Continuous Improvement Associates

Defensive Routines

Meetings boring? Start late? Don't discuss the “real” issues? People go along, but don’t participate wholeheartedly?

Here’s why … and how to stop it.

Two types of learning
Let’s put learning in perspective. Figure 1 shows single- and double-loop learning.  

Single-loop learning (R1) is the principle behind continuous improvement and TQM: observe a process, take corrective action, and then observe some more to learn and adapt. Excellent.  

Double-loop learning (R2) is a higher level of learning. We examine our thinking (our mental models) to learn how to make better decisions, even with the same data. We don’t just adapt, we create new ways of doing things. It’s generative, creating a new reality.

Why don’t we learn?
We must overcome many barriers to get around the loops. One, at the “Examine Mental Models” step, is human “defensive routines.” These are a problem when others attempt to examine our mental models, our ways of understanding the world.  

Chris Argyris observed: “social scientists … conclude that defensive routines represent massive and pervasive causes of ineffective learning.” Strong stuff.  

Defensiveness is deeply embedded in the human psyche. Humans are not perfectly rational men making optimal decisions with perfect data as postulated by much economic theory. Typically, we don’t accept this finding with joy. Indeed, when the point is raised, it’s likely to create additional embarrassment and threat.

How does this affect us?
It makes us skillfully incompetent. Yes, it seems a contradiction to use those two words together. But it fits, because behavior is skillful when it works, appears effortless, and is produced automatically … without much conscious attention to the process.

What is systems thinking?
Seeking to understand system behavior by examining the “whole” ... instead of by analyzing the parts.

Learning is a feedback process. With single-loop learning we adapt to the way things are. With double-loop learning we create new ways of being and performing.

Fig. 1

Real World Process

Single-Loop Learning

Double-Loop Learning

Observation & Feedback

Examine Mental Models

Strategy, Structure, & Decision Rules

Examine Mental Models

R2

R1

Decisions & Corrective Action

adaptive

generative

adaptive

generative


What is systems thinking?

What does it do to groups?

It causes us to not talk about the real issues that affect the organization. We can recognize the truth of Senge’s statement in the text box at the bottom of the page. Most laugh — and not just because “63” is a funny number; it’s because it’s true. This effect led a colleague to go so far as to say, “A group always diminishes the individual” ... a common experience.

It makes sense that this behavior affects groups. Argyris explains: “Since organizations are populated by these same individuals, it is not surprising to find that individuals create organizational conditions that highly limit double-loop learning and protect the individuals from becoming aware of these conditions and from accepting responsibility for creating and maintaining them.”

The impact of defensive routines?

We can’t afford them, because in an increasingly dynamic, interdependent, and unpredictable world, it’s no longer possible to “lead from the top.” We need committed participation from everyone ... openly surfacing and sharing views and perceptions. If they don’t, organizations can’t learn.

A 1993 Harvard Business Review paper, “The Reinvention Roller Coaster,” makes the point that the consequences are serious. “There is an unspoken code of silence in most corporations that conceals the full extent of a corporation’s competitive weaknesses. But a threat that everyone perceives and no one talks about is far more debilitating to a company than a threat that has been clearly revealed. Companies, like people, tend to be at least as sick as their secrets.”

What causes defensive routines?

Based on standard norms we craft our

What’s your group’s IQ?

“How can a team of committed managers with individual IQs above 120 have a collective IQ of 63?”

Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline, 1990
positions, evaluations, and attributions in ways that inhibit inquiry into them and inhibit the ability of others to test them with their own logic. The typical consequences: defensiveness, misunderstanding, and self-fulfilling & self-sealing processes.

**Self-sealing?**
What this means is illustrated in Figure 2. Systems thinking helps us understand what’s happening in terms of a reinforcing feedback loop. Everyone has experienced this dynamic. The loop creates a vicious cycle when we use our standard norms (Figure 3).

**So what to do?**
The good news: reinforcing feedback loops can either take us down … or they can take us up. If the organization changes its norms, the feedback fosters a virtuous cycle.

**Norms for better performance**
Such a different set of norms is shown in Figure 4. All we have to do is to reveal the data and reasoning behind our statements and make them and our choices testable. Logically, this should be a snap because, in effect, it’s just applying the scientific method to our group processes. In fact, when this is explained, almost everyone says, “No problem, I can do that.”

But, it’s not so easy. In practice we find we don’t do it. Remember our “skillful incompetence? The behavior is so engrained, so unconscious, that it’s not under our control. For groups to succeed, they need help … they need facilitation … monitoring that the rules are really being followed.

**Facilitation**
Roger Schwarz’ ground rules in Figure 5 foster double-loop learning (The Skilled Facilitator). Behaviors based on these rules minimize anti-learning defensive routines. Embarrassment and threat aren’t bypassed and covered up; they’re engaged.

**Conclusion**
Groups are hesitant to change; they’re afraid it will lead to breakdown … where nothing gets done. But the opposite is true: groups are newly energized, more creative, … and they have more fun, too. Try it, you’ll like it.

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**Feedback is Power - Tap It**
Reinforcing feedback is a double-edged sword. It can work for us or it can work against us. When it works for us, we sense that everything is going great. But when it works against us, we often feel doomed … doomed because we feel as if we’re in a “death spiral.” It’s very difficult to pull out of a vicious cycle … that’s why it’s called a “death spiral.”

**Workshop Benefits**
Using ground rules that promote double-loop learning is an integral aspect of Continuous Improvement Associates workshops. They help groups address the “real issues.” Workshops are a place to practice in a safe environment, where the use of the more productive norms of behavior are monitored and encouraged.

**Defensive Routines**
“We are the carriers of defensive routines, and organizations are the hosts. Once organizations have been infected, they too become carriers.”

**Chris Argyris**
*Strategy, Change and Defensive Routines, 1985*