Evaluating Chris Argyris’s ideas: an Islamic perspective
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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate Chris Argyris’s ideas from an Islamic perspective.
Design/methodology/approach – The main approach is a literature review combined with an analysis based on Islamic principles. At the end, there is a short case study that demonstrates the possible application for practitioners.
Findings – Chris Argyris’s work touches on a fundamental point: the lack of congruence between espoused values and theories-in-use. Such incongruence is amplified by the existence of organizational defense routines. From an Islamic perspective, such an incongruence is very problematic. The paper discusses two mechanisms in the Islamic tradition – sincerity to others and mutual consultation – to overcome this problem. The case study also suggests that more modern techniques can be useful as well. The implications for management education are discussed.
Research limitations/implications – It is proposed that the points raised by Chris Argyris should be taken very seriously by all researchers. Generally, it is proposed that management education should concern itself more with the congruence between values and behaviour.
Practical implications – The case study demonstrates that there are techniques that can be used to overcome organizational defence routines.
Originality/value – This is the first time Argyris’s ideas have been examined from an Islamic perspective.
Keywords Islam, Behaviour, Values, Business studies, Argyris, Islamic perspective, Archetypes
Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction
Practical wisdom was defined by Aristotle as “the habit of deliberation, judgment and execution” (Beabout, 2012). Oliver et al. (2010, p. 430) talk about practical wisdom as being, “the application of intelligence, creativity and knowledge to the common good by balancing intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal matters over the long and short term, through the mediation of values”. We believe that the Islamic tradition has something to contribute to our understanding of practical wisdom. Attention to management from the Islamic tradition has increased as Muslim researchers attempt to identify management theories that fit within the spirit of Islam. These theories must be robust and adaptable to the Islamic value system (Ahmad and Fontaine, 2011, Osman-Gani and Sarif, 2011). An assumption underlying this research is that if
Muslims develop a better understanding of management from the Islamic tradition, mankind as a whole will benefit. Muslim researchers generally believe that there is an urgent need to import spiritual values into management theory and practice. This view seems to be more and more popular among non-Muslims as well, as there is a growing realization that “good companies combine financial and social logic to build enduring success” (Kanter, 2011) and that capitalism has stressed too much on return on equity as the main measure of success and competition for its own sake (Meyer and Kirby, 2012). In this context, the authors of this paper propose to investigate the ideas of Chris Argyris from an Islamic perspective.

Why analyse Chris Argyris’s ideas?
Conventional approaches to management do not seem to work very well. Statistics show that the practice of conventional management is characterized by failure. For example:

- Mintzberg et al. (2005, p. 32) quote Walter Kiechel who said that 90 per cent of strategies fail.
- Nutt (2004) found that managers in organizations have a 50 per cent success rate when it comes to making decisions.
- Beer and Nohria (2000) report that 70 per cent of change initiatives in organizations fail.
- Deming (1994) reports that 95 per cent of changes made by management make no improvement.
- Starkey et al. (2004) show that 62 per cent of businesses in the USA do not survive five years, 80 per cent not more than ten years and 90 per cent will not survive beyond 20 years. Organization failure is very much the norm. Organization success is the exception.

From an Islamic perspective, these organizational failures have a high social cost so that any means of reducing their failure rate will benefit society. Argyris (2004, p. 394) argues that some organizational failures can be traced back to the use of particular models of action anchored in organizations.

Argyris’s work has been recognized by academics and practitioners. Wood and Wood (2009, p. 3) observe that the fellows of the Academy of Management vote on the 50 most influential management books written in the twentieth century ranked Argyris’s first book 15th. They observe that Argyris, early in his career, hit on a fundamental incongruity between human development and organizational design. Argyris saw this mismatch between the development of people and the design of jobs as being the root cause of much dysfunctional behaviour in organizations (Wood and Wood, 2009, p. 3). Another topic researched by Argyris regards the theory-practice relationship; he developed theories of action that explain incongruence between governing values and action strategies. These problems are directly linked to the practical wisdom search to find the right way to “apply general principles, generic tools, or wide-scale evaluation information to the idiosyncrasies of particular contexts” (Halverson, 2004, p. 92). Before discussing the Islamic perspective, we propose to summarize Argyris’s key ideas: Model I, Model II, organizational defensive routines and actionable knowledge.
Chris Argyris’s models of action: Model I and Model II

Argyris (2001, 2004) argues that people have espoused theories and theories-in-use. Espoused theories are the stated values and beliefs. Theories-in-use are the actual behaviour of individuals. Argyris (2001, 2004) found that most people have a Model I theory-in-use. Model I is when people’s behaviour is governed by four values:

1. achieve intended purpose;
2. maximize winning and losing;
3. suppress negative feeling; and
4. behave according to what one believes is rational.

These governing values lead to the following behavioural strategies:

1. control environment and tasks unilaterally; and
2. protect self and others unilaterally by:
   • advocate personal position;
   • evaluate the thoughts and actions of others and yourself; and
   • attribute causes to whatever your are trying to understand.

The consequences of these prevalent behavioural strategies are:

1. miscommunication;
2. self-fulfilling prophecies;
3. self-sealing processes; and
4. escalating errors through single-loop learning.

Argyris (2001, 2004) found that, for most individuals, the espoused theory contradicts the theory-in-use. However, if individuals wish their espoused theory to be aligned with their actual theory-in-use, the governing values must change and they must consciously switch to Model II theory-in-use. In this case, the governing values are:

1. valid information;
2. free and informed choice; and
3. internal commitment and responsibility to monitor one’s effectiveness.

The key behavioural strategies are:

1. sharing control;
2. attribution and evaluation illustrated with relatively directly observable data;
3. surfacing conflicting view; and
4. encouraging public testing of evaluations of ideas.

The consequences of such behavioural strategies are a reduction of self-serving, self-sealing and error-escalating processes through double-loop learning (Argyris, 2001).

Model I theory-in-use produces single-loop learning. Single-loop learning puts emphasis on routine and incremental improvement (Fulmer and Keys, 2004, p. 25). For example, if there is a corporate policy that all thermostats should be at 26 Celsius, then
employees will ensure that this policy is followed. Whether this is a good policy or not is never discussed. Double-loop learning requires people to ask questions about the reasons and motives behind the policy (Argyris, 1994). The ultimate aim of double-loop learning is to publically understand and discuss the shared mental model of the group (Senge, 1990). Single-loop learning is useful for routine tasks and it has a place in business. It is counterproductive for non-routine and complex tasks. Double-loop learning is essential for transformational change (Argyris, 2004).

Organizational defensive routines
Organizational defensive routines are “any action, policy or practice that prevents organizational participants from experiencing embarrassment or threat and, at the same time, prevents them from discussing the causes of the embarrassment or threat” (Argyris, 2001, p. 58). In other words, the processes and culture of the organization encourage employees to use Model I theory-in-use. Argyris (1994) gives various examples of what many people would consider “good management” but turn out in fact to be organizational defensive routines. In one case, a chief executive officer (CEO) discovered that a certain process comprised 275 steps. He re-engineered the process to reduce the numbers of steps to 75. Although this seems like good management, Argyris (1994) says that this is an example of single-loop learning. Ideally, the CEO should have asked how long this inefficient process had been in place and why nobody in the organization had challenged it before.

Argyris (2001, p. 51) argues that some individuals inside organizations can engage in double-loop learning but such individual effort is only temporary. Analysing the lifecycle of new change initiatives, Argyris (2001, p. 51) notes that these initiatives are short-lived because “they are subverted by organizational defensive routines”. In Argyris’s intervention in organization, the key is to get the top management to engage in double-loop learning (Fulmer and Keys, 2004). When individuals overcome single-loop learning and organizational processes and culture minimize organizational defensive routines, organizations learn (Argyris, 1992). Organizational learning is the notion that in a highly complex and competitive business environment, leaders of organizations have to push their employees to improve the way they carry out their functions. Though single-loop learning is suitable for routine situations, complex and new problems require double-loop learning. Yet, most individuals are uncomfortable with the potential threat and embarrassment that comes from double-loop learning. Argyris (1992) makes many important observations:

1. Individuals are not aware that they are engaging in defensive behaviour.
2. Unless people change their theory-in-use, there are no significant changes possible inside the organization.
3. Double-loop learning cannot happen without unfreezing the models of organizational structures and processes currently being used.
4. Double-loop learning is very difficult in most organizations because it requires trust.

