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George Cairns,* George Burt and Nic Beech
Graduate School of Business, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

Coherence and complexity: ambiguity and (mis)-understanding across management teams

This paper examines the concept of 'cohesion', little discussed in management literature, and proposes the following.

- *Management action derived from intent towards cohesion may mitigate against the development of organizational cohesion, in that…*
- *… Apparent conflict between management intent and action inhibits understanding of organizational intent at senior and middle management level, with the result that…*
- *… The divisive response to the failed drive for unitary cohesion inhibits organizational learning.*

*Correspondence to: George Cairns, Graduate School of Business, University of Strathclyde, 199 Cathedral Street, Glasgow, G4 OQU, UK.
E-mail: g.m.cairns@strath.ac.uk

Introduction

Coherence, in the context of this paper, relates to the 'wholeness or consistency in managing strategic change and competition, (which) has to embrace both thought and action, (in) intra and inter-company relations' (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991, p. 239). It is viewed as the shared understanding emerging from cycles of dialogue and interpretation at all levels within the organization, and may be considered as the balance between groupthink (Janus, 1972; Esser, 1998) and paradox (Thompson, 1998). Coherence is considered to exist when strategic 'intent and implementation are united' (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991, p. 244). Whilst the term coherence may be taken to imply a unitary state of belief [and] action across the organization, Pettigrew and Whipp place primary emphasis for its development at the higher levels of the company, stating (p. 267) that 'there has to be coherence of purpose and belief amongst the *senior* (italics added) management team, even though individual styles and methods may differ'. The writers present evidence from a longitudinal case study within a single organization, to argue that the seemingly (to senior and middle managers) incoherent search for coherence by top management may, in itself, be a driver for fragmentation and alienation within the organization.

Coherence is considered to exist when strategic intent and implementation are united

Pettigrew and Whipp present the concept of coherence as 'the most abstract and wide-ranging of the five central factors (in managing change and competition)' (p. 266), of which the others are environmental assessment, human resources as assets and liabilities, linking strategic and operational change, and leading change. They take the view that coherence 'can be generated by attention to four elements of strategic thinking: consistency, consonance, advantage and feasibility' (p. 244). This attention should then facilitate successful organizational development through secondary mechanisms of leadership, senior management team integrity, uniting intent and implementation, developing apposite knowledge bases, inter-organizational coherence, and managing a series of interrelated changes over time.

In order to understand coherence, and its importance to alignment of thinking and acting across the organization over time, it is necessary for managers to begin to understand the complexity of this issue. Managerial action and its interpretation may not be consistent with managerial intention. In this paper, the writers argue that it may, in fact, be contradictory, both in intent and interpretation, thereby undermining the strategic intent of the organization. The case study highlights an organization which has undergone rapid growth since its formation some four years ago, through acquisition of a portfolio of businesses. The organization, driven by its CEO, seeks to develop competitive advantage by exploiting synergistic cross-business opportunities, and to develop an espoused integrative culture, but without explicit consideration of the management behaviour which underpins coherence. The rapid growth and the nature of that growth, leads the organization to struggle with change, in the face of the normal trend (Goold and Luchs, 1992) for organizations to change management style seldom and with great difficulty. Whilst top management may be comfortable with the resultant frequent reorganizations, seeing them as mere 'routines of reform' (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993), it is apparent that senior and middle managers find the process to be disruptive and may feel alienated from the perceived consolidation of power around the CEO (Harrison *et al.*, 1988).

The initial findings from the research indicate internal barriers to the development of coherence. These include

- the role of the CEO and the dominant managerial style;
- lack of interface between top, senior and middle management;
- the rewards system encouraging business unit management focus as a profit centre, rather than through cross-functional knowledge sharing;
- 'rewarding A while hoping for B';
- lack of an inclusive strategic management process to facilitate dialogue; and
- top management action seen as bureaucratic and procedural.

Instead of the secondary mechanisms supporting the primary conditioning features, the existing secondary mechanisms prevent or impede development of coherence and thus inhibit organizational learning. The relationship between top management intent and action and senior/middle management response does not support an organizational climate of 'reciprocal interaction' (Terborg, 1981), necessary for the development of organizational cohesion. Rather, the climate is one which the writers would categorize as 'reactive fragmentation', where signals are misinterpreted, fear and anxiety are created and the enemy is seen as being within.

Through the uniqueness of the case study organization, the writers have gained an insight into a dynamic start-up and growth-through-acquisition organization, which has not attended to the pre-qualification factors for coherence which, the writers argue, are in themselves subsets of coherence. By developing this understanding, the writers seek to promote a deeper understanding of coherence as critical to strategic thinking and acting and to organizational learning.

Literature

Despite the strength of the argument presented by Pettigrew and Whipp (1991) in support of cohesion as a concept central to successful strategy implementation, there has been little further development of the literature in relation to it. On the other hand, 'strategy as learning' is the dominant epistemology for the last 20 years in the strategic management literature (Senge, 1990; Pfeffer, 1994; Argyris, 1996); 'planning as learning—the ability to learn faster than the competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage' (de Geus, 1988). By adopting a learning approach, the rationale behind planning was turned upside down—the planning process being more important than the planning outcome.

