

# Chapter 5

## Searching differently

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It is time to look for significantly different tools to be able to analyse the situation differently. There is something insufficient about the classical linear and simple cause-effect kind of understanding. There is a tired bluntness in our analytical tools.

In my search for new methods and new insights I have joined a four-year course called Sustainable Co-Creation. It is strange looking back at the decision process for this. I was on the verge – literally – on signing up for a Copenhagen Business School three-year MBA (Master of Business Administration) course. There is an admission test for joining and the date for that was set. My CEO had suggested it and it sounded like a natural next step given the career path I was on. But as the date approached, it was as my whole body conspired against me. It was as if my full nervous system sounded all the alarms it could. What kept on reappearing in my mind was something to the effect of ‘this is the old world, this is a continuation of the system as it is, this is not mild, kind and caring’. The evening before the test, I called my CEO and told him I couldn’t go through with it – I simply didn’t believe those skills to be the right skills and the right mindset for a better future.

Perhaps he was puzzled by this decision, but if he was, he didn’t sound so. It took him less than seconds to reorient himself. ‘OK, if you think so, I trust you are right. So instead you and I have to figure out what kind of leadership training is right for you – you will have to design it yourself’. This was the best message I could imagine.

The ‘education’ hence mainly consisted of the experiments described in Chapter 2, the writing of this book and participation in the Sustainable

Co-Creation Course. The attraction of the course was especially the teacher Michael Stubberup. A few years earlier I had been given the book 'Heart Prayer' (Stubberup, 2004). The book had made a deep impression on me. It was about the Eastern Christian tradition of heart prayer. A branch of Christianity I didn't know about. The insights from the heart practice developed over more than one thousand years by monk practitioners called hesychasm. The insights were profound and deeply inspirational.

*'What is a charitable heart? It is a heart which is burning with love for the whole creation, for men, for the birds, for the beasts ... for all creatures. He who has such a heart cannot see or call to mind a creature without his eyes being filled with tears by reason of the immense compassion which seizes his heart; a heart which is softened and can no longer bear to see or learn from others of any suffering, even the smallest pain being inflicted upon a creature.'*

Isaac of Nineveh (Stubberup, 2004)

Professor Steen Hildebrandt is a Danish academic and author on business, organizational theory and management, a household name in management in Denmark. Together these two very different persons have been working for decades to obtain clarity as to what sustainable co-creation means and how it is brought about. Together they authored the book 'Sustainable Leadership: Leadership From the Heart' (Hildebrandt and Stubberup, 2016). At their course we practice methods for systemic change individually as well as in groups. The following description of methods is inspired by their work and our joint developmental work in the course.

In Danish the word 'leading' has the same meaning as searching – and I think it is true that when we search for the new, that is a kind of leadership. Here I will describe two types of searching: searching with organisations and searching within yourself.

## SEARCHING WITH ORGANISATIONS

Theory U is a framework and a set of tools that Otto Scharmer and his team at MIT have developed for the purpose of initiating system change, see for example Scharmer (2013).

His starting point is that as with faultlines along with tectonic plates are places where earthquakes take place, there are similarly fragile faultlines in our collective social body. Especially three faultlines are pressing at this stage of history: (1) our relationship with nature and our planet; (2) our relationship with one another; and (3) our relationship with ourselves.

Faultline one constitutes an ecological divide which for example can be observed in the increasing pressure on water supply and water pollution, it can be seen in the loss of topsoil, it can be seen in the area of climate change, it can be seen in the breakdown of eco habitats and the following irreversible loss of species. This has led to unprecedented environmental destruction and loss of nature. A key figure

is that the current global existence of human society uses 1.5 times the regeneration capacity of the earth.

Faultline two is a socioeconomic divide which can be seen in the gap between those who have and those who have not. It can be seen in the gap between the well-fed and the one in eight who go hungry to bed; it can be seen in a world where billions of people still live at levels of poverty where their most basic needs are not met, and it can be seen in inequality of ownership and income. This has led to unprecedented levels of inequity and fragmentation – resulting in the loss of felt society and solidarity. Less than 100 billionaires own as much as half of mankind combined, i.e. more than 3.8 billion people.

