

## CHAPTER 17

# WHAT THE HECK IS THEORY U?

*“You have to let go of the old  
to make way for the new.”*

*– Ancient Chinese proverb*

Change can be very hard.

Or it can be effortless.

What makes it so hard is that we cling on to what we've got and never create the space we need to move forward. I like to think of it as trying to cross a room whilst clinging on to a heavy chair that won't move. However much we may want to move, unless we let go of the chair we're going nowhere.

And yet all we need to do to change is to make a decision. Simple as that.

However, most people tend to think they've made a decision when actually all they've done is to make a wish. They 'decide' they'd like something, but don't then take the actions needed for them to get it. Usually this comes from fear: we have a natural fear of losing what we've already got. And fear of loss is one of the biggest human motivators, which means we're hard wired to be highly motivated not to let go and make space for the new.

**JARGON BUSTER:** *The word **decision** comes from the Latin **decidere**, which means 'to cut off'. When we make a decision we are literally cutting ourselves off from all other choices.*

So in order for us to achieve any significant change in our lives, work or relationships, the first thing we have to do is to take the plunge and let go of our attachment to the existing way of things.

Theory U and the U-Change process has proved to be an incredibly effective way of doing that in a whole range of different contexts.

### **Where Did Theory U Come From?**

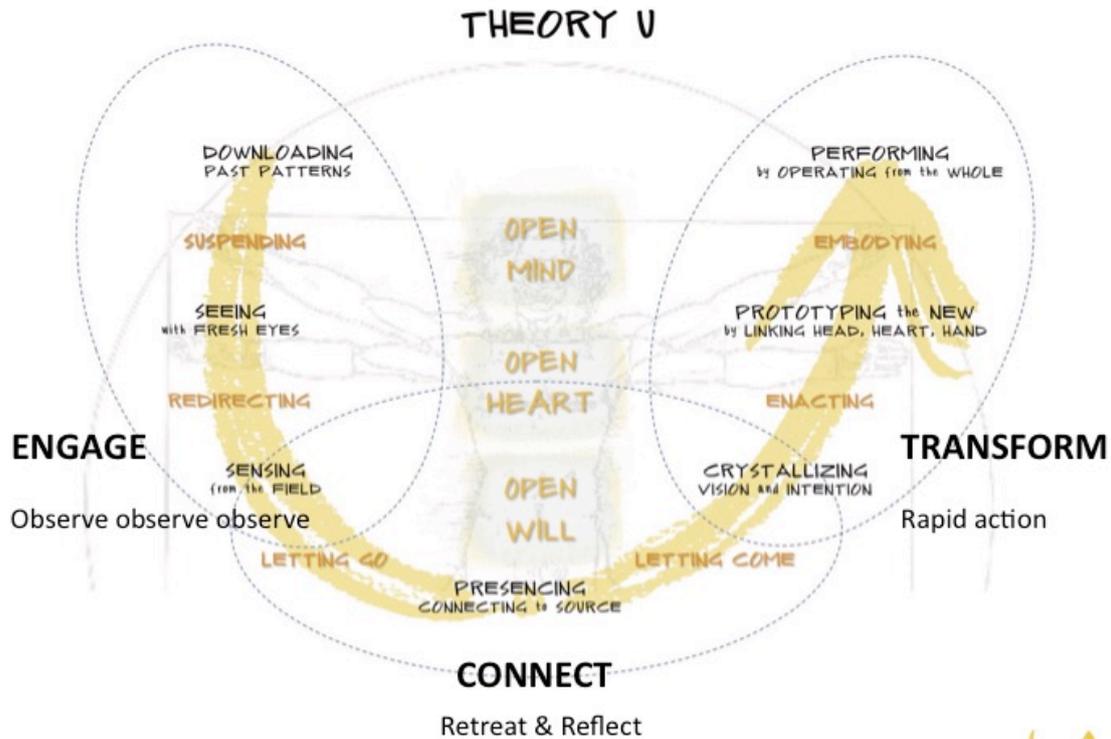
There was a serious question that needed to be answered, and that was, “What is it that enables some people to achieve innovation and change while others struggle to even get to grips with things as they are?”

Researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan School of Management, including Joe Jaworski and Otto Scharmer, undertook a series of over 150 interviews with top thinkers and innovators to find out how they worked. The majority of them had somehow developed a very similar type of approach.

One of their interviewees, the leading economist and complexity thinker W. Brian Arthur, summed it up as a three-stage process:

1. **‘Observe, Observe, Observe’** – understand the existing situation by observing it from as many different perspectives as possible, as we’ve seen in the previous chapter. I suspect that the reason he says observe x3 is seeing things from first-, second- and third-person positions. In order for us to do this effectively we have to let go of our own prejudices and perceptions.
2. **‘Retreat and Reflect’** – taking time out to let everything gel and allow new possibilities to form in your mind. This is something that can’t be forced, you have to create the space to let it come.
3. **‘Take Rapid Action’** – once the ideas come they are acted on quickly, without wasting lots of time critiquing them. There’s a real danger of losing the creative spark if we stop and over analyse. Getting into action creates the momentum for great things to happen.

Taking this and the input from other leaders they interviewed, Otto and his colleagues developed the idea that the deep change process was like a U shape. Sensing and then letting go of what is; holding the space for the new to emerge; and then creating a new future.



I've personally seen this pattern repeated many times with my clients. I call it Engage – Connect – Transform.

Engage with and observe what's actually going on; Connect to our sense of what's possible; and Transform ourselves or our organisations by taking rapid action.

But most people actually consider change as a linear process. They think of it as knowing where they are now, where they want to get to, and then drawing a straight line between the two. By taking this incremental approach they miss out on the opportunity for re-invention, and fail to achieve improved results. This is because of a time-proven saying, "If you keep doing what you've always done, you'll keep getting what you've always got."

