Edmondson, Amy C. (1996): Three Faces of Eden: The Persistence of Competing Theories and Multiple Diagnoses in Organizational Intervention Research

In this paper the author compares three different strategies for intervention research namely from Schein, Senge and Argyris. Schein's corporate culture approach focuses on process consultation to diagnose organizational problems. Solutions are designed by the managers and researchers together. In Senge's technique (based on System Dynamics) dysfunctional properties of organizations are results from individual misinterpretations of cause and effect in complex dynamic systems. The aim is to foster learning through participative processes of the organizational members. In Argyris action science method the underlying assumption is that all human action is a consequence of design. His solution is to enable double-loop learning of individuals (= changing mental models). At the end some options for collaborations between the different scholars are elaborated and advice for an integrative approach is emphasized. In the following the main points of the paper are written down.

Introduction

- Cognitive approach → Individuals' beliefs and insights as critical influences on organizational effectiveness. → Attentiveness to changing conditions.
- Organizations should be vital communities of learners.
- Three academic traditions (at MIT's Center for Organizational Learning): corporate culture, system dynamics and action science. → No single approach as most effective one.
- Each approach is based on a theory of organizational (in)effectiveness. →Important are factors which enable or inhibit an organization to function.

Three approaches to intervention and organizational learning

- Example of Office Co. → Leading manufacturer of capital goods for offices.
- Increase in price sensitive consumers. → Shift from product focus to solution focus.
- Schein's advice: 1. Observe meetings & managers in action. 2. Do not intervene (say as little as you can). 3. Facilitate sessions to uncover cultural assumptions. 4. Find contradictory beliefs that prevent from learning.
  → Organizational ineffectiveness as function of inconsistent cultural assumptions and values.
- Senge's advice: Create a team of researchers and managers to change the organization. 2. Collect data to reflect system irrationalities. 3. Elaborate a working hypothesis. 4. Design learning laboratories to enable reflection on the dynamics of the system.
  → Organizational ineffectiveness as a function of poorly designed systems to inevitable result of erroneous perceptions of causality.
- Argyris' advice: 1. Actively participate in sessions. 2. Identify defensive communication among managers. 3. Be direct and show managers their personal theories of effective action which affects others to become defensive. 4. Use coaching to develop skills to reflect out loud and learn from each other.

→ Organizational ineffectiveness as function of a lack of interpersonal competence and resulted from individuals' unawareness of interpersonal strategies.

- In summary the three theories focus on culture, system interrelationships and managers' interpersonal causal reasoning.

Process consultation and culture: skills and values as barriers to learning (Schein)

- Enable the client to continue on his own to improve the organization.
- Culture as learned product of group experience.
- Establishing a clinical relationship slowly, after a period of distance.
- Organizational change limited by ignoring power.
- Once counterproductive beliefs are articulated, it is then possible to change them.
- Schein's model for diagnosing corporate culture: Visible artifacts (dress code, ways of talking) → Shared espoused values ("value participation by all employees") → Shared basic assumptions ("leaders have the answers")

Modeling and experimentation: cognitive barriers to organizational learning (Senge)

- Call for active participation and learning by organizational members.
- Information feedback systems principally equal to business systems. (archetypes)
- Do not attack symptoms, but work with underlying causes (→ separated in time and space). → Structure more important than process.
- Small team of researchers diagnosing the dynamics of the organization to improve it (management practice fields).
- Establish norms of openness, productive confrontation etc. (no quick fix mentality).
- Synthesize technical and behavioral issues → combine technical models with softer concepts as visions and personal growth.
- Our actions create our reality.

Intervention and interpersonal competence: developing skills for double-loop learning (Argyris)

- Human action as consequence of design (effective and ineffective one).
- Two kinds of programs in people's heads: 1. Theory we think lie behind our action. 2. Theory in use (=Model 1 to win, suppress emotions and to appear rational). → Problem: Individuals are unaware of gap between 1 & 2. → Miscommunication & escalating error.
- Individuals Model 1 creates Organizational Model 1 → culture of defensiveness, self-fulfilling prophecies, etc. → High resistance of this system.
- Model 2: Governing values (valid information, choices, monitoring) → Action strategies (advocate, illustration, testing) → Consequences (reduction of defensiveness, misunderstanding, self-fulfilling processes, errors, etc.)

Reflecting on options for collaboration

- Schein as ethnographer (clinician) → culture as powerful barrier.
  - → Model lacks in facilitating action.
- Senge as experimentalist (magician) → ineffective decisions as lack of understanding causality.
  - → Model lacks of addressing decision-making authority.
- Argyris as interventionist (logician) → inquiring interpersonal strategies to change systems.
  - → Model lacks a systematic way to organization-specific patterns.
- ➢ Conclusion: Integration of all three models is innovative and would contribute to understanding barriers of learning in organizations.