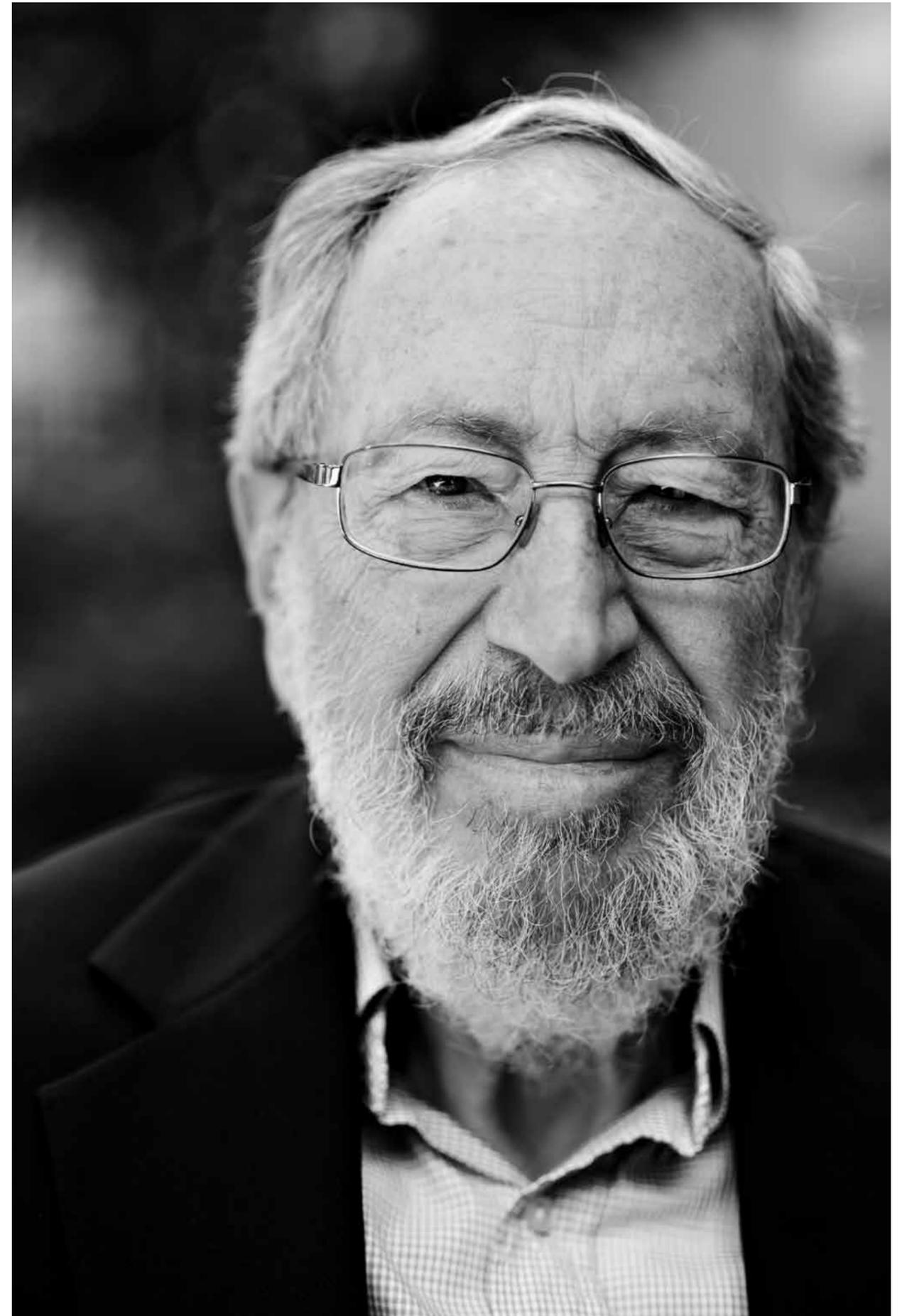


Ed Schein

Inspections of a wise and sharp observer

The way in which he learned to be a consultant and teacher is very directly related to his childhood. Living in several countries, learning different languages made Edgar H. Schein learn to be absorbent of new situations. Very successfully he applied these early experiences to his work. Now he is known as brilliant prolific researcher, writer, teacher and consultant. by Nina Prehofer



I have had enough lessons.

