manz and Sims, 1989; Spillane, 2005). Here, Scharmer’s ideas on how leaders can evolve to attain their highest potential are translated into team processes for learning and development. Strategies presented for promoting team evolution, drawn from the author’s work with teams around the globe, help readers to see how Theory U might be put into practice in their respective organisations and communities. Scharmer’s ideas hold much

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