

# Values in Action

When the good intentions of leaders are not enough.

A paper  
from



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## Values in Action: When the good intentions of leaders are not enough



We have worked together over more years than we care to remember.

One of our early collaborations was a jointly authored book, ***Values in Action***.

We have adapted the introductory chapter from that book to provide greater accessibility to the ideas of Argyris and Schon, which continue to have great resonance with the people that we work.

In this paper we examine some of the contradictions that attend to leadership



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Why is it that others are often such a disappointment to us? So many leaders in organizations start out vested with the hopes and dreams of their employees, only to be seen later as possessing some fatal flaw that diminishes them in the eyes of others. Other leaders we see as flawed in many ways from the start: they will never match our expectations.

Such realities become even more puzzling if we accept that the vast majority of people are intelligent and are well intentioned in their behavior. How can a leader who is supposedly well intentioned behave in such contradictory and ineffective ways – and especially when they seem to say one thing and do another?

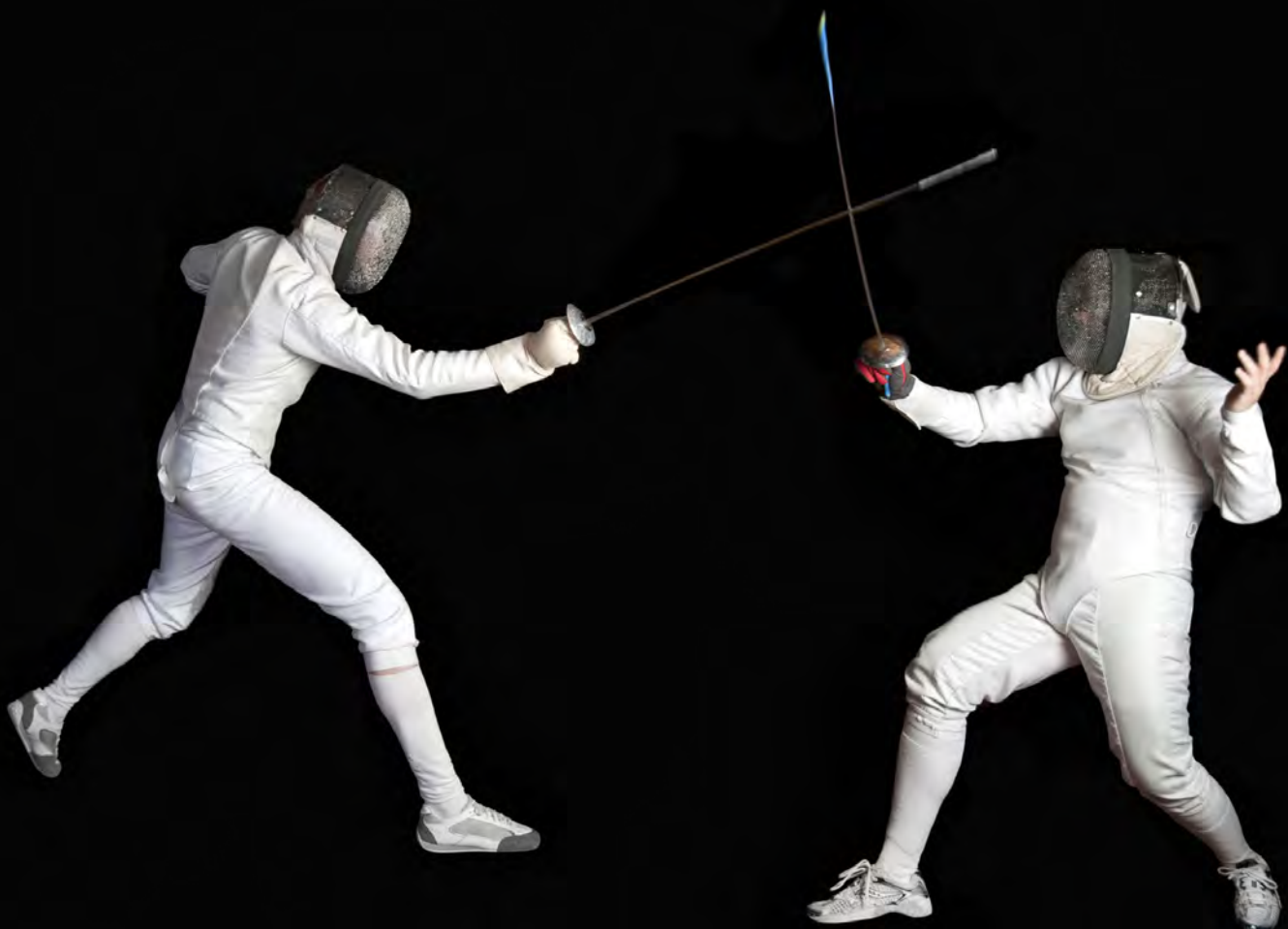
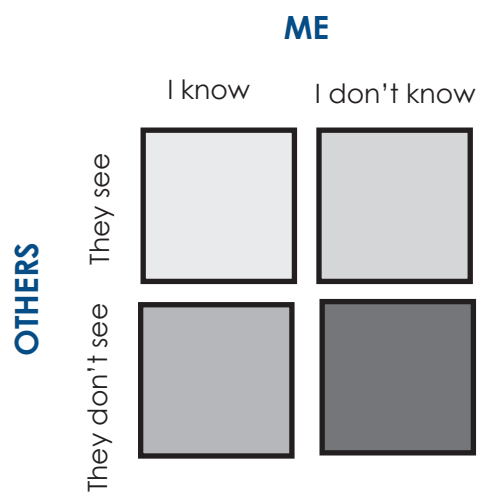
At times we feel confined to eventual and continual disappointment in those who lead us. But this need not be so. The first step to an alternative reality is to understand how this disappointment arises.

