Organizational
Assessment Research:
Filling in Gaps
That Normal Science Overlooks



In this chapter we explore the relationship between our perspective and certain features of the correlational approach in research used for organizational assessment. Such studies typically inquire into the effectiveness of arrangements related to job design, the performance of organizations, the interactions among units within the organization, and the interaction between the organization and the environment (Van de Ven and Ferry, 1980, p. 9).

In most of this research literature, effectiveness is defined as producing a desired result (Van de Ven and Ferry, 1980). Our definition of effectiveness is producing a desired result in such a way that its production can continue under similar or reduced material or psychological costs. The latter condition is important as we shall see; it is possible to have a relatively effective organization slowly but covertly eating away the foundations of its effectiveness without realizing it.

Many different variables are related to organizational effectiveness. In this discussion we shall focus primarily on job design and job performance. As Hackman and Oldham (1976)

identify the domain, it is inquiry into what turns people on, how it is possible to improve work behavior and satisfaction and, in turn, the economic performance of the unit involved.

## **Basic Assumptions**

The fundamental assumption of assessment research is that the fit or match between the individual and job requirements is the crucial factor. Bowditch and Buono state, for example, that "the basic premise underlying this [fit] principle is that an organization will operate more effectively and more efficiently when harmony and congruence exist between its parts. Thus, a particular set of tasks will demand a particular organizational configuration, a specific set of skills, and an appropriate decision-making subsystem. The greater the consistency between these aspects of the organization, the greater the probability of success" (1982, pp. 7, 8).

Pfeffer (1982), however, after reviewing much of the literature, has concluded that the empirical research to date has such a low predictive validity that the basic premise of the importance of fit is questionable. There are also scholars who question the assumption that fit and satisfaction necessarily correlate. For example, Landy (1978) has suggested that the satisfaction-fit perspective has its intellectual roots in theories of motivation that assume that people will expend energy to maintain or increase pleasant experiences, as well as to minimize or decrease unpleasant experiences. Given these assumptions about human motivation, the fit between the individual and the job is better to the extent that the mismatch or gap is less. Moderating this basic tenet is the empirically demonstrated phenomenon that creativity can be enhanced under conditions of optimal frustration (Barker, Dembo, and Lewin, 1941), as well as under conditions of difficult but achieveable challenge (Lewin and others, 1944).

Still another assumption is that the positive effects of a "good" fit will have their predicted effects over time. In other words, it has been assumed that the meaning of the fit to the individual is stable enough that a measure of it taken during

one week will not change significantly the next week, as long as no major ability or job changes have occurred. If there are exceptions, they are random and can be controlled for by using valid sampling procedures and research instruments. But Landy (1978, p. 537) raises questions about such assumptions. He suggests a theory of job satisfaction where the very attempts at dealing with mismatch conditions may alter individuals' satisfaction. We will not be concerned with these debates here, not because they are trivial, but because we want to explore several scientific and moral gaps in the perspective of assessment research that would remain important even if the predictive validity of the research was high or if it was based on valid theories of motivation.

The scientific gap may be stated as follows: Is it possible that the research conditions and research instruments utilized in the descriptive approach have embedded in them some self-limiting conditions? Is it possible, for example, that even though a study might illustrate the Hackman-Oldham theory, the results will contain unrecognized gaps in what is reality, as long as the researchers remain descriptive? In other words, is the description of reality limited by the ideas in good currency about how to describe reality?

The moral gap is related to the issue of justice. Let us first recall that the concepts of fit, consistency, and harmony, in addition to being central to research on human performance, have been, and continue to be, key concepts in social psychology and organizational theories (for example, in dissonance theory, social comparison theory, and contingency theory). All these theories make the basic assumption that inconsistency is abhorred by human beings and that it therefore affects their performance.

Consistency is also the basis for the application of laws and for justice. Any given law is supposed to be applied equally; hence, the notion that no one is above the law. The relationships between consistency and justice have not been explored by the scholars in assessment research. Yet it seems reasonable to assume that individuals' performances could be as affected by a sense of justice or injustice as it is by a sense of satisfac-

tion (Evan, 1976). For example, individuals could be dissatisfied with the fit but consider it just (it is a new organization or one that is in trouble). Or they could be highly satisfied, yet the fit could be unjust (men got paid more than women for equal work).

