



## Flawed Advice and The Management Trap

How Managers Can Know When They're Getting Good Advice and When They're Not

by Chris Argyris  
Oxford University Press © 2000  
262 pages

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### Take-Aways

- Most professional advice on nonroutine issues is flawed and ineffective.
- Most of this professional advice is not actionable or results in negative unintended consequences.
- A common discrepancy exists between “espoused theories” of how things should be and “theories-in-use,” that is, what people actually do.
- Managers usually espouse internal commitment, but really practice actions that lead to external commitment.
- For advice to be helpful, design it in terms of a “theory-in-use” which states how to produce effective action.
- Much of the advice given by management consultants and human resource professionals is vague and ambiguous.
- Much of this advice is not only untested, but untestable, and impossible to validate.
- Those who give bad advice generally really believe their theory and aren't aware they are giving bad advice.

### Rating (10 is best)

Overall

**6**

Applicability

**7**

Innovation

**8**

Style

**4**

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## Review

### Flawed Advice

Chris Argyris says that management advice — the content of countless seminars by management consultants and human resource professionals — rests upon a discrepancy. The goal of a more democratic workplace with empowered, internally-driven workers contradicts the actual actions executives take to produce this result. Argyris contends that much leadership, decision-making, corporate change and management advice lacks critical thinking. He urges executives to seek specific, testable, actionable advice. Role-playing and numerous examples show how advice givers may fail to understand the nature of the problems they're addressing. This book is valuable in helping managers identify flawed advice and understand why so many management initiatives fail. However, the author's own recommendations suffer from the same lack of testability. It just may not be possible to test for the effects of specific advice in complex situations. Still, this is an important book because it urges executives to think critically about the guidance they are given. *getAbstract.com* recommends this book to managers and to those who advise them.

## Abstract

### The Major Reasons Management Advice is Often Flawed

Most management advice is flawed because it is “not actionable.” It cannot be carried out or, even if it is put into action correctly, it may produce results that are contrary to what those giving the advice intended.

The reason so much advice is flawed is because people often have one theory about how their actions are supposed to lead to results, while they hold a second theory they actually use. Their deeply-believed, first theory is their “framework or design for action.” Commonly, because people hold it so strongly, they are willing to “take risks to protect it.” This happens even though they are really acting in accordance with their other theory, or “theory-in-use,” those theories that “produce real, concrete actions.”

Most of the theories that lead to action – called Model I theories – are based on a command-control model. The four key values of this model are:

1. You should be “in unilateral control.”
2. You should win and not lose.
3. You should hold back or suppress any negative feelings.
4. You should act as rationally as you can.

However, management advisors may advise you to express different ideas, more democratic and worker-driven. When that happens, you may become defensive, since your theory-in-use compels you to seek control, win, withhold negative feelings, and seem rational. As a result of these internal Model I constructs, you may blame others or the system itself for errors. You are less likely to question the advice you have been given or to recognize the discrepancy between your ideas and your actions.

You are caught in a loop. Model I actions “create defensiveness, self-fulfilling prophecies, self-sealing processes, and escalating error.” These responses reinforce command-

“Most professional advice on nonroutine issues continues to fail.”

“People hold two different ‘theories of action’ about effective behavior: the one they espouse and the one they actually use.”

“Good [organizational] designs pave the way for effective action — that is, action that leads to the intended consequences with few, if any, counter-productive side effects.”

“Most of that advice is — most of the time — simply not actionable. And even if it is implemented correctly, it will lead to consequences that run counter to the intentions of those providing it.”

“Espoused theories often represent our ideas — indeed, our ideals — about effective action. Theories-in-use are what produce real, concrete actions.”

“Most theories-in-use are: Model I. The governing values of Model I are: be in unilateral control; win; do not lose; suppress negative feelings; act as rationally as possible.”

control behavior. You react to exert control, to win, unaware that your actions are based on your “theory-in-use.” The contradiction stems from the dynamics of the process.

In fact, your whole organization is likely to behave with the same “skilled unawareness” because “individuals programmed with Model I produce organizations that are consistent with Model I.” In other words, this defensiveness is likely to run throughout your organization. No one wants to feel embarrassed or threatened by recognizing the discrepancies between ideas and actions. As a result, in most organizations, you will find many unacknowledged discrepancies. The basic unaware, organizational outcome is:

1. Managers state an inconsistent message as if it is consistent.
2. The managers’ Model I behavior makes the contradiction “undiscussible.”
3. As a result, the “undiscussibility” also becomes undiscussible.
4. The problem perpetuates itself, because no one can discuss it.

### The Key to Giving Good Advice

These problems stem from giving advice based on Model I. The key to giving good advice is to make it actionable. Good advice should lead to effective results. Action is effective “to the extent that it leads to the consequences intended,” while avoiding unintended consequences that interfere with the intended beneficial outcomes.

Use these three tests to determine the validity of the advice you are giving (or getting):

1. If you put the advice into action correctly, it will result in the predicted consequences.
2. These results will be effective as long as no unforeseen conditions undermine them.
3. This advice is actionable and testable in the every day world.

Use these four tests to determine the actionability of the advice you are giving (or getting):

1. This advice should be very specific in the “detailed, concrete behaviors” necessary to achieve the intended consequences.
2. This advice should contain “causal statements” saying that a certain action will cause certain results.
3. The people who get this advice can learn the concepts and skills necessary to put those causal statements into action.
4. No impediments block the implementation of the advised actions in the targeted organizational setting.

Based on these tests, judge whether the advice you give or get really helps. Advice should:

1. Indicate specific intended results, goals, or objectives.
2. State the particular sequence of actions necessary to produce those results.
3. Specify the actions necessary to monitor and test for “any errors or mismatches.”
4. Specify what actions are necessary to correct any mistakes.

