

Theory U- Social Technology for Innovation

Colin Andrew Brown, Accurity GmbH, Kloten, Switzerland
working for Roche Pharmaceuticals, Basel, Switzerland.

ABSTRACT

How do we achieve real Innovation? By going deep within ourselves to access our own genius, our own inner place of creativity and bringing forth the best possible solution for the issues at hand.

Theory U is a change management technology developed by Otto Scharmer from MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) that enables leaders and participants to take projects through a deep innovative process.

This paper will describe the Theory U process, how to 'traverse the U', going through the seven steps involved, what is achieved with each step, what obstacles need to be overcome to achieve a profoundly creative outcome. Further highlighted will be the social technology of "Presencing" and how this achieves deep access to the creative potential within us.

INTRODUCTION

Otto Scharmer, a lecturer at MIT University, USA developed Theory U. It is a social technology, which enables people to access their deepest innovative capacity. Theory U is a structure, which gives a group, the opportunity to access their profound innovative faculty, that part which can bring to awareness the best possible outcome for the situation at hand. Going to this deepest part of yourself is called Presencing.

This paper will describe Theory U, how it came about. It will highlight experience gained using the U, its suitability for the pharmaceutical industry and implementation recommendations. This paper seeks:

- To give a basic understanding of the Theory U process
- Demonstrate successful usage of the U process.
- Show how understanding of the U process can be useful in everyday ongoing projects.
- To give recommendations of how to implement the U.

THE BLIND SPOT(S) OF OUR TIMES

A great deal of time and effort is used by academics and consultants to understand how good business leaders achieve success, concentrating on what they do and how they do it. From this many useful business techniques and mindsets have been created and successfully introduced into the business world.

One thing that has not been looked at much is the inner world of the innovative leaders. This is the blind spot of our times. Just what was going on in the minds of these business leaders, what attitudes and perspectives did they have when they were at the peak of their innovation? What quality of attention and intention did they have? It is this inner life, which Theory U seeks to address.

Life in western society just seems to keep getting faster and faster. Back in the early 70's, when the effect of IT on society was just beginning to become obvious, there were sociologists looking at what we were all going to do with our increased leisure time once all the intelligent machines had taken over the majority of the work. Society has not turned out that way, our pace of life seems to get even faster. This leaves us with an important question when working on a new project: do we quickly put into place tried and tested procedures which can easily be understood

PhUSE 2010

and setup, or do we try and seek the best new innovative process for the project? The fact that life and society seems to be speeding up puts pressure on us to seek a quick solution, i.e. putting tried and tested methods quickly into place. However, this very speeding up of our world also means that the current issues and problems we are facing are significantly more complex than the original problems for which the solutions were originally developed. This situation applies to pharmaceutical drug development just as much as it does to any of the worlds current global issues.

Just re-using tried and tested routines can seem like a good and quick way forward, however, a really innovative development could be close at hand which could lead to a much better solution to the problem at hand. We are in danger of being blind to the best possible solution. This is the second blind spot of our times.

