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Edited by

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Single-Loop and
Double-Loop Models in
Research on Decision
Making

Chris Argyris

Some current research and theory on organizational deci-
sion making from the political science literature is
examined, in which the potential role of learning and
feedback in the decision-making process is largely ig-
nored. An espoused theory of action based on single-loop
learning is found to be the most general model of action.
A double-loop model is proposed as providing feedback
and more effective decision making.

RESEARCH AND THE STATUS QUO

Cohen and March (1974: 205) state explicitly: "First, we do
not believe that any major new cleverness that would con-
spicuously alter the prevailing limits in our ability to change
the course of history (in organizational theory and practice)
will be discovered." However, a few pages later (Cohen and
March, 1974: 215), in the fascinating section on "Technology
of Foolishness," they raise questions about certain "robust
faiths" that have become segments of contemporary West-
ern civilization, such as the concept of choice, which assumes
pre-existence of purpose, the necessity of consistency, and
the primacy of rationality. Their questions seem to imply that
the course of history may be alterable, and it is not surprising
that this inconsistency appears in a section in which Cohen
and March attempt to apply their framework to develop prac-
tical advice to administration.

The problem has two aspects. The first is that Cohen and March
recommend a leadership strategy that has been called (by
March) mini-Machiavellian and derivable from the major proper-
ties of decision making in organized anarchies that Cohen and
March found as a result of their research. They recommended
that the leader should (1) be involved in the organization in order
to provide the energy needed to influence major decisions, (2)
become informed so that in an information poor system (charac-
teristic of organized anarchies) he will then become valued, (3)
persist in promoting his views, since a decision defeated today
may be accepted tomorrow, (4) exchange status for substance,
(5) facilitate opposing factors to participate, and (6) overload the
system thereby making themselves more necessary.

This advice appears to be a framework for maintaining organi-
zations as Cohen and March found them: mini-Machiavellian
and organized anarchies. The advice could also perpetuate the
expectations of subordinates, especially the ineffective and/or
less involved ones, that organizations and their leadership will
never change, and can lead to physical and psychological
exhaustion in leaders. Imagine being advised to work hard, to
be present at most meetings, to provide energy in a system
whose participants refuse to energize (and through their
bickering are capable of using up any energy input), and to
facilitate opposition because it is the best way to correct
excesses or polarizations of positions.

Finally, the advice appears to sanction deceit. The effective-
ness of a mini-Machiavellian leadership is based on the as-
sumption that the reasons for behavior or strategy are kept
secret. For example, Cohen and March (1974: 211) recom-
mend that if the president of a university wants to untangle a

curriculum reform from an issue of social justice, he should create a garbage can attractive enough to seduce the social justice proponents away from the immediate action.

To those familiar with organizational activity, Cohen and March have elevated leadership strategy to what some would consider dysfunctions in organizations.

Cohen and March might object to calling the strategy dysfunctional, since they described organizations as they were and since they provided a section on the technology of foolishness which raised some basic questions about orthodoxy in decision making. The term, foolishness, indicates that Cohen and March were aware how radical their questions would appear to many theorists on decision making. What Cohen and March reported was a rational theory of leadership, consistent with their model, which, in turn, was consistent with the organizations they studied.

In examining other literature, to learn what can be done about this problem, one finds mostly conjectures and almost no empirical research. The primary objective stated in almost all of the studies is to attempt a rigorous description of the problem. This position is predictable because the underlying assumption of much research in social science is to conduct rigorous research about conditions, systems, relationships, and so forth as they are (Argyris, 1968, 1971, 1973, 1974, 1975; Hackman and Morris, 1975). Such an assumption is considered in that useful insights for correcting problems can be derived from the accurate description of a problem.

A paradoxical assumption is that change is possible even though the factors causing the problems are taken as given. For example, Cohen and March (1974) view intergroup coalition rivalries, avoidance of uncertainty, interpersonal threat, and mistrust as factors inhibiting decision-making effectiveness; but they were viewed as factors to be understood, not altered. This does not mean that suggestions are not made in the literature to increase decision-making effectiveness. For example, a collegial style of decision making might be recommended, but no insight provided on this could be attained without first reducing conflict, mistrust, and so on.