What is the impact upon an organization and society at large if the organization performs well on the basis of a fit that satisfies many employees yet is unjust? How may an awareness of injustice help to maintain performance? What is the impact of practitioners' utilizing the results from research that unknowingly couples "good" fit with injustice?

Finally, there is the assumption that mismatches can and should be reduced. This presumes that mismatches are reducible without danger to the organization or significant discomfort to the individual. In some cases this assumption is valid. Jobs have been enlarged and enriched without significant harm to most of the individuals performing them. In other cases, however, this may not be true. We are finding that many professionals who express the desire for a Model II world have great difficulty in producing such a world even when the conditions are optimal. For example, Brodtrick (personal communication, 1983), in a study of European attempts to debureaucratize organizations, discovered that those who had complained most vigorously about overregulation found that it was now "difficult to make decisions in areas where they used to be able to simply invoke a rule and hide behind it."

Later we will cite the example of a group of professionals who were very dissatisfied with the quality of feedback that they were receiving about their performance. Part of their dissatisfaction was caused by their belief that their superiors did not know how to give usable feedback. Another cause of their dissatisfaction was that they believed their superiors could, if they wished to do so, learn to give valid feedback. In either case, the superiors were judged to be at fault. The consultants were exposed to a learning experiment in which they learned that (1) they, too, did not have the skills that they insisted their superiors have; (2) they, too, were blind to their lack of skills; and (3) learning these skills was much more difficult than they

had thought was the case. The gap between the feedback that they expected and what they received from their superiors remained, but now their expectations of their superiors had altered significantly. They were much more patient with, and respectful of, the gap. Their sense of dissatisfaction appeared to be reduced while their commitment to work remained high or, in the case of those individuals who were not threatened by the new learning, even increased. A few who realized how much they or others would have to learn in order to give and receive helpful feedback began to think that it would be better for them to seek other professions or jobs where they might not be as dependent on others for feedback as in their present jobs (for example, set up their own businesses).

#### Assessment Research in a Professional Organization

The first step in our argument is to present a study that was conducted by Argyris (1985) in three offices of a professional consulting firm. Included in the interviews were questions about the degree of fit between the needs and abilities of employees, on the one hand, and job requirements, on the other. The interviews lasted from one to two and one-half hours. All were tape recorded and most were transcribed. Since the results obtained in the three offices were almost identical, only the results in Office A will be used to illustrate the argument. Twenty-five of the thirty-five consultants in the office were interviewed and all but one of the ten managers. The findings will be organized around the Hackman and Oldham (1976) categories of skill variety, task significance, and autonomy.

One caveat before we describe the results. The research methods used in this study were not correlational in the sense that is exhibited by the rigorous research of many of the writers. The results, however, are similar. In other words, the data that were collected largely confirm the hypotheses of Hackman and Oldham. Our task is to see what gaps exist even when these hypotheses are confirmed.

One hundred percent of the consultants reported that skill variety was extremely high. The four critical skills identi-

fied by the consultants were analytical abilities (92 percent), conceptualizing ambiguous problems (84 percent), interviewing skills with clients (64 percent), and dealing with demanding, difficult clients (60 percent). The managers identified analytical and conceptual skills as being the two key skills (100 percent). They added that dealing with difficult interpersonal team relationships and managing vice-presidents were critical skills in their jobs (80 percent).

The consultants reported that task identify features were crucial. It was important that the case team, early in the client relationship, identify the issues and decompose or modularize them into whole and identifiable pieces of work (100 percent). Eighty-four percent of the consultants reported that the prime skill of a manager is to help the team achieve task identity early in the history of the relationship. One hundred percent of the managers reported the same views.

All the consultants and managers reported that their work had a high degree of task significance. The success or failure of their performance had an immediate, substantial, and clearly identifiable impact on the clients, the consulting firm, and their own careers. Both groups cited their high salaries (about which there were no negative views) as confirmation that their performance was highly significant to the clients and to the consulting firm.

Autonomy was also a crucial factor. The consultants reported that they especially liked those case assignments that provided a substantial degree of freedom and independence (92 percent). Seventy-two percent reported that these conditions did exist in most client cases. When they did not, they reported dissatisfaction and frustration. One hundred percent of the managers reported that a successful case team relationship was one in which the problem was framed early, the parts were decomposed and assigned correctly, and the major task of the manager was to provide an overall sense of direction.

