

Theory U Summary



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1-Sentence-Summary: *Theory U* is an actionable and in-depth manual for leaders who want to drive organizational change creatively and efficiently that is aligned both with themselves and their teams.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



Otto Scharmer rarely concerns himself with small problems. When he talks about leadership, it's not in the context of "how to sell the next product" or "how to increase employees' productivity." He tries to tackle the topic from the perspective of whole systems rather than their parts.

When he writes books, they are usually about making a change on the global level. His approach is as broad and all-encompassing as one person's outlook can get.

In *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*, he shows leaders how to drive change in their organizations in the context of socioeconomic "revolutionary shifts" happening globally right now. He points to three such shifts.

The first takes place in the economic realm, as most of the world's nations are leaning towards similar economic policies based on privatization and capitalism. Next, the second change penetrates international relations, as institutions like the United Nations or the World Bank emerge and grow. Lastly, the third movement is cultural and spiritual, driving many people to redefine their life objectives from external to internal.

Scharmer argues that leaders who want to find creative solutions to the present day's challenges need to take into account all of these global tendencies.

Here are 3 lessons I've learned about creative leadership:

1. An effective leader learns from the future, rather than the past.
2. To access your full creative potential, tap into the "blind spot."
3. To materialize your ideas, adopt the agile strategies used in software development.

Theory U takes leadership to a whole new level with all of these lessons and more. If you want to learn what this "new level" is about, then let's follow Scharmer "down the U!"

Lesson 1: Learn from the future as it emerges.

The underlying idea of the whole U-Theory is that any person can progress either from the future or past. It focuses on the notion that each of us has two selves: past and the future.

To describe each of these personas, Scharmer tells his story of how one day, as a child, he came back from school to discover that his parents' house had burnt down. He suddenly realized that all the objects and spaces he was attached to were no more. His *old self* was "dead," so to speak.

At that moment Scharmer realized that he also had a *future self* or the personality that he could bring to life by his actions-the Otto Scharmer he ultimately wanted to become. Because his prior self died in the fire, he naturally embraced the possibility of learning from the future version of himself.

This is exactly what creative leaders ought to do. They should drop learning from history, which, in Scharmer's nomenclature, means "reproducing old behaviors to deal with new challenges." Instead, the actions of a truly innovative leader should focus on the possibility found in the future.

Lesson 2: Tap into the "blind spot" to access your full creative potential.

Now we get to the technical side of how to get through the "U process" as a leader. Theory U divides this into three major steps.

The first step is "going down the U," which focuses on gathering information in a non-judgmental and accepting way. It requires adopting an "attitude of a beginner," or a state of mind which allows you to be open to whatever others bring to the table. You need to hear them out without trying to impose your point of view.

This is not a passive process. It requires you to actively approach relevant people and ask them for their opinion. Scharmer emphasizes that it is not just about seeking “experts,” though. You also need to reach out to other individuals who may appear less visible but are also involved in the issue at hand.

An excellent example of how this works is agile software development. On these teams, the practice of reaching out to users for feedback on new products is well-established and extremely valued.

The second step of the U-process is tapping into your blind spot. This unseen area is the moment when a person intentionally enters the unknown. **A leader needs to let go of all the past and future knowledge and attune herself to what her gut tells her in the present.**

Scharmer argues that listening to the blind spot is even more important than gathering information while “going down the U.” When you really tap into it, the right answers present themselves effortlessly.

Finally, there is the third step of going back up the U. This involves bringing the solutions found in the blind spot from the realm of ideas to the physical world.

Lesson 3: Adopt the approach used in software development: prototype, test, iterate.

The analogies between the advice from *Theory U* and agile software development are striking. I believe this is because both software teams and leaders ultimately try to tackle issues bigger than themselves.

Initially, it is impossible to wrap one’s head around tasks like “changing the world” – and this is the caliber of the problems Scharmer gets at. That’s why he encourages leaders to start with prototyping and accepting that *the initial outcome will not be perfect*. Prototypes are not meant to be the finished product, but a way for a leader to learn by gathering feedback.

When you put your idea out there before it’s complete, you instantly get information about what works and what doesn’t. **This lets you make necessary adjustments to your strategies before you invest a lot of time or money in them.** By creating consecutive iterations and incorporating feedback, you improve incrementally until your project reaches the desired shape.

That’s exactly how agile software teams operate. They put the prototype to test as fast as they can. They gather user feedback and implement the necessary changes. Then they “lather, rinse, repeat” this strategy for as long as it takes before the final product emerges.

Thanks to this way of working, they aren't stopped by the fear of failure or give in to unnecessary perfectionism. And neither should a creative leader.

Theory U Review

Theory U is as inspiring as it is practical. I appreciate Scharmer's work because he is not merely an academic; he also builds his arguments on personal experience in managing people and organizations. I think this is the main reason why this book comes across as so authentic and valuable.

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Who would I recommend the Theory U summary to?

The 55-year-old executive who feels stuck in managing his department, the 38-year-old state administration employee who recognizes the flawed status quo but doesn't know how she can change it, and anyone placed in a context where they need to act as a leader.