

Book review on overcoming organizational defenses

[Business](#), [Management](#)



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Chapter 1

Argyris (1990) argues that morale, commitment and satisfaction by the employees as well as the organizations are only the penultimate function, since the ultimate goal of the organization is performance. This is not least because if these penultimate factors comprise the ultimate criteria, then they only succeed in covering up a vast number of problems that 21st century organizations must deal with. This book is interesting not least because of the author's effective use of words, phrases and idioms, word puzzles etc, which tends to inspire confidence because of the pragmatic nature of the issues raised, but also because the text had already been reviewed by yet another excellent mind, Warren Bennis. For instance, Argyris refers to the slavish tendency of the organization to stick to status quo as the "organizational inertia".

Argyris's insight with regard to organizational culture and management including on issues such as organizational resistance to change that results

from the adherence to the norms; the tendency to unreasonable behavior than is envisaged by many managers, coupled by the misperception that managers have leadership, knowledge, skills and experiences by the very virtue that they held management or leadership position. The lack of the perfect conditions at an organizational and individual level must be accorded greater attention if success is to be secured. Other imperfections include the existence of barriers to communicating with the senior management, because of the existence of parallel communication hierarchies, which ensures that communication only occurs extensively among individuals at the same/close ranks and not across the ranks. Another departure of reality from the ideal situation is the tendency to apportion blame to other people or series of decisions in such a way that everyone is not responsible for the blame.

Chapter 2

Argyris asserted that nearly all the subjects in his studies worked from values or theories in use that seek to make inferences about other people's behavior without necessarily confirming the validity of such opinions, while also abstractedly advocating one's views without a reasoned/reasonable justification. The theories-in-use are influenced by implicit dispositions to averting embarrassment and desire to win. According to this notion, individuals tend to or believe themselves to be unilaterally in control of the task, environment and/or their own or other people's safety. This tendency does in turn create strong defensive and self-centered tendencies at individual, group or organizational levels, which also renders

individuals vulnerable to the reactions of other people.

In Model I, the key ways through which people try to meet their needs include the clear definition of goals that moves away from mutually defined or shared purpose. In addition, individuals optimize winning and keep losing at the lowest level, minimize expressing negative feelings and always try to be rational. Often, changes in goals are taken as signs of failure or weakness and negative attitudes are understood as signs of incompetence, while the rationality demands that individuals suppress feelings to maintain objectivity. I love this chapter's insight into what I think is the hypocrisy in the modern world, which many people think of as being polished when actually it is simply an attempt to hide some aspects of our lives. I think the transformation to Model II is important to create genuine organizational cultures and personalities.

Chapter Four

This chapter focuses on the logic-driven, defensive routines pursued by organizations, which has both a profound and powerful influence on the organization as well as the individuals within it. The logic includes crafting inconsistent messages, pretend there is consistency, avoid discussing inconsistencies and frustrate others from discussing the same. The Challenger Space tragedy is a prime example of how a technical flaw was repeatedly ignored by the team, with efforts of a few officers to pay it more attention being frustrated in order to meet the deadlines of mission.

However, the rules to manage threats make defensive routines unmanageable, especially since such rules escalate the defensive routines,

which subsequently become embedded within the organization (Argyris, 1990, p. 74). This chapter is helpful to me because it makes organizations to appear human, with decisions that are made serving human goals. However, I think, Argyris overplays the dark intention by managements to deliberately mislead and frustrate efforts to clear any inconsistencies.

Chapter 5 and 7

Chapter five sets off by decrying the large amount of managerial advice tendered by textbooks, which cannot be operationalized, not least because such advice derives from accepted theories and fail to answer the matter of theories-in-use. Effectively, this makes such advice ineffective since it does not recognize designed and accidental errors and assumes the non-existence of organizational defenses. This exposes the firm to the dangers of inbred management, which include lack of novel goals, uniformed actions, clinging to old practices, lack of ambition, poor tolerance to criticism and passing antiquated knowledge to future generations (Argyris, 1990, p. 75). In order to overcome organizational defenses, it is helpful to question errors and the attitude of the organization towards them. In addition, it is necessary to exercise systems thinking as against addressing individual errors, through the adoption of double loop learning. As against single loop learning, double loop learning includes engagement of organizational members on how to handle embarrassing and threatening issues, helping them appreciate their role, re-education and repetition of the learning experience in order to entrench the new order.

I believe these two chapters are helpful in ensuring that new knowledge

emerges, but also that individual organizations develop customized approaches to addressing their own problems as against being slaves to established managerial wisdom. However, I am not entirely convinced that old knowledge and practices are as erroneous as Argyris seems to be implying.

Chapter 8

The technical control theories emphasize the processes and the tasks to be completed as important, with humans serving as facilitators or cogs in a wider system, which ensure that the tasks are ultimately accomplished. On the contrary, human control theories recognize human capital as special factors of production, whose influence on the organization/production process not only differs widely, but is also dependent on the nature of the environment and multiple other human factors. This tension shows an advancement in theory, which has moved away from the older technical theories towards human capital driven theories of management and control. However, there is little certainty on the part of the human control theories, stemming from the very fact that human factors are widely different and difficult to predict with absolute accuracy.

References

Argyris, C. (1990). *Overcoming Organizational Defenses by Chris Argyris: facilitating Organizational Learning*. New York: Allyn and Bacon.