

Uncovering The Blind Spot of Leadership by C. Otto Scharmer

We live in a time of massive institutional failure, collectively creating results that nobody wants. Climate change. AIDS. Hunger. Poverty. Violence. Terrorism. The foundations of our social, economic, ecological, and spiritual wellbeing are in peril.

Why do our attempts to deal with the challenges of our time so often fail? The cause of our collective failure is that we are blind to the deeper dimension of leadership and transformational change. This “blind spot” exists not only in our collective leadership but also in our everyday social interactions. We are blind to the source dimension from which effective leadership and social action come into being.

We know a great deal about what leaders do and how they do it. But we know very little about the inner place, the source from which they operate.

Successful leadership depends on the quality of attention and intention that the leader brings to any situation. Two leaders in the same circumstances doing the same thing can bring about completely different outcomes, depending on the inner place from which each operates. I learned this from the late Bill O’Brien, who’d served as CEO of Hanover Insurance. When I asked him to sum up his most important learning experience in leading profound change, he responded, “The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor.” The nature of this inner place in leaders is something of a mystery to us. Studies of athletes’ minds and imaginations as they prepare for a competitive event have led to practices designed to enhance athletic performance “from the inside out,” so to speak. Deep states of attention and awareness are well known by top athletes in sports. For example, Bill Russell, the key player on the most successful basketball team ever (the Boston Celtics, who won 11 championships in 13 years), described his experience of playing in the zone as follows:

Every so often a Celtics game would heat up so that it became more than a physical or even mental game, and would be magical. That feeling is difficult to describe, and I certainly never talked about it when I was playing. When it happened, I could feel my play rise to a new level. It came rarely, and would last anywhere from five minutes to a whole quarter, or more. . . . At that special level, all sorts of odd things happened: The game would be in the white heat of competition, and yet somehow I wouldn’t feel competitive, which is a miracle in itself. I’d be putting out the maximum effort, straining, coughing up parts of my lungs as we ran, and yet I never felt the pain. The game would move so quickly that every fake, cut, and pass would be surprising, and yet nothing could surprise me. It was almost as if we were playing in slow motion. During those spells, I could almost sense how the next play would develop and where the next shot would be taken. . . . My premonitions would be consistently correct, and I always felt then that I not only knew all the Celtics by heart, but also all the opposing players, and that they all knew me. There have been many times in my career when I felt moved or joyful, but these were

the moments when I had chills pulsing up and down my spine. [William F. Russell, *Second Wind: The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man*, 1979].

But in the arena of management and leading transformational change, we know very little about this inner dimension, and very seldom are specific techniques applied to enhance management performance from the inside out. This lack of knowledge constitutes a blind spot in our approach to leadership and management (Figure 1).

Slowing Down to Understand

At its core, leadership is about shaping and shifting how individuals and groups attend to and subsequently respond to a situation. But most leaders are unable to recognize, let alone change, the structural habits of attention used in their organizations. Learning to recognize the habits of attention in a business culture requires, among other things, a particular kind of listening. Over more than a decade of observing people's interactions in organizations, I have noted four different types of listening: downloading, factual listening, empathic listening, and generative listening.

Listening 1: Downloading

"Yeah, I know that already." I call this type of listening downloading—listening by reconfirming habitual judgments. When everything you hear confirms what you already know, you are listening by downloading.

Listening 2: Factual

"Ooh, look at that!" This type of listening is factual or object-focused: listening by paying attention to facts and to novel or disconfirming data. You switch off your inner voice of judgment and focus on what differs from what you already know. Factual listening is the basic mode of good science. You let the data talk to you. You ask questions, and you pay careful attention to the responses you get.

Listening 3: Empathic

"Oh, yes, I know exactly how you feel." This deeper level of listening is empathic listening. When we are engaged in real dialogue and paying careful attention, we can become aware of a profound shift in the place from which our listening originates. We move from seeing the objective world of things, figures, and facts (the "itworld") to listening to the story of a living and evolving self (the "you-world"). Sometimes, when we say "I know how you feel," our emphasis is on a kind of mental or abstract knowing. But it requires an open heart to really feel how another feels. An open heart gives us the empathic capacity to connect directly with another person from within. When that happens, we enter new territory in the relationship; we forget about our own agenda and begin to see how the world appears through someone else's eyes.

Listening 4: Generative

"I can't express what I experience in words. My whole being has slowed down. I feel more quiet and present and more my real self. I am connected to something larger than myself." This type of listening connects us to an even deeper realm of emergence. I call this level of listening "generative listening," or listening from the emerging field of future possibility. This level of listening requires us to access our open will—our capacity to connect to the highest future possibility that can emerge. We no longer look for something outside. We no longer empathize with someone in front of us. "Communion" or "grace" is maybe the word that comes closest to the texture of this experience.

