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Inconsistent and Unactionable Advice

ONE OF THE MOST OFTEN-CITED BOOKS on personal leadership is Steven Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), which is based on a set of principles that emphasize the importance of character and responsibility. Covey advises that the first step to effectiveness–a process that he calls "inside-out"–is to begin with one's self. From these basic principles, Covey derives such advice as: Develop trust, Generate positive energy, and Sidestep negative energy. The strategy is to be positive. The source of this positivism is a genuine caring for others, which depends, in turn, on first caring for one's self.

Covey provides a detailed example of how he used these principles in dealing with his son. But he makes it clear that the actions he took and the principles he followed apply to any situation where a "subordinate" is performing in a disappointing manner that does not meet jointly-arrived-at performance goals (pp. 175–179).

After a two-week discussion period, Covey decided to offer his son the job of cleaning up the yard to "make it green and clean." Consistent with his philosophy, he wanted his son to own the responsibility for the task. To help assure his son's commitment, he made him the boss; he himself would be his son's helper. We pick up the conversation at this point:

I said. "You boss me."

"I do?"

"That's right. But my time to help is limited. Sometimes I'm away. But when I'm here, you tell me how I can help. I'll do anything you want me to do.

"Okay!"

"Now guess who judges you."

"Who?"

"You judge yourself."

"I do?"

"That's right. Twice a week the two of us will walk around the yard, and you can show me how it's coming. How are you going to judge?"

"Green and clean."

"Right!"

I trained him with those two words for two weeks before I felt he was ready to take the job. Finally, the big day came.

"Is it a deal, Son?"

"It's a deal."

"Green and clean."

"What's green?"

He looked at our yard, which was beginning to look better. Then he pointed next door. "That's the color of his yard."

"What's clean?"

"No messes."

"Who's the boss?"

"I am."

"Who's your helper?"

"You are, when you have the time."

"Who's the judge?"

"I am. We'll walk around two times a week and I can show you how it's coming."

"And what will we look for?"

"Green and clean."

Four days later, when the son had done nothing, Covey began to feel frustrated and somewhat betrayed. He describes his feelings as follows:

> This was not acceptable. I was upset and disillusioned by his performance after two weeks of training and all those commitments. We had a lot of effort, pride, and money invested in the yard and I could see it going down the drain. Besides, my neighbor's yard was manicured and beautiful, and the situation was beginning to get embarrassing.
>
> I was ready to go back to gofer delegation. Son, you get over here and pick up this garbage right now or else! I knew I could get the golden egg that way. But what about the goose? What would happen to his internal commitment?
>
> So I faked a smile and yelled across the street, "Hi son. How's it going?"
>
> "Fine!" he returned.
>
> "How's the yard coming?" I knew the minute I said it I had broken our agreement. That's not the way we had set up an accounting. That's not what we had agreed.

So he felt justified in breaking it, too. "Fine, Dad."

I bit my tongue and waited until after dinner. Then I said, "Son, let's do as we agreed. Let's walk around the yard together and you can show me how it's going in your stewardship."

As we started out the door, his chin began to quiver. Tears welled up in his eyes and, by the time we got out to the middle of the yard, he was wimpering.

"It's so hard, Dad!"

What's so hard? I thought to myself. You haven't done a single thing! But I knew what was hard–self-management, self-supervision. So I said, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Would you, Dad?" he sniffed.

"What was our agreement?"

"You said you'd help me if you had time."

"I have time."

So he ran into the house and came back with two sacks. He handed me one. "Will you pick that stuff up?" He pointed to the garbage from Saturday night's barbecue. "It makes me sick!"

So I did. I did exactly what he asked me to do. And that was when he signed the agreement in his heart. It became his yard, his stewardship.

It is possible to generate a different set of lessons from this situation than those drawn in the text. Covey was, for example, enthusiastic about his son's accepting responsibility for taking care of the yard. He rehearsed and re-rehearsed with his son the basic features of the relationship. The son was responsible for judging his own performance, for being his own leader, and for using his father, when appropriate, as a helper. Covey was to act as a champion. The language used here should be familiar to those who read the literature on generating employee commitment.

Being a dedicated champion did not, however, work at the outset. The son did not respond as promised or as the champion expected. Again, this is a familiar situation in many commitment programs. Not surprisingly, Covey began to feel bewildered, upset, and betrayed. His automatic response was to take action that amounted to a reversal of the course he had been championing. Again, this is not news. Many champions have reported such feelings. But there *is* something newsworthy if we dig a bit further. Where did this reaction come from—given that it was clearly counterproductive to Covey's espoused theory of personal leadership?

Underneath this surface theory there exists an older, counterproductive routine that Covey activated in his mind, but was careful not to use. Why? Because he knew it was counterproductive, he suppressed it. Again, why? Because he felt it was important to be positive. And what is positive about suppressing bewilderment? Bewilderment, after all, was not, by itself, likely to make the son defensive, nor was it likely to make it easy for the son to accuse his father of acting in ways that violated their mutual promise.

Now, step back a moment and look at this from a different angle. What Covey actually does is suppress his feelings—and, even more important, he covers up the fact that he is doing so. The issue here is that, although Covey advises people to act authentically, he himself does not do so. Suppression and cover-ups do not lead to authenticity. Patience that translates into several days of false behavior and smiling even though the smile is fake simply do not create authenticity—even if done in the name of being positive and caring. Genuine trust and caring cannot be produced by inauthentic actions. Nor by the pretense that what is going on is not inauthentic.

The advice is clear. If trust were really being developed, what prevented the son, during the first day, from saying, "Dad, I am unable to fulfill my commitment because some of the garbage makes me feel sick"? If he had, I believe that Covey would have been delighted to pitch in and help. The fact is that, in practice, the son had not really accepted that, as a "subordinate," he could ask his dad to help him. True, his father had championed this possibility. And true, the son had promised he would do so. But neither was enough. By themselves, rehearsal and agreement were inadequate.

Subordinates are often embarrassed to admit they are hesitant to take initiatives that they have been invited–and have agreed–to take. This puts them in a double bind. If they hide their feelings, they are violating the relationship. But if they expose them, they will be admitting that they are bypassing their earlier agreement and acting as if they were not doing so.

Moreover, if they are aware that they are not performing as promised and that their supervisors feel frustrated and upset, how can they express these feelings without violating a theory of personal leadership that advises them to be positive? Perhaps by covering up and keeping silent they are, in their own view, being positive?

A further complication, of course, is that, in the name of positiveness and patience, the necessary work is not getting done. What if this happened in an organizational setting in which others were privy to the promises of performance? Might they not begin to wonder what the boss was waiting for? But, if they followed Covey's advice, they might see these questions as generating negative energy and defensiveness. So they would suppress them and then act as if they were not doing so.

We can now see that, embedded in Covey's theory of personal leadership, as illustrated in this example, is a causal scenario that goes something like this:

1. Create trust because that is the highest form of human motivation.
2. If you create trust, you will bring out the best in people.
3. Be patient.
4. If you follow the advice, everyone involved will benefit and, ultimately, much more work will get done in much less time.

If we examine this scenario closely, we find that it has some troublesome features. The causal claims are crafted in ways that cannot be tested in real life. The theory does not, for example, tell potential leaders how to create trust without also producing mistrust. Nor is it clear how a combination of trust and mistrust, accompanied by cover-ups, will bring out the best in people. Nor is it possible to know when patience is a defense.

Even so, Covey writes, "I am convinced that both partners will benefit [if they follow my advice]." Although I honestly doubt this claim, it may well be true. My problem is not that Covey makes this claim. It is that he makes it in ways that cannot be tested by a potential user. Let me be clear. The theory is morally attractive. Personally, I like the emphasis given such qualities as personal responsibility, authenticity, trust, genuine caring, and self-acceptance. I just cannot see how these qualities get produced by implementing his theory.

If my analysis is correct so far, there is another important problem. Covey would certainly not write a book that he know to contain the gaps and inconsistencies that I have illustrated. That means he must be unaware of those gaps and inconsistencies—and unaware that he is unaware. How do we explain this unawareness?

First, as noted above, the structure of his framework does not include provisions for questioning or testing it. More troublingly, as I hope to show in Chapter 3, like most people, Covey employs two mutually inconsistent theories of effective action: the one that he espouses and the one that he actually uses.

Developing Effective Groups and Meetings

Doyle and Strauss (1982) are consultants who help management groups produce effective meetings. They have developed a strong practice with some of the largest and most sophisticated organizations in the United States and elsewhere. Part of their advice focuses on routines that are likely to help make meetings work. This advice is straightforward. But there is another part of their advice, which deals with how to handle difficult issues of group performance. This I find problematic.

According to Doyle and Strauss, if a group is having difficulty in deciding where it wants to begin and how, the best thing to do is wait until it is convinced it needs you. Then, when it asks you to take more control, take it and give direction as to the actions required.

Reasonable? Certainly. But what are the cues that would lead an advisor or leader to become convinced that a group needs help? Is it long silences? Is it discussions that go in circles and get nowhere? Should an advisor tell a group that he or she is waiting for the right cues? Or what the "right" cues are?

Doing so might, of course, lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which group members intentionally produce the awaited cues so that they can get the advisor to take charge. If this happens, group members will likely not be candid about their strategy and so will tend to learn that covering up is part of effective group functioning. But if the advisor says nothing, does not this withholding of important information also require a cover-up? And how does that help develop the trust so crucial to the authors' advice? Indeed, even if a group found such intervention helpful, if the explanation of delay until a specific request for help was made was that "I wanted to encourage you to be in charge," could not someone legitimately ask why that had not been made explicit?

Or consider the problem of a group that is hung up or fixated. The authors' advice is to slow the group down: "We have plenty of time left. Let's make sure we're all together." The assumption underlying this type of proposed intervention is that a group that is stalled can undo its defensive reactions by slowing down. But how does slowing down lead to more effective action? If group members, acting naturally and at normal speed, produce group hang-ups, how does slowing down help them get together since they have not been able to do so up until now? Here, again, the issue is not surface reasonableness, but unexplained–and unexplored–gaps and inconsistencies in the advice given, as well as the absence of any sanctioned approach to test those recommendations.

Suppose, further, that an advisor believes a group is manipulating him or her to make choices for them. The authors' advice: wait them out, perhaps saying, "I need some help. What do you think that we should do next?" In other words, cover up the inference that the group is being manipulative.

