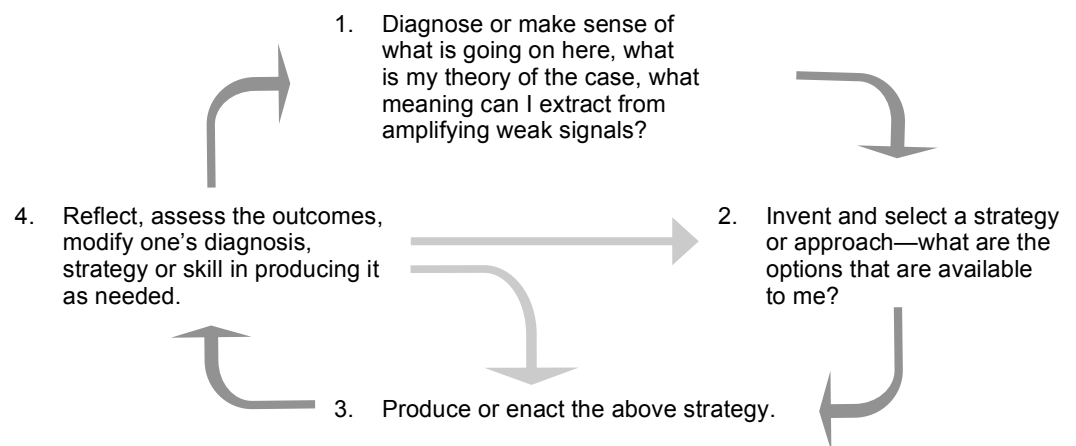


Briefing Notes:

The Use of Enactments in Executive Learning

Cynicism in organizations is rampant (Kanter and Mervis, 1989). Middle managers and front-line workers talk often about their bosses' failure to 'walk the talk' with little awareness that they are often seen the same way by their own subordinates. It is difficult to see oneself from the outside-in. Credibility that one will follow talk with action requires us to get into the heads and hearts of significant others to explore how others will make sense of one's behavior. The take up of the proposed changes or implementation of the directives is crucial to its success at the 'moment of truth' in value-creating exchanges with customers.

A leadership cycle can be simplified into four stages (Argyris and Schon, 1978):



If one looks at executive development and indeed many of the learning cycles of real teams in action, there is an overfocus on stages one and two. In case teaching, we often cycle many times through the students' interpretation of the facts of the case and the options they develop and even through to their recommended strategy (Gilmore and Schall, 1996 and Sutton and Pfeiffer, 1999). However, when called on to produce the strategy, many people are unable to do so, especially under the 'blooming, buzzing confusion' of the field of action. The other does not always act as imagined in the first two states of thinking, hence the military saying that no strategy survives the first encounter with the enemy.

Even when we produce our invented strategy to perfection, it often does not have the effect we anticipated. Take a simple example of an individual preparing for a performance appraisal conversation with a subordinate. In the diagnostic phase, one might think of the substantive issues that one wants to cover and one's previous experience of difficulties in giving hearable feedback. Often we fall prey to what social scientists have termed, "fundamental attribution bias" in which we are much more likely to focus on the other's traits, such as their defensiveness as the barrier rather than reflect on our lack of skill in giving feedback. Assume in this example, the superior does have as an element of sensemaking that defensiveness is an issue.

In the invention stage, she identifies the strategy of 'setting a non-defensive climate' and might even decide to begin with the positive elements (what Argyris, 1982 has termed 'easing in'). When this strategy is implemented, the outcome may be paradoxically opposite. Most people, in the appraisal frame, tune out to the positives (thereby forgoing learning opportunities from success) because they anxiously are waiting for the negatives. Furthermore, much research shows that the positive comments tend to be general and the negative comments much more specific. Then when the reflection or learning stage (about effective appraisal processes, not about this particular employee) happens (and it often does not), it is rarely the two parties together, or if they are, the same inhibited defensive dynamic can prevent real discussion of what the encounter was like. Each party goes off to reflect with sympathetic others, who most often support rather than challenge or help them explore the tendency to blame the other, therefore setting the stage for the next such encounter to have a depressing similarity to the previous one.

In sum, leaders' and team's strategy deliberations often suffer from the following:

- Confusing the selection of the strategy as the end point and not exploring the dilemmas of actually producing it under real world conditions.
- Being too ethnocentric and seeing the issues through their eyes versus exploring the perspective of others.
- Being too cognitive and not exploring emotional aspects both in themselves and in others that might be fate making to the success of the intervention.