Commonly, these kinds of specific steps work well for routine matters. Routinely, there will be a close fit between your “espoused theory” and your “theory-in-use.” In other words, usually what you say and believe fits your actions. But, then the routine changes. A crisis arises. And often, problems appear. In nonroutine situations, theories-in-use aren’t appropriate, and don’t lead to the desired actions and outcomes. Most of the advice given in such situations won’t work well, because it is “neither valid nor actionable.”

“Individuals programmed with Model I produce organizations that are consistent with Model I. Such organizations typically manifest defensive routines that are skillfully designed to prevent their members or constituent parts from experiencing embarrassment or threat.”

“Model I theories-in-use — like the advice to which they give rise — encourage and reward defensive routines.”

“Without such clarity, much executive-generated advice reinforces the defensive patterns of their organizations.”

“Management risks damaging its credibility if it talks about internal commitment as if there were few limits or — what is far more common — if it espouses internal, but really practices external commitment.”

## The Pervasiveness of Bad Advice

Use this model of good advice to evaluate the advice you get from various management advisors and human resource professionals. Generally, they are not aware they are giving bad advice. They believe in their ideas and do not assess them critically. For example, Steven Covey, author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, uses an example to show how important it is for leaders to create trust. However, in his theory, he does not tell potential leaders “how to create trust without also producing mistrust.” In fact, he recommends that to show positive support, you should conceal your real feelings of disappointment rather than express them. However, the action he advocates — telling you to be inauthentic — contradicts the stated goal of creating trust.

In another case, M. Doyle and D. Strauss, who wrote the book *How to Make Meetings Work*, urge “real change leaders” or RCL’s to empower others by requiring results and accountability, while promoting “genuine participation,” “joint accountability,” and “open dialogue.” But if you read their description of what they actually did to try to achieve these results, you will find they acted “unilaterally,” without genuine participation. These kinds of errors also appear in the work of authors and consultants who teach re-engineering, TQM, and other new management approaches.

Many of these programs are designed to give employees a sense of “internal commitment,” that is an inner motivation and commitment to their job and the organization. They explain that employees who feel only “external commitment” just do what they are told, instead of working from inner motivation. However, in practice, managers espouse values supporting internal commitment, but act based on their support of external commitment. Then, this contradiction becomes apparent when they try to implement the program, which could potentially tear the organization apart. However, usually the employees prevent this from happening because they learn to accept the contradictions. They simply distance themselves from the program and act the way they think management wants them to act.

This is why many change programs have limited result and often make management seem less credible. Thus, be very careful when you introduce any management programs in your own company to avoid such inconsistencies.

Unfortunately, it is often difficult to stop taking and implementing flawed advice, because there is a tendency to use self-censorship to avoid recognizing that the actions you are taking aren’t effective. For instance, if you are governed by advice to have a positive dialogue with your employees, you may suppress your own negative views. Then, your employees also may be hesitant to express negative ideas. Everyone will be defensive. You’ll avoid dealing with the real problem, and thus you will make “this undiscussibility undiscussible.” You will be caught up in a “defensive routine,” which you protect and reinforce by your own behavior.

## Developing a More Effective Approach to Advice

To take and give advice more effectively, use the Model II approach, based on examining whether your advice is really effective. To this end, you need to give advice and, simultaneously, to ask yourself if your advice works. Share any reservations or “private dilemmas” you feel. Make the elements of your advice specific and concrete, so they can be tested.

A Model II “action theory-in-use” requires “mistaken assumptions to be reformulated, incongruities reconciled, incompatibilities resolved, vagueness specified, untestable

“Public testing of theories-in-use must be accompanied by an openness to changing behavior as a function of learning.”

“It is simply not possible to deal effectively with any subject if it is not discussible and if its undiscussibility is not discussible.”

notions made testable, scattered information brought together into meaningful patterns, and previously withheld information shared.” In other words, be explicit when you give advice. Be very specific about the kinds of behaviors you are describing, so they can be put into action. Likewise, when you get advice, you want it to be clear and specific, based on testable, verifiable causal statements.

For example, suppose a management consultant talks about the need for leaders to show “courage” in taking charge and expressing their vision. Such terms are vague and ambiguous. Their meaning isn’t clear. They should be expressed as actions. Have advice you receive clarified and expressed in specifics. And, when you give advice, be equally clear and specific.

To put the Model II theory into effective use, start with a series of “governing variables” based on valid information. Specify action strategies where you “advocate your position.” Add “inquiry and public testing” to see if the advice is effective. Don’t be defensive or try to save face by holding onto ineffective theories. If you can avoid defensiveness, you can reduce the “self-fulfilling” and “error-escalating processes,” and be more effective in solving problems and getting the results you want.

With the Model II approach, you cut through muddy advice. You can make problems, issues, or advice more explicit, and test the related “assumptions, evaluations, and attributions.”

For instance, when someone states a problem, such as accusing someone in management of being unjust or defensive, ask for specific illustrations of that behavior and then test whether their perceptions and interpretations are correct. Strive to bring this specificity, clarity, and testing of assumptions to the organization as a whole. Encourage everyone to think more critically and to overcome defensive reasoning.

## About The Author

Chris Argyris is a professor at Harvard University’s Graduate Schools of Business Administration and Education. He has written thirty-one books on organizations and the people in them. He has spent his professional lifetime studying organizations. His work includes designing new organizational structures and policies to help people become more integrated into their organizations, to reach their full potential, and to make the organizations more effective.

## Buzz-Words

Causal statements / Defensive routines / Designed ignorance / Espoused theories / External commitment / Internal commitment / Model I / Model II / Routine and nonroutine matters / Skilled unawareness / Tested and testable / Theories of action / Theories in use / Undiscussible / Undiscussibility