

«Whatever happens, learn from it»

A conversation with Edgar H. Schein

On the occasion of the article about Edgar H. Schein in our classics-category in this issue Tina Dörffer talked to him about the essentials of his work on behalf of the OrganisationsEntwicklung..

ZOE: Prof. Schein, you have written a number of new books and revisions in the past year. Can you share what's the theme of your new writing? **Schein:** I think I began to realize that there're two concepts that we use all the time that are still not yet very well understood. One of those concepts is culture, and the other concept is relationships. We're constantly talking about the role of culture in organizations developing different kinds of cultures. And then there are practical words we always acknowledge that it's important to build relationships. But as I observed we use those words in many different ways, and I think, we don't really understand in depths what culture really means and what it's all about.

We certainly don't understand what it means to have different kinds of relationships, different levels of trust, and different levels of openness, yet we very much depend in our thinking on those words. So, I've tried to write several books that take those concepts into greater depths.

ZOE: You mentioned culture and relationship. How has this interest evolved in your research?

Schein: It goes back all the way to my own history. I grew up in Europe, first in Swiss culture, then in the Soviet Union for a few years, and then in Czechoslovakia, before I came to the US at age 10. So I had in my own history several cross cultural experiences. But then I decided to become an experimental social psychologist in my education, and unfortunately was not able to pursue that, because in my post doctoral work after getting a PhD at Harvard, I was in the army, and during my days in the army at the Walter Reed Institute of Research I was asked to become part of a team that was de-briefing prisoners of war, who had been captured by the North Koreans and the Chinese

in our Korean war, and had been kept in prison camps, and allegedly been indoctrinated, what became to be called brain-washed. I found that the applied work of trying to figure out what had happened to these people, really brought me into a whole new arena of how to think about social science.

ZOE: How did you gather information from these prisoners of war?

Schein: I had learned from my mentors at Walter Reed, that if you're asking questions about a sensitive subject, the most important principle is, don't ask about it. Well then, what should one ask about? One should ask people to talk about the events that are of interest to you. So, I simply asked, tell me what happened to you from the day you were captured. Give me as much detail in what happened to you and how you were treated, and how you reacted to it. That was the beginning of my learning how to do process consultation.

In asking those questions, what's important is not only to say what happened and how you reacted to it, but then to keep going with what happened next, so that you gradually get the person to tell you from his or her perspective what's really going on rather than you're imposing your own prepositions on what might have happened.

ZOE: After the army you started to work for the school of management. What happened?

Schein: The first thing that happened was, I realized that I knew nothing about management, which proved to be important because it forced me to rethink what I knew as a social psychologist, and to re-examine my research methods. All of

which then got focused on learning a whole new way of teaching through being sent in my second year to the Human Relations Labs, that were running at that time in Bethel, Maine, and discovering the power of experiential learning, where instead of the teacher teaching, the teacher and the student together create a learning environment. For me that was the opening of a whole new way of being.

ZOE: Can you elaborate how it changed your concept in style of teaching?

Schein: When I first entered the classroom with all my knowledge of group psychology and so on, I was very busy lecturing and telling the management students what I thought they needed to know. After my experiences with the Human Relations Lab and discovering experiential learning, I realized that the real learning from a student's point of view has much more to do with developing a relationship with the teacher, in which the teacher learns through his own curiosity what it is that the student really needs to know. And learning becomes a code-terminated process by the teachers and students working together around projects to facilitate better more practical learning for the student.

ZOE: So, you mean that teaching was as much about the process as it was about the content?

Schein: Exactly. That was in a sense my biggest discovery that the relationship between the teacher and the student is the key to how much the student learns. And then I discovered the same issue all over again when I began to do consulting as a teacher of management, and found when I was being asked to consult an organization, for example on group process or something related to my expertise, that again, they didn't really want me as an expert to tell them what to do, but they wanted me to help them with their own process to figure out how to run their group through their meetings or their strategies in a better way. So, that led to my inventing the concept of process consultation.

ZOE: How did the style of consultation connect with the emerging and growing field of organizational development?

Schein: Much of this grew out of the contact that we were all building in these Humans' Relationship Labs, where many of us realized that the way to work with organizations is to think about bigger systemic processes that were going on in organizations, and that we had to help organizations at this larger systemic level. That led to the label of organization development, but of course as different practitioners we were all doing it differently, which finally led to my working with Warren Ben-

nis and Richard Beckhart on producing a whole series of paperbacks that described different ways of doing organization development, and that in the beginning defined that field.

ZOE: How did you practice this in your consulting work?

Schein: I think the key experience came early when I was simultaneously consulting with an American startup computer company, Digital Equipment Corporation. And at the same time with a Swiss chemical company, Ciba Geigy, which created both a contrast in style of consulting, where Digital wanted me to be a process consultant, and Ciba Geigy wanted me to be an expert to tell them about various things. But the more important issue for me was that these two companies were so culturally different, both in terms of their technologies, their products, the stage of their evolution, and most importantly that one was a New England Northeast US company, and the other was a Swiss German company in a completely different field, which forced me really to think more clearly about the whole culture question.

ZOE: So, what did you do with this diverse experience?

Schein: Well, being a good professor and needing to do research and get tenure, I began to ask myself, how these practical experiences really played into academic research, and realized that as a consultant I was really gathering very important clinical data about this whole concept of organizational culture. And I also realized how closely tied this was to the very important topic of leadership, which led me finally in 1985 to put it all together into my first edition of the book call Organizational culture and leadership.

