

Theory U – Leading from the Future as it Emerges

During COVID-19, I have been thinking a lot about the relevance of this framework from the Presencing Institute. I especially appreciate the bottom of the “U” curve of his model as it tells us we need to pause and slow down. Just sit with what the new reality needs to be. Then as we go up the right side of the U curve, we try prototyping. We are seeing this everywhere. People are trying things out... read over this description and see what you might do with your team or organization to use the concept of the U model for processing important material. Their emphasis on listening seems critical in this moment in time.

Description:

The U references the letter U as a symbol for the process of moving through a U shaped social change process developed by The Presencing Institute at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the USA. Since the early 2000s it has been elaborated as Theory U (also called “U” methodology) by C. Otto Scharmer. This work itself draws on collaboration between Scharmer and his colleagues Peter Senge (Center of Organizational Learning), Joseph Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers. Theory U is called “One Process, Five Movements.”

1. CO-INITIATING: Build common intent, stop, listen to others & what life calls you to do
2. CO-SENSING: Observe, Observe, Observe. Go to the places of most potential and listen with your mind and heart wide open
3. PRESENCING: Connect to the Source of Inspiration and Will to go to the place of silence and allow the inner knowing to emerge
4. CO-CREATING: Prototype the New in living examples to explore the future by doing
5. CO-EVOLVING: Embody the New in Ecosystems that facilitate seeing/acting from the whole



We move down one side of the U (connecting us to the world that is outside of our institutional bubble) to the bottom of the U (connecting us to the world that emerges from within) and up the other side of the U (bringing forth the new into the world).

Theory U Assumptions:

- These times call for a new consciousness and a new collective leadership capacity to meet the massive challenges that threaten the foundations of our social, economic, ecological, and spiritual well-being in a more conscious way.
- Development of this capacity allows us to create a future of greater possibilities.
- When leaders develop the capacity to come near to that source, they experience the future as if it were “wanting to be born” — an experience called “presencing.” That experience carries with it ideas for meeting challenges and bringing in an otherwise impossible future. The capacity for presencing can be developed.

Theory U Uniqueness:

- It was specifically developed to deal with this time of massive institutional failure, collectively creating results that nobody wants: e.g., Climate change. AIDS. The work continues to constantly evolve. They now speak of the 4.0 framework and the concept of the U School as a global platform for helping a new generation of 4.0 eco-system entrepreneurs to act more creatively, collectively, intentionally.



Our Suggestions for Using Theory U:

The Presencing Institute is dedicated to developing new social technologies by integrating science, consciousness, and profound social change methodologies. They have a [fantastic website](#) with many tools and background for free.

- The foundational capacity of the U is listening. Listening to others. Listening to oneself. And listening to what emerges from the collective. Effective listening requires the creation of open space in which others can contribute to the whole.
- Suspend the “voice of judgment” is key to moving from projection to observation.
- The preparation for the experience at the bottom of the U – presencing – requires the tuning of three instruments: the open mind, the open heart, and the open will. This is an active “sensing” together as a group.

Be sure to use the following suggested tools:

- **Journaling** – <https://www.presencing.org/#/resource/tools/guided-journaling-start>
- **Listening, awareness and embodiment practices**
- **Case clinics** – case giver presents a case, and a group of 3-4 peers or team members help as consultants based on the principles of the U-Process
<https://www.presencing.org/#/resource/tools/case-clinic-desc>
- **Dialogue Interviews** engage the interviewee in a reflective and generative conversation.
<https://www.presencing.org/#/resource/tools/dialogue-interview-desc>
- **Prototyping** moves an idea or innovation into a concrete next step and creates a microcosm that allows you to explore the future by doing. Prototypes work on the principle of “failing early to learn quickly.” Prototypes can be concrete products, meetings, processes, services or experiments. Whatever it is, the underlying process is systems sensing, then systems thinking, then stopping to embrace a moment of shared/individual stillness before selecting possible prototyping ideas.
<https://www.presencing.org/#/resource/tools/prototyping-desc>
- **Sensing Journeys** pulls you out the daily routine and allows you to experience the organization/challenge/ system through different stakeholders’ eyes.
- **Stakeholder Interviews** allow you to step into the shoes of your interviewees and see your role through the eyes of these stakeholders.
- **Shadowing** means accompanying someone for a defined period of time to observe him/her during work and learn from this observation.

Helpful Resources:

<https://www.presencing.org/#/aboutus/theory-u>