Edgar H. Schein was born in Zurich, Switzerland on 5 March 1928 and spent his childhood in Czechoslovakia and Russia before his father moved the family to Chicago, where he lectured in physics at the University of Chicago. Schein himself was educated at the University of Chicago, at Stanford University, where he received a master's degree in psychology in 1949, and at Harvard University, where he received his Ph.D. in social psychology in 1952. He was chief of the Social Psychology Section of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research while serving in the US Army as a captain from 1952 to 1956. He then joined the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1956 and was made a professor of organizational psychology and management in 1964. From 1968 to 1971 Schein was the undergraduate planning professor at MIT, and in 1972 he became chairman of the organization studies group, a position he held until 1982. In 1978 he was named the Sloan Fellows Professor of Management, a chair he held until 1990. At present he is Sloan Fellows Professor Management Emeritus, and continues at the Sloan School half-time as a senior lecturer. He is also the founding editor of Reflections, the journal of the Society for Organization Learning devoted to connecting academics, consultants, and practitioners around the issues of knowledge creation, dissemination and utilization.

Schein has been a prolific researcher, writer, teacher and consultant. Besides his numerous articles in professional journals he has authored fourteen books including Organizational Psychology (1980), Organizational Culture and Leadership (1992) and The Corporation Culture Survival Guide (1999). He was coeditor, with the late Richard Beckhard, of the Addison Wesley Series on Organization Development, which has published more than thirty titles since its inception in 1969.

Schein takes the view that organizational psychology is slowly moving from an individualistic point of view towards a more integrated view based on social psychology, sociology and anthropology. Schein goes on to point out that culture as a ‘a pattern which shares basic assumptions’ as well as ‘a shared definition of primary task, mission and strategy as well as shared goals’, is a central dimension in this evolution. Our failure to take culture seriously may stem from our methods of enquiry, which emphasize abstractions that can be measured. More ethnographic or clinical observations are needed.

Schein notes that organizational psychology was introduced in the early 1960s by LEVITT and Bass, as well as himself. At that time, much of the emphasis was on the individual and only lip-service was paid to the organizational sociologists. Business schools called it organizational behaviour, a term with which Schein has always been uncomfortable, calling it an ‘oxymoron’. The newly formed subject group at MIT was instead called organizational studies. According to Schein, psychology has not paid enough attention to sociologists and anthropologists, whose traditions have been to go out into the field and observe a phenomenon at length before trying to understand it. Schein goes on to stress that the field will only progress when we have a set of concepts that are ‘anchored in and derived from concrete observations of real behaviour in real organisation’.

Another issue in this area of research is the connection between social needs and empirical research. This link became very apparent in Schein’s study of the behaviour of prisoners of war in the Korean conflict. The conflicts of psychology at that time were not capable of explaining the observed...
behaviour there. The phenomenon of ‘coercive persuasion’, subsequently development in detail by Schein, can be used to explain why so many of the programmes of organization development and organization learning that are launched with great enthusiasm do not seem to succeed.

Perhaps Schein’s most important contribution involves the three cultures of management. In a typical organization, the operators are the line managers and the workers who make and deliver the products and services that fulfil the organization’s basic needs. The engineers involve the core technology that underlines what the organization does. This group includes the technocrats and core designers in any function group. Finally, there are the executives who share a common set of assumptions based on the daily realities of their status and role. Their daily reality is often financial, and the essence of this role is accountability to the owner-shareholders, which usually involves share prices and financial results. Organization studies will not be mature, says Schein, until we begin to study, observe and absorb these three cultures.

Schein’s consulting work focuses on organizational culture, organization development, process consultation and career dynamics, and among his past and current clients are major corporations both in the United States and overseas, such as Digital Equipment Corporation, Ciba-Geigy, Apple, Citibank, General Foods, Procter & Gamble, ICI, Motorola, Hewlett-Packard, Exxon, Shell and the Economic Development Board of Singapore. He has received many honours and awards for his writing including the Social Science Research Council Auxiliary Research Award (1968), the Gordon Hardwick Award of the Middle Atlantic Placement Association (1967), and most recently the Lifetime Achievement Award in Workplace Learning and Performance of the American Society of Training Directors and the Everett Cherington Hughes Award for Career Scholarship from the Careers Division of the Academy of Management, both in 2000. He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the Academy of Management. Schein and his wife Mary have three children and seven grandchildren; they live in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


APA

Chicago

Harvard

© Thoemmes Continuum, 2005
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA