
Chris Argyris (1923–2013)

Chris Argyris, a pioneer in the fields of organization development, organizational learning, and action science, passed away on November 16, 2013, at his home in Weston, Massachusetts. A devoted husband and father, he is survived by his wife of 63 years, Renee, by their two children, Dianne and Phillip, and by his brother Peter. Argyris was born in Newark, New Jersey, on July 16, 1923, to Greek immigrant parents, and grew up in Irvington, New Jersey. He served in the Signal Corps of the United States Army during the Second World War, rising to the rank of Second Lieutenant. After the war, Argyris received his bachelor's degree in psychology from Clark University (1947). As an undergraduate, he met Kurt Lewin, whose work would influence him throughout his life. From Lewin, Argyris took away an enduring conviction that the best test of a social science theory was the ability to produce a desired change in the real world. Argyris went on to receive a master's degree in psychology and economics from Kansas University (1949), and a doctorate in organizational behavior from Cornell University (1951), where he studied with William Foote Whyte.

Argyris served on the faculty at Yale University from 1951 to 1971, becoming the Beach Professor of Administrative Science and Chair of the Department of Organization Behavior. He was instrumental in creating the Yale School of Management. Yale University later established an endowed faculty position in his name, which is currently held by noted social psychologist and Yale president Peter Salovey. In 1971, Argyris accepted a joint appointment at Harvard's Graduate School of Education and Business School as the James Bryant Conant Professor of Education and Organizational Behavior. Over his long career, Argyris published more than 150 articles and 30 books, and was the recipient of 14 honorary doctorates.

His first book, *Personality and Organization* (1957), explored the conflict between the nature of formal organizations and the developmental needs adults have for independence and self-control. The unintended consequences of this conflict, he maintained, was detrimental to individuals. His career became dedicated to finding a better way to manage so that people and organizations could thrive. His later work with the National Training Laboratories, studying the "T-Group" approach to organization development, deepened his focus on action research, but did not prove a satisfying resolution to the conflict.

A major turning point in his intellectual journey occurred in 1971 when Argyris met Donald Schön, trained in philosophy and Ford Professor of Urban Studies at MIT. Argyris and Schön began a decades-long collaboration that produced the "theory of action" approach to organizational research, published in two seminal works, *Theory in Practice: Increasingly Professional Effectiveness* (1974) and *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* (1978). The latter helped give rise to organizational learning as a new field of research in organizational behavior.

Argyris and Schön's work illuminated the impact of taken-for-granted causal theories used by individuals in organizations. A central insight is that individuals are unaware of a discrepancy between their *espoused theories* of behavior and their *theories-in-use*, and this leads them to blame others for problems they have unwittingly helped create. Their research demonstrated, through painstaking analysis of thousands of hours of recorded conversations among managers, a remarkable consistency in the interpersonal strategies people used facing uncertainty, conflict, or psychological threat. These strategies, called "Model 1," implied "governing values" of unilateral control, face-saving, and rationality, and helped explain why defensiveness occurs instead of the learning that is desperately needed in difficult interactions. Argyris and Schön hypothesized that learning in organizations required an alternative theory-in-use (called "Model 2"), governed by values of valid information, informed choice, and internal commitment. Model 2 was not natural for people, but it could be learned with concerted effort. Argyris continued to develop the philosophical and empirical bases for this work for the rest of his life, leading to the publication of numerous articles and books, notably *Action Science: Concepts, Methods, and Skills for Research and Intervention* (1985, with Robert W. Putnam and Diana McClain Smith).

Argyris was a gifted teacher whose high standards conveyed immense respect for students—who were alternately inspired and scared by him. Professor Robert Kegan at the Harvard Graduate School of Education recalled, "Whether he was shaking up a classroom, a faculty meeting, or just a casual encounter, Chris could not help himself. If there were an opportunity for learning—yours or his—he was not going to pass it up. And what Chris taught us all, is that there is nearly *always* an opportunity." Noted action scientist Diana McClain Smith, Argyris's former student, lauded his "unique ability to empathize with people's experiences and circumstances while still holding them accountable for changing them." Roger Martin, former Dean at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, wrote in the *Financial Times* that Argyris taught him to focus on actionable knowledge, dramatically altering his consulting and leadership practice. Argyris taught me to find my own voice rather than imitate that of others, and profoundly influenced my research on psychological safety and learning. Legendary for providing overnight feedback on papers received from colleagues and students alike, Argyris conveyed how much he cared about others and about excellence with his actions, even more than his words. His legacy to those who had the privilege to be guided by him was one of penetrating intelligence, challenge, respect, and generosity.

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