To find some explanation we can turn to the work of the late **Chris Argyris** and the late

**Donald Schon**. Throughout their lives they jointly and individually contributed greatly to our understanding of how human beings in organizations behave – sometimes in very effective ways and sometimes in very ineffective and apparently contradictory ways.

To set Argyris and Schon in context we might go back to the work of Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham who created the **Johari window**. This window clearly implies much of what goes through our mind is not expressed.

### Johari Window



In some instances, perhaps this is just as well; would you care for your every thought to be made public? But some of what we usually hold secret can be used differently to advantage. It can improve our own effectiveness, enhance the quality of the relationships we enter into, and renew the organizations and social systems we inhabit.

One common element we often keep hidden refers to certain assumptions about the nature of the world underlie much of what we do, especially those that guide us in our behavior and in interpreting the behavior of others.

## Theories of action

Central to the work of Argyris and Schön is the concept of a *theory of action*. Theories of action are the “mechanisms” by which we link our thoughts with our actions.

Argyris and Schön divide theories of action into two types: espoused theories and theories-in-use

Espoused theories are those we know about: those which we espouse to ourselves. Theories-in-use are the theories of action implied by our behavior; they are more likely to be unknown to us.

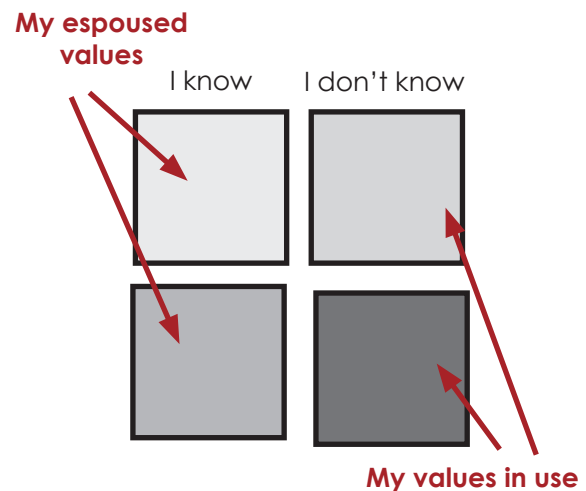
Theories of action have a number of elements

**Action strategies:** These are the behaviors in which we engage to manage our immediate surroundings, especially our social surroundings. Argyris would say that they are to keep a governing value within an acceptable range: to maintain an important belief.

**Consequences for self:** These are the ultimate effects for ourselves of our action strategy and of the response it engenders in others. It often includes what we feel obliged to do or are prevented from doing.

**Consequences for others:** These are the ultimate effects for others of our action strategy

## Espoused Values vs In Use



and the response it engenders in them; often they include what they feel obliged to do or are prevented from doing. “Others” can include people, groups, organizations or systems.

**Governing values:** Governing values or governing variables are constancies which we seek to keep within acceptable ranges. They are goals we seek to satisfy, beliefs we seek to operationalize or defend, values we seek to express... For example..

- To maximize winning and minimize losing
- To be rational
- To maximize cooperation and collaboration

In the book *Reasoning, learning and action* Argyris uses the term *governing value* interchangeably with *governing variable* in a number of places. A governing variable or governing value is best thought of as a mix of motives, values, beliefs and feelings; the specific mix depending on the person, the situation and the context.

**Action strategy effectiveness:** This denotes

the extent to which our behaviors (our action strategies) lead us to confirm the “rightness for us” of our governing values. The effectiveness of our action strategy is judged in relation to the governing values of either our espoused theory or our theory-in-use.

An example...

