

## **Double Loop Learning: A Powerful Force for Organizational Excellence**

**Presented by  
Jean Richardson  
Azure Gate Consulting, LLC**

**At  
Pacific Northwest Software Quality Conference 2014**


© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



### **Two Key Areas of Organizational Risk**

- **Decision Latency**
  - The amount of time between the emergence of a need for a decision and the time the decision is made and communicated.
- **Decision Quality**
  - The ultimate appropriateness of the decision to resolve the issue.

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



**Christopher Argyris**  
7/16/23 to 11/16/13

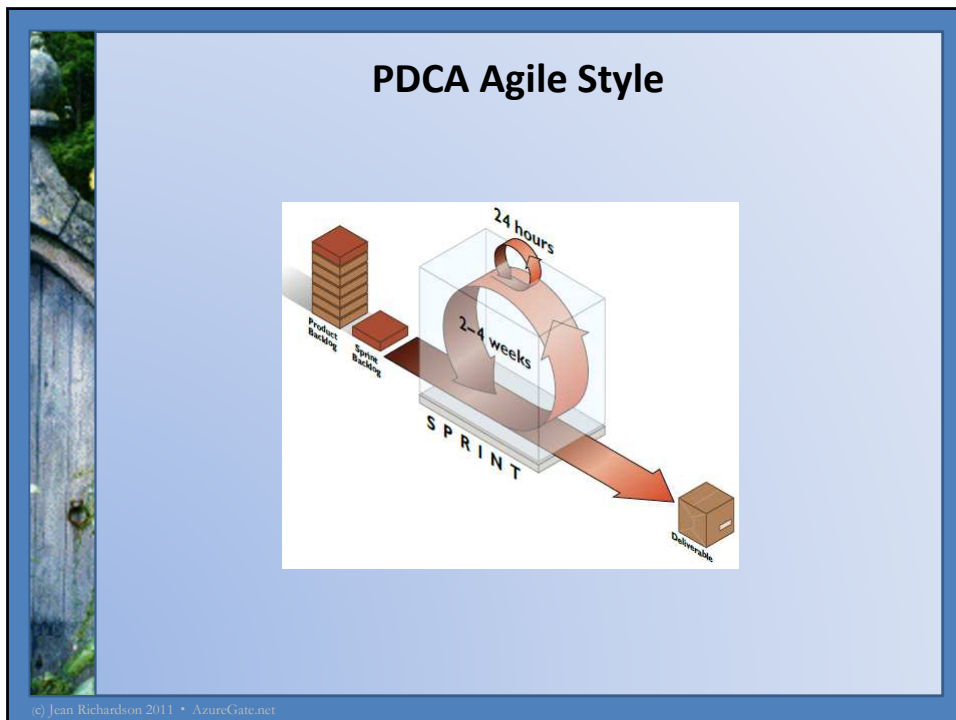
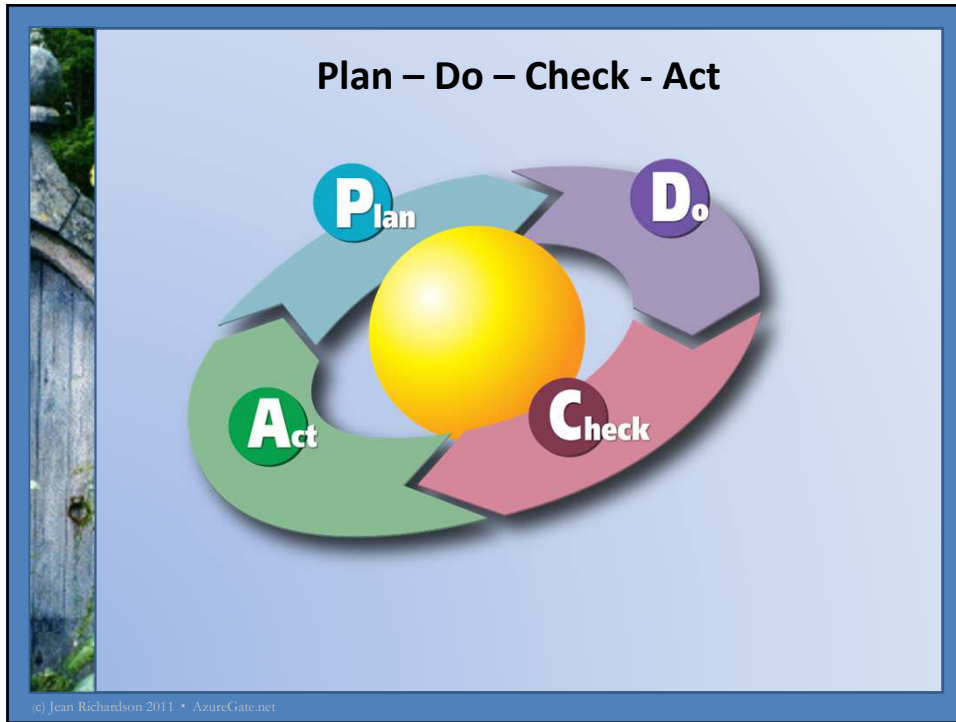
- Harvard Business School professor
- Organizational Defensive Routines
- Maturity/Immaturity theory
- Skilled Incompetence
- Organizational Learning
- Double-loop Learning

