

Different Kinds of Learning (Loops of Learning)

Key breakthroughs in helping people understand the dynamics of learning are the concepts of single-loop, double-loop and triple-loop learning. These concepts help you to realize and appreciate the kinds of learning that you and your client can glean during a project. The concepts are largely from the works of Argyris and Schon (1974).

Single-Loop Learning (Following the Rules)

The conventional example used to explain this concept is the thermostat. It operates in one mode. When it detects that the room is too cold, it turns on the furnace. When it detects that the room is too hot, it turns off the furnace. In other words, the system includes one automatic and limited type of reaction – little or no learning occurs and little or no insight is needed. Experts assert that most organizations operate according to single-loop learning – members establish rigid strategies, policies and procedures and then spend their time detecting and correcting deviations from the “rules.”

You might exhibit this kind of learning when you notice that your client has not produced a certain deliverable on time during a project, so you get angry at your client and demand that your client produce the deliverable – without ever really exploring why your client did not produce the deliverable in the first place.

Double-Loop Learning (Changing the Rules)

In double-loop learning, members of the organization are able to reflect on whether the “rules” themselves should be changed, not only on whether deviations have occurred and how to correct them. This kind of learning involves more “thinking outside the box,” creativity and critical thinking. This learning often helps participants understand why a particular solution works better than others to solve a problem or achieve a goal. Experts assert that double-loop learning is critical to the success of an organization, especially during times of rapid change.

To continue the above example of your client not producing a deliverable, double-loop learning occurs when you engage your client in discussion about their reasons for the absence of the deliverable, and whether your expectations were realistic or not. Results of the discussion might be, for example, that project timelines are changed or that communications between consultant and client are improved.

Triple-Loop Learning (Learning About Learning)

Triple-loop learning involves “learning how to learn” by reflecting on how we learn in the first place. In this situation, participants would reflect on how they think about the “rules,” not only on whether the rules should be changed. This form of learning helps us to understand a great deal more about ourselves and others regarding beliefs and perceptions. Triple-loop learning might be explained as double-loop learning about double-loop learning.

To continue the above example, triple-loop learning occurs when, after having engaged in discussion with your client, both of you discuss the dynamics of your conversation, including how it was conducted, what learning was produced from the conversation and how that learning was produced.