Up to this point, the data would suggest, as Hackman and Oldham (1976) predict, that the consultants and managers had high internal motivations to produce work of outstanding quality. Some qualitative comments to illustrate this are:

"Pressure on the job is self-imposed almost completely [laughs]. I must not only do a good job but I must be the best, or damn close to it, in whatever I do."

"People around here are very bright, hard working, and highly motivated [to do an outstanding job]. They will work beyond the purple heart stage."

"Most of us not only wish to succeed, but to succeed at maximum speed, which is really what is at issue."

Ninety-six percent of the consultants and 70 percent of the managers reported that job pressures were high because of the very high standards; that pressures were self-imposed rather than imposed from without (80 percent and 90 percent, respectively); and that the pressures were considered legitimate or understandable when they came from the client (92 percent and 90 percent, respectively). One consultant reported that he did not feel much pressure, and then added, "But I would say I am a strong minority."

The professionals reported that receiving feedback from managers and officers was very important (96 percent). Each group reported the biggest mismatch in this area. Seventy-two percent of the professionals and 70 percent of the managers reported receiving inadequate feedback. Eighty-eight percent of the professionals and 100 percent of the managers reported that the most important obligation the firm had to individuals was "to give [them] an opportunity to do first-rate client work and to provide adequate and timely performance evaluations." The dissatisfaction with feedback appeared to influence the professionals' views about how much the firm cared for them and their careers. Those who were dissatisfied with the feedback also reported that the firm did not show very much caring.

These results are consistent with the findings reported by another consultant who had conducted a study in the same firm three years earlier. He interviewed the same number of managers and nearly 90 percent of the professionals. The consultant reported several sources of discontent, none of which were related to the job itself: One interviewee commented on the "discrepancies between the personal developmental potential . . .

and the extent to which those tremendous potentialities are purposefully realized." Another said that "the 'psychic costs' of working at [the firm] are unnecessarily high. 'The system' generates... counterproductive reactions." Examples of such reactions were: "ineffective and unsystematic performance evaluation and feedback processes," "ambiguous and sometimes conflicting signals as to 'How am I doing?" and, "relative lack of processes and mechanisms for staff to use in resolving ambiguities about one's performance." The consultant's report also identified ineffective and at times insensitive behavior on the part of officers and managers when they did give feedback.

To conclude, the fit or match between such core job dimensions as skill variety, task identity, task significance, and autonomy were high. The consultants and the managers reported a high degree of meaningfulness in their work and a sense of responsibility for outcomes at work, as well as a high degree of internal commitment for high-quality work. But while satisfaction with the work itself was high, satisfaction with feedback and career progress was significantly lower. Some illustrative comments:

- "Feedback, I would say, is almost a joke. There are a couple of people who do a good job. But very few. Most do a very bad job; they'd be better off not doing it."
- "Bad, bad, I haven't been able to speak to my sponsor since the first day I came here."
- "The trouble with feedback... is that it is too general. When it is specific, it is often unfair and punishing."
- "Feedback I get is little and when I get it, it is full of insensitivity and judgments that make little sense to me."

So far we have research results that are consistent with those obtained in studies of the fit between individual variables and organizational variables. Let us explore what gaps, if any, are embedded in these findings that may affect our description of reality. First, however, a word about the theory of action perspective on assessment research.

### Action Science Approach to Assessment Studies

The notion of fit or the importance of consistency are also relevant in a theory of action approach. Where it differs from assessment research is in how fit is studied. Questionnaires and interviews provide data primarily at the espoused level. They do not provide actual behavior from which meanings could be inferred and from which theories-in-use could in turn be constructed. In our study, however, we were able to obtain such data. They shed some interesting light on the dimensions where the misfit or mismatch was most powerful, namely, the quality of feedback, interpersonal relationships, and career development.

The first set of data included cases written by nearly all the officers, managers, and consultants in the three offices. The cases used the format similar to that of the X-Y case described in Chapter Eight and in detail elsewhere (Argyris, 1982). Such cases give us a window on the range of problems organizational members consider important, the ways in which they make sense of these in their own terms or categories, and the actions they take to handle them. This form of assessment in turn allows us to see the organization as members construe it and to assess not only the problems but the way its members grapple with them. What we found in this case was that all the respondents espoused a theory of action that combined honesty with caring, concern with helpfulness, but that none of the respondents were able to produce a scenario either in oral or written form that was consistent with these features. Moreover, as is true for all our subjects to date, once having diagnosed their ineffectiveness and made a commitment to produce more consistent scenarios, they were unable to do so as judged by their fellow workshop members and themselves.

