Interview: Robert Putnam, Applying Argyris

The following interview appeared on HR.com in October 2003.

Interview: Robert Putnam, Applying Argyris
By David Creelman

A long-time colleague of Harvard professor Dr. Chris Argyris, Robert Putnam makes his living applying these ideas.

David Creelman spoke to Dr. Putnam about putting academic insights into practice.

DC- Can you give me a little background on how you met Dr. Argyris?

RP- I took a doctoral program at Harvard and was very drawn to Chris, his work and his way of working with those of us in the class. I did my dissertation with him, and co-wrote Action Science with Dr. Argyris and Diana McLain Smith. That was a career forming experience and our practice has grown from that foundation.

DC- As you've moved into practice, which of Dr. Argyris' ideas have you embraced?

RP- One of the first things Chris ever said to us is that people design action to achieve intended consequences. If you help them understand the nature of the design you'd have a very powerful lever for helping people improve their effectiveness. That was the starting point for applying Chris' ideas. We called ourselves "Action Design" with the notion of helping people recognize and talk about the designs that implicitly inform their action.

We also use the tool concepts that have become quite popular such as advocacy, inquiry, the ladder of inference, the left-hand column, and so on.

DC- I'm interested in starting with the more concrete artifacts. Most of our readers have likely come across these ideas.

RP- Let me start with the "left-hand column" tool. We ask people to write a dialogue case of an important episode that illustrates the kind of interaction they would like to handle more effectively. You take a piece of paper, draw a line down the middle and on the right you write down what was actually said, as near as you can remember, and in the left-hand column you write any unspoken thoughts or feelings you had during the conversation. So when we speak of the left-hand column it refers to your unspoken thoughts or feelings when you are in the midst of a difficult interaction.

DC- What do people get out of this exercise?

RP- People find it helpful just to write the cases because it enables them to look at one of these difficult interactions and to see the nitty-gritty of how it happened. When you review what you've written you get insights into what you did and didn't do.

It's also a very good basis for a professional development session because it gives us the opportunity to take a look at how you acted in the moment, what the other person did to trigger you, and how you were thinking at that time. People find all these unexpected puzzles and interesting anomalies when they look at what they were thinking that led them to say this but not say that, and how the other person misunderstood. It gives people a good insight into their own thinking and behavior that may contribute to not getting the results they want.

DC- This brings me to one of my central questions about Chris Argyris' work. They sound like great ideas and I have seen them successfully employed in training programs, but it's rare to see them spontaneously used in the

workplace.

RP- The learning process to develop the skill to interact more effectively requires ongoing attention. A one-shot training program cannot possibly be more than a beginning. So the question of sustaining practice over time, so that you really develop significant new skills, is a very important one.

With the left-hand column in particular we find that within minutes people begin saying things like, "Let me tell you my left-hand column on that one." So it very quickly provides a language for people to voice things they would not otherwise have said.

That's the upside but there are limits too. There is a reason things stay on people's left-hand columns—saying them might create problems. Handling this requires developing two kinds of skill: saying difficult things and responding to the reactions others have in productive ways, and even more fundamentally, learning to think differently in the first place so that what appears on your left-hand column can be said. Developing these abilities takes time and practice. As Chris often said, it takes about as much practice as learning to play tennis.

DC- The ladder of inference is another Argyris tool that really appeals to me but I haven't seen it used much in practice.

RP- The ladder of inference is a simple model of how the human mind works in everyday life. The world is full of all kinds of data, far more than the human mind can pay attention to. The bottom rung of the ladder of inference is the data you've chosen to notice. Then you go through an interpretation process that assigns meaning to that selected data, which takes us to the second rung. That interpretation leads to a conclusion, the third rung, that may lead you to take some action.

So in its simplest form the ladder of inference has three steps: the selected data, the interpretation steps in your inference process, and your conclusion at the top. These steps occur at the speed of thought, so fast that we're usually not consciously aware of the steps in our reasoning process. To an important degree our reasoning is a secret from ourselves. The ladder of inference becomes useful in helping people recognize when both they and others have jumped through several inferential steps to draw a conclusion. They are disagreeing about the conclusion, and what they need to do to make progress is make explicit the data they have selected and the steps in their interpretation process.

DC- How have you seen this put into practice?

