Edgar Schein: The Anxiety of Learning - The Darker Side of Organizational Learning

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How closely related are organizational learning and indoctrination? This *HBR* interview with one of the founding fathers of the field of organizational psychology, **Ed Schein**, reveals the darker side of "organizational learning." Drawing from his vast and unusual background including research in the U.S. army's effort to repatriate prisoners of war in Korea, Schein speaks to the issues firms face when attempting to reinvent themselves through organizational learning.

by Diane L. Coutu

Coutu: You seem to imply that learning—for both individuals and organizations—is based on pain and coercion. Do you really believe that? What about the mimicry of children or the creativity of artists?

Schein: I believe that all learning is fundamentally coercive because you either have no choice, as is the case for children, or it is painful to replace something that is already there with some new learning. Let's not forget that kids' learning is entirely based on having to negotiate an environment that is almost totally controlled by others. Indeed, the family is probably the best example of indoctrination there is; we totally manage the milieu of kids so we can imbue them with the value system we want. As for intellectual curiosity, I believe it is just the product of earlier anxieties.

Imagine for a moment a person who is an excellent pianist. We may believe that this is because he has a great musical gift. But I'm willing to bet that somewhere along the line, someone made that person feel that it would be to his advantage to practice the piano. Or he might have been made to feel that wasting a great gift was immoral. So it might very well have been fear or guilt that got the musician going to begin with.

Q: That sounds very pessimistic. Is there some way to promote learning without all the blood, sweat, and tears?

A: No, because there's an inherent paradox surrounding learning: Anxiety inhibits learning, but anxiety is also necessary if learning is going to happen at all. But to understand this, we're going to have to speak about something managers don't like to discuss—the anxiety involved in motivating people to "unlearn" what they know and learn something new.

There are two kinds of anxiety associated with learning: "learning anxiety" and "survival anxiety." Learning anxiety comes from being afraid to try something new for fear that it will be too difficult, that we will look stupid in the attempt, or that we will have to part from old habits that have worked for us in the past. Learning something new can cast us as the deviant in the groups we belong to. It can threaten our self-esteem and, in extreme cases, even our identity.

You can't talk people out of their learning anxieties; they're the basis for resistance to change. And given the intensity of those fears, none of us would ever try something new unless we experienced the second form of anxiety, survival anxiety—the horrible realization that in order to make it, you're going to have to change. Like prisoners of war, potential learners experience so much hopelessness through survival anxiety that eventually they become open to the possibility of learning. But even this dejection is not necessarily enough. Individuals can remain in a state of despair permanently.

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>
> — Edgar Schein

Q: How can leaders help their followers maximize their learning while minimizing their pain?

A: The basic principle is that learning only happens when survival anxiety is greater than learning anxiety. Of course, there are two ways to accomplish that. Either you can increase the survival anxiety by threatening people with loss of jobs or valued rewards, or you can decrease learning anxiety by creating a safer environment for unlearning and new learning. The problem is that the creation of psychological safety is usually very difficult, especially when you're pushing for greater workforce productivity at the same time. Psychological safety is also dramatically missing when a company is downsizing or undergoing a major structural change, such as reorganizing into flatter networks.

Most companies prefer to increase survival anxiety because that's the easier way to go. And that, I think, is where organizations have it absolutely wrong. To the extent that our present managerial practices emphasize the stick over the carrot, companies are building in strong resistance to learning. That's very predictable, because in most organizations managers bully their followers to learn—or else. Then when the latest corporate change program turns out to be just another case of the manager crying wolf, and he gets fired as a result, employees settle into a wait-and-see attitude. If leaders really want workers to learn new things, they have to educate them about economic realities in a way that makes their messages credible. When management gains that credibility, it can create the kind of anxiety that leads to a safe learning environment.

In this respect, it's important to distinguish between forcing people to learn something they can see the need to accept—such as new computer skills—and asking them to learn something that seems questionable to them. There will always be learning anxiety, but if the employee accepts the need to learn, then the process can be greatly facilitated by good training, coaching, group support, feedback, positive incentives, and so on.

Q: In organizations, what creates all the anxiety that gets the learning started?

