

The More You Know, The More You See

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The Breckenridge Institute



Studies in Organizational Culture

2007



A Newsletter Published by the Breckenridge Institute
A Research Center for the Study of Organizational Culture

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I was once on a scuba diving trip to the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia, and one of the dive masters who knew a lot about marine life would always say, “The more you know, the more you see.” With over 1,500 species of fish, 1,000 species of mollusks and crustaceans, and 600 species of coral, it was easy for divers to get overwhelmed by the sheer number of types of sea life living on the reef. It was also easy to misidentify species because a diver had an inadequate (or incorrect) knowledge of the taxonomies and empirical and theoretical foundations of marine biology. Before each dive, two marine biologists would give workshops on marine life that taught us how to recognize the differences between the myriad fish, coral, and the other sea life that we would likely encounter during our next dive. This new knowledge paid big dividends because divers were able to identify subtle differences in what formerly seemed like an overwhelming visual array of sea life pulsating on the reef.

The process of assessing and changing organizational culture has some important things in common with this diving example. When first entering an organization, it’s easy for consultants to get overwhelmed by the sheer number of variables because, like the coral reef, even small organizations of less than 100 people are complex goal seeking organisms composed of structures, systems, human performers, and culture. It’s also easy for consultants to misidentify the underlying causes of organizational and individual behavior if they have an inadequate (or incorrect) knowledge of the empirical and theoretical foundations of how organizations work. In the absence of models that are reliable predictors of organizational and human behavior, it’s easy for consultants to misdiagnose what’s actually happening in an organization by focusing on symptoms and causal factors, rather than the underlying “root” causes of organizational performance and culture which are often *invisible* and function like an Invisible Bureaucracy that frustrates and undermines organizational and individual performance. Reliable empirical and theoretical models help make Invisible Bureaucracy visible, so the more a consultant *knows* about them, the more they will see in terms of being able to help their clients assess and change organizational culture.

For example, Chris Argyris explores the issue of needing reliable models to see the underlying causes of effective and ineffective organizational and individual behavior in his book, *Flawed Advice and the Management Trap*. Argyris evaluates representative examples of over 100 books and myriad articles published by the world's most respected business gurus, and then uses his own theoretical model (theory of action) to evaluate the kind of causal analysis and recommendations for change that these publications give readers. His study includes the likes of Stephen R. Covey, John Kotter, Jon Katzenback, Peter Drucker and other business-literature experts. He concludes that much of the causal analysis and many of the recommendations given by these authors is appealing, and even compelling, but most of it *is not actionable*. In other words, even if a manager could fully implement the recommendations these business luminaries give them, the resulting corrective actions would not lead to the kind of positive change and sustainable improvement that the authors claim it would.

Argyris concludes that, "Since thoughtful and well-intentioned advice givers do not intentionally offer counsel that is full of gaps and inconsistencies, there must be something in the frameworks on which they rely that makes them unaware of these problems – as well as unaware that they are unaware." In other words, the "surface theories" that these writers espouse are based on tacit, unexamined assumptions, beliefs, and models that are not *reliable* in the sense that they do not accurately describe and predict the behavior of organizations and the people in them. So it's important that consultants understand the tacit, unexamined assumptions, beliefs, and models upon which their causal analysis and recommendations are based by evaluating them against criteria like the ones listed below.

Reliability: To what extent are a consultant's causal analysis and recommendations based on an underlying theoretical model of organizations, work-groups, human interaction, and cognitive operations-preferences that is *reliable*; e.g., it describes and predicts the actions, interactions, and overall performance of organizations, work-groups, and the people in them?

Validity: To what extent are the reasoning and assumptions that underlie the causal analysis and recommendations *valid* in the sense that they have been reflected on, made explicit, and subject to public tests and scrutiny to deconstruct organizational defense routines and establish the "organizational truth" of what's really going on in the situation? Validity helps avoid the self-fulfilling and self-sealing cycle that creates and sustains ineffective-invisible cultural norms; organizational defense routines; tacit beliefs and assumptions that are not reliable and are based on stereotypes, and patterns-of-interaction between key personnel that frustrate and undermine high-performance.

Being Actionable: To what extent are a consultant's causal analysis and recommendations *actionable* in the sense that: a) they outline detailed concrete behaviors that will produce the desired results, b) they can be crafted so people can be taught and learn the concepts, behaviors, and skills required to produce the desired results, and c) the implementation of the corrective actions will not be frustrated and/or undermined (overtly-covertly, intentionally-unintentionally) by the organizational context and cultural norms within which they are embedded?

As mentioned previously, it's easy for consultants to misidentify the underlying causes of organizational and individual behavior if they have an inadequate (or incorrect) knowledge of the empirical and theoretical foundations of how organizations work.

Field experience with clients has shown that if a consultant cannot clearly articulate the underlying theoretical foundations upon which their causal analysis and recommendations are based, and if their approach to working with organizations (and the people in them) do not satisfy criteria like those listed above, then it's unlikely that their assessment findings and recommendations will lead to long-term, sustainable, positive change in an organization. One of the objectives of my forthcoming book entitled *Making Invisible Bureaucracy Visible* is to teach consultants and managers to reflect on (and be more aware of) their own tacit, unexamined assumptions, beliefs, and models and the ways in which their knowledge-base and views about how organizations work powerfully shape and define what they "see" when they assess organizational culture.