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Article

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Interview with Edgar Schein

Edgar Schein is one of the founders of organizational psychology and a pioneer of the study of organizational cultures. Awarded in the category of "Advancing Workplace Learning and Performance," Edgar Schein received the Lifetime Achievement Award for his pioneering work in organizational behavior and the role of culture in organizations.

Edgar Schein is Sloan Fellows Professor of Management Emeritus and senior lecturer at MIT's Sloan School of Management. At the same time he has been consultant more than 40 years. Edgar Schein has written a popular book "Organizational Culture and Leadership". His most recent books are "Process Consultation Revisited: Building the Helping Relationship" (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1999) and "The Corporate Culture Survival Guide" (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1999).

Ruth Alas: Your recent book about corporate culture has been titled as a "survival guide". Why is organizational culture so important?

Edgar Schein: For most organizations their culture is their source of strength, so to survive they at least need to understand what in their culture is the strength and what needs to be changed, if anything.

Ruth Alas: How can leaders influence organizational cultures in the period of environmental turbulence in East European reform countries? How long does it take to change the basic assumptions? How is it possible to achieve a good balance between all the interested parties (necessary for success) in the long run in such a turbulence?

Edgar Schein: During turbulent times leaders need clear visions and messages of where they want to go in the future. This is not a culture question but an organization/management question. If they are clear they can then analyze how much the cultures of the existing organizations will have to be changed, and if fundamental changes are needed this can be a 5-15 year process.

Ruth Alas: Which qualities should the leader have in order to be able to implement organizational changes successfully?

Edgar Schein: Ability to see and understand culture as well as the flexibility to change own behavior and learn new things.

Ruth Alas: You have described three different cultures in one organization: executive culture, engineers' culture and operators' culture. Which of these three are involved in this process? How to achieve synergy? Edgar Schein: In every organization all three cultures co-exist and have to be aligned with each other if the org. is to succeed. The main task of executive management is to insure that all three cultures are preserved and aligned with each other because each is important to survival and growth.

Ruth Alas: To which extent does organizational culture reflect national culture? Lets assume, that one Estonian company wants to expand operations to Lithuania. They have decided to buy one of the 3 local companies offering a product (service). How should they make sure, which company to choose?

Edgar Schein: Companies will always reflect their country cultures, so the Estonian company should examine whether the culture of the Lithuanian company is at least compatible with the Estonian one. If not, either don't acquire them or manage them only financially.

Ruth Alas: In your book "Process Consultation Revisted", you emphasize the importance of the relationship between a consultant and a client. Why do consultants underestimate the building of this relationship and how does it influence the entire process?

Edgar Schein: Commercial consultants who underestimate the importance of the relationship are not really consulting, they are selling services and are more interested in steady sales than really helping the client. Many consultants don't consult, they just sell products and services.

Ruth Alas: You have been a consultant for 40 years. Which qualities and competences should a consultant have? Can every consultant help every manager or should some criteria be met in order to achieve a match between the consultant and the manager?

Edgar Schein: The consultant should have the ability to create enough of a relationship to determine whether he or she can be helpful. I don't know whether I can help until I have achieved some decent communication with the potential client. I have often found that I could not help so terminated the relationship.

Ruth Alas: In conclusion, what is the most important in the implementation of organizational changes?

Edgar Schein: The most important thing is to involve the people who become targets of change in the change process itself.

Ruth Alas, Estonian Business School