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# *The U process as team transformation tool*

### *A case study by Frederike Vos*
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***Due to customer's privacy, the identity of the organisation described in this case study will remain anonymous.***

### Introduction

This paper describes the process of an organisation that decided it was necessary to improve leadership and teamwork in its Management Team (MT). The MT misses clarity of purpose and focus. It wants better decision-making and to learn to lead dialogues and conflicts. Besides that, it needs to work more together, learn to build on each other and unite capabilities.

At the beginning of the process, different business units were managed separately from the organisation as a whole. The lack of teamwork at management level resulted in the MT not being able to support and enable the development of the organisation. The management team consists of 17 members and runs an organisation of approximately 5,000 employees.

Engage! was contracted to support and facilitate this change process. The organisation was advised to implement an approach for a cultural transformation of the management team. The purpose for this process was *"to facilitate a transformation in the leadership team's behaviour to support the development of the organisation."*

### The approach

The approach used to facilitate this process was the *'U-curve'*[1].

The U-curve was in the first place a tool to structure the interactions during the process from March to November 2007. Secondly the U-curve enabled the organisation to *"go a little bit deeper"* and arrive at conscious creative action, rather than defensive reaction which was the case in the present situation.

To support this process the consultant made use of the Art of  Hosting[2]. The challenge for the consultant was to use these *'soft'* methods and technologies in a very technical organisation, where the *'hard'* side was dominant.

### The process

In this particular case the process consisted of six phases, executed throughout six half day long team sessions. Before the start of each session specific 'core questions' were communicated and discussed with the CEO in a preparation meeting, together with his COO and HR- manager, also member of the MT.

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[1]     Otto scharmer

[2]     www.artofhosting.org

The U-curve is designed to deliver a clear understanding of and greater influence over the cause of a problem. It can lead to more conscious behaviour, higher quality decision making and more impactful action.

The participants of the process were first invited to 'slow down', to look at themselves, their context and the world. They were invited to find deepening and reflection by going down the U, so that they became 'present to what wanted to emerge'. The process sets the stage for participants to enable them to let go of the old and create space for the new. Going back up the U again shifts focus and awareness back to action and creation. In short a change of behaviour.
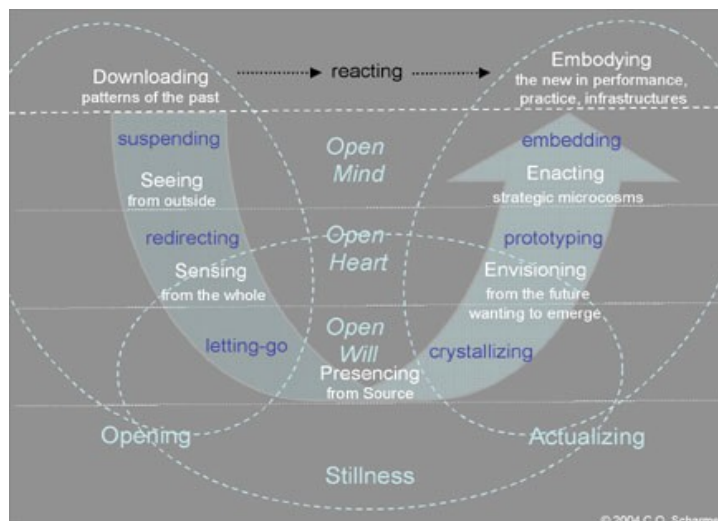


*Illustration: The U-curve*

## Session 1 – *Seeing the System*

*Question:* What do you observe about the behaviour of the Management Team?
*Practice:* Circle and CultureScan.
*Desired outcome:* A consensus picture of the current and recent behaviour of the Management Team.

This first session resulted in the MT becoming aware of unwanted behaviours. They became aware of a lack of commitment and responsibility. Lack of co-operative behaviour, ambition and work spirit. Procedures also created problems for the team members. This behaviour was mainly visible during their meetings and collective decision-making. By acknowledging and reflecting on these issues, they created and shared a common commitment to change the situation.