Now, in order to implement such a cover-up, an advisor, we are told, must cover up the cover-up—in this case, by asking for help. But why? Is this not important information for group members to have? How can we know when to tell them and when not?

Or take yet another example: some movement is needed, and group members are either unaware of it or do not produce it. The authors' counsel: take the proverbial bull by the horns and say, "Well, since there don't seem to be any strong feelings, one way or the other, I suggest we try . . . ."

As Chapter 3 shows in more detail, a group's actions that produce no movement are themselves skillful, as is its individual, as well as collective, unawareness. Thus, the problem identified by the authors is produced skillfully—that is, not by accident but by the designs the members have in their heads. Similarly, errors of this type are generated by skill, not by holes in the members' heads.

As a result, the advice bypasses the responsibility the members have for skillful behavior that results in counterproductive outcomes. "Taking the bull by the horns" is, here, a way to bypass the underlying problem. If the actions taken turn out to be helpful, the group will evaluate the leader positively, which is likely to reinforce their dependence on him or her. And this, in turn, will actually help the group keep the leader away from the underlying causes while acting as if this were not the case.

The illustrations vary, but the theme is constant: Doyle and Strauss consistently recommend strategies that would have a leader deal with difficult, potentially embarrassing issues by taking charge and guiding the group through troubled waters. Advice of this kind, though appealing, does not specify the actual behaviors that will help a leader effectively take charge. "Wait until they are convinced," "Slow down the group," and "Wait them out" do not stipulate precisely which actions constitute effective waiting or slowing down. Nor do they set out the criteria to be used to check whether the actions taken are valid and not superficial, or whether they are taken too early or too late.

A related problem is that most of this advice on taking charge is accompanied by an injunction for the leader to act as if he or she were not doing so. The mechanism at work here is bypass and cover-up. Because this mechanism is consistent with the defenses that exist in most groups, such advice may lead to a more efficient meeting, especially where the issues at stake are routine and straightforward, not embarrassing or threatening.

If so, however, the efficiency is created entirely by the skill of the leader, which makes the group more dependent, not more competent, in dealing with difficult issues in the future. In fact, it may encourage them to focus on routine, straightforward issues at the expense of more difficult ones or even to reinterpret non-routine issues as being routine ones. And it may encourage others to collude in keeping them blind to what they are really doing—all in the name of caring, providing support, and being civilized.

I do not believe that the authors are unaware that such consequences can occur. Nor do I believe that they are deliberately trying to design such consequences. What I do believe is that they are unaware of the extent to which following their advice creates and reinforces these consequences.

Real Change Leaders

Real Change Leaders, by Jon Katzenback, et al. (1995) is a book that describes managers who have been successful at bringing about organizational change that is revolutionary, that questions and uproots established practices. These Real Change Leaders (RCLs) exhibit limitless energy for hard work, as well as a commitment to meeting challenges and producing high performance. RCLs also continually challenge the status quo. They enjoy changing what appears to be unchangeable and making discussable what has been undiscussable. They are dedicated to learning in the service of change.

The authors make it clear that RCLs exhibit a great deal of care and concern for other people. They are committed to genuine democratic participation and are good at capturing the creative energy in every individual. They do so by being open, honest, and asking everyone, including themselves, to be dedicated to facing reality.

Two things about this argument are troubling. First, RCLs are said to empower everyone by requiring results and accountability, yet their own words strongly suggest this is not so. And, second, RCLs are said to be both tough and participative. Again, their own statements do not illustrate this claim.

One RCL, Mary, describes her actions as follows:

> I brought them in, and just started talking—for about an hour and a half—about all the things that I had been thinking about.

> We all began to realize that the potential of this was phenomenal if we could just pull it together. All I can tell you is that when they came back with their final work, it knocked my socks off (p. 95).

Embedded in Mary's brief description are several claims (summarized in the left-hand column), about which I raise a series of questions (in the right).

CLAIMS	*QUESTIONS*
1. I talked for an hour-and-a-half.	1. What did she say? How did she craft it? If RCLs are concerned about employees taking initiative and empowering themselves, how does an hour-and-a-half broadcast cause that?
2. It caused everyone to realize the potential if they pulled it together.	2. What did Mary and others say that caused the realization? What does "pulling it together" mean? How was it caused?
3. It caused final products that were excellent.	3. What actually caused these products? Was it Mary? Was it the way Mary dealt with her people? What contributions did her people make?

Mary is saying, in effect, I know what happened; the inferences that I made are valid; and my conclusions are correct. In other words, Mary crafts her claim as, "Trust me, I am right." This is the equivalent of telling others that, if they think the way she does, then they will see the light. Her logic—and that of most of the RCLs cited—is self-referential. If it works, it does not work for the reasons given by the RCLs, but because of the coercion that they place on others to follow them.

Why did the authors not ask the kinds of questions I pose above? The answers to such questions are exactly what others need if they are to implement Mary's claims. How can someone be successful like Mary without knowing precisely what she said, what the employees said, and how she responded. How did Mary cause people to pull together? How did she know that what she did and said could be productive? Or that, in fact, it was? Perhaps there were other causes for their behavior, such as a realization that their jobs and their firm were in jeopardy.

George, another RCL, devised a strategy to cut the costs of making Compaq computers, yet he was unable to convince his superiors in Houston to approve the plan. So he just went ahead and took the risk himself. George and his colleagues described the days that followed as full of tough actions and plenty of blood, sweat, and tears. But what does all this mean in terms of actual behavior? Again, what we get is a black box.

Clearly, George did have courage. But what does his example teach us about how to produce such courage? What did George say, and what did he choose not to say? How did he craft the former and cover up the latter? What was the reasoning behind these choices? What were the defensive reactions of top management? How did George respond to them? We don't know.

Further, how did George communicate with his own people that he was going to bypass the top? What did he say, if anything, about how he was going to cover up the bypass? What was George teaching his subordinates about the defenses of those at the top? And how did these subordinates communicate to their subordinates? George may have helped get something important done in ways that unwittingly reinforced the defensive routines of the organization that so frustrated him in the first place. Again, we don't know.

At the same time, the more we look into the details we are given, the more we realize the gaps between the authors' description of what the RCLs did and what the RCLs say they did. For all the talk about "genuine participation," "democratic principles," "joint accountability," and "open dialogue," the RCLs consistently describe themselves as acting unilaterally.

Transforming Organizations

Kotter (1996) identifies eight errors that regularly lead to failure in efforts to transform organizations. The are: (1) allowing too much complacency, (2) failing to create a sufficiently powerful guiding coalition, (3) underestimating the power of vision, (4) undercommunicating the vision, (5) permitting obstacles to block the vision, (6) failing to create short-term wins, (7) declaring victory too soon, and (8) neglecting to anchor changes firmly in the corporate culture. These errors are, Kotter argues, often the reason that new strategies are not implemented well, acquisitions do not achieve expected synergies, reengineering takes too long and costs too much, downsizing does not get costs under control, and quality programs do not deliver hoped-for results. Kotter claims, I think correctly, that these errors exist throughout most organizations and that they persist over time.

Errors are mismatches between intention and what actually happens. Errors result from ignorance or unawareness. By definition, it is not possible to create them on purpose because, if you implement what you design, that is a match, not a mismatch. The mismatches Kotter cites are embedded in important words and phrases: *allowing too much* complacency, *failing* to create, *underestimating*, *undercommunicating*, and *neglecting*.

Why do managers produce such errors time and again? It cannot be, as many claim, that they have no choice because the defensive routines of their organizations coerce them into behaving in ways that sidestep real problems. The reason is simple. If they were coerced, then the errors produced are not mismatches, but matches that happen to be consistent with defensive routines of the sort illustrated by Kotter in his discussions of inwardly focused culture, paralyzing bureaucracy, parochial politics, low levels of trust, and arrogant attitudes reinforced by the status quo.

Here, for example, is how Kotter suggests that managers repair what he sees to be a common mismatch-based error: failed efforts to create a high sense of urgency among employees. The approach: observe those who have faced such problems in the past. Consider, say, Adrian, the head of a division in a large company, who realized that few others in his organization saw the dangers and opportunities facing the division. Consistent with Model I theory-in-use, he believed that the problem was not insurmountable and that managers who resisted could be "induced, pushed, or replaced."

Adrian was, of course, making attributions to—and evaluations of—his colleagues. He did not, however, test their validity with those involved. If he had, he may have discovered that they were indeed blind and so could have developed actions to help them reduce their blindness. Or he could have discovered that they were not blind. In which case, they could have found out that their complacency was produced because they adhered to organizational defensive routines. Or he could have discovered that his colleagues were not complacent, but had been acculturated to be passive and not take initiative.

Adrian's colleagues were also skilled at Model I theories-in-use. They could be blind to their own limitations and blind to the fact that they were blind. In addition, they could deal with these embarrassing and threatening issues by bypassing their feelings and covering up the bypass. Given such bypass and cover-up, they would not be likely to level with their superiors publicly—or with each other.

Under conditions like these, it makes sense to conclude, as Kotter does, that the Adrians of the world overestimate how much they can force changes and underestimate how hard it is to drive people out of their comfort zones. It also makes sense to conclude that the Adrians of the world may be blind to how their actions might inadvertently reinforce the status quo. Trying to establish a sense of urgency may, therefore, be incorrect advice. It may be, for example, that the players already do feel bewildered about how to act, which leads to a sense of urgency that supports organizational defensive routines. No mismatch here. Causes lead to predictable effects—even if those effects happen to be counterproductive.

In other words, Kotter's advice—raise the urgency level by creating a crisis, eliminating perks, setting stretch performance goals, using broader measures of performance, and insisting that people talk more frequently to disgruntled customers, suppliers, and shareholders—could both raise the level of urgency *and* make it easier for complacent employees not to examine their complacency. Eliminating perks, for example, could send a signal that is cosmetic and fails to engage the causes of complacency. Setting stretch goals could enhance performance and bypass the question of why employees were not doing so in the first place. Even if the advice has positive consequences, its very success may also produce counterproductive outcomes that strengthen complacency and drive it underground.

Executive Insight

The fundamental assumption behind the kind of advice under discussion is that it is valid and actionable. The advisors promise—and most users appear to accept the promise—that, if the advice gets implemented correctly, the promised consequences will follow. The causal claim is straightforward. It is also doubtful.

