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Building Learning Organizations Part 1: Why Is It So Hard To Do?

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“Learning occurs when we detect and correct error. Error is any mismatch between what we intend an action to produce and what actually happens when we implement that action. It is a mismatch between intentions and results. Learning also occurs when we produce a match between intentions and results for the first time.”

— Chris Argyris, **Knowledge for Action** (1993)

Most organizations and their people know that today’s world of enormous change and uncertainty demands change at every level of the organization. When I talk with leaders, senior managers, supervisors, and employees, I find that they are very aware of the change that is required of them and their organizations to meet the emerging and uncertain future. The answers to their problems seem almost too clear, and yet, this awareness is not enough. Being aware of the need to work differently — and actually working differently

— are worlds apart. It doesn’t matter how much *we think* we should be doing; the fact remains that if we don’t start *doing* what we should be doing, we end up doing the same thing we’ve done for years. This results in a lack of change, when the need for change is so great. For most organizations, this is a recipe for disaster.

This leads to an interesting question: **If people and organizations know what is required, why it is so difficult for them to change the way that they do things?** In my sixteen years of experience in both the public and private sectors, I have found examples of the desire to change, and, occurring at the same time, the seeming inability to change. Here are a few examples:

- People take training and find that they are motivated to make changes in their behaviours; however, within a week or two, the motivation dissipates, and the people return to their former behaviours.
- A CEO reads a book that makes him or her consider changing the way that the organization

does business. The CEO shares these ideas with senior management, who seems to be interested. For no apparent reason, within a few weeks, senior management shelves the ideas, and the organization continues to do business as usual.

- An organization moves to implement a new way of doing business that promises to increase the profitability of the company through empowering its employees. However, the process generates marginal results, and actually decreases the morale among the employees.
- A group of employees is given a mandate from the organization to develop a new process for manufacturing a product. Six months later, the group presents its plan to the executive committee of the organization. The executive committee seems excited about the possibilities, but one year later, nothing has been done to implement any of the new ideas.

Why is it so hard for people and organizations to change? I believe

that the answer to this question is deceptively simple: People and organizations can't change because they don't know how **to learn from their experiences**. According to Chris Argyris, author of **Knowledge for Action**, people learn from detecting and correcting error. However, this is not as simple as it sounds. This kind of learning requires loyalty to the truth, and inquiry into the assumptions underlying our thinking, at all levels of the organization. In my experience, truth and inquiry are not valued or rewarded in the organizations in our society.

In order to be truthful, and to be able to ask critically reflective questions that are meant to uncover the underlying assumptions and mental models, people need to feel safe from recrimination and punishment. Then, they need to be aware of the times when they are covering up the truth. In his research, Argyris has found that we are so good at covering up the truth that we are often not even aware that we do it. This is what Argyris examines in detail in his book **Knowledge for Action**. Argyris has spent a lifetime researching the reasons that we find it so hard to be truthful, and the impact of this untruthfulness on our organizations, our society, and our lives.

This next series of articles examines the concepts of truth, loyalty, and inquiry, in an attempt to determine how we can move towards the more healthy and functional relationships that characterize learning organizations. Senge states that most organizations are *learning disabled*, primarily because they are unable to learn. I would go further and say that most people are *learning disabled*, because they do not know how to learn in ways that

help them become functional human beings.

Most organizations want "... employees who've learned to take active responsibility for their own behaviour, develop and share first-rate information about their jobs, and make good use of genuine empowerment to shape lasting solutions to fundamental problems" (Argyris, 1993). What most people and organizations do not want is to travel through the process that is necessary to come to this place of empowerment. I believe that people and organizations are too afraid of the discomfort that this process brings.

Why are people and organizations so afraid of telling and hearing the truth that they so desperately need to know? We have been taught that the price for honesty and inquiry is what Stephen Brookfield, author of **The Skillful Teacher**, calls *cultural suicide*. If we state the truth, we are *rocking the boat*. We know from experience that rocking the boat makes the situation uncomfortable and uneasy for others in the group. We don't like being uncomfortable and uneasy, because we believe that these *negative* feelings tell us that we're incompetent. We believe that we can't let anyone know that we feel incompetent, because that would create a situation that would be embarrassing and threatening for all of the people involved. We assume that these *negative* feelings of embarrassment and threat are unhealthy, and so we avoid them like the plague.

To deal with these *negative* feelings, Argyris has found that, at a very early age, we learn to develop sophisticated *defensive routines* that spare us and others from these negative feelings. For example, a defensive routine that we often use when someone *rocks the*

boat is to *shoot the messenger*. We react to this person's honesty and inquiry by avoiding this person, and by not listening to, or taking seriously, what this person has to say. The tragedy of using these defensive routines lies in the lost opportunities for learning that could potentially occur whenever these situations arise.

Regardless of whether or not we like it, learning is difficult. It is frustrating and confusing, because we are venturing into the unknown whenever we learn. It is when we are feeling most defensive and stubborn that we are chained by our failure to see past our own beliefs and mental models about the situation. This is also when we need to remind ourselves that we are in a place of learning. These *negative* feelings tell us to open our minds to other ways of knowing, other alternatives, and other perspectives, even though it may be painful. If we refuse to be open during these most difficult times, we fail to learn, and that is the greatest failure.

"It is ... a bit baffling to find that individuals develop designs to keep them unaware of the mismatch [between intentions and results]. And they do this when the issues are embarrassing or threatening, the precise time when effective learning is crucial."

— Chris Argyris, **Knowledge for Action** (1993)

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