

Regenerative Leadership

Lessons from Birthing of the Corona Quilt Project

Abstract

We live in a time of exceptional upheaval, disruption, chaos and uncertainty. Often, moments of extreme stress and pressure serve as significant initiations for us as individuals and communities. One such global community initiative was the Corona Quilt Project that was started at the onset of the pandemic, in April 2020, to create an opportunity for authentic individual expression and a sense of belonging and connection. The Project also exhibited a departure from the traditional model of leadership.

Building on the experience gathered in this project, the article discusses the emergent change process of Theory U as a new social grammar for the collective. It also highlights the principles that form the essence of Listening to the Field of the Emerging Future and Regenerative Leadership. Using the Corona Quilt Project as its base, the article illustrates the need for a new and more aligned approach to address the complex challenges in a post pandemic world.

The Current Context

At this juncture in history, we collectively navigate multiple, synchronous and interwoven challenges. The tried and tested approaches to change may need revising. Professional communities of practice, especially professionals engaged in change, must also examine their own beliefs and principles, and encounter their own inner transformation. The field of behavioural science prides itself in observation, experimentation and modelling the ways in human cognitive processes and behaviour, in relation to each other and their contexts. Perhaps, it is time for new approaches to emerge within this field that reflect the current paradigm.

Understanding the debates of the past can be helpful in constructing new ways forward. In behavioural science and related fields, modernist approaches have historically tended to focus on objective reality on what is more easily measurable and repeatable. Postmodernist relativism, on the other hand, has resulted in a fascination with inter-subjective meaning-making and phenomenology. Historically, there has been a degree of animosity between these two camps with little common ground. Viewing this polarity through the lens of personality theory, preferences relating to judging or perceiving in MBTI terms, or left and right hemisphere thinking (McGilchrist, 2012) underlie apparent differences. This is an illustration of how factors underlying apparent contradictions are rarely considered. The same applies to understanding voting patterns. According to Peterson (Science Daily, 2010), "People's values are deeply embedded in their biology and genetic heritage. This means you have to take a deeper view of political values and morality in terms of where these motives are coming from; political preferences do not emerge from a simple rational consideration of the issues."

A key challenge for behavioural scientists and other change practitioners is to observe and understand *underlying* factors, i.e., the field conditions that give rise to phenomena. By doing so, they can reconcile and transcend key polarities, recognising that no single position is adequate for the complexity of sense and decision-making required today. This integration invites the practitioner to evolve their practice towards a post-conventional stance, implying they must be able to work with multiple, and often competing narratives, at once. This includes an understanding of their own perspectives in the mix, combined with deep reflection on their underlying structures of thought, culture and ontology. Working

adaptively with complex and politically charged issues of today's world, practitioners learn to navigate many contradictory and polarising data-points while discerning the different narratives and the power-bases.

The Post-Conventional View

The post-conventional stance embraces an understanding that sensemaking is not only a means of interpreting the world through one's own preferred lens but of examining the lenses themselves. It is these lenses that shape the world according to the sense-maker's own image, consciously or otherwise, as part of the observer effect. Given the nature and scale of current global challenges, it is timely that behavioural scientists, individually and collectively, reflect deeply on the embedded constructs they project onto the contexts around them.

To engage in surfacing these lenses can take us to the heart of many profound assumptions, beliefs and values. These include our different creation stories, relationship to all of life, understanding of justice, truth and grace, and even beliefs about our purpose on earth. Once these come into awareness, and begin to examine whether they still serve the current context to stay with the metaphor of the lens - does it need cleaning, has it become cracked through trauma, might something new be needed?

An example of this radical self-examination and deep adaptation can be found within the field of professional coaching, a newer member in the family of behavioural sciences. Owing to the heightened global awareness of climate and environmental emergency, activists in the community pressed for changes within the key coaching bodies, challenging them to revise their ethical frameworks. As groups such as Climate Coaching Alliance (a self-organising community of coaches wishing to bring a greater environmental focus to their work) sprang up, the main coaching bodies found themselves grappling with a key internal belief structure - the coaching contract. Having its roots in person-centred and therapeutic approaches, the coaching contract has always been narrowly focused on adhering to the expressed agenda of the client and/or of the organisational sponsor. Would it be appropriate, and if so, how might coaches bring up the subject of climate and environmental impacts (or equality, diversity and inclusion and other pertinent issues) unless this was what the client specifically requested? This

would challenge the very basis of what most coaching competencies, accreditation systems and professional bodies had invested in for decades.