This is not because some actions controlled by the users might get in the way. Instead, it is, as we have seen, a direct result of the gaps and inconsistencies built into the framework from which the advice is derived. But it is also a result of the theories-in-use that are likely to be triggered when the advice is implemented. These theories will produce results that are counterproductive, generate a systematic unawareness of this counterproductiveness, and activate defensive routines that reinforce both the results and the unawareness of them. The cycle is vicious, and it is closed.

This is true even when the advice comes not from external experts but from leading managers themselves. Consider, for example, these observations by Henry B. Schacht, formerly CEO of Cummins Engine (Horton, 1986, p. 286):

STATES	***LEAVES UNSPECIFIED***
"I know only that we had good people and a discipline to approach the situation, plus a high degree of good humor and a good sense of our own fallibility."	What are the characteristics of "good people"? What are the features of a "good disciplined approach" and a "good sense of our own fallibility"? How would one recognize them?
"We work very hard at a sense of collective responsibility and collective performance."	How to produce collective responsibility and collective performance under conditions of embarrassment or threat.
"But that doesn't mean there isn't individual responsibility within that. (One) must blend the individual within a general sense of sharing."	How to produce the blend, especially when the forces are against it.

and by James Burke, formerly CEO of Johnson and Johnson (Horton, 1986, p. 15):

STATES	***LEAVES UNSPECIFIED***
"It's only natural for people to want to tell me how things are going at the moment, but I tell them to talk about the future."	How does he divert them from the natural to doing something less natural? Why is it less natural in the first place?
"I don't think it bruises people to argue and debate. You'd be surprised how easy some of our young people find it to politely say, 'you know, you're wrong . . . you don't have the facts . . . I do, and here's the evidence to prove it.'"	How do they react to him? Are they upset? Do they cover-up? Does it make any difference to Burke? If so, how does he deal with it? How do they talk politely, and not bruise, when they talk about other people's defensive routines and fancy footwork? How do they encourage confrontation of their own views if this is what they say? What is the impact on the problem-solving process if there are individuals who find this model approach counterproductive?

and by Frank T. Cary, formerly CEO of IBM (Horton, 1986, p. 186):

STATES	*LEAVES UNSPECIFIED*
"I learned the technique of intense questioning. When someone came and started to make a presentation, I would stop them at the outset." (p. 202)	How does he produce intense questioning without making people intense? If it is all right for them to become intense, how does he deal with these feelings? How does he recognize them if they choose to cover up? How would he stop them? What would he say?
"I'd ask, 'What is it that you're recommending?' I made them explain in a way that was meaningful." (p. 202)	How does he recognize a meaningful way from a nonmeaningful way? How does he act to make them explain in a meaningful way?
"All IBM managers are motivated to do a job; one of IBM's great strengths. The trick is a matter of knowing how to set the agenda . . . to get people working together." (p. 203)	Why do executives explain issues in nonmeaningful ways in the first place? Are they unaware of doing so? If so, why?
	What does he actually say, and how does he act to set the agenda to get people

"When he was in charge of corporate staff he encouraged them to operate in a contention mode. When he became general manager of the data processing group, he changed his agenda to eliminating contention and conflict." (p. 203)	working together? Why do they need someone to set the agenda if they are motivated to do a good job? Why don't they set the agenda the way he would? What did he say and do to encourage contention? What did he say and do to discourage contention? Any ideas of why he needed to do this in the first place?

The advice these executives give is abstract. It does not tell the reader what behavior is required to implement it. If people talk about the present, get them to talk about the future. If they make presentations in nonmeaningful ways, press them to make meaningful ones. If they lack a disciplined approach, get them to be more disciplined. Such talk is neither helpful nor actionable.

Nor do these advice givers make distinctions between errors that are due to ignorance and those that are designed. It is one thing if they simply do not know how to do what they urge others to do. It is quite another if, as is more likely, the errors are designed. In that case, what's missing is counsel on how to separate undesigned from designed error, as well as on how to find out what causes executives to produce designed errors in the first place and then to cover them up.

Without such clarity, much executive-generated advice reinforces the defensive patterns of their organizations. Reginald Jones of General Electric periodically sought honest feedback from his immediate subordinates. His practice was to assign an executive whom everyone trusted to chair key meetings. He did so because he assumed that individual and organizational defensive routines were so strong that subordinates could not level directly with their superiors, especially when the issues at stake were embarrassing or threatening.

Note, however, that Jones never tested the validity of his assumptions with his subordinates. Instead, he covered up his attribution and acted as if he were not covering up. No matter how good his motives, strategies like his are likely to make present problems self-fulfilling and the counterproductive reasoning underlying them self-sealing.

All these examples of professional advice have much in them of real merit. But a close examination reveals a pattern of gaps and inconsistencies that get very much in the way of the positive outcomes each author so clearly desires. We need to better understand the costs—often the hidden costs—of this pattern, as well as the unintended consequences to which it so often leads.

2

Organizational Consequences of Using Inconsistent Advice

CHAPTER 1 ILLUSTRATED how even the most highly-regarded advice about producing effective leadership, learning, and internal commitment contains important gaps and inconsistencies. Nevertheless, the advice is widely used. This often leads to counterproductive outcomes.

Consider, for example, the policies and practices intended to produce organizations that are global, competitive, flexible, and innovative. Underlying these policies and practices is a near unanimous agreement about the importance of people. As one CEO said, "No vision, no strategy can be achieved without able and dedicated employees." And top executives are clear about what they want from such employees:

- An unwavering interest in the best interests of the corporation
- A dedication to winning competitive battles and beating the competition
- Breakthrough performance

- Continual improvement
- Commitment to learning

Bauman, Jackson, and Laurence (1997), in an engrossing discussion of organizational change, say that the future of corporations is based on employees who have an enduring desire to be challenged and to win, as well as a commitment to continuous improvement and to learning of all kinds—especially those that keep an organization competitive, alert, flexible, and effective.

Jack Welsh, CEO of General Electric, spearheaded a program on employee commitment and ownership. He said that he wanted workers on the factory floor to be obsessed with the business and to feel like they owned their equipment. He also wanted them to apply continual pressure on their bosses and their peers for high performance.

Today, these are fairly common sentiments among top-level managers. In this chapter, I want to dig deeper into them. Beneath the rhetoric, there often lurk inner contradictions that, although rarely acknowledged, have profound implications. Indeed, in my experience, many of the best-intentioned claims about how to be more effective, if carried out correctly, lead to less effectiveness. They are, implicitly, designed that way.

Just think, for a moment, about the most common advice in good currency on designing and implementing programs for organizational improvement and change:

1. Define a vision.
2. Define a competitive strategy that is consistent with the vision.

3. Define organizational work processes that, when carried out, will implement the strategy.
4. Define individual job requirements so that employees can produce the processes effectively.

The advice makes sense. It is, indeed, rational to start with a clear, comprehensive, general framework and to work downward to steps that are increasingly concrete and local. No inner contradictions here. They appear when someone tries to implement the advice—build commitment, for example—in real life.

Much of the current advice about building commitment ignores the fact that it comes in two very different types. Both are valuable. Both can lead to persistence, endurance, and vigilance. Both can coexist. But the consequences to which each leads are naturally contradictory.

Commitment can be external or internal. These differ in how they are activated and in the source of energy they utilize. External commitment is triggered by management policies and practices that enable employees to accomplish their tasks. Internal commitment derives from energies internal to human beings that are activated because getting a job done is intrinsically rewarding.

When managers ask for commitment, they usually want employees to:

- Implement the strategy, process, and job requirements as faithfully, reliably, and effectively as they can.
- Monitor such implementation to assess effectiveness.
- Be vigilant about recognizing actual or potential gaps, errors, and inconsistencies, as well as new and unrecognized challenges.

The first two points can be implemented by the use of either external or internal commitment. The third requires internal commitment because it asks employees to go beyond what is defined by vision, strategy, and management process—indeed, to question policies and practices, especially for difficulties that were not recognized at the outset.

When someone else defines objectives, goals, and the steps to be taken to reach them, whatever commitment exists will be external. Employees may feel responsible for producing what is required of them, but they will not feel responsible for the way the situation is defined. How can they? They did not do the defining. But so long as the goals are reasonable and the performance requirements specific and fair, most employees will try to meet them. Internal commitment is different. It requires not the acquiescence, but the participation of employees in defining both goals and performance standards.

The more internal commitment is desired, the greater this involvement. But is it realistic to expect thousands of employees to have genuine participation? I think not. One of the most far-reaching programs of employee involvement that I know about—at SmithKline Beecham—created more than four hundred task forces. Yet even this amount of participation did not produce the desired levels of internal commitment. The important thing to keep in mind is the degree of internal commitment that is realistic. Top management risks damaging its credibility if it talks about internal commitment as if there were few limits or—what is far more common—if it espouses internal, but really practices external, commitment.

The differences here are real, and they really matter. Confusion and uncertainty only make things worse. The following exhibit, for example, summarizes the second-order effects of these differences.

EXTERNAL COMMITMENT	*INTERNAL COMMITMENT*
Perform as required.	Perform as required and keep alert to changing the requirements.
Hold management responsible for defining the work requirements and enabling the employees to achieve them.	Seek joint responsibility for defining work requirements and enabling conditions.
Hold management responsible for identifying and correcting gaps and errors.	Hold themselves responsible for identifying and correcting gaps and errors.
Hold management responsible for defining fair financial compensation.	Seek to influence the definition of financial compensation and seek nonmonetary compensation.
Dependence on management. Be pawns.	Dependence on self. Be originators.
Denies any personal responsibility for choosing external commitment and dependence on management.	Accepts personal responsibility and seeks to choose internal commitment.
Sees inquiry into the way they reason as being unfair, if not a sign of mistrust.	Encourages inquiry into and testing of ideas.
Fears making selves vulnerable lest they will also feel weak.	Seeks making selves vulnerable in ways that they will feel strong.

As noted, difficulties commonly arise when managers espouse values and actions consistent with the right-hand columns but implement programs that are, in fact, consistent with the left. This inner contradiction comes alive largely when implementation efforts begin. Managed poorly, such contradictions can rip an organization apart. Ironically, what often prevents a blowup is that employees learn to live with the inconsistencies by quietly distancing themselves from feeling responsible for continually energizing the programs. This may prevent disaster, but it sacrifices the upside potential of a fully engaged cohort of employees.

