



Framing the Issue

The Work of Chris Argyris

Innovation, ingenuity, and thinking outside the box are often cited as hallmarks of successful organizations, but in practice, their occurrence is rare. More likely, the “way things work around here” is a litany of missed deadlines, low morale, strained relationships, and inept problem solving. In fact, many organizations manage to operate far below the standards of excellence they strive for. Why is that the case?

No one sits down and says “Okay, here’s our plan for lowering morale in the company.” No one asks, “What can we do to run this project into the ground?” We are human beings who desire to succeed, to foster creativity, to be competent, and to value the dignity of work. Yet we find ourselves being ineffective, settling for less, and caught in escalating cycles of unproductive behavior toward each other. We also tend to cover up inefficiency to protect ourselves, and come to see those actions as necessary, realistic, and even caring. How does this happen?

I have written this book to help people and their companies sort out these puzzles of human behavior. My inspiration and the foundation for this book is the work of Chris Argyris. Professor Argyris has dedicated his life’s work to the topic of human behavior in organizations. His research has shown that our reactions to conditions of threat and embarrassment create patterns of behavior that he refers to as *organizational defensive routines*. These routines are predictable and ubiquitous in the world of work, and ultimately they do not serve the best interests of an

organization. Understanding how each one of us participates in these dynamics is an important step toward creating a productive workplace. Learning how to mitigate or even avoid the resulting discord and loss of productivity is another. My goal is to help you accomplish both. This book, along with its accompanying interactive materials, attempts to make Chris Argyris's work more accessible and practical.

WHAT IS AN ORGANIZATIONAL DEFENSIVE ROUTINE?

Organizational defensive routines arise when we find ourselves under the conditions of threat or embarrassment. In reaction to these conditions, we engage in a characteristic mode of defensive reasoning and behavior. We think, "The problem is not me, but you." If both parties are thinking in the same defensive mode about each other, then the stage is set for some nasty behavior.

Although we would not think of ourselves as being unreasonable or ill intended, we readily concoct private explanations about why others do what they do. We make attributions about each other's motives and intentions and hold other parties accountable for the difficulty when we find ourselves at odds with one another. In the privacy of our own minds, we hold our positions with a high degree of certainty. It is hard to listen when you think the other person is dead wrong. Yet we will be the first to call "Unfair!" if we don't think the other person is listening to us.

None of what we are thinking is spoken directly to the person involved. In fact, when and if we share our emotionally charged assessments, theories, and explanations, we generally do so only with those individuals who we feel will be sympathetic to our views. These private conversations are held behind closed doors, in the hallways and break rooms. Nothing is discussed in public meetings, and rarely, if ever, do the targets of those third-party conversations ever find out what we really think. The result is "open secrets," "undiscussables," or the "elephant in the room." Most everyone can think of some example of this, often accompanied by a juicy story. What is often left out of the story is the teller's complicit participation in it. There is no awareness of how he or she might be involved in creating the open secret, the undiscussable, or the elephant in the room.

These dynamics become a routine part of the workplace culture. Whole departments become encased in assumptions and expectations that feed predictable,

vicious cycles of human behavior. As organizational defensive routines take hold of a company's culture, the consequences are increasingly troubling. I have observed companies in which defensive routines proliferate to the point where the organizational culture becomes so toxic to working relationships that the organization's productivity suffers dramatically.

Defensive routines become so ingrained in our social behavior that they become an accepted part of the "way things work around here." What becomes apparent is that the organization, project, or team isn't all that it's cracked up to be. No one is walking the talk, and everyone knows it. When this realization dawns on us, our first reaction is usually sadness, disappointment, or a physical sensation of being let down. People talk of being deflated and dispirited. There is a loss of animation. Animation, by the way, derives from the Latin word *animus* (m.) or *anima* (f.), "soul." That definition holds true here. There is a loss of soul.

