

# Theories In Action

Argyris and Schon (1974) suggest that individuals and organizations maintain theories of action that they have developed about and for themselves. Theories of action typically include an espoused theory of action and a theory-in-use. The "espoused theory of action...is the theory of action to which he [or she] gives allegiance, and which upon request, he [or she] communicates to others. However, the theory that actually governs his [or her] action is his [or her] theory-in-use, which may or may not be compatible with his [or her] espoused [publicly stated] theory; furthermore, the individual may or may not be aware of the incompatibility of the two theories." (p.7).

## Defensive Routines

Argyris (1990) suggests that theories in action often contain defensive routines that exist within individuals as well as within organizations. "Defensive routines are thoughts and actions used to protect individuals', groups', and organizations' usual way of dealing with reality." (Argyris, 1985, p. 5). They act to buffer individuals and/or organizations from threats from the environment. For example, "whenever human beings are faced with any issue that contains significant embarrassment or threat, they act in ways that bypass, as best they can, the embarrassment or threat. In order for the bypass to work, it must be covered up...[even if the cover-up is public, much like the U. S. Government's homosexuality policy of 'don't ask, don't tell']...Organizational defensive routines are actions or policies that prevent individuals or segments of the organization from experiencing embarrassment or threat. Simultaneously, they prevent people from identifying and getting rid of the causes of the potential embarrassment or threat. Organizational defensive routines are anti-learning, overprotective, and self-sealing." (Argyris, 1990, p. 25).

## Single and Double Loop Learning

"Organizational learning is a process of detecting and correcting error. Error is for our purposes any feature of knowledge or knowing that inhibits learning. When the process enables the organization to carry on its present policies or achieve its objectives, the process may be called single loop learning. (Argyris, 1977, p.116). When the organization does more than monitor for deviation, such as question the underlying objectives, policies, and/or governing values of the process, including what is defined as an error, the process is called double loop learning. For example, complying with the federal laws with no consideration to the intent of the law or the actual effect within the organization can lead to a single loop learning cycle. Operating procedures, such as affirmative

action plans and/or more inclusive hiring practices, are established, objectives are developed, such as raising the number of minority employees over a five-year period, and monitoring procedures are implemented. Any deviations from any of these areas will result in a corrective action that returns the process or system back within the system's parameters. Single loop learning asks such questions how does discrimination exist within this organization, how is it perpetuated, consciously or unconsciously; are the minimum requirements of the law adequate to address our situation; what are the advantages and disadvantages of fully addressing the issue versus complying with the minimum federal guidelines? Double loop learning asks how did we create this mess?

### **Paradoxical Theory of Change**

It is interesting how change occurs in many gestalt interventions. According to the paradoxical theory of change, change occurs when an individual, group, or organization becomes what he, she, or it **is** versus continually trying to be what one is not. (Beisser, 1970). As such, Gestalt theory "rejects the role of 'changer [or change agent],' for his [or her] strategy is to encourage, even insist, that the patient [or client] *be* where and what he [or she] *is*. [It is believed that] change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person to change him [or her], but [change] does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what he [or she] is—to be fully invested in his [or her] current positions. By rejecting the role of change agent, we make meaningful and orderly change possible." (Beisser, 1970, p. 77). Hence, "change does not take place by trying coercion, or persuasion, or by insight, interpretation, or any other such means. Rather, change can occur when the patient [or client] abandons, at least for the moment, what he [or she] would like to become and attempts to be what he [or she] is." (p. 77). At the extreme, such as addressing issues surrounding shame, Proust sheds some light on the situation, "To heal a suffering one must experience it to the full." (p. 78).

The implications of this simple theory are startling. It suggests that change occurs when the person risks being at the boundary, where authenticity is defined as the courage to be fully who or what you are in the moment and, thus, to escape personally and socially constructed reality. However, it is at this point that angst, defined as overwhelming awareness of unfinished business in the form of embarrassment, humiliation, shame, grief, and/or joy, often supercedes the process and prevents the completion of the unfinished business and the beginning of a new way of being. At the extreme, when the angst is fully experienced, a release occurs. At its fullest, it is known or experienced as the awe of Self, where core changes can occur.

## References

Argyris, Chris, and Schon, Donald A. *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*. 1974, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Argyris, Chris. *Double Loop Learning in Organizations*, Harvard Business Review. September/October, 1977. 115-121.

Argyris, Chris. *Overcoming Organizational Defenses*. 1990. Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Prentice-Hall.

Argyris, Chris. *Strategy, Change, and Defensive Routines*. 1985. Boston: Pitman.

Biesser, Arnold. *Paradoxical Theory of Change*, in Joen Fagan and Irma Lee Shepherd (Eds.) *Gestalt Therapy Now*. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 77-80.

# Organizational Theories in Action

	<b>Underlying Belief</b>	<b>Thoughts/ Vehicles Used</b>	<b>Public Action or Statement</b>
<b>Espoused Theory of Action</b>			
<b>Actual Theory in Use</b>			
<b>Action Strategies of Individuals and Groups</b>			
<b>Consequences of Action Strategies for Individuals and groups</b>			
<b>Consequences for Others</b>			

<b>Organization or Institution Consequences</b>			
---	--	--	--

## Organizational Theories in Action

	Underlying Belief	Thoughts/ Vehicles Used	Public Action or Statement
<b>Espoused Theory of Action</b>			
<b>Actual Theory in Use</b>			
<b>Action Strategies of Individuals and Groups</b>			
<b>Consequences of Action Strategies for Individuals and groups</b>			
<b>Consequences for Others</b>			

<b>Organization or Institution Consequences</b>			
---	--	--	--