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Leading the future

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ABSTRACT

This article examines conceptions of leadership appropriate for a global mind set. The financial value of triple bottom line investing is highlighted as an example of this trend. However, this approach is shown to be dependent upon a given society's stage of values development, thus an outcome of more advanced society's citizens having already met basic survival needs, supporting access to higher order values. Constructivist developmental theory is explored and the idea of a global mind set is linked to the emergence of world-centric value systems in individuals. A dialogical approach is introduced, along with Theory U, which is examined in more detail as a process or approach that can facilitate world-centric consciousness. This leads to exploring the perspective and impact of spirituality in relation to leadership appropriate for facilitating a global mind shift.

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1. Introduction

Leadership is often seen as the way to a better future. High expectations are placed on leaders to deliver us unto the promised land of a world that we can envision but do not yet live in. These expectations place explicit and implicit demands on leaders. Yet we seldom reflect on the implicit demands, or what capacities are necessary for leaders to live up to them. Beyond this, we seldom inquire how the deepest assumptions we hold may influence the motivation needed to do the demanding work of developing these capacities. So while we may view leadership as the way to a better future, we may not be clear on what it takes to actually do it.

So how do we “lead the future” towards a “Global Mindset Change?” In this article I will begin by exploring some signs and directions that appear to indicate that, at least in some ways, such a change is indeed underway. However, further reflection will reveal that simply dictating, reasoning or even modeling this change is not sufficient. There are conditions and capacities necessary to enable such change. I will explore some capacities I perceive as essential for this leadership and describe some theoretical approaches to understanding these capacities. One approach in particular, Scharmer's Theory U, will be highlighted as an example of how to lead *from* the future. This leads to examining the spiritual dimensions of leadership and how an integral consciousness can foster the change we desire.

A list of trends, predictions, forecasts and other attempts, both educated and wishful, create maps to help us move into the future we desire. For example, the call for papers for this issue of Futures was titled “Global Mindset Change.” To me this highlights the positive ideals motivating the work found in this special issue. There are examples in many different areas of how people are working to put such an orientation into effect. Senge et al.'s [1] recent book *The Necessary Revolution: How Individuals and Organizations Are Working Together to Create a Sustainable World* describes many ventures around the world in a way that shows how working to implement such a change of minds and actions is not simply good for the environment and the people involved, but it is also good for business. This reflects a trend that is rising quickly.

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Moves to the notion of a triple bottom line [2] that include profits, people and planet or environment are one indication of how this trend is unfolding. Investment firms such as Trillium Asset Management, founded by the late Joan Bavaria [3], helped to show that ethical and values based investments were not a matter of choosing either ethics and the environment or profits. In fact it has been shown that one can actually earn more money using a socially responsible investing (SRI) approach than investments made on a traditional basis. A Wall Street Journal Article from April 21, 2008 said that “a study last year . . . found a growing body of research showing that SRI investments perform as well as or better than non-SRI investments over time.” [4]

For example, on a smaller scale, the clothing company Nau [5] is seen to have a legally enforceable triple bottom line [6]. Their articles of incorporation and bylaws to make their commitments to a sustainable triple bottom line legally enforceable. While this has not been adopted widely, nor truly put to the test, it indicates that the cutting edge of how leaders think about doing business is experimenting with putting a new mindset into practice.

2. Preconditions

From these brief examples of how some leaders are working towards a better future I will turn to some of the challenges and what can be perceived as necessary preconditions for this mindset change. Under the heading of arguments against triple bottom line investing, this entry in the Wikipedia is found:

It is observed that concern for social and environmental matters is rare in poor societies (a hungry person would rather eat the whale than photograph it). As a society becomes richer its citizens develop an increasing desire for a clean environment and protected wildlife, and both the willingness and financial ability to contribute to this and to a compassionate society. Indeed support for the concept of the ‘Triple Bottom Line’ itself is said to be an example of the choices available to the citizens of a society made wealthy by businesses attending to business. [7]

