

Chris Argyris, *Knowledge for Action; A Guide to Overcoming Barriers to Organizational Change*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass Publishers, 1993

Leonardo M. Álvarez

Why do organizations commit mistakes? What impedes an organization from correcting systematic patterns of errors? Why is it that often when interacting well intentioned individuals produce organizations with behaviors they dislike? Why is it that individuals behave in an incompatible manner with their explicit intentions? How can we produce knowledge about these problems that can be used and tested in real institutional settings to alter persistent patterns of negative behavior without harming individuals or organizations?

Argyris is interested in producing knowledge about how individuals behave in organizations and the ways these individuals can learn and adapt to new circumstances. His attempt is to provide actionable knowledge; that is, statements about human behavior that can be used practically to improve the functioning of organizations. His position toward knowledge is ambitious. It requires that we should be able to distinguish –and

reproduce– the elements that guide action among individuals; that is, their theories of action, based on the causal patterns people find effective to achieve their objectives.

The task appears exceedingly difficult if we think about the infinite varieties of behavior that individuals present and the possible interactions social systems can produce. Sociology and psychology are extremely complex disciplines in which there is no one accepted theory. The kind of question formulated by the author implies understanding at the same time both individuals and their social interactions. How can we expect to make testable inferences about people's behavior in organizations in which we want to produce change?

The way Argyris handles this problem is surprisingly consistent, even elegant. He has explained these problems through an analysis of people's basic patterns of behavior. He has found that people can show two basic patterns of behavior: the first one is defensive, not explicit, and most

of the time unrealized by the individual. The second one is consistent with the individual's spoused values, and is explicit. The first kind of behavior is labeled Model I and is the most extended one. The second, labeled Model II, is the desirable pattern of behavior that most people would like to follow.

"Model I behavior is based in four governing values: 1) achieve your intended purpose, 2) maximize winning and minimize losing, 3) suppress negative feelings, and, 4) behave according to what you consider rational" (p. 52). This kind of behavior according to Argyris is prevalent in most people most of the time. It is based in theories of action developed in the individual's early life when he realizes that these routines of behavior are helpful to avoid embarrassing or threatening situations.

This knowledge on how to avoid threatening situations becomes internalized by the individual that practices these actions continuously and effortlessly without even realizing the existence of a pattern. Therefore, we can talk about skilled behavior. It is precisely due to the skill that individuals do develop, and the value these patterns have for avoiding difficult situations what makes it very hard for individuals to change into a behavior consistent with their spoused values (Model II).

Patterns of defensive (Model I) behavior are skillfully hidden and the act of hiding them is in itself concealed, not only by the individual that produced them but also by others that find it threatening or discomfoting to

expose them. Defensive routines are formed and this process soon develops a self-reinforcing cycle that easily becomes embedded in the organizations' unspoken norms. With this sort of culture it thus becomes extremely difficult for organizations and individuals within them to adhere to their spoused values; they become prisoners of their own relationships. Therefore, it is not because of ignorance or lack of information that organizations persistently commit the same mistakes, but because of Model I interactions that make individuals to simulate behaviors and conceal problems.

The question then is how to change. According to Argyris the problem consists in developing skills in individuals to behave consistently with their spoused values (Model II) while creating organizational awareness of dysfunctional patterns of behavior. This process can be lead and catalyzed by an external, skilled, interventor that helps people uncover the negative patterns and to start discussing in a constructive manner what has been undiscussable.

This kind of intervention is based on discussions with the individuals to find out their feelings and what the "wicked problems" are. The idea is to create a process of feedback that uncovers the negative patterns and helps individuals to become aware of the extent that Model I behavior occurs. This feedback is aimed at developing skills for dealing with difficult, undiscussable, interpersonal issues.

Argyris' argument is exemplified by an actual case of an organizational intervention in which this process of

change is initiated. The author himself is the facilitator of the organizational change in a small consulting firm. We have here plenty of concrete descriptions of the functioning of the firm and how Argyris helps them find solutions to their problems, that have become concealed and that are leading the organization to behave contrary to its spoused values. This is done through a guided discussion between the participants. The author provides detailed dialogues with an interpretation on the different perspective the actors take by making untestable assumptions about others' actions and intentions. By discussing these issues, incorrect interpretations about other people's behavior and expectations are eliminated and a new form of discussion is developed. This experiment of organizational change is the best proof of the author's causal statements. The transcriptions of the conversations, and the way the problems were addressed helps us understand the kind of skills required to deal with this sort of problems and the difficulties that appear.

This method is aimed at changing not only the external, visible behavior of people, or the manifestation of the problems, but its sources. According to Argyris, organizations often attempt to change only the manifest forms of these problems, not dealing with the basic (often undiscussable) mechanisms that are creating the situation. By addressing the defensive routines behind the concrete problems that appear in the organization it is possible to create a double-loop learning; giving a solution to the ac-

tual conflict that appeared and eliminating the structure that generates it. Therefore this process is aimed at achieving a permanent effect in the functioning of the organization.

Argyris makes an impressive work in showing defensive patterns, their impact on organizations and how they get changed in a consulting firm. However, he does not explain how to conduct change in big organizational settings. This is probably the problem that his theory should try to solve if it is to be useful for government. The question therefore is not how to change small organizations with highly trained, flexible and prone-to-change professionals but how to change the patterns of behavior within large bureaucratic settings, highly politicized and responding to multiple (and often incompatible) interests and hidden agendas.

Indeed there remains the question that if even in organizational settings where participants are willing to change, the method of Argyris would result in the adoption of Model II behavior and better organizational performance. From psychology we have learned that some pathological patterns of behavior¹ are functional in preventing the subject from suffering a complete collapse. Even with very intensive psychotherapy some individuals remain unable to change these patterns; sometimes even the realization of their existence triggers irreversible negative reactions (like suicide).

¹ By pathological I mean those patterns not imposed on the individual that persistently preclude him from adapting to the environment or behave according to his main values.

Argyris work is very useful despite these limitations; it does shorten the gap between knowing and doing. It helps to understand the kind of problems, processes and skills that appear and are required to implement change from defensive routines (Model I) to patterns of behavior consistent with the spoused values of the organization and its participants (Model II). His proposal actually helps us understand how to produce change that is to become permanent and reinforces positive dynamics. He has found an answer on how to guide or-

ganizations through the process of transformation. However, the actionable knowledge that is exposed in his book requires a very intensive process of individual inquiry within the organization. The most difficult part to learn is the one related to the necessary skills to conduct this sort of change; from his work we understand that being able to reflect and prove hypothesis about people's behavior is as important as doing it in a non confrontational manner. How to do this is still an art that each individual is likely to develop in different ways.