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A Model of Blind Spots, Learning and Change

‘While I still hate to readjust my thinking, still hate to give up old ways of perceiving and conceptualizing, yet, at some deeper level, I have, to a considerable degree, come to realize that these painful reorganizations are what is known as learning, and that though painful, they always lead to a more satisfying, because somewhat more accurate, way of seeing life.’

Carl Rogers, *On Becoming A Person*

We have seen in the last chapter that blind spots are areas where we resist learning. Blind spots cause us to interpret cues around us in ways that preserve our existing ideas and behaviours and prevent us from adapting and learning.

Before we go into detail regarding the role of *leadership* blind spots, we need a model to help us understand the dynamics of learning and blind spots more generally. The research that underpins this book provides a model that reveals some of the dynamics of learning, blind spots and change. This chapter briefly summarizes the research and the learning model. Whilst we will not go into a lot of academic detail, this chapter will be more ‘theoretical’ than others in the book. Nevertheless, the model does provide a practical tool that in itself will help to overcome blind spots and accelerate learning. We will see why overcoming blind spots is a difficult and painful process, and why learning

to learn (or learning agility) is a skill that requires conscious effort and ongoing support.

The chapter attempts to cover some complex ground as concisely as possible. To aid clarity, it has been divided into five parts:

- part one gives a brief overview of the research and how it was structured;
- part two offers the model of learning and blind spots that forms the basis of the eight learning practices;
- part three looks at the motivational forces that can either promote learning or generate blind spots;
- part four looks at different learning states, showing how the dynamics of learning and blind spots change according to the context and our state of mind;
- part five summarizes the key messages presented in the chapter.

1. The Research

The research that informs this book was undertaken to address the question of how people learn (or resist learning) when their organizations go through change. Kolb's learning theory, although still widely used in organizations, had come under criticism¹ and the research intended to re-examine the processes involved in experiential learning, particularly in the context of rapid organizational change.

¹ Holman, D., Pavlica, K. and Thorpe, R. (1997) 'Rethinking Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning in Management Education. The Contribution of Social Constructionism and Activity Theory.' *Management Learning*, 28(2), 135–148. Kayes, D. C. (2002) 'Experiential Learning and Its Critics: Preserving the Role of Experience in Management Learning and Education.' *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 1(2), 137–149. Nichol, B. (1997) 'Group Analytic Training for Management Trainers: Integrating the Emotional and Cognitive Dimensions of Management Learning.' *Management Learning*, 28(3), 351–363. Reynolds, M. (1997) 'Learning Styles: A Critique.' *Management Learning*, 28(2), 115–134. Sadler-Smith, E., Allinson, C. W. and Hayes, J. (2000) 'Learning Preferences and Cognitive Style: Some Implications for Continuing Professional Development.' *Management Learning*, 31(2), 239–256. Vince, R. (1998) 'Behind and Beyond Kolb's Learning Cycle.' *Journal of Management Education*, 22(3), 304–320.

Two organizations, both of which were going through intensive culture change programmes, participated in the study. One was a scientific organization that had recently been privatized by the government (we shall call it Scientific Solutions). Staffed by PhDs and world-renowned experts, these professionals had to learn to compete in the private sector and to 'sell' their expertise. The MD, her senior team and a number of senior scientists and managers, totalling 13 people altogether, agreed to participate in the research.

The second organization was a logistics company, which stored and transported goods for clients all over the world (we shall call them Logical Logistics). The depot that agreed to participate was focused on one client in the retail trade delivering its goods to stores all over the country. Many of the staff employed at the depot had left school at 16 or 18 and had learned through experience at work. The General Manager was introducing a more team-oriented approach to management rather than the somewhat macho and bullying style that had existed before. The GM, members of the senior management team and a few middle managers, totalling nine altogether, all agreed to participate in the study.

The first stage of the research involved defining what was meant by learning. This was difficult, as there were almost as many definitions of learning as there were writers. The definition used drew on cognitive, behavioural, psycho-dynamic and humanist traditions in learning.² A distinction was made between learning as an output and

² For a detailed review of the literature, see Blakeley, K. (2005) *How Managers Learn When Their Organisations Go Through Change*, unpublished PhD Thesis, Brunel University. For a selection of readings, see:

Argyris, C. (1982) *Reasoning, Learning and Action: Individual and Organizational*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Inc. De Board, R. (1978) *The Psychoanalysis of Organizations*. London: Tavistock/Routledge. Fineman, S. (1997) 'Emotion and Management Learning,' *Management Learning*, 28(1), 13–25. Friedlander, F. (1983) 'Patterns of Individual and Organizational Learning,' in S. Srivastva and Associates (Eds) *The Executive Mind: New Insights on Managerial Thought and Action*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass. Gardner, H. (1985) *The Mind's New Science*. New York: Basic Books. Gheradi, S. *et al.* (1998) 'Toward a Social Understanding of How People Learn in Organizations: The Notion of Situated Curriculum,' *Management Learning*, 29(3), 273–297. Goldstein, A. P. and Sorcher, M. (1974) *Changing Supervisor Behaviour*. New York: Pergamon Press. Herzberg, F. (1966) *Work and the Nature of Man*. New York: World Publishing Company.

learning as a process. Learning as output was defined as the generation of:

1. New or changed beliefs, constructs or schemas (including self concept).
2. New or changed emotional orientations towards people (including self), events and phenomena.³
3. New or changed behaviours.

It is not intended to suggest that it is either possible or desirable to separate these elements. Nevertheless, the definition provides three different lenses and three sets of conceptual tools through which to view learning – cognitive, emotional and behavioural.⁴ Having identified what we meant by learning as an *output*, attention was focused on what learning *processes* generated these outputs. A trawl through the learning literature revealed over 25 learning processes currently in use, including experiential learning (on-the-job), coaching, vicarious learning (learning by observing others), declarative learning (formal, study-based learning), reflection, double-loop learning, etc.

