



# Identifying Individual & Organisational Values

A workbook

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## IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANISATIONAL VALUES

Identifying individual and organisational values has become an important part of the evaluation process.

However, identifying values is not always an easy task. Many techniques are able to record the values individuals and organisations espouse, but not necessarily the values actually practiced.

Furthermore, it is not simply a difference between what people say and what they do. Research has shown that in different circumstances our behaviour is influenced by different sets of values. This is especially true when organisations or individuals feel under pressure, or threat (which is of course often when organisations are evaluating themselves or being evaluated). As people's value base changes so does their interpretation of events. This can profoundly effect evaluation in a number of ways. For instance :-

- Misleading base on which performance is judged
- Rejection of evaluation findings
- Poor adoption of evaluation recommendations.
- Low levels of individual and organisational learning

This workshop does two things.

1. It demonstrates a technique which can be extremely effective in helping people distinguish between these different sets of values, and understand the consequences of this. Workshop participants will learn the technique by using it.
2. Acts as an introduction to the ideas of Argyris and Schön.



## The work of Argyris and Schön

### “Espoused theories” and “theories-in-use”

This next section of the workbook provides some theoretical background to the workshop process and technique it uses.

Chris Argyris and Don Schön are two US academics and thinkers, whose work has had a profound influence on the development of ideas around “organisational learning”. Since the publication of their first book “Theory in Practice”<sup>1</sup> in the early 1970’s, they have had enormous influence on our understanding of what prevents organisations working effectively. Large chunks of Peter Senge’s best selling book on management, “The Fifth Discipline”<sup>2</sup>, is based entirely their work.

The increasing recognition in the evaluation field of “utilisation”, “organisational learning” and the importance of theories of “values”, has resulted in greater attention being paid to Argyris and Schön’s work in the evaluation literature and Internet discussion groups.

### How organisations “learn”

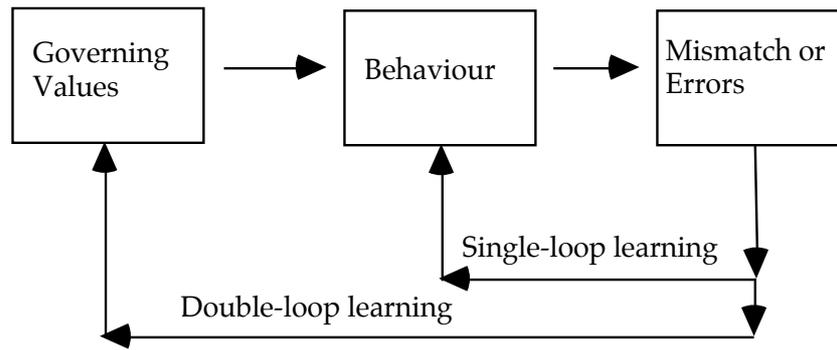
Argyris and Schön distinguish between “single loop” and “double loop” learning.

Single loop learning is essentially learning that results from directly questioning our behaviour. Double loop learning is learning which results from directly questioning fundamental values that underpin those behaviours.

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1. “Theory in Practice”, Argyris, C & Schön D, Jossey-Bass, 1974

2. “The Fifth Discipline”, Peter Senge, Random House, 1992



### How organisations prevent learning

The problem is that people in organisations tend to block the opportunities for double-loop learning. Research shows that on the whole :-

