

If TRIZ IS So Good, Why Isn't Everyone Using It, Part 7: Plausible Deniability & Spiral Dynamics

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Abstract

Considering that TRIZ purports to be the most powerful creativity and imagination toolkit in the world, it is perhaps a little surprising to see why its spread has been so slow. A check on attempts to corporately implement other tools, methods and philosophies reveals that TRIZ is not alone in this phenomenon. There have, nevertheless, been some implementation success stories and the paper takes these successes as a start point for trying to understand what are the critical factors that will determine whether a methodology introduction or change initiative will work or not. In so doing, the paper introduces the phenomenon of 'plausible deniability' and details its vital role in the management of change. Having formulated a plausible deniability theory, the final section of the paper describes the role of spiral dynamics in defining and delivering strategies capable of producing durable innovation and change.

Introduction – Plausible Deniability

TRIZ is approaching a critical point in its history. What happens in the next two or three years will determine whether it grows into a global phenomenon or shrinks into cult-like obscurity.

If things continue the way they are at the moment, it looks more likely that TRIZ will head down the path marked 'cult'. Clearly something about the way it is being presented to the world right now is not working. There are a host of reasons contributing to TRIZ's lack of success. Some are more important than others. One of the more significant appears to be plausible deniability. Plausible deniability, for those that have never heard the term before, is a phenomenon common amongst managers working in organizations (Reference 1). The concept works something like this;

- 1) someone approaches a manager with a proposal that something should be changed
- 2) the manager is faced with a difficult decision; pleasure-seeking thinking (Reference 2) points in the direction of giving the idea a try because there is an opportunity to look like a hero to superiors. Pain-avoidance thinking (Reference 2 again) on the other hand points in the direction of not changing anything, because if something goes wrong, there are going to be questions along the lines 'why did you tamper with a perfectly

- satisfactory system?' Generally speaking, in most large organizations where short-term thinking is frequently dominant, pain avoidance tends to dominate pleasure-seeking. In this situation, a manager is likely to err towards the do-nothing approach.
- 3) The do-nothing approach, however, also carries with it the potential of pain: what if someone else (e.g. a competitor) adopts the change idea and it turns out to be a success? In this situation, the questions coming down from above will be things like 'why didn't you see it coming?' or – absolutely catastrophic if news gets out that you turned the idea down – 'what on earth caused you to reject that?'
 - 4) In order to make sure there is a good answer to this potentially career limiting scenario, the manager, therefore needs a plausible explanation for why not adopting the change was the correct thing to do.

Plausible deniability, in other words, is the reason that managers are looking for (either implicitly or explicitly) to justify their decision to *not* do something.

Finding a plausible explanation why something should not be done is what plausible deniability is all about. In the case of TRIZ, 'lack of case studies' is probably the most frequently used and plausible reason for not doing anything. There is no current TRIZ equivalent of the Jack Welch character standing up and announcing to the world that Six Sigma saved the company some enormous amount of money. The Jack Welch and GE experience makes it very difficult for a manager in another company to produce a plausible reason for not doing something with Six Sigma or an equivalent.

So is TRIZ ever going to report the Six Sigma breadth of success? Actually there are two questions here: Is TRIZ ever going to *create* such big successes and is anyone going to *report* them?

Let's explore the first question first. Is TRIZ going to create success stories? Does it work in other words. The evidence here appears strong that it provides an extremely useful spark at the beginning of the ideation process. The method is highly likely to deliver general solutions that will eventually trace through to the actual solution. Translating the general solutions into the specific ones, however, absolutely demands domain knowledge; someone in the organization, with a detailed knowledge of the context of the organization, its customers and its market is going to have to make that translation. Put yourself in their position (many readers might already have been there). Did TRIZ create that solution? Or was it you? The smart money is on the likelihood that the answer is *you* came up with the solution. Take that a half-step further as the story rises up and through the company hierarchy and pretty soon it becomes 'TRIZ wasn't needed; we did it anyway'.

The only likely exception to this phenomenon is if you have something to gain by attributing the success to TRIZ – as the TRIZ consultants and champions have. In which case the first hint of a success carries with it the inevitable scent of bias and 'well, he would say that, wouldn't he'. Even if the story passes this test, when it comes to reporting the success more widely – outside the organization for example – we pretty soon hit a new hurdle: how does the company benefit by telling everyone about their success stories? Doesn't it simply alert their competitors to the fact that there is something they need to be doing themselves? Does that sound like a good idea? Or might it be better, if the method works, to try and keep the information hidden within the company? Answer: don't tell anyone; make it our 'secret weapon'.