In his most recent book about helping, Ed began to realize that the worst thing about helping, the most difficult thing, is that if we have the good intention to help, we then forget to find out what's really needed. We jump in and say »let me help you« but it may be completely wrong, it may not be what is needed, it may be offensive, it may be insulting.

So the helping mentality should be one of humble inquiry. The best metaphor in his opinion for how to be a helper or change agent is to be a midwife. Help with the birth of the idea or whatever, but that new idea always belongs to the client – it is never ours. We have to facilitate it, but not to impose it.

This goes back to the famous psychologist Carl Rogers, who created a whole school of doing therapy by mainly reflecting what the person said back to him. And Schein thinks this is the right principle: He said the most fundamental idea in human relations is that people have the capacity to change themselves. The consultant's job is to help them use that capacity rather than telling them, forcing them or imposing on them.

Lessons learned

Born in 1928, Ed's childhood was shaped by many moves: from Switzerland to Russia, to former Czechoslovakia, back to Switzerland and finally to the US. He was educated at the University of Chicago, then Stanford, where he received his Masters Degree in Psychology, and then Harvard for his PhD, which he finished in 1952. He joined MIT's Sloan School of Management in 1956 and some years later he was made Professor of Organizational

Psychology and Management. He wrote numerous articles and authored many books.

Has there been any situation where a man like this is aware that he has learned his lesson? Sitting in his Cambridge (MA, USA) apartment, he tells me: »oh yes, over and over again«. He said it took him quite a while to learn not to jump in with his own answers. One can throw answers out there but they may have no use to anybody if you haven't figured out what the problem is in the first place. »I have had enough lessons. I try not to feel too confident that I know the answer or how to do things until I have kind of observed and found my way into the situation.« Ed feels that people like to stand on a podium, make predictions and tell other people what they should do. But that's not »my style« as he calls it.

The key to a successful future organization

»I think for anyone to make a prediction for the future would be foolish.« For Ed the most important issue is to see that we are in a period of a very rapid change; because of information technology, multiculturalism and social responsibility. All those factors mean that organizations are inventing new ways of doing things. And so he would suppose one could say the successful organization of the future is the one that is best at learning new ways of doing things. It's a learning issue now. But one could certainly predict that the learning problems will be around complexity and communication that every field will be getting more complex. This means that communication between team members and their bosses will become more difficult.



His collection of netsuke and a selection of Ed's many books.

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Ten years ago people would have said there has to be a face-to-face meeting. Now it is clearly happening that it is possible to collaborate without being in the same place or ever seeing each other personally. Ed is going with this technological evolution. He has one client that he never met, has given global classes talking to a camera with 400 people watching all over the world. And in the future there may be more new vehicles of communication.

Observing life and people

Ed Schein says about himself that he is an observer rather than a predictor. He says what he likes about the observing position is that he learns more and finds new things. He tells me that his daughter complains that her children are glued to screens all the time and that she worries about it. But he could see that the child she worried most about turned out to be very successful in finance, although he spent most of his high school years in front of a screen. It didn't do him any harm. »If you are not observant and interested, you're not going to discover what is already happening in the world. Almost everything we can predict is already in existence somewhere. So why predict?« He says we should concentrate on things we know we have not solved yet, for example, on making cross-cultural relationships work. We know that groups will be more multi-cultural in future. Ed says we should be asking the questions: How do you build trust across cultures? How do you build effective working relationships? How do you create mutual helping? »Those are the problems we should be addressing!«

So many questions – are there answers to them?

Well, Ed has thought about it. He thinks that we should invent what he calls »cultural islands«. On those islands you create special dialogues or special practice events that will enable people from different cultures to work together with each other. It is like a temporary parallel organization system. It would exist until you have created the team. Then the team would go to work and the island would disappear and only recur if it is needed for creating another team. It is like offside meetings. ►



Ed Schein in his new apartment in Palo Alto.

