Taking criticism: do you practice what you preach?

I feel like this week's readings are a direct continuation from the previous week. While I have previously mentioned the inherent problems with feedbacks, this week instead focuses on the efficacy of feedbacks on individuals. While I have previously mentioned that quality feedbacks are difficult to give, due to the limitations of skill and inherent paradoxes mentioned in Peiperl (2001), whether or not people actually recognize and utilize feedbacks were raised in this week's readings. I can speak from experience when I say self evaluation is a difficult activity as there is an inherent difficulty in separating the self from one's accomplishments. Rather than making an objective observation of how things are, we are naturally biased to treat our accomplishments as an extension of the self (Belk, 1988). The implication of this, is that while it is easy to observe and make judgments on others, it is an innate desire for humans to treat the product of our efforts as a part of themselves. Because of this, when we are critiqued in our work, we naturally activate our defence mechanisms as much as if someone has made a personal attack on our personal qualities (Belk, 1988).

The defence mechanisms described by Argyris (1991) reflects typical defence mechanisms described by contemporary psychology: Projection, denial and superiority complex which are described to be at the pathological level of defence. This is really interesting as one would think high level professionals are capable of handling criticism as the common argument from society indicates that "a master has failed more than the novice have tried". The argument provided by the readings indicated that this effect was caused by the education system where individuals are habituated to a stream of success, however when confronted with a situation where they must look inward for a source of failure, they are incapable to do so. Although this is valid in its argument, I believe organizational culture plays an important role as well. To clarify, in the corporate ladder, success and work capability is often a key criteria for promotional evaluation. If an individual is placed in an environment along with several highly skilled and capable peers, it would be natural to try and exaggerate one's role in successes and attribute failures to external sources. Based on this logic alone, corporate cultures that reward these individuals can only propagate this form of learning rather than fostering the ability to genuinely engage in this so called double loop learning.

Another point raised in the article was the general concept of reactive feedback. This typically means that when things go wrong, people tend to focus on the symptoms and case specific variables that resulted in poor performance. Very rarely will people try to develop deeper into potential fundamental issues in their business model that may have caused the issue in the first place. The argument can always be made that sometimes bad things happen that is outside of reasonable prediction/control, however in the interest of continued improvement, I believe it to be important to learn from every potential source of weakness in order to prevent another occurrence in the future despite how unlikely it is. Obviously this would be highly subjective; even if the extraneous variable was very rare, it is important to at least establish an environment where such variables can be evaluated rather than upright dismissal. This is also a problem of convenience; it is much more convenient to blame external things than to admit a flaw in our core schema. This is due to the fact that if we were to start questioning our core beliefs, it would imply that all auxiliary decisions based on former core beliefs were also wrong. This method of thinking is a fallacy in itself as logic would dictate, it would be beneficial to recognize sunk costs (in the form of effort and past decision) and change one's decisions to ensure a superior future outcome where as doubling down on existing beliefs and blaming things on luck to be incredibly unprofessional decision making.

This problem have existed for me personally both inside and outside the scope of mgmt. 300. For example, in the context of mikes bikes, our performance is significantly worse than our practice rounds. This can be attributed to a combination of poor strategy, decisions and competitor action. However, when a specific plan or strategy is proposed (especially if it was one of my proposals) that seem to be rather poor, I would find myself trying to justify my decision and attribute its performance to external factors immediately rather than conducting an internal investigation at why I made the decision in the first place. On an even more personal level, I have experienced the very same single loop learning and defence mechanisms when I receive feedbacks for poor coursework grades. The first thing I tend to do is to look at the feedback and try to justify how the feedback was inaccurate because I've done exactly just that in paragraph 6 sentence 2! Clearly the marker is an idiot who didn't understand my point! But then the realization dawns. The marker is an educated person who have far more specialization in the subject hand, if they couldn't see the points I was trying to communicate, then whose fault is it more likely? Obviously there can be error in both, but for the sake of self-improvement even if it is just in the confines of one particular paper, it would be more beneficial to take the feedback provided and improve upon oneself rather than dismissing the criticism outright. Not only does this help mitigate a poor mark in the future, but the learned habits may provide an advantage in a future situation where the very same problem may occur again.

Reference list:

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