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Practising what we preach

Dick, Bob (1992) Practising what we preach: identifying the gaps between espoused and actual values. A brief paper prepared for the First International Values Symposium, Warilda Conference Centre, Brisbane, 20-21 July 1992.

Actions → rules → values → world view

Actions

Just imagine, for a moment, that you know nothing of human behaviour. Perhaps you are a trainee Venusian anthropologist, beamed down to earth on your first field project. You have been given the opportunity to observe some humans and to explain their behaviour.

I don't know much about Venusian anthropologists, but I imagine they might start with scrupulously accurate observations. So you could watch humans closely. As you did so you could note down in detail the actions you observed. If you observed enough people in enough situations you could build up a description of typical human behaviour.

Detailed description of actions wouldn't be enough. People behave differently in different situations. People don't behave entirely the same on a crowded railway station as they do in the privacy of their home. You might want to provide a description of the behaviour *and the situation*.

Nor would that be sufficient. People may behave differently depending on their intentions. Imagine someone at the crowded railway station waiting to catch a regular train. Now compare this to the same person at the same station, running late for a meeting with someone not known by sight.

So you would presumably decide to include some information about intentions ...

“In situation **a**, a person did **b**, intending to accomplish **c**”

You may well decide to include further information — age, sex, and occupation of the person, for example: in short, the role the person is occupying. (Of course, being a Venusian you know nothing about roles; you have to deduce them from the evidence.)

Venusians probably have some limits to their information processing. The sheer mass of data would therefore be overwhelming. You would have to condense the data into something which identifies the most important patterns.

Rules

Actually, people do so many different things that you would find it hard to describe more than a sample of what you saw. So perhaps you would report those actions you saw most often. You could look for patterns in your observations, and report the patterns. You would lose some detail, but your data would be more useable.

Actions are situational, and depend on intentions. The *patterns* of action, too, usually differ from situation to situation and depend on intentions. People *in*

general behave differently on a crowded railway station and in their own home; people *in general* behave differently waiting to catch a train and running late to meet a stranger. You might therefore report the patterns of action using a formula similar to that for the raw observations ...

“In situation **a**, people tend to do **b**, when they intend to accomplish **c**.”

You can regard such statements as rules. People seem to behave as if there are unwritten rules to follow:

“On a railway station, waiting for a train, stand facing the tracks and read a newspaper or book or talk to the person next to you.”

Although the rules are not 100 per cent accurate, many of them predict behaviour quite well. Most commuters do behave in a roughly similar fashion. If the behaviour and situation and intention are frequent enough, you may be able to make rough predictions from them.

These rules, then, are to some extent specific to the situation but common enough to be often observed. Chris Argyris and his colleagues call them *action strategies*: implicit rules about action. You might deduce them from observing a wide enough range of behaviour. They are the habitual ways in which people manage their environment, including their social environment.

You now find your data base much more useful; but it still contains very large amounts of information. Your description of patterns of action can be further summarised. You might find similarities between one action strategy and others — patterns in the patterns. Identifying and describing these higher-order patterns gives you more general rules of behaviour which act across *classes* of situations or intentions. Argyris calls them *governing variables* or *governing values*.

Values

Governing values, then, are the more general behavioural intentions which people display across a range of situations. For example, there are behaviours which are common in public settings, and rare in private settings. There are actions which are common for unmarried people pursuing a sexual partner, which married people less commonly exhibit. And there are some which are more general than that — in most settings, most people value some level of tact.

As an example of governing values, Argyris identifies these (among others) ...

- Achieve the purposes as the actor perceives them
- Maximise winning and minimise losing
- Minimise eliciting negative feelings
- Be rational and minimise emotionality
- Valid information
- Free and informed choice
- Internal commitment to the choice
- Constant monitoring of the implementation

In your address to the Annual Congress of Extravenusian Studies, you can report human behaviour in similar terms.

Not that these are the only values which govern behaviour. They just happen to be some of those which together define one or the other of two clusters of values which emerge in Argyris' work. For, on further analysis you would then find that values tend to cluster together. For example, the four on the left above together define a style of interpersonal behaviour and social structure which form a distinct world view. Argyris calls it Model I. The other four define an alternative world view which Argyris labels Model II.