Let's return to the 'TRIZ wasn't needed; we did it anyway' comment from the last but one paragraph for a second. Is there any truth behind that statement? Absolutely there is. The

two million or three million or whatever number we are using this month number of patents and other successful solutions that have fed the TRIZ database all came from people who – by definition – *didn't* use TRIZ. Ergo, if they didn't use it, if the solutions came out anyway, then why do we need to bother with TRIZ? Won't the 'TRIZ solutions' come out anyway?

All the evidence points to the fact that they will. There is a 'but' however. Yes, the solutions will come out anyway, but *not* in a timescale that is in any way controllable. What we have here is an extreme example of the story of giving a thousand monkeys a thousand typewriters and sooner or later one of them will recreate the works of Shakespeare. Sure 'sooner or later'. Wouldn't it be nice, though, if it could be sooner? Especially in today's competitive environment, where a 2 or 3 month lead is increasingly likely to be sufficient to deliver the all important discriminator between you and your competition.

So how about this as a thought. How about forgetting the idea of case studies as a means of 'selling TRIZ'. How about if we think about the plausible deniability issue and think of a different way of presenting what TRIZ is all about?

Spiral Dynamics

Before we get into the DNA of the plausible deniability issue, we need to understand a little bit about human psychology. Specifically we need to understand some of the ways in which human consciousness evolves and changes its patterns of operation through the life of an individual. The work of Beck and Cowan on spiral dynamics (Reference 3) provides an excellent platform on which to build arguments relevant to the TRIZ growth question.

As illustrated in Figure 1, spiral dynamics recognizes that human consciousness jumps through several different stages through the life-span of an individual. Figure 1 shows these jumps as discontinuous shifts from one s-curve to another.

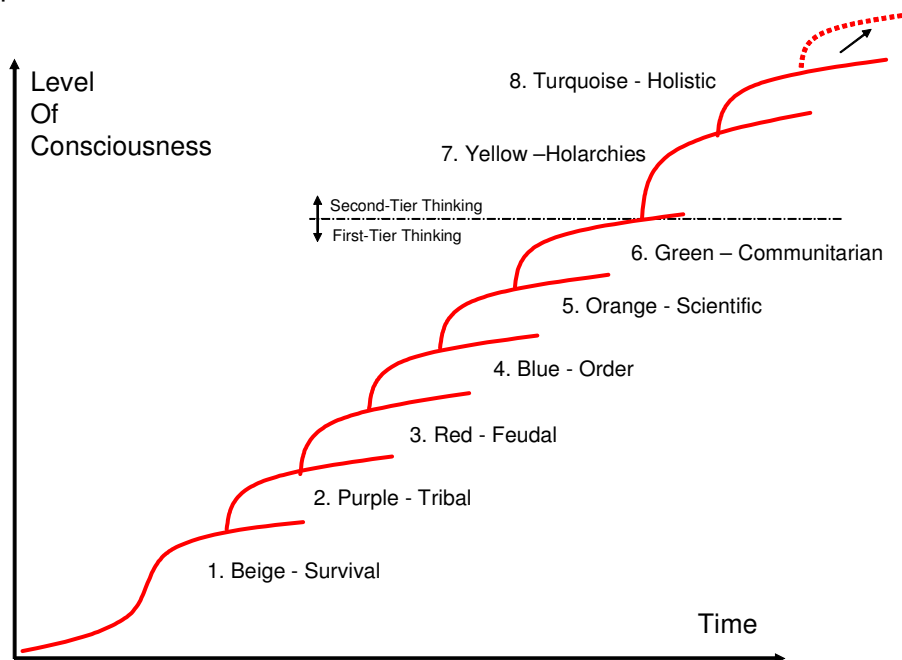


Figure 1: Different Levels In Human Thinking

The precise meaning of each stage need not concern us unduly here. Suffice to say that as we pass through life our way of thinking passes through a characteristic set of distinct

stages. Some people will pass through all of the stages, while others will stagnate at a stage part the way through the progression. In true s-curve fashion, the transition from each stage to the next involves the emergence and resolution of a contradiction (Reference 4). According to Beck and Cowan, it is fundamentally impossible for an individual to skip stages in the progression, and by definition, therefore, given that in a population there is a necessary span of ages, there will always be people at different levels of consciousness.