ALTERNATIVE VIEWS

An earlier model called "synoptic" described a decision maker going through a set of processes where he or she (1) identified and systematically ordered objectives and values, (2) comprehensively surveyed all possible means of achieving those values, (3) exhaustively examined the sequences, and (4) made a choice that maximized or reached some acceptable level of achievement. Lindblom (1959, 1965: 137–138, 1968) described this model, but with other researchers argued that this view was not adapted to man's limited intellectual capacities, to the inadequacy of information, to the high cost of analysis, to learning from failures, or to the close relationship between fact and value in policy making. Consequently they proposed as a third model described as an incremental approach to decision making (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Moynihan, 1972). Researchers proposing this model consider analysis to be drastically limited and the definition of a good policy arbitrary, and it is probably not possible

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to select rigorous criteria for effectiveness. The closest one could come to understanding effectiveness would be to define key questions, which, if answered, would make it possible to evaluate effectiveness. Effective action is more a succession of comparisons between actions and feedback from the environment, which provide information for the next action or decision. Since decisions are made on necessarily incomplete information, once executed, feedback is required to evaluate their effectiveness.

It is not the purpose here to argue for any of these approaches, but rather to explore the importance that learning processes play in problem solving and decision making. The effectiveness of this approach depends upon being able to subdivide problems and upon the actions being repeatable enough so that decision makers can learn from their actions and adapt their decision making and behavior accordingly; also upon the availability of valid information from the environment within realistic time constraints to make corrections possible.

Underlying Role of Learning in Decision Making

Learning is here defined as the detection and correction of errors, and error as any feature of knowledge or of knowing that makes action ineffective. Error is a mismatch: a condition of learning, and matching a second condition of learning. The detection and correction of error produces learning and the lack of either or both inhibits learning.

It is difficult to conceive of how decision-making processes that include such activities as search, design, and choice could operate effectively without valid information. It is here assumed that the more complex and ill-structured a problem, the higher the probability of ambiguity and so the higher the probability of errors; that is, the lower the probability that actions will match plans effectively. Furthermore, problems become increasingly complex and ill-structured, the need for learning increases, but so does the difficulty in carrying out effective learning.

An assumption in the three models of decision-making processes just described is that complex decisions can be subdivided and the subordinate problems solved in some sort of functional sequence. Such an approach would be especially appropriate for decisions that once made are not intended to be altered. This makes crucial the learning processes before the decision. For example, Allison (1971), George (1973), and Neustadt (1970) provide illustrations of decisions where the learning could have occurred before the decisions were made, though in many cases, it did not. .

Factors That Inhibit Learning

At least two important sets of variables can be altered to increase the effectiveness of learning, no matter at what point the learning is to occur. One is the degree to which interpersonal, group, intergroup, and bureaucratic factors produce valid information for the decision makers to use to monitor the effectiveness of their decisions. The other is the receptivity to corrective feedback of the decision-making unit—that is, individual, group, or organization.

Allison (1971) presented evidence that organizational and bureaucratic political factors significantly influenced the amount and quality of the learning during decision making. Examples of organizational factors are partial resolutions of interdepartmental and interpersonal conflicts, ineffective and incomplete search, avoidance of uncertainty, political exchanges, and annexation of other units. Examples of bureaucratic and political factors among individuals are competitive games; bargaining, parochial priorities, personal goals, interests, stakes, and stands; use of power; misperception, and miscommunication.

Halperin (1974: 235–279) suggested that there were "maneuvers" to affect the information given and received; for example, (1) reporting only those factors that support one's view, (2) biasing reports to senior participants to promote one's own view, (3) not reporting facts that indicate danger, and (4) avoiding senior officers who might report facts that one wished to suppress.