RP- I've seen it used in all kinds of conversations and meetings I facilitate. One of my current clients has invested in leadership development for their senior team and has learned these tools. I'm helping them embed the skills in their day-to-day work. In the course of their conversations they will say things like, "Hold on, Jack. I think you are jumping the ladder of inference on that one." Or they will say, "I know I'm jumping up the ladder on this." That creates an opportunity for them to walk through the data and interpretations that led to the conclusion.

DC- That's encouraging. Why is it so rare to bump into people talking this way and using these tools?

RP- The problem is that the tools are so conceptually straightforward and so easy to stick into a training program that in minutes somebody will say, "Oh, I understand that." They think they've got it but the tools are profoundly difficult to put into practice in the heat of the moment. I've been in organizations where they've trained hundreds or thousands of people in these tools and ironically it's almost as if they've inoculated the organization against the deep learning the tools can provide. People think, "We've already done that."

Over the years we've discovered that giving everyone brief training, even when it starts with top management, is not a good approach. People do the workshops, find the tools easy to understand, and assume that good intentions are all it takes to use them. But they look around and see that their boss, who had the same program, still gets frustrated and in the heat of the moment makes the same imperious, unilateral moves they have learned to hate. Then they say, "See, the stuff doesn't work," or "the top is not using it," and it falls into disuse.

The strategy that does make a profound difference is to have a small number of people who make a much larger commitment to learning to use the tools in practice. Then you get the genuine behavior change even under a significant degree of stress. That's when you begin to see sustainable change.

DC - This is a critical idea for HR managers. The normal approach is to train all our managers about one concept or another without any of them truly becoming particularly proficient. It's a very appealing approach but it is probably a foolish strategy. It's like the idea that it'd be nice if all your managers understood finance but frankly what the corporation really needs is a few people deeply steeped in finance, not a bunch of dilettantes.

Maybe for these tools we are better off developing a few specialists and bringing them in when they are needed—just like we call in the finance pros when we need them. That might be a better investment than buying 5,000 copies of the book and wondering why nothing changes.

RP- You've described two extremes, the brief training for 5,000 versus the deep expert. I think it is very helpful to have a few deep experts, but I would also say there is a mid-range that is very important. To use your finance analogy you want some of your key managers, especially at senior levels, to have a pretty good working knowledge of finance. It's that mid-level of skill between the very limited understanding and the true specialist that I would like to see more of.

We have found the way to achieve this is by working with people on real issues. As they begin to interact differently and see that contributing to progress on their business issue, they incorporate the skills into their normal behavior. Others in the organization see that, and you begin to get traction.

DC- Of all the ideas you use in your consulting, are there one or two that are particularly powerful?

RP- The concept of framing and re-framing has great power. What we mean by framing is the way in which people define a situation, how they construct their role and their view of other people in the situation. For example, if there is a problem with a new employee someone might immediately frame it as a hiring mistake whereas someone else might frame it as an orientation issue. Typically we frame things spontaneously without thinking about it. The frame just presents itself to you as an objective reality. However, it's not an objective reality, it's a construction of the human mind influenced by the culture we are in. The way we frame a situation channels what actions appear relevant to us.

In our professional development work we help people make that frame explicit so that it becomes possible to think how you might want to re-frame it, how you might think differently about the situation and redefine what you're trying to achieve. This opens up more powerful options.

DC- The idea of framing is one concept that may have entered the general consciousness of business. It wouldn't surprise me to be in a meeting and hear someone say, "Let's reframe this," and actually use the concept in the correct way. For example, something might originally be framed as a marketing issue and someone will say, "No, we need to re-frame this, it's a product development issue."

RP- That's a useful observation because it points to the distinction between technical or business issues and the behavioral realm. When it comes to behavior and interaction, people have enormous difficulty changing their frames. A client of mine is in the pharmaceutical industry. The research division and the marketing division have entrenched views of each other. Researchers see marketers as having a set of characteristics; marketers see researchers as having other characteristics, and those views are very persistent. And they lead each group to dismiss the validity or legitimacy of what the other says, and to treat that as undiscussable. Getting those departments to work better together will require each of them to do some reframing. I was working with one of those groups recently and we identified their current frame. Then I asked, "what might be a way of reframing it?" They drew a blank. The leader said, "I think we'll need help to see another framing."