MacDonald, S. (1995) 'Learning to Change: An Information Perspective on Learning in the Organization.' *Organization Science*, 6(5), 557–568. McGregor, D. (1960) *The Human Side of Enterprise*. New York: McGraw Hill. Mezirow, J. and Associates (1990) *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass. Nichol, B. (1997) 'Group Analytic Training for Management Trainers: Integrating the Emotional and Cognitive Dimensions of Management Learning.' *Management Learning*, 28(3), 351–363. Pedlar, M., Boydell, T. and Burgoyne, J. (1989) 'Towards the Learning Company.' *Management Education and Development*, 20(1), 1–8. Revans, R. (1982) *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*. Chartwell-Bratt. Weick, K. E. (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Wenger, E. (1991) 'Communities of Practice: Where Learning Happens,' in R. E. White *et al.* (Eds) *Learning Within Organizations*, Western Business School, University of Western Ontario, Ontario, pp. 25–41. White, R. E., Crossan, M. M. and Lane, H. W. (1994) *Learning Within Organizations*. Western Business School, London, Canada.

³ The term *emotional orientation* was used to refer to the emotions aroused by a cue. A cue can be a person, event or other phenomenon. We do not refer to attitudes in this model, as attitudes are commonly defined as a mixture of emotional orientation *and* beliefs in relation to a cue. This research attempted to differentiate between the cognitive and emotional elements of an attitude.

⁴ The separation also acknowledges that there have, in the past, been distinct sets of literature that have informed our understanding of learning, each with its own useful set of concepts and tools.

However, many of the processes were similar (e.g. learning that causes a profound change in one's beliefs and/or assumptions is variously referred to as transformational learning, double-loop learning or generative learning). To avoid this kind of repetition, a core set of 15 different processes was identified.⁵

The research itself was conducted over the period of a year. Participants were interviewed at the beginning of the year using a semi-structured interview format. They were asked about their beliefs and feelings about their roles, the organization, the people they worked with and the changes being introduced. Throughout the year, participants completed learning diaries once a month in which they wrote down their thoughts, feelings and behavioural responses to events as they occurred. Finally, participants were interviewed at the end of the year when they were asked to describe their learning over the period. They were also asked the same questions as in the first interview, in order to track any changes in their responses. In addition, participants sought feedback from their colleagues at the end of the year. This was designed to gain an insight into what changes had been noticed by colleagues, bosses and direct reports regarding their behaviour, emotions and thinking over the year.

Using the interviews, diaries and feedback, learning outcomes were identified for each participant at the end of the year. Having identified the learning outcomes, it was possible to identify the 'story' behind each participant's learning by tracking back all the relevant references in the diaries. It was also possible to note the individual's blind spots or areas where they did not learn. Using the diaries it was often possible to see where areas of potential learning came to participants' attention but were not engaged with. In fact, the diaries provided useful evidence of how we repress, distort, dismiss or fail to notice ideas and information that could potentially generate significant and much needed learning. We will see evidence of this later in this chapter.

⁵ These were as follows: declarative learning, discursive learning, emotional learning, practical or procedural learning, learning through coaching, experimental learning, imaginative learning, learning through feedback, reflection, rehearsal, training, vicarious learning, comparative learning and tacit learning.

2. A Model of Learning

From this research came a model of learning that focused on four key processes. The first process was that of *paying attention* to a cue. It was noticeable that every diarist was paying attention to a unique set of cues. There were only two incidents in each organization that were mentioned by more than two diarists over the whole year. All the other incidents were highly personal and idiosyncratic. This prompted the question: what leads people to attend to one issue and ignore others? Why do people ‘select’ certain events to learn from and not others?

The role of attention was central to the learning journey, and this was supported by much of the literature in cognitive, clinical and social psychology.⁶ In order to learn from an event, attention must be paid to it; blind spots emerge when we do not pay attention to information or ideas that are relevant to our concerns.

Having noted the importance of ‘attention’ for learning, the learning biographies were then compared in order to determine any patterns regarding the types of learning processes that generated different learning outcomes. It was found that out of all the learning outcomes examined, only two learning processes were found in ALL examples of learning. These two processes were *emotional learning* and *sensemaking*.

Emotional learning is defined as the experience of new or different emotions in relation to a cue that are processed in a way that leads to changes in behaviour, emotional orientation or belief.

Originally the term *reflection* was used rather than sensemaking. Reflection is probably the most recognized and discussed of all the learning processes. However, this did not seem to capture fully the processes of analysis and thinking that were taking place in the diaries and interviews. Reflection implies looking back and

⁶ Eysenck, M. W. and Keane, M. T. (1990) *Cognitive Psychology, A Student's Handbook*. Hove, UK: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Fiske, S. T. and Taylor, S. (1991) *Social Cognition*, second edition. Singapore: McGraw Hill. Naranjo, C. (1993) *Gestalt Therapy: The Attitude and Practice of an Atheoretical Experientialism*. Bancyfelin, Wales: Crown House Publishing.

reinterpreting past events, but people's thinking was just as much focused on the future. Much of people's thinking was devoted to understanding what was happening to them now in order to guide their actions in the future. *Sensemaking* rather than 'reflection' seemed to capture better what was going on. Sensemaking was defined as: 'the process of constructing, reconstructing and deconstructing meaning around cues, their implications and consequences in a way that led to new or changed beliefs, emotional orientations or behaviours.'⁷

So far then, learning seemed to constitute *paying attention* to a cue, *experiencing an emotion* in relation to it and *making sense* of it (not necessarily in that order). As a definition of the learning process, this seemed incomplete without the inclusion of a behavioural element. However, new or changed behaviours did not take place in every example of learning. In some cases there was a conscious decision *not* to change behaviour. Nevertheless, changing behaviour is a vital part of learning, even if it does not always occur. So it was included as one of the core learning processes. In doing so, it was not intended to imply that behavioural change always took place. Behavioural change *often* took place, and whether it did or did not, the behavioural outcome of any learning was intimately linked to the other three processes. In other words, behaviour change does not emerge from nowhere, but is based on prior changes in attention, emotion and/or sensemaking.

We could represent these processes as a cycle, as shown in Figure 2.1. The arrows indicate that these processes can occur in any order – emotion can lead to attention can lead to sensemaking which leads to action which leads to emotion.

This model also raises the important question of what differentiates a cycle that leads to learning from one that does not? Just because we pay attention to something, experience an emotion, make sense of it and act on our interpretation, this does not necessarily generate learning. For example, someone might suggest that Jim's presentation skills are not as polished as they could be – he needs to be clearer in his delivery. Jim feels intense irritation at the feedback and

⁷ The term *sensemaking* has been popularized by Karl E. Weick in his brilliant book *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995). Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.