Argyris (1992) observes that typically, people make inferences and then assume that these inferences are fact (Argyris, 1992, p. 14). He writes, “They act like naive scientists. They create causal explanations, they tend to blame others for errors and they tend to attribute any positive consequences to themselves” (Argyris, 1992, p. 25).
The concept of organizational learning has been hotly debated since Argyris’s work. Prange (1999) provides a good overview of the literature. One contention is whether organizational learning should be viewed at the individual level, at the group level or at the organizational level. This is a point over which many experts differ but Argyris (2001) maintains that organizations do not learn. Only individuals can learn but the processes and culture within the organization help or hinder the process. For Argyris (2001), this individual level is essential to have “actionable knowledge”. In an interview, Chris Argyris said:

I am interested in producing knowledge that is actionable. In order for it to be actionable, it must be actionable by practitioners [...] Managers see (the usefulness of actionable knowledge) however their problem became, “does it have to be this difficult?” (Fulmer and Keys, 2004, pp. 17-19).

Relating the work of Chris Argyris to practical wisdom in management, it seems that there is a serious problem. If most people are unaware of the inconsistency between their espoused values and theories-in-action and most people work in organizations where defensive routines are well established, then how can we achieve practical wisdom?

Using archetypes to overcome defensive routines
The work of Chris Argyris has greatly influenced Peter Senge. Senge is interested in resolving systemic problems inside organizations and he feels that double-loop learning is essential. Senge (1990, pp. 255-6) writes that teams can overcome their defensive routines by developing the skills of “reflection and mutual enquiry”. To do this, Senge (1990, p. 94) proposes the use of “systems-archetypes”. The research on archetypes is relatively new. It is based on the assumption that organizations are made up of interdependent subunits and “the result of (this) interdependence is resistance to change as subunit managers seek to maintain a complex network of commitments and relationships” (Romanelli and Tushman, 1994). This interdependence leads to an “underlying scheme” (Greenwood and Hinings, 1993). Greenwood and Hinings (1993) have reviewed the research on archetypes since the 1960s. They conclude that organizations tend to operate through structures and systems that are manifestations of a single, underlying interpretive scheme: they exhibit archetypal coherence. They note that organizations that have structures and systems that are not manifestations of a single, underlying interpretive scheme will move towards archetypal coherence. What is exciting about archetypes is that they provide a new tool to help managers develop practical wisdom as they identify recurring systemic problems and overcome defensive routines at the same time. Having reviewed Argyris’s ideas, let us now move to the Islamic tradition.

The Islamic worldview
Ahmad (2011, pp. 342-8) says that the Islamic worldview revolves around three core concepts: the belief that God is unique and in control of the Universe (tawheed); the belief that God sends messengers so that mankind may know how to live their lives in a way that is consistent with the purpose of creation (risalah); and that people are accountable for their deeds on the Day of Judgement (akhirah). The Qur’an is the holy book of the Muslims. Its core message revolves around three verses:

(1) The purpose of creation is to worship God:

I have not created Jinn and men except that they may worship me (Qur’an, 51:56).
(2) Most people do not live according to their intended purpose due to the intense rivalry that characterizes human social interaction:

the mutual rivalry diverts you (Qur’an, 102:01).

(3) Those people wishing to live according to their intended purpose have to follow the formula:

Except those who believe and do righteous deeds, and encourage one another to the truth and encourage one another to be patient (Qur’an, 103:03).