There are no simplistic answers. From a post-conventional perspective, the compassionate view might be that perhaps it is beyond the remit of coaching bodies to either mandate or prohibit practice in this way. But rather to see that such institutions have served a useful role in establishing shared foundations for practice. As the context for coaching itself changes, it is now coaches who must evolve their practice to navigate the wider moral contract with humanity and the Earth. When coaches no longer see themselves as separate from the client, but in a constant dynamic flow, sharing the planet, they can work fluidly with a multi-dimensional contract. This would balance the client objectives within the wider socio-environmental context, not to mention the salient stakeholders of generations yet to come, or the marginalised, or Nature herself.

Bridging the Gap

The coaching world is not alone in struggling to adapt to new contexts requiring new action logics. These include and transcend both ‘ego’ discourses with emphasis on self-sovereignty and personal responsibility, and ‘eco’ discourses that emphasise the good of the collective.

We then require a change in approaches that are neither exclusively modernist nor postmodernist, neither purely individualistic nor collectivist. Approaches that weave together many voices and positions, not only to mediate them but to evolve new shared perspectives, and co-sense into the emerging field of the future. One methodology, Theory U, a collective, holistic and inquiry-based approach to change, supports synergistic solutions for a world that works for all by harmonising diverse data and perspectives from the wider ecosystem. Developed by Otto Scharmer and others, it is a synthesis of leadership and systems thinking practices and wisdom traditions that support awareness based social change.

Theory U (Figure 1) emphasises three key portals of transformation – an embodied (vs conceptual) experiencing of Open Mind, Open Heart and Open Will as access points for systems (an individual, an organisation, a society). They carry out the task to deeply sense and see themselves, listen with profound

empathy towards their margins and the wider ecosystem, within which they are nested as catalysts for movement.

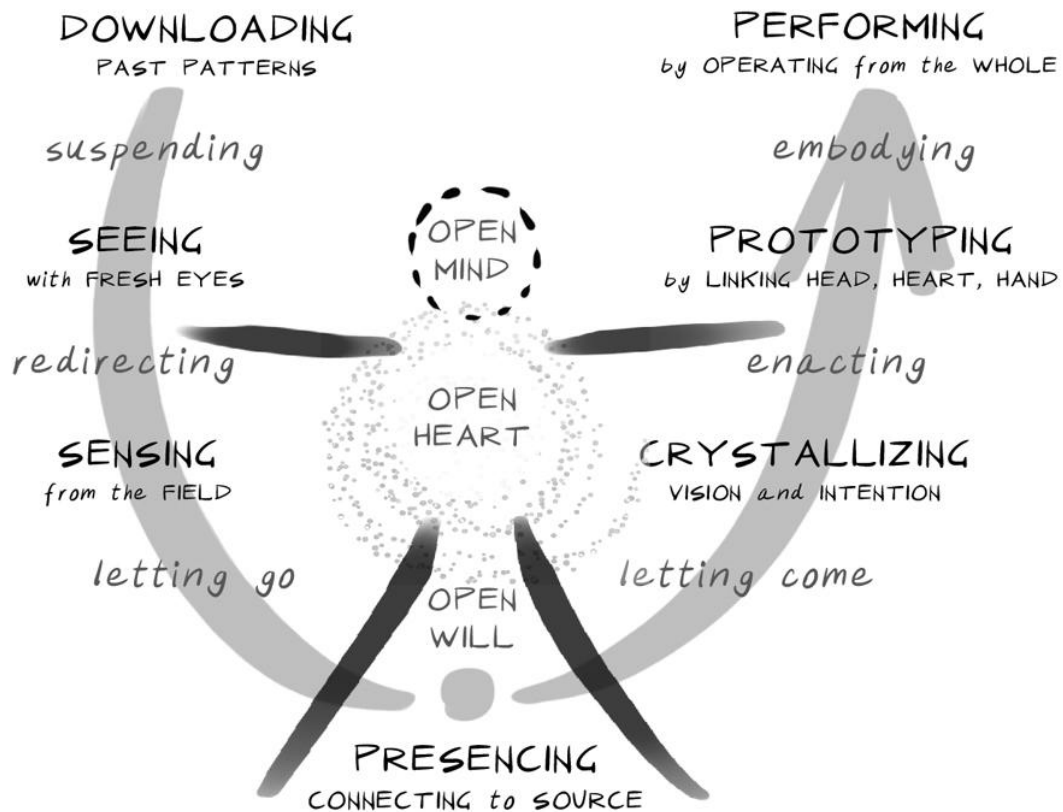


Figure 1 - Copyright Presencing Institute

A key stage involves consciously putting aside previous habits of thought or prevailing ‘best practice’, to suspend judgements and begin to see afresh with new eyes. As an embodied experience, this approach embraces the totality of sensing approaches, not only the rational mind but also empathic and intuitive sensing from the field, arising in metaphors and symbols, dreams and fleeting impressions.

