

Scharmer's Theory U and Administrative Leadership: Seeking Leaders and Developing Candidates

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Abstract

As we select candidates at the university for educational leadership programs, we attempt to identify traits that would suggest these people have the ability to lead and become effective administrators. Through the years we have developed many interview protocols but there is still no one common boilerplate that serves as "the" model for interviewing leadership candidates. We constantly look to refine that process to increase the odds of selecting the correct candidates. This paper examines "Theory U", developed by Otto Scharmer, from the Society of Organizational Learning in Massachusetts, as having potential for providing an enlightened view and offering new insights to the selecting and developing of leadership candidates. Although Scharmer did not specifically develop this theory for this use there may be some positive elements that need to be explored further. This paper begins that dialogue.

Key words: administration, leadership, candidate selection, theory, interview process, Scharmer, develop leadership

The best predictor of the future is the past. This has been touted for years as an axiom. As we interview potential candidates for leadership positions in our administrative vacancies how do we ensure the potential for true leadership? Predictors in this arena have been sketchy at best. We typically have a list of criteria for openings but zeroing in on specific leadership abilities and traits is less common than one would think during administrative searches. Not that we all don't want to do this effectively; it is just that common elements seem to escape description.

According to Otto Scharmer's Theory U (Scharmer, 2007) it is clear that unique individuals who are likely to lead organizations in creative ways have an inner direction that is a bit more difficult to predict or examine than other traits. As Scharmer puts it there is some "more profound and practical integration of the head, heart and hand – of the intelligences of the open mind, open heart, and open will at both the individual and the collective level" (Scharmer, 2003).

In the forward to Scharmer's text "Theory U: Leading from the Future As It Emerges: The Social Technology of Presencing", Peter Senge states that "...Scharmer suggests that the key to addressing multiple unfolding crises of our time-and the future course of human development-lies in learning how to access this source of mastery...". It is this sense of leadership and operation within the context of leadership that is explored (Scharmer, 2007).

These traits of integration of the heart and mind and open will that Scharmer defines are the things that separate organizations from truly exemplary, high performance organizations, especially at that top leadership position (superintendent of schools, etc.).

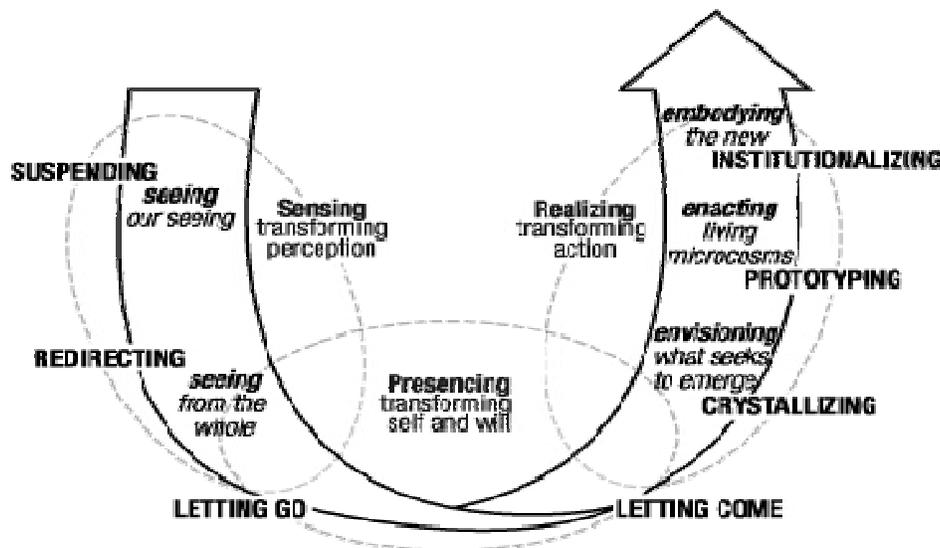
If an organization is mired in problems or issues and a person to lead the organization into a more stable, productive future is needed; what do you look for? If you ask any ten members of any interview committee you may get several different responses. True leadership is a combination of so many factors that distinct identification of the traits and that single one person that will do that job may remain illusive.

Many times the group conducting the search really does not know what it might take to move forward since they are mired in the same organizational culture, issues, and environment as well. Typically outside consultants are contracted to conduct searches for expressly those concerns.

A most thorough examination of an individual’s past actions, a complete debriefing and discussion of futuring may be the most promising indicator of true leadership skill; something that is not often found on paper or the resumes that usually precede a candidate. This is not to suggest that even the interviewers themselves at any given time know exactly what they are looking for or what they need for the future leadership of an organization. However, traits that transcend the individual and move toward creative reflection will at least give you a possible candidate that will be focused on the positive evolution of your organization.

Scharmer (2002) speaks of a process called “presencing”. Moving forward, learning from the evolution as it unfolds is certainly a new way of looking at issues. Critics suggest that you cannot learn from the future, but again Scharmer puts forth the possibility of learning as things emerge, changing and adapting almost immediately throughout such a process. How is this capability in an individual you are seeking to lead your organization measured or quantified for the purposes of any interview/selection process? Does the providing of some test-case type scenarios during the interview process get at the heart of such a skill? Perhaps it may get one closer to seeing an individual leader in a “presencing” state but the realities of such situations are often so culturally complex that creating a similar environment for a 45 minute interview is simply not possible.