This line of thought reflects Maslow’s [8] theory of human motivation and his well known hierarchy of needs. Hagerty studied whether Maslow’s theory could predict quality of life indicators over time. He examined data from 88 countries over a 35-year period, and found that “the sequence of actual need fulfillment is significantly correlated with Maslow’s hierarchical predictions.” [9, p. 268] Thus there is merit to concerns that notions like socially responsible investing are associated with a more advanced societal stage of development and that imposing later stage based mindsets, values and rules on societies still struggling with the fulfillment of earlier stage needs may actually be counterproductive. For instance Sirolli [10] describes how well intentioned but poorly thought out aid and development programs created more problems than they solved.

This kind of developmental pattern has been found in a variety of other lines of research. For instance Graves [11] identified eight distinct stages of value structures. Progression through these stages was seen to be driven by adaptations to life conditions. Later or higher stages were not viewed as “better” than earlier stages, but as being better able to handle increasing complexity of life conditions. The field of adult developmental psychology similarly identifies a number of post-formal stages of cognitive development. In the late sixties the works of Loevinger [12], Perry [13] and Kohlberg [14], began to question Piaget’s [15] assumption of the formal operational level being the highest stage of development. The idea that cognitive development could continue in adulthood into areas beyond formal operations led to theories about post-formal stages. Other theories in this field include Basseches [16–18] dialectical thinking; Commons [19] hierarchical complexity; Cook-Greuter [20] post-autonomous ego development; Fischer [21] hierarchies of skills and Torbert [22] action inquiry.

Central to developmental theory is the notion of subject-object relations. Constructive developmental theorist Kegan notes that:

Subject-object relations emerge out of a life-long process of development; a succession of qualitative differentiations of the self from the world, with a qualitatively more extensive object with which to be in relation created each time; a natural history of qualitatively better guarantees to the world of its distinctiveness; successive triumphs of “relationship to” rather than “embeddedness in.” [23, p. 77]

Wilber [24] identifies a progression from an ego-centric, through ethno-centric to world-centric worldview. Each of these stages reveals a more extensive object that we can encompass as “self”. Thus it is the later stage of a world-centric value structure and worldview that is synonymous with a “global mindset.” From a developmental perspective, this means that there is an implicit demand on leaders to be world-centric in their outlook and to not only be aware of such considerations, but also be able to lead others to take action enabling an integration of such views with individual action. From the above I propose that in order to lead any kind of global mindset change, one must have access to not only the values of a world-centric view but also a similar level of ego development and complexity of skill or task ability, as well as capacity in areas such as dialectical thinking and action inquiry. This is a tall order, and beyond the scope of this paper to address thoroughly. To simplify things let us focus on the need to be world-centric.

What does it mean to be world-centric? In the call for papers for this special issue there was a brief description comparing characteristics of a “consumptive–materialistic–atomistic orientation” to an “ecological–spiritual–integral orientation.” These lists portray a clear distinction between a way of doing things that has characterized much of our modern civilization and a view that appears as one that any sane person would prefer. Readers of this journal will likely resonate with this second list, giving an impression that people generally, given a choice, want the right things. Such an orientation certainly appears to

be world-centric. But it is also clearly not the case that by simply exposing leaders to “the facts” about the world that are alluded to in these orientations that they will see the light, be converted and go forth and lead the crusade to the promised land.

A developmental perspective enables us to see that while a leader may be inspired by higher order or world-centric values, this does not mean that they internally make meaning at this level. Thus a leader can “self-author” or internally choose world-centric values, or they can be “held by” such values, with them being externally generated rules they follow. In the latter they relate to them from an earlier, more traditional level of consciousness. In this case, being inspired by such values may allow a leader to be motivated to *do different things*, but it may not enable them to *do things differently*. We can begin to see why others, when presented with the best of arguments, facts, etc., continue to end up producing business as usual. Most disappointingly, even when we appear to have won a convert, and they also begin to preach the gospel, the ability to follow through and act in ways that move the cause forward in a sustainable manner are often sadly lacking. Thus how do we move world-centric beyond a nice slogan or ideal and into a living reality? Our first inclination may be to create a map or model of the desired future so that we know where we want to go. Of course this is only a first step. But is it the right first step?