For these islands, special rules can be defined. Rules, which make you put aside cultural differences. One obvious cultural difference is that in northern cultures, such as Sweden, people are able to tell their boss quite directly that he or she has done something wrong; elsewhere, e.g. in China this would be a big taboo. But on an island you can create a common set of rules that will get everybody to tell you what you need. All you have to do is create a climate where this is possible.

This climate is achieved by practicing. This sounds very clever and easy. Create a simulation where the subordinate is able to practice telling his boss that he has done something wrong. By revising it, it makes it easier for the future in a real situation. If you like, the island is a simulator, or simulations are like Ed's islands. Places where you can create problems and then find ways of solving them.

Another invention

Building a relationship among colleagues who don't know each other – a lesson.

Ed: »So this one colleague broke up these 5 people who supposed to become a kind of a collaborative team into pairs. Now what to ask the pair to do? The instructions were: When you actually sit down, face-to-face, you say ›So what about you?‹ Just that. And it worked! What would you say if I asked you the same question?«

Nina: »I would start telling you something about myself.«

Ed: »Exactly. So I think where we need the inventions is at the micro level. Not the big picture out there.«

Nina: »So it's important to be curious, open, humble, really wanting to communicate and to solve

problems? You can't force anybody, right? So you take a group, team out on the island. And how do you transform the knowledge from the island to the rest of the organization?«

Ed: »They are trained, so they are different people when they get back. But if there is a real disagreement between the way the island works and the way the work-world works then you have to systematically train all the teams over a period of time. That's why a culture change takes five to ten years! You could take any team out and retrain them, but to change a whole organization toward curiosity, openness, this takes time. It also has to be top-down or sooner or later it will get killed.«

Curiosity

In these times Ed is interested and curious about how to build a relationship. How personal to be and how to go about doing it. He observed that it is a very careful dance between revelation and acceptance. People leak out something about themselves, because they want to know what the other person really finds acceptable. And if they find it acceptable, they might say something more. Then the other person does the same thing. In movies this can be seen all the time. The scriptwriters know how to write the script but they don't necessarily know the theory of revelation and acceptance behind it. And the theory would be that it's a very careful status acceptance thing. We are very sensitive to being offended. And it happens in silly ways around helping.

Ed tells me, »I had nine people for dinner and we brought in Thai food. So we were all sitting around the table having this marvelous dinner and at one point we are supposed to come in here to discuss the book we've read. And four people jumped up and grabbed their plate and started to march towards the kitchen. And I realized, I knew, they thought they were being helpful to get the dishes off the table. But I find myself saying, ›I have to stop this, because they don't know where to put that stuff in the kitchen, they are gonna pile stuff up, they may break something‹. So I had to say ›stop! In my house I clear away the dishes.‹ And so in the simplest way we make these dumb mistakes. Nobody said ›Ed do you need some help?‹ – they just jumped up and started doing stuff.«

»So we should ask more?«

»Yes! And I could have then said, I'd love help but only from one of you.« ●

I met Ed Schein this year at his place in Cambridge (MA, USA). He lives by himself in a serviced apartment house. From his balcony you can see the Charles River and the city. I got to know him as a very interesting, wise and impressive personality. We were sitting on the couch, him to my right. It is a very silent place. After our talk he showed me some of his books and his collection of little ivory netsuke. Being able to visit him while I was on vacation in New York was a great stroke of luck. Before I left, he gave me the latest book he had read with his book club. I promised to write a review, which should hopefully be ready by the time this magazine appears. The book: »Netsuke« by Rikki Ducornet. By the time we took the pictures Ed Schein had already moved to his new apartment in Palo Alto (CA, USA).

Buchtip:

»Prozessberatung für die Organisation der Zukunft. Der Aufbau einer helfenden Beziehung.« von Edgar H. Schein
Erschienen im EHP Verlag.