But even that isn't the whole story. Along with that loss comes a sense of helplessness. Organizational defensive routines are experienced and reported as being external to anyone's control or influence. We distance ourselves from any sense of personal responsibility. We don't realize that we might be as much a part of the problem as the next person. No one knows how to break the cycle and start afresh. This self-fueling, counterproductive process exists in all organizations and plays out in one-to-one interactions, in groups, and across organizational divisions, time and again, to the detriment of all.

These situations are depressing, to put it mildly. They are also much more common than we'd like to think, in organizations of all sizes, shapes, and geographies. But there is a way to break the cycle. And although the process is difficult, it is doable and very much worth the effort.

HOW I CAME TO WRITE THIS BOOK

I came to know Chris Argyris's work and to write this book through an untraditional route. My academic background is steeped in the liberal arts fields of philosophy, psychology, religious studies, and folklore. Prior to my career as an educator and consultant, I made the rounds in a variety of health care professions, mainly in care of the sick and dying.

I never thought I would be writing a business book. Fortunately, my background, particularly in the study of philosophy, has served me well in this line of

work. In the study of philosophy, reflection is a requirement, and critical thinking is an essential tool, just as it is in the field of organizational learning. I have never been attracted to a philosophy that is disconnected from living, nor do I desire to ponder thoughts without understanding their practical implications. I follow the precepts of the philosopher Epicurus, who said, “Empty is the argument of the philosopher which does not relieve any human suffering.” Translated into the language of action science, knowledge must be actionable if it is to be at all useful.

I recognized in Chris Argyris’s work a program of attraction for those with an appetite for reflection. He prescribes a different way of thinking and acting that holds the promise of greater learning, reduction of error, and a fair exchange between conflicting views. Simply said, he offers us a better, more excellent way of behaving in the workplace. In my world of philosophy, demonstrations of the best of human action are called virtues. The word *virtue* comes from the Latin *virtus*, which is a translation of its Greek counterpart, *arête*, “excellence.” The antidote to the vicious cycle of human behavior exhibited in defensive routines is a virtuous one in which we act well or most excellent with each other.

I made the connection between virtues and Chris Argyris’s work one night when he spoke to a small group of us gathered at a friend’s house. Argyris said, “People think that because I am a social scientist, I am interested in the truth. I am not interested in the truth as much as I am in justice: how to treat people with respect and dignity in the workplace.” And at that moment, my heart was won over to his work. From my youthful days to adulthood, I was always involved in issues of justice. My generation acted to correct injustices and instilled in me a firm belief that things could change and that I could be part of that effort.

My confidence in my ability, as one individual, to change the world has tempered over the years, but I still believe in the pursuit of justice. Instead of trying to change the world, I now focus closer to home. Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk who lived and died during the turbulent 1960s, once said, “Social justice is how you treat the person next to you.” Every encounter I have has become an opportunity to act justly. That evening, Argyris’s statement confirmed a connection between his work and the passion I felt for the cardinal virtue of justice.

Acquiring the mind-set and skill set proposed by Argyris for a more just workplace is a matter of learning new behavior through practice. When watching Argyris interact with workshop participants, I would always hear him say, “So, how would you do it? What would you say?” He was interested in seeing if people could produce

the behavior they thought would be effective and well intended. He, like other practitioners of action science, was also offering the person a chance to practice.

We learn to do something well by doing it. Practice involves the repeated necessary actions for perfecting a craft. It is the cultivation of good habits. There are good “habits of practice,” a definition for virtues used by Thomas Aquinas, to be found in Argyris’s work. Like any virtuous activity, these habits of practice don’t come naturally, but come about only by doing them. Practice is something we can do, and if we do it well, we can alter the destructive path of defensive routines.

FROM WORKSHOP TO BOOK

In 1998, I had a chance to engage in a full-time practice by working an entire year as an external consultant to Shell Oil Company’s Learning and Transformation Services. As part of my work there, I developed a two-day workshop called “Unlocking Organizational Defensive Routines,” designed to focus on the interpersonal nature of organizational defensive routines and the practical skill set needed to unlock them. I conducted the workshops while at Shell Oil and, beyond my tenure there, for other companies both nationally and internationally.