3. Theory U

What if instead of creating models responding to the ongoing problems of the world, we looked at illuminating the blind spot lying within such models, and generated a more comprehensive framework for seeking to understand the underlying processes behind change itself? [25, p. 240]

Physicist and philosopher David Bohm [26,27] inquired into how the very system of thought that creates such models can be a source of incoherence. Our blindness to how this incoherence filters, biases and limits the models we create can be seen as a more fundamental problem than the actual models we choose to work from. From this I also identify dialogue as a necessary capacity for world-centric leadership.

Bohm sees dialogue as a method for countering the tendency of thought to reify or reduce reality to its images, and for allowing the flow of insight. Bohm tried to counter this inertia of thought by using dialogue to slow down and observe the process of thought constructing perceptions. [28, p. 63]

Further work along these lines can be seen in Scharmer’s [29] Theory U. While the inertia of thought dampens awareness, Scharmer points out “three gestures of becoming aware. They are: suspension, redirection, letting-go.” [29, p. 35] This describes a movement countering the inertia of the system of thought. He describes levels of subtlety at which change takes place as going from re-acting to re-structuring to re-designing to re-framing to re-generating. This last one he calls presencing, or “seeing from our deepest source” [29, p. 29]. It is this seeing from our deepest source that stands out for me as essential to leading the future. For this reason I will now describe Scharmer’s model in more depth (Fig. 1).

To be able to see the future that wants to emerge from our deepest source requires us to become aware. Scharmer identifies steps in the process of generating this awareness, as well as blocks along the way. These are presented as shifts in

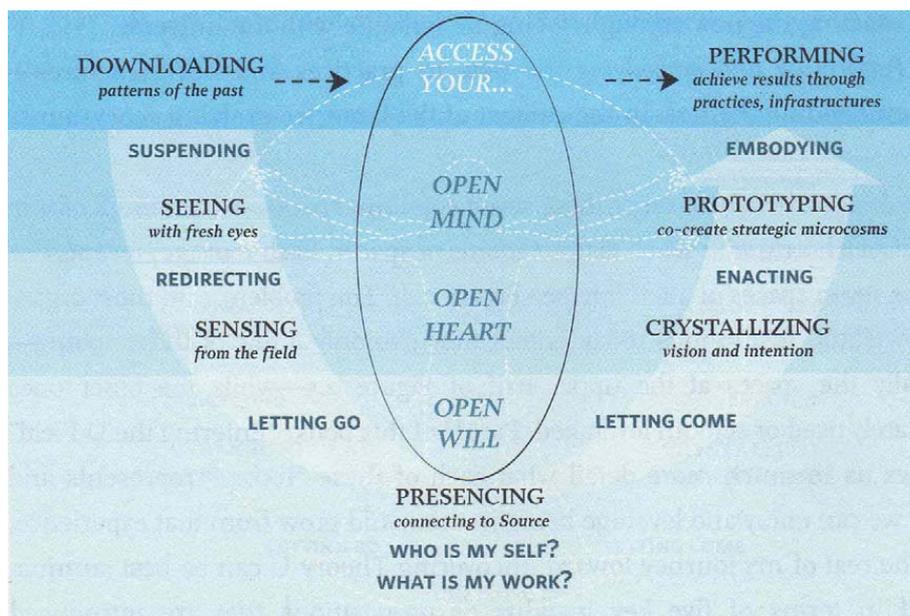


Fig. 1. Stages, processes and orientations of Scharmer's Theory U.

the field of our attention, each having a threshold. The movement across these thresholds involves a kind of dying, a letting go of the old identity and allowing a new pattern of organization of meaning to emerge. Scharmer proposes to take us on a deep journey into the “way we pay attention, the *field structure of our attention*” [29, p. 117].