These are issues that must be investigated, attempted to uncover, and at least minimally identified as we seek the best leadership for the future. Scharmer best describes this “presencing” as a combination of the two concepts of sensing and presence (Scharmer, 2004). When a leader moves into this presencing phase they begin looking at what future possibilities may arise and they emerge into some area that is yet to manifest itself. They truly are making a shift from where their perception had previously been operating (Scharmer, 2004). Such a leader begins to change the inner place from which he/she operates. The entire process of this transformation is depicted within a version of Scharmer’s Theory U model from Senge, et al (2004):



Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*. Cambridge, Mass: SoL, Society for Organizational Learning, 2004. Page 225.

It may often be easier to look back on a series of administrative decisions that were made in an evolving situation, a crisis, or an opportunity for major change. Examining to see how many of these decisions were based upon the past or how many were made as the situation evolved, how many “emerged”. People often easily take credit for such things in retrospect, but how many are willing to admit that the decisions came as they were going through the situation and the eventual outcome was positive – not some long protracted plan of decisions that had been consciously well thought out and weighed prior.

Most practitioners think that kind of process is a worthy measure/indicator of leadership and are more willing to suggest that is what happened as they look back on their own decision-making. This may or may not be the case. To see an effective change-agent/ leader engaged in such activity would help to determine their real level of “presencing” or reflection on the past. Measuring this in an interview situation is tremendously challenging. Questioning techniques and opportunities for discussion within the format of our typical interview process are clearly necessary to even begin to get at some of these issues. Pre-made questions may simply not be the answer. A discussion of past decision-making strategies, environments, cultures involved, and futuring may hold greater promise. Some opportunity to demonstrate non-linear thinking, intuition, and insight may be helpful.

Identifying the way in which a leader applies him or her self to the organization and its concerns are a clear element of leadership that may be valuable to your organization. How does this individual gain understanding of the organization, put themselves within that context, and actually engage in that “presencing” process? Whether or not there is direct transference of similar issues in the person’s background to your organization’s current needs, the fact that this individual can do this and has demonstrated such in their past may give rise to the possibility that they may instinctively know how to do this and given some time can do this within a new organizational structure as well. Although we are relying on the past as an indicator of future potential it is, at minimal, based on something that can be replicated not piece by piece but perhaps in the very process itself.

Some thoughts on the latest skills and traits that are desired in effective school leaders include self-confidence, stress tolerance, emotional maturity, integrity, extroversion, achievement orientation, self-efficacy, and a host of interpersonal skills (Hoy and Miskel, 2008). How does such a listing compare with Theory U and the need to find a leader that can make decisions based in a creative, forward, visioning manner? These traditional skills can be present in one who is the exceptional leader and most likely are, but that does not also indicate that the leader with those traits can step out of the norm and be the exceptional leader. This is the dilemma, matching some administrative interview typically based upon a search for those types of traits and selecting a true visionary leader.

The university program of educational leadership candidates that involves continual case studies and scenarios may best give the students/candidates opportunities for reflections that can come closer to a real situation. An active internship where the accountability to make decisions is really there is actually quite rare but some type of internship experience in a real context, a true evolving environment is again at least closer to the reality of daily leadership than just classroom instruction. The effective graduate program in educational leadership will give as many opportunities as possible to react and relate in the closest to the real-world setting. Projects based on real needs, within real contexts are not planned out years in advance and followed every year thereafter but developed with cooperative schools that have changing needs. A close relationship between the university and the cooperating school is the key to matching needs and program opportunities and the ability to allow for leadership demonstration and development.

The entire process of identifying and developing leadership may indeed take on a different tactic using Scharmer’s Theory U as a base. This is an area that should be explored further for its value in creating the outstanding educational systems that may truly be necessary for the coming years and global challenges. It will take schools, school districts, states, professional organizations and post secondary institutions working together to craft new ways to develop leadership programs that go beyond the usual and opportunities for in depth experiences within real cultural contexts to truly impact our leadership development initiatives. Doing this may begin to create opportunities for real leaders to emerge and demonstrate their talents. How much of this talent can be taught is yet to be determined. How much of Scharmer’s “presencing” can also be taught is unclear. Can a leader, in fact, even identify that they are presencing at any given moment may also be - yet to be determined. But it is in the offering of true opportunity to discuss these concepts, engage in real leadership decision-making and reflect on all these aspects through which we must consciously evolve.

Scharmer suggests (detailed within concluding sections of his 2007 text) that upcoming leaders need to observe the following twenty-four principles and practices of “presencing”: 1) attend: listen to what life calls you to do, 2) connect: listen to interesting players in the field, 3) co-initiate: inspire a common intention, 4) form a highly committed core team to clarify essential questions, 5) take journeys to places of most potential, 6) observe: suspend your judgment, 7) practice deep listening with an open mind and heart, 8) create ways in which the system can see itself, 9) let go of old things that must die, 10) let come: surrender to the future that may be emerging through you, 11) embrace intentional silence, 12) follow your journey: do what you love to do, 13) create circles of presence that hold the future in the highest intention, 14) crystallize your vision and intent, 15) form groups of change, 16) prototype strategic microcosms for the emerging future, 17) integrate head, heart and hand, 18) iterate, create, and adapt with the world around you, 19) co-evolve innovation systems that allow people to see and act from the emerging future, 20) create innovation infrastructures that support mentoring and are supported by social technology, 21) evolve collective awareness through media usage, 22) engage intentional grounding, 23) engage relational grounding, and 24) engage authentic grounding (Scharmer, 2007). Such practices and step are clearly the identical steps that an educational leader needs to embrace. Scharmer puts the futuring element from his theory into these steps which speaks loudly to the future of our educational system as well.

Scharmer’s concepts may be a breath of fresh air to the entire leadership schema. Whether or not these ideas have the ability to be truly applied to leadership in an educational institution are yet to be tested. Exploration of such concepts gives hope for the future that we gain a better understanding of what exemplary leadership truly involves.

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