From these results we infer that all the theories-in-use were the same. The consultants did not differ from the man-

agers or the officers. Hence, we might predict that if the consultants were in the position of having to lead others, they would do no better than the officers and managers had done. For example, if they had an opportunity to give feedback to others, they would produce feedback as ineffective as that produced by the officers.

An opportunity occurred to test this prediction in one of the offices in the firm. The officers and managers were concerned about the "morale" of the consultant group. They invited a number of consultants, selected by their peers, to conduct a study on these issues and feed the results back to them.

We now had an opportunity to see how the young consultants would behave when (1) they had the power to study and be critical; (2) they designed the research, the feedback process, and the meeting; (3) they had the backing of the officers; and (4) they had the support of an external consultant to help them. Finally, the officers and consultants invited one of us to sit in on the meeting to make sure that the officers and managers did not "pull rank" and to have a public observation of what happened as a double protection of the consultants.

In many ways the consultants were in an experimental situation where they were doing the evaluating and feeding back results under conditions that were more supportive than those available to officers or managers in everyday life. Yet, it was our prediction that the consultants would not behave differently from the way the officers or managers did when they gave feedback. The session was taped, the tape recordings were analyzed, and the relevant results were published (Argyris, 1982). As the consultants were giving feedback to the officers and managers on their performance and stewardship, they behaved precisely in the ways that they had faulted the officers and managers for behaving. They were judgmental and evaluative without illustrating their views, and they did not encourage confrontation of them. The session reached the point where the officers and managers reported that they were in a bind. On the one hand, they genuinely wanted to listen and to change. On the other hand, the feedback they were receiving was either too general or highly judgmental and insensitive. If they focused on

the latter, the professionals would accuse them of "pulling rank" and being closed. If they focused on the former, there was little they could do to make constructive changes. If the officers and managers hid the fact that they were hiding their increasing sense of unjust punishment, the professionals would leave the meeting believing that they had done a good job. Since the officers and managers felt they could not change on the basis of the feedback they had received, their lack of change could be seen by the professionals as evidence of their resistance to change.

#### What Did We Learn?

If we focus on the objective of describing reality, we can say that through an intervention consistent with the principles of action science, we developed a much richer picture of reality than would otherwise have been available. We now know that the consultants were unable to produce more competent behavior than the officers and managers when they had a chance to do so under supportive conditions. We also know that they were blind to this fact. Blindness, from our perspective, is action, and such action is designed. That must mean that there are programs in the consultants' heads that keep them blind and programs that keep them unaware of their blindness. If this is true, it is a critical slice of reality that would have been missed by the typical assessment approach.

Finally, the assessment approach gives us no idea of the group, intergroup, and cultural defensive routines that may exist in the organization to protect and reinforce these features. Yet to decrease any mismatch would require an understanding of these features. We have found that these deep-structure, taken-for-granted features surface when we conduct training sessions to help individuals learn Model II action. As individuals strive to learn new actions and discover that they cannot, they increasingly direct their attention and energies to discovering and redesigning the barriers to these new actions at the individual, group, and organizational levels. It is thus not likely that individuals can go through the reeducative processes described

in this book without examining the deep structures of their own and the organization's defensive routines.

#### Issues of Justice

The results of the two diagnostic interview studies indicated that the consultants were dissatisfied with the feedback activities. They believed that their superiors (and the firm) were responsible for this state of affairs. They also believed that their superiors could learn to behave more competently if they "really cared about people issues." The consultants and managers reported little or no personal responsibility for the mismatches that existed in the feedback domain.

Because of these beliefs the professionals thought it was just to ask for organizational changes and changes in the behavior of their superiors. At the organizational level they therefore sought to make feedback a right and an obligation. They recommended more attention to career development. The consultant to the study agreed with these views. He recommended that the managers and officers provide better learning and career development experiences for the young professionals. He also recommended formation of career development committees, provision of more formal training, and establishment of clearer policies on promotion. He suggested that the superiors schedule more feedback sessions and learn to conduct such sessions more competently. In order to support the justness of these recommendations, the consultant suggested that it be agreed and announced that every staff member has the right and the obligation to "seek periodic evaluation and discussion of his/her performance....It should be ... person to person ... and thorough."

