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Interview with Peter M. Senge and Otto Scharmer

by George Hall

In *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, a companion book to the best selling classic *The Fifth Discipline* and its sequels, organizational learning experts Peter M. Senge, Otto Scharmer, and their coauthors Joseph Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers provide an intimate look at the development of a new theory about change and learning. In wide-ranging conversations held over a year and a half, the authors explore their experiences and those of 150 scientists and social and business entrepreneurs in an effort to explain how profound collective change occurs. How does something truly new come into the world? How do we see with fresh eyes? How do we connect or understand the reality we are facing in ways that we haven't in the past? Their journey of discovery articulates an inspiring way to see the world and of understanding our part in creating it--as it is and as it might be.

In this interview, Senge and Scharmer share their views on:

- Organizational Learning
- Obsolete Mental Models
- The Theory of the U
- Wisdom
- Innovation & Emerging Futures

Peter Senge *is a senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management and the founding chair of SoL, The Society for Organizational Learning, a global network of learning communities addressing profound institutional change. A renowned pioneer in and writer about management innovation, Senge is the author of the widely acclaimed* The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, named by* Harvard Business Review *as one of the seminal management books of the past 75 years.*

George Hall (GH): In your book you mention, "Our normal way of thinking cheats us... common industrial age models are inappropriate to guide our thinking." How so? Why are we cheating ourselves? Why is this normal?

Peter Senge: Let's take the last part first. Why is using an industrial age model normal? It is "normal" in the sense that it is habitual. Normal can mean many different things, but in this case it means habitual and habitual in the sense that virtually all of us grew up in a culture that was very much dominated by machines. The more modern word for this would be technology. Everything that's new and exciting about our world seems to be new technology. What is new technology except new machines? We are conditioned to think in very machine-like ways. Our schools, for example, are organized like big machines; literally are set up like assembly lines with grade one, grade two, grade three, and so on. Throughout our culture and at all levels, very subtly, this machine-like thinking is reinforced.

In our everyday language, you find it again and again, usually in ways that nobody even notices, which, again, points out how embedded it is in our culture. We think nothing of talking about "leaders who drive change." We don't stop to think about the use of a very mechanical metaphor. You drive a car, but you don't usually try to drive your spouse. That is just one of countless examples that, if we stop to examine our language, we can quickly discern just how deeply embedded these mechanical ways of thinking are. That is why it is normal. It is habitual; it is embedded in our culture. It is also costly. It is damaging to the extent that what we are referring to is not actually a machine. It really alters, and I would say destroys, our relationship with another when you refer to a person as a machine. You would not like it if you were talking to someone and they kept saying, "Well, you don't have a choice, John; it's just your programming." You would consider that insulting. When we operate in that way and apply mechanical metaphors to describe a living system, it can be pretty insulting.

GH: In your book you state, "Deeper levels of learning create increasing awareness of the large whole, both as it is and as it is evolving…you develop the capacity to sense an emerging reality, and to act in harmony with it." How do you gain a sense of that emerging reality? Can you illustrate with an example?

Otto Scharmer: During the research for our book, we discovered that many entrepreneurs and founders of successful companies have developed a special capacity to sense an emerging reality. When they tapped into the emerging reality and sensed their next opportunity, they tapped into a different sort of knowing within themselves. They felt this opportunity that they then tried to realize. I knew that this type of innovation, which the economist Brian Arthur writes about, could be captured in a model. We developed such a model--the Theory of the U. This model describes this capacity to innovate as one U-shaped process with three highly nuanced stages. First, you open up to and immerse yourself into your context. In Arthur's words, you "observe, observe, and observe." Second, you retreat out of this total immersion. You retreat and reflect deeply and allow an inner knowing to emerge of its own accord.

While engaging in a state of deep reflection, a spark or an idea will begin to emerge from that process. Then, in the third phase, you move that spark into reality by practical experimentation and prototyping, which involves taking action and learning by doing quickly.

GH: Do you imagine that the Theory of the U is for general consumption or for upper levels of management? Is it useful for the general public to consider or more for the cutting-edge leaders--the Steve Jobs of the world?

Peter Senge: In an interview we conducted with Ken Wilber, an eminent contemporary philosopher and probably one of the most important thinkers in the world in terms of integrating Eastern and Western ideas, he discussed how the U-Theory is universal. The U-Theory applies to everybody not only collectively and in the kind of business settings that Otto and I emphasize, but also individually. Wilber suggests that the U-Theory captures a fundamental process that describes how human beings open themselves to bring something new into the world at all levels (individual, collective,

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Interviewer George Hall, a principal of the firm Bracken, Najor, Hall LLC, consults on workplace learning/performance issues. George teaches in the College of Business Administration at the University of Central Florida and the University of Phoenix. He can he reached at georgechall@comcast.net.

societal). As such, the U-Theory is just as applicable to me as an individual, wrestling with the challenges of my life, as it is to a big corporation.

Wilber's comments are especially interesting to me because I think it might be one of those examples where we are blind to what is right in front of us because we have been close to it for so long. But for all of us, there are timeless questions that illuminate our creative capacities. How do we see something that we haven't seen before? How do we connect or understand the reality we are facing in ways that we haven't in the past? Is everything we do, somehow or other, just a replay or expression of past habits of thought and action? When do we escape our habits?

Wilber's take was that in talking about the Theory of the U, we are talking about the fundamentals whereby human beings occasionally escape the tyranny of their habits, see their world freshly, and participate in creating something new rather than reinforcing what has been.

GH: In your book, you describe a different sort of learning that manifests itself as an emerging future that depends on us. You quote Brian Arthur, "You observe and observe. Essentially there is no decision making; you just do what becomes obvious. Much of it depends on where you are coming from and who you are as a person. All you can do is position yourself according to your unfolding vision of what is coming." Can you elaborate on Arthur's comments about how the ability to engage an emerging future depends on "…where you are coming from and who you are…"?

Peter Senge: I think one way to appreciate his comment is to make a distinction. We are inclined to think that our effectiveness in leading change depends on how clever our strategies are, how knowledgeable we are, how much experience we have, and our positional power. That may be true to some degree, particularly in doing things that we have done many times before or in facing situations or circumstances where we already have a fair amount of history. But in facing something that is really new or when something really new is demanded of us, then what do we have to fall back on? What history or prior skill or past knowledge is my basis for action? In that sense, then, Brian Arthur's "where you are coming from" phase contrasts the idea that it is all about my past (my education, my prior job experience, and all my accumulated experience) with how open I am. How willing am I to *not* know? How willing am I to approach the situation like a child, and just look and see it for what it is rather than what I expect it to be?

In the original interview that Otto and Joseph Jaworski conducted with Brian Arthur, we were trying to understand how highly successful innovators could look at the same situation that everybody looked at and see something completely different. How is it that they could see a completely novel opportunity? The answer we found was that somehow they were seeing the reality more freshly, not more habitually, than everyone else. The phrase, "where you are coming from," refers to an almost childlike, unassuming stance taken by such innovators. In our book, we use the term "suspension" to capture this fresh outlook. Suspension implies the ability to take everything I know, everything I've experienced, everything I would normally be predisposed to use to interpret and control a situation and set it

aside. Just set it aside, and try to look and act freshly.