The ability to sense reality in this multi-dimensional way is intrinsic to each one of us. Yet our old habits, biases, judgements, and default ways of responding often filter the way we see the world. We manage, control, and limit our experience of life all the time.

Otto Scharmer mentions the three voices we have inside us that can get in the way of our ability to presence: the Voice of Judgement, the Voice of Cynicism, the Voice of Fear. Each one of us has these voices inside us, attempting to protect us and keep us safe. They do so to maintain the status-quo, filtering anything that does not meet our predefined notions of normality. Yet we can learn to expand our worldview, see beyond these voices getting in our way of learning and growth, and expand our capacity to deal with change, uncertainty and complexity. To tap into the field of the emerging future, we need to be able to observe these voices within us and allow them to ease their power over us, so that we can be more attentive to the moment of emergence.

Often the most powerful and pioneering ‘call to actions’ are one that have very little precedence. We, therefore, mostly want to stay with the known. The voice of fear, judgement and cynicism often step in when we are tapping into something that might change and impact our identity and that of the collective field. Such moments often require ‘presencing’ showing up to this larger field of emergence.

In Practice: Principles and Application

“Our Age of Anxiety is, in great part, the result of trying to do today’s jobs with yesterday’s tools!”

— *Marshall McLuhan*

A different approach is required to meet the current challenges of the volatile ambiguous environment amplified by the pandemic. It is a departure from our old ways of problem solving and learnt behaviour. It calls for a degree of self and systemic awareness, along with the ability to take risks and experiment with new ways of being and doing. In addition to relying on our left brain and rationality, we need to listen and trust other sources of intelligence. A heightened requirement and awareness of ‘*letting go and letting come*’ can be seen through the different waves of the pandemic. This becomes an important new skill.

A tangible project embodying these principles in its birthing was the Corona Quilt Project. At the onset of the pandemic, we invited people to find their unique experience of the pandemic by tapping into the wisdom of their hands on a square piece of cloth. Their unique voice and expression would be woven together with numerous other squares as a way to find connection and belonging in times of social

distancing. We draw upon the experience of one of the co-founders of the project, Shruti Sonthalia, to illustrate the key principles of this approach.

What is the Corona Quilt Project?

The Corona Quilt Project is a global community initiative started at the onset of the pandemic in April 2020, to create opportunities for authentic individual expression and a sense of belonging and connection. It invited people from diverse walks of life, consciously emphasising on diversity and inclusion, to create a physical or virtual square, using the wisdom of their hands, to process and express their experience of the pandemic. The first phase of the project converged with 12,000 squares coming together in three public art installations at Jindal Mansion, Haji Pump Station and a school at Haji Ali, in Mumbai. Corona Quilt Project has now travelled across different parts of India with installations in Zydus headquarters in Ahmedabad, Panjim Church in Goa and Nila House in Jaipur. Shruti, one of the authors, is the co-founder of the initiative.

Listening for Intuitive and Collective Intelligence

The journey of the Corona Quilt Project started as a call Shruti felt to take forward her grandmother's legacy to quilt, and tap into the wisdom of our hands. She had a strange and unsettling series of dreams that kept pointing in that direction. Shruti is one of the co-founders of the project. With her grandmother weak and beginning to suffer from dementia, she started to explore ways to learn. She happened to come across a colleague, who was also a journal quilter. A flow of conversation and energy was initiated. The poem, "Weaving a New Quilt for Humanity", sparked the idea of using the wisdom of our hands to create a tangible quilt, consciously tapping into healing, expression and belonging during these times. Trusting this call, and not being judgemental or cynical, allowed the seed of this idea to be nurtured in conversations.

Reflective Questions

- What feels innately true yet uncomfortable at this point?

- What voice of judgement, cynicism and fear are you present to? What is attempting to divert attention from?
- What becomes possible as you pause and pay attention to the intuitive intelligence repeating itself in your space?

Presencing: Letting Go and Letting Come

One of the most significant challenges in this journey has been to sense deeply into the moment of presence. It is that place of pause required between a contraction and an expansion, to be able to see it, to be mindful of it. To allow the next emergence, however uncomfortable or challenging to one's sense of identity it might be. Our linear rational mind has learnt to judge quiet and rest, the winter that exists in nature. We have grown accustomed to value only one arc of the circle, spring and summer, that is being productive. However, the roots to our creation that enable us to enjoy a harvest in summer have often deepened in winter.

During the initial weeks of the pandemic, there was a deep inner pause, a conscious choice to move away from activity and listen deeply. To allow the body-mind to tune with the current reality. It was in that phase of stillness that the poem, "Weaving a New Quilt for Humanity", by Julia Myers came by. In the beginning, there were many moments where we were aware of the voice of perfectionism within us. Also, the fear of stepping into the unknown. We noticed those to be important choice-points on the journey. One was the choice to continue holding on to known identities and self-image of ourselves. The other was to give ourselves permission to embrace a new way of being, a different, less-than-perfect, courageous self-perception.

