**Single-loop and double-loop learning**

For Argyris and Schön (1978: 2) learning involves the detection and correction of error. Where something goes wrong, it is suggested, an initial port of call for many people is to look for another strategy that will address and work within the governing variables. In other words, given or chosen goals, values, plans and rules are operationalized rather than questioned. According to Argyris and Schön (1974), this is *single-loop learning*. An alternative response is to question to governing variables themselves, to subject them to critical scrutiny. This they describe as *double-loop learning*. Such learning may then lead to an alteration in the governing variables and, thus, a shift in the way in which strategies and consequences are framed. Thus, when they came to explore the nature of organizational learning. This is how Argyris and Schön (1978: 2-3) described the process in the context of organizational learning:

*When the error detected and corrected permits the organization to carry on its present policies or achieve its presents objectives, then that error-and-correction process is single-loop learning. Single-loop learning is like a thermostat that learns when it is too hot or too cold and turns the heat on or off. The thermostat can perform this task because it can receive information (the temperature of the room) and take corrective action. Double-loop learning occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organization’s underlying norms, policies and objectives.*

Single-loop learning seems to be present when goals, values, frameworks and, to a significant extent, strategies are taken for granted. The emphasis is on ‘techniques and making techniques more efficient’ (Usher and Bryant: 1989: 87) Any reflection is directed toward making the strategy more effective. Double-loop learning, in contrast, ‘involves questioning the role of the framing and learning systems which underlie actual goals and strategies (op. cit.). In many respects the distinction at work here is the one used by Aristotle, when exploring technical and practical thought. The former involves following routines and some sort of preset plan – and is both less risky for the individual and the organization, and affords greater control. The latter is more creative and reflexive, and involves consideration notions of the good. Reflection here is more fundamental: the basic assumptions behind ideas or policies are confronted… hypotheses are publicly tested… processes are disconfirmable not self-seeking (Argyris 1982: 103-4).

The focus of much of Chris Argyris’ intervention research has been to explore how organizations may increase their capacity for double-loop learning. He argues that double-loop learning is necessary if practitioners and organizations are to make informed decisions in rapidly changing and often uncertain contexts (Argyris 1974; 1982; 1990).

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