

The Blind Spot of Leadership
Presencing as a Social Technology of Freedom

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Claus Otto Scharmer

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Introduction: The Blind Spot

There is a blind spot in leadership theory, in the social sciences as well as in our everyday social experience. This blind spot concerns the inner place from which an action—what we do—originates. In the process of conducting our daily business and social lives, we are usually well aware of *what* we do and what others do; we also have some understanding of the process: *how* we do things, the processes we and others use when we act. And yet there is a blind spot. If we were to ask the question, “Where does our action come from?” most of us would be unable to provide an answer. The blind spot concerns the (inner) *source* from which we operate when we do what we do—the quality of attention that we use to relate to and bring forth the world.

I first began thinking about this blind spot when talking with the former CEO of Hanover Insurance, Bill O’Brien. He told me that his greatest insight after years of conducting organizational learning projects and facilitating corporate change was that “the success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor.” That sentence struck a chord. What counts, it dawned on me, is not only *what* leaders do and *how* they do it, but that “interior condition,” the *inner place* from which they operate.

I also realized that organizations, institutions, and societies as a whole may have this blind spot—not only individuals. Maybe, it occurred to me, what really needs to be done in response to the current world crises — political, social, and spiritual — has to do with changing that interior condition: collectively shifting the inner place from which a person, an organization, or a system operates.

This study is based on my post-doctoral research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1994 through 2003. It integrates 130 interviews with leading thinkers and practitioners in strategy, knowledge, innovation, and leadership around the world, as well as the results of various action learning and research projects with leaders of companies and civic grass-roots movements in the United States, Europe, and Japan.¹

In participating in these projects I realized that there is a piece missing from current social learning theory. Virtually all established learning theories and practices are based on the Kolb type of experiential learning: learning based on reflecting the experiences of the past.² However, in working with leadership teams across sectors and industries I realized that leaders cannot meet the challenges they face by operating only with a past-driven learning cycle. I sensed that they needed to access a different source of learning. I wondered whether

there could be a deeper learning cycle based on one's sensing of an emerging future, rather than on one's past experiences.³

Such a theory did not yet exist. Also, a number of people to whom I proposed this idea considered the question wrongheaded. The only way to learn, they argued, is from the experiences of the past. Learning from the future is neither possible nor a useful avenue to pursue, they said. Despite those warnings and admonitions, I forged ahead in the belief that my theory had validity. This book is the result. The existence of this deeper source and cycle of learning, its uncovering and articulation, is the main thread of this study. I argue that in order to learn from the future as it emerges, individuals, groups, and institutions have to shift the inner place from which they operate. That is, in order to enhance the capacity for creating profound innovations, leaders have to become aware of and change the inner place from which they operate as individuals and as collective entities, the source from which their action originates. In this book I explore and map the topography of this rarely researched territory—the blind spot of learning and leadership.

An Archeology of Social Fields

I refer to this subtle territory of social reality creation as a 'field' because a field is, as every farmer knows, a living system—just as the earth is a living organism. I grew up on a farm in northern Germany. One of the first things my father, one of the pioneers of biodynamic farming in Germany, taught me, was that the living quality of the soil is the most important thing in agriculture. Each field, he explained to me, has two aspects: the visible, which is what we see above the surface; and the invisible, which is what is below the surface. The quality of the yield—the visible result—is a function of the quality of the soil, of those elements of the field that are invisible to the eye.

My thinking about social fields starts exactly with that point: that fields are the *grounding condition*, the living soil from which grows that which *later on* becomes visible to the eye. And just as every good farmer focuses all his attention on sustaining and enhancing the quality of the soil, every good organizational leader focuses all her attention on sustaining and enhancing the quality of the social field that she is responsible for.

Each Sunday my parents took me and my brothers and our sister on a *Feldgang*—a field walk—across all the fields of our farm. Once in a while my father would stop and pick up a piece of soil or maybe dig a little below the surface so that we could see the different types and structures of soil. The living quality of the soil, he explained, was contingent upon a whole host of living

entities—millions of living organisms living in every cubic centimeter of soil—whose work is necessary for the earth to breathe and to evolve as a living system.

Very much in the same spirit, this study is a about a field walk across the social fields of our contemporary society. And just as we did during the *Feldgang*, once in a while we will stop and pick up a little piece of data that we want to pay closer attention to in order to better understand the subtle textures, structures, and principles that are involved in the evolutionary dynamics of social fields.