What are the invisible roots that you have been growing?

What are you noticing about the value of winter? What are you noticing about surrendering and letting go?

What are the voices showing up uncomfortable with this conversation? How might you deeply listen to its wisdom?

Systems Awareness and Trauma

Our awareness as individuals being nested in systems, and those systems being nested in other systems, exists for almost 95% of human history. It is only after the industrial revolution, in the past 400 years, and especially the last 50 years, that left-brain machine-centered reductionist awareness became prominent.

The word “trauma” has often seemed big and heavy, something most people, especially Asians and the corporate world, have attempted to keep distance from. Unprecedented times of the pandemic have compelled many to own their relationship with the world. Since its onset, it has been incredibly revealing to see the relationship between trauma and sight - the ability to hold a complete systems perspective. The experience of stress and trauma often puts our body mind into a survival reptilian response - inadvertently zooming in to our personal reality and zooming out from the collective reality. Thus, being mindful and acknowledging the role trauma may play in being empathic, and taking a whole systems perspective, is useful.

What does zooming out make accessible to you?

What are the new elements and inter-relationships between elements that you are able to acknowledge?

Where stress and trauma might be preventing you from taking a systemic view?

Diversity and Weaving Together Polarities

The guiding principle and call for the Corona Quilt Project was to honour this intersectionality and interdependency. Firstly, its call to creation emerged from honouring the timeless wisdom – the healing power of our hands - that our ancestors had known and used through centuries (especially women to work through their emotions), and to bring it alive in post-modern, intensely technology-oriented times. Secondly, it was honouring the suffocation and fear that people, especially minorities, feel in expressing themselves fully. A very significant and symbolic element of the Corona Quilt was to ensure that each individual had full and complete expression through their own square. Simultaneously, with each square being woven with numerous other squares, each individual could find a sense of community and

belonging. At its heart, was the act of weaving together, which is experienced by many as a polarity - being able to own your individuality while being part and belonging to a community. This place of weaving together duality - the possibility of AND - was at the center of creation of this project.

During the initial launch of the project, there was only one person of colour in the team. A conscious decision was taken to delay the launch of the project to ensure an intentional space for diversity. Another very conscious choice was to include individuals and organisations from diverse sectors. Our earliest partners belonged to differently abled communities, e.g., organisations working with menstrual hygiene, among others. In retrospect, an important choice-point in growing the team was to build one with known and familiar people with a familiar skill set, or one with a significantly different one. A major guiding principle in inviting people was listening to the field of guidance and trusting our intuition. The result was a team instinctively aligned in their purpose for this project.

What aspects of diversity are blurred or at the periphery for you?

What becomes possible in building a conscious relationship with diversity?

What new skills, perspective and ways of seeing the world become accessible to you by consciously inviting n people different from you? What does it make available for your creation?

Emergent and Dynamic Leadership in Service of Context and Purpose

We are learning to let go of expectations framed by a narrative of control and certainty, and to surrender to what Life is calling us to. These shifts to our core paradigms can be extremely challenging to define in abstract terms. However, once we tune into living system patterns, we can sense into these implied shifts with ease. It is embedded within our instinctual selves, as expressions of human Nature, as many ancient wisdom traditions point towards. Nature is always in the midst of sensing its own way forward like vine tendrils reaching out to find their direction of growth. So it is when we attune and integrate our primal embodied knowing.

The Corona Quilt Project made it important to listen and move to where energy and aliveness was present. This was a departure from the traditional model of leadership. However, it was important to ensure that spaciousness and freedom was experienced to bring in one's creative voice and leadership.

What are the leadership frames that feel familiar?

What does emergent and dynamic leadership mean to you?

How has leadership sustained in nature? What does it reveal to us?

Each principle mentioned above is a significant element in Listening to the Field of the Emerging Future and Regenerative Leadership. The above principles form the foundation of this work.

Conclusion

Moments of extreme stress and pressure have often been significant initiators for new paradigms. As practitioners and behavioural scientists, this paper illustrates our journey to arrive at the need for a more relevant and aligned approach to address the complex challenges our world faces today. We share a model that responds to many of these requirements that may arise in a post-pandemic world. One of these responses include a diversity of people coming together in an attempt to weave together polarities, as individuals and communities. This is based on our experience of the Corona Quilt Project where the key principles of this new way of operating were embodied. This new, more aligned approach exhibits a departure from the traditional model of leadership. In this process, a regenerative leadership is born.

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