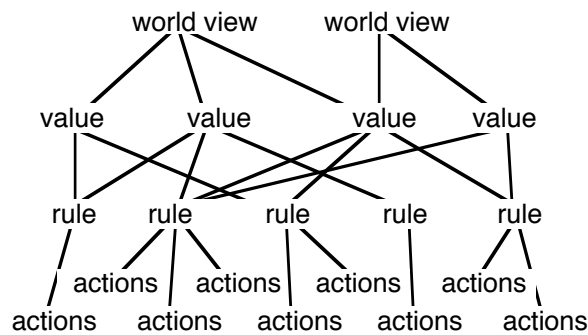
Values are combinations of beliefs and feelings. They specify desired classes of behaviour. The beliefs, conscious or unconscious, specify which behaviour is

appropriate and which is inappropriate. The feeling component of a value is what provides the motivation to act. (Those friends of yours who believe in physical fitness but do little about it demonstrate how beliefs without feelings have little actual effect.)

Many of the values are held as irrational beliefs, in the sense that people do not know why they hold them. This can make them difficult to change.

World views

As mentioned, values cluster to form world views. A world view is a pervasive orientation to the world and to people.



The figure summarises the relationship between actions, rules, values, and paradigms.

Espoused and actual

The imaginary Venusian anthropologist has so far described rules and values and a world view *deduced from actions*. Following Argyris I'll call them rules in use and so on. As the Venusian learns to speak it may find that *humans* describe their actions in different terms. They have a *perception* of how they act, and of the rules and values and world view which inform the action. In Argyris' terms, these are espoused.

Argyris is not talking about the untruths or selective truths we knowingly tell. He refers instead to the rules and values and world view we genuinely believe underpin our actions. We espouse them to ourselves. (What we espouse to others may sometimes be different again.)

He makes a number of claims about the comparison between espoused and actual. Focussing specifically on values ...

- There is *some* gap between espoused and actual: we don't always manage to practise what we preach.
- We are blind to this gap (if we became aware of it, presumably we would do something about it).

There are obstacles to finding out about it ...

- *Other* people may glimpse *our* gap between espoused and actual from time to time.
- However, there are rules against talking about the gap. In other words, the gap is taboo. People are unlikely to tell us about it.
- There are rules against even *identifying* the taboo: what Argyris calls the cover-up of the cover-up.
- Should anyone breach the taboos, we are likely to respond defensively. This both allows us to deny the information, and discourages others from mentioning it again.

And the wider system, too, conspires to maintain the silence ...

- The structures and roles of the social systems we inhabit are such that defensive behaviour develops. The taboos prevent it being addressed once it has developed.

All of this behaviour, too, is rule-governed. These rules, too, operate without our awareness. Becoming aware of the gaps between espoused and actual requires deliberate effort.

And there is more ...

Self-fulfilling prophecies

One of the common forms of social interaction is the self-fulfilling prophecy. When we form assumptions about others, our actions often produce a response which erroneously confirms our assumptions.

This seems to have two sources ...

- The role we fill when we act in a certain way implies a *counter-role*: the other half of the interaction, so to speak. The role of teacher, for example, presumes the counter-role of student. People seem more often than not to act the counter-role to the role we exhibit.
- When we form assumptions about the world, including the social world, we seem naturally to be motivated to *confirm* our assumptions rather than to challenge them.

In short, we are not motivated naturally to check out our assumptions. And in a complex world, when we look for supporting evidence, we usually find it.

In social interaction, the assumptions we form about the motives of others often trigger self-fulfilling prophecies.

Assumptions about motives

A common and pernicious example of self-fulfilling prophecy is the form which arises from assumptions about motives. Without always being aware of it, we form assumptions about the motives which might explain other people's actions. We seldom check the accuracy of our assumptions. If we do, we probably look for, and find, evidence to confirm them. *We then act as if these assumptions are fact.*

Quite often, our actions trigger a reaction. Quite often, too, we take the reaction as confirmation of our assumptions.

As examples ...

