

Travelling the U: An inquiry into what happens when women lead from within

By Susan Skjei



When I first talked to Frances Baldwin about collaboratively hosting a workshop for women leaders, she was enthusiastic, although neither of us knew exactly what we would do. We just knew that we wanted to create a safe, energized environment in which women could share their stories, explore their assumptions and mental models about leadership, and unfold new ways of accessing their inner wisdom in order to empower their action. Over the course of several months, we talked on the phone, shared ideas by email, and slowly began to shape an approach.

We had both been studying the “U-model,” which has emerged from research conducted by Otto Scharmer, Peter Senge, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers, and which is described in their new book, *Presence: Human Future and the Field of the Future*. The U-model seemed like the perfect conceptual framework for our workshop. We created a large mural with a U in the middle, and our plan was to slowly add to the model throughout the workshop, based on the experience of participants.

The first morning, the group introduced themselves in ways that were heartfelt and sometimes tinged with some pain. One woman said that she had been supporting and helping men for much of her career and now wanted to find her own voice and make her own contribution. Another said that she felt she was in a losing battle to meet all of the expectations of work, family, and professional development—she was exhausted. Still others said they wanted to learn how to receive help and support from others, instead of feeling they had to “go it alone.”

Next we told stories about ourselves as leaders. It soon became apparent that, even though many of the women were in high-visibility positions of leadership, they did not see themselves as leaders in the traditional sense. In fact, in several cases, they had a hard time understanding why people thought of them as leaders at all. We discussed the prevalence of the myth of the “heroic leader”—the single person with the vision who makes all the difference. The model of leadership embedded in these women’s stories was more of someone who sees a problem and wants to help make things different at a grassroots level. This leader raises questions and gets people to see things in a new way. She then mobilizes people around her, sometimes one person at a time, and eventually the team or community takes collective action that is far more effective than what any one person could achieve on her own.

We noticed that, as women, some aspects of leadership sometimes make us feel uncomfortable, such as power, visibility, vulnerability, and exposure. Many

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women described painful leadership experiences in which they were “going along” with someone else’s vision without having had much input, yet being expected to represent that vision and defend it in public situations. We wondered if we, as women, had a tendency to take on the issues/problems of others rather than explore our own personal connection with the issue. We reflected on the question, Why do others see me as a leader?

In pairs we described a time when we felt we were being authentic as a leader. Once again, these descriptions were often different than what one might expect. We told about times of responding intuitively, having courage, seeing a need and taking action, facing a challenge against all odds, making sacrifices and choices, feeling compassion and “suffering with,” experiencing both seriousness and fun, feeling vulnerable and being willing to expose the “cracks,” acting with receptivity and bravery, being able to engage others, and experiencing the learning that comes out of pain. When we explored the conditions in the environment that led to authenticity, having a support network and the ability to share ideas with others were considered key ingredients.

We then took our own experiences of authenticity into our exploration of the U-model. The model builds on cognitive scientist Francisco Varela’s study on “The Three Gestures of Becoming Aware” as well as economist Brian Arthur’s action learning model. The premise is that, when faced with a new or challenging situation in which innovation is required, we often revert to old patterns, simply downloading old information and strategies and reacting to the new situation as if it were the same as the old one. The U-model suggests an alternative strategy: stop and sense where we are at a deeper level and get in touch with actual experience, and then use this connection with reality to “presence” the future as it is emerging. In other words, if we can lower our defenses and increase our contact with reality, our actions will embody who we really are in response to what is really needed. We no longer have to act as disembodied “instruments” in the service of the organization and suffer the inevitable negative consequences. Scharmer et al describe the three stages of traveling along the U as (1) sensing, (2) presencing, and (3) realizing. In order to foster inquiry in our workshop, we identified three basic questions that correspond to these stages: (1) what is? (2) what if? and (3) what now?

On Saturday afternoon we focused on the “sensing” part of the model. We asked ourselves, as women, what are the primary ways that we know about our worlds. Is it through listening, through our sense perceptions, or through what others tell us? Is it through science or through what we determine ourselves? We discussed the research from *Women’s Ways of Knowing* by Belenky et. al, which presents a developmental view of how women come to know their worlds and themselves. Through interviews with 135 women, the authors mapped stages of knowing, which begin with “listening to the voices of others.” We had examples in our own group of women who had spent much of their childhood just listening to the voices of others (usually men) and, from that, learning to be good receivers and supporters. The next stage, “subjective knowledge,” comes from self-reflection. Some women in our group talked of times when they rebelled against the voices of others, and instead tried to find a voice inside. Meditation and other self-reflective practices became a life-saver for these women. Some ventured into the realms of business or organizational life and discovered a third stage, “procedural knowledge,” which comes from reason and logic, and which helps us communicate in our scientific world of scientific facts and numbers. Finally, “constructed knowledge” comes from putting it all together. At this stage, our action

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is based on listening to ourselves, others, and the world and making sense of it all. This is truly an empowered stance.