No wonder so many reenergizing initiatives have proved disappointing. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of internal commitment, the lower one looks in an organization undergoing reengineering, the more the conditions are consistent with external commitment. This is, no doubt, an important part of the reason why such processes have had, at best, limited positive consequences and, more often, have decreased management's credibility.

For example, the Institute of Management concluded, after a study of 1,100 managers' attitudes (1996), that many companies only pay lip service to internal involvement in decision making. Middle managers (83 percent) favored more involvement, yet their superiors didn't know it. Top managers, the report argues, were not walking the talk, nor were they aware of the credibility gap that they were creating.

Much the same is true of other commitment-focused practices and initiatives. Eccles (1993), for example, in analyzing programs such as the GE "workout" sessions, notes that many of the decisions made were routine—open windows, for example, in an overly hot workspace. When problems were less routine, employees were not empowered to do anything;

decisions and resources remained firmly with top management.

So, too, with many of the practices associated with TQM (total quality management): the espoused theory is consistent with internal commitment, but the reality is more consistent with external commitment. Knights and McCabe (1997), in a review of the literature and of actual TQM-related experience in a bank, conclude that the essential flaw of TQM is that, when implemented, it tends to reinforce the mechanistic and hierarchical models that are consistent with the mental maps of most managers.

Even with the balanced scorecard, as Kaplan and Norton (1996) point out, those at the top who introduce the new methodology are likely to experience conditions akin to internal commitment. But for those involved with implementation at lower levels, the reality is far closer to external commitment.

The same pattern recurs in many discussions and descriptions of enthusiastic program "champions," individuals who can be counted on to:

- Pursue performance objectives with tenacity
- Manage by decree
- Make few compromises while providing generous resources for compliance
- Act as committed defenders
- Keep up the tension: persuade, persuade, persuade
- Monitor frequently: make sure no one strays off course

Even if driven by internal commitment, these behaviors inevitably reinforce the top-down character of the external commitment model. The "one voice" of enthusiastic champions leads to other employees feeling that management is in control and drives out their sense of internal responsibility and personal empowerment. How, in such a circumstance, can they feel personally responsible or empowered? They may be perfectly willing to go along with what is, in reality, a top-down strategy, but the basis for their loyalty and cooperation is external commitment–not the internal commitment preferred by those at the top.

Adler (1993) describes improvement efforts at a plant jointly owned by GM and Toyota. The key lever of change: employees were asked to take responsibility for the analysis of their work, while the engineers who used to perform such activities now acted as consultants to employees. The conditions described by Adler are genuinely consistent with those of internal commitment. Even so, once the work became more routine, feelings changed. As one employee noted, "Working on an assembly line in an automobile factory is still a lousy job."

Now, there is nothing wrong when employees report that they realize there are practical, real-world limits to job redesign. The problem is that management, confusing the two types of commitment, may misattribute such positive outcomes to the effective implementation of their view of empowerment.

This is, in fact, quite common. Garvin (1995) cites the examples of several CEOs who clearly believe that employee focus on predefined, well-executed processes is empowering and liberating:

Paul Allaire (CEO of Xerox):

After all, if you have processes that are in control, you know how the organization is working. There's no guesswork

> because variances are small and operating limits are well-defined. . . . You get quality output without a lot of checking.

[and later]

> You don't need the old command-and-control approach, which was designated to keep people in line; instead, you can tell people to do their own things provided they respect the process. You wind up with an environment that frees people to be creative. (p. 83)

***Craig Weatherup (CEO and President of Pepsi-Cola North America)*:**
I agree with you one thousand percent. A process approach *is* [emphasis is speaker's] liberating. It helps us build reliability and winning consistency, and our people love to win. So over time, they've bought in completely. (p. 83)

***Jan Leschly (CEO of SmithKline Beecham)*:**
Sometimes you get the same results by changing the players. . . . It was a gradual process.

[and later]

> People have a tough time understanding what it means for processes to be reliable, repeatable, and in control . . . and it will take up years before we can honestly say that all 50,000 people at SmithKline Beecham understand what it means to standardize and improve a process. (p. 83)

But how can there be true empowerment, true internal commitment, when there is no guesswork, when allowable variances are small and operating limits tightly defined?

Because tight controls reduce the need for a lot of checking, employees can feel secure and confident that they will not be unfairly dealt with so long as they follow the dictates of the processes and respect the small variances and operating limits. But this kind of security is empowering only to individuals who have chosen to be pawns. Such people value defined limits precisely because, if they respect them, they will be left alone and not required to question anything. In other words, they are safe from being personally responsible. Such "going by the book" may lead to competent performance, but it neither reflects nor creates internal commitment.

These difficulties and confusions show up, as well, in the hands-on practices of many change professionals whose craft is to facilitate change and continuous learning within an organization. During the past decade, I have had the opportunity to work closely with more than three hundred such professionals, most of whom had had at least eight years of experience. As we worked together, I asked many of them to describe the problems they faced in dealing with gaps and inconsistencies related to internal commitment. Specifically, I asked them to write case studies about their experiences in getting line managers to implement—not back off from efforts to create—genuine participation and internal commitment.

The format was to note, in the right-hand column of a divided page, the actual dialogue (as they remembered it) from some frustrating interaction. And then, in the left-hand columns to describe the thoughts and feelings that they did not express at the time.

THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS NOT EXPRESSED	***WHAT I AND THE OTHERS SAID***
I better start by getting their views.	**I:** Thanks very much for meeting with me to review our progress in implementing work processes. How would you say things are going? **M1:** Well, I would say that we are meeting all our numbers. M2: Yes, but it isn't easy. There is a lot of pressure from above. But we can do it. **M3:** I would agree. Is there something wrong?
I knew he was going to be the big resister.	**I:** Yes, I'm talking about a major change. **M2:** The only kind of changes we do are going to be incremental. Let's be realistic. **M3:** Well, we can't influence very much. I mean it's their managers who will have to tell them.
M3 is so insecure about the things she can influence. I'll try to boost her confidence, later.	**I:** I worry because we all go around talking about collaboration and yet what will happen if the managers say just do it!
I guess it is time to get to the point. Here goes.	**I:** I guess that is my worry. How do we build up the employees' internal commitment? How do we empower them?

Sure you have to do that. But when we started this all of you committed yourselves to integrate the work processes with internal commitment, empowerment, and so on.	**M4:** Well, to be honest with you, the clear signals I get from above is that our job is to produce the numbers without, of course, upsetting people. I think that we are doing that. **M6:** Yes, do you have information to the contrary?
I know that you feel I am pressuring, but I am trying to get through to you.	**I:** Well, what you are telling me in this session. For example, M3, you said that you expect their local managers to pressure them to meet the numbers. You also say that this isn't going to develop commitments to major types of change. All of you seem to say that change is going to be incremental because that is what is realistic or fits within the scheme of things. **M1:** Yes, that's right. Look, please get off my back. I expect to make the numbers especially around quality and customer satisfaction. If your people want to do more on internal commitment and all
I'm stumped. I feel like I am missing something here. We're almost out of time. I don't want to say something that will reactivate the whole spiral of how they can't do this.	that stuff, fine. You scheduled those sessions for my people and I'll do my best to make sure they attend. **M4:** Yes, we're swamped.

Virtually all the cases follow a similar pattern of diagnosis and action on the part of the change professional:

DIAGNOSIS	*ACTION*
The line managers are not integrating the hard and soft.	Point out that integration is key and they committed themselves to it.
The line managers are frustrated.	Tell me about your sense of disappointment. What troubles you?
Line managers deny they are disappointed.	Help the line managers see that they are in denial.
Line managers ask to be left alone to implement the work processes.	Let's work together. They don't really understand how to integrate.
Line managers are reneging on their commitment.	Deny their views of disappointment and begin to become more directive and controlling.

Seen in context, these responses primarily work to deflect the real issues or escape from them through abstraction. The change professionals started and ended feeling that the line managers were too numbers-oriented; the line managers, that the "soft" change professionals did not realize the reality they had to face. In the name of maintaining a good working relationship, all parties bypassed and then covered up their bypass. The inevitable result: inner contradictions remain and frustration grows. Thus, gaps and inconsistencies are not just problems of logic or argument. They are a recipe, a tested recipe, for bickering, dysfunctional behavior, and lackluster performance.

Further Reading

Reengineering: Clemons, Row, and Thatcher 1995; Grint and Case 1998; Hendry 1995; Jackson 1996; Stoddard, Jarvenpaa, and Littlejohn 1996; White and Wolf 1995.

TQM: Hackman and Wageman 1995; Knights and McCabe 1997; Mazen 1997; Sitkin, Sutcliffe, and Schroeder 1994.

Participation and Empowerment: Eccles 1993; Heller, Pusic, Strauss, and Wilpert 1998; Meyer and Allen 1997; Mohrman, Galbraith, and Lawler 1998; Wilkinson 1998.

New Perspectives on Human Resources: Lawler 1996; Legge 1995.

Human Resources in Building Competitive Edge Leaders: Ulrich, Losey, and Lake 1997.

3

Why Flawed Advice Persists

CHAPTERS 1 AND 2 SURFACE A PUZZLE: if so much professional advice, even if implemented correctly, leads to consequences that are counterproductive because of the inconsistencies and gaps it contains, why have so many users found that advice to be helpful? Solving this puzzle is more important than we might initially realize. Something powerful and fundamental is going on here–something that goes right to the heart of what I think of as the theory of action.

Let me begin with an obvious premise: human action is produced by human beings using their mind/brain. No meaningful action is possible without an internally consistent design, script, or scenario that specifies–for a given set of conditions and a given set of governing values–intended outcomes, as well as the actual behaviors required to produce those outcomes. Thus, the heart of each design is a causal claim: if we act in such and such a way, the intended consequences will likely occur, subject to the constraints of the underlying values.

Good designs pave the way for effective action—that is, action that leads to the intended consequences with few, if any, counterproductive side effects. If any such side effects do occur, they must be specified ahead of time. Moreover, the results of effective action persevere and do not harm whatever level of effectiveness currently exists. Implicit in this definition is the further requirement that all actions should be monitored to see if they are leading to their intended results.

Advice of the sort under discussion is just a proposed design or script for action. As such, the causal claims embedded in advice can be tested and should, therefore, be crafted in ways that allow them to be tested. These tests should be as robust as possible to reduce, if not eliminate, all sources of error. And they should be implementable in everyday life; otherwise they cannot be of much help to those taking action.