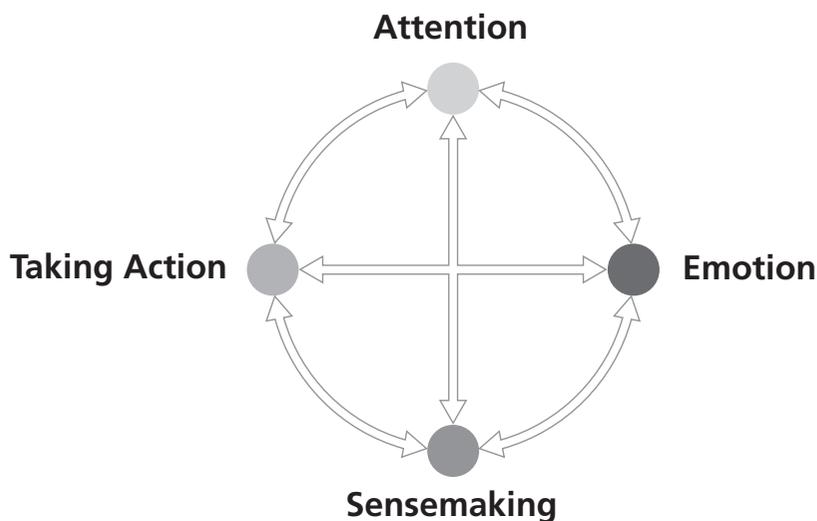


Figure 2.1 Four learning processes.

makes sense of it by using an old belief – claiming that the individual who gave the feedback knows nothing about presentation skills and simply wants to undermine his confidence. Jim then acts on this interpretation by carrying on as normal. As a result, he does not learn, as there are *no learning outcomes*. If this pattern continues, we can say that Jim has developed a blind spot in this area.

However, if Jim pays attention to the feedback, managing his irritation, facing his feelings of vulnerability and changing his behaviour as a result, he will have learned. His changed behaviour and more effective delivery would be evidence of a learning outcome.

So what is different about the processes in the first example, where blind spots block the learning, and the second, where learning is in evidence? In the first example, Jim is simply *processing information* based upon previous beliefs, emotional orientations and behaviours. In other words, he is drawing on his *living knowledge*. Living knowledge is a key construct in our model of learning. It represents our personal understanding of reality. It is what we ‘know’ (beliefs, ideas and schemas), what we feel (emotional orientations towards objects, events or people) and what we do (behaviours that we believe ‘work’, enabling us to meet our needs in the world). It accumulates over time

and we develop and change it through our personal experience. Although living knowledge is a highly personal combination of beliefs, feelings and behaviours rooted in our individual experience, we tend to see it as *truth*. When we draw on our existing store of living knowledge, processing information already stored in memory, it is a relatively easy and spontaneous process.

Learning, however, is more difficult and arduous. Our second example shows Jim when he is in learning mode. He has paid attention, processed his emotions, made sense and acted in a way that has generated a learning output and grown his living knowledge. However, this process has been more painful, challenging and slow. We can contrast information processing with learning as follows.

The four processes involved in information processing are:

- *attention*: automatically attending to whatever appears in our consciousness;
- *emotions*: experiencing or noticing familiar emotions;
- *sensemaking*: making sense using existing constructs;
- *behaving*: acting automatically using our existing behavioural repertoire.

The four processes involved in learning are:

- *attention*: changing our attention patterns, noticing new or different cues;
- *emotions*: focusing on and exploring new or unprocessed/unexplained emotions;
- *sensemaking*: using new constructs or adapting existing constructs to make new meaning;
- *behaving*: experimenting with new or changed behaviours.

We can represent the activities of information processing and learning as a cycle, as shown in Figure 2.2. The diagram is intended to show the information processing cycle in the middle and the learning cycle on the outside. When we make sense of our experience using our existing living knowledge, we are processing

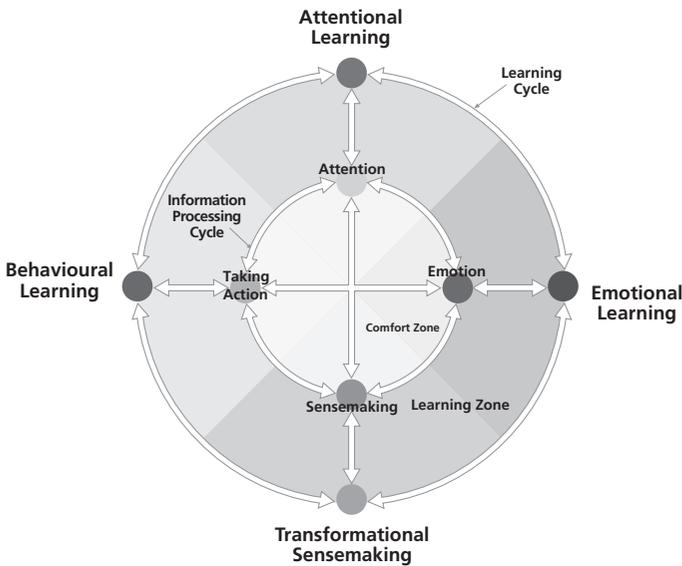


Figure 2.2 Information processing and learning.

information and no change or learning takes place. This is the tempting region known as the *comfort zone*!

Once we move outside the comfort zone, we start to learn. It is only when we step outside the comfort zone that we begin to develop new constructs, emotional orientations and behaviours, introducing the potential for more complexity and flexibility in our responses to change. This is identified on the diagram as *attentional learning*, *emotional learning*, *transformational sensemaking* and *behavioural learning*.