Not uncommonly, consultants form assumptions that clients are covering up something. In pursuing more information, they trigger the client's defences. Becoming persuaded that the consultant is out to prove their incompetence or the like, clients are likely to begin to cover up. This happens even if they were at first being open.

In counterpoint to this, consultants usually work hard at protecting their credibility. After all, it is often the major source of their influence. Their reluctance to acknowledge a gap in their understanding, however, implies a lack of credibility. The result may be more pressing enquiry from the client, and more covering up from the consultant. The eventual outcome is a loss by the consultant of whatever credibility she might have had.

As with the example above, self-fulfilling prophecies often go around in pairs. Eventually people may respond to each other almost entirely in terms of the stereotypes they have formed of each other. Common mutual self-fulfilling prophecies therefore characterise role-counterrole relationships. Some examples are: parent-child, teacher-pupil, boss-subordinate, and the like.

Escaping from mutual self-fulfilling prophecies

It appears that there are considerable obstacles preventing us practising what we preach. It even appears that in our efforts to extract ourselves from the mire we may even just dig ourselves further in. The existing rules and systems are in this respect loaded against us.

The necessary first step, therefore, is to be willing to challenge and renegotiate the existing rules. We can sometimes avoid self-fulfilling prophecies by following these steps at the beginning of a relationship ...

- 1 **Relationships.** Establish a person-to-person relationship by being a person rather than a subordinate or teacher or parent or whatever.
- 2 **Processes.** Agree with the other person the process to be used.
- 3 **Business.** Then and only then begin work on the content or business.
- 4 **Processes.** If the rules are breached, renegotiate them.

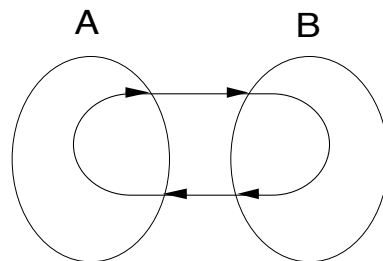
A similar approach can be used to dig your way out of the mire, with an added first step ...

- 1 **Attention.** Get the person's attention by letting them know this is an important issue for you.
- 2 **Relationship.** Affirm or reaffirm the relationship by letting them know clearly your regard for them and your wish to preserve the relationship.
- 3 **Processes.** Agree jointly on the processes to be used to address the issues. In this, include your concern for their issues as well as your own.
- 4 **Business.** Deal with the issues, trying to find ways for each of you to get what you want out of the relationship.
- 5 **Processes.** Revisit the processes at any time when they appear not to be working.

This is more easily done if a clear but supportive form of communication is used.

Communication

The beliefs and feelings of two people about each other influence their actions. But this information is seldom provided. Some of it, as stated earlier, is taboo. Until this information is known it is hard to work out a better way of acting within the relationship.



The components of information are therefore ...

- each person's actions
- the material consequences of each person's actions;
- the beliefs each person develops about the other, especially about the other person's suspected motives;
- the feelings this engenders towards the other person;
- the intention each person forms about future action.

If this information is exchanged between the two people, they have some chance of understanding the dynamics of their interaction. It also helps if ...

- you describe the other person's actions, and the material consequences of that action, as specifically as you can;
- you acknowledge the beliefs and feelings you develop as your own responsibility rather than the "fault" of the other person;
- you persuade the other person that it is important to you that you understand *their* perceptions.

The most important aspects of communication are probably these ...

- Inform the other person about your conscious motives before doing anything which the other person might see as a threat.
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- Check your assumptions about the other person's motives before acting on them, for example by informing the other person about them.
- At all times show a willingness to listen to the other person's point of view, and to try to meet her concerns.

In addition, it helps to be clear at all times about your intended and actual outcomes. When the intended outcomes are not achieved, you can then investigate to find out what *you* contributed to the problem.

This paper draws on the work of Chris Argyris, alone (e.g. *Strategy, change and defensive routines*, Pitman, Boston, 1985) and with Donald Schön (*Theory in practice: increasing professional effectiveness*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1974; and *Organisational learning: a theory of action perspective*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1978). It also draws on ideas I have developed with Tim Dalmau, for example in *Values in action: applying the ideas of Argyris and Schön*, Interchange, Brisbane, 1991, and a forthcoming book on organisational culture.