The Power of Enactments

Enactments of even a small part of the strategy can increase significantly the resilience of change agent implementing the strategy. War gaming, or 'murder boards' before testifying on the Capitol Hill, or simulated juries, or rehearsing a complex surgery, all increase one's understanding of the likely dynamics and decrease one's anxiety so that one is more present to signals of ineffectiveness and open to shifting strategies.

Enactments offer learning from both sides of the encounter. It is a powerful way to get in the skin of the other. For example, we often attribute to the other 'resistance to change' when inventing our strategy. When we enact their role as someone tries

out our strategy, we discover specific arguments why we are opposed to the change and we can even experience empathy with their point of view. In negotiation preparation, it is far more powerful to enact the dynamic rather than only talk about it (Shell, 1999). One often gets in touch with how the issues look from the other's point of view, especially emotionally. Armstrong and Walker, (1983) have argued that multiple role-plays in conflict situations (e.g., strikes) predict future outcomes better than expert opinions.

Enactments can help one explore what a future role might be like. "When Ronald Reagan was asked to predict what kind of governor of California he'd make, he famously answered: "I don't know. I've never played a governor." (Rich, 2003, p. 7). Although humorous, it does suggest one of the most powerful modes of learning is through 'playing' the role. Often if people have not imaginatively occupied a role they aspire to they can be surprised and disappointed (Hall, 1995). Bennis when president of University of Cincinnati was asked if he was having fun. He reflected on the difference between 'being president' and 'doing the president.' Enactments get one more in touch with the latter, the quotidian elements of the job, not just the overall image of the role (Weick, 2001).

A Case Example of Enactments in Executive Education

A leadership development session for women in academic medicine was exploring strategic change and each participant was invited to connect with her 'hunger' (Gilmore, 1988, 2003, p. 73) to make a difference about a significant mission related issue. Examples were creating a pediatric center of excellence, significantly improving patient safety, creating a new department of rehabilitation, ensuring dedicated funding for the educational mission, etc. They were then asked to identify a significant stakeholder or group whom, at this stage of the development of the idea, they needed to engage to advance the idea, perhaps to get sanction, or feedback, or permission, or sponsorship or resources, etc.

Without giving individuals significant time to make explicit their diagnoses and their proposed interventions, each was invited to enact an encounter with whomever they chose as a key target of influence and for them to design the setting of the encounter, e.g., in the other's office, informally in the hall, in a formal meeting, etc. We often learn more by ready, fire, aim than the rational sequence of ready, aim, fire (Peters and Waterman, 1982).

After ten minutes of the encounters, the full group reflected on some of the issues that were surfaced.

Many chose powerful figures in their environment to enroll (deans), but on reflection began to explore in a more sophisticated a more effective sequence of building allies early on before approaching the dean. At a deeper level, some reflected that there may be some feelings of powerlessness in their roles as middles and women when they looked up, yet readily acknowledged that they are

in turn key figures in the fates of the initiatives and work lives of subordinates and colleagues.

In one case, an influencer took a thoughtful logical tactic in beginning the conversation with her 'dean' by acknowledging how busy 'he' was and her appreciation of his time. In the debrief, the 'dean' felt that the individual was apologetic in a way that undercut her passion for the importance of the issue, a nice example of how a thoughtful strategy can produce a counter-productive effect. Note in the real world, the dean would most likely not give that feedback, hence the power of enactments amid the safety of supporters and friendly skeptics.

After the encounters, the influencer and the target were each asked to identify if the target was 'leaning in,' 'leaning out' or 'neutral.' The group then linked their own experience when they were the target of someone else's influence attempts to their reactions to the person they tried to influence in this enactment. Many of the targets (deans or other powerful figures) noted that they deliberately sought to be neutral (successfully, as a slight majority saw themselves and were seen as neutral, with the remainder split between leaning in and leaning out). Yet when in the other role of influencing, they wanted both a rational and emotional response. They explored the dilemma of how does one join with another's thinking without mistakenly communicating that you will support it later on.

