1985

A Theory of Effectiveness: Faculty Development Case Studies

Ronald A. Smith

Fred S. Schwartz

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad>

Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Smith, Ronald A. and Schwartz, Fred S., "A Theory of Effectiveness: Faculty Development Case Studies" (1985). *To Improve the Academy*. 91.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad/91>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in To Improve the Academy by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

A Theory of Effectiveness: Faculty Development Case Studies¹

Ronald A. Smith
Concordia University

Fred S. Schwartz
Vanier College

Many faculty developers spend a significant portion of their time working as consultants with faculty members. How successful are they in this role? Argyris and Schon (1974) and Argyris (1970) suggest that effectiveness in a consulting relationship depends on three factors. First, the consultant must elicit valid information about the problem. If relevant information is withheld or hidden (whether deliberately or unintentionally), problem identification, problem solving, and decision-making are hindered. Second, it is important to create a climate which encourages free and informed (rather than coerced) choices and commitments. Third, no progress can be made unless the person seeking assistance freely decides to take action and to monitor success or failure.

If these are the conditions of a successful consulting relationship, what strategies are most consistent with

¹ A version of this paper has been presented to the Canadian Educational Research Association meeting in Montreal, May, 1985.

them? Argyris (1982) makes two essential points. The first concerns control. Only if clients share in the design and control of tasks and the environment is there likely to be a free flow of information and free and informed choices. The second concerns the way in which individuals deal with negative feelings that emerge in working relations. Rather than trying to protect themselves and the other person in these threatening situations, they should work together to generate valid and relevant information.

These strategies for action and their associated values (valid information, free and informed choice, and internal commitment) call for a collaborative inquiry process. The faculty developers and their clients are viewed as interdependent. Neither is likely to have the solution to the problem at hand, and each requires the other's help in working through the problem.

GENERATION OF CASE STUDIES

In order to collect data to assess the effectiveness of faculty developers in complex interpersonal situations, we invited fourteen faculty developers attending a workshop at a national conference to write up a detailed study. The background for the case described Professor White (an alias) who is dissatisfied with the performance of student J. Doe in his class. White wants to keep Doe in class and help him pass, but is giving his final warning. We provided workshop participants with a transcript of some of Professor White's statements to Doe. These statements were said to represent the range of meanings that Professor White communicated to Doe.

1. Doe, your performance is not up to standard; moreover, you seem to be carrying a chip on your shoulder.
2. It appears to me that this has affected your performance in a number of ways. You seem lethargic, uncommitted, and disinterested. My students cannot have those characteristics.
3. Let's discuss your feelings about your performance.

4. Doe, I know you want to talk about the injustices that you believe have been perpetrated on you in the past. I do not want to spend a lot of time discussing something that happened several months ago. Nothing constructive will come from it. It's behind us.
5. I want to talk about you today, and about your future in my class.

We asked each faculty developer to produce: (a) an analysis and critique of how White dealt with Doe; (b) any recommendations they would give to White, and (c) a conversation they would have with White if he came to them and said, "How well do you feel I dealt with Doe." We used the following format:

In this column, write any current thoughts or feelings you would have that, for whatever reasons, you would not communicate with White.

In this column, write what you would say to White, how you would expect White to respond, and how you would respond to White's reply. Write up the actual conversation with White.

We examined the cases for each faculty developer's judgments of White's effectiveness, the implied theory of effectiveness embedded in the analysis and critique of White's performance, and the extent to which the dialogue generated was consistent with the inferred theory of effectiveness. We invite the reader to consider his or her own theory of effectiveness before going on.

ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE OF WHITE'S EFFECTIVENESS

An examination of the "analysis and critique" section of the case write-ups led us to conclude that all of the faculty developers judged Professor White's performance to be inadequate. Column 1 of Table 1 presents illustrations from the developers' analyses and critiques of his effectiveness. We inferred their theories of effectiveness from their statements as illustrated in Column 2. During the workshop, we made these inferences explicit and participants confirmed them.