The issue in working with social fields is that we haven't yet learned how to see below the surface, how to decipher the subtle structures of the territory underneath. As every practitioner and experienced consultant knows, it is this invisible territory that is the most important when it comes to creating the conditions for high performance in teams, organizations, and larger institutional ecologies. As McKinsey's Jonathan Day once noted about his experience in helping global corporations through the process of fundamental change: "What's most important is invisible to the eye."⁴

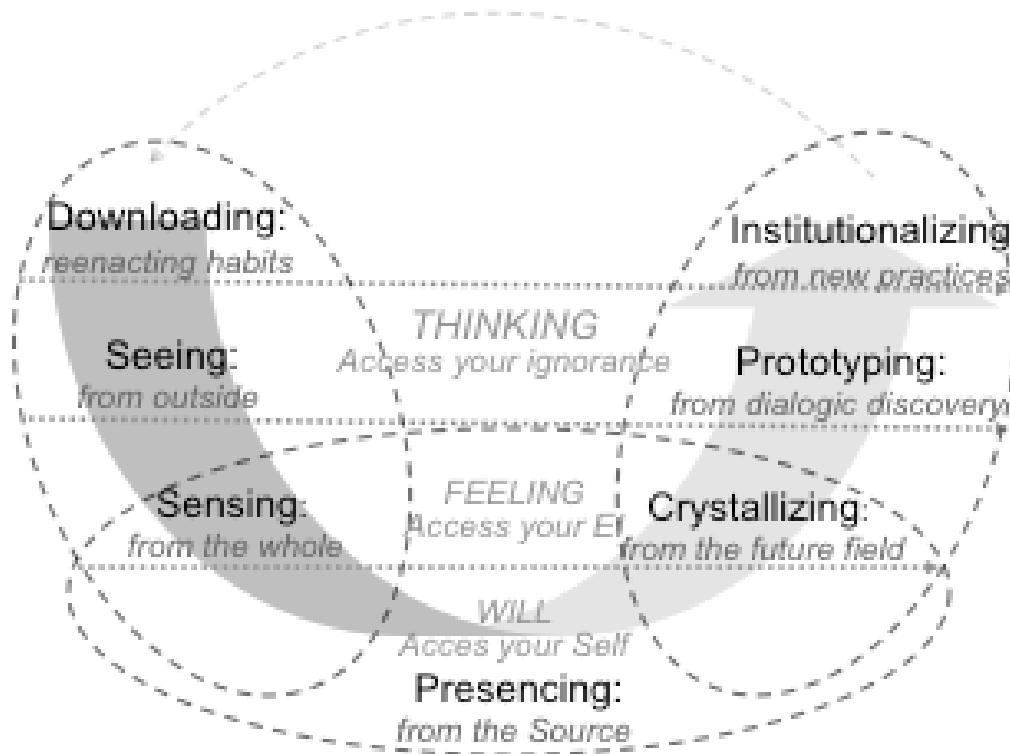
The purpose of the field walk is to learn to see what so far has largely remained invisible: the full process of *coming-into-being* of social action, the creation of a social reality. Just as a plant starts growing long before we see the sprout above the soil surface, the coming-into-being of social reality starts before people behave and interact. This invisible territory beneath the surface is what I explore and describe throughout this book.

Seven Archetypal Field Structures of Attention

The *structure of attention* of the actor, group, or organization is the blind spot (in the social field) that corresponds to the invisible field beneath the surface.⁵ The term 'field structure of attention' allows me to get my arms around a surface layer of social fields that is still somewhat accessible to scientific observation. Just as my father taught me that the most vital layer of the soil is right at the surface, where the ground is permeated by light and air, in social fields the corresponding area is where the light of consciousness meets and is permeated by that which normally is in the background of our awareness—the *structure* based upon which we pay attention to the world. Each field structure of attention embodies a particular type of relationship between the self and the world. Each one makes visible what otherwise is not: the grounding in an archetypal gesture out of which social systems are enacted moment by moment.

I have identified seven archetypal field structures of attention—seven gestures linking self and world—that map the territory of the blind spot (see figure 1). I call them:

1. Downloading: projecting habits of thought (seeing 0)
2. Seeing: precise observation from outside (seeing 1)
3. Sensing: perception from within the field/whole (seeing 2)
4. Presencing: perception from the source/highest future possibility (seeing 3)
5. Crystallizing vision and intent (seeing/acting from the future field)
6. Prototyping living examples and microcosms (in dialogue with emerging environments)
7. Embodying the new in practices, routines, and infrastructures.