The organization confirmed the justice of these ideas by turning them into policies. Policies, of course, are espoused theories, and true reduction of the mismatches will occur only if the officers and managers behave in accordance with the intent of these policies. We suggest that, without a particular kind of reeducation and without changes in the organizational culture, the intent will not be implemented. If this is the case, then the

sense of mismatch will become greater because behavior will not change even though the organization has mandated better feedback.

But the X-Y learning experiences, plus those data obtained from actual evaluation meetings, both suggest important moderating conditions. The results of the X-Y case suggest that Model I is culturally learned and that all participants acquire it in the course of socialization. Hence, individuals are not personally responsible for developing their Model I-ness. At the same time, however, the way they choose to behave within the framework of their Model I-ness is their choice. Individuals have master programs in their heads that define their theories-in-use. If this is so, then individuals (superiors or subordinates) will tend to produce conditions of insensitivity, misunderstanding, and escalating error, although they may vary widely in the behavior they select to produce these conditions. Under these conditions, how just is it to hold only superiors responsible for poor feedback? How just is it for the subordinates to assume that if the superiors wanted to behave differently, if they cared, they could do so? In our opinion, the answer is that it is not just: It requires of a superior that he or she act in ways in which the subordinates themselves do not and cannot act.

Moreover, an analysis of the tapes of actual evaluation sessions shows that the subordinates withheld their frustration and anger or expressed them toward the end in Model I ways. The former response tended to provide the superior with a false sense that "the session went well." The latter provided evidence for the primary fear of many superiors about feedback sessions, namely, that subordinates will become defensive and that not many positive results will be gained.

There are two points that we are making here. First, all concerned believed that feedback sessions should be held, that it was possible to generate rules about competent behavior, and that they themselves already followed them. Individuals may therefore believe that they are being treated unjustly when the other players do not follow the rules. But our point is that the natural, automatic responses of Model I individuals will be to violate the rules, to be unaware that they are doing so, and

either not to receive feedback that may serve to penetrate their double-layered unawareness or to receive counterproductive feedback that predisposes them to blame the other person.

The second point is that, at the theory-in-use level, there is little sense of personal causal responsibility. All the individuals held the same theory-in-use, and we suggest that they learned it early in their lives. It is possible for people to alter their behavior within Model I governing variables, but the result will still be Model I actions and consequences. Moreover, any educational programs that help individuals change their actions without helping them alter their governing variables will lead to gimmicks and fads.

Although individuals have no choice in their theory-in-use and the O-I learning system, they can choose to alter their theory-in-use and, hence, the organizational learning system and culture. But such changes will not occur unless the players are committed. Thus policy recommendations—for example, everyone has a right to helpful feedback—are primarily espoused theories that provide a basis for mismatch and dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, changes in theory-in-use may lead to the view that all the players can contribute to creating conditions in which individual theories-in-use, organizational learning systems, and therefore organizational culture can be altered.

The question arises, If the players held the point of view that we are recommending, would it have altered their responses to the original questions or lessened the intensity with which they held their views? Would it have altered the degree of certainty with which they asserted that the superiors' incompetence was a sign of injustice and not caring? If the answers are yes, then the diagnostic experiences recommended by a theory of action should be added to assessment theory and practice.

If the answers are no, however, then it would be important to ask what implications this has for justice in the organization. What kind of world will be created if the desire for satisfaction becomes a more powerful motivation than the desire for justice, especially since the basis for satisfaction is competence that few may have and rules for governance that few can

fulfill? For example, how can we tell when individual satisfaction becomes simply a matter of self-interest or even narcissism? Or under what conditions is it just for an organization to place a ceiling on satisfaction or on the degree of match in order to enhance organizational health?

#### Individuals and Double-Loop Learning

If genuine organizational change is to occur, we believe that all individuals will have to learn a theory-in-use whose utilization leads to double-loop learning. As individuals come to learn in this way, they will necessarily create new organizational learning systems and a new culture that sanctions such learning. Our candidate for the new theory-in-use for individuals is Model II; for the organizational learning system it is Model O-II.

But the further question arises, How would professionals tend to react if placed in learning environments designed to teach Model II? There are two sets of factors that influence such learning. The first set is related to the nature of the learning environment. The second set is related to the "readiness" of individuals to learn.

