Double-Loop Learning: A Concept and Process for Leadership Educators

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What is Double-Loop Learning?

Double-loop learning is an educational concept and process that involves teaching people to think more deeply about their own assumptions and beliefs. It was created by Chris Argyris, a leading organizational trainer, in the mid-1980's, and developed over the next decade into an effective tool. Double-loop learning is different than single-loop learning which involves changing methods and improving efficiency to obtain established objectives (i.e., "doing things right"). Double-loop learning concerns changing the objectives themselves (i.e., "doing the right things").

Single-loop and double-loop learning are readily understood using the analogy of a household thermostat. Single-loop learning is about achieving a given temperature--like a thermostat set to 68 degrees that turns up the heat whenever the temperature drops below 68 (the objective). Double-loop learning involves changing the setting on the thermostat (i.e., changing the objective of the system). Double-loop learning calls for changing the objective itself. Indeed, double-loop learning is not only about changing the objective, but involves questioning the assumptions about that objective, the ways of discovering and inventing new alternatives, objectives, and perceptions, as well as ways of approaching problems.

Henry Mitzberg (1994) says, "Every manager has a mental model of the world in which he or she acts based on experience and knowledge. When a manager must make a decision, he or she thinks of behavior alternatives within their mental model." This is single-loop learning.

For example, if you are conducting a workshop for a group of managers on "high involvement management," and you're doing this in a bureaucratic and hierarchical organization, one thing you need to acknowledge to yourself . . . is that managers who have worked their entire careers in organizations such as this have likely been institutionalized into an analytical, linear, and somewhat "nonlearning" mindset. They may be open to learning new methods or techniques that support their present management practices (i.e., single-loop learning), but

they are likely to become defensive if questioned about the assumptions that lie beneath their current practices (double-loop learning).

Double-Loop Learning and Leadership Educating

One of the key purposes of leadership education is to influence people's thinking and behavior to become more effective leaders. Leading is about transformation. The intent of double-loop learning is also transformation; the transformation of deeply held perspectives of the world in which we work and act. Double-loop learning can be viewed as a distinctive educational strategy that contains high-level potential to shift the perceptions of our learners.

The strategy or method used to achieve this type of deeper learning is a form of communication, of dialogue that involves a good deal of interaction among learners. It proposes that the educator "drill down" into a topic in order to identify and bring the taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs of the learners to the surface. Double-Loop Learning helps people acquire and integrate new information and develop new skills, to question and possibly discard familiar and perhaps dysfunctional ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

Drilling down into the subject of leaders and leadership will take learners past the obvious to some of the non-obvious notions we all have held that no longer function well in our evolving world of work. Dialogue about our deeply-held, taken-for-granted ideas about organizations, for example, focuses on what we know to be obvious then moves to the less obvious. Communication between people within organizations involves sophisticated tools. The obvious include emails and telephones and departmental meetings. Less obvious perhaps, are the tools that are usually mistaken for communication itself, even for the organization itself. For example, management systems of information and authority, budgets, evaluation and appraisal systems, databases and so on. Even less obvious, tools of communication include statements of visions, missions, values, and policies (Klatt, 1999).

The terminology involved in these kinds of communication can develop a kind of "myopia" in which people no longer see other aspects of the wider process of communicative interaction in which they are participating. "The perspective being suggested invites one to explore the communicative process itself, in which the mere presence of, the images of, and the fantasies about, leaders all affect local processes of communicative interaction in the living present" (Stacey, 2001 pg. 183-4).

The usefulness of the strategy of double-loop learning for leadership education and development comes from its potential to extract tacit knowledge from individuals and convert it to explicit knowledge. It is a way to better understand the ordinary, to question our everyday working world, to think outside the

presumptions and limitations that we have, perhaps unconsciously, constructed for ourselves.

An Educational Process of Double-Loop Learning

Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (1978) recommend a form of inquiry-based dialogue, dialogue that questions the validity of underlying assumptions and beliefs about leadership. The leadership educator, through the development of critical questions, guides learners through an inquiry process which gets underneath the starting perceptions about leading and managing. Learners must then ask why they hold the positions they do and what they mean by them. They may ask what factors have led them to adopt particular standards for leaders, what contradictions they find in those standards, and what rationales they use when adapting to those contradictions.

Learners are asked to reflect on and inquire into previous contexts for learning about leadership, they reflect on and inquire into previous episodes of learning to lead, or failure to learn. They discover what they did that facilitated or inhibited learning to lead, they invent new strategies for learning. They then discuss these strategies in light of previously learned values or norms, and reflect on and inquire into the validity of these norms.

In the case of double-loop learning however, norms are seen in transition. They cannot be taken as given and used as criteria for learning new leadership strategies. "Good dialogue is not a matter of smoothness of operation or elimination of error. On the contrary, its goodness is inherent in the ways in which error is continually interpreted and corrected, incompatibility and incongruity are continually engaged, and conflict is continually confronted and resolved." (Argyris & Schon, pg. 146).

A key aspect of leadership education is that everyone has his or her own definition of leadership, most often at the tacit level. We all know what a leader is, but we find definitions and explicit knowledge hard to come by. In the educational context all participants, unlike in chemistry or math, come with assumptions and beliefs that become part of the learning setting. These assumptions and beliefs can be extremely strong and make double-loop learning very difficult, if not threatening, to the student. Thus, while educational programs can involve a degree of double-loop learning, they most often entail single-loop learning, that is, learning how to do something that one already knows they need to do, but learning how to do this better and more efficiently. Double-loop learning, therefore, is hard work. It means we must change habits of thinking, challenge and restructure deeply held assumptions, and act in new and unfamiliar ways.

Conclusion

The results of successful double-loop learning and the process of dialogue that accompanies it can, however, be well worth the challenge. This kind of inquiry can lead to experimentation with new designs and new actions, which in turn can lead to further new designs and actions when learning to lead. Double-loop learning allows the educator to create opportunities, opportunities for people to understand the need to rethink why they lead and how they lead.

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