TABLE 1
A Faculty Developer's (FD) Reasoning
about White's Effectiveness

FD's analysis and critique of White's effectiveness	Inferred theory of effectiveness	FD's recommendations to White
"Expectations may not have been clear to students"	make your expectations clear	"ask questions about expectations of student performance & how these were communicated"
"You seem to have a chip on your shoulder, assumption never checked out"	check out your assumptions	"share with students assumptions/perceptions of chip; ask, if accurate, how and why?"
"The whole tone of this is extremely negative and will probably put the student on the defensive."	set positive tone; avoid defensiveness	"Instructor should indicate concern rather than criticism"
"Instructor seems to have already made up his mind"	don't prejudge	"Instructor should try not to form an opinion until he has heard the student's side of the story"
"The professor attributes all sorts of reasons to student for the poor performance—chip, etc.—which may or may not be valid"	test out your attributions	"Hear out from student why she/he isn't doing well; perhaps White's interpretation of situation is false"

Column 3 of Table 1 presents the developers' recommendations to White. In the cases illustrated, their recommendations are consistent with their theories of effectiveness. However, there were times when the reasoning about White's effectiveness was internally inconsistent. For example, one developer wrote, "The teacher has already

prejudged or determined the cause of the student's poor performance—"past injustices"!." But that statement indicates that the consultant has made a judgment without any apparent attempt to verify its accuracy. When we made the participants in the workshop aware of this paradox, namely, that they were doing to White exactly what they had judged as ineffective when White did it to Doe, they readily acknowledged it. However, they said they would not actually say or do these things to White. We need, therefore, to examine the dialogues they created to see whether their conversations with White were consistent with their theories of effectiveness.

Tables 2, 3, and 4 present the complete dialogues generated by three of the participants. These cases were chosen, because they reflected the major findings of our analysis clearly and concisely.²

Notice in Table 2 that:

1. The left column gives information about the developer's theory of effectiveness: avoid negative critiques (A); don't be blunt (C); allow client's participation (B); allow the expression of feelings (C). (The letters in parentheses refer to paragraphs in Table 2.)
2. The left column also reveals the developer's espoused strategies: "don't jump in with negative critiques" (A); "probe to see if White can come to . . ." (B); and "open up an avenue of discussion . . ." (C)
3. The developer wants to "show the value of discussing" (C), and "open up an avenue of discussion . . . share ideas," but paradoxically does not share his or her own feelings and judgments in the dialogue on the right.
4. After the questioning strategy (D, F) designed to lead White to come to the developer's diagnosis doesn't work, the developer eases in his or her own diagnosis, but indirectly: "do you think it might have helped . . . ?" (H), and "we all need to . . ." (J).

²The complete case write-ups are available from the authors.

TABLE 2

Dialogue Between First Faculty Developer (FD) and White

Uncommunicated concurrent thoughts and feelings

Dialogue between FD and White

(A) Assumption: Relationship between FD & White is casual & this is first session between us. I don't want to jump in with a negative critique immediately. I will assume that he has a positive experience?

(B) What I feel is important in his dialogue with Doe is that Doe was not allowed to participate. I would probe to see if White can come to this understanding on his own.

(C) I don't want to say bluntly, "You were negative in your talk with Doe," but I do want to dialogue or show the value of discussing Doe's feelings of past injustices. If White can open up an avenue of discussion, then we might share ideas.

(D) *FD*: Well, I feel it was very important to your process with Doe that you genuinely want to help him. Tell me, what was Doe's response to your effort to help?

(E) *White*: Well, it was pretty negative. You know he has a chip on his shoulder and it really affects his attitude. I don't think that he will make it.

(F) *FD*: Do you think there was anything you might have done differently that might have helped the situation?

(G) *White*: Probably, but I'm not sure what. I told him what my expectations are and tried to guide him to deal with the future rather than staying in the past. I don't have the time for a lot of unimportant stuff.

(H) *FD*: White, do you think it might have helped to draw him out on what he felt his problems were? Sometimes people are able to see the future a little more clearly if they are able to discuss the problems that are bothering them—even if they might not relate directly to what you think is important.

(I) *White*: Well . . . maybe.

(J) *FD*: Frankly, we all need to be a little more patient when attempting to help out students.