Perhaps an example, drawn from my consulting work, will help bring these points to life. The chief information officer (CIO) of a large electronics firm was told by the CEO that an important organizational problem existed and had to be corrected.* The problem was that the Information Technology (IT) group was too large and too expensive. Moreover, its service to the line organization was inadequate.

The CEO reminded the CIO that this was not the first time he had spoken of this problem. He was becoming impatient. He warned that if costs did not go down and if the quality and efficiency of service did not improve, he would be forced to take drastic action that might include finding a new CIO.

Not surprisingly, the CIO called a meeting of his immediate reports to take corrective action. He began the session by

* This section borrows heavily from Argyris and Schön 1997, pp. 88–103, 111–120.

telling his subordinates that he had received a "read-our-lips" message from line management: cooperation from IT was nonexistent, and IT professionals were providing minimal value added, despite ever-higher budgets. "Therefore," he said, "I want to discuss with you our ability to react to users' needs. We are always having difficulties with line management. But they are, after all, our customers. We have to be concerned about meeting their needs."

Members of the IT group responded, "We *are* concerned about their needs. The big trouble is that they do not know what they want. On the rare occasions they do, they have no idea how long it will take us to provide them with high-quality services. They always want everything yesterday. We have had it up to here with their complaints. The problem could be easily solved if they gave us the people and resources we truly need."

The CIO expressed empathy with the IT group's frustration and anger and suggested that they might begin to turn things around by developing what he called a "credible plan to respond to [customer] needs." Their response was brief and bitter: "There is no sense in planning; our users don't plan. They demand and complain. Whenever we think we are on top of things, they make new demands and complain about what we are failing to do."

The CIO tried again: "Since we do not have a solid plan, we cannot review the way we are managing our resources. . . . As I see it, we have two choices. The first is to continue to do what we are doing–and I believe that will be disastrous. The second is to break out of this mold and change the way we do business."

Members of the group countered by arguing that there was no way to change line management. As one put it, "If you want to try, good luck." The CIO replied, "If planning isn't the way to go, how do you propose to solve the problem?"

The IT professionals responded with increasing emotion, arguing, in effect, that (1) the problem was not solvable because line management makes impossible requests; and (2) the IT professionals were already killing themselves. "That's why the good people are leaving," said one individual. "I agree," said another. "It is not fixable."

Virtually at the end of his patience, the CIO finally exclaimed, "We have to fix it because we have no choice! Otherwise we are not being responsible."

Clearly, the IT professionals are expressing frustration with—and mistrust of—both line executives and their own superior. As a result, they craft their conversation in a way that makes productive dialogue difficult. For example, they advocate their positions and make evaluations and attributions about line management in ways that neither encourage nor permit inquiry or testing:

- The line does not know what it wants.
- The line makes demands with unrealistic deadlines.
- If we meet their demands, they will follow up with more unrealistic demands.
- These problems are unfixable because of line management's recalcitrance.

Now, the CIO wanted to get his subordinates to be cooperative. He also wanted to minimize the likelihood that they would see him as unfair and judgmental. So, unlike his subordinates, he censored his evaluations and attributions and then acted as if this were not the case. Asked to write out his private thoughts and feelings, he offered the following:

- These guys act like a bunch of babies.
- They do not realize how insensitive and opinionated they are.
- Sometimes I feel that I should read the riot act to them. They've got to wise up or all of us will lose.

When asked what led him not to make these thoughts and feelings public, he looked astonished. "If I said this stuff, all it would do is add fuel to the fire." He was correct. His private thoughts and feelings were crafted in the same counterproductive manner as were his and his subordinates' public conversation.

The use of self-induced censorship to create conditions for dialogue is rarely successful. When, for example, members of the IT group were asked if they had any idea of their boss's private thoughts, they responded with words that were almost identical to the ones the CIO had actually used. When they were asked what led them not to say them aloud, they responded with the same look of astonishment. "Are you kidding," said one. "That would make things worse." Quite likely, they were also carrying on internal monologues that were not vocalized. Thus, we have people holding private conversations about each other and thinking that the others did not hear those conversations. In actuality, they did "hear" them, but acted as if they did not.

As I saw it, the CIO had begun the meeting with a "take charge" attitude. He told his group about negative evaluations by the top, warned them that the time had come for corrective action, and requested a constructive dialogue about what could be done to correct the situation. But the subordinates also had their own "take charge" attitude. They bypassed the CIO's requests, arguing that the problems were caused by line management.

The CIO responded in two ways. First, he avoided publicly expressing his negative feelings, fearing that doing so would make the situation worse. He was right. If he had made public his negative evaluations and attributions, he would likely have activated the same kind of defensiveness that his subordinates' negative evaluations and attributions had activated in him. The very way he framed his private thoughts and feelings was counterproductive to learning. The irony was that his private thoughts were consistent with the views of the CEO. Both saw the IT professionals as uncooperative and acting childishly.

The unintended result: in the name of producing a positive dialogue, the CIO increased the amount of information that was withheld, suppressed his personal feelings, bypassed the feelings of his subordinates, and acted as if he were not doing so. Then, when the CIO asked the group to develop a rational, credible plan for responding to the needs of line management, they rejected the suggestion on the grounds that it was irrational. Line managers, they agreed, did not know how to plan and would only escalate their demands and criticisms.

The structure here is interesting. All participants seem to have the same strategy: all believe that they should take charge and warn the others that their actions are not acceptable. But, in practice, this activates a barrage of evaluations and attributions, which are crafted in ways that do not encourage learning. For example, the subordinates evaluate the line as unable to plan and attribute to them the intention of making life difficult for the IT group. The CIO privately feels the same about the IT group, but decides that he should suppress his private thoughts and feelings to avoid provoking unconstructive emotional responses and focus, instead, on developing rational new plans.

This strategy fails to achieve its intended objectives. The subordinates respond with even more emotion and make more negative evaluations and attributions, which they communicate with a sense of rising certainty. (If the CIO had asked them openly how they knew their diagnosis was correct, they would probably have said, "Trust us, we work with them, we know!") Then, when some of the professionals were asked if they had any idea of their boss's private thoughts, they used words that were almost identical to the ones the CIO used about himself. And when asked what led them not to discuss their views, one of them said, "That would make things worse. All you would get is a blowup." Like the CIO, the subordinates were carrying on private conversations, making private attributions, and covering up the fact they were doing so.

Reflecting on these consequences, it seems fair to infer the following: all the participants experienced an interest in solving the business problem, but their ways of crafting their conversation, combined with their self-censorship, led to a dialogue that was defensive and self-reinforcing. When this kind of impasse occurs, everyone has to focus on two major problems:

1. The business problem they set out to solve in the first place.
2. The problem triggered by defensiveness, mistrust, its cover-up, and the cover-up of the cover-up.

The latter problem, we suggest, takes up a lot of all participants' span of attention. Not only do they have to listen to the other parties and think about their response; they must also strive to do this while, at the same time, keeping track of their cover-ups.

Remember where we started: a business problem identified as high IT costs and poor IT performance. Everyone agreed with this description of the problem, but disagreed about its causes. The CIO then went into his meeting with three assumptions about the action strategies he should adopt in order to make the meeting effective:

1. I should take charge of the meeting if it is to meet my objectives. My definition of victory is that my subordinates develop a plan that will convince senior line executives that they intend to cut costs.
2. It is important for me to involve my subordinates in developing a corrective plan. They will then be more committed to its implementation.
3. If my subordinates become emotional and do not act like grown-ups, I must suppress my feelings about the latter and defuse my reaction to the former by focusing on rational actions, such as planning. The way to suppress my negative feelings is to experience them privately, censor them from the group, and act as if I were not doing so.

The IT group used action strategies based on similar assumptions. They, too, felt that they should take charge of the meeting. Their definition of victory was that the CIO would realize that the major obstacle to solving the problem was the line managers. They, too, sought to involve the CIO so that he would become a more effective spokesman for their views with top management. Finally, they assumed that their responses were rational. Whenever they added emotional decibels, it was to make sure that the CIO heard what they said.

These shared strategies and assumptions led each side to craft conversations that upset the other, which led, in turn, to bypassing the emotional dimensions of important issues, which then became undiscussable. A conversation that is intended to be positive actually produces defensive reactions in all participants, who deal with these defensive reactions in ways that—with the best intentions—reinforce and escalate defensiveness.

This self-reinforcing pattern of action strategy and anti-learning consequence is what I call a primary inhibitory loop. Such loops are "primary" in the sense that they are informed by the participants' theories-in-use during face-to-face discussions, especially when the discussions are laced with embarrassment or threat. Within such loops, responses that are defensive and dysfunctional get triggered by and, in turn, reinforce conditions for error. Not being able to discuss important issues is one example; others include vagueness and ambiguity in what gets said or implied.

In the CIO's meeting with his subordinates, the actual causes of line/staff troubles remain both vague (they are neither clearly specified nor illustrated) and ambiguous (the different interpretations are neither clarified nor resolved). Attributions that the CIO and his subordinates make about each other or about line management remain untested. Worse, to the extent that they cannot be tested so long as the feelings associated with them are undiscussable, they become untestable.

In organizational settings, when conditions for error set off defensive reactions like those of the CIO and his subordinates, these reactions, in turn, reduce the likelihood that individuals will engage in the kind of fair and open inquiry that leads to productive outcomes. Vagueness and ambiguity often yield organizational situations that individual members find threatening. So does uncertainty about what is to be done and by whom, or about criteria for performance. And so does the withholding of important information or the de facto treatment of important issues as undiscussable.

These defensive patterns are painfully familiar. Few managers will find their existence newsworthy. Why, then, do the counterproductive dialogues in which they are embedded occur so systematically? And why do they persist? No one wants them. Texts and courses on organization design, leadership, conflict resolution, and employee empowerment treat these loops as violating both the letter and the spirit of modern management and organization theory. But persist they do.

Part of the answer is related to the assumptions and skills individuals learn to use early in life in dealing with issues that are embarrassing and threatening. But individuals are only part of the answer. Part of it has to do with the way organizations behave. And still another part involves the interactions between organization and individual. Let me begin with the individual.

People hold two different "theories of action" about effective behavior: the one they espouse and the one they actually use. When they deal with issues that are embarrassing or threatening, their reasoning and action conform to a type of theory-in-use that I call Model I. Model I generates the kinds of primary loops described above. In the case cited, neither the CIO nor his subordinates espoused such a theory of action, yet all of them used it.