This notion of *dual processing* (effortful vs effortless processing) is common in the cognitive and social psychology literature.⁸ It is widely recognized that using our existing living knowledge involves effortless, automatic processing that enables us to cope with many

⁸ See, for example, Brewer, M. (1988) 'A Dual Process Model of Impression Formation', in T. Srull and R. Wyer (Eds) *Advances in Social Cognition*, Vol. 1, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum and Associates. Louis, M. R. and Sutton, R. I. (1999) 'Switching Cognitive Gears: From Habits of Mind to Active Thinking.' *Human Relations*, 44(1). Lord, R. G. and Foti, R. J. (1986) 'Schema Theories, Information Processing, and Organizational Behaviour', in H. P. Sims, D. A. Gioia and associates, *The Thinking Organization: Dynamics of Organizational Social Cognition*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, pp. 49–74.

tasks simultaneously. Learning involves making sense of cues in a way that generates expanded living knowledge and is more difficult, slow and energy-absorbing.

Hence, our definition of the learning process would be:

Paying attention, processing emotions, making sense and taking action so that new or changed constructs, beliefs, emotional orientations and/or behaviours are generated.

Blind spots emerge when, having been exposed to significant new information or ideas, we decide to go into *information processing mode* instead of taking the opportunity to *learn*. We interpret cues (or repress, ignore or dismiss them) in order to preserve existing constructs, emotional orientations and behaviours. This enables us to stay inside our comfort zone rather than engaging in the more difficult task of learning. As noted in the Carl Rogers quote at the beginning of the chapter, a lot of learning involves pain. Blind spots protect us from the pain of learning. We shall explore this idea further in part three.

3. The Drivers of Learning and Blind Spots

The diaries showed that learning (as opposed to information processing) often involves some psychological pain or discomfort. The greater the degree of learning, the greater the emotional intensity and, often, pain. This is particularly the case when learning involves changing our beliefs, emotional orientations or behaviours as opposed to simply adding new ones. When we go on holiday to a new country, for example, we add lots of new constructs regarding the culture and people of that country. This form of *incremental* learning is, in most cases, pleasurable. We add new constructs without challenging existing aspects of our living knowledge.

However, learning that involves change or that challenges existing beliefs, emotional orientations or behaviours is often painful. Whilst this kind of learning can involve positive emotions such as excitement, optimism and hope, there is always discomfort of some kind. Giving up old beliefs, existing values, comfortable behaviours

and challenging deep-rooted feelings is anxiety-provoking. Even in the most positive of cases, when people willingly take on learning, there is always some anxiety or uncertainty.

We can see this very clearly if we look at the experiences of the diarists whose learning informed the research for this book. Even the diarists who enjoyed learning (and there weren't many!) experienced doubts and anxieties regarding their ability to come through it. The following are typical examples of how the diarists described their experience of learning:

'I've gone through a change process, but a painful one, because I started to doubt myself. It wasn't just "oh right," like that, it was very much . . . there were 3 or 4 weeks where I felt so low. It's like your comfort factor, you have a comfort factor which is your baseline of the way that you operate, and if you can imagine that being smashed and you're falling through, you're trying to grab hold of something, and partly it took a while to get used to where I was, and what I felt comfortable with.'

'All this has resulted in me not achieving very much at work, feeling pretty unbalanced and unstable about everything in my "career" and self esteem. I've lost sight of what I'm good at, what value I can bring and going through a period of not believing it, even when I can see it.'

'(doing the diaries) made me more depressed . . . because you fill it in and you think, well this is whatever I did, what have I achieved over the last month? I'm doing nothing really, I mean, OK I was occasionally finishing a job and writing a report, but I didn't feel it was very satisfying. So as a learning thing, it just makes you reflect on what you're doing and, as I say, that can be depressing.'

Even when people were extremely positive about their learning, their diaries were full of ups and downs, frustrations and setbacks, anxieties and uncertainties.

Mike talks about the links between excitement and fear of failure:

‘developing new business – quite a personal responsibility. A good deal of learning what/how to make things happen. The excitement of learning/developing something new is tempered with the small risk of failure (although this is only in the background).’

One diarist gained hugely in confidence over the period, but the experience was not always enjoyable:

‘I think I’m quite pleased that I didn’t bottle it really, in some ways. I think having survived the last six months, I feel much more confident in myself and that terrible situation, because that’s really awful, but just sticking there, and I made one or two decisions that were OK and came out all right, but that just gave me a bit more confidence.’

As people revealed their experiences of learning and change in the diaries, it became more and more obvious that learning was not a comfortable process.⁹ Information processing was altogether less effortful, less painful and less frightening than learning. When we process information in an effortless manner using our existing living knowledge, we experience anything from a mild satisfaction to an intense feeling of mastery and control. Learning entails examining difficult emotions; it involves paying attention to anxiety-provoking problems; it demands that we question our ideas and everything we have known; it necessitates experimenting with new behaviours. Learning involves losing control, accepting uncertainty and embracing risk. It is the temptation to revert to information processing, rather than engaging with learning, that leads to blind spots.

So why bother? What makes us invest our energy in learning and willingly undertake the emotional discomfort that learning entails?

⁹ There are, of course, different types of learning. Incremental learning, for example, occurs when you add new constructs to your existing mental models in a way that does not challenge existing beliefs. This happens when you go on holiday and ‘learn’ new facts about a country. In this book, the pain associated with learning almost always derives from people having to *change*, *challenge* or *test* aspects of their existing living knowledge.

Four Drivers of Our Learning and Blind Spots

The diarists revealed some interesting answers to this question. An analysis was conducted of the main areas (or *learning domains*) in which people focused their learning, showing a remarkable degree of commonality. The analysis revealed four main drivers of people's attention and learning:

1. *Self esteem* – preserving, protecting and enhancing my self esteem.
2. *Psychological comfort* – the drive to achieve emotional wellbeing and psychological comfort. This also includes the drive to meet my underlying 'needs' such as 'being liked', 'gaining influence', 'developing my expertise', 'helping others'. It is when we are meeting our underlying needs that we feel most fulfilled and comfortable.
3. *Goals* – achieving my goals, often by understanding 'what works' in the world.
4. *Values* – affirming and protecting my values in the world.

The role of these drivers in learning has been noted by many other academics and practitioners in the area of adult experiential learning.¹⁰ However, it is worth stressing the point that people are more likely to engage in learning if, in doing so, they see the likelihood of achieving any of the above outcomes. If learning appears to compromise any of

¹⁰ Weick (1995) quotes Erez and Earley, who maintain that three needs crucially influence a person's sense of identity: (1) the need for self-enhancement (maintaining a positive cognitive and emotional orientation towards the self); (2) the self-efficacy motive (the desire to perceive oneself as competent and efficacious); and (3) the need for self-consistency (the desire to sense and experience coherence and continuity). They claim that these needs influence the nature and outcome of learning and sensemaking in organizations (see Weick, K. E. (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, p. 20).