A: The evidence is mounting that real change does not begin until the organization experiences some real threat of pain that in some way dashes its expectations or hopes. This threat can come from a number of places internally, including from the CEO, or it can come from competitors. Whatever its source, this threat of pain creates high levels of learning anxiety and survival anxiety, ultimately prompting the organization to launch a serious change program. Not surprisingly, it is often the CEO and other executives who feel most threatened by any new learning because it reveals their behavior to be dysfunctional. However, I would like to emphasize that unless leaders become learners themselves—unless they can acknowledge their own vulnerabilities and uncertainties—then transformational learning will never take place. When leaders become genuine learners, they set a good example and help to create a psychologically safe environment for others.

Q: Would you say that learning needs to start at the top then?

A: Not at all. Commitment and change at the top certainly increase the chances for the transformational

program to succeed, but if you study cases of major change in organizations, you'll find that learning most often begins with a small group and only gradually spreads across the organization and then up. In fact, it's rather common for individuals or small groups to make major strides in their own learning before the rest of the organization does. When those learners begin to innovate, however, they make other people anxious and envious, so the organization's autoimmune system rejects them. Indeed, individual learning can be a dangerous thing when the organization's value system and culture don't have enough freedom to allow individuals to do what they need to do. In those instances, we shouldn't expect the organization to foster individual creativity, because that's just not possible.

Q: How can innovative learners protect themselves from being sprung by the organization?

A: As we learned from the prisoners of war in Korea, resilience is often the ability to make yourself invisible. In organizations, individual learners lie, cheat, go underground—they do whatever they have to do to remain invisible. And in large organizations, going underground isn't that difficult. There is this wonderful story about the guy who was first proposing the PC project to IBM's senior management. He had to get the board's approval for his project and was given only five minutes on the agenda at the end of the day. He was unhappy about this until his boss told him how lucky he was: "Because you only have those few minutes, they are going to hear whatever they want to hear, and your project will go through." The implication is that IBM might never have approved the project if senior managers had given the learners in the organizations careful consideration.

By the way, groups are much better than individuals at surviving coercive pressures, as we can see from another Digital story. An engineering group that was working on an accelerated computer chip didn't have support from several key senior managers, who believed that the development costs of the chip were excessive and preferred to allocate funds to other projects. Nevertheless, the group members survived by finding other sources of money inside the organization, and they developed the chip anyway. The group's own survival anxiety was sufficient to overcome all kinds of organizational obstacles.

Individuals and groups within an organization can learn new things that run counter to the organization's culture, and these new things can survive. But the crucial point is that this is not organizational learning, because the organization itself did not learn anything. If the organization as a whole is to learn, top management must coercively impose new beliefs and practices on the entire membership.

Q: What can managers do about employees who resist learning?

A: There are a lot of traps here. Managers have to realize that it's important not to put a value on learning per se because doing that can be dysfunctional. Consider something as ostensibly innocuous as the learning that is supposed to take place at the off-site meetings and Outward Bound programs that many companies now sponsor. These companies force their employees to climb trees all day and then reveal personal stuff to one another at night. It's very strange to think about a bunch of people sitting around the campfire and confessing their problems and their marital pains. These bonding activities seem like a very coercive way to shame somebody into being as open as he can be and then getting him to spill his guts. The idea, obviously, is to create bonds among individuals so they will become a much stronger group, but the camaraderie can come at a cost to the individual, who may prefer to protect his true personality. So yes, the group has learned something. But that learning was coerced, and the resulting new team may be dysfunctional because its members are not necessarily being true to themselves. In fact, there are occasions when individuals do the organization a huge favor by refusing to learn.

Another example of inappropriate learning that comes to mind is 360-degree feedback. In this process, subordinates are supposed to learn to give open and honest feedback to their bosses. But one group of engineers I interviewed had wisely chosen not to tell their boss certain things because they knew he was too

fragile to accept that kind of criticism. Instead, they spoke up more during meetings and raised objections to their boss's behavior "in real time." Giving such spontaneous feedback proved to be very effective. The subordinates turned out to know better than the human resources department exactly what they needed to do to get the message across to their boss.

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Diane L. Coutu is a senior editor at *Harvard Business Review*.

Edgar H. Schein is the Sloan Fellows Professor of Management Emeritus at MIT's Sloan School of Management and an expert on organizational development.

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