This journey moves through stages from downloading to seeing, sensing and presencing. It is marked by three gate keeping processes that go on in our minds. These are described as the three enemies of the journey down the U; the voice of judgment, the voice of cynicism, and the voice of fear. Each of these can abort the process of deepening the field structure of attention. In addition to these three voices, Scharmer points to four failures of attention that illustrate how the move beyond simply downloading past patterns of thought and action can be blocked. By:

1. not recognizing what you see (decoupling perception and thought),
2. not saying what you think (decoupling thinking and talking),
3. not doing what you say (decoupling talking and “walking”),
4. not seeing what you do (decoupling perception and action),

the field structure of our attention is locked into downloading past patterns. These kinds of patterns can easily contribute to an internal voice of judgment engaging in a vicious cycle that becomes self-maintaining.

This cycle can be overcome by reversing the decoupling, *suspending* this activity and starting to engage the four aspects in a positive manner. This leads to the first shift, moving from downloading to seeing. In this process the field structure of our attention moves from being encased in the center of things to seeing from the periphery or boundary. Here we can see the data in front of us instead of only perceiving the downloaded images of the past. An attitude of wonder is highlighted as essential to keeping the capacity for seeing open.

The shift to sensing involves overcoming the voice of cynicism by *redirecting* our attention and a process of:

1. Charging the container.
2. Deep diving.
3. Redirecting attention.
4. Opening the heart.

Scharmer describes the field structure of attention in sensing as allowing perception to move from inside the heads of individuals to coming from not just the periphery of, but also outside of organizational boundaries. In this state of sensing from the field we can see much more than before, perceiving situations from a whole systems view that transcends and yet includes our individual point of view. With this expanded awareness, we see ourselves as part of the system and Scharmer characterizes this as having an open heart.

To shift the field of attention to the bottom of the U requires overcoming the voice of fear and a *letting go*. ‘Presencing’ is described as a combination of sensing and presence. It is

a moment when we approach our self *from the emerging future*. . . The key difference is that sensing shifts the place of perception to the current whole while presencing shifts the place of perception to the *source* of an emerging future—to a future possibility that is seeking to emerge. [29, p. 163]

It is this kind of capacity that can enable leading the future. By switching from looking *towards* an imagined or desired future to leading *from* the source of an emerging future, there is a radically different opportunity present. This is illustrated as Scharmer tells how this stage of the U journey is characterized by two core questions at the heart of creativity. He discusses his interview with Michael Ray [30] as having best articulated these questions as; who is my Self and what is my Work? The capital S self is one’s highest/authentic self, and the capital W work is not our career but our purpose for being here on earth. Thus leading through presencing brings a very different quality to our work and opens up new possibilities for enabling radical change.

Scharmer lists principles of presencing as:

- letting go and surrendering,
- inversion or going through the eye of the needle,
- the coming into being of a higher (authentic) presence and self, and
- the power of place: creating a holding space of deep listening.

Once this place of presencing is attained, there is a need to bring what we receive back into the world. Thus the steps of crystallizing, prototyping and performing denote the journey back up the U. As we begin moving up the U, we learn the steps seen as critical to moving into the world from this deeper place of presencing. It is essentially the work of keeping the connection to higher Self that is made at the bottom of the U.

Once we have gotten early intuitions about what wants to emerge from the future, we require some clarification and grounding in forms that we can act on. Crystallizing, or *letting come*, “facilitates the surfacing of a living imagination of the future whole” [29, p. 195]. This is where vision and intention can help us bring the insights from our deepest Selves into manifestation. Scharmer then describes the principle of operating from “grand will” and quotes Martin Buber to

illustrate the surrender that is required to let go of the ego or small self's habitual action of inserting itself and its images into our will.