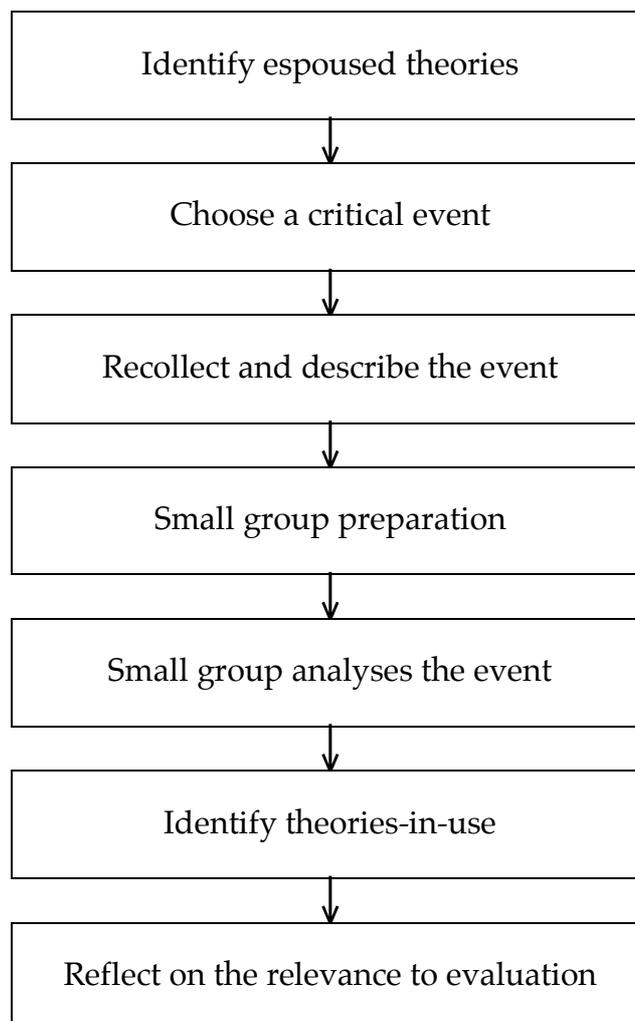
- People tend to focus on the contribution of actions to outputs, rather than the contribution of values to actions. Essentially we are not trained to question our values, or respond constructively when they are questioned by others. Many evaluators will be well aware of this !
- Our actions are informed by two different value systems. Our “espoused theories” are a set of values which tell us how we wish to behave, and our “theories-in-use” are a set of values which tell us how we should behave.
- people are reasonably able to describe accurately their “espoused theories”, but often misleadingly describe their “theories-in-use”.
- Most people’s “theories-in-use” tend to block double-loop learning precisely when they have most to gain from it (ie when something has gone wrong, or we feel discomforted in some way). Argyris calls this feature “skilled incompetence”. Essentially we establish mechanisms to reduce the cognitive dissonance between the two value systems. This of course provides evaluators with a serious problem. If people are unable to describe accurately their “theories-in-use”, then evaluators are left with the task of ascribing values to people’s actions. This requires levels of inference which many evaluators feel is unethical, or which can lead into difficult areas of justification.

This workshop explores an effective way of uncovering those “theories-in-use”. The method was developed by Argyris and Schön themselves, plus many others.

## WORKBOOK PLAN

In the early pages of the workbook, you first identify the values that you would like to observe (ie your “espoused theories”). The main workbook activity then invites you to choose a recent event to analyse, describe it in detail, and then discuss it within a structured process. Finally, you will explore the relevance of this to evaluation.

The main steps of the workbook process are shown in the following diagram. You will find it helps to stay on track during the following activities if you take a moment to study this now...



## IDENTIFYING ESPOUSED THEORIES

Take a few minutes to respond to the following instrument. It describes actions which have implications for learning and evaluating behaviour. Read each pair of items, and decide how you would *like to be able to behave* (you may or may not behave in this way).

If you would like to favour one of the two actions strongly, and this is important to you, place a tick in the box near that item: the first or last box. If you favour one items only to some extent, or you favour it strongly but don't regard it as important, tick a box nearer the middle. If you genuinely can't decide, or think an item is completely unimportant, tick the middle box.

You will return to this later, and compare your actual behaviour in the situation you analyse to the preferred behaviour you indicate now. These items are for your own learning; you are able to choose the extent to which you reveal them to others.

Some examples of responses...

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Strongly favour A  
and is important

Indifferent  
or item is trivial

Weakly favour B  
or is not important

You will probably get the best results if you do not agonise too long over any one response.

Note that you are being asked to respond in terms of **how you would like to behave**, not necessarily in terms of how you think you actually behave.

Pursue own goals perhaps without

n n n n n n n n

Explicitly and jointly define all

Identifying individual and organisational values

making them explicit		goals before proceeding
Act unilaterally to control the environment or situation	n n n n n n n n	Involve other(s) in defining and managing the situation
Other person seems to perceive you as defensive	n n n n n n n n	Other person seems to perceive you as not defensive
Try to win, using a win/lose style if necessary	n n n n n n n n	Work to achieve outcomes for both self and other
Unilaterally define and manage the task	n n n n n n n n	Explicitly and jointly define and manage the task
Resulting relationships tend to be defensive	n n n n n n n n	Resulting relationships are not defensive
You maintain your values whatever happens	n n n n n n n n	You are open to revising your values in the light of developments
Act to minimise negative feelings for self and other	n n n n n n n n	Express negative feelings openly and clearly
Unilaterally engage in actions to protect self	n n n n n n n n	Express vulnerability and invite other to assist
Defensive norms: tit for tat behaviour	n n n n n n n n	Non-defensive norms: expose your and others' defensive behaviour
Conceal your assumptions about others' motives	n n n n n n n n	Reveal your assumptions before acting on them
Act to encourage rationality implicitly or explicitly	n n n n n n n n	Encourage expression of feelings, and express your own feelings
Act unilaterally to protect others from hurt	n n n n n n n n	Reveal perceived hurt to others before acting
Actions tend to generate low commitment from others	n n n n n n n n	Actions tend to generate high commitment from others

Style of interaction tends to persist over time	n n n n n n n n	Style of interaction improves over time through joint effort
Present information selectively	n n n n n n n n	All relevant information is provided
Act to limit the choices open to other person	n n n n n n n n	Create environments which maximise personal freedom
Treat process as given once begun or decided	n n n n n n n n	Encourage others to express dissatisfaction with processes
Learning is unilateral or implicit or ignored	n n n n n n n n	Jointly draw explicit learning from interaction
React defensively if others voice their assumptions	n n n n n n n n	Encourage others to voice their assumptions
Partial censorship of some beliefs or feelings	n n n n n n n n	Open expression of almost all beliefs and feelings

We will come back to these results later on.