5. The developer evaluates performance, "Doe was not allowed to participate" (B), "you were negative" (C), and assumes that these are accurate and valid without question.
6. The developer's diagnosis that Doe was not allowed to participate (B) implies that it is important to allow the client to participate in the dialogue. The strategy is not to confront White directly with the diagnosis but rather to ask a series of questions. When Doe's answer (G) to a question is not consistent with the developer's diagnosis, the answer is ignored, and another question is asked (H).
7. The developer wants to "open up an avenue of discussion. . . share ideas" (C), but sharing the diagnosis would violate his or her criteria for effectiveness, which is "don't jump in with a negative critique" (A) and "don't be blunt" (C). Hence, built into the theory of effectiveness and reasoning are features which prevent openness and problem solving.

Table 3 presents another dialogue. Some of our observations about this dialogue are:

1. The left column reveals a part of the developer's theory of effectiveness: "have students make verbal commitments to the ground rules of the course" (A). Yet, in the dialogue, the theory is not made clear to White, nor is his explicit commitment and acceptance of the theory gotten from White.
2. The developer evaluates him: "White has already decided Doe is wrong" (B). This implies that White should not make prejudgments, yet the developer has prejudged White.
3. In (B), the developer criticizes White for gathering evidence to support his prejudgment that Doe is wrong. Yet, the developer's own strategy of asking questions (D, F) to get evidence to support the judgment that White didn't get student commitment (A) contradicts this theory of effectiveness. He or she is doing exactly what was judged ineffective when White did it to Doe.

TABLE 3
Dialogue Between Second Faculty
Developer (FD) and White

Uncommunicated concurrent thoughts and feelings	Dialogue between FD and White
<p>(A) Too often as teachers, we set the ground rules implicitly, do not communicate them to students, and do not have students take verbal responsibility for their own learning. They don't realize they've made a commitment by staying, so it is hard for you to appeal to their integrity in this choice later. Might be better to allow students to participate in setting the ground rules.</p>	<p>(D) <i>FD</i>: White, when the class first began and you set forth your expectations for students, did you give each student the opportunity to accept individual responsibility for meeting those expectations or withdrawing from the class?</p>
<p>(B) I think White has already decided Doe is wrong and is gathering evidence to prove this.</p>	<p>(E) <i>White</i>: Well, I said what my students must do and a few did drop out at that time.</p>
<p>(C) White needs to acknowledge the past can be past for himself as well as Doe.</p>	<p>(F) <i>FD</i>: Would you be willing to allow Doe to recommit himself to meeting those expectations?</p>
	<p>(G) <i>White</i>: His behavior shows he really isn't interested in the course.</p>
	<p>(H) <i>FD</i>: I agree he may not have shown much interest in the past. The question is whether it is too late for him to behave in a way that would allow him a success for the remainder of the class. If it is, perhaps it is appropriate for him to withdraw now and take the course later.</p>
	<p>(I) <i>White</i>: Well, I consider it a failure on my part if I can't communicate my enthusiasm for this class at a level where students will sense and respond to it. I really don't want him to drop out.</p>

(Table 3 continued on page 71.)

TABLE 3 (continued)

Uncommunicated concurrent thoughts and feelings	Dialogue between FD and White
	(J) <i>FD</i> : You know, White, we can not "learn" a student anything. Some students are willing to respond to what we have to offer at a given time and some are not. I would suggest that you tell Doe some ways he might be able to deal with those issues you feel are standing in the way of his learning at this time. Then, either get his commitment to "be here and now" and to keep his word to do what he said he would do in this class by virtue of his staying in the class, or ask him to leave the class.

Table 4 presents a dialogue which represents a direct approach, rare with this group of developers. Our observations about the dialogue are:

1. The developer says that White's conclusions may not be correct because of factors that have not been explored (B). Yet, the developer's own conclusions, that White is "opinionated . . . functions on a think level . . ." (A), may be wrong and are not explored.
2. The developer's attribution that White is "not someone you could say he is wrong to" (A) prevents testing other evaluations, because that would be telling White he is wrong. This thinking prevents White from generating the information necessary for collaborative problem solving. The process is self-sealing.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

These examples illustrate what we found in all of the dialogues. The faculty developers withheld information and made assumptions, judgments, and attributions without

TABLE 4

Dialogue Between Third Faculty Developer (FD) and White

Uncommunicated concurrent thoughts and feelings

Dialogue between FD and White

(A) He is a very opinionated person who functions on a think and not a feeling level. So I would appeal to White's reason and sense of fair play. He is not someone you would say that he is wrong to. He is, however, not afraid to say and think how he feels.