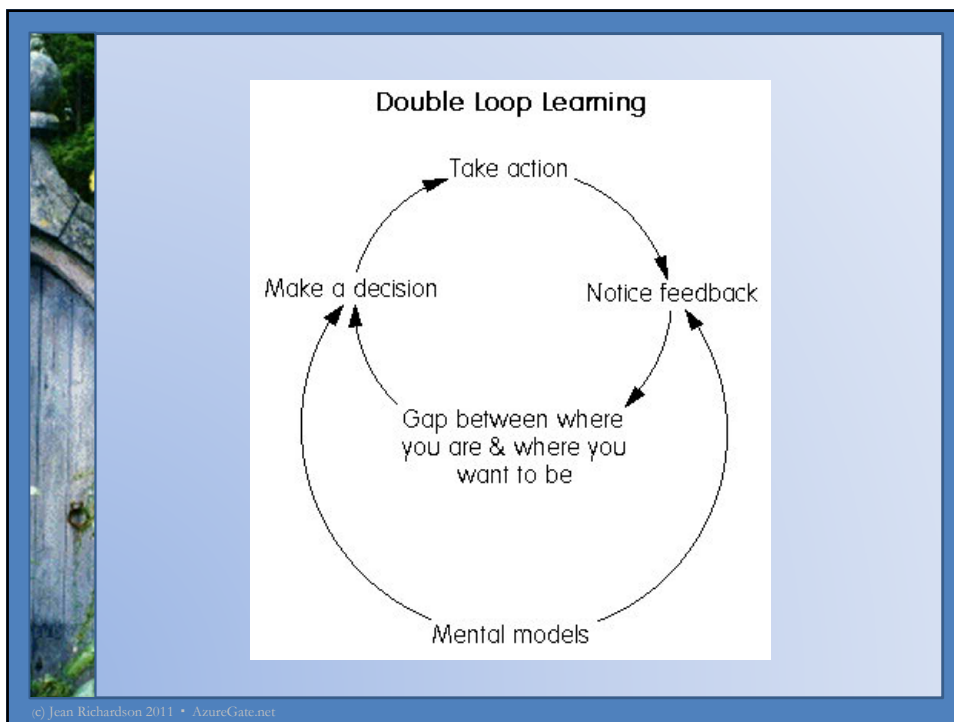
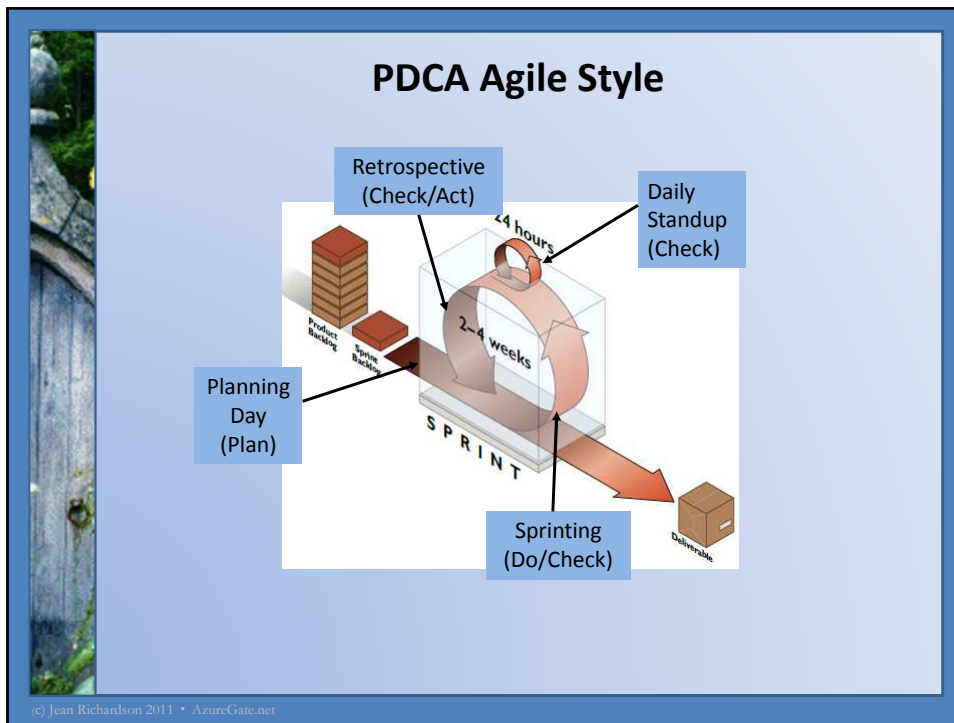
© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net