To put these concepts in practice, we introduced meditation as one example of a way of knowing that helps us tune into our own subjective experience, while simultaneously clearing away conceptual and emotional obstacles. We worked with a Buddhist practice called the “Four Foundations of Mindfulness,” which helps to bring stability to our awareness. We worked with “mindfulness of body” through our posture, keeping a strong back and soft front and settling into our breathing with relaxation and energy. “Mindfulness of life” provided a way to tune into our basic sense of well-being as it shifted and changed over the course of the meditation period. “Mindfulness of effort” helped us stay with the practice without becoming heavy-handed, and “mindfulness of mind” allowed us to focus on the coming and going of our thoughts, as well as the space between the thoughts.

The meditation technique was new to some and difficult for some (not necessarily the same people). While it seemed helpful to some, to others it felt abstract. How does this actually relate to our lives? How is this different from prayer? How does it help in the workplace? We left the session with many questions. It was clear that we had touched on something important about how we could “know” from our own direct experience, but it was unclear how this would benefit our lives directly and how it related to leadership altogether.

I left that evening feeling somewhat disturbed. I wanted so much for these women to have an experience of awareness and mindfulness that would empower them, yet I felt that I was being too prescriptive. I wondered if I was beginning to impose my own ideas, without having drawn out the questions and stories enough from the participants themselves. I decided to use the U-model to reflect on my own experience. I asked myself “what is?” and as I tuned in to myself, I sensed that I was tense and anxious. I tried to fully embody that feeling and, sure enough, it began to shift. Suddenly I noticed that I was afraid. I didn’t want to disappoint them. I didn’t want to fail. I wanted to appear to be competent. I stayed with my experience and moved into the presencing stage. At that point I asked myself “what if?” and just stayed with my vision of what I wanted for the workshop and what I wanted for each participant.

It suddenly became crystal clear to me that I needed to involve the participants more in relating the model to their own lives, allowing them to discover their own inspiration about what is possible. After a somewhat sleepless night, I discovered that Frances had had similar thoughts and insights, and we shifted our agenda to incorporate our new perspective.

Sunday was an entirely new day. Our group was fresh and excited about what was in store. We talked about our “ah-ha’s,” and I shared how I had worked with the U-model the night before. Frances told a wonderful story about how she had worked with the power of “what is” in a school district in Palo Alto and how that had transformed people’s experience and opened up new opportunities. We also heard an amazing story from Maria Dolores Diaz about a seemingly small intervention that ended up becoming a lifesaver for thousands of people in Honduras after the flooding disasters there in the late 1990s. The stories were incredibly inspiring, and we realized that, once again, we had tapped into the root of our desire, as women, to connect with what matters and to provide help and assistance wherever we could.

The next part of our exploration was critical. How could we bring all of this insight into our lives? We decided to apply our own leadership stories to the U-model, as a means for going deeper. In small groups, we began to delve into “what is?” questions: What do you see, smell, hear, sense about yourself and your leadership situation? How do you feel? What is the emotional tone of the situation? What are your thoughts about this? What are the mental models in the situations? What are the assumptions?

The reports were revealing. Some said that they go places other may not go because they are already marginalized and so can slip into the edges and cracks of a situation and see things differently. They also acknowledged that society doesn’t always appreciate their “gems” and that they need to have courage in order to bring them forth. They realized that they had a lot of knowledge and they wanted to own this knowledge and act on it without the need for recognition.

Next we moved to another set of questions that focused on “what if?” These included questions such as, What do I want to let go of? What do I want to embrace? What is my highest possible future? What matters most to me now? What do I want? The debriefing from this section was even more interesting than the first. One woman said, “When I sense the future, it has a lot to do with courage. It is not so much based on what I can accomplish or what I know, but on how much I can bring myself to the situation.” We sat together in the tenderness and joy of an emerging future in which no one knew exactly what would happen, but which we did know would be enlivened and powerful.

The “what now?” questions included What experiments can I create? Who can I engage as an ally? What resources can I attract? What prototypes can I create? Out of this questioning came many heartfelt ideas. We could create concentric circles of involvement, we could talk to one person at a time and get her excited, we could focus on one thing and do it well.

We then returned to the model and each woman annotated it, based on her own journey of discovery. The mural was soon rich with ideas, archetypes, roles, steps, and key reminders. By the time we were through, the U-model was hardly recognizable as a U, and instead had become a gigantic cauldron of our experience, which revealed itself as a profound place of nourishment, both for ourselves and for the people we lead.

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