Vince (1996, 'Experiential Management Education as the Practice of Change' in R. French and C. Grey (Eds), *Rethinking Management Education*. London: Sage) quotes Claxton's four personal defence systems: 'I must be *Competent*, I must be *Consistent*, I must be *In control*, I must be *Comfortable*'.

Argyris (1976) maintains that single-loop learning is governed by four variables: (1) achieve the purpose as the actor defines it; (2) win, do not lose; (3) suppress negative feelings; (4) emphasize rationality.

these areas, there is a higher likelihood that there will be a reversion to information processing and blind spots. Learning often emerged through a stop-start process driven by hope that these outcomes would be achieved and blocked by fear that these outcomes would be jeopardized. Only when the benefits seemed to outweigh the risks would it be engaged with, as we shall see in the examples below.¹¹

These four drivers do not necessarily operate in alignment. Learning may involve the achievement of our goals but also risk our self esteem and our psychological comfort. Often, our learning is difficult because we have to make choices between these desired states. On the one hand, if we want to achieve our goal of career progression, we may have to take on a difficult assignment. This might jeopardize our self esteem or psychological comfort. It may also threaten our values around work/life balance. However, we weigh up the various incentives and risks and take a judgement according to the strength of our various goals, needs and desires.

There is an astonishing degree of overlap in these categories, both in terms of content but also in terms of the *number* of influencing variables that appear to be important (i.e. three or four):

<i>This research</i>	<i>Claxton</i>	<i>Erez and Earley</i>	<i>Argyris</i>
Goals	I must be in control	Self efficacy	Achieve the purpose as the actor defines it
Self esteem	I must be competent	Self enhancement Self efficacy	Win, don't lose
Psychological comfort	I must be comfortable	Self consistency	Suppress negative feelings
Values	I must be consistent	Self consistency	Emphasize rationality

¹¹ Argyris makes the following point: ‘One might say that participants in organizations are encouraged to learn to perform as long as the learning does not question the fundamental design, goals and activities of their organizations. This may be called single-loop learning . . . Furthermore, most groups and organizations studied in their usual settings permit only single-loop learning. Recent research on individual adult learning suggests that human beings are also acculturated to be primarily single-loop learners in dealing with other human beings and with substantive controversial issues (Argyris and Schon, 1974)’. See Argyris, C. (1976) ‘Single Loop and Double Loop Models in Research on Decision Making.’ *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **21**, 363–375.

These four drivers are always operating throughout the learning process. They influence what we engage with and what we avoid – driving both our learning and our blind spots.

The effect of these drivers is best illustrated through some examples.

Self Esteem

It is well known that self esteem plays an important role in our learning.¹² So, too, does our self concept – we will tend to be more receptive to learning that boosts our self esteem and reinforces or promotes our self concept. Our self esteem is founded on at least three fundamental needs:

- the need to feel respected and valued by those around us;
- the need to feel competent and in control;
- the need to feel liked and accepted.

When information presents itself that supports these needs, we feel like we're on cloud nine! We are highly receptive, as one diarist shows:

'I took my CV along and I was absolutely knocked over by the response I got, because I expected to get some – "yes, we're very interested, we'll put it through the process and we'll see," but I got a very "wow, gosh we're desperate for people with these sorts of skills and these sorts of qualifications." So from feeling undervalued by Scientific Solutions, I suddenly saw the contrast between the way I seem to be valued outside and I got offered interviews for all three jobs.'

¹² See, for example: Argyris, C. (1976) 'Single Loop and Double Loop Models in Research on Decision Making.' *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21, 363–375. Kelly, G. A. (1955) *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. New York. Norton. Vince, R. and Saleem, T. (2004) 'The Impact of Caution and Blame on Organizational Learning.' *Management Learning*, 35(2), 133–154. Harmon-Jones, E. and Mills, J. (1999) *Cognitive Dissonance – progress on a pivotal theory in social psychology*. New York: American Psychological Association. Brown, A. D. and Starkey, K. (2000) 'Organizational Identity and Learning: A Psychodynamic Perspective.' *Academy of Management Review*, 25(1), 102–120.

However, when we receive information that challenges our self esteem, our blind spots tend to emerge and we are less receptive to learning, as demonstrated by the following diarists:

'It was implied that one of my projects was £10k overspent, but I do not believe it.'

'Was slightly disappointed by the subordinates' results on the feedback. Reflected on this a little and came to the conclusion that because of the differences in the way people score, I couldn't actually read an awful lot into the results anyway.'

An interesting example of how self esteem relates to learning came from a project manager whose project went disastrously wrong. In the immediate aftermath of the painful experience, the manager claimed:

*'Got the report out just in time. There are lots of lessons to be learned from this but they are mostly on the contractual side. **I don't think Graham or myself could have done things much differently.** Of all the jobs I've ever worked on with SS, I've found this to be the most frustrating and probably the least enjoyable.'*
(my emphasis)

So, no conscious learning has taken place at this point; the diarist has attributed the cause of the problem to extraneous factors outside himself. No new insights into how he might change as a result of this project have been derived. The diarist has reverted to information processing – making sense of the event in a way that preserves existing constructs, emotional orientations and behaviours. At this point we might observe a blind spot emerging.

However, the manager's emotions bubble away under the surface and he continues to 'fret' on his experience. Rather than burying his emotions, he tries to make sense of what happened as a way of processing and addressing the painful emotions he continues to experience. Eventually, after approximately six months, when the pain has died down, he admits:

'I think there is a tendency with projects to, if things start to go wrong, to sort of . . . it's almost burying your head in the sand, there

is a tendency to try to beaver away and think “well, if I just do some extra hours on this, we’ll turn it round and we’ll get it right,” and I think that’s wrong, because one of the lessons from this is that once you start to overspend on a project, you never ever recover it. You might think you’ve got other tasks where you can recover the overspend on an early task, but it just doesn’t work like that.’