Hoopes (1969) described the distortion and manipulation of information by subordinates and the lack of open debate. Wildavsky (1964) and Wildavsky and Pressman (1974) focused especially on the competitiveness and bureaucratic win-lose politics among bureaus and departments. Thomson (1968) and Halberstam (1969) provided vivid examples of how personal ideologies, cognitive rigidities, and concepts of loyalty inhibited the generation and communication of valid information to upper levels. Geyelin (1966) and Halberstam (1969) provided evidence that key officials repeatedly and privately attributed motives to others, which then influenced the information that the officials gave or expected to receive. Schlesinger (1973) and Sorenson (1963) stated that secrecy had been a governing principle of presidential decision making nationally, and that conflict was the "one quality which characterizes most issues likely to be brought to the President." Moynihan (1972) suggested that bureaucratic political strife and competitiveness led to "competitive depreciation." Wildavsky (1964) provided informative descriptions of the political warfare, one-upmanship, and power maneuverings that occurred during budgetary processes. Donavan (1970: 32, 33) described how the decision related to the Bay of Pigs moved to execution without President Kennedy being able either to control or to reverse it, and how President Johnson was misled into signing community-action legislation that provided for citizen participation, a concept which he did not like. Gawthrop (1971) described administrative politics as games in which the basic rules were to maximize winning and self-interest. Schlesinger (1973) described the compelling need, especially of the President, for "passports to reality" ' since the world that immediately surrounds superiors is so often unreal. Neustadt's (1960, 1970) work presaged many of the observations above and suggested that key top figures seem to forget the constraints others have placed upon them by their national governance processes as well as by deeply held norms developed over years of national political activity.

Moreover, the literature suggests that the factors that inhibit valid feedback tend to become increasingly more operative as the decisions become more important and as they become

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more threatening to participants in the decision-making processes; that is, valid information appears to be more easily generated for less important and less threatening decisions. This is a basic organizational problem for it is found not only in governmental organizations, but also in business organizations, schools, religious groups, trade unions, hospitals, and so on (Argyris, 1964, 1970, 1972).

One might say that participants in organizations are encouraged to learn to perform as long as the learning does not question the fundamental design, goals, and activities of their organizations. This learning may be called single-loop learning. In double-loop learning, a participant would be able to ask questions about changing fundamental aspects of the organization (Allison, Neustadt, Halperin, and others).

Furthermore, most groups and organizations studied in their usual settings permit only single-loop learning. Recent research on individual adult learning suggests that human beings are also acculturated to be primarily single-loop learners in dealing with other human beings and with substantive, controversial issues (Argyris and Schon, 1974). This high degree of consonance between learning acculturation and the kind of limitations placed on learning within groups and organizations results in processes that limit exploration and information and so help provide stability but also inhibit learning in fundamental organizational issues.

To intervene in these circular processes, one needs a model that helps to explain what aspects of current behavior of decision makers and policy makers inhibit double-loop learning, a model that would increase the effectiveness of decision making and policy making, and finally one that would make it possible to use the explanatory model to achieve effectiveness.

THEORIES OF ACTION

Argyris and Schon (1974) stated that all human action was based on theories of action. One can differentiate between espoused theories of action and theories-in-use. Espoused theories of action are those that people report as a basis for actions. Theories-in-use are the theories of action inferred from how people actually behave (taken from video or audio tapes, or other instruments that focus on collecting relatively directly observable behavior). Most individuals studied seem to be able to detect the discrepancies between their espoused theories and theories-in-use of others, but were not able to detect similar discrepancies in themselves. People observe the discrepancies manifested by others but they are programmed with theories-in-use that say, "If you observe others behaving incongruently with what they espouse, in the name of effectiveness, concern, diplomacy, do not tell them."

Single-Loop Model

A model of the theory-in-use was found to account for much of the behavior relevant to this study (Argyris and Schon, 1974). It was hypothesized that human behavior, in any situation, represents the most satisfactory solution people can find consistent with their governing values or variables, such as achieving a purpose as others define it, winning, suppressing negative feelings, and emphasizing rationality.

It was also hypothesized that human beings learned to associate behavioral strategies with their governing values or variables. The primary strategies are to control the relevant environment and tasks unilaterally and to protect themselves and their group unilaterally. The underlying behavioral strategy is control over others, although people vary widely in how they control others. Giving the meaning of a concept to others and defining its validity for them is one of the most powerful ways to control others.