Wilber (Reference 5) takes the spiral dynamics thinking a stage further when he suggests that it is very difficult for people at different stages through the progression to relate to people at other stages – i.e. ‘cross-level’. Wilber, in fact, goes so far as to say that “*cross-level debates are rarely resolved, and all parties usually feel unheard and unappreciated*”. While spiral dynamics and Wilber’s related ‘Theory of Everything’ are primarily focused on the resolution of political and social problems, their relevance to the spread of TRIZ is nevertheless incontrovertible.

The spread of TRIZ, then, is fundamentally dependent on someone providing a message, and someone receiving it. The provider in this case is the TRIZ-advocate. Their mode of communication to the potential receiver can take on many forms – from the written word to a distance-learning CD, to a seminar to a one-on-one in-person discussion. Taking the idea of provider and receiver and recognizing that both can be operating at different levels (often with some degree of flux) through the consciousness evolution progression, we might visualize a matrix of interactions between them. Figure 2 shows such a matrix. The basic underlying idea behind the picture is that each box in the matrix represents the outcome of an interaction between a provider and the receiver each at one of the eight different consciousness levels.

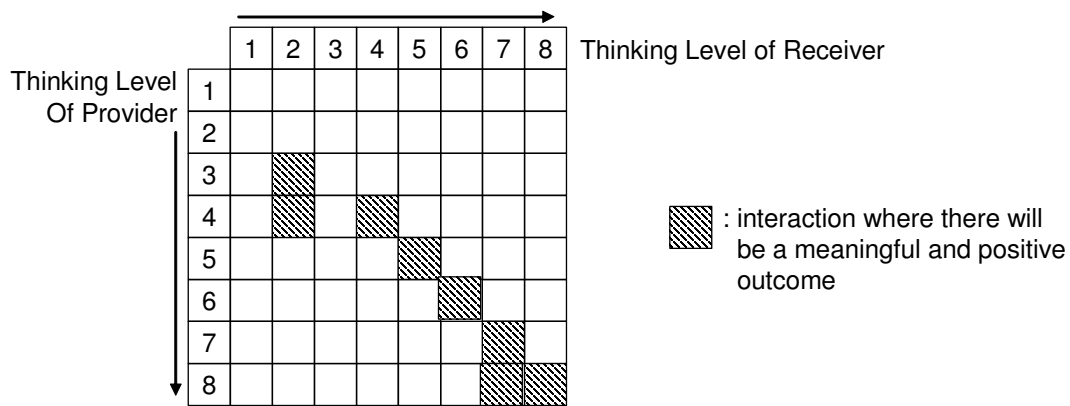


Figure 2: Situations Where A Provider Can Influence A Receiver To Useful Action

Each shaded box in the figure represents a provider-receiver interaction where the outcome will be a positive one. By ‘positive’, we mean an interaction in which there is a useful, useable and meaningful outcome. In terms of the TRIZ-dissemination issue, we might interpret ‘positive’ in terms of the receiver having an experience that leads them to think positively enough about TRIZ that they will do something with it. What the figure shows then is that the large majority of the different possible provider-receiver interaction combinations will not lead to a positive outcome. In fact, it is largely only interactions that take place where the provider and receiver are both operating at the same consciousness state that will deliver a positive outcome. Given that 90% of the adult population of the world (according to Beck and Cowan) are at either level 3, 4 or 5, same-level interactions represent the only means of achieving a positive outcome.

Fortunately, a person achieving a certain level of consciousness does not lose the ability to think and act at one of the earlier levels. The only real issue here is that the general tendency (especially for people at levels 5 and 6 – Wilber) is that people are more inclined to talk down to people they perceive to be at an earlier level, rather than try and empathise with them. Nevertheless, what we have here is a first important clue towards improving the spread of TRIZ (or, to repeat, any other thing).

Perhaps ironically, the ‘someone-somewhere-already-solved-your-problem’, barrier-breaking, whole-world perspective of TRIZ tends to mean that many TRIZ providers have at least traits of second-tier (level 7 and 8) thinking. There is thus an innate psychological tendency to talk down to the un-initiated. We have perhaps all experienced the ‘if you haven’t been doing TRIZ for 20 years, you don’t understand it yet’ speech from certain quarters of the community. As suggested by the figure, this kind of attitude is doomed to create alienation and resentment if the receiver of the message is operating at a different level of consciousness. Talk at the same consciousness level as your audience, or else don’t bother, appears to be the clear message from the spiral dynamics research.

Pleasure-Seeking And Pain-Avoidance

The next part of the story brings us back to the two dominant human motivators – the desire for pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Our interest at this stage comes through an exploration of how people’s pleasure-seeking and pain avoidance motivations shift at different levels of consciousness. Figure 3, therefore, seeks to outline some of the main pleasure and pain motivators at each of the first eight different consciousness levels defined in spiral dynamics. In each case, the motivators have been cast in the TRIZ context – what TRIZ-selling strategies, in other words, are likely to ‘work’ at different levels of consciousness.

Consciousness Level	Characteristics	Pleasure-Seeking Motivations	Pain-Avoidance Motivations
1. Beige	newborn infant Alzheimer’s victim shell-shock (unlikely to need TRIZ)	Sex	food, water warmth safety
2. Purple	gangs/tribal rituals/magic blood oath	good fortune ‘one of the gang’ revenge	curse/spells rejection/isolation
3. Red	power gods/ego feudal rule heroic predatory ‘terrible two’s’	ego-gratification ‘my way’ slaying dragons mass adulation submission from others rebellion	defeat loss of power rivals/threats
4. Blue	codes of conduct hierarchy/order ‘moral majority’ chivalry puritan	stability obedience from others prizes/medals/knighthood status/promotion ‘with god on our side’	change rebellion from others loss of status outcast
5. Orange	materialism competitive self-interest science over politics ‘nature tamed’ ‘management by	winning trophies/prizes peer recognition ‘best in show’ biggest/best/fastest merit pay/material gain	losing ‘keeping up with the Jones’

	objective'	thrill of the chase intellectual property	
6. Green	'sensitive-self' deep ecology 'politically correct' reconciliation/consensus networking	'making a difference' 'maximise my potential' brotherly respect harmony 'sensitive solutions'	orange or blue attitudes aggression/conflict hierarchy
7. Yellow	holarchy flexibility/adaptive inter-dependence co-opetition	knowledgeable/'wise' 'life-long learning' 'completing the jigsaw' discovery/challenge/jungle 'core competence' (Level 4 invention) elegant solutions	sub-optimization rigidity 'stupid rules'
8. Turquoise	holistic universal order 'Theory of Everything' spiritual harmony	'defining the jigsaw' 'wrong jungle' empathy/trust/connection (Level 5 invention)	non-holistic non-spiritual

Figure 3: Pain Avoidance And Pleasure Seeking Strategies At Different Consciousness Levels

This table is intended to provide guidance on what will and won't work in trying to 'sell TRIZ' (or for that matter anything else) to an individual. The essential message is that success is only ever likely to come if the receiver perceives that they are benefiting in some way – either through a reduction in pain, an increase in pleasure, or – preferably – both.

There is little point – to take just one common scenario example from the above figure – of trying to convince a hard-nosed, blue-thinking manager that TRIZ will help them come up with a 'breakthrough' solution that will 'disrupt their competitors', because these are precisely the things that that person does not want to do. Try the same message with someone thinking in the orange state, however, and you might – just might – have a chance to move forward. Provided that the receiver continues to be operating at the same level of consciousness when it comes to committing to actually do something. Remember in this situation that people can shift very rapidly between their current highest level and lower levels – an interaction that starts at one level can very quickly shift to another.

If this level-shifting tendency adds another level of complexity, it is a small one compared to what happens when we move from an individual to a group setting. Fortunately, the only real shift in thinking required when we start applying this spiral dynamic/pleasure-seeking/pain-avoidance thinking in a group situation is that a critical mass of benefits needs to be provided across the group. As many people as possible need to get what they want from the transaction. Not surprisingly, the bigger the group, the more difficult it becomes to achieve the desired critical mass.

Finally, to add just one more level of complexity, we also need to think about short versus long term effects. Taken from the long term durability perspective, it is worth noting that pleasure-seeking tends to work better than pain-avoidance. Present big enough sanctions to people, and they can be convinced to do just about anything in the short term. Take those sanctions away, however, and the strong likelihood is that they will revert to their previous way of doing things. Durable change only happens when people see continuing pleasure in the results of that change.

Summary

TRIZ (or any other initiative) has a chance of *really* taking off if:

- Introductions are made with the provider and the receiver operating at the same level of consciousness
- The people using it and the people paying for them to use it both see how they personally benefit ('pleasure seeking')
- The people using it and the people paying for them to use it are both reassured that they personally will not lose in any way ('pain avoidance')
- The people paying for it do not have any reason not to try it ('plausible deniability').

Satisfy these four conditions and there is a chance that success will follow; ignore any one and that chance diminishes exponentially. Ignore any of the four at your peril.

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