The last verse quoted sets the minimum standard to enter Paradise. All four conditions (faith, good deeds, encouraging one another to the truth and encouraging one another to be patient) have to be met. Scholars often explain that the first two conditions (faith and good deeds) are for the individual while the two other conditions (encouraging one another to the truth and encouraging one another to patience) determine the social commitment of a believer. This verse sets two principles that are also found in the Christian tradition. Ethics is rooted in religious belief (Tredget, 2010) and in the principle of seeking the common good (Sandelands, 2009). In the context of Argyris’ work, the following verses provide further explanation as to how Muslims should understand Chapter 103 of the Qur’an. God says:

O you who believe! Stand out for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even though it may be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be they rich or poor, Allah is a better protector. So follow not your desires, lest you may avoid justice and if you distort the testimony or change it, verily Allah knows what you do (Qur’an, 4:135).

O believers, people should not scorn others, for perhaps they may be better than them […] You should neither discredit one another nor abuse each other with nicknames […] O believers, avoid most form of suspicion, for verily, some suspicion is sin. Neither spy on each other nor backbite. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? (Qur’an, 49:11-12).

When explaining these verses, Philips (1996, p. 101) argues that the practice of “reading” into people’s statements all types and shades of meaning has no place in Islam. These verse indicates that Model I theory-in-use and the use of defensive routines are not acceptable in Islam. When reading the history of early Islam, it is clear that the Companions of the Prophet did not worry about embarrassing others when critical decisions needed to be taken. This mindset was summarized by the Prophet when he said:

The example of the one who stands up for Islam and the one who has left it are like the people in a boat, some of whom occupy the upper deck and some occupy the lower deck. Whenever those in the lower deck need water, they have to go to the upper deck to retrieve it. So some of them said, “why don’t we make a hole in our deck so we do not harm the people of the upper deck?” If the people do not stop them, they will all fall and be failures, but if they stop them they will all be saved (Al Bukhari).

The question is, does Islam have any practical solution to offer to avoid organization defensive routines? We propose two fundamental processes that are at the core decision-making process in Islam: sincerity to others (nasihah) and consultation (shura).

**Sincerity to others and mutual consultation**

The Prophet said:

“The religion is sincerity to others” The people said, “To whom?” He replied, “To Allah and His Book and to His Messenger and to the leader of the Muslims and to the common folk of the Muslims” (Muslim).
Sincerity to others is the core principle that regulates relationships in the Muslim community. Ideally, “(Muslims) would work for one another and sincerely advise one another to the point that would even sacrifice their own worldly interests out of preferences for their brothers’ needs” (Zarabozo, 1999, p. 492). The following incident illustrates how the Prophet’s Companions took this obligation. Jareer asked a servant to buy a horse. The servant bought it for 300 dinars. Jareer estimated its true value to be 800 dinars. He went to see the seller and gave him another 500 dinars. When asked why he did this, he said, “I gave the oath of allegiance to the Prophet to establish the prayer, give the zakah and be sincere to every Muslim” (Zarabozo, 1999, p. 495).

Zarabozo (1999, p. 494) concluded:

The Prophet described this religion by just one word: *nasihah* (i.e. sincerity to others). If Muslims do not make *nasihah*, then they should question their religion as a whole. Where is his Islam or faith without this sincerity to others?

The literature on practical wisdom in management stresses the need for individuals to identify and strive for the common good (Statler et al., 2007; Mele, 2010). The Islamic concept of sincerity to others supports this altruistic perspective.

Apart from being sincere to others, a second key process in the Muslim community is consultation (*shura*). This process is ordered in the *Qur’an* in the following verse:

> Those who answer the call of their Lord, establish the prayer, conduct their affairs with consultation, spend out of the sustenance which we have given them (*Qur’an*, 42:38).

