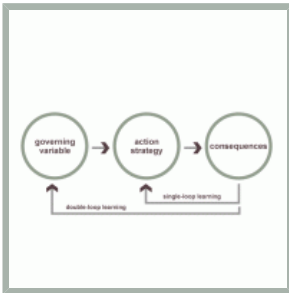


## double loop learning



### characteristics

author:	Argyris, Chris and Schön, Donald Alan
country:	United States
period:	1978
type:	theory
role:	consultant and change agent
activity:	analyse and reflect
topic:	org. design & development, innovation & risk and change management
abstr. level:	organisation
perspective:	learning
status:	final
module:	classics I
comments:	1

### description:

Psychologist Chris Argyris and philosopher Donald Schön's intervention research focused on exploring the ways organisations can increase their capacity for double-loop learning. They argued that double-loop learning is necessary if organisations and its members are to manage problems effectively that originate in rapidly changing and uncertain contexts.

Argyris and Schön distinguished three levels of learning in organisations.

#### 1. SINGLE-LOOP learning

"Adaptive learning" focuses on incremental change. This type of learning solves problems but ignores the question of why the problem arose in the first place.

#### 2. DOUBLE-LOOP learning

Generative learning focuses on transformational change that changes the status quo. Double loop learning uses feedback from past actions to question assumptions underlying current views. When considering feedback, managers and professionals need to ask not only the reasons for their current actions, but what to do next and even more importantly, why alternative actions are not to be implemented.

#### 3. DEUTERO-learning

Learning how to learn better by seeking to improve both single- and double-loop learning.

People's tacit mental maps provide guidance on acting in situations: planning, implementing and reviewing their actions. Learning is based on the detection and correction of errors given a current set of norms, the applied action strategy and the realised outcome.




Argyris and Schön regarded individuals as the key to organisational learning. People constructing and sharing mental maps make the development of organisational memory and learning possible.

The theory-in-action concept of the two researchers substantiated that a gap exists between what individuals say they want to do (espoused theory) and what they actually do (theory in use). People always behave consistently with their mental models (theory-in-use) even though they often do not act in accordance with what they say (espoused theory). This concept is useful in understanding organisational behaviour and change processes.

Top management issuing orders, memos and directives alone is insufficient to change employees' behaviour. Single-loop learning often leads to organisational malaise resulting in symptoms such as defensiveness, cynicism, hopelessness, evasion, distancing, blaming, and rivalry.

In order to effectively come to grips with new situations, the espoused theories need to be aligned with the theories in use. Double-loop learning techniques help the organisation members learn together and the organisation change.

### assets:

-  **double loop intervention process**  
ProvenModels • editor PM • version 0.2 • 50 KB
-  **double loop learning**  
ProvenModels • editor PM • version 0.2 • 42 KB
-  **double loop reflection technique**  
ProvenModels • editor PM • version 0.2 • 61 KB

### pros:

- The model helps conceptualise organisational learning by overcoming the taken-for-granted aspects of organisations and by detecting and solving structural problems.
- Argyris and Schön offered a way to learn proactively by examining underlying assumptions of behaviour. Earlier learning cycles such as Kolb's, used trial and error as the principal learning mechanism that allowed introspection only after the action.
- Double loop learning emphasised that ideas, even from valued experts, should never be accepted at face value. Experience of employees within and specific to the organisation, creates real change.

### cons:

- Without substantiating their assumption, Argyris and Schön suggested that most people would desire a double-loop learning orientation and practice, but that they apply single-loop learning. Simon's 'bounded rationality' theory assumed that human search effort is limited. Solutions are not chosen because they are the best of alternatives, but because they are satisfactory.
- Organisational change occurs when behavioural defences by individuals and groups are overcome and new interactions take place. This perspective overlooks the role systems and structures play in change processes.

processes.

- Argyris and Schön assumed that the best learning takes place in an open, apolitical climate. They omitted conflict as a powerful enabler of change and ignored the role of politics in organisations.

#### references:

- Organizational Learning  
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