In Model I, the core injunctions that people strive to satisfy through their actions include:

1. *Define goals and try to achieve them*—that is, not try to develop, with others, a mutual definition of shared purpose.
2. *Maximize winning and minimize losing*—that is, treating any change in goals, once they are decided on, as a sign of weakness.
3. *Minimize the generation or expression of negative feelings*—which would be interpreted as showing ineptness, incompetence, or lack of diplomacy.
4. Be rational—that is, remaining objective and intellectual and suppressing feelings.

To accomplish these ends, under Model I, people will seek to:

1. *Design and manage the environment unilaterally*—that is, plan actions secretly and persuade or cajole others to agree with one's definition of the situation.
2. *Own and control the task.*
3. *Unilaterally protect yourself*—that is, keep yourself from being vulnerable by speaking in abstractions, avoiding

reference to directly observed events, and withholding underlying thoughts and feelings.

4. *Unilaterally protect others from being hurt*—in particular, by withholding important information, telling white lies, suppressing feelings, and offering false sympathy. Moreover, do not test the assumption that the other person needs to be protected or that the strategy of protection should be kept secret.

Following any of these action strategies means behaving unilaterally toward others and protectively toward oneself. If successful, such behavior controls others and prevents one from being controlled by them. But at a stiff price: being seen as defensive and willing to have relations with others colored by mistrust and rigidity.

No wonder there is little public testing of the assumptions embedded in such theories-in-use. As with the CIO and his group, testing would require confronting one's own defensiveness, as well as the defensiveness of others. This means, in practice, that much action will be based on an untested theory-in-use, which then inevitably becomes self-sealing—that is, immersed in a closed, self-reinforcing defensive loop.

In an earlier book, *Theory in Practice* (1974), Don Schön and I describe how lack of public testing risks creating self-sealing processes. The individual not only helps to create behavioral worlds that are artifacts of his theory-in-use but also cuts himself off from the possibility of disconfirming assumptions in his theory-in-use and, thus, from the possibility of helping to create behavioral worlds that disconfirm his starting assumptions about them.

However, public testing of theories-in-use must be accompanied by an openness to changing behavior as a function of learning. The actor needs minimally distorted feedback from others. If others provide such feedback—especially if they do so with some risk—and if they experience that the actor is not open to change, they may believe that they have placed themselves in a difficult situation. Their mistrust of the actor will probably increase, but this fact will be suppressed. The result will be the creation of another series of self-sealing processes that again make the actor less likely to receive valid information the next time he tries to test an assumption publicly (p. 78).

Because effective learning depends on both the exchange of valid information and the public testing of attributions and assumptions, Model I tends to discourage it. Because long-term effectiveness depends on the possibility of such learning, Model I tends toward long-term ineffectiveness.

This, too is a self-reinforcing process. In a world of defensiveness and escalating error, it is understandable that people will try to protect themselves by striving even harder to be in unilateral control, to win and not lose, to deal with the defensiveness of others by attempting to be—and encouraging others to be—"rational," and to suppress, as best they can, their own and others' negative feelings. And this, in turn, means that social values such as concern, caring, honesty, strength, and courage will likely become defined in ways that support Model I theory-in-use. Concern and caring, for example, will come to mean: "Act diplomatically; say only things that people want to hear." In much the same way, strength will come to mean winning, maintaining unilateral control of a situation, and keeping private one's feelings of vulnerability.

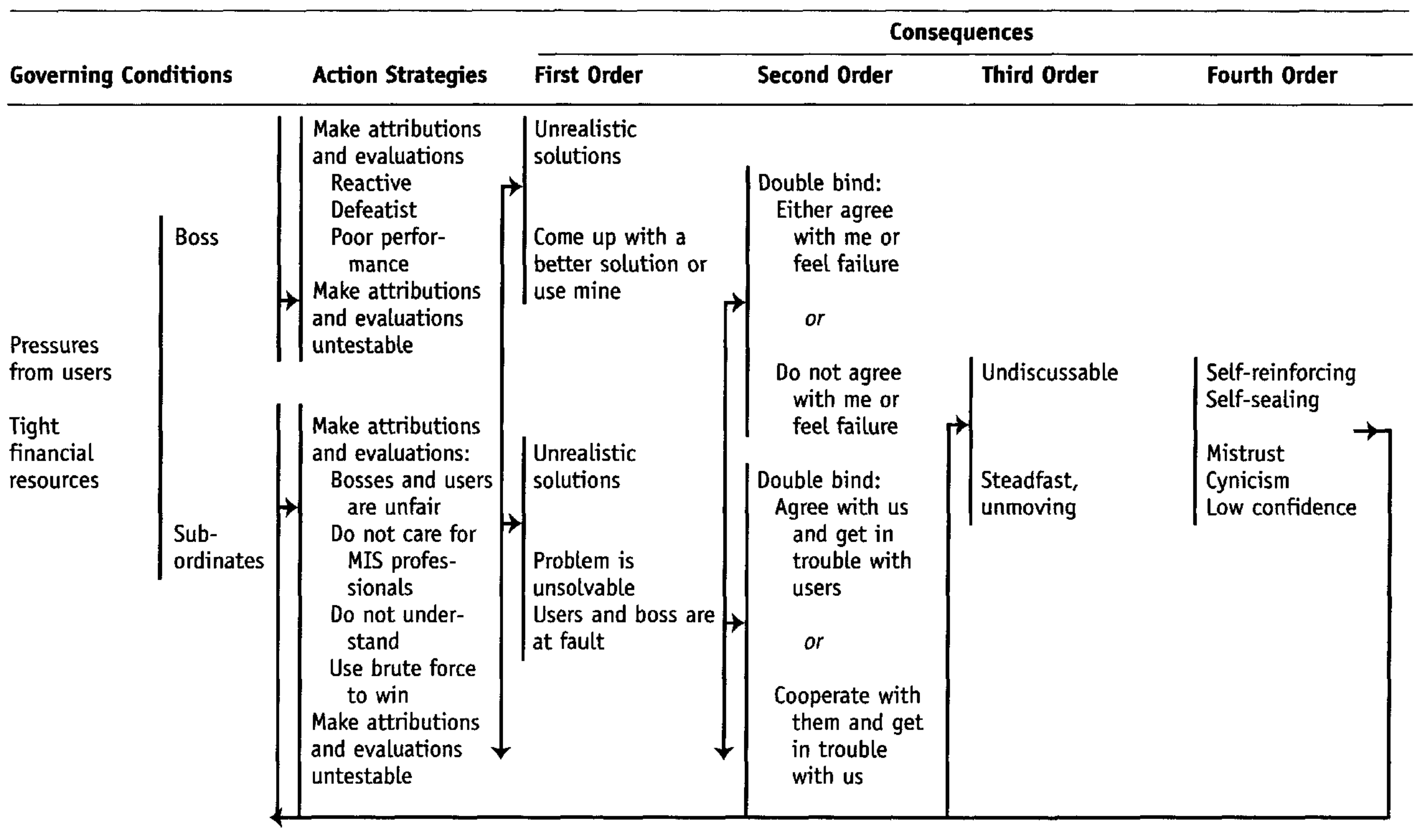
As this dysfunctional cycle locks into place, people become highly skilled in their execution of Model I strategies. Their actions will "work"—in that they achieve their intended objectives while appearing spontaneous, automatic, and effortless. As a result, the people in question will be even less likely to reflect on, learn about, or modify their Model I behavior.

Secondary inhibitory loops refer to the behavioral loops—the causal connections between action strategies and their anti-learning consequences—related to the interactions of groups within organizations. Figure 3.1 maps—for the CIO example—the pattern of relationships among primary and secondary loops, beginning with the governing conditions that set these patterns in motion: the dissatisfactions of users and the tight financial conditions that no longer permit high IT costs.

Next come the action strategies the CIO and his subordinates used during their meeting and their first-order consequences. One such consequence, of course, was that the CIO evaluated the group's conclusions as unrealistic and challenged them to come up with something better. The group then evaluated the CIO's solution as unrealistic and said that the problem would remain unsolvable unless line management changed. These interactions led to second-order consequences in the form of two sets of double binds—one affecting the group, the other affecting the CIO as well as line managers had they been present.

Here lies the transition from primary to secondary loops. Line managers judge IT staff as unrealistic and lacking in cost-consciousness; the staff judges the underlying problems to be the responsibility of line managers themselves. Both views become embedded in the organizational norms that govern relationships between line and staff.

Figure 3.1 Perseverance of Counterproductive Actions and Attitudes



The double binds that follow from such judgments and norms feed into a pattern of intergroup conflict typical of line-staff relationships. Also typical is the fact that these conflicts become undiscussable, and their not being discussed becomes undiscussable. Each group sees the other as unmovable, and both see the problem as correctable–if only the other side would change its behavior.

All this feeds back to reinforce the primary loops at work in the CIO's meeting with his subordinates, creating an organizational pattern that "seals in" the whole counterproductive cycle. Inevitably, each participant feels mistrust of the others, low confidence in interactions with the others, and cynicism about the likelihood of resolving conflicts with the others. These feelings are legitimized because they are seen as typical of the organization.

As Figure 3.1 shows, any dialogue about the business problem of reducing IT's costs and improving its performance will be negatively influenced by these primary and secondary inhibitory loops. If line managers are unaware of interactions captured on the map because they have been shielded from them, they will see only the persistence of high costs and poor performance. Understandably, this leads them to mistrust the CIO and feel doubt, even cynicism, about his ability to solve the business problem. (As it turned out, the CIO in the case was eventually fired and replaced by a "tough line officer.") But even if managers had not been shielded, they would–without some change in the structure of belief and action–probably still have had the same kind of reaction.

Such changes do not come easily. This is, in large part, because the patterns described both create and sustain organizational defensive routines. These routines are made up of actions and policies within an organizational setting that are intended to protect individuals from experiencing embarrassment or threat, while at the same time preventing them, as well as the organization as a whole, from identifying the causes of the embarrassment or threat, while at the same time preventing them, as well as the organization as a whole, from identifying the causes of the embarrassment or threat in order to correct them.

All such routines are based on a logic that is powerful and profound in its impact on individuals and organizations. The logic can be expressed in terms of four rules:

1. Craft messages that contain ambiguities or inconsistencies.
2. Act as if the messages were not inconsistent.
3. Make the ambiguity and inconsistency in the message undiscussable.
4. Make this undiscussability undiscussable.