### **Argyris' Contribution**

- Skilled Incompetence
  - "Skilled Incompetence" (1986)
- Organizational Defensive Routines
  - Theory in Action; Theory in Use
  - "Good Communication That Blocks Learning" (1991)
- Organizational Learning
  - "Teaching Smart People How to Learn" (1991)
- Double-loop Learning
  - "Double-Loop Learning in Organizations" (1977)
  - "Double-Loop Learning, Teaching, and Research" (2002)

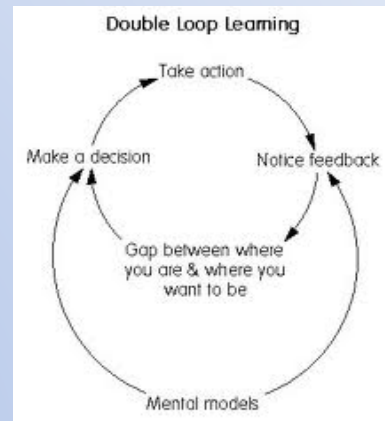
© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net





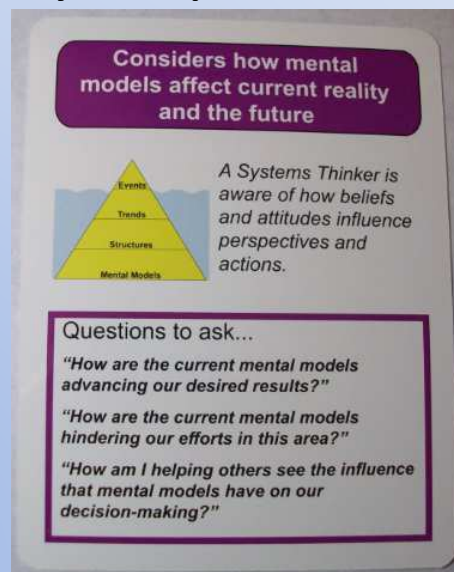
## Double Loop Learning Defined

- A process of finding and fixing errors.
- Focused on un-useful or unhelpful mental models.



© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net

## Key Concept: Mental Models



© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



## Life is a Game of Mental Models

And, we change them all the time:

- Books
- Music
- Friendship
- The classroom
- The Economy

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



## We Create Our World Through Thought



© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net

## We Create Our World Through Thought



© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net

## We Create Our World Through Thought



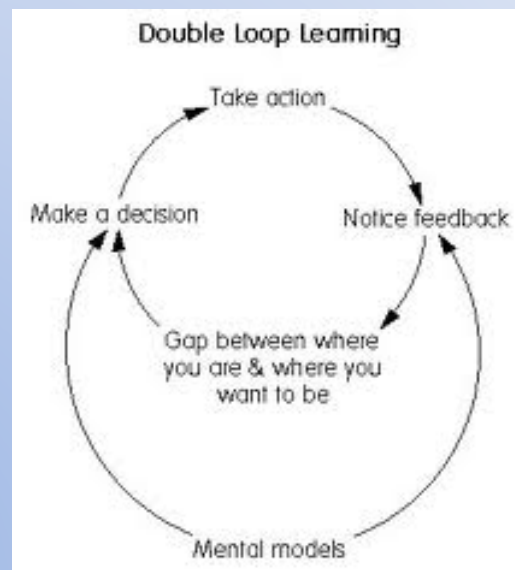
© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net

## Theory in Action; Theory in Use

- Behavioral and thinking changes are hard.
- Thinking is associated with identity.
- Knowledge workers are already oriented toward thought and ideas—many of which they hold dear.
  - Part of identity.
  - Changes in mental models can seem to threaten identity.