In these 'community of practice settings' there is another layer of learning available. Given that in this situation of multiple role plays, many enacted the role of 'dean,' the group has information from two sides: what did it feel like to be a dean and how were the tactics and strategies of the influencer shaped by their diagnosis of how to approach the 'dean.' For example, in the great majority of the cases, the 'dean' surfaced the issue of resources. In fewer cases, the influencer surfaced the resource dilemmas and issues, believing that those were of central concern to the 'dean.' Note that in this setting with no real deans present, these represent collective images that can verge on stereotypes but also can stimulate group and individual thinking such as:

- Do I aspire to be a dean? If so, why? How is it similar or different from my current role?
- What is the mix of concern for mission and margin in the dean's role versus in my role? How does it feel on each side of the encounter if a mission-driven pitch is predominately carried by the advocate and the dean is cast or takes up the issues of resources, constraints, politics, etc.?
- What is my real dean like and what are the untested and tested assumptions that I have in how I 'manage my dean or manage my boss' (Drucker, 1986 and Gabarro and Kotter, 1993).
- How can my or our experience in enacting what it was like to be a dean increase the range of strategies I/we might explore in subsequent encounters?
- How in encounters that are or feeling like 'managing up' can we 'go to the balcony' (Heifetz, 1994) with the other when the dynamic feels dysfunctional or unproductive and jointly redirect the encounter?

Conclusion

When most people use enactments to stimulate their thinking and feeling about a complex situation, it is powerful. Why then is it so infrequently used? The dominant reason is the reverse side of why they are effective: even in playing a role, there are real risks; one is acting, doing, not just talking, and thinking. We fear looking foolish in front of colleagues whose opinions we value. At a deeper level, each of us often disappoints ourselves in many encounters because we enter with a vague image of how we hope the exchange will go and walk out with a sense of disappointment in how it actually went. The French have a phrase “l’esprit de l’escalier” which roughly translated is ‘stair case wit’—capturing the brilliant ideas we wished we had said in the meeting that we just left.

Enactments invite us to take the risk of rehearsing the meeting, not in a scripted fashion, but improvisational, at the risk of disappointing ourselves and being vulnerable in the eyes of our colleagues. In the above leadership session, there was a poignant moment when a participant who had enacted the dean role said that she felt she was not helpful because she did not know this person’s real dean, etc. However her partner, the influencer in the enactment, had found her very helpful. What she was powerfully expressing for the entire group is the felt risk of being in a performance, in doing versus talking about doing. I recalled my own feelings of shame and incompetence when participating in a negotiation enactment where I paid the highest price of anyone in the room for the item being sold. A key skill in using enactments is containing those feelings in setting a context that supports the individual and collective learning.

References

- Armstrong, S. and Walker, Harry S. Validation of Role Playing as a Predictive Technique for Conflict Situations. *World Future Society Bulletin*. July – August (1983): pp. 15 – 22.
- Argyris, C. *Reasoning, learning and action: Individual and organizational*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass. 1982.
- Argyris, C. and Schon, D. *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*. Reading Mass: Addison-Wesley. 1978.
- Drucker, P. “How to Manage the Boss.” *Wall Street Journal*. Aug. 1. (1986): p. 16.
- Gabarro, John J. and Kotter, John P. “Managing Your Boss.” *Harvard Business Review*. May – June 1993, pp. 150 – 157.
- Gilmore, T and Schall, E. “Staying Alive to Learning: Integrating Enactments with Case Teaching to Develop Leaders,” Curriculum and Case Notes, R.A. Leone and M. O’Hare eds., *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. 15(3), (1996): pp. 444 – 456.

- Gilmore, Tom N. *Making a Leadership Change*. Philadelphia: CFAR. 2000.
- Hall, Douglas T. "Unplanned Executive Transitions and the Dance of the Subidentities" *Human Resource Management*. Spring 1995, Vol. 34, No. 1: pp. 71-92.
- Heifetz, R. *Leadership without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1994.
- Kanter, Donald L. and Mervis, P. *The Cynical Americans: Living and working in an age of discontent and disillusion*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 1989.
- Peters, T. and Waterman, B. *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies*. New York: Harper & Row. 1982.
- Rich, "Top Gun v. Total Recall," *New York Times*, Sunday, September 14, 2003, section 2, p. 7.
- Shell, G. Richard. *Bargaining for Advantage: Negotiation Strategies for Reasonable People*. New York: Viking Press, 1999.
- Sutton and Pfeiffer. "The Smart Talk Trap," *Harvard Business Review*. May/June. (1999): 135 – 142.
- Weick, Karl E. "Leadership as the Legitimation of Doubt." Chap. 8 in Bennis, Warren G. & Spreitzer, Gretchen M. & Cummings, Thomas B. (eds.). *The Future of Leadership: Today's Top Leadership Thinkers Speak to Tomorrow's Leaders*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2001.

For more information on this or related materials, contact CFAR at info@cfar.com or 215.320.3200, or visit our website at <http://www.cfar.com>.