## Session 2 – *Sensing from the Whole*

*Question:* How does it feel to be part of this team at the moment? How does your current behaviour contribute to the old patterns that you want to leave behind?
*Practice:* Circle, Competing Commitments exercise
*Desired outcome:* What comes out of these questions are a consensus picture of the underlying patterns and beliefs that generate their behaviour.

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The beginning of this second session was marked by a retrospective view on the last session. Characteristic here was a negative and defensive reflective behaviour.

> *"Well yes, we celebrated the patterns and had them out. But we still are negative and defensive...see even a funeral is a better place to be, because people speak there from their heart. A most difficult moment, but the most enjoyable compared to what is happening in the company."*
>
> *"Well I did not have time to reflect, which is too bad, I need to sit with what we are doing".*
>
> *"I could not see anything", "I tried but did not succeed", "I was too busy".*

This 'check-in' set the stage for personal reflections.
The team hesitated but succeeded in sharing their personal suffering of the situation.

> It took a while before they started speaking. The silence passed the 10 minutes. Finally one took the talking piece from the centre and said:
>
> *"I am tired of it, it plays for such a long time. This hurts me and I have no more energy and I feel no more fun."*
> *"I miss the energy and the appreciation. I do worry about my health, there is too much stress."*
>
> It took quite a while before almost everyone spoke out their despair, anger, frustrations, helplessness, struggle, workload and lack of energy.
>
> The last one who spoke was the CEO, who got hurt by hearing all these feelings.
> He carefully tried to cheer the group up with, *"work should be fun, those expressions are not the ingredients for success"* but he could not stop himself to speak out his own fear, *"I am scared not to be able to change, that we will not succeed. Why aren't we changing at all?"*
>
> *"The emotion is the fuel for the fire and anger releases energy to create change"* said the consultant at the end of this part of the session.

## The competing commitments exercise

Complaining is a way of caring and is fuelled by involvement. A competing commitment is a means of behaviour for avoiding deeper commitment. To get out of this struggle, it is important to see what happens when one lets go of the competing commitment, what is the worse case scenario?
The MT shared a deeper commitment for success. Their competing commitments were short term and individual actions and everyday business.
The team feared losing control, low quality, loss of staff members and going out of business. In short, they feared failure.

As result of this session, the following weeks for the first time, the team had a positive discussion around a target that wasn't reached.

## Session 3 - *Learning Journey*

*Question:* What are existing best practices in transforming leadership behaviour?
*Practice:* Visit to Leadership Team which has accomplished a similar transformation.
*Desired outcome:* Learning from a best practice in transforming leadership behaviour.

The learning journey offers the opportunity to witness a similar positive and possible change elsewhere, which can stimulate own change behaviour. The MT visited a company where a similar transformation process was experienced.

The beginning of this third session was marked by a retrospective view on the last progress of the process till the present moment. Characteristic was a change in behaviour concerning communication and co-operation. They learned to ask each other for help, communicated more openly but were still experiencing difficulty addressing undesired behaviour. They still felt restricted by the day to day business.

The learning journey led to positive feedback, the team considered the journey educational and inspirational. The CEO was less positive, he didn't believe his organisation capable of a similar transformation. He believed this was because  of their rigid organisational structure.

> **After a few weeks,** the consultant went for the next preparation meeting. On his way, in the corridor of the office, he met one member of the team who said that *"the situation is not good yet, there is a lot of irritations and a sense that we should not be doing this. The direction does not push enough. And the constant change of positions does not help the situation."*

## Session 4 – *Presencing & Envisioning*

*Question:* Who are we? What is our work? What would this team look and feel like in the future? What steps would we have taken to get there?
*Practice:* Sitting body relaxation, meditation and questions. Vision work with back-casting.
*Desired outcome:* Vision of and commitment to the a more desireable future

During this session the participants were invited to investigate their own (professional) place and role in the organisation, to reflect on their own values and core qualities. They were invited to be totally present and to focus on this exercise by first doing a short  meditation to centre themselves guided by the consultant.
After the meditation, the team communicated the awkwardness of the 20 minutes of silence they had before they finally shared their insights and reflections on the question of this session.