DC- Is there anything you disagree with Dr. Argyris about?

RP- One of the ways our differences show up is how my partners and I think about and help people work on key relationships. Organizational issues can get bound up in what we call relationship structures that form between particular individuals. Helping people change those structures requires a shift of focus from Chris' construct of Model I and Model II.

DC- As I understand it, Model 1 is our normal mode of thinking where we, among other things, try to appear rational and in control while suppressing

negative feelings. Whereas Model II is a mode of thinking that stresses getting valid information, making informed choices and constantly monitoring to be sure we are on track and being honest with ourselves.

RP- In our work we call them the unilateral action model and the mutual action model. By cutting the world in this bi-polar way you simplify things enormously, you create the sense that everyone is in the same boat, and you highlight the impact on learning. On the other hand it glosses over differences that become important when you are trying to help people see how they trigger each other.

DC- One of our readers wondered if there are any programs to help young people reach Model II before they join the workforce.

RP- In the '70s when Chris moved from Yale to Harvard he had a co-appointment in the Business School and the School of Education, where he was when we worked with him. He thought if you could change school systems, and therefore educate young people in model II, you could really change the world. Unfortunately he found the education system impenetrable. It was enormously difficult to get traction with school system administrators and faculty. The business world was much more receptive to him. There are people working with these ideas in schools but I'm not close to it, and I don't know of programs to help young people learn Model II.

Now speaking personally as the father of a 15-year-old son I think Model 1 is a capability you need to develop as you're growing up. However, I also believe, based on my sample of one, that some of the key Model II capabilities of reflecting on your own thinking and having increased awareness that other people may think differently can be developed at a young age.

DC- Another reader felt that Chris Argyris criticisms of employee empowerment have really condemned the concept. Is that fair?

RP- I think what Chris condemns is the charade of empowerment because it gets used so widely as an espoused theory when it just ain't so. Many change programs say they empower people when they do not. So this talk of empowerment actually generates cynicism. I think Chris is all for empowerment when it is genuinely possible, but to be real about it we also have to own up to the limits to what is possible.

DC- There are a lot of people who are real Argyris enthusiasts, but many of them find it frustrating that the world hasn't made more progress in adopting his ideas. I think that's one of the underlying concerns of all the people who have discussed his work with me.

RP- In Allen Ginsburg's poem The Terms in Which I Think of Reality one passage reads, "For the world is a mountain of shit: if it's going to be moved at all, it's got to be taken by handfuls." I actually find that hopeful. The world is a big complex difficult place, and there are all these highly intelligent people wanting to make things happen and afflicted with all the blind spots of the human race. If you look at the social cognition literature it shows that people are overconfident in their own judgments and convinced of the purity of their own intentions while attributing bad motives to other people. People look for confirming data and don't notice disconfirming data. It creates a lot of crossed wires, a lot of impatience and frustration. So it's really a matter of moving it by handfuls or, to change the metaphor, bailing while the water keeps coming in.

Robert Putnam and his colleagues in Action Design offer a five-day professional development workshop, "Creating Productive Conversations," that helps practitioners develop skill in using the ideas discussed here. Information is on their web site at http://www.actiondesign.com.

HR.comments

10/25/2003
Very interesting, but how useful is it to real life?

10/25/2003
I too am a big fan of Chris and Bob. In fact, I have attended two workshops with Bob Putnam and the Action Design folks. I found both experiences humbling, transformational and invaluable. The mountain can be moved, but ever so slowly!
Don Murphy dsmurphy@iquest.net

tom bowers   orgdevpro@carolina.rr.com   10/27/2003

There have to be better ways to move mountains than by the handful.

10/30/2003
I've been an Argyris/Putnam fan for years. I especially like Bob's last comment about handfuls. We HR/T&D folks must be models ourselves for this kind of transparent thinking if we want to make even a dent with others. Argyris's work is more a sane, effective place to stand than a neatly-packaged program.

Author
David Creelman
creelmanresearch@canada.com
David Creelman is a Contributing Editor to HR.com and CEO of Creelman Research.

David does writing, research and analysis on human capital issues. His clients include consultants, think tanks, HR vendors and academics. He will occasionally speak at conferences.

He is always happy to hear from you. Email: creelmanresearch@canada.com.