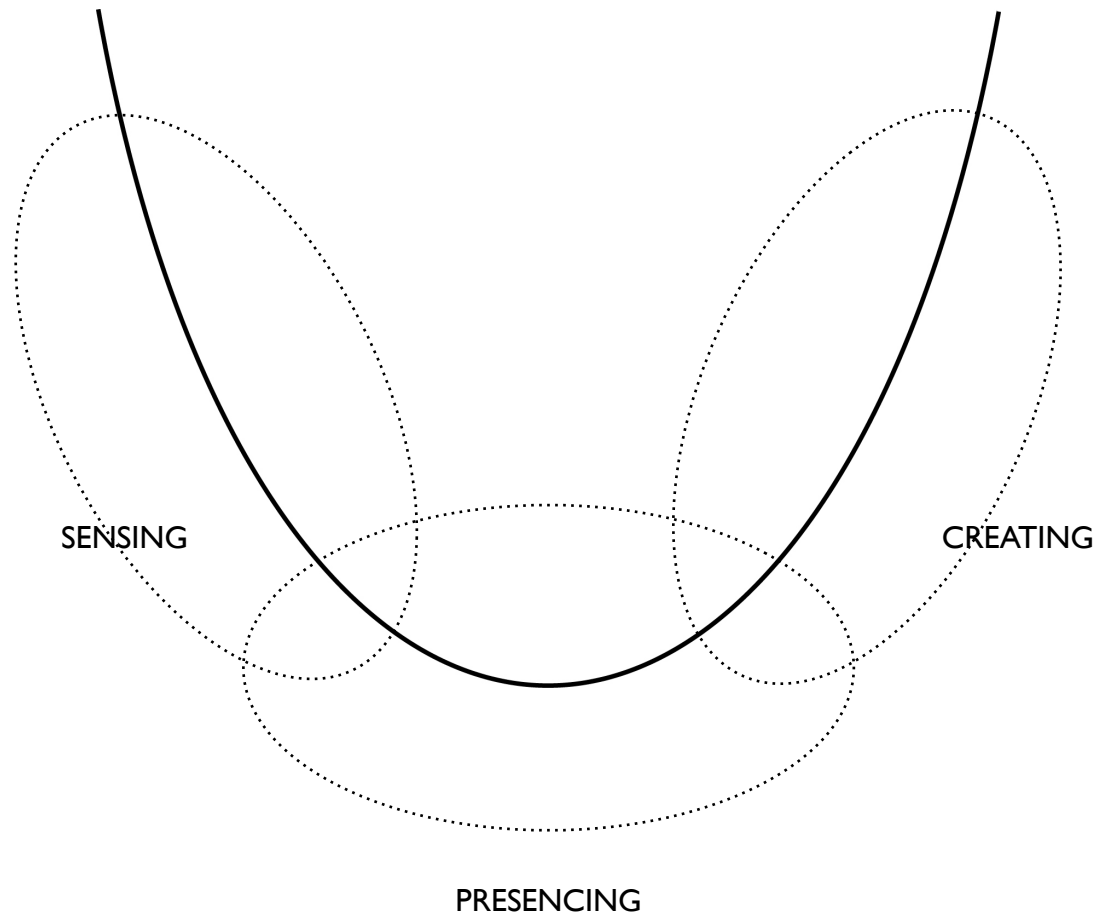


Theory U

Theory U is a framework and method that has evolved out more than 100 years of scholarship and study, most recently in the body of work by Otto Scharmer, Katrin Kaufer, and others. The approach has proven itself extremely useful for the designing and navigating of creative processes of all types; the Reos team regularly employs the U as a key tool in our work.

Theory U is so named because the shape of the U describes a “detour;” it is a bending curve, not a straight line. Insofar as the most difficult of humanity’s challenges stem from human ideas and behavior, the “detour” of the U is a path not from problem to solution (a straight line) but instead from a problematic situation (the left hand side of the U curve) to *source* of the situation, namely human minds, hearts, and actions (at the bottom of the U), to its change, metamorphosis, or solution (on the right hand side of the U). These three stages—called in the literature Sensing, Presencing, and Realizing or Creating—comprise the framework and the method.

In Sensing, we observe as many aspects of the system as we can—not only through data, but also through personal experience. We immerse ourselves into the problematic situation as much as we can. And then, rather than go directly to thinking up solutions, we first probe the sources of the problem, using systems thinking and other means of discovery and reflection.



This leads to a necessary shift in perspective. At the bottom of the U, we observe also ourselves. We work to see our roles in the problematic situation and also our inner conviction and imagination, the best and highest potential we have as leaders to intervene, heal, or positively influence the situation. We realize that we ourselves are the only and best instruments for positive change. At the bottom of the U we locate ourselves as “co-owners” of both the challenge area and its metamorphosis into a healthier state.

Finally, the right hand side of the U is the space of Realizing or Creating. Having taken the fruitful detour into the reality of the situation we want to address, we are ready to design and commit to specific interventions. Those designs are first sketched, then iteratively evolved and strengthened with the help of others. At length, they are ready for real-world testing and further development.

We find that Theory U enables us to successfully navigate otherwise hopelessly complex and highly disputed terrain. The Sensing phase brings the whole, many-layered system into view so that we can all see—and “own”—its full reality. “Presencing” helps focus our abilities and creativity for their highest and best use. And Realizing or Creating structures the process of thinking of ideas, improving them step by step, and finally bringing them to fruition in the world.

Source: Otto Scharmer. 2007. Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges. Cambridge, MA. Society for Organizational Learning.