*“For one person, the value of winning may be very important (Governing [value]) ... I will hesitate to cooperate with others if this means that they might win instead of me (Action strategy) ... The person bent on winning is viewed with suspicion. The legitimate needs of other people are pushed aside and the goals of the organization become secondary to winning (Consequences for self and others) if this can be done without blowing his or her cover” [Egan: 1983, p.XIV-5].*

Argyris and Schön suggest that **we all have a strong propensity to hold inconsistent thoughts and actions.** The links between what we think we are trying to achieve and the way we go about it are often not what we imagine: our espoused theories differ from our theories-in-use.

To put it simply, we *don’t* always practice what we preach, however sincerely. The difference between espoused theories and theories-in-use applies at the level of national strategies, organizational management strategies, and small group and interpersonal behaviors, and even (especially) within families.

For example, if we could, most of us might remember a visit as a two year old child to some relatives. We thought and felt the experience to be simply awful and standing on their front porch about to go home with our parents, one of them suggests we might thank “Aunt Sally and Uncle Jack” for a wonderful experience. After just having our most horrible life experience so far, we are disinclined to do

just this, but we look at our parent’s face and realize that if the sun is to shine for us tomorrow, then we should do as requested. At that moment we have told our first lie, one of millions we will tell for the rest of our lives: we have just disconnected our behavior from our feelings.

It seems a curiosity of humans in organizations that we seem to notice first (and most) the discrepancy between what those “above” us preach and what they practice. More so than those we supervise or lead and especially more so than ourselves, for as Chris Argyris suggests we are mostly blind to this disconnection in ourselves. This disconnection between felt intent and external behavior lies at the heart of so much human ineffectiveness. To improve this, if we can achieve a better understanding of the links between what we think we are trying to achieve and what we actually do, then we will have more options for increasing our effectiveness and satisfaction, and also that of others. At the heart of such a step is facing up to the discrepancy in ourselves first.



When a person realizes a mismatch between ideal-self and actual-self, strong feelings can be generated. This was brought home to Tim Dalmau some years ago. He was conducting a leadership workshop for school principals with Bernie Neville.

The principals were given the task of generating a picture of ineffectiveness. They were asked first to describe a common failing of principals, one they themselves would also "own up" to committing occasionally.

They were asked to describe the behavior, its consequences for them, its consequences for the other parties involved, and its overall effectiveness. They were then invited to imagine what appeared to be the overall value or belief that underpinned this strategy.

It was then suggested to them that the governing values often appeared to be some mix of the following...

- To maximize winning and minimize losing
- To minimize expressing negative feelings
- To be rational

- To decrease the opportunity for honest confrontation
- To define the group task unilaterally and have others agree to it

A near riot developed. It seemed that they were prepared to discuss and analyze their own behavior. But when it came to acknowledging that their "intentions" or "unconscious motives" were not those they espoused, they became intensely resistant.

This miniature case study exemplifies much of what Argyris has often described and illustrated about the relationship between espoused theory and theory-in-use. For each of us...

- There is a gap between what we think we believe and the values implied by our behavior
- We are blind to this gap
- Though others may perceive it, they are reluctant to admit they have done so, let alone bring it to our attention
- If they do bring it to our attention, we are likely to react most defensively

For good measure, these taboos against being







open about beliefs and feelings are then reinforced by a taboo against revealing the taboo. Argyris (for example 1985) calls it the undiscussability of the undiscussable -- the cover-up of the cover-up.

This same inconsistency between espoused and actual values and strategies lies at the core of many difficulties in relationships between individuals and groups. In addition, people tend to ascribe incorrect governing values to others' behavior. This is as true of individuals as it is of groups or, need we say it, nations.

A core assumption, as Argyris and Schön have said, is that people seldom reveal their assumptions about each other, especially about motives.

When they act on their assumptions, their motives are very often misunderstood. The common result is a mutual self-fulfilling prophecy: each person's assumptions are

maintained by the other's behavior and support the person's own behavior.

The next stage occurs when people act on assumptions. Because of the social taboos they usually don't voice them. They merely act on them as if they were true.

This often results in more of the very behavior that triggered the assumptions in the first place. The assumptions, people believe, have been confirmed. This is the self-fulfilling prophecy in operation.

Much of the work in which we undertake has two purposes. Firstly, it is to enable people to make contact with their assumptions about each other (the often incorrectly ascribed governing values, or perhaps the strategies they assume drive the other person's behavior).

Secondly, the processes we oftentimes choose to use enable people to exchange this information in such a way that it can be understood, and challenged, and possibly corrected.

## Models I and II

Governing values examples include such things as “maximize winning and minimize losing” and “minimize expressing negative feelings”. Some of these governing values tend to cluster together to form what might be called world views.