On a visit to Shell Oil, Chris Argyris came across my workshop manual and contacted me with the idea of transforming the workshop into a book format. And that is what I have done. Sample lectures have become chapters. The exercises and video scenario, “Fix It Now or Fix It Later,” are incorporated into the book in order to facilitate the same aim of the workshop: to help you understand your role in organizational defensive routines.

My intentions in this book are to render the work of Chris Argyris into the everyday language of personal interactions. I hope to faithfully represent his work at a conceptual level and, more important, make it come alive for those who wish to put into practice the skill set and concepts based on his research. In this endeavor, I hope to fulfill what I believe is his true desire for his work: to make it actionable.

I should note, however, that although the concepts and skill set found in this book are Chris Argyris’s intellectual property, I do bring to his work my own experience. As of this writing, I have been a practitioner of his work for more than fourteen years. I have striven to put into practice the thinking and actions prescribed by his research. In this book, I offer up my own mistakes, practical suggestions, and way of thinking about his work so as to help you practice it better.

THE STYLE OF THE BOOK

Organizational defensive routines have been the subject of many scholarly articles and books, but this is not one of them. This book contains no longitudinal studies, empirically based research, or extensive quotations from the field's literature. Although these methodologies of academia are valuable, they run the risk of objectifying organizational defensive routines as a phenomenon to be studied apart from our own involvement. I want to avoid creating any further distance from this human reality that is already designed to remove us from any accountability for its existence.

For this reason, I am not writing in an academic voice, but a personal one. I will rely on examples of my own thinking and acting to demonstrate the qualities of defensive reasoning. I will share case studies and stories from my consulting practice to illustrate this fundamental human dynamic we have in common with each other. I hope that the use of my personal voice will evoke a sense of identification on your part. If it does, then you will stand a greater chance of altering the defensive routines in which you participate with the people in your daily life.

Use of Metaphors

My personal voice gravitates toward the use of metaphor. I like playing with metaphors. They appeal to more than just our intellect. They tickle the imagination, evoke emotions, and establish common meaning quickly. Metaphors help us grasp complex realities and apprehend their entirety in a single image. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, a French philosopher of linguistics, metaphors “yield a surplus of meaning.” Imaginative metaphors can tutor our imaginations and thoughts in new directions.

I hope to expand the metaphorical vocabulary for how we think about organizational defensive routines. Currently our language is bound up in the mechanical imagery of controlling and fixing them. We need metaphors to help us dispel their “aura of externality” so that we can more easily discover our own complicity. The right metaphor can help us find a new direction for freeing ourselves from their destructive impact.

Use of Storytelling

In this book, I also use storytelling as a means of making sense of organizational defensive routines and as a teaching tool. Traditionally, business books have used

case studies as a format for teaching business principles. They are a form of story, but objectified and removed from the reader. This approach is valuable to a cognitive comprehension of various business issues and challenges. In fact, a little distance helps the process of moving from the concrete to general principles.

In the case of organizational defensive routines, however, “a little distance” can only further reinforce the perception that they are an external reality existing outside our personal influence or involvement. As previously mentioned, I wish to avoid this message, so I am relying on a fictional narrative instead of an abstracted business case. Fictional narrative has a greater potential to draw you deeper into the complexities of human interactions. Identification with the characters opens up the possibility of introspection—to see how similar or dissimilar you are to them.

The Fictional Narrative

The fictional narrative is called “Fix It Now or Fix It Later.” The business context is specific to the oil industry, but the problem is generic to anyone who has had to face the decision to fix a soon-to-be-failing piece of equipment. Have you ever heard a small squeak or, worse, a slight grinding sound when you hit the brake pedal in your car? If you have, you might have thought something like, “Oh no, not now. I don’t have time this week to be without my car. Besides, this is a bad month for a repair bill. I wonder if I can wait two weeks.” You might wait the two weeks, get the brakes fixed, and move on. But then again, you might find yourself at some point pushing the brake pedal to the floor, not stopping, and smashing into the car in front of you. When you hear that first squeak, do you fix it now or run the risk of failure? The fictional narrative in this book begins with the characters facing just such a “squeak.”