> Finally the CEO started talking, he said that he was amazed, he mentioned the exact time they stayed in silence and added: *"it is a relaxing afternoon like this!"*.
>
> Most of the others who followed continued on the reason why there was such a long silence, but also tried to answer the question, and started to talk about what really matters to them in life. What was interesting to notice is that most of them managed to talk in the 'we form' instead of the 'I form' for a question directed to the individual and not the collective. Nevertheless most of the members pointed out their core qualities, like: *"good in structure and consistent"*, *"team player"*, *"make the connections and build bridges"*, *"loyal and give the needed push at the right time"*, *"success oriented and good determination"*, *"energy, perseverance, catalysator and trust"*, *"bring people and processes together"*, *"give directions, stretch challenges and edges"* and *"deal with complex situations and fighter"*.

Characteristic was the immediate loss of presence the moment this part of the session was over. The team immediately started to check mails, make calls and tried to get some work done despite the invitation of the consultant to have a reflective silence during the break.

**Future vision and back casting**

In this exercise the team envisioned the future; they imagined the success of their organisation and described what they saw and how this felt. The exercise enabled the team to regain faith, inspiration and hope for the future.

After this energetic exercise, they 'checked out' of the session with a description of the action each member personally took in the future to enable the change. This final question offered the opportunity to really commit to an action, to a step that would perhaps facilitate the needed change. Some of the visions resulted in immediate action in communication policy.

> What if it really happened, what if it was end 2008 and the MT reached the change it wanted. How does that feel? *"surprising", "smiling", "want more", "proud", "enjoying", "yes, yes, yes", "impatience", "pleasure", "party", "fun", "spare time", "relaxed", "when do we start?"*
>
> How does the team look like now ( in the future)? *" we help each other", " more efficient", " above budget", " self- confidence", " trust in others", " letters with compliments", " positive ambiance", " more people want to work for us", " less meetings", " complimenting others", "clear strategy", "like a football team", "focused on future and not on what went wrong".*
>
> How did it happen? *"one clear direction", "improvement of process management", "consistent choices", "doing and persevering", "happened slowly", "start to tell how good the audits performed", "when the budget increased again", "when we started talking with a toy in our hands" (referring to the talking piece).*

As feedback of this session, the CEO as well as the team expressed again their awkwardness with the long silence they had just before.

**Session 5 – *Crystallising***

*Question:* What are the core principles? What are the values? And what are the barriers preventing them from living their principles and values?

*Practice:* Appreciative Inquiry exercise. Cultural Transformation Tools from Richard Barrett.

*Desired outcome:* Core principles, list of barriers preventing change and strategies for engaging them.

This exercise consisted of investigating what the conditions and important patterns of a positive past experience were. The successful conditions in a successful experience were then turned into core principles. After an hour work, the MT came up with a list of 17 principles around how they would like to work together. Then they ranked the principles by order of importance.

> Examples of the principles they came up with:
> *We aim for a collective purpose*
> *We respect each other and invest in good personal relations*
> *We give each other constructive feedback*
> *We believe in our goal and radiate it*
> *We put the collective above our units.*

This session generated energy. Compared to the earlier session where the silence was most present, the atmosphere was this time cheerful. After this section the results from the assessment the organisation did were presented to the MT.The information showed a big inconsistency between the personal values and the values of the organisation. Characteristic was that the MT was more negative  and pessimistic than the staff itself.

The results showed 43% of entropy in the MT, which is a very high level of mismatch between the current culture and the desired culture. The results of the values scan affected all the members of the MT. This was a very powerful moment in the process, a moment of realisation.