Argyris and Schön identified two such clusters. They termed them Model I and Model II. Model I might be described as a competitive and defensive stance towards the world. Model II is more collaborative and less defensive.

In more detail, Chris Argyris describes the governing values of Model I as follows...

- “Achieve the purposes as the actor perceives them
- Maximize winning and minimize losing
- Minimize eliciting negative feelings
- Be rational and minimize emotionality”

This cluster produces adversarial and defensive action strategies, poor relationships, and poor learning. On the other hand, the governing values for Model II are ...

- “Valid information
- Free and informed choice

- Internal commitment to the choice and constant monitoring of the implementation”

The action strategies here, less defensive and more collaborative, are also more conducive to effective relationships and learning.

In his work, Argyris has found it is not unusual for people to advocate Model II values and to think they express them in action. That is, their espoused theories are Model II.

In general, people prefer to practice what they preach. When they become aware of a mismatch, they experience negative feelings. Unfortunately, they also experience negative feelings when they or another person violates the social rules of the social system and culture. Currently, most systems encourage Model I values.

In our frequently adversarial culture people often show a mix of Models I and II in their espoused theories.

To the extent that they think the situation allows them, however, many are willing to move as far towards Model II as possible. I agree with Argyris that their actions, especially when under threat, show the defensiveness of Model I.







In his books and papers Argyris gives many verbatim accounts of the work he does.

It is obvious from this material that most leaders do often think they are acting out of Model II values.

Whenever there is a potential for threat in the situation, however, they are likely to behave in the defensive ways that imply Model I values. And when this happens, subordinates are particularly and especially sensitive to the discrepancy.

For example, Chris Argyris often asked them to give feedback to each other on their behavior, or to role play the giving of feedback in case-study situations.

Their feedback was given in an attacking way, or so carefully and tentatively that the information is “fuzzy”; he describes the latter as “easing in”.

Many leaders use the Model I actions of blame and criticism and demand, or talk in generalizations. They do not actually use the

specific and non-defensive communication that they advocate to others and believe they are trying to use.

A leader who can model by their own behavior an openness and willingness to face up to their own incongruences, their own discrepancies, will inevitably generate much higher permission among subordinates than one who is defensive. If they model open inquiry into these discrepancies and encourage others to do the same then the possibility exists to create a Model II environment, to which we now turn.

The disappointment that seems so attendant to leaders is not inevitable. And the discrepancy we so often see in them is visible to others in us, indeed every one.

## In summary...

On the one hand, people claim to hold certain beliefs, and claim to observe these values in their behavior. This is their espoused theory.



On the other, there are beliefs implied by their actual behavior: their theory-in-use. The two are very often discrepant, but the person is not aware of this. This is true of all of us, regardless of education, social standing, occupation, age or gender.

If people become aware of this discrepancy in themselves, dissonance results; and this in turn may trigger change in their espoused theory or their theory-in-use. They are unchallenged and in fact unchallengeable, even though people often don't understand why. Model II allows second order learning in which the overall values are open to challenge.

There are some leaders who advocate Model II values. In other words, their espoused theory is Model II. Their behavior, however, frequently is

more consistent with Model I values. This implies a Model I theory-in-use.

Certain beliefs tend to cluster together. People who believe in the pursuit of winning and the avoidance of losing, for example, tend also to believe in being narrowly rational, and minimizing emotionality.

Argyris and Schön have identified two clusters of beliefs which they call Model I and Model II. Model I might be characterized as adversarial, competitive, and narrowly rational. Model II is more consensual, more open to change, and provides more opportunity for choice.

The two models also have differing consequences for people, for systems, and for learning. In particular, Model I allows only learning only within fixed limits. Certain beliefs





are maintained as beliefs without reason: unchallenged and in fact unchallengeable, even though people often don't understand why. Model II allows second order learning in which the overall values are open to challenge. There are some leaders who advocate Model II values. In other words, their espoused theory is Model II. Their behavior, however, frequently is more consistent with Model I values. This implies a Model I theory-in-use.

If such people could become aware of the mismatch, they might become motivated to do something about it. Unfortunately, however, this is difficult. The prevailing culture is Model I, and so are many of the organizations and social systems within it. Anyone trying to inform

them of the mismatch is likely to use Model I behavior to do so. The prevailing culture is Model I, and so are many of the organizations and social systems within it. Further, anyone trying to inform them of the mismatch is likely to use Model I behavior to do so.

If, on the other hand, there is both espoused and practiced leadership that is accepting of this mis-match in us all, then there is a real chance of creating a climate of openness to critical reflection and inquiry: the foundation of an effective organization

*Dick, Bob and Dalmau, Tim (1999) **Values in Action:**  
Interchange Publications*



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