The characters in the narrative are dealing with a plant in the midst of a turnaround. During a turnaround, an entire unit is shut down for scheduled repair and maintenance. When the unit is down, it offers the opportunity for inspectors to examine equipment and perform tests on areas normally not accessible during full operation. During the current turnaround, an inspection report revealed additional problems. An exchanger is predicted to fail sometime in the next eighteen months, six months before the next scheduled turnaround.

An exchanger transfers heat out from one system into another. A common example is a car radiator. In the radiator, heat is transferred from the water to the air and out of the system. The water cools down and returns to the engine to repeat

the cycle. Similar to a blown radiator, a malfunctioning exchanger can cause the system to overheat, resulting in serious damage to equipment.

The choice is to fix the exchanger now or to continue operating it, with the risk of failure. By taking the risk, Sales can deliver on its commitment to the customer, defer the cost of the repairs, and maintain the schedule as planned for the turn-around. At the same time, taking the risk might result in an unpredicted failure. Failure would impact the current operational budget, incur greater repair costs, cause hardship for the employees, and possibly damage the environment.

The Characters

The main characters are Brenda, the sales manager from the corporate office, and Mark, the operations manager for the plant. Brenda Fields is in her early forties and a career professional with the company. Early in her career, she worked as an operations manager. She has a strong technical background. Her knowledge of operations and distribution systems prepared her well for advancement in the business division. She is responsible for a related line of products that focuses on a specific group of customers. She oversees the capital budget, customer relations, and contract negotiations with customers. She goes to bat with senior business leaders for capital infusions for the plant.

From her vantage point, she sees the bigger picture of the business that takes into account the customer, technical operations, the marketplace, and the competition. She is willing to take risks. She is accountable to the senior leaders and business center.

Mark Listman is in his mid-thirties, working in his first managerial job. An operations manager is an entry-level management position. He has been with the company for nine years, having joined straight out of college. He has held two or three line positions in various technical fields.

His main responsibility is to manage one of the plant's product lines at its optimal capacity, safely and at the least possible cost. He is environmentally sensitive yet prudent. He is one of several peers reporting to the plant manager, Walter Burton, who carries the overall responsibility for the entire plant.

As you enter into their world, you may notice yourself taking sides with one or the other character. If you do, take note of the point in the story where you identify or side with Brenda or Mark. Similar to the defensive routines you come across at work, taking sides will only draw you into the defensive routine further and will

ultimately render you ineffective. Instead, as you read along, see if you can track how both Mark and Brenda are contributing to the difficulty at hand. If you can, then you are well on your way to understanding how to intervene in defensive routines.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

You know that you're in the middle of an organizational defensive routine when you hope and pray you don't run into so-and-so today or, worse, have a meeting with him or her. Your head imagines what your organization is capable of, but your heart sinks with the thought of the "way things really work around here." If there is still an ounce of hope in you that things can change, then you have picked up the right book.

This book is not written for managers alone, nor is it written solely for consultants or coaches. Throughout the book, when you see the word "practitioner," understand that it means anyone who wishes to change things for the better. Practitioners exist in all positions and at all levels of an organization. They are managers, project leaders, internal OD consultants, Human Resources staff, and external consultants. They are also employees who have no managerial experience, but a desire to improve their workplace and their own contributions at work.

Anyone who comes in contact with organizational defensive routines will benefit from the exercises and easy-to-understand concepts found in this book. The book includes a DVD that supports the exercises, skill set, and concepts. You can use the DVD and chapter exercises in work group and team settings, as well as in your own private reflection. Any insight you gain into your participation in defensive routines will prove invaluable to you as a practitioner. To the degree that you can use the book's helpful hints and skill-building exercises to improve your own practice, the book will have succeeded in its main purpose.

