

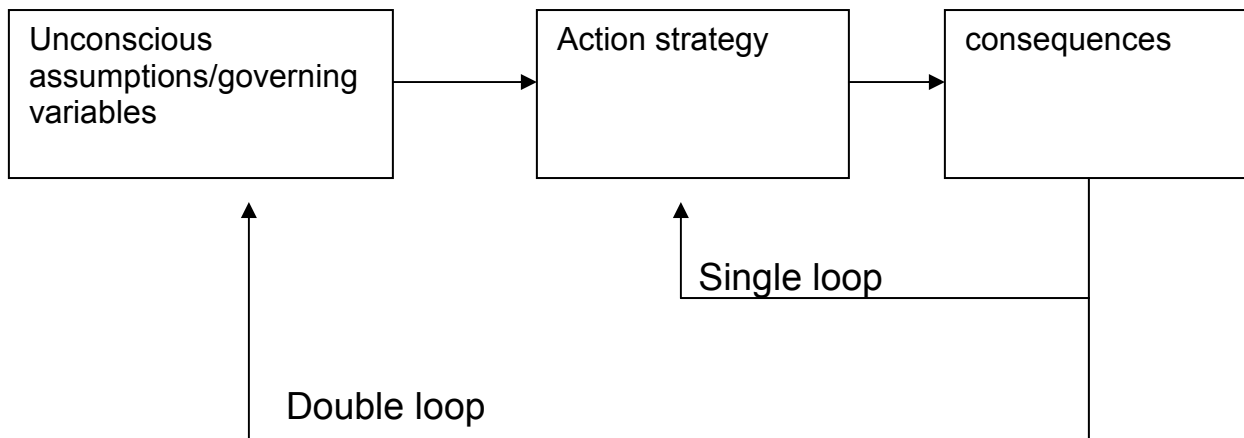
Team learning disabilities

“Every act of conscious learning requires the willingness to suffer an injury to one's self-esteem. That is why young children, before they are aware of their own self-importance, learn so easily.” ~Thomas Szasz

1. **The challenge of learning.** Learning often presents a challenge to the way we think or act. It's no surprise that individuals, teams and organisations often act in ways that avoid learning and the challenges it brings. These can be called defensive routines.
2. **Common defensive routines**
 - ◆ The enemy is out there. This defence attributes failures or difficulties to people or factors outside the team e.g. headquarters, patients, targets, IT. Even when there is truth in this, it focuses energy away from our need to learn
 - ◆ The illusion of taking charge. In the face of a problem or failure we feel something needs to be done. This defence substitutes activity for careful reflection and learning. We feel we are doing *something*.
 - ◆ The Learning Horizon. When the consequences of our actions are distant in time or space, we can't learn from them. Focusing on just our part of the system blinds us to valuable learning
3. **When what we say and what we do don't match.** We often see a gap between what managers or organisations say and what they actually do. e.g.
 - ◆ Managers describe, or teach, management as being about planning, organising and rational decision making. The reality of management is often unplanned, disorganised and intuitive
 - ◆ We talk about the need for rigorous debate and consideration of all the facts, but often feel or even exert pressure on others to hide or minimise certain information

- ◆ Most managers condemn bullying but it is still widely reported

Chris Argyris calls this espoused theory (what we say) and theory-in-use (what we do). This is not deliberate and conscious hypocrisy. A combination of lack of awareness, organisational game playing, and a belief that it is just human nature to behave in this way insulates managers from these conflicts.



4. Questioning our assumptions – Single loop and double loop learning

- ◆ **Single loop learning.** This is where we respond to problems according to existing, unconscious, assumptions or governing variables, like a central heating thermostat. This has many benefits – we cannot go back to first causes for every problem we encounter. But it also has dangers as circumstances change and our governing variables no longer apply. But because they are unconscious, we go on applying them. This leads to “skilled incompetents”, people increasingly expert in doing the wrong thing.
- ◆ **Double loop learning.** This starts when people begin to question their own assumptions and mental models, and those they share with others. However, this often provokes fears that
 - i. They have no alternative to what they may destroy

- ii. They, or others, may lose face
- iii. They may be seen as incompetent, naïve or even crazy

This fear may trigger defensive routines (as above) often including brainstorming, time-outs and SWOT analysis!

5. **Learning and not defending.** Defensive routines are dangerous, because they can mask the real issues, but they are seductive and powerful, allowing us short-term comfort and an illusion of certainty. How can we encourage double loop learning?

- ◆ **All change starts with me.** Locating the problem in everyone else is a defensive routine. How am I defending against learning and change?
- ◆ **Don't try to "fix" people.** Challenging the defensiveness of others head on makes them.....more defensive!
- ◆ **Teams can be powerful in encouraging double loop learning**
 - i. Minimise threat and fear
 - ii. Make defensiveness discussable
 - iii. Reflect, as a group, on the defensive routines that make certain topics or facts undiscussable
 - iv. Recognise the tendency, in yourself and others, to slip into single loop learning or defensiveness (e.g. we don't have time for this; let's commission a review; this isn't our job; let's do a SWOT analysis)

Key reading

An Organisation with a Memory. Report of an expert group on learning chaired by the Chief Medical Officer. 2000. London. Stationery Office. (Chapter 3, learning from failure) This publication is downloadable from www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4065083

Argyris, C. 1991. Teaching smart people how to learn. Harvard Business Review. Vol. 4. No. 2.

Senge, P. 1990. The fifth discipline. London. Random House (chapter 12, Team Learning)