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Start with action, then reflect



I promised some time ago that I **would post** on Scharmer's Theory U. I wasn't that impressed with the 2005 book co-authored with Sengeaworski & Flowers but some of his papers and presentations *in his own voice*, have seemed more interesting. So I bought the **massive paperback tome** which now sits by my chair in the sitting room. Its comprehensive and interesting while still being an easy read. I've even managed to get through several chapters watching the outstanding **1974 BBC serialisation of The Pallisers** while providing the cat with a living bed. Would that all books in the unread pile had that quality.

Now this is not that promised post, but one of what may be a series prompted by the book. This one is also linked to my post of yesterday on granularity which I want to link to the idea of *Presencing* which is central to the book, variously defined, but *Arriving at Silence (shifting the place of perception to the source)* will serve my purpose. This belongs to a long tradition in organisational science which focuses on changing attitude and in turn draws on various traditions of meditation. I don't think you can fault the intent, or use in the hands of a skilled facilitator, but I do think we need to be a little more pragmatic in how we achieve that state.

Scaling and sustainability have always been the issue with methods that depend on changing the people rather than the process. You might achieve the change in an individual or a group of people for a period, but until you imbed the new way of thinking into the *heart and soul* of an organisation such change is only temporary. Unfortunately and ironically *heart and soul* changes are normally achieved more through process than through people. They are easier to understand, easier to implement and accordingly such approaches dominate in government and industry alike. Now if that is the reality, then a pragmatic, lives with it, uses it and evolves to something more sustainable. The idealist advocates a *life would be better if* strategy.

Now the general problem with techniques that draw on some of the ideas from meditation is that they conveniently forget about the life discipline involved in making those works. The spiritual exercises of Loyola or any of the various Buddhist techniques (including their US variations) can simply be acquired in a one or two day workshop or even a consultancy exercise. The danger here, and its always been a danger with the Senge tradition; wanting to replicate the end point of an evolutionary process rather than recreate its starting conditions. That said, anything that works to get people in a more reflective mood, which prevents premature convergence on a solution without adequate thought and reflection is of itself a good thing.

I want to suggest that we can go a little further, faster if we adjust the granularity of our vision and focus on action as much as reflection. This also links to the other key Scharmer concept, and the title of the next book: *Leading from the emerging future*. Granularity is key here and too much strategy is conducted at a high and

often abstract level. That allows people to leave a session feeling good as they have produced material with which no one can disagree. The devil comes in the implementation.

So taking a complexity perspective, we turn things onto their tail and start with finely grained actions and feedback mechanisms. Those provide a rich context for non-facilitated reflection, which in turn can lead to increased adoption. Its something I have been thinking about for over two decades now, in particular in pre-IBM days when I was in a formal strategy role. Given that its not surprising that the design of SenseMaker® and also many of Cognitive Edge's methods as been around that approach. I should also make it clear that I don't think I am challenging what Scharmer wrote, so much as how it is interpreted by his followers. My approach here is summarised by one of the great quotes from Mother Theresa which also links to my opening image.

In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do little things with great love.

So how would this work? Well there are two methods/tools that can work stand alone or in parallel. Both focus on finely grained material, both provide evidence to decision makers that can trigger reflection in action.

- **Firstly** the key Cynefin idea of using *safe-to-fail* experiments. I'll be using this in a large group facilitation tomorrow and revising some of the processes in consequence so expect more posts on this. An issue identified as complex is not subject to reflection or analysis but instead anyone with a coherent ~~theory~~ hypothesis as to what might or might not work gets to create a *safe-to-fail* experiment based on that theory. Taken as a whole the portfolio of experiments can, and should be contradictory. Some of them should use the principle of obliquity, trying to solve related problems is often a better way of dealing with a direct one, ask any parent of teenagers. Some should take a naive perspective, looking at things through the eyes of a different discipline. Biologists are naive in respect of civil engineering but they have given radical new insights to that profession. The job of the leader is to manage the portfolio of experiments and the monitoring thereof. I've see more meaningful reflection in executives confronted by a wall of a hundred or more specific *safe-to fail* action sheets devised by their own employees, than in any number of reflective workshops.
- **Secondly** the use of a micro-narrative tool such as SenseMaker® allows continuous real time feedback on the impact of the experiments, but also provides a very different way of reflecting on the present. By moving to mass capture of self-interpreted narrative, we allow a senior decision maker to see an objective pattern in the *whole* through statistical analysis, but also to immerse themselves in the rich context provided by the micro-narratives. The process of collection over large groups without the footprint of expert interpretation increases the objectivity of the material. In turn that increases reflective response of the executive.

Now I could (and will) spend more time on both of these. My overall point however is that the whole of the U curve needs to be less linear, more connected more real time. The danger is assuming you have gone all the way down one side when it fact you need to constantly iterate across the U. In a complex system that understanding can only really be achieved by taking action in the future to reflect in the present. I think that is in part Scharmer's attention but I need to get more into his methods to see how much the intent is enabled by the practice. For me immersion in micro-narrative and safe-to-fail experiments is as effective a way of *presencing* as is reflection; not, of course that they contradict each other. The former is, I think, more sustainable.

As a foot note:

I should say that I also have some concerns about the favourable reference to Ken Wilber in the introduction not to mention **Daniel Pinchbeck**. Willber's integration of the essentially elitist ideas of Spiral Dynamics concern me, and wearing my limited edition *I survived the Mayan Apocalypse T Shirt* reminds me of just how insanity is always a short distance from insight. But I will suspend judgement on those until I get to those sections in the book. I've drawn on some nutters myself over the years and share Terry Pratchett's view on some of the responses to his announcement that he was suffering from early onset Alzheimer: *Some of them wanted to sell me snake oil and I'm not necessarily going to dismiss all of these, as I have never found a rusty snake*. Sources are one thing, but one should be judged on what you do with the material.

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