Think, for example, of a chief executive who says to her immediate subordinates, "We encourage everyone to be innovative and risk-oriented. This is what we mean by empowerment. Of course, we also expect you to keep out of trouble."

This is, of course, a classic mixed message. People usually send mixed messages spontaneously, with no indication that the message is mixed. If they appeared to hesitate because of the inconsistencies in the message, others might see it as a sign of weakness. It is rare, indeed, for an executive to send a mixed message and then ask, "Do you find my message inconsistent or ambiguous?" The nature of the message is made undiscussable by the very naturalness with which it is delivered, by the absence of any invitation or disposition to inquire about it, and by the undiscussability of its undiscussability.

People follow such rules all the time. They do so without having to pay much attention to them because they have become highly skilled at enacting them. The irony is that this skillfulness is inextricably linked with incompetence in that the skillful use of mixed messages leads to a range of unintended and counterproductive consequences. The CIO and his subordinates created a dialogue in which crucial messages were covered up, and the cover-up was not discussable. This led to increasing emotionality, as well as to double binds, which then led to—or reinforced—feelings of mistrust, cynicism, and lack of confidence in the other parties to the dialogue.

It is simply not possible to deal effectively with any subject if it is not discussable and if its undiscussability is not discussable. Thus, under the rules that govern defensive routines, individuals with a high sense of integrity and a willingness to accept personal responsibility will feel that they are in the following double bind: If we do not discuss the defensive routines, then these routines will continue to proliferate. But if we do discuss them, we are likely to get into trouble. According to one colorful senior executive, in his organization these double binds go under the name of "s— sandwiches."

Double binds matter because they allow defensive routines to be protected and reinforced by the very people who would most like to get rid of them. This protection is covert and undiscussable, which makes the routines appear self-protective and self-reinforcing. And whenever actions are self-protective and self-reinforcing, they can easily become self-proliferating. The irony here is that the self-proliferating features of defensive routines are triggered most powerfully when someone tries to engage them directly. Once individuals realize that danger, they shy away from engagement in the name of progress and constructive action.

Under these conditions, defensive routines flourish and spread into organizational loops that are known to all and manageable by none. Indeed, executives have often told us that the very thought that defensive loops *could* be managed is unrealistic, futile, and romantic. A few have wondered if such management might not actually be dangerous because, as one put it, "Wouldn't it mean that we would have to give up whatever we have to protect us?"

These reactions make sense in the world as it is. They are also self-fulfilling and self-sealing–self-fulfilling, because they create the conditions under which it would be naïve or dangerous to engage them; self-sealing, because they also create the conditions under which it is unlikely that the self-fulfilling prophecy will be interrupted.

Here, then, is one of the most important causes of organizational rigidity and stickiness: defensive routines inexorably get stronger and stronger while the individuals responsible for them believe it is unrealistic or even dangerous to do much about them. Since these routines are accepted as inevitable, natural, and immune to management or influence, it is not surprising that the most common reaction to them is a sense of helplessness.

Employees in industrialized societies appear as fatalistic about them as peasants are about poverty. People do not take responsibility for creating or maintaining them. They are willing to say that they are personally influenced by them, but are unable or unwilling to see how they might create or reinforce them. They do, however, develop a cynical attitude about them: "Nothing will ever change around here."

Because cynicism makes it easy to ignore or sneer at evidence of positive intentions, cynical people automatically mistrust others and see the world as full of evidence that nothing will change. It is a short step from this kind of attitude to blaming other people in an organization for any difficulties that may arise.

There will always be plenty of evidence that someone else is to blame, that defensive loops exist, and that others are both acting consistently with them and covering up the fact that they are. Even when the cynics try to be positive and constructive, their advice often reinforces defensive routines. "Be careful," they warn. "You'll get yourself in trouble if you try to change that: it's a legacy from way back." In other words, respect the defensive routines and inhibitory loops that make it so difficult for people to take constructive action in the first place.

Organizations whose people operate with Model I theories-in-use will create behavioral worlds and learning environments that are consistent with Model I. Such worlds and environments are highly unlikely to alter their governing variables, norms, or assumptions spontaneously because doing so would require unwelcome and uncomfortable inquiry into inhibitory loops. They can, as a result, rarely change—unaided—from within.

They need at least an approximate picture of a new end state to aim toward, a map of how to move there from Model I, and warning signs of the kinds of behaviors (making statements that are not disconfirmable, for example, or unilaterally controlling others in order to win) that would knock such movement off course. But they also need rules in the form of maxims or heuristics to help them create genuine Model II behaviors, like advocating a position and coupling it with inquiry, making private dilemmas public, and framing attributions so that they can de disconfirmed.

In a Model II environment, the action theory-in-use helps—indeed, requires—mistaken assumptions to be reformulated, incongruities reconciled, incompatibilities resolved, vagueness specified, untestable notions made testable, scattered information brought together into meaningful patterns, and previously withheld information shared. These are the kinds of conditions that favor productive dialogue, not those that trigger, as with Model I, inhibitory loops.

What kind of conversation would the CIO described earlier create if his objective, consistent with Model II, were to reduce interpersonal and organizational defenses and the conditions for error? First, he would carry on a private conversation in which he pushed to make issues more explicit and tested the validity of assumptions and attributions. Thus, when he heard his subordinates say that line managers "do not know what they want," he might say to himself:

> These individuals are making evaluations of—and attributions about—the line's intentions without providing any data that I could use to make up my own mind about the validity of their claims. I should ask them to provide data to illustrate their claims. I have learned not to ask them "why" they believe what they do because that will activate espoused-theory explanations that are likely to be self-serving. That means, when they

> say that line managers don't know what they want, I should say, "What is it that they say or do that leads you to conclude that they do not know what they want?"

If this question gets answered with concrete information, the CIO can make a judgment as to whether line managers really are acting inappropriately. If he believes they are, he can communicate these evaluations upward in order to begin to change the line managers' actions.

Similarly, when his subordinates say that the line does not trust them or really care for them, the CIO could say, "Have you tested your assumptions about their views of us? If so, what did you say to the line? If not, what led you not to do so?"

If the CIO asks these questions, the group might respond, "Are you kidding? That would be disastrous. They would either laugh or get furious." This response is, of course, yet another attribution about line management. As such, it can—and should—moreover, be tested by a logic different from that which initially produced it. So, if all the CIO hears are further untested assertions, he could say, "I asked if you tested the validity of your assertions about the line. The answer I get is another set of untested assertions. This is not good enough. I cannot be an effective representative of our views with line management if I come to the meetings armed only with untestable assertions."

If the CIO hears what he believes are incorrect or self-sealing conclusions, he could ask:

> If it is true that the users are the problem because they do not plan and do make last-minute demands, and if it is also true that they have been doing this for years, wouldn't giving us

> increased resources reinforce the very behavior we find frustrating?

The CIO could also cite actions that illustrate how his group might be creating the very consequences they condemn. He might, for instance, say:

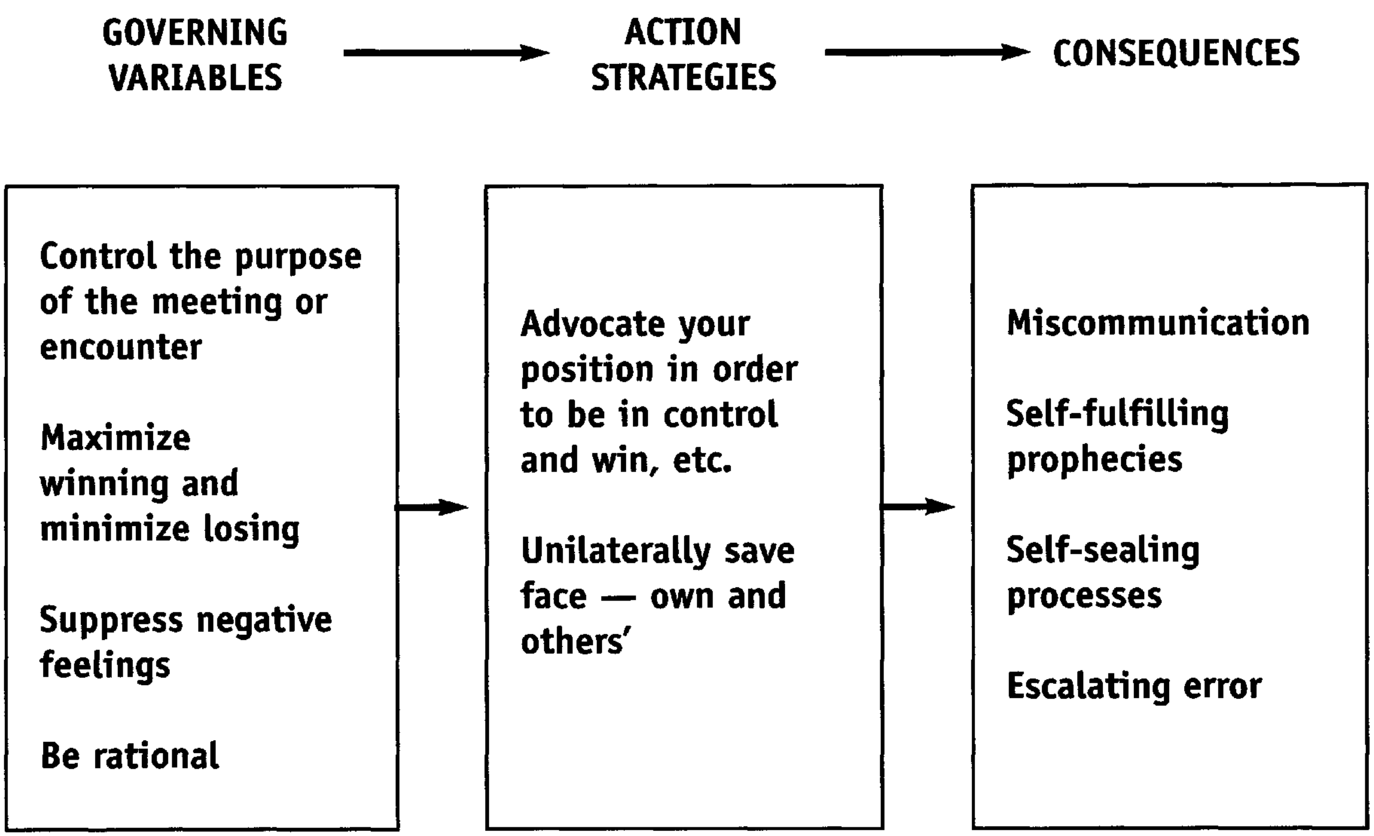
> You stated that our customers are inflexible and insensitive. You do not like this behavior, and you use it as evidence that the problems are not correctable. You may be right, but I do not hear anyone presenting a compelling argument that is also testable. Whenever I have tried to make some suggestions, the responses that I hear from you include 'good luck to you' and 'trust us, our users are uninfluenceable.' It is difficult for me to trust this kind of diagnosis. If you act toward the line managers the way you are acting toward me, I can see how they would become, in your eyes, uninfluenceable. But I can also see how they may come to a similar conclusion about you.

or

> This leads me to another issue. You may be finding me uninfluenceable. I want to establish conversations that do not require me to distance myself from my responsibility or yours for the problems we are experiencing. I want to explore what I am saying or doing that makes me, in your eyes, uninfluenceable.