## IDENTIFYING THEORIES-IN-USE

The next section of the workbook explores your “theories-in-use”.

### Choose a recent interaction

In this step you produce a record of an event in which you would have liked to have changed something or put an idea across, but your efforts were frustrated. Some incident where you would have liked to have been more effective.

Choose a part of that event, which encapsulates that which you found difficult or challenging in some way—that you would like to handle differently if it occurred again.

It will be most useful if it is an interaction of a type which has happened more than once. The insights you gain will therefore have more application. However, it is also important for the following analysis that you analyse **one specific instance** of it. This gives you specific behaviour to analyse.

Find a comfortable place: where you can concentrate, be relaxed, and work well by yourself.

### Recollect and describe the interaction

Reconstruct the event in your mind. Recall... where it was... what time it was... who was there... what were the surroundings... how did it begin... Recall it in as much detail as you can

Write a paragraph which describes the situation and what happened...

the setting

the other people involved

your own actions

others' actions

and other general information

Now write a few paragraphs about what you thought you were doing *at the time*  
Focus on the most critical part of the situation.

In particular...

At the time, exactly what did you do and say? What were the actions and words which you would now like to perform or say differently?

At the time, what did you expect these actions or words to achieve, for yourself and others?

**Describe yourself as "A" and the other people as "B", "C", and so on.**

## Develop a more detailed description

On the right hand side of the following pages write a description of the critical part(s) of the interaction. Describe your own words and actions, and the words and actions of the other people. Continue to describe yourself as **A** and the other(s) as **B** (and **C**, etc.)

*For the moment, ignore the first column*

Your thoughts and feelings	Everyone's actions and words
	<p style="text-align: right;">continued...</p>

Your thoughts and feelings	Everyone's actions and words

## Identify the thoughts and feelings

Now review the actions and words while you imagine what it was like at the time. You will find yourself beginning to recollect your thoughts and feelings as this happened. As before, continue to describe yourself as **A**

Give particular attention to...

Thoughts and feelings which you did not express at the time

Assumptions you made about what the other(s) may have been trying to do

Return to page 10 and fill out the left-hand column.

## Interpret the interaction

Your task now is to achieve a deeper understanding of the values being displayed.

Analyse your own actions and thoughts, basing your analysis on what you have just written. Do so **as if you are someone else** who does not know any of the people involved. Imagine perhaps that you are a Martian who has just landed their space craft in the middle of the interaction and who is trying to work out what on Earth (literally) is going on. The more you can distance yourself from the situation and treat **A** and the others as strangers, the more effective this will be.

Just imagine that the behaviour of person **B**, and other people present, is **entirely a response to A's behaviour** and the material outcomes it causes for **B** and others.

**The success of this activity depends to some extent on your being able to perceive this as an observed interaction between people you do not know.**

In other words, there is this person **A** who happens to have acted as you acted. And there is this other person **B** (and perhaps **C** and **D** and so on) who behave in the same way as people you have interacted with. But you don't know any of them. Nor do you know the organisation everyone is working in.

Write down the actions by A which may have triggered B's (or others') behaviour

For each, offer an explanation of how this might have come about.

In particular, what misperception may B (and others) have developed of A's motives?

Which of A's actions might persuade B (etc.) of the correctness of their assumptions?

Take into account that B (etc.) may be acting out their feelings at what has happened, rather than reacting directly to A's behaviour

