

SUPERINTENDENT'S UPDATE TO THE BOARD

March 11, 2025, Public Board Meeting



Leadership Practices that Support Success for all Learners

I recently had the privilege of attending the OECD Education for Human Flourishing Leadership Programme in Berlin. I was honored to be part of the British Columbia delegation, which included senior leaders from the BC School Superintendents Association and an Assistant Deputy Minister from the Ministry of Education and Childcare. The programme also welcomed leaders from the jurisdictions of Finland and Estonia, along with representatives from the International Baccalaureate Organization. The programme was facilitated by Dr. Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer at MIT and Founding Chair of the Presencing Institute—and his team. Our key focus was on awareness-based systems change, a concept at the heart of Dr. Scharmer's Theory U developed over 20 years of research. Dr. Scharmer's work is referenced in the OECD High Performing Systems for Tomorrow 2023 Conceptual Framework report, which discusses the notion of human flourishing.

Dr. Scharmer's work is influenced by several notable thinkers and practitioners, including Friedrich Glasl (Austrian organizational development and conflict resolution expert), Rudolf Steiner (early twentieth-century educator and social innovator), Joseph Jaworski (Author of Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership), Francisco Varela (cognitive science), Peter Senge (Author of The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization), and the late Edgar Schein (Organizational Culture and Leadership).

During the three-day programme, we immersed ourselves in the core concepts of Theory U and put them into practice. One key component is prototyping—"learning by doing" to model an ideal future state. Theory U draws attention to the "interior conditions," the sources from which we operate, both individually and collectively. It emphasizes the need to be aware of the hidden dimension of how we pay attention, as these significantly influence our perceptions and actions.

The principle that the quality of our results as a system is reflective of the awareness from which people operate was a focal point of discussion. This calls for a fundamental shift in leadership attention to the deeper source from which they function.

There are four ways that action and attention come into the world: habitual (listening from a habitual stance), ego-systemic (factual or noticing the differences), empathic-relational (listening from within from an emotional stance), and generative eco-systemic (listening from the source and from the future wanting to emerge). The quality of results achieved by a system depends on the quality of awareness people operate from. This principle highlights that inner shifts are needed to create outer change. The emphasis is that leaders need to shift their attention to the inner place from which they operate.

"Leadership is the capacity to shift the inner place from which we operate" – Dr. Otto Scharmer

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Theory U focuses on understanding and cultivating social fields, which encompass the relationships among individuals, groups, and systems that shape patterns of thinking, conversing, and organizing. The quality of these social fields profoundly impacts the results produced. The U process is a deep learning cycle that draws people to the edges of the system, connects them to their deepest sources of knowing, and encourages exploration of the future through action. The seven ways to attend to and co-shape the world around us are: Downloading (observing current reality and habitual patterns), Seeing (perceiving with fresh eyes), Sensing (opening the mind to see anew), Presencing (connecting to the source of inspiration), Crystallizing (allowing new ideas and intentions to emerge), Prototyping (exploring the future through action), and Performing (embodying the new).

This framework doesn't just apply to individual and organizational growth; it is also a pivotal strategy for addressing the broader challenges faced by our educational systems today. In a world that feels increasingly divided, the ability to lead with courage, compassion, and curiosity is more critical than ever. We need to create spaces that allow for collective movement from attention to intention, to action, to prototype models that uplift and honor the human spirit.

In conclusion, the words of Ilya Prigogine resonate deeply: "When a system is far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence in a sea of chaos have the capacity to lift the entire system to a higher order." This perspective is vital as we strive to champion transformative leadership that fosters human flourishing across our educational landscapes.



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