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ZOE: The fifth edition will soon be released. Tell us about new findings.

Schein: When I first wrote it, what was really new was the idea that organizations had their own cultures. Until that time we hadn't really thought seriously about an organization as a culture. What I now realize is that the world has evolved so much that while organizations still have cultures, the more important thing is to recognize how nested or embedded organizations are in the larger national cultures, in which they exist. And how influenced they are by the occupational cultures of the people who are doing the work.

So, the whole idea of an occupational culture is now much more heavily emphasized than I had in the earlier editions.

The changing of culture should never go directly to the issue of culture, but should start with what is the problem that is causing you to want to change anything. And only when you identified clearly what problem you're trying to solve, do you then ask the question of what are the cultural forces that may aid us or hinder us in solving that problem.

ZOE: This is one of your key questions that you are trying to solve.

Schein: Absolutely. Both as a coach and as a consultant and even sometimes as a teacher, the key questions are «*What's worrying you*», «*What problems are you trying to solve?*» When you give me a proposal or what you want to do like changing culture, I would say, «*Why do you want to do that?*» Because those are the key questions that help to build a relationship. And until I built that relationship I won't really know what it is you're really trying to do. And until I know what you're really trying to do, I can't really be helpful.

In doing that I'm not looking for an aha-moment, but what I'm doing is, I'm trying to find that what's really on their mind in order to build a more personal relationship with them, because I think very often what's very worrying people, doesn't come out until they believe that you're really interested in them, and that interest is what I'm trying to build.

ZOE: You say, everything happens in a conversation.

Schein: That is precisely the way to think about all forms of change and intervention. I don't believe in diagnosis as such. I think everything we say to each other is an intervention toward building your relationship and toward together figuring out what's going on. And if we don't have that sense of mutual trust and doing it together, we won't really be able to figure out what should be done next in the way of an adaptive move to solve what is immediately worrying the person.

ZOE: You have recently described this in your new works.

Schein: I began to realize that the helping idea that was embedded in process consultation, really had much broader application to all forms of helping. And therefore one of the first expansions was to write a book that was a more general theory of helping, and how to get together with a client to do this codetermining of what to do next. Then I realized that one of the problems of helping was, that we were so programmed by our own national culture, especially in the US, to always know everything and be always the expert telling things, and that got in the way of helping. So I wrote a book called

Humble Inquiry, which tried to emphasize that the way to build a relationship is not to tell people things, but to really inquire and find out what's on their mind, and then finally apply that very directly to consulting into today's fast past world, where the philosophy of process consultation is still relevant, but it has to be done faster. And faster it can best be done by getting personal very immediately with more direct personalized questions.

ZOE: So, what's the essence in that approach?

Schein: The essence can be captured by three words: the most important one is curiosity, the second most important one is commitment to wanting to be a helper. There are many other roles in life, if we want to be helpful, we have to be committed to that, and that implies the third key word, which is caring. I have to be caring toward the other person, and want to build what in my latest book I call a level 2 relationship, a more personal mutually caring kind of relationship that is totally different from the more transactional level 1, typical bureaucratic relationship that we often espouse, and which inhibits actually getting into a helping process.

ZOE: One of your key words is career anchor. Can you share how this has emerged?

Schein: That takes me back to the work with the repatriates of the Korean war, where I learned first hand how a cohesive organization, in this case the Chinese communists, were able by controlling the environment to begin an indoctrination process. When I then switched to my academic career, I wanted to study this same indoctrination process in corporate America. And so I launched a panel of MIT alumni from the Business School to study in their first few years how the company value systems were indoctrinated into these individuals, only to discover after a year or two of research that this process didn't happen. That in fact people if they didn't like the company values, were able to leave to go to other companies. Or in some cases they rejected the values and went into a different occupation.

So, what I learned was the actual occupations of the alumni were all over the map. And for a while I gave up this research, but when I re-interviewed them all, 10 to 12 years later, I discovered that in each case the person had evolved a career image of himself in terms of the competencies, the motives and the values that characterize that career, and people themselves said, this became a guide to how they made their future decisions. And so I ended up labeling these as career anchors, and found that they fell into a discrete set of aid types of anchors.

ZOE: What is your career anchor, Prof. Schein?

Schein: Well, among the choices, the one that always struck me is being quintessential to me is the need for autonomy, to be sort of my own boss, and develop my own style of doing things. I am an only child and never got very good at accepting other peoples' versions of things. And that in combination with my very many different life experiences, led me to really seeing myself as a learner of whatever happens, learn from it. Because you don't have many choices, particularly as a kid, as to where and what you are going to be doing. But you can always turn it to your own advantage if you learn from it.

And that philosophy has kept me going throughout my own life. Whatever happens, learn from it.

When I think about that style in relation to my research as a consultant and as an academic, I realize that in many ways we are still at a Darwinian or pre-Darwinian stage in understanding what really goes on in and between organizations. And that we have to continue to observe carefully, create new typologies, look for new forms. Because, the world is moving in such a rapid pace, that we don't yet really know what is the right way to organize, what is the right way to do a job, because we keep inventing new forms in response to new environmental pressures.

ZOE: That sounds like an outlook.

Schein: For me the outlook is not about what will happen, but how do we try to figure out what's ahead. And I've always resisted the question of predicting anything, but I'm deeply committed to the process of watching very closely what the emerging future is via what our children and what our grandchildren are doing with their lives. They are facing a very different world from the world that I grew up in. And how they will cope, what they will invent and how they will structure their world is what we need to understand better.



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