Faultline three is a kind of spiritual divide and can be seen in decreasing levels of happiness and increasing levels of suicide, depression and burn-out. It is a divide between self and Self and causes a loss of ‘meaning of life’. Every 40 second, someone commits suicide. More than 800,000 people commit suicide per year. This is more than the sum of people who are killed by war, murder and natural disasters combined.

According to Scharmer, the three divides are connected in that the inner void of faultline three causes increasing consumerism, which causes an increase in the ecological divide which again leads to increases in the social divide. There are internal feedback loops between these three divides that seem to increase the severity, and hence the fragility, of the whole collective social body of our global human society. It is us – all of us – who are creating the results, and every day the results are being reproduced worldwide as if by an army of zombies caught in an unbreakable collective story loop.

Scharmer captures the essence of this ‘zombie-state’ in the idea of ‘absencing’. Often we handle difficult situations with our head on auto-pilot. Scharmer calls this absencing, and I can recollect having done this more times than I can count – to avoid the inconvenience or difficulty of doing deeper work. The absencing process follows this process:

- (1) ‘Denial’, i.e. not seeing what is going on, eyes-wide-shut.
- (2) ‘Desensing’, i.e. reducing, not connecting with or lacking empathy with other.
- (3) ‘Absencing’, i.e. losing the connection to one’s higher self, one’s ideals and corner-stone values.
- (4) ‘Delusion’, i.e. being guided by illusions and lies that one tells oneself to keep on.
- (5) ‘Destruction’, i.e. damaging others and ourselves.

This leads to a kind of tyranny characterised by one truth ideology, an us-versus-them, rigid collectivism and a one-will fanaticism. Another way Scharmer expresses this effect is ‘a closed mind, a closed heart and a closed will’. When we handle difficult situations based on absencing, we bring ourselves into

a landscape where the danger of the faultlines increases, and so we create new ‘difficult situations’.

The central question is then: how do we stop creating results that nobody wants?

Scharmer suggests that we learn to discriminate between two types of learning. One is the classical type of learning, where we learn from the past, the other kind of learning requires us to train our ability to ‘learn from the emerging future’. To change our loops we must learn to learn from the emerging future founded on our ‘highest potential’. It is a kind of entrepreneurial approach to life, where the participants in the learning process connect to their own source and to their highest future potential.

The issue of water clearly belongs to the ecological divide. However, a key insight is that this divide cannot be repaired unless repairment happens in the social field and in the spiritual field as well. A central statement in Theory U is ‘the success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor’. This calls for working with our interior. To make a profound change, we have to work from our own self, our own journey of becoming our higher self. The change is profound and has infinite consequences.

So, as the important connection identified by Scharmer starts with the inner void, the faultline between self and capital-S Self, this is where we need to work hardest right now. This is the ‘blind spot’ where it all emerges – working with the source of what emerges from our human societies, from each of us. And even further back to the source in ourselves. Hence, all work on the collective, like searching with organisations, has to be grounded in the participants not absencing. Change that is good, true and beautiful cannot succeed if we act like absencing zombies.

Theory U is a process that works with what Scharmer calls presencing as a kind of opposite concept to absencing. Scharmer explains the word presencing like this:

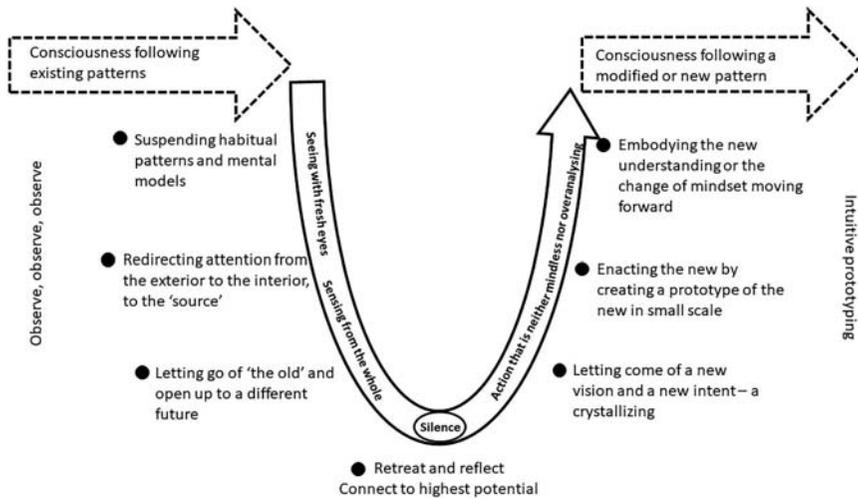
*‘To sense, tune in, and act from one’s highest future potential – the future that depends on us to bring it into being. Presencing blends the words “presence” and “sensing” and works through “seeing from our deepest source”.’*

Otto Scharmer (2013)

Entering the state of presencing is not as foreign as it may sound. Most people have experienced this spontaneously in their lives. It happens when we have a moment of surprise, profound insight – when we have an encounter with our deeper levels of awareness. The feeling of being in this ‘mode of operation’ is profoundly distinct when we experience it. We are invigorated, curious and excited.