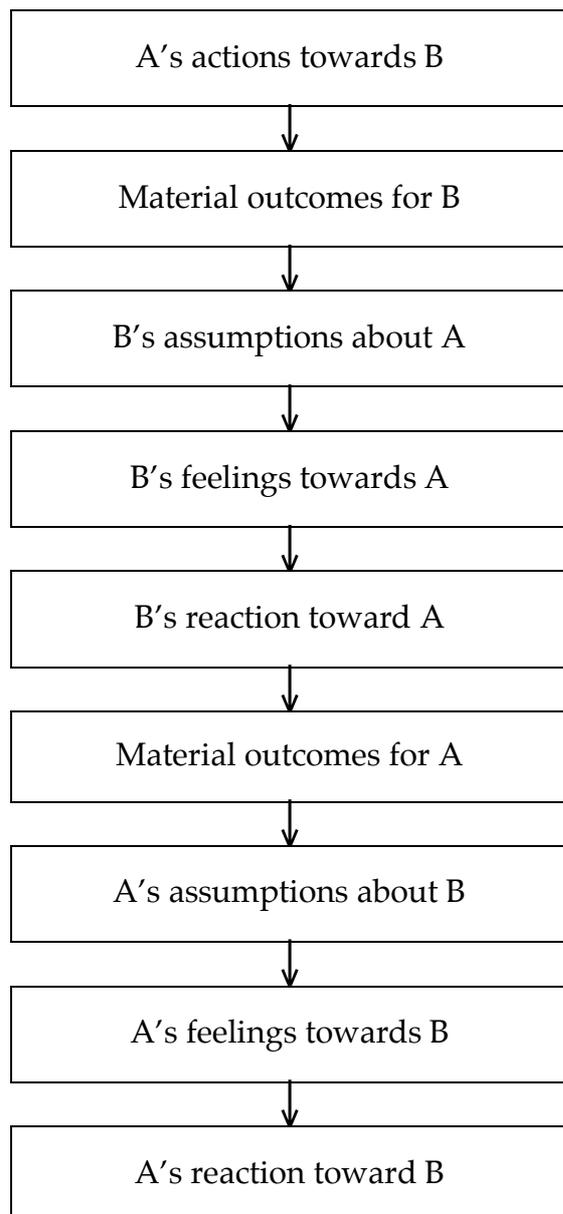
A's action → material outcomes for B → B's assumptions → B's feelings → B's reaction

There may be a number of explanations of how B's behaviour might be triggered by A's actions or their consequences.

## Develop one explanation in more detail

Choose the most likely of the explanations on the previous page and develop it in more detail.

Continue the analysis to take into account the actual or likely reaction of A to B (remember: this isn't you that you are analysing)



Try to deduce the rules which this person [who used to be you] and other people seem to be following in this event. All you know about these strangers is their actions as expressed in the situation, and the thoughts and feelings of one of them (A) at the time.

In this interaction, the rules people seemed to be following were :-

when the following happens ...	people do (or don't do)...

## Develop another perspective

So far much of this work has been done by yourself. To help you gain greater insights we are now going to put you in the position of visiting Mars and talking to some fellow Martians.

Select another person who you do not know very well.

Explain the interaction, in detail. Give the description as if it were A and B, whom you don't know, not yourself and people you have interacted with.

**At this stage, don't give them your hypothetical explanation of B's reaction or A's further reaction, or the rules which both seem to be following.**

## The Martians develop their own analyses

Your partner takes five minutes or so, working individually, to prepare their own analysis of the interaction.

A's action outcomes B's assumptions B's feelings B's reaction outcomes A's assumptions A's feelings A's reaction

## Record analyses

Your partner describes their hypothetical explanation. As each explanation is given it is recorded on butcher paper headed...

A's action outcomes B's assumptions B's feelings B's reaction outcomes A's assumptions A's feelings A's reaction

Finally, you add your hypothetical explanation to the bottom of the list

Now discuss any differences between your two analyses.

Why might this be the case ?

## Establish "theories-in-use"

Identifying individual and organisational values

Return to working on your own.

Repeat the exercise which you did at the beginning of this workshop, only this time applying it to the situation you have just analysed :-

Pursue own goals perhaps without making them explicit	n n n n n n n n	Explicitly and jointly define all goals before proceeding
Act unilaterally to control the environment or situation	n n n n n n n n	Involve other(s) in defining and managing the situation
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## COMPARING “ESPOUSED THEORIES ” AND “THEORIES-IN-USE”

### Individual reflection

Working on your own, compare the results of the two “questionnaires”; the one you have just completed and the one you filled in at the beginning of this workshop.

Using this comparison, and other insights you gained, reflect on the following questions :-

What were the differences between the two questionnaires. What was the greatest difference.

What were the similarities ?

What in general terms can help explain those differences and similarities.

What are the implications if this in terms of :-

- The values and beliefs on which performance is judged
- Acceptance or rejection of evaluation findings
- The adoption of evaluation recommendations.
- Degree of individual and organisational learning

## Group reflection

Now return to your pair, or perhaps select a group of four, and discuss collectively your individual reflections.

You may wish to record any notes of that conversation below :-

## Further reflection

You may find that re-reading this workbook in a week's time will bring further insights. If you have your diary handy, it is a good idea to write an instruction to yourself to do so this time next week.

If you wish to learn more about Argyris and Schön's work there is a lot of material about. The following texts provide a good, easy to read introduction :-

"Good communication that blocks learning", Chris Argyris, Harvard Business Review, July - August 1994.

"Overcoming Organisational Defences", Chris Argyris, Prentice Hall, 1990

"The Fifth Discipline Workbook", Peter Senge et al, Nicholas Brealy, 1994