Ismail and Ibrahim (2011, p. 305) discussed the importance of consultation in Islamic management. They note that Muslims have to consult one another but they argue that the advice given is not necessarily binding. Nonetheless, if Muslims were to use consultation systematically, it would prevent “brilliant, righteous, and well intentioned (Muslims) from making mistakes owing to personal bias” (Ismail and Ibrahim, 2011, p. 306). A question arises: what is the difference between consulting one another (*shura*) and simply holding a meeting? In the Islamic perspective, each and every person in a *shura* is sincere towards others (*nasihah*) and everybody is conscious that everything said or withheld will be accounted for on the Day of Judgement. In other words, *nasihah* is a pre-requisite to have an effective *shura* and both are essential to develop practical wisdom. If Muslims are competing with one another (see the *Qur’an*, Chapter 102), they will not be encouraged to be always truthful or patient (see *Qur’an*, Chapter 103). In Islam, personal practical wisdom is not possible as the views of others have to be sought. Practical wisdom has to be collective and intense rivalry is the one thing that will make collective practical wisdom virtually impossible to achieve.

**The case of Triple H**

In order to illustrate the previous considerations we present the case of a Malaysian consulting company called Triple H Sdn Bhd. Triple H was founded in 2006 by Mr Hussein Hassan-Hussein, a Lebanese consultant living in Malaysia. After reading Senge (1990) and Sterman (2000), he decided to start a Malaysia-based consulting company that combines knowledge management and systems thinking solutions. He adopted the methodology developed by the MHA Institute in Canada (Herasymowycz and Senko, 2007) and then sought to improve it. One of the authors interviewed him, in order to discuss the pervasiveness of single-loop learning, and whether his approach helps participants engage in double-loop learning.
In the interview, Mr Hussein explained that he does not specifically touch upon single-loop and double-loop learning, but he uses archetypes extensively to overcome defensive routines. Herasymowycz and Senko (2007) expanded Senge’s work and identified ten negative archetypes and ten positive archetypes, with their accompanying mental model (see Table I). These 20 archetypes have been integrated in the Triple H methodology. In a typical consultancy project, the consultants would explain the 20 archetypes to the client’s employees involved in the project. In Table I, one observes that negative archetypes are typical of single-loop learning whereas positive archetypes are typical of double-loop learning.

Consultants at Triple H would invite the group to discuss whether the negative archetypes relate to the problems they are facing and which archetype is the “noisiest”. Once the noisiest archetype has been identified, the group discusses the mental model associated with the archetype and how it relates to their problem. After that, the group discusses the second noisiest archetype. Without referring to Argyris’s work, the participants engage in double-loop learning. Triple H provides its participants with “archetype cards”. These look like playing cards. Each card has a negative archetype and the associated mental model on one side. On the other side, it has the positive archetype with its associated mental model. Once participants become familiar with archetypes, they can analyse any business problem or opportunity by going through ten cards. It is not unusual for employees to look at these cards while talking with one another over the phone. The name of the archetypes often enters the shared language of the organization and they become means of conveying complex messages in a simple sentence (remember, we have to stay on track). When asked about the success rate of their projects, Mr Hussein said that it was around 50 per cent. In a typical failure, the CEO tells his subordinates to attend the training session. They engage in double-loop learning and get very excited as they see many useful initiatives. Frequently the CEO refuses to endorse the initiatives proposed by the group. However, when senior decision makers attend the session on archetypes, the likelihood of success increases substantially as both leaders and subordinates engage in double-loop learning.

Practical wisdom for management from the Islamic tradition
Historically, Muslim scholars have always emphasized the congruence of values and behaviour. In this light, Argyris’s findings should be a major concern. Argyris (2004) does not claim that individuals are knowingly hypocritical. He says that most individuals are unaware of the discrepancy between their values and their behaviour. Such lack of awareness obviously makes practical wisdom very difficult. In the Islamic tradition, we can say that:

1. The problem has been explained in the 102nd chapter of the Qur’an and its root cause is intense rivalry. The solution is provided in the 103rd chapter of the Qur’an. The solution is based on a personal sense of ethics that is rooted in faith in God and in productive social interactions.

2. To expand on the 103rd chapter, two processes – sincerity to others and consultation – are given great importance in the Islamic tradition.

3. The experience of Triple H seems to indicate that, in practice, Muslim managers can use archetypes to promote double-loop learning in their organization.
This discussion raises an important principle in management from the Islamic tradition. The verses of the Qur’an and statements from the Prophet are general in nature. Every generation of scholars has to take these general principles and apply them within the latest developments of their time. Today, using Chris Argyris’s ideas and archetypes to make the practice of Islamic management more effective may make sense. In the future, new theories and practices might be better. Probably one of the greatest wisdoms in Islam is its general guidelines and a broad discretion to allow practitioners to implement them within the social and cultural context of their time.