The ‘new’ in Theory U is a comprehension of the process leading to the presencing state for groups, including an understanding of the pre-conditions necessary and the frame that needs to be established around the work for it to work. The miracle is that it is possible to consistently create conditions that allow groups to create collaboratively from these deeper levels of awareness.

Theory U is a framework for this journey and provides a number of tools for each stage of the journey. The process of Theory U is shown in [Figure 21](#)



**Figure 21** The process of Theory U according to Otto Charmer. (Source: Adapted by the author from [Scharmer, 2013](#))

(I have changed the descriptions to make it more appropriate to engineers, but for a deeper understanding it is a good idea to study Scharmer’s own wording ([Scharmer, 2013](#))).

In overview, the process of Theory U is divided into three terrains: the left-hand side, the bottom and the right-hand side. The headline of the left-hand side is ‘observe, observe, observe’. In the bottom, there is a retreatment period of reflection, a silent point of transformation. The right-hand side is the path of action characterised by rapid, intuitive prototyping and adapting the prototype until it fits with ‘the whole’.

When we go into the details of the process, it consists of five main actions or movements: Co-initiating (left-hand side), Co-sensing (left-hand side), Co-presencing (bottom), Co-creating (right-hand side) and Co-shaping (right-hand side).

The process is co-initiated from the normal state of our consciousness exiting our existing patterns of ‘learning from the past’. The co-initiating is about finding common intention, by listening to our own and stakeholders intention and listening to ‘what life calls you to work with’. A method for this is to create deep listening in the group, where we learn to understand each other’s perspective on the issue at hand. Each participant makes an effort to connect to his/her own intention and what life calls him/her to do. This is shared, and a shared intention is developed around the issue including an understanding of the group’s driving force to work on this issue. It also includes identifying critical questions and a list of possible learning journeys that the group could take to get different

perspectives on the system they are trying to change. When the group have identified and worded the issues as precisely as possible, they are ready to start the co-sensing part of the Theory U process.

This stage of the process is down the left-hand side of the U and is called co-sensing. Here everything has to do with observing. The process is in fact, called 'observe, observe, observe'. The 'observing' follows three steps. The first step is to suspend habitual patterns and mental models, to observe with an open mind from a new angle. Scharmer suggests 'looking at reality from the edges of the system'. Too often we see things from the echo chamber that we are in, our perception is under an invisible group-think with the people that surround us. So the point is to find new points of observation and look at the chosen issue anew without the baggage of what one already knows. The second stage is to redirect attention from the studied object to the interior, to see oneself in the system, to understand that you are part of the system, to get an 'ecosystem awareness', saying 'I am not me observing the system, I am included in the system, and through me or through us the system is now seeing itself'. The third step in this process is a subtle 'letting go', releasing the mental grip on the system, letting go, in order to allow something new to arrive, to create inner space for it. Letting go without knowing what will arrive.

Another way of explaining the three parts of this co-sensing process is that one has to let go of the inner voice of judgement, i.e. an open mind, one has to let go of the inner voice of cynicism, i.e. an open heart and one has to let go of fear, i.e. an open will. What is intended is that everybody in the group gets into contact with their inner source of knowing.

Based on the observations, the issue to be tackled may be redefined, refined and honed.

As the group arrives at the bottom of the U, the stage of co-presencing comes into focus. At this point, a profound shift of attention is carried out from head to heart. Practically, a silent retreat in nature may be the most conducive conditions for getting in contact with oneself. To resonate over the questions 'Who is my self' and 'What is my work'. This can be carried out both together or one-by-one. The session starts with the group sitting in a circle and sharing reflections, and is followed by a silent retreat, finally the group returns and shares a distilled capture of the essence of each person's insight. The group's sharing sessions are held in a respectful and concentrated atmosphere honouring that something important is about to happen. The sharing of reflections leads to starting points for prototyping in the processes of co-initiating and co-sensing.