In the introduction to Part Three we will present a detailed description of how a group of professionals reacted to the conditions that we created. Initially, they found themselves feeling bewildered and frustrated. Bewildered that they had such difficulty in producing the action strategies that they had designed. Frustrated because their errors reoccurred even when they were sure that this would not be the case. The bewilderment and frustration, however, eventually turned to experiences of success and mastery. (Incidentally, the bewilderment and frustration were used to fuel the learning.) But what about "readiness" to learn? We can obtain some insight into this factor by reexamining the basis for the fit between the professionals and their jobs. In the left-hand column below, we present some comments that they made that illustrate their position. In the right-hand column we state the inferences we made from these comments.

# Statements made by respondents

Professionals are highly motivated and have plenty of initiative. The key is to provide them [with] challenging work and opportunities to learn.

The people here will work beyond the purple heart stage as long as there is challenge. If there is little challenge, they become unhappy.

The job we do must not only be good, it must be the best.

It would scare me to death to be here and not be a competent professional. You'd feel like shit all the time.

There is a lot of pressure and most of it is self-imposed. For example, professionals hate to make errors. They go into a "doom-zoom" and act as if they are a bunch of fragile egos.

# Our inferred meanings

The energy for work is related to the degree of challenge and learning in the work.

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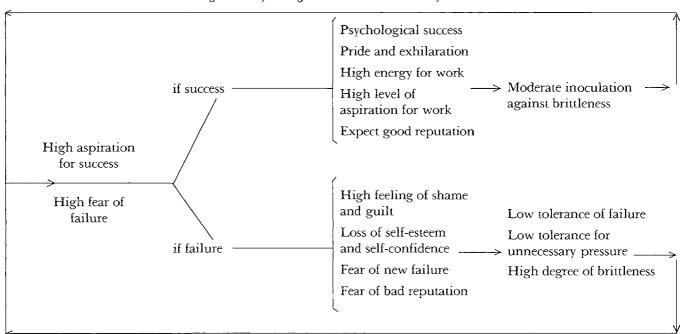
High but achievable level of aspiration for career success.

Deeply emotional, negative reaction to performing in a mediocre or below-average way.

Reaction to error can be strongly disproportionate to the magnitude of the error.

From data such as these, it is possible to develop a model (Figure 4) of how professionals will tend to react to success and failure. The model suggests that professionals represent an intriguing combination of high aspiration for success and an equally high fear of failure. The experience of success leads to feelings of pride and exhilaration, high energy for work, strong aspirations for quality work, and the expectation of achieving a good reputation. These conditions, in turn, reinforce the aspiration for success.

Figure 4. Psychological Success-Brittleness Syndrome.



At the same time, they also provide a moderate inoculation against feelings of failure and brittleness. We define brittleness as the predisposition to express an inappropriately high sense of despair or failure when producing error. The higher the degree of susceptibility to shame and guilt and the greater the avoidance of, and fears about, shame and guilt, the greater the internal state of brittleness. Brittleness is expected to result from reactions to failure. These reactions include strong feelings of shame and guilt, loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, fear of new failure, and fear of acquiring a bad reputation. Such reactions lead to a lowering of tolerance for failure, to unnecessary pressure, and to a high degree of brittleness. These consequences in their turn reinforce the high fear of failure.

It is thus not unreasonable to conclude that professionals will tend to find the unfreezing process threatening. They are, in effect, being placed in a learning situation where there is a high probability that they will produce errors and experience failure. This indicates that closing the gap in feedback processes may be far more difficult and far more closely connected to the level of action skills possessed by the participants than either the researchers or the consultants thought would be the case. It suggests that, like the young consultants, the professionals also held beliefs about justice and satisfaction and what data were important (espoused) that helped keep them unaware of their inability to produce the actions they were requiring others to produce.

It appears that organizational assessment research has assumed that it is possible to separate satisfaction, competence, and performance, on the one hand, from justice, on the other. This assumption is consistent with such Model I governing variables as unilateral control and maximizing winning and minimizing losing. For example, assessment research that ignores justice can be used by either employees or management to strengthen their respective cases in order to win and not lose.

In a Model II world it would be difficult to separate these factors because there personal responsibility is crucial. The moment the consultants explored how they were partially responsible for "causing" their dissatisfaction, their blindness to their

own incompetence, and their blindness to the difficulties that they and their superiors would have in altering their behavior, then the entire thrust of the exercise changed because the issue of justice became prominent.

Issues of justice, in turn, will probably have important implications not only for managing organizations but for creating the conditions that are necessary if researchers are to obtain valid information. And without valid information, science of any kind is in jeopardy.