So, his initial sensemaking around the event (there was nothing he could have done differently) was inaccurate, serving to prop up his self esteem rather than identify the ‘truth’ of the matter. This could only be done once the initial pain had died down. In fact, the diarist subsequently gave a presentation to his colleagues on what he should have done to avoid the project failure and the lessons he learned.

It must be said that it takes courage to learn from these kinds of painful experiences. As we saw, the immediate impulse is to make sense of the event in a way that preserves self esteem (‘we couldn’t have done anything differently’). There were plenty of examples where the diarists did not go beyond this kind of self-preserving sensemaking, continuing to maintain that the problems were not of their making. These examples provided important data on how blind spots emerged and were sustained.

Psychological Comfort

We all want to be happy. At a more mundane level, most of us would prefer to be comfortable than unhappy, frustrated, angry or anxious. The need to achieve psychological comfort drives both learning and blind spots. A good example of the complexity of this dynamic is given to us by a diarist:

*‘I’d been feeling [unhappy] for a long time, but I suppose I eventually started thinking, well look, the original plan was always, to say, “right I’m not happy in this job, I’m going to look for another one.” But once I’d left this place in the evening or for the weekend, I’m one of these people that can switch off completely. **Now if this seeming overwhelming uncomfortableness came with me when I***

did leave in the evening, then maybe I would have done something about it in the evening or at the weekend, but I didn't, because once I'd left this place, I no longer had that overwhelming motivation to do something about it, and so that's why, for quite a long time, I had lots of other things on that were higher priority in the short term.' (my emphasis)

This diarist makes it quite clear that he was prepared to tolerate a high degree of unhappiness at work simply because he could 'switch off' once he got home. The motivation to make sense of the discomfort, face it and act comes from the strength, duration and *intrusion* of the 'uncomfortableness' (does it affect life outside work? Is it transitory? Can I live with it?). There was also a subconscious dimension playing on this diarist's mind. Will I be even more uncomfortable if I face the problem? Will it involve more pain and more uncertainty than simply putting up with the discomfort at work? He decided to put up with the discomfort at work rather than face more uncertainty by addressing it.

The drive for psychological comfort operates in many ways. When we are experiencing high levels of pain at work, we may engage in high levels of learning and pain in order to relieve it. However, sometimes we may make an unconscious assessment that it is better to put up with the current, 'known' pain to avoid the future, 'unknown' pain. Uncertainty comprises psychological pain in and of itself.

On the other hand, if we are comfortable, we may simply dismiss information that introduces discomfort. Beyond this, boredom comprises an excess of comfort and may well spur learning as we seek emotional arousal and excitement.

The diarist above sensed that a lot of uncertainty would result if he faced his pain. In fact he was correct. When he did engage with the learning, he decided that having spent his whole career with the organization, he would leave to consider new career paths.

What helped him to overcome his blind spot and face the learning? He received some feedback that provided a considerable boost to his self esteem and through some coaching, he generated a new interpretation that enabled him to move forward. He realized that

the reason he was not enjoying his job was because it did not allow him to use his strengths – as opposed to concluding that it was because he was not good at his job (which was what he was fearful of facing).

Blind spots can perform the useful function of temporarily protecting us from difficult learning at a time when we lack the resilience to cope with it. The diarists were often able to face learning only after they had experienced a significant boost to their self esteem. This provided the resilience to overcome their blind spots and expand their living knowledge.

Goals

One of the diarists working for Scientific Solutions embraced the need to ‘sell’ enthusiastically. Greg’s learning was fully focused on how to develop his selling skills and to develop relationships with customers. His diaries were full of minute descriptions of client meetings, business breakfasts and presentations made to clients. His learning was immense during the period, though not without its anxieties. However, during the middle of the year, he received some feedback from his team. The feedback indicated that he was not helping or managing them enough. They were finding the selling difficult and they needed his help. They felt lost and directionless.

Greg acknowledged the feedback, though made sense of it through the filter of *his own* values and goals. He claimed that they were intelligent, independent professionals and did not really need his help! This tendency to interpret new and potentially difficult information in a way that preserves existing constructs indicated a possible blind spot. However, he did make a resolution to change his behaviour.

By the end of the year he had made great strides in terms of his marketing and business development. His manager made the comment:

‘he’s grown, I think hugely, as an individual writing about this particular product, delivering conferences, articles and editorials in all the top magazines, and he’s a known national figure now.’

However, according to one member of his team:

‘I don’t think Greg has changed a great deal over the year.’

It was clear throughout the diaries that Greg’s attention was focused on his expressed goal of growing his business and developing his marketing skills. Despite getting feedback that his people wanted him to manage and support them more, and despite his resolution to do this, it did not happen. This was clearly a behavioural blind spot for Greg. What did Greg say?

‘you’re always juggling the balls aren’t you, and thinking “am I giving this one enough attention or not?” and, I suppose there’s never enough time to give them all as much attention as you’d like, so you have to make a decision as to how much really. I could probably have spent a bit more time, but it’s tricky, knowing how worthwhile it is, some people don’t want it.’

Developing his team was not really a goal that Greg was deeply committed to – whether consciously or not. Greg devoted his year to his motivational goal of growing his business and developing his own selling abilities. Anything else was secondary. Greg gives us a good example of how commitment to a goal can generate profound learning. But he also shows how we will avoid learning in areas that we are not deeply committed to, regardless of how much other people need us to. Goals can generate both learning and blind spots. They can narrow our attention and may cause us to dismiss cues that do not seem relevant or helpful to their achievement.

Values

It is very common during change for people’s values to be challenged. If you are a scientist and you believe that you are working for the good of society, or you are developing innovatory products that will help others, the introduction of the profit motive and the imperative to ‘sell’ (especially to sell services that do not meet your own high technical specifications) can undermine everything that you believe in and represent. It can also force you to adopt behaviours that you dislike and do not connect to emotionally, whilst

jettisoning behaviours that you value and are skilled in applying. If you are a manager with strong beliefs about how people should be treated, you may come across situations where you have to compromise your values if you want to ‘get to the top’ and ‘keep in with the boss’. In all these cases, uncomfortable emotions will be triggered that will either lead to a learning response or to a blind spot. The following excerpts from the diaries show how ‘values’ surface during learning:

‘The hazard analysis in the report demonstrated a much higher risk than they wanted, so they’ve altered the results to suit themselves. I am disgusted . . . Quite clearly they don’t give a shit about the health and safety of their workforce. Spoke to people here about it and it appears this isn’t the first time this has happened. I have refused to work on any more of their projects. There is (to me anyway) such a thing as professional integrity.’

