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.
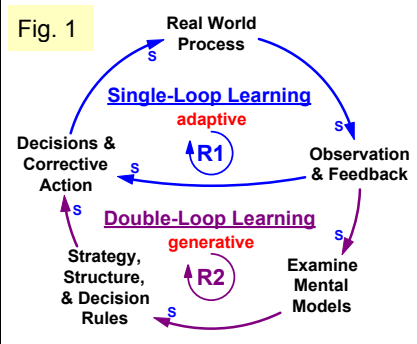
How does this affect us?

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*

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

Fig. 1

Real World Process

Single-Loop Learning
adaptive

R1

Decisions & Corrective Action

Observation & Feedback

Double-Loop Learning
generative

R2

Strategy, Structure, & Decision Rules

Examine Mental Models

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.

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

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attention to the process.

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

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.
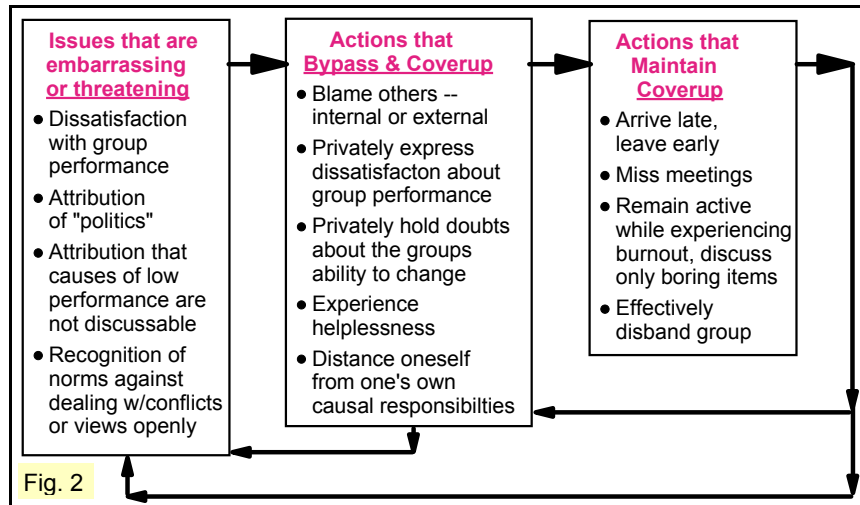
Try it, you'll like it.

Figure 2

Issues that are embarrassing or threatening
- Dissatisfaction with group performance
- Attribution of "politics"
- Attribution that causes of low performance are not discussable
- Recognition of norms against dealing w/conflicts or views openly

Actions that Bypass & Coverup
- Blame others -- internal or external
- Privately express dissatisfacton about group performance
- Privately hold doubts about the groups ability to change
- Experience helplessness
- Distance oneself from one's own causal responsibilties

Actions that Maintain Coverup
- Arrive late, leave early
- Miss meetings
- Remain active while experiencing burnout, discuss only boring items
- Effectively disband group

Fig. 2

Self-fulfilling & self-sealing processes

Figure 3

- Remain in unilateral control.
- Maximize winning and minimize losing.
- Suppress negative feelings.
- Be as rational as possible.

Fig. 3 **Norms that make feedback vicious.** These are the standard norms that govern our behavior.

Figure 4

- Base our statements on valid information that we make observable and testable by anyone who wishes to do so.
- Allow others to make informed choices by fully disclosing our data & reasoning.
- Set up vigilant monitoring of the implementation of our choices in order to detect and correct error.

Fig. 4 **Norms that make feedback virtuous.** These are the norms that allow us to learn.

Figure 5

- Test assumptions and inferences.
- Share all relevant information.
- Focus on interests, not positions.
- Be specific — use examples.
- Agree on what important words mean.
- Explain reasons behind statements, questions & actions.
- Disagree openly with any member of the group.
- Make statements, then invite questions & comments.
- Jointly design ways to test disagreements & solutions.
- Discuss undiscussable issues.
- Keep the discussion focused.
- Do not take cheap shots or otherwise distract the group.
- Expect all members to participate in all process phases.
- Exchange relevant information with nongroup members.
- Make decisions by consensus.
- Have the group do self-critiques of its performance.

Fig. 5

Ground rules for double-loop learning. To "operationalize" norms that facilitate a virtuous cycle.

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

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