(B) *FD*: You have come up with a conclusion about Doe's reasons for poor performance which may not be correct. Perhaps Doe's poor performance may be due to other factors that, if explored with you, would lead to a better attitude toward your course.

(C) *White*: I think the kid is smart. I find it frustrating that all sorts of personal factors prevent him from doing well.

(D) *FD*: How could you tell him that?

(E) *White*: It has to be straightforward and short like I told you—no deep analysis stuff. Maybe I can tell him I don't know why he is not doing well.

(F) *FD*: It sounds as if you have a number of things you could explore with one another.

admitting or testing them. Consequently, they could have been acting on the basis of inaccurate information. They rarely confronted each other or raised threatening issues. They avoided expressing negative feelings. Their emphasis was on being logical, objective, and unemotional. As a result, the issues that need to be raised to solve significant problems were unlikely to be expressed.

The behaviors these case studies suggested are consistent with attempts to manage information and to control both the situation and the other person. These actions are likely to create defensiveness, mistrust, and little

learning. The faculty developers espoused openness and problem solving, but their case studies revealed behavior unlikely to lead to either. They created paradoxes, dilemmas, and inconsistencies, and they did not seem to be aware of them.

Faculty developers do not deliberately design their actions to produce these consequences. When these dilemmas were pointed out to them, they readily admitted to them. Our work suggests to us that faculty developers have theories-of-action of which they are unaware, but which actually govern their behaviors. These theories-in-use are different from their espoused theories of effective action.

Research on various adult populations indicates that most people have a theory-in-use that, in fact, differs from the one they espouse. Argyris and Schon (1974) have called this theory-in-use Model 1. They have found it in over 99% of the more than 2000 professionals they have studied (Argyris, 1983).

This Model 1 theory-in-use has its basic values or governing variables: define your goals and try to achieve them, maximize your chances of reaching your goals (avoid losing), be rational, and minimize the generation of negative feelings. The behaviors of the developers (withhold information, make unillustrated and untested evaluations, etc.) and the strategies which are inferred to underlie them (manage the information and control the task) flow from and are consistent with Model 1 governing variables. In complex interpersonal situations, these values, strategies, and actions lead to counterproductive behavior and ineffectiveness.

To explain the inconsistencies and dilemmas in the faculty developers' cases, we must look to their thinking. They were confident of their analyses. Inferences and assumptions were taken as valid, even though Professor White may logically have made different inferences and assumptions. The faculty developers, by assuming their logic was correct and failing to test the validity of their inferences and assumptions, established a system of thinking in which error was possible and unlikely to be discovered. In addition, by withholding information and by

minimizing the expression of negative feelings, the faculty developer helped to create a climate where the feedback necessary to detect errors was unlikely.

If you agree with our analyses and interpretations of the cases, and accept the theoretical position, then increasing faculty development effectiveness means becoming aware of your theory-in-use and the way in which it contradicts your espoused theory (Smith, 1983). This task is difficult and complex. The bibliography contains several references which might be helpful: Argyris (1982), Bolman (1978), Heller (1982).

REFERENCES

- Argyris, C. (1970). *Intervention theory and method*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Argyris, C. (1982). *Reasoning, learning and action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Argyris, C. (1983). Action science and intervention. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 19, 115-140.
- Argyris, C., & Schon, D. A. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bolman, L. (1978). Learning and lawyering: An approach to education for legal practice. In C. L. Cooper & C. P. Alderfer (Eds.), *Advances in experiential social processes* (Vol. 1, pp. 111-135). New York: Wiley.
- Heller, F. (1982). *Increasing faculty and administrative effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Smith, R. A. (1983). A theory of action perspective on faculty development. In M. Davis (Ed.), *To improve the academy* (Vol. 2, pp. 47-58). Orinda, CA: POD Network.