Control as a behavioral strategy influences the leader, others, and the environment in that it tends to produce defensiveness and closedness, because unilateral control does not tend to produce valid feedback. Moreover, controlling behavior unilaterally may be seen by others as defensiveness. Groups composed of individuals using such strategies will tend to create defensive group dynamics, reduce the production of valid information, and reduce free choice. Consequently it was hypothesized that a particular kind and quality of learning would take place. There would be relatively little public testing of ideas, especially important or threatening ones. As a result, leaders would tend to receive little genuine feedback and others would tend not to violate their governing values and so disturb the accepted fundamental framework. Many of the hypotheses or hunches that the leaders generate would then tend to become limited and accepted with little opposition. Moreover, whatever a leader learned would tend to be within the confines of what was acceptable.

Under these conditions, problem solving about technical or interpersonal issues would be rather ineffective. Effective problem solving occurs to the extent individuals are aware of the major variables relevant to their problem and solve the problem in such a way that it remains solved (at least until the external variables change); and, moreover, that they accomplish these without reducing the current level of problem-solving effectiveness (Argyris, 1970). Under these conditions, top administrators tend to become frustrated with the ineffectiveness of the decision-making process and react by striving to increase control, by increasing secrecy about their own strategies, and by demanding loyalty of subordinates that borders on complete agreement with their views.

Besides the acculturation of individuals to these interpersonal group and intergroup dynamics, the consequences just described would be compounded by pyramidal structures, management information systems, including budgets (Argyris, 1964, 1965). In other words, the activities documented in the literature cited above exist at the individual, interpersonal, group, intergroup, organizational, and intraorganizational level in such a way that they mutually reinforce each other to create a stable, indeed, an ultra stable slate (Schon, 1972).

Double-Loop Model

A model incorporating double-loop learning can avoid the consequences of a model based on single-loop learning (Argyris and Schon, 1974). The governing variables or values of Model II are not the opposite of Model I. The governing variables are valid information, free and informed choice, and internal commitment. The behavior required to satisfice these

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values also is not the opposite of Model I. For example, Model I emphasizes that the individuals are expected to be articulate about their purposes, goals, and so forth, and simultaneously control the others and the environment in order to ensure achievement of their goals. However, in the double-loop model, the unilateral control that usually accompanies advocacy is rejected because the typical purpose of advocacy is to win; and so, articulateness and advocacy are coupled with an invitation to confront one another's views and to alter them, in order to produce the position that is based on the most complete valid information possible and to which participants can become internally committed. This means that the leader must be skilled in eliciting double-loop learning. Every significant action in the double-loop model is evaluated in terms of the degree it helps the participants generate valid and useful information, including relevant feelings, and solve the problem so that it remains solved without reducing the level of problem-solving effectiveness.

The behavioral strategies of this model involve sharing power with anyone who has competence, and with anyone who is relevant in deciding or implementing the action, in the definition of the task, or the control over the environment. Face saving is resisted because it is seen as a defensive nonlearning activity, and any face-saving action that must be taken is planned jointly, with the people involved, with the exception of individuals vulnerable to such candid and joint solutions.

Under these conditions individuals would not tend to compete to make decisions for others or to outdo others for self-gratification. They would try to find the most competent people for the decision to be made, and would try to build viable decision-making networks in which the major function of the group would be to maximize the contributions of each member so that when a synthesis was developed, the widest possible exploration of views would have taken place.

Finally, if new concepts were formulated, the meaning given to them by the formulator and the inference processes used to develop them would be open to scrutiny by those who were expected to use them. Evaluations and attributions would be the result of directly observable data after the concepts were used. Also, the formulator would feel responsible to present the evaluations and attributions so as to encourage open and constructive confrontations.

If the governing values and behavioral strategies just outlined are used, then the degree of defensiveness in individuals, within, between, and among groups, would tend to decrease and free choice would tend to increase, as would feelings of commitment. The end result should be increased effectiveness in decision making or policy making in the monitoring of the decisions and policies and in the probabilities that errors and failures would be communicated openly and that actors would learn from the feedback.

TRANSITIONAL MODEL

It is not easy to conceptualize models of transition from a single-loop to a double-loop model that do not violate the requirements of the latter. Moreover, if one is able to design