If the above two journeys are associated with the head and the heart, the third right-hand journey is associated with the body. In that way, the process has connected the head, heart and body. In this co-creation stage, the group works with prototypes. The prototype need only be 80% ready before being presented to the relevant stakeholders.

The prototype should, however, follow the guidelines: aim for the prototype being relevant, revolutionary, rapid, rough, right, relationally effective and

replicable. During the process, a balance should be found to, on the one hand, avoid the dangers of acting too mindlessly fast and on the other hand to avoid acting too slow and potentially falling into ‘analysis-paralysis’. When 1–3 prototypes have reached the described level, they are to be presented to stakeholders for feedback. The prototypes are then adapted or changed according to the feedback, preferably with a number of feedback loops.

The purpose of the co-shaping phase is to scale the prototype, making it ‘live’ in the real world. This important work of reaching fruition for the work has to be done as in a continuation of the spirit that the group has worked until now. The group acts from a shared awareness and a continuous feedback loop between the whole and the parts and this is to be further instituted in the following implementation process. During this work there has to be a continued building of capacity in the group. And new group members have to be welcomed in a way that ensures that they can take a share in both the awareness and the vision.

When I look at the two processes of absencing and presencing, something dawns upon me. The initial feelings I began this book with, the feelings of desecration, banality and apathy, were not new to me. But for a long time I avoided the feelings and dodged them as best possible until I mustered in myself the required open mind, open heart and open will to face these feelings, to venture into an understanding of what they meant and tentatively find ways forward. Hence, this book project is a Theory U journey in itself. I recognise all the states described in this process, but found it to be a much more messy process with lots of ‘running back’s’ and ‘getting ahead of myself’s’. The process has created a sense of inner peace, courage to look forward and an optimistic readiness for the change ahead.

**Your reflections:** Can you recognise the difference between presencing and absencing? Can you remember situations in your life where you did one or the other? Do you remember why? Do you recognise it when others do the one or the other? How would you know the difference? What is the difference in sensed experience in the two cases? How can you enable or give space to presencing in your work with others?

## SEARCHING WITHIN YOURSELF

Sustainability sometimes becomes an elusive word, and in all the analysis we lose track of the bigger picture. Sometimes it is good to remember that we ourselves in our bodies have deep experience with sustainability and its opposites. In short:

*‘The explanation draws on the mechanisms of life itself and on the conditions of its regulation, a collection of phenomena that are generally designated by a single word: homeostasis.’*

Antonia Damasio (2018)

Homeostasis is the same concept that drew Lovelock to his insights about the earth as a Gaia-system. Similarly, the body consists of numerous interlocking homeostatic systems are. Homeostasis involves negative feedback loops that ensure that various states keep within sustainable life-enabling ranges. The typical example is how the body regulates its internal temperature to a constant of 37°C (98.6°F).

But homeostasis also works on levels that require conscious cooperation by the person.

*'Feelings are the mental expressions of homeostasis, while homeostasis, acting under cover of feeling, is the functional thread that links early life-forms to the extraordinary partnership of bodies and nervous systems. That partnership is responsible for the emergence of conscious, feeling minds that are, in turn, responsible for what is most distinctive about humanity: cultures and civilizations.'*

Antonio Damasio (2018)

An important part of my journey of understanding water stewardship has been about understanding myself. The work of Antonia Damasio makes it clear that these two things are connected and why. Most of the homeostatic feeling apparatus work without our paying attention to it. From a 'change point-of-view' this has the unfortunate consequence that we act primarily instinctively on the feeling inputs we receive from the homeostatic system. However, when we make the required effort to make these inputs the object of analysis, quite different solutions present themselves.

Stubberup and Hildebrandt suggest a method of Smallest Possible Change that I have found useful. The concept of the Smallest Possible Change builds on ideas and insights from the theory of life as a self-organising system presented by Varela and Maturana (1980). One purpose is to increase our own ability to understand sustainability by examining our own system, i.e. our own human being. The method teaches us important lessons of what systems sustainability means practically. While the theory behind it is complex, the practical method is simple and self-organising towards incremental complexity and effect. This means that the initial usage is simple, but as it is repeated over time it causes an ever-deepening understanding of our sustainability.