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Figure 1: The U-Process of Presencing: Seven Field Structures of Attention

These seven field structures of attention describe seven different gestures of relating to and bringing forth the world. The texture of many of these field structures of attention will be quite familiar to the reader. The one probably least familiar is *presencing*, a term that blends the two words “sensing” and “presence.” It means to sense and bring into the present one’s highest future

potential. Every human being and social system has the ability to activate and access this deeper capacity. And yet, although most people have had brief experiences with this in their lives, they are quick to add that this level of operating is not only very difficult to sustain but also almost impossible to perform on a collective, or institutional, level. In most organizations, people spend most of their time downloading, rather than sensing, presencing, or creating their best future possibility.

And yet, most leaders and managers say that they do not intend to repeat the patterns of the past. But they lack a collective leadership technology that would allow them to shift from reacting to the past to presencing the future that wants to emerge.

The U-Process: Playing the Macro Violin

The core of this thesis is a new, collectively enacted social art and technology—a social technology of freedom. The basic mechanism of this technology revolves around illuminating the blind spot. Viewed from this angle, leadership is the capacity *to shift the inner place from which a system operates*. Accordingly, the most important tool is the leader's self, his or her capacity to perform that shift.

The seven field structures of attention—the gestures that form the relationship between the self and the world—apply to the evolution of systems at all levels (individuals, groups, institutions, ecosystems, and so forth). They provide a method for developing a common capacity to act from full presence in the “now.” They also introduce a language to articulate an *evolutionary grammar* of bringing forth new worlds.⁶

Presencing is both an individual and a collective phenomenon. For a social system to be transformed, it must cross a subtle threshold, a threshold that I refer to as the eye of the needle.⁷ What is the needle's eye? It is the Self--people's highest future possibility, both individually and collectively. In the moment we approach that deep threshold, as economist Brian Arthur once put it, “everything that is not essential has to go away.” Having crossed this threshold, we experience a subtle and yet fundamental shift of the social field. In German, I would call this shift *Umstülpung*, in English *inversion*; that is, instead of operating with our selves at the center, we change our focus to operate from a field that begins to emerge from the surrounding periphery.

The U-process of presencing involves three different movements of awareness, or stages:⁸

- co-sensing: opening up to the world outside: becoming one with the world,
- co-inspiring: opening up to a world within: becoming one with one's deepest source of future possibility, and
- co-creating: bringing the emerging future into being.

This threefold movement of the U-process to form a new collective system of operating can be compared with constructing and playing a musical instrument. Three conditions must be met in order for an instrument to produce its best music. First, it must have a well-built structure or body of resonance. Without a well-built body of resonance, no music can be produced. No musician would give a concert with a violin that had a half-completed or broken body of resonance. However, in organizations, that's exactly what we do all the time. Time and again teams try to address problems without the appropriate body of experience. This is precisely why the first stage of the U-process is all about broadening and deepening the collective body of experience.

Second, the musician must have a deep intuitive openness to the inspiration of the present moment. This is why the second stage of the U-process is about entering a deeper place of silence and listening in order to collectively open up to the source of inspiration and knowing. At this stage, all of the above experiences constitute a collective body of resonance that, if attended to from a deep place of listening, allows us to become aware of the new music that wants to emerge.

Third, the musician must have the capacity to stay attuned to that emerging flow while at the same time delivering it through the instrument. Here is how violinist Miha Pogacnik described this experience:

When I gave my first concert in Chartres, I felt that the cathedral almost kicked me out. For I was young and I tried to perform as I always did: just playing my violin. But then I came to realize that in Chartres you actually cannot play your small violin, but you have to play the macro violin. The small violin is the instrument that is in your hands. The macro violin is the whole cathedral that surrounds you. The cathedral of Chartres is entirely built according to musical principles. Playing the macro violin requires you to listen and to play from another place. You have to move your listening and playing from within to beyond yourself.⁹

The three movements that constitute the U-process are forming the body of resonance, receiving the musical inspiration, and playing the macro violin. When

this happens in an organization or a social system and people begin to experience the deep process of presencing, three tangible transformations can be observed: a transformation of social space (decentering), of social time (slowing down to stillness), and of self (collapsing the boundaries of the ego). The noticeable outcomes of this process include a heightened level of self, of energy, and of commitment; an ongoing field reality that can be tapped and activated later; and profound long-term changes.