When you operate from Listening 1 (downloading), the conversation reconfirms what you

already knew. You reconfirm your habits of thought: “There he goes again!” When you operate from Listening 2 (factual listening), you disconfirm what you already know and notice what is new out there: “Boy, this looks so different today!” When you operate from Listening 3 (empathic listening), your perspective is redirected to seeing the situation through the eyes of another: “Boy, yes, now I really understand how you feel about it. I can sense it now too.” And finally, when you operate from Listening 4 (generative listening), you have gone through a subtle but profound change that has connected you to a deeper source of knowing, including the knowledge of your best future possibility and self.

Deep Attention and Awareness

To be effective leaders, we must first understand the field, or inner space, from which we are operating. In my book, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*, I identify four such “field structures of attention,” which result in four different ways of operating. These differing structures affect not only the way we listen but also how group members communicate with one another, and how institutions form their geometries of power.

The four columns of Figure 2 depict four fundamental meta-processes of the social field that people usually take for granted:

- Thinking (individual)
- Conversing (group)
- Structuring (institutions)
- Ecosystem coordination (global systems)

Albert Einstein famously noted that problems cannot be resolved by the same level of consciousness that created them. If we address our 21st-century challenges with reactive mind-sets that mostly reflect the realities of the 19th and 20th centuries (Field 1 and Field 2), we will increase frustration, cynicism, and anger.

The way we pay attention to a situation, individually and collectively, determines the path the system takes and how it emerges. On all four levels—personal, group, institutional, and global—shifting from reactive responses and quick fixes on a symptoms level (Fields 1 and 2) to generative responses that address the systemic root issues (Fields 3 and 4) is the single most important leadership challenge of our time. (In this article, I discuss individual leadership. For a brief introduction to group and institutional leadership as they relate to Theory U, please download the executive summary of Theory U from www.theoryu.com.)

The U: One Process, Three Movements

To move from a reactive Field 1 or 2 to a generative Field 3 or 4 response, we must embark on a journey. Several years ago, during an interview project designed to promote profound innovation and change, I heard many practitioners and thought leaders describe the core elements of this journey. Brian Arthur, the founding head of the economics group at the Santa Fe Institute, explained to my colleague Joseph Jaworski and me that, for him, there are two fundamentally different sources of cognition. One is the application of existing frameworks (downloading) and the other is accessing one’s inner knowing. All true innovation in science, business, and society is based on the latter, not on “downloading.” So we asked him, “How do you do that? If I want to learn that as an organization or as an individual, what do I have to do?” In his response he walked us through

a sequence of three movements.

The first movement he called “observe, observe, observe.” It means to stop downloading and start listening. It means to abandon our habitual ways of operating and immerse ourselves in the places of most potential for the situation we are dealing with.

Arthur referred to the second movement as “retreat and reflect: allow the inner knowing to emerge.” This requires going to the inner place of stillness where knowing comes to the surface. We listen to everything we learned while “observing,” and we attend to what wants to emerge. We pay particular attention to our own role and journey.

The third movement, according to Brian Arthur, is about “acting in an instant.” This means to prototype the new in order to explore the future by doing, to create a little landing strip of the future that allows for hands-on testing and experimentation.

I call that whole process—observe, observe; access your sources of stillness and knowing; and act in an instant -- the U process, because it can be depicted and understood as a U-shaped journey.

A New Social Technology: Seven Leadership Capacities

But why is the U the road less traveled in institutions? Because it requires an inner journey and hard work. The ability to move through the U as a team or an organization or a system requires a new social technology. As illustrated in Figure 3, this social technology is based on seven essential leadership capacities that a core group must cultivate:

- Holding the space
- Observing
- Sensing
- Presencing
- Crystallizing
- Prototyping
- Performing

1. Holding the Space: Listen to What Life Calls You to Do

Leaders must create or “hold” a space that invites others in. The key to holding a space is listening: to yourself (to what life calls you to do), to others (particularly others who may be related to that call), and to that which emerges from the collective that you convene. But it also requires a good deal of intention. You must keep your attention focused on the highest future possibility of the group.

2. Observing: Attend with Your Mind Wide Open

Observe with an open mind by suspending your voice of judgment (VOJ). Suspending your Voj means shutting down the habit of judging based on past experience. Suspending your Voj means opening up a new space of inquiry and wonder. Without suspending that Voj, attempts to get inside the places of most potential will be futile.

Example: In 1981, an engineering team from Ford Motor Company visited Toyota plants operating on the “lean” Toyota production system. Although the Ford engineers had firsthand access to the revolutionary new production system, they were unable to “see” or recognize what was in front of them and claimed that they had been taken on a staged tour; because they had seen no inventory, they assumed they had not seen a “real” plant.

The reaction of the engineers reminds us how difficult it is to let go of existing ideas and beliefs.

3. Sensing: Connect with Your Heart

Connect to the deeper forces of change by opening your heart. I once asked a successful top executive at Nokia to share her most important leadership practices. Time and time again, her team was able to anticipate changes in technology and context. Time and again, they were ahead of the curve. Her answer? “I facilitate the opening process.” This is the essence of what moving down the left side of the U is all about—facilitating an opening process. The process involves the tuning of three instruments: the open mind, the open heart, and the open will. While the open mind is familiar to most of us, the other two capacities draw us into less familiar territory.