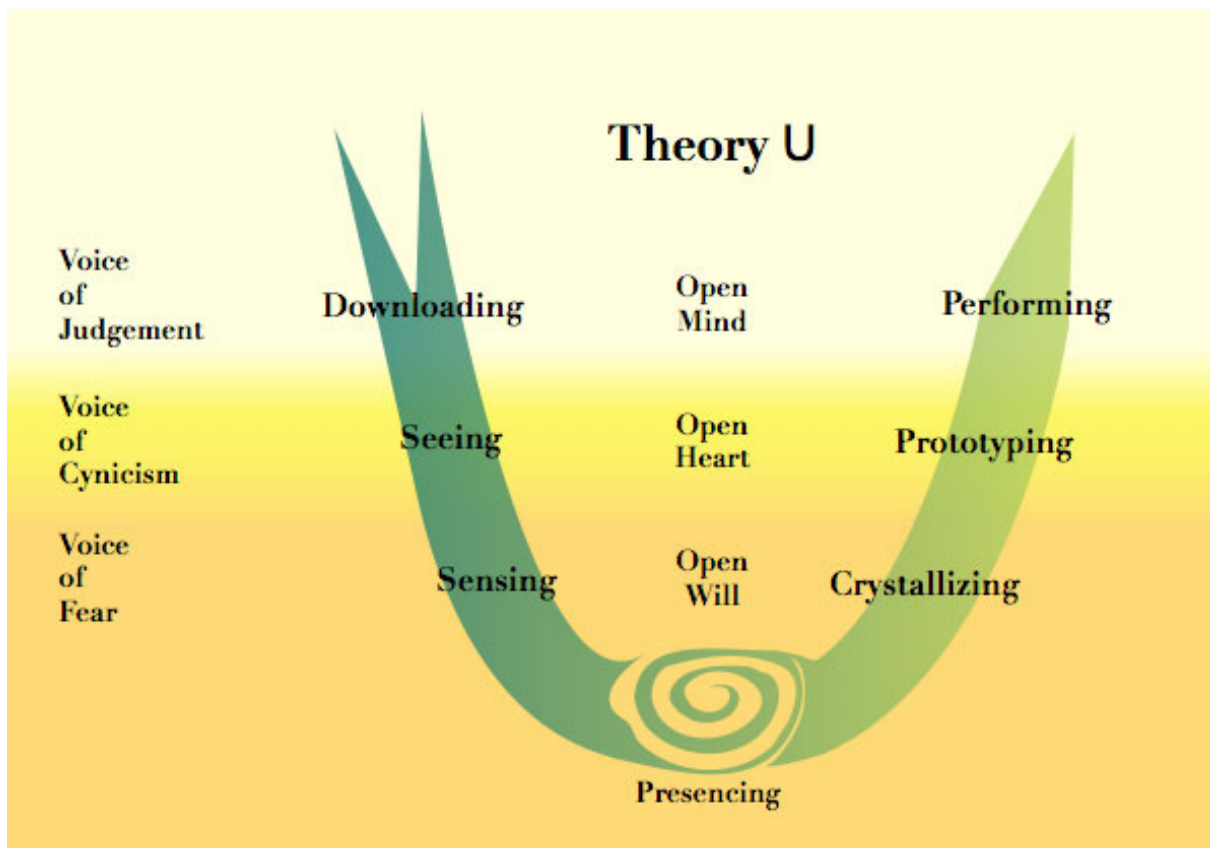
Using Theory U addresses both these blind spots.

THEORY U OVERVIEW

Otto Scharmer took over ten years to develop Theory U, finally publishing a book on the subject in 2009. It is a social technology, which enables people to access their deepest truths. Theory U is a structure which gives a person, or a group, the opportunity to access the deepest part of themselves, that part which can bring to consciousness the greatest future outcome for the situation at hand, something which the mind in its 'normal state' cannot do due to its blind spot. Going to this deepest part of yourself is called "Presencing". The word is a mixture of Presence and Sensing. As the name implies, this involves being fully in the moment and thereby being open and aware of that which needs to be brought into the world.

Theory U is a path of innovation, which is divided up into seven parts, usually depicted in the shape of a "U" (see diagram below). Moving along this path is called, "Travelling the U". The first part of the U is the inner journey, opening up the mind so the person is in a state of "Presencing", reached at the bottom of the U. The second part of the journey is the outer part, bringing the ideas found at the bottom of the U into the world. Each of the parts has a set outcome to perform.

Different methods can be applied in each of the parts of the U. This ability to use a variety of different social technologies in each of the separate parts makes Theory U immensely adaptable.



TRAVELLING THROUGH THE U

Briefly, the journey through the U develops in seven steps. These steps are usually arranged on a U shape, you start at the top left hand corner, travel down the U to the lowest level, Presencing, where the ideas appear, moving up the U, bringing the idea into the world finally at the top of the U on the right. The steps are:

1. DOWNLOADING

This is the situation most people find themselves in: repeating the same responses to the same stimulus over and over again. Yet this everyday habitual thinking can, be easily altered by expanded it through listening and intensively observing, thereby gaining a thorough understanding of the situation one is confronted with.

2. SEEING

Moving from downloading to Seeing is a step that involves the suspension of the inner voice of judgment. This is a step towards gaining an open mind, observing from the periphery of the mind, as it were, rather than being bound to the place of emotions attached to the situation we are trying to understand; where, as it were, 'one cannot see the wood for the trees'. Suspending the inner voice of judgment requires a shift in consciousness, so we have already started on traveling the U, moving away from the normal mode of thinking.

3. SENSING

The next stage is Sensing, observing the situation from a place outside your own standpoint. If this is a group situation, then it is trying to take the perspective of the group and not just your own perspective. This involves being willing to opening your heart, gaining trust in your situation and the people around you and developing a sense of empathy in what is living there, in the moment. It is this sense of empathy that can move your viewpoint to that of the group in order to experience it. The hindrance here is the voice of cynicism, "this will never work anyway." Oh, but it will.