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net

## The More We Practice, the Faster We Go



© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



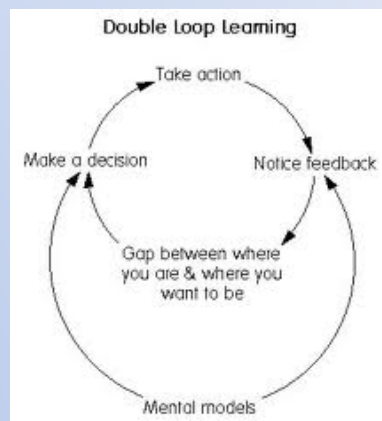
## Showing Is More Powerful Than Telling

- Theory in Action; Theory in Use
- Show your work
  - Read a “book”
  - Take a class
  - Share what you’ve learned
  - Apply it and show that you are
- Ask about what they are learning and how that is changing the way they see things—and how they work.


© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net

## Theory in Action; Theory in Use

- What is discovered through experience is now new inputs to our mental model of how the world—and the organization or our team or ourselves **are**.
- To align our reality with our expectations, our Theory in Action and Theory in Use must match.




© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



### Real Learning Causes Change

- Learning is like gold . . . And is for everyone.
- Organizational learning is a process of detecting and correcting errors.
- Learning takes place when learners have the ability to “hear.”
  - Some may have chosen not to hear.

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



### What Key Things Prevent Double Loop Learning?

“ . . . mental models that we all develop early in life for dealing with emotional or threatening issues.” -- Argyris

- Strategies to remain in unilateral control, maximize winning and minimize losing, suppress negative feelings, and appear to be as rational as possible.
- Purpose: Avoidance of vulnerability, risk, embarrassment or the appearance of incompetence.

“deeply defensive strategy and a recipe for ineffective learning . . . Antilearning . . .” -- Argyris

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



**Martin Seligman**


- Past President of the American Psychological Association
- Founder of Positive Psychology
- Founder of the MAPP program at University of Pennsylvania

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net

## **Positive Psychology**

- Authentic Happiness
- Well Being Theory
  - Positive Emotion
  - Engagement
  - Relationships
  - Meaning
  - Accomplishments


© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



## The Lay of the Land

- Feedback about failure
- In the context of what?
- Losada ratio
  - Strong and loving marriage: 5:1
  - Flourishing work environment: 2.9:1


© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



## Setting Context and Vision

- The leader's role is to help the organization see itself—set context and vision.
- Showing others how to respond to what can feel like personal failure helps them build skills they may not have.
- Failure may truly be an opportunity upon which to build success if you don't:
  - Descend into a grief spiral.
  - Engage in defensive routines so that you cannot see failure.


© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



### What's a Leader To Do?

- Don't just "fix" concerns.  
Help employees focus on self-awareness and initiative rather than acting on blaming. Listen for your part in problems and demonstrate the kind of response you'd like to see from them.
- Don't make promises you shouldn't keep.  
Mentor and coach employees on reasonable and unreasonable requests. Educate them on the market and support creative responses to market demands.
- Respect employees.  
They take their punches and focus on solutions—just like the leadership is expected to.

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



### The Knowledge Worker's Special Vulnerability

- They bring more of themselves to work than the assembly line worker did.
- Reflexive thinking requires frequent self and other confrontation.
- Psychological vulnerability is an aspect of effective reflexive thinking—the key ingredient to double-loop learning.
- “. . . to the extent they are more psychologically present at work, they expose more of themselves to others; hence, they are more vulnerable.”

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



## Double-Loop Learning at Telus

... what we call **Fair Process**. This is a process for how you estimate your challenges, engage your team members, explore options for answering those challenges, decide what's best to do, and then explain why an option has been picked. That's Fair Process. It's not always a fair outcome, but it's a fair process. It's executing the option that we chose and then evaluating it from a learning and development perspective. Did it work? Did it not work? And then we recycle that learning back into the organization.