To understand more about that territory, I interviewed psychologist Eleanor Rosch of the University of California at Berkeley. She explained the difference by comparing two types of cognition. The first is the analytical knowledge upon which all conventional cognitive science is based. The other type of knowledge, the one that relates to the open heart and open will, is “open, rather than determinate; and a sense of unconditional value, rather than conditional usefulness, is an inherent part of the act of knowing itself.” Action resulting from that type of awareness, Rosch said, “is claimed to be spontaneous, rather than the result of decision making; it is compassionate, since it is based on wholes larger than the self; and it can be shockingly effective.”

4. Presencing: Connect to the Deepest Source of Your Self and Will

While an open heart allows us to see a situation from the whole, the open will enables us to begin to act from the emerging whole.

Danish sculptor and management consultant Erik Lemcke described to me his experience of this process: “After having worked with a particular sculpture for some time, there comes a certain moment when things are changing. When this moment of change comes, it is no longer me, alone, who is creating. I feel connected to something far deeper and my hands are co-creating with this power. At the same time, I feel that I am being filled with love and care as my perception is widening. I sense things in another way. It is a love for the world and for what is coming. I then intuitively know what I must do. My hands know if I must add or remove something. My hands know how the form should manifest. In one way, it is easy to create with this guidance. In those moments I have a strong feeling of gratitude and humility.”

5. Crystallizing: Access the Power of Intention

The backstories of successful and inspiring projects, regardless of size, often have a similar story line -- a very small group of key persons commits itself to the purpose and outcomes of the project. That committed core group then goes out into the world with its intention and creates an energy field that begins to attract people, opportunities, and resources that make things happen. Momentum builds. The core group functions as a vehicle for the whole to manifest.

In an interview, Nick Hanauer, the founder of half a dozen highly successful companies, told Joseph Jaworski and me: “One of my favorite sayings, attributed to Margaret Mead, has always been ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.’ . . . With only one person, it’s hard—but when you put that one person with four or five more, you have a force to contend with. All of a sudden, you have enough momentum to make almost anything that’s immanent or within reach actually real.”

6. Prototyping: Integrating Head, Heart, and Hand

Learn the prototyping skill of integrating head, heart, and hand. When helping a golfer who has lost his swing, the master coach in the novel and film *The Legend of Bagger Vance* advises, “Seek it with your hands -- don’t think about it, feel it. The wisdom in your hands is greater than the wisdom of your head will ever be.”

That piece of advice articulates a key principle about how to operate on the right side of the U. Moving down the left side of the U is about opening up and dealing with the resistance of thought, emotion, and will; moving up the right side is about intentionally reintegrating the intelligence of the head, the heart, and the hand in the context of practical applications. Just as the inner enemies on the way down the U represent the VOJ (voice of judgment), the VOC (voice of cynicism), and the VOF (voice of fear), the enemies on the way up the U are the three old methods of operating: executing without improvisation and mindfulness (reactive action); endless reflection without a will to act (analysis paralysis); and talking without a connection to source and action (blah-blah-blah). These three enemies share the same structural feature. Instead of balancing the intelligence of the head, heart, and hand, one of the three dominates—the hand in mindless action, the head in endless reflection, the heart in endless networking.

Connecting to one’s best future possibility and creating powerful breakthrough ideas requires learning to access the intelligence of the heart and the hand—not just the intelligence of the head.

7. Performing: Playing the Macro Violin

When I asked the violinist Miha Pogacnik to describe key moments from his music experience, he told me about his first concert in Chartres. “I felt that the cathedral almost kicked me out. ‘Get out with you!’ she said. For I was young and I tried to perform as I always did: by just playing my violin. But then I realized that in Chartres you actually cannot play your small violin, but you have to play the ‘macro violin.’ The small violin is the instrument that is in your hands. The macro violin is the whole cathedral that surrounds you. The cathedral of Chartres is built entirely according to musical principles. Playing the macro violin requires you to listen and to play from another place, from the periphery. You have to move your listening and playing from within to beyond yourself.”

Most systems, organizations, and societies today lack the two essentials that enable us to play the macro violin: (1) leaders who convene the right sets of players (frontline people who are connected with one another through the same value chain), and (2) a social technology that allows a multi-stakeholder gathering to shift from debating to co-creating the new.

In summary, Theory U illuminates a hidden dimension of leadership—the inner place from which leaders operate. Profound change today not only requires a shift of the mind, it requires a shift of will and a shift of the heart. I have come to refer to this deeper shift as “presencing.” A blend of the words “presence” and “sensing,” presencing signifies a heightened state of attention that allows individuals and groups to operate from a future space of possibility that they feel wants to emerge. Being able to facilitate that shift is the essence of leadership today.