In other settings, college professors will find the book's exercises and pedagogical methods helpful in creating more practice-oriented and interactive classroom presentations.

THE LAYOUT OF THE BOOK

Throughout the book, I will be referring to the terms, concepts, and skill set covered in Chris Argyris and Donald Schön's corpus of work. I will briefly introduce these concepts in Chapter Two. I will also address the initial misunderstandings or

errors beginners often fall into when they first translate the concepts and tools into practice.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five open with narratives that show the characters, Mark and Brenda, exhibiting common characteristics endemic to the rise and maintenance of defensive routines. In all three chapters, the opening narrative fills you in on the back story to the business meeting available for viewing on the DVD. The opening narrative also serves as a jumping-off point for reflecting on the typical ways we react to the conditions of threat and embarrassment that commonly give rise to defensive routines.

Chapter Three explores the various types of conditions of threat and embarrassment. Chapter Four focuses on our internal reaction to potential threat and embarrassment and the need to maintain control. I discuss Chris Argyris's Model I, with its accompanying aims, beliefs, and values. Chapter Five covers the various bypass and cover-up strategies used to keep defensive routines in place.

In Chapter Six, Mark and Brenda's story culminates in a business meeting. Before reading Chapter Six, insert the DVD into a DVD player or computer and watch the business meeting take place. You can observe the full spectrum of interpersonal, team, and organizational defensive routines. Because of the magic of video, you will always be able to see a replay of the meeting and hear the characters' private thoughts. Their private thinking will reveal the typical kind of thinking that promotes defensive routines.

Chapter Six in effect marks the turning point in the book. The book's focus shifts from understanding how defensive routines come about to learning what to do with them. The technique of mapping, introduced in this chapter, demonstrates a method of tracking the interlocking patterns of defensive routines. This technique gives the practitioner a tool for presenting defensive routines that minimizes the tendency toward blaming and emphasizes the contributions of all participants. (The methodology for mapping is explored in detail in Appendix A.)

Chapter Seven describes the challenges that individuals, teams, and organizations must face in order to de-escalate defensive routines. This chapter, which opens with Mark and Brenda beginning to unravel their own defensive routines, focuses on self-reflection and the ways in which people can begin to engage their differences productively.

In Chapter Eight, we see a demonstration of the behavior capable of mitigating the negative effects of defensive routines. Here, Mark, Brenda, and their team are

now able to model a productive conversation. In conjunction with working on the chapter exercises, you will be able to observe scenes from a business meeting where Mark and Brenda are able to move the dialogue forward to a positive outcome.

Without a change in mind-set, though, Mark and Brenda would not have been able to engage in mutual learning. Chapter Nine introduces the four key thought enablers that support the thinking needed to produce the kind of action we saw in Chapter Eight. In the business fable, DVD scenes reveal how and where Mark's and Brenda's transformed private *thinking* shows its influence and makes the productive *behavior* possible.

Chapter Ten is a meditation on the value of learning from mistakes. We've seen how people can diagnose and reverse an organizational defensive routine. But how can defensive routines be minimized, or even avoided, again and again? Chapter Ten offers thoughts on what makes it difficult to learn from mistakes and how to view them differently in order to correct them sooner and more easily.

Finally, Chapter Eleven is written for practitioners who wish to use the book's exercises in a group setting. I offer up my own mistakes as reflections on the pitfalls and common obstacles practitioners encounter when teaching the material or conducting a session where defensive routines exist.

Defensive routines play out in our interpersonal working relationships. Any alteration or reduction of defensive routines takes place in the same arena of human interaction. Therefore, how we relate to each other is the greatest leverage for change. The medium in which we work together is conversation. If we can improve the quality of our conversations, we can alter the dysfunctional nature of defensive routines and further organizational learning and success.

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