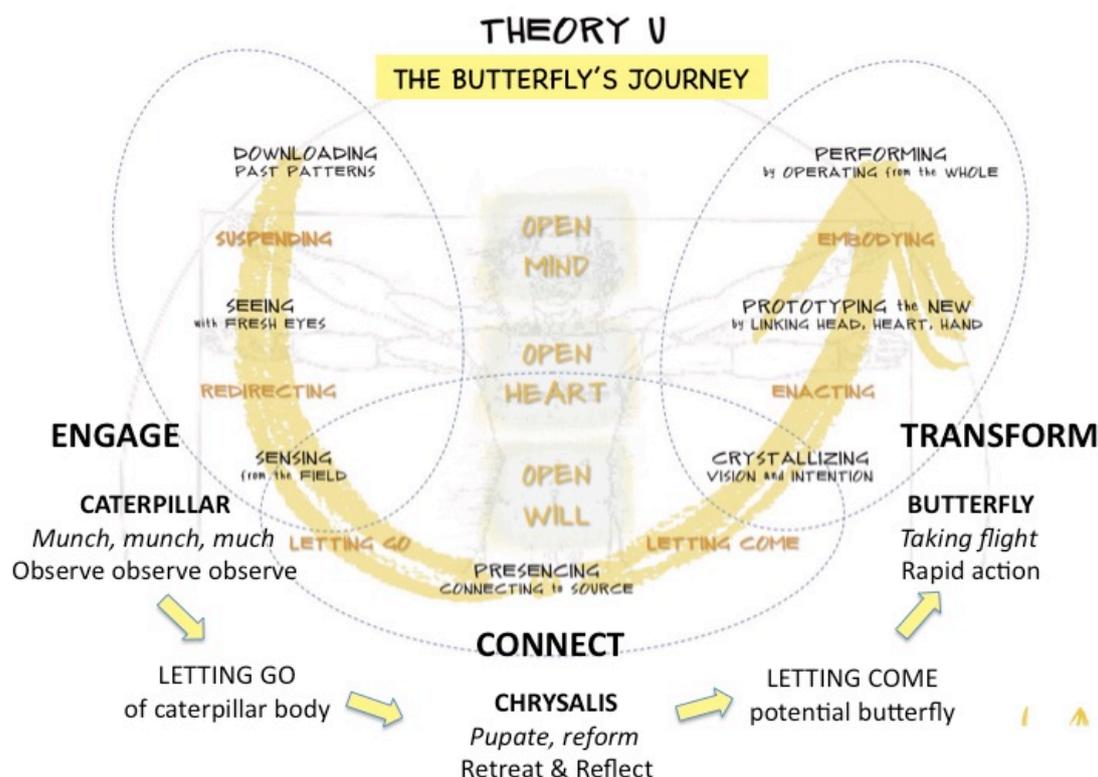
And when you go for re-invention, what happens in practice is always that exact U shape.

There's an initial dip as people realise what they're currently doing isn't going to get them where they want to go and they start looking for new ways of doing things. Then there's a period of reinvention where new projects and practices get started and embedded (and inevitably some of them fail). This can be really disruptive for a time! Finally, as new initiatives take hold there's a momentum that builds up, creating huge energy to propel everyone forward.

I always advise my corporate clients to be prepared and expect to under-perform in the short-term and over-perform in the long-term.

## The Butterfly's Journey

A great analogy for the U process is the butterfly's journey. If the caterpillar wasn't prepared to let go of being a caterpillar, it would never be able to become a butterfly.



Let's compare the two:

**Caterpillar** – the caterpillar has a voracious appetite and eats practically everything in its path. In the 'observe, observe, observe' stage we are hungrily gathering new information and viewpoints.

**Chrysalis** – here the caterpillar lets go and allows the butterfly to start to form. Of course, that's pretty much exactly what happens when we retreat and reflect. It is very much a process of reinvention.

**Butterfly** – the butterfly emerges, dries its wings and immediately takes flight, just as we emerge from our reflection and take rapid action.

We'll be looking at each of these three stages in greater detail in the coming chapters.

## **My Personal U-Change Experience**

A couple of years ago I found myself in a place where I'd achieved a certain amount of personal success, but I was feeling burnt-out and unfulfilled. In fact, it got to the point where I was suffering from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.

Something had to change, so I decided to take a moment to list all the work I was doing that I actually enjoyed and found rewarding. In future, I thought, I'd only do those things and cut out everything else. But that still didn't feel quite right. What I was doing was looking at the future through the same lens as before. Yes, doing what I was passionate about felt better, but it still wasn't enough.

My next thought was to let go of everything, even the things I loved doing. I don't mean I literally decided not to do them any more, rather I was letting go of the need to be doing them.

Have you ever had a really good clearout? Doesn't it make you feel great? If de-cluttering your home feels good, imagine what it's like when you do it to your mind!

I found myself in a position where I had no idea what the future held or what ideas might come to mind. For about 10 days I was in a state of blissful suspension: I had let go of the past and was waiting for a new future to emerge.

And then one night, as you'll recall from my Introduction, I awoke at 4:11 with this metaphor of the Titanic, and I knew that was where my future lay: in writing this book and sharing the message about transformational personal, organisational and social change with you; hoping to inspire you to become the great person you're capable of becoming.

## **What Incredible Things Could You Do?**

There's only one way to find out:

To 'take the red pill', read on and take action, and you'll find out how deep the rabbit-hole goes; what you're truly capable of.

Or take the blue pill, decide to stay where you are, and you'll go back to your daily life where nothing changes.

It's up to you...