Using the concept of prototyping from the design industry, in the next step up the U, Scharmer shows how we move to *enacting* and help to maintain this consciousness of the higher Self by utilizing the wisdom of our hands/bodies to act in ways that our heads can only catch onto later. He talks about the tension between and care to navigate between “two major dangers and pitfalls: mindless action and action-less minds” [29, p. 205]. To support this stage Scharmer describes three things; the need for some kind of daily practice, an attitude of keeping open to what the universe brings us and creating strategic microcosms, or landing strips for emerging future possibilities.

Once these landing strips for future possibilities are in place, the final move of *embodying* brings us to the final phase, performing. For performing, attention moves to the larger kinds of institutional ecologies that our work is embedded in. The field unfolds in a more integrated way with the center flowing out to the periphery as an integrated whole rather than a crossing of boundaries. The principles involved in this include systemic integration, innovative ecosystems, and field shift of the evolving ecosystem.

4. Conclusion

Central to Scharmer's entire approach is a core proposition, that the “success of the intervention depends on the *interior condition* of the intervener” [29, p. 7]. This brings a focus to the main question being explored here—how to lead the future. As leaders trying to bring about a desired future that has an “ecological–spiritual–integral orientation,” it is less about what they do than how they do it, and even more about who they are. Thus far I have identified an implicit demand on leaders to be world-centric, and dialogue as a capacity crucial for this kind of leadership. The question then becomes what might be a leverage point for movement in the direction of developing as a person with interior conditions of being that enable the kind of leadership called for? The answer for me emerges from what I consider as a spiritual view. From a spiritual view we find ourselves able to detach from our identifications with mind, emotions and body, and have an awareness of self as soul, or our spiritual nature. Thus rather than having a spiritual aspect to our makeup, we *are* spiritual beings, or soul, and *have* a human body, mind and emotions [31]. This view can enable us to have a firm foundation for addressing our interior condition that is not limited by the sense of identification found in a body/mind/ego.

The desire to go beyond our limited self-image is found in many places. For instance Carey [32] identifies a fundamental option for self-transcendence to be at the heart of transformational leadership. Bohm takes this further by saying that “the point is to have a notion of *creative* being, rather than of an *identified* being” [27, p. 169]. Bohm viewed the mind, emotions and body as aspects of a comprehensive system of thought that tends towards reacting defensively to challenges to the images it creates. The core image is the self-image and that having an identified sense of being was in itself possibly the core source of incoherence in the system of thought. “The identity has a certain limited significance. It's not that we are going to dispose of it, but it has no fundamental deep eternal significance.” [27, p. 170]. The attachment to identification keeps us focused on continuity of form rather than of essence. Bohm also notes that “I don't know what I am. What I am is unknown, but constantly revealing itself.” [27, p. 167] One way to interpret this is to see “not knowing” as a mental limit, and that soul, as a unit of awareness, is constantly revealing itself to human consciousness through its expression in human form. This comes from the view “that we are Spiritual Beings having human experiences” [33].

Applying this to leadership for a global mindset change, it is detachment from our illusions of identity, a letting go of habitual or programmed beliefs about our existence being primarily tied to the human, skin encapsulated ego form that enables a self-transcendent movement that counters the system of thought, self-embeddedness, etc. It is an unlearning of sorts, a letting go along the lines that Socrates described so well [34]. The leverage and value of spiritual practice as a means of enabling leadership capable of leading the future is also found in research on leadership that brings in insights from developmental psychology. Joiner and Josephs note that a large proportion of leaders with higher stages of what they define as *leadership agility* (based on stages of cognitive and other types of development) also have some kind of spiritual or meditative practice [35, pp. 221–222].

So how do we “lead the future” towards a “Global Mindset Change?” From the perspectives I have reviewed, it seems clear that higher consciousness is at the core of leadership capacities necessary for bringing about this desired future. This higher or integral consciousness has various aspects to it including; higher stages of cognitive development, a world-centric worldview, a dialogical approach and a capacity to contact and maintain connection with the core of who we are as spiritual beings. The pursuit of this inner dimension of our existence, through a wide variety of means and forms, can be viewed as the leverage point for developing our ability to lead the future.

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