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



## Double-Loop Learning at Telus

... what we call Fair Process. This is a process for how you estimate your challenges, engage your team members, explore options for answering those challenges, decide what's best to do, and then explain why an option has been picked. That's Fair Process. **It's not always a fair outcome, but it's a fair process.** It's executing the option that we chose and then evaluating it from a learning and development perspective. Did it work? Did it not work? And then we recycle that learning back into the organization.

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



## Double-Loop Learning at Telus

. . . what we call Fair Process. This is a process for how you estimate your challenges, engage your team members, explore options for answering those challenges, decide what's best to do, and then explain why an option has been picked. That's Fair Process. It's not always a fair outcome, but it's a fair process. **It's executing the option that we chose and then evaluating it from a learning and development perspective.** Did it work? Did it not work? And then we recycle that learning back into the organization.

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



## Double-Loop Learning at Telus

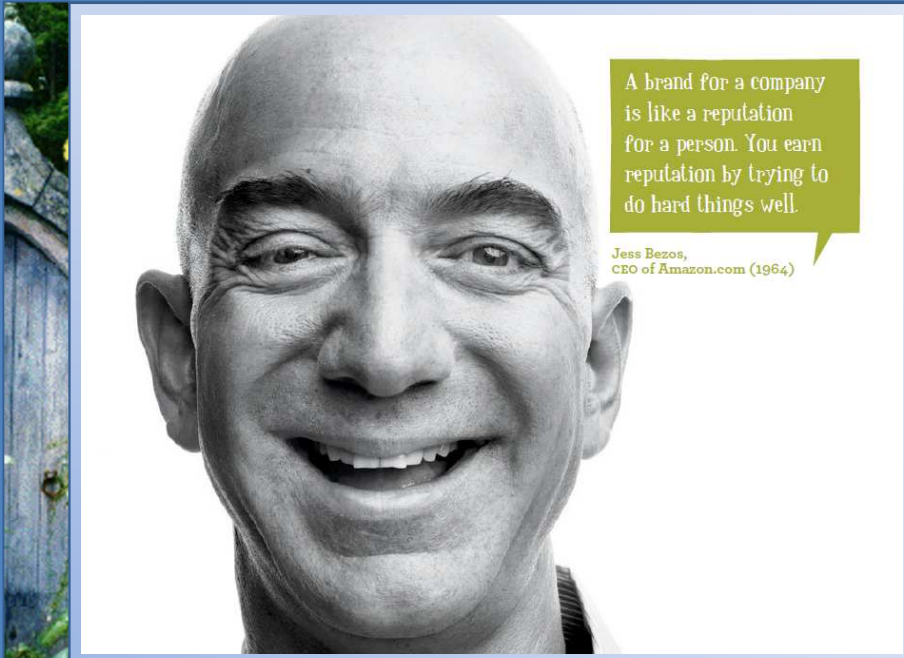
. . . what we call Fair Process. This is a process for how you estimate your challenges, engage your team members, explore options for answering those challenges, decide what's best to do, and then explain why an option has been picked. That's Fair Process. It's not always a fair outcome, but it's a fair process. **It's executing the option that we chose and then evaluating it from a learning and development perspective.** **Did it work? Did it not work?** And then we recycle that learning back into the organization.

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net

## Double-Loop Learning at Telus

. . . what we call Fair Process. This is a process for how you estimate your challenges, engage your team members, explore options for answering those challenges, decide what's best to do, and then explain why an option has been picked. That's Fair Process. It's not always a fair outcome, but it's a fair process. It's executing the option that we chose and then evaluating it from a learning and development perspective. Did it work? Did it not work? **And then we recycle that learning back into the organization.**

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



A brand for a company is like a reputation for a person. You earn reputation by trying to do hard things well.

Jeff Bezos,  
CEO of Amazon.com (1964)

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net





## Double-Loop Learning: A Practice for Mitigating Two Key Areas of Risk

- Decision Latency
  - How long from choice point to decision.
- Decision Quality
  - How did the decision serve us.

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net



## Questions?

Jean Richardson

[jean@azuregate.net](mailto:jean@azuregate.net)

Blogging at: [www.azuregate.net](http://www.azuregate.net)

LinkedIn: Jean Richardson

Twitter: JeanAtAzureGate

© Jean Richardson 2011 • AzureGate.net