

Chris Argyris

Theories of action: theory-in-use and espoused theory

Argyris and Schön (1974) argue that people have mental maps with regard to how to act in situations. This involves the way they plan, implement and review their actions. Furthermore, it is these maps that guide people's actions rather than the theories they explicitly espouse. What is more, fewer people are aware of the maps or theories they do use (Argyris, 1980). One way of making sense of this is to say that there is split between theory and action. Argyris and Schön suggest that two *theories of action* are involved.

A theory of action is first a theory: 'its most general properties are properties that all theories share, and the most general criteria that apply to it – such as generality, centrality and simplicity - are criteria applied to all theories' (Argyris and Schön 1974: 4). The distinction made between the two contrasting *theories of action* is between those theories that are implicit in what we do as practitioners and managers, and those on which we call to speak of our actions to others. The former can be described as *theories-in-use*. They govern actual behaviour and tend to be tacit structures. Their relation to action 'is like the relation of grammar-in-use to speech; they contain assumptions about self, others and environment - these assumptions constitute a microcosm of science in everyday life' (Argyris & Schön 1974: 30). The words we use to convey what we, do or what we would like others to think we do, can then be called *espoused theory*.

When someone is asked how he would behave under certain circumstances, the answer he usually gives is his espoused theory of action for that situation. This is the theory of action to which he gives allegiance, and which, upon request, he communicates to others. However, the theory that actually governs his actions is this theory-in-use. (Argyris and Schön 1974: 6-7)

Making this distinction allows us to ask questions about the extent to which behaviour fits espoused theory; and whether inner feelings become expressed in actions. In other words, is there congruence between the two? Argyris (1980) makes the case that effectiveness results from developing congruence between theory-in-use and espoused theory.

For example, in explaining our actions to a colleague we may call upon some convenient piece of theory. We might explain our sudden rush out of the office to others, or even to ourselves at some level, by saying that a 'crisis' had arisen with one of 'our' clients. The theory-in-use might be quite different. We may have become bored and tired by the paper work or meeting and felt that a quick trip out to an apparently difficult situation would bring welcome relief. A key role of

reflection, we could argue, is to reveal the theory-in-use and to explore the nature of the 'fit'.

Much of the business of supervision, where it is focused on the practitioner's thoughts, feelings and actions, is concerned with the gulf between espoused theory and theory-in-use or in bringing the latter to the surface. This gulf is no bad thing. If it gets too wide then there is clearly a difficulty. But provided the two remain connected then the gap creates a dynamic for reflection and for dialogue.