Three Bodies of Methodology

The first stages of modernization—until today—have guided separate disciplines that focus on one of the three movements described above. Among the disciplines that embody and focus on the first movement—co-sensing—are those that require precise observation, such as science, phenomenology, and the creative arts. Disciplines that embody the second movement include the contemplative and meditative practices of the various wisdom traditions across cultures (Buddhist, Daoist, Confucianist, Hinduist, Shamanist, as well as Western such as Anthroposophical meditation practices). Disciplines that focus on the embodiment of the third movement include engineering and design, architecture, and the creative arts.

While the first stages of modernization have largely revolved around differentiating these three bodies of methodology, I believe that the next stages of modernization will result from reintegrating the three into a new synthesis of science, art, and an emerging praxis of collective creation.

Leadership as Collective Meditation in Action

Viewed from this perspective, leadership is to shifting the place from which a system operates. That is what leaders do—and what the most effective leaders have always done: refocus and reconfigure the structure of collective attention. They shift the inner place from where people and systems attend to the world and themselves. Shifting the structure of attention does for organizations what meditation does for individuals: it deepens the process of becoming aware and increases the number of options for responding to a given situation. The art of leadership, from this perspective, is about facilitating the practice of collective meditation-in-action.

The inner work of cultivating this leadership capacity involves an inversion (*Umstülpung*) of one's field quality of attention. The thresholds one crosses when moving down the left arm of the U involve the inversion of

- thinking: from being bound by judgmental reactions to appreciative inquiry (“accessing your ignorance”)
- feeling: from being bound by emotional reactions to opening up one’s heart as a gateway to sensing (“accessing your emotional intelligence”)
- will: from being bound by old intentions and identities to letting go and opening up to one’s higher self as the gateway to presencing the new (“accessing your Self”).

Dialogic Action Research: Interweaving the First-, Second-, and Third-Person Views

The methods deployed on the field walk ahead are three: phenomenology, dialogue, and action research. All three methods look at the same key issue: the intertwined constitution of knowledge, reality, and self. All three follow the dictum of Kurt Lewin, the founder of action research: “You cannot understand a system unless you change it.” But each method has a different point of departure: phenomenology uses the first-person point of view (individual consciousness); dialogue uses the second-person point of view (fields of conversation); and action research uses the third-person point of view (enactment of institutional patterns and structures). These three perspectives will interweave and grow together as the field walk unfolds.

Structure

The first part of the field walk deals with different aspects of the blind spot. I relate the blind spot to leadership (the inner place from where a system operates), organizational learning (the source of learning: future or past), systems theory (deeper sources of emergence), society (a shift of consciousness), capitalism (dialogue as a new governance mechanism), and philosophy and experience (self). For each aspect I make the same point: that there is a blind spot in the current theory and practice of leading, learning, and effecting change—and that the blind spot concerns the deeper source, the inner place from which an individual or a system operates.

The second part of the field walk explores illuminating the blind spot. On this journey I present the U-theory of activating the deeper sources of individual and collective intelligence—playing the macro violin—by sharing some insights from my 130 interviews with thought leaders; the journey also plumbs the depths of transformational change processes. The seven chapters in this section feature the seven different architectures of attention, seven archetypal gestures of relating to and bringing forth the world.

The third part of the field walk explores using the U-theory to uncover the foundations of a social technology of freedom. I close with a proposal for reinventing the 21st-century university based on the principles and practices outlined throughout this book.

Endnotes

- ¹ The companies include Glaxo, SmithKline, Federal Express, Shell Oil, Fujitsu, and McKinsey & Company.
- ² Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential Learning*. Prentice Hall.
- ³ Scharmer article on organizing around not-yet-embodied knowledge.
- ⁴ See the full interview at www.dialogonleadership.org/interviewDay.html
- ⁵ To put it in technical terms: the unit of analysis that I focus on concerns the 'field structure of attention.'
- ⁶ I thank Reinhard Kahl for suggesting this expression to me.
- ⁷ I owe the eye-of-the-needle term to Bernard Lievegoed as well as to Jaworski and Senge.
- ⁸ Jaworski and Scharmer 2000. Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, Flowers (forthcoming)
- ⁹ Pogacnik, personal conversation.

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