4. PRESENCING

Connecting to the deepest part of the Self, finding the essence of that which wants to emerge into the world, is that place, at the bottom of the 'U' that is called Presencing. To reach this place requires that you let go of your own preferred solutions and take the risk of doing something different, something that at this time is unknown to you. In other words you have to lose control to gain control and in this moment of letting go, it can be as if you are looking down at a black abyss under you. This can evoke real fear. Now you have to find the courage to move forward. If you do this, you find that you are now in a different state of mind and are better able to seek a solution. There are several methods of doing this. For those used to meditation than meditating on the situation can bring success. A non-meditative technique that can be used here is called journalism, which is being asked a previously fixed set of questions and writing down the first answers that come into your mind.

5. CRYSTALLIZING

This stage is where the ideas and images from the Presencing stage are brought together, with the group focusing their energies on the emerging idea. Collecting people's different visions together is sensitive work. Each part of each vision has to be acknowledged and added to the full picture without any negation. Here you start putting the full picture together adding flesh to the bones. The effect on this work of having previously gone through the stage of opening the heart really pays dividends here as each person, in their commentary, builds further on the vision of the others. You are still in the Presencing state, but as this part of the work continues you realize that this has a quality of being 'in the flow' of a process. The intention of the group becomes focused here on the desired outcome.

6. PROTOTYPING

Now we arrive at the beginning of practical interactions, putting into place ideas, observing and listening to feedback; you are dancing a dance that is for many rather familiar. Prototyping as a technology helps in trying out ideas, seeing what works and what does not, adjusting accordingly.

7. PERFORMING

This is the final bringing into the world the ideas of the project, getting the right set of people together with the correct values to put a final answer in place.

EXPERIENCING GOING THROUGH THE U

In 2009 two consultancy meetings took place in Europe, for business consultants and entrepreneurs to practice going through the U process. One was held in the Burren, Ireland, the other, in German, was held in Bergell, Switzerland. A variety of projects were taken through the U process, including:

Bonus Scheme of a Finance Institute.
Giacometti Museum in Bergell, Switzerland.
Burren Landscape, Community, Farming.
Theory U Future Development.

A variety of experiences were gained. Going through the bottom of the U into "Presencing" really made a significant difference not only in the understanding of the issue at hand but also the resulting ideas that appeared. This was made quite clear when presenting the results back to the clients; an almost comical open-mouthed astonishment was generated.

What was also clear was that the three thresholds of voice of judgment, cynicism and fear are thresholds of increasing difficulty to overcome, with one project simply refusing to go through the bottom of the U. Interestingly enough, the material gathered from the attempt was still enough to advance the knowledge of this particular project further.

When moving beyond crystallizing into the beginning of prototyping, we came into known territory for the business world. It was interesting to see how often consultants would slip out of the process and fall back into their old ways of thinking. In fact this happened so often that it became a standard phrase to ask, "where are you now on the U? Are you prototyping or downloading?" In other words, are you still in the U process or have you slipped back into your old habitual ways of thinking?

SUITABILITY FOR THE PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY

The fact that this process is modular and adaptive makes it easy to fit into the pharmaceutical industry, where well-defined processes are welcomed. The ability to fit different social technologies into these steps enables the project leader to construct the U to achieve the best response from the current project team.

IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Going through the U is a process which takes time and should be given at least two days initially. An offsite meeting, would give a high advantage, the project team should be completely focused on the task at hand and not distracted by everyday routine. Like all new processes this should not be introduced on mission critical projects where the slightest delay cannot be justified. It is of course highly advantageous to have someone who has a good understanding of the U process.

CONCLUSION

Our world is becoming an ever more complex place. To solve the problems we face we need new ideas and processes to achieve the best possible outcome. Theory U is a social technology which allows us to access our own inner innovative ability. Using new processes such as Theory U will significantly boost our ability to provide the most innovative outcome to the work at hand.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Christian Mueller at Roche, Basel, Switzerland and Andreas Koller at Artesis Consulting, St. Gallen, Switzerland for their support.

PhUSE 2010

RECOMMENDED READING

Theory U Leading from the Future as it Emerges The Social Technology of Presencing by Otto Scharmer, SoL, the Society for Organizational Learning.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Your comments and questions are valued and encouraged. Contact the author at:

Author Colin Andrew Brown

Company Accurity GmbH

City / Postcode Kloten, CH

Work Phone: +41 61 687 1431

Email: colin_andrew.brown@mac.com, colin.brown.cb2@roche.com

Web: www.theheartexplosion.com

Theory U is licensed by the Presencing Institute - Otto Scharmer, www.presencing.com/permissions.