*‘I had a stage when I first got married I looked to leave, because I was being made to do things I wasn’t comfortable with and I find that difficult . . . I found that very difficult to cope with, look I’m sorry Karen I’m going to give you a written warning, it’s not my decision, it’s his decision, I wouldn’t give you a warning at all, and I was in the middle there, where I was like, “I don’t want to do this decision but they’re telling me I’ve got to do it.” . . . **It’s hard to take a decision I’m not happy with, it’s that conscience thing.**’ (my emphasis)*

*‘Felt more as if I should be on E’s side rather than F . . . **Felt slightly uncomfortable (a bit disloyal to F as if I was manipulating him a bit – but not significant).**’ (my emphasis)*

*‘my initial reaction was “how,” excuse my French, “how f***ing presumptuous” . . . what they’ve done is taken what their values are . . . to being values that I might have, without bothering to actually question or ask what it was that made me tick and what I actually liked doing.’*

Whenever our values are challenged, we experience discomfort. We then have a choice. Do we bury the discomfort and make sense

of the situation in a way that makes us feel good (generating a blind spot), or do we explore the discomfort and enter on a learning journey where the outcome is unknown and uncertain? If we choose the latter, we tend to go into a deeper sensemaking mode, asking ‘is this right?’, ‘is this what I want?’, ‘why are they doing this?’ When our values are challenged on an ongoing basis, we can end up by asking profound questions that can result in a rapid expansion in our living knowledge, generating deep, personal change. Values are complex and, as a result, Chapter 10 is devoted to a detailed examination of their role in promoting learning.

4. Three Learning States

This section focuses on how different moods or states of mind affect the dynamics described above. Different *learning states* influence the extent and nature of the learning that is undertaken and the types of blind spots that are experienced. Three different learning states are described: *visionary*, *adaptive* and *dissonant*. There are other learning states but these did not emerge initially from the research.

If we are in a *visionary* learning state (wanting to change the world in line with our vision), we tend to take more risks with our learning – we are excited, passionate, committed and will absorb any learning that would appear to help achieve our aim.

Leaders of change often find themselves in a visionary learning state. They have drawn up a vision for the future; they have a sense of optimism and feel that they have a personal role to play in the achievement of the vision. A lot of prior learning will have fed into the crafting of the vision – leaders will have previously challenged many assumptions and considered lots of new ideas, so the vision will embody many of their personal beliefs and passions. As a result, their self esteem, their personal goals, their psychological comfort and their values are all in alignment with their vision. Achieving their vision will enable them to meet these needs, so they are excited, motivated and driven. They are prepared to take on risks; they

tolerate a lot of the discomfort and pain of learning because of the anticipated rewards (success of their goals, enhanced self esteem, the realization of their values and the meeting of needs such as status, achievement or recognition).

However, as we saw in the last chapter, visionary learning is often accompanied by visionary blind spots. Visionaries tend to narrow their attention onto those phenomena that appear relevant (and in many cases, supportive) to their visions. They can be impatient, dismissive and intolerant of information or ideas that appear to question or challenge the vision. Ideas or questions that appear to complicate the goals can be dismissed, and the people who raise them can be regarded as ‘resistant to change’. We will see further examples of this in the next chapter.

If we are not leading change but having to adapt to changes being implemented around us, we may get into a slightly cautious, *adaptive* learning state. This is when we may be willing to learn but we want to be in control and limit the possibility of failure. We will experiment cautiously, carefully limiting the risk. We will learn and take risks for as long as we feel in control and as long as we feel the benefits outweigh the cost. We will be aware of the risks to our self esteem (personal failure), to our values (unsure of whether the new approaches will involve sacrificing what we believe is important), to our psychological comfort (will we be able to meet our needs for respect, liking, influence, status, etc?) and to our personal goals. Nevertheless, we will be prepared to take on the goals of the new learning as long as we are supported by our managers and colleagues, and our self esteem is not allowed to fall to unacceptable levels.

When we are in an adaptive learning state we are stepping outside the comfort zone and cautiously experimenting with new approaches and ways of seeing the world. Anxiety and confidence are evenly balanced – we feel in control, but only just. This means that our blind spots will tend to resist anything that pushes us further into the learning zone or that further challenges our sense of control. Anything that is experienced as too radical, too fast or too challenging will tend to be resisted. Control, caution and implementing small experiments to see what works are the hallmarks of the adaptive state of mind.

Sometimes, however, we can feel downright depressed and devalued by the new learning environment. Change introduces new values, new challenges and new uncertainties; it reduces our ability to take control, and suddenly we find that our living knowledge no longer works. This environment introduces intense dissonance in the learner – and dissonance is a well-documented state of learning.¹³

Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that when we encounter information that contradicts or challenges our existing beliefs, we are thrust into a tense, dissonant state of mind. This is psychologically uncomfortable and we will be motivated to reduce the dissonance by making sense of the situation in a way that reintroduces harmony in our beliefs and behaviour. We might do this by avoiding the new information or by changing our existing beliefs to support the new information. However, certain beliefs are highly resistant to change – e.g. those that appear supported by ‘reality’ or those that are in alignment with many of our other beliefs. Beliefs that appear core to our sense of identity are also highly resistant to change.¹⁴ If the new information is too challenging, we have a strong tendency to distort it in order to preserve our existing, core beliefs.

Situations of intense change, particularly those introducing new values, can have a strongly dissonant effect on organizational members. Change that introduces new beliefs around what is effective, valued, competent and morally worthwhile strongly challenges existing beliefs that are highly resistant to change – beliefs around self concept, self esteem and personal values. Organizational members are thrown into turmoil as they are forced to re-examine deeply held assumptions affecting their personal identity. Their living knowledge no longer ‘works’ in this new environment, so, despite seeking support for their existing beliefs and behaviours, reality continuously disconfirms them. People’s values and self

¹³ Harmon-Jones, E. and Mills, J. (1999) *Cognitive Dissonance – progress on a pivotal theory in social psychology*. New York: American Psychological Association.