The scenarios I have just presented are informed by the model for *individual* theory-in-use that I call Model II (Argyris and Schön, 1974, pp. 85–93). The governing variables or values of Model II—valid information, free and informed choice,

Figure 3.2 Model I, Theory-in-use



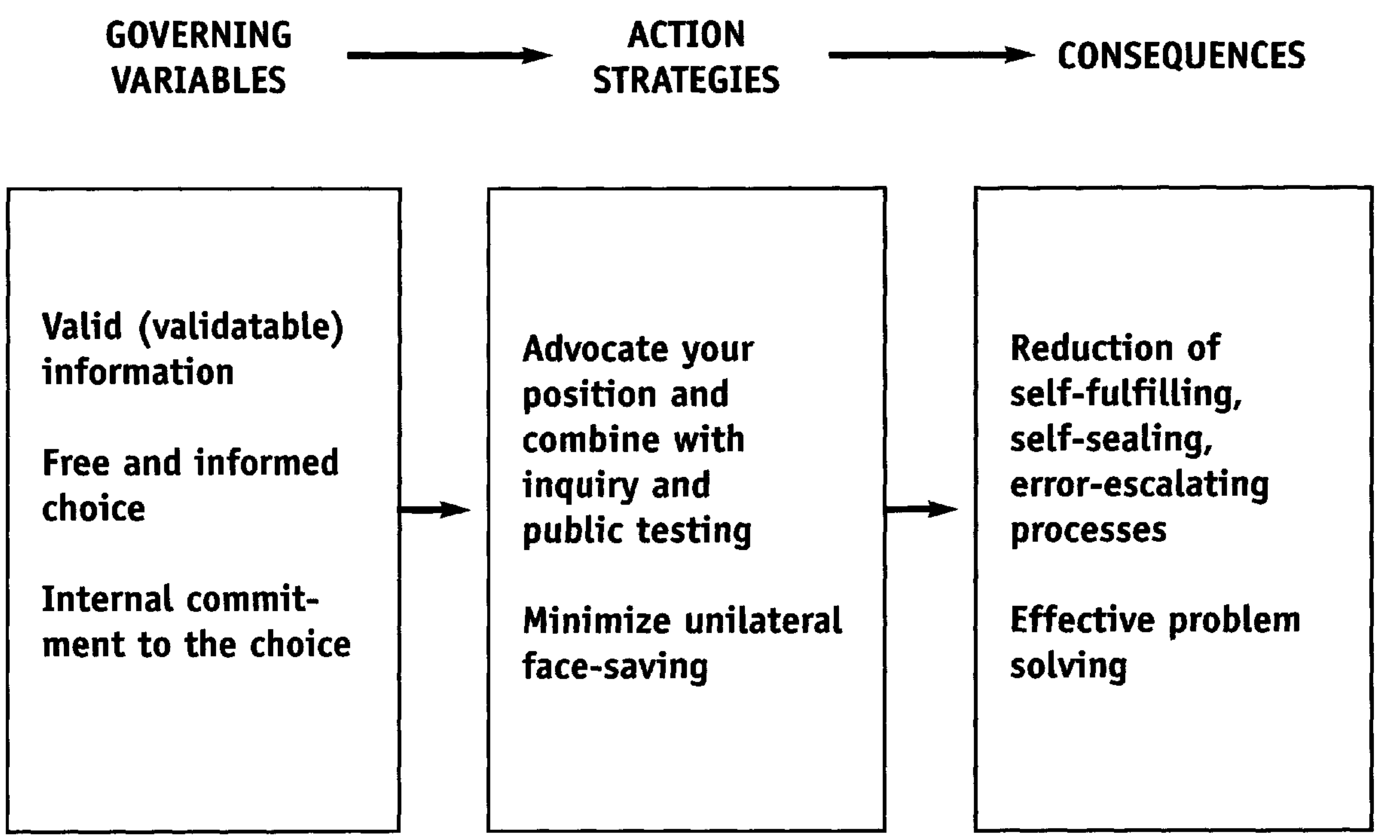
and internal commitment–are not, however, opposite those of Model I. Nor are the action strategies required to fulfill these values opposite those of Model I. In Model I, individuals advocate their purposes and simultaneously try to control others and the environment to assure that those purposes are achieved (Figure 3.2). Model II does not reject the skill or competence to advocate one's purposes. But it does reject the unilateral control that usually accompanies advocacy because the typical purpose of advocacy is to win.

In other words, Model II couples articulateness and advocacy with an invitation to others to confront the views and emotions of both self and other. It seeks to alter views in order to base them on the most complete and valid information possible and construct positions to which the people involved can become internally committed. And it invites double-loop learning on the part of others. Every significant Model II action is evaluated in terms of the degree to which it helps the individuals involved generate valid and useful information (including relevant feelings), share a problem in ways that lead to productive inquiry, solve the problem such that it remains solved, and do so without reducing the present level of problem-solving effectiveness.

The behavioral strategies of Model II involve sharing power with anyone who has competence and is relevant to deciding about implementing the action in question. Definition of the task and control over the environment are shared with all the relevant actors. Saving one's own face or that of others is resisted as a defensive, anti-learning activity. On those occasions when face-saving actions must be taken, they are planned jointly with the people involved.

Under these conditions individuals will not tend to

Figure 3.3 Model II, Theory-in-use



compete to make decisions for others, to one-up each other, or to outshine others for the purpose of self-gratification. They will, instead, seek to find the people most competent to make the decision or solve the problem at hand. And they will build viable decision-making networks, in which the major function of the group is to maximize the contributions of each member so that, when a synthesis is developed, it incorporates the widest possible range of relevant views (see Figure 3.3).

Model II reduces the degree of defensiveness in individuals, within groups, and among groups at the same time that it boosts free choice and feelings of internal commitment. It emphasizes the kind of learning through which individuals confront the basic assumptions behind their own and others' views and through which they seek public tests of their underlying hypotheses so as to make them disconfirmable, not self-sealing.

There is another collateral benefit of using Model II theories-in-use. The social values in good currency today are, for the most part, consistent with Model I. When applied correctly, they may make individuals feel good or righteous, but they are also likely to exacerbate conditions for error and reduce the chance for productive organizational inquiry. Model II versions of these social values have a far different—and, I think—vastly superior effect.

This brings us back to the question posed at the outset of this chapter: why, if so much professional advice is riddled with gaps and inconsistencies, do users continue to find it helpful? True, it may produce, more often than not, frustrating and unsatisfactory outcomes. But it allows people to

HELP AND SUPPORT	***HELP AND SUPPORT***
Give approval and praise to others. Tell others what you believe will make them feel good about themselves. Reduce their feelings of hurt by telling them how much you care and, if possible, agree with them that the others acted improperly.	Increase the others' capacity to confront their own ideas, to create a window into their own mind, and to face the unsurfaced assumptions, biases, and fears that have informed their actions toward other people.
RESPECT FOR OTHERS	***RESPECT FOR OTHERS***
Defer to other people; do not confront their reasoning or actions.	Attribute to other people a high capacity for self-reflection and self-examination without becoming so upset that they lose their effectiveness and their sense of self-responsibility and choice. Keep testing this attribution.
STRENGTH	***STRENGTH***
Advocate your position in order to win. Hold your own position in the face of advocacy. Feeling vulnerable is a sign of weakness.	Advocate your position and combine it with inquiry and self-reflection. Feeling vulnerable while encouraging inquiry is a sign of strength.

HONESTY	***HONESTY***
Tell other people no lies, or tell others all you think and feel.	Encourage yourself and other people to make public tests of their ability to say what they know yet fear to say. Minimize what would otherwise be subject to distortion and cover-up of the distortion.
INTEGRITY	***INTEGRITY***
Stick to your principles, values, and beliefs.	Advocate your principles, values, and beliefs in a way that invites inquiry into them and encourages other people to do the same.

remain within the comfort zone defined by Model I versions of deeply held social values—and, by so doing, tacitly encourages them to place primary responsibility for unwelcome outcomes *not* on systematic faults in the advice being used, but on intractable realities "out there." When "accept it, that's just the way it is and has always been" is widely treated as a perfectly legitimate explanation of failure, there is no felt need to look for micro-level causes closer to home. After all, how can any individual—or any piece of advice—be held to account for the intransigence of the universe?

But, if we are honest, we know that higher levels of performance that this are possible, even if uncomfortable to reach.

And we know that the results of the advice often followed are really not okay. If errors are actions and if actions are designed, then all errors not due to simple ignorance must also be designed. We can change the design.

In the cases cited in previous chapters, for example, Katzenback's real change leaders were trying to remain in control, to win and not lose, and to skirt negative feelings by "being positive." Similarly, Covey's actions with his son, whatever his espoused theory, involved hiding his frustration and his feelings–and then covering up that he was doing so. In both instances, worry about the negative impact of being candid and honest led to a pattern of well-intended "easing in," which is not consistent with Model II.

Covey, remember, gave his son approval and praise, strove to say what he thought would make him feel good, and expressed genuine caring and concern–all this, while having increasingly negative feelings about his actions. By contrast, Model II dialogue would have worked to increase the son's capacity to face up to his own commitments and reflect on his own assumptions, biases, and reasoning. The conscious intent of "easing in" may be to express respect by deferring to, not confronting, another's reasoning or actions. But it ultimately leads to a lower degree of trust because it assumes that the other has a low capacity for self-reflection and self-examination. Although comfortable, Model I limits learning and puts a ceiling on both personal growth and group performance.