There may be different nuances to how to apply the method and one is free to adapt to one's ideas and preferences. The way I apply it is rooted in my need for a disciplined habit. By applying the method on a daily basis I ensure it becomes a habit that helps me ensure my continued learning process.

Each day consist of positive and negative events, i.e. good things happen (attraction), and bad things (repulsion) happen. We have nice emotions and difficult emotions, some people are nice to us, some are not.

The first step is to make a daily recording of the two most positive events and the two most negative events. I do this in the evening just before I go to sleep. My experience is that even if you haven't thought of it that way during the day our

‘human-being system’, or our nervous system, will answer the question relatively effortlessly, and the same is the case when you ask for the most negative events. This is a small and enjoyable thing to do and is continued until it constitutes a routine. It resembles the general advice of ‘gratitude journals’, but I prefer this method because it recognises both the positives and the negatives, so it does not deny the negative of our experience.

When the above first step works well and it has become part of a routine, the method is extended. The second step is to ‘relive’ the two-by-two positives and negatives by recalling the emotional feeling in your body of each event for a short while. The purpose of doing this is to get a sense of the full spectrum of emotions of the day. And by acknowledging and re-sensing these maximum positives and negatives, you enable yourself to take a step back and sense a kind of new neutrality from which you can move on.

Over time, this strengthens what is called the ‘witness-function’. The ‘witness-function’ is an ability in your consciousness to distance yourself slightly from what you are doing. You are able to witness your own mental processes. This allows for a small gap between the input you get and the response to give; a time gap that allows you to gauge your feelings and come up with an appropriate response to the situation. So instead of *being* angry, happy, sad etc. you have a slightly changed stance of rather *experiencing* anger, happiness or sadness. This is a subtle change in perspective, where you do not perceive yourself as the emotion, but feel yourself feeling the emotion. It is a change that, as it is trained, improves your ability to observe your own system, including your nervous system and cognitive processes.

My first experience with this was a small registration through the day of – ‘ah this will probably be one of my positives’ (or negatives). Other effects of the witness function are a sense of time being stretched. When the witness function is strong, a day feels much longer in a way where boredom is not a part of the experience. This stretching of time provides a change in the perceived opportunities for how to act, especially in difficult situations. There is simply more time to think, sense and come up with an appropriate reaction compared to ‘made-in-the-moment’ automatic reactions. But perhaps even more positively, when the sun is really shining in a nice way or the teamwork is flying, I notice it and feel the joy of it more deeply.

The third extending step is to train naming feelings. For each positive and negative event I try to describe the feeling – just in a few words. It was surprisingly difficult to do in the beginning, trying to come up with a sentence that in a few words captures the essence of the felt feeling. This is a wonderful way to develop a language you can ‘speak with yourself’ in. And it improves the emotional agility, your ability to explain to others what is going on in you as well as your capacity for ‘articulated’ empathy, i.e. the type of empathy where you can actually help others understand their feelings.

The fourth extension is to add an intention of a ‘Smallest Possible Change’ for tomorrow. The idea is to promise yourself to change a small thing tomorrow.

The most important reason for the change to be small is that it must not trigger any alarm signals in your nervous defence system. It should really be something that is easy and nice to do. For the first many experiments with this method, make the change be about self-care. So try in a ‘homeostasis-promoting’ way to listen to what your nervous system is longing for, to ensure that it thrives, feels safe and is nourished.

At the onset take slow steps to get some experience with the method. A special purpose is to gain trust in yourself, the best kind of self-confidence. A self-confidence that you can trust yourself, i.e. if you promise yourself to change or do something – do it. If you are in doubt of whether you can go through with an act, reduce it or simply don’t promise yourself to do it. When you have repeated this process of promising and delivering 10 or 20 times your ‘self-confidence’ is increased and you may add the load in your ‘smallest possible change for tomorrow’ promises, but carefully avoid triggering fear responses.

To me this has proven to be a very flexible and adaptive way of improving my sustainability – all the time adjusting to what is happening around me and in me.

If you would like to join similar courses, it may be a good idea to look at MIT U-lab for a start. They offer free online courses at [edx.org](http://edx.org).

Your reflections: Are you able to keep your word, when you promise yourself something? Do you have that kind of self-confidence? What if the promise was about self-care first?