¹⁴ For a detailed explanation of how and why certain constructs are more permeable and amenable to change, see Kelly, G. A. (1963) *A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. New York: Norton.

esteem are undermined, causing many to lose confidence in themselves and their abilities. This *dissonant* learning state is full of anger, frustration, fear and anxiety. People are thrust into sensemaking mode but instinctively seek to confirm their old values and assumptions, rationalizing why the new values and beliefs are 'wrong'.

However, in order to get rid of the dissonance, the learner may eventually engage fully and deeply with the learning. This often entails quite radical change, involving the answers to questions such as 'who am I?', 'what do I want?', 'how can I achieve real happiness?', 'what's truly important to me?' At this point, when the learner fully engages with the learning, we often see radical changes in behaviour – people in the study left organizations they had been with for over 20 years, one took a year's sabbatical and one completely changed career.

Blind spots that characterize the dissonant learning state include the refusal to engage with any of the learning required – the situation is already too painful and people's self esteem is already extremely low. There is a strong tendency towards denial and withdrawal, aggression and cynicism – all being hallmarks of the dissonant learning state. This state is often characterized as being 'resistant to change'.

There are, of course, other learning states which did not emerge from the research. For example, Csikszentmihalyi¹⁵ refers to a state of *flow*, where, after a period of intense practice and engagement, you suddenly and briefly find that your performance reaches a peak, time seems to stand still and, despite achieving extreme levels of performance, everything feels effortless. Flow situations are those in which attention is freed to achieve your goals; there is no anxiety or fear of failure. You lose awareness of time, of yourself and of anything apart from the task at hand. You are totally focused, in control and experiencing the joy that comes with a sense that you are freely expressing yourself and your talents. Flow is experienced when pursuing a challenge that is personally meaningful and completely engaging.

¹⁵ Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: HarperCollins.

Another learning state is a reflective, almost meditative, state, referred to by Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers as *suspension*.¹⁶ The importance of ‘reflection’ in learning has long been recognized, but these authors take it a step further. Suspension requires an ability to empty one’s mind and ‘observe’ one’s own assumptions. It is a state in which one aspires to ‘let go’ of what one thinks one knows in order to achieve a meta-awareness of one’s own ‘living knowledge’ – its strengths and its limitations. This state of mind is promoted as a source of enlightenment by the meditative traditions of the world’s great religions.

Later in the book, we refer to the *generative* learning state. This is the playful, curious, experimental and open state of mind that is conducive to creativity and innovation.

Needless to say, it is difficult to achieve these states of mind when going through profound and difficult change. Flow, meditation and creativity are often rooted in a sense of calm, peace and openness, and these qualities have to be consciously worked at and cultivated. As a result, they did not emerge as significant factors in the research. We will refer to them, however, as we go through the eight practices.

5. Summary

Learning and blind spots are two sides of the same coin. We have seen that a lot of learning, especially during periods of intense change, involves psychological discomfort and pain. We have a choice – we can either engage with the learning or we can avoid it. If we avoid the learning, we avoid any immediate risk of pain and hide comfortably behind our blind spots. If we engage with the learning, we expand our living knowledge to embrace change and complexity.

It is more likely that we will engage with learning if we see the benefits. There is a payoff to the anxiety of learning if we achieve

¹⁶ Senge, P., Scharmer, C. O., Jaworski, J. and Flowers, B. (2005). *Presence – exploring profound change in people, organizations and society*. London: Nicholas Brealey.

valued goals, increase our self esteem, increase psychological comfort or affirm our values. However, if we feel that any of these outcomes will be threatened, we are more tempted to avoid learning and revert to information processing – using our existing store of living knowledge to guide our thinking and actions in the situation. Blind spots occur when we revert to information processing when learning is the more appropriate response.

Our goals, values, self esteem needs and need for psychological comfort affect all four learning processes. They affect:

1. *What we pay attention to.* We ‘see’ things that are relevant to our goals and values; we often miss or dismiss things that appear irrelevant to them or which impede or complicate them.
2. *How we respond emotionally to events.* We respond with an array of emotions – elation, anger, anxiety or doubt – according to how an event impacts our goals, values, self esteem or psychological comfort. These emotions need to be faced and made sense of. However, if emotions are too intense or uncomfortable, we are tempted to avoid facing them.
3. *How we make sense of events.* We will tend to make sense of things in relation to how they affect our goals, values, self esteem or psychological comfort. Constructs that are central to these four areas are often more resistant to change.
4. *How we act.* We will adapt our behaviour to achieve these four valued outcomes, but will be wary of taking action if we feel they will be jeopardized.

Our tolerance of discomfort is also affected by our mood – a learner with a vision will take more risks than a cautious learner who is slowly learning to adapt to change. A learner in a strongly dissonant state – where their self esteem is dangerously low – may limit learning in order to preserve what little self esteem they have left.

This rather long chapter has attempted to explore some of the dynamics behind our learning and the development of our living knowledge. It is a simple but useful way of understanding what is happening when we learn and when we avoid learning. It also shows how our living knowledge is in fact ‘created’ by us as we travel

through life. We often learn in order to fulfil deep-rooted needs, stay in control and feel comfortable. Some anxiety or frustration may be tolerated if the benefits are substantial. However, if we feel we will lose control or lose our sense of competence, we may well be tempted to avoid the learning. We will tend to learn what suits our goals and may be tempted to block out information, ideas, opinions and views that get in the way. We are also more resistant to learning anything that challenges or threatens our values.

Thus, our learning is inherently biased and the living knowledge that results from it is also, partly at least, biased and egocentric. Our living knowledge is simply an expression of our personal experience and preferences – it is a unique, highly personal artifice rather than an objective expression of truth. It is also highly susceptible to blind spots.

This does not mean to say that our living knowledge is not comprised of valuable ‘objective’ knowledge. Amongst the beliefs, assumptions, values, emotional orientations and behaviour patterns that comprise our living knowledge, there will be ‘truths’ that can be objectively or relationally verified. However, the knowledge that we draw upon in our daily lives in order to guide our actions and decisions is, to a substantial degree, personally and socially constructed.

If this is the case, what are the implications for those in positions of leadership?