The development of management education
When reflecting upon our findings, three points seem pertinent to management education.

First, Argyris’s ideas should be discussed in detail and not merely in passing. Argyris (2004) proposed that a technique called “the left hand column” be used to help practitioners engage in double-loop learning. We suggest that archetypes can also be used. The point is that people learning about management need to be taught a practical technique and they need time to practice this technique in order to become reasonably

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative archetype</th>
<th>Mental model</th>
<th>Positive archetypes</th>
<th>Mental model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limits to success</td>
<td>Let's do more of the same</td>
<td>Plan for limits</td>
<td>We always plan for limits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success to the successful</td>
<td>Someone wins, others must lose</td>
<td>Strut your stuff</td>
<td>We can both win</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tragedy of the commons</td>
<td>This common resource belongs to me</td>
<td>Collective agreement</td>
<td>This common resource belongs to everybody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth and underinvestment</td>
<td>Get past the current crunch</td>
<td>Invest for success</td>
<td>We continuously invest in long-term capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness principle</td>
<td>We must please everybody all the time</td>
<td>Be your best</td>
<td>We choose what we can and cannot do, even though some people will be upset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixes that fail</td>
<td>We cannot waste time or money. The first answer must be right</td>
<td>Fixes that work</td>
<td>We take the time necessary to get it right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shifting the burden</td>
<td>We know what needs to be done but it is difficult so let others do it</td>
<td>Bite the bullet</td>
<td>We know what we need to do and we will do it, no matter how hard it is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drifting goals</td>
<td>Our current level of activity is acceptable, although below standard</td>
<td>Stay on track</td>
<td>We continue to meet or exceed standards and goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidental adversaries</td>
<td>What I am doing does not affect others but somebody is trying to undermine me</td>
<td>Cooperative partners</td>
<td>We keep one another informed. There is always a way to work out this situation together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escalation</td>
<td>If I try harder, I will be successful</td>
<td>Win win</td>
<td>I can create a new pattern of behaviour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table I.**
Positive and negative archetypes used by Triple H Sdn Bhd

**Source:** Adapted from Herasymowych and Senko (2007)
proficient. Argyris touches upon something so fundamental – the alignment of values and behaviour – that it is worth spending time discussing it.

Second, we believe that cross-cultural similarities between concepts in the western and Islamic traditions merit further attention in order to build bridges of shared understanding.

Third, we recommend that curricula be amended to put more emphasis on universal values (Muslims believe that many Islamic values are shared by all religions) and to explore how these values can be operationalized in practice. Changing any syllabus is difficult because certain topics have to be discontinued. However, we refer to the beginning of this study in which we highlight the failure inherent in the current practice of management. Argyris makes a powerful argument that many people know what they ought to do, but they do not do it because of the organizational defensive routines. In this light, changing curricula by putting more emphasis on values and the congruence of values and behaviour is rooted in pragmatism, not idealism.

Conclusions
Generally, we find that Chris Argyris touches upon a problem that everybody should be concerned with: the alignment of espoused values and actual behaviour and how this impacts the development of practical wisdom in management. Our conclusions are that:

1. The notion of practical management is implied in the 103rd chapter of the Qur’an.
2. To achieve practical wisdom, the Islamic tradition emphasizes two processes: sincerity to others and consultation. Both processes require participants to be aware of their accountability on the Day of Judgement.
3. Chris Argyris’s research raises important issues but with the right practice – such as the use of archetypes – these issues can be resolved.

The case of Triple H gives us hope that overcoming defensive routines is possible. Further research is required to confirm the link between developing practical wisdom, espoused values, defensive routines and the use of management tools. Lastly, like Argyris, the Triple H experience would indicate that top management should take the lead in developing practical wisdom inside the organization.

References


**Further reading**


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