> The results were *'shocking'*, one said that *'this image is a disaster'* and another one *'we are torn'*.

A discussion developed about how to deepen their principles, how to strengthen their team. They were eager to find out how they could create an anchor to remind themselves of this session. The values results had such an impact that they decided to use a paddle as symbol and as a process intervention tool during their management meetings. The sponsors this time reflected positively on the last step.

### Session 6 – *Prototyping and Learning*

*Question:* How can we experiment with working in this new way (cultural and structural)? What learning infrastructure do we need in place to keep developing the prototypes?
*Practice:* Change conditions (Spiral Dynamics), Kolb's learning cycle
*Desired outcome:* Commitments to experiments; action plan to set up learning infrastructure; next steps.

This was the last session, the end of the U process and the start of the team's independent process without expert advice. The MT was introduced to a working model about the conditions for change and the learning cycle. The MT was given the opportunity to look structurally at the barriers that were keeping them from changing and to look back to their guiding principles to analyse them further.

The team worked in small groups and ideas for actions were then presented to each other. They decided to deepen and thicken the principles and find a way to keep them alive, and agreed on pursuing the learning they started together with monthly sessions. They got enthusiastic to create space for conversations in some sort of buddy teams.

Specialist groups were formed to address different problems in order to create more time and space for process-related issues during MT meetings. They were eager to re-evaluate themselves on their values with the values scan in a few months. They wanted to share their guiding principles with the personnel and to ask them for feedback on the behaviour of the MT members.

Looking back on the U process the team was very positive and eager to continue the change process. They experienced difficulties with the depth of the process but had an overall gain of energy and quality in the team.

**The results**

What follows below is the situation in the organisation two months after the closing of the last session as described above.

- After the last session, the MT members held to the agreements they set for themselves.
- A small group worked on the principles and came back to the whole team with a proposal around what their guiding principles were going to be. This resulted in six principles they all agreed upon. The six principles are shown on walls in many meeting rooms in the form of placemats. They use the principles as guidelines and an intervention tool during their meetings.
- The MT now also discusses the process. The quality of the meetings has increased.
- They continued their monthly learning sessions. Every session covers a theme that matters in the current situation (e.g. leadership).
- They decided to keep working in small (expert) groups because it worked well earlier in the process; it allows more space for good discussions.
- The first session they had was about their collective purpose and their right to exist as an organisation. This meeting clarified why there was such a discrepancy between the team members. They agreed upon one purpose and created two slogans in order to keep the purpose alive for themselves and the whole organisation.
- And finally, their paddle is beautifully displayed as a symbol in the boardroom.

At the time of writing however, not everyone in the team is acting consistently in line with the principles and what they have learned from the process. Approximately 75 % of the team really made a step, but the rest remained cynical.

The behavioural change in the MT has not lead to a change in culture yet that is visible in the rest of the organisation. Neither can the organisation already claim concrete results in meeting their business targets. Ultimately they know that it will lead to better results. They believe they've laid down some good foundations.

**Reflections & conclusion**

The U process has been proven of good use for the start of the transformation process that continues till today. However considering the feedback of the MT and the experienced relapses in the weeks in between, in this case it would have been advisable to have a shorter time span between the sessions (2 or 3 weeks?). They would probably have gone down the U more naturally and more easily.

What we can learn from this case is that it is extremely important that the leaders of an organisation take the same responsibility they also expect from their employees and vice versa. A leader cannot expect from their staff members and employees to take up the task of change of behaviour without setting a visible example.

When you want a new culture with different behaviour, colleagues need to address each other on undesired or old behaviour. This is a perfect example of horizontal steering. I believe that a lot of culture change doesn't meet its goals because of a lack of this horizontal steering.

In this particular case 75% adopted the new behaviour. It is my opinion that, if the organisation wants to successfully change its culture fully, they consistently need to address and confront the 25 % who are not demonstrating the new behaviour.

*For more information on this Case Study, please contact Peter Merry (peter@petermerry.org).*