

Teaching Smart People How to Learn

Abstract

Our organizations must become *learning* organizations, says Chris Argyris, but first they must resolve a learning dilemma: professionals who occupy key leadership roles in the company frequently are the least able to learn. They are prone to the behavior patterns and defensive routines that block learning.

That highly skilled professionals are not good at learning may seem counter-intuitive, but that is one of Argyris' points: highly skilled professionals are adept at what he calls "single-loop learning." (Argyris' example of single-loop learning is the thermostat that automatically turns on the heat whenever the temperature in the room drops below 68.) These professionals have spent a good part of their lives acquiring credentials, mastering one of a number of disciplines, and applying these disciplines to solve real-world problems -- all of which approaches exemplify single-loop learning.

To return to Argyris' thermostat example, "double-loop learning" is when a thermostat could go beyond its programmed function and ask itself "why am I set at 68?" and then explore whether or not some other temperature might more economically achieve the goal of heating the room. It could, in other words, examine the impact it is having and could have on the room's temperature.

Most professionals, Argyris says, are almost always successful at what they do and thus rarely experience failure . . . which means in many cases they expect perfection from themselves and lack experience in learning from failure. So whenever their single-loop learning strategies go wrong, they become defensive, screen out criticism, and put the "blame" on anyone and everything but themselves. They are unable to see the impact they may be having on whatever situation they are trying to analyze, change, or resolve. In short, their ability to learn shuts down precisely at the moment they need it the most. Again, counter-intuitively: professionals are enthusiastic about continuous improvement -- and often are the biggest obstacle to its success.

So how does a firm become a learning organization -- in which managers and professionals stop reasoning defensively and actually learn from their mistakes? The answer, says Argyris, is to make managers and employees focus on their own behavior so they can reason more effectively and "learn to learn." People can be taught how to recognize the reasoning they use

when they design and implement their actions. They can begin to identify the inconsistencies between their espoused and actual theories of action. They can face up to the fact that they unconsciously design and implement actions that they do not intend. Finally, people can learn how to identify what individuals and groups do to create organizational defenses and how these defenses contribute to an organization's problems. Until highly skilled professionals, for example, become aware of the ways the reason defensively, any change activity is likely to be just a fad.

Finally, it is accurate to say that change has to start at the top; otherwise, defensive senior managers are likely to disown any transformation coming from below. The key to any educational experience designed to teach senior managers and staff how to reason productively is to connect the learning to real problems. The best demonstration of the usefulness of productive reasoning is for busy managers and staff to see how it can make a difference in their own performance and in that of their organization. This will not happen overnight. Professionals need plenty of opportunities to practice the new skills. But once they grasp the powerful impact that productive reasoning can have on actual performance, they will have a strong incentive to reason productively -- not just in training sessions but in all their work relationships.