Organizational learning has been the dominant focusing or integrative mechanism (Senge, 1990; Argyris, 1996) towards a theory of strategic management in the 1990s. The strategy as learning approach requires the development of consensus and alignment in management thinking. The dominant concern for management is the articulation of tacit knowledge and the development of shared understanding (Polyani, 1962; Spender, 1996). This concept of organizational learning is closely linked with that of shared vision (Senge, 1994), and both might be viewed as central to the development of cohesion, since without the sharing of learning and vision, there is unlikely to be unity of intent and action in change.

Dialogue and conversation (Wack, 1985; Galer and van der Heijden, 1992; Ellinor and Gerard, 1998) is the mechanism for management teams to learn from process. Learning occurs as management teams jointly review their experience of what has been going on in the world in which their business operates; internalize this experience against the background of new information; and infer conclusions from the process (Galer and van der Heijden, 1992). Alignment of management thinking occurs from this process, with the development of strategic vision (Hamel and Prahalad, 1989 and 1994; Senge, 1990; van der Heijden, 1993). This alignment and strategic vision enables the organization to act as a unitary actor, but without explicit acknowledgement of how to manage flexibility, diversity, ambiguity and conflict across levels of management, or across SBUs, as the vision unfolds over time.

Organizational learning theory (Senge, 1994) implies that, by developing shared vision, each person understands and embraces the cornerstones of the strategic intent. When broadly held, this understanding creates a focused and cohesive culture in which each member acts in ways which are consistent with the vision (Thompson, 1998). However, where organizational 'learning' is directed towards implementation of the unitary vision of a CEO and/or top management team, rather than of the organizational members as a whole, two principal dangers arise. First, there is the danger that organizational members might 'develop an entrenched shared mental model that inhibits divergent, and encourages stereotypic, thinking' (Hayes and Allinson, 1998, p. 867). Here, coherence may be seen as being subjugated by groupthink and inertia. Secondly, there is the danger that the response may be one of 'reactive fragmentation', as seen in the case study organization.

The interaction between individuals and situations has been a critical concern for many researchers (Griffin, 1997) from the field of interactional psychology, which seeks an integrated view of personality theory and situational theories as determinants of individual behaviour (Pervin, 1989; Schneider, 1983). Bandura's (1978) theory of reciprocal determinism proposed a specific reciprocal relationship between individuals and situations, whilst Terborg (1981) identified five conceptualizations of the term 'interaction' within the organizational literature, of which one; 'reciprocal interaction'; describes the mutual influence of individuals and situations and how each makes and shapes the other. This suggests that the actions of a manager in developing coherence will seek an affirmative response from members of the organization, which will in turn support further efforts in the process. Obviously, such reciprocal interaction will be a necessary feature of the coherence model, of intent and implementation united.

The literature develops the link between vision and coherence but does not explore the application of these constructs to the actions of individual managers who may, by their practice, corrupt the theory. The management practice may be such that vision and coherence never occur, or that they appear to occur only under a particular understanding of the relationship between individual levels of management and of context. Cohesion is a concept which is derived of knowledge, in that united intent and implementation must be founded upon a shared knowledge and understanding. Whilst it might be viewed that 'shared vision' is derived of shared knowledge, with knowledge providing power in the Baconian sense, the post-Baconian construct of Flyvbjerg (1998, p. 27) implies that 'power *defines* (italics in original) what counts as knowledge and rationality, and ultimately … what counts as reality'. In the Flyvbjergian construct, the appearance of coherence through reciprocal interaction may be a mere surface manifestation of underlying reactive fragmentation.

In seeking to critically engage with the theory derived from the literature, this paper explores an example of interaction within an organization, considering relationships and interaction between the top, senior, and middle management, in order to develop understanding of management thinking and acting towards coherence.

The research intervention and methodology

The research method adopted within this study is that of a single organization case study with multiple levels of analysis (Yin, 1994), from which is derived firstly a descriptive analysis (Kidder *et al.*, 1986), which is subsequently used as a basis for inductive/deductive iterations of theory generation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992). The research data were gathered from within an organization which has grown rapidly over its four-year existence, primarily through acquisition of smaller companies working in fields related to, but not specifically involved with, the 'core business' field which the company's title might be held to imply its involvement in. The significance of the nature of expansion is that the parent company, A, might be seen to have areas of business synergy with its acquisitions, e.g. B and C, but companies B and C may, in themselves, have no clearly identified area of overlap or synergy in their fields of operation. In addition to the variety which is to be found in the fields of business, the acquisitions exhibit varied forms of espoused organizational culture and values. The organization has inherited cultures and values from both the bureaucratic and structural, and the entrepreneurial and innovative schools, with management and employee cohorts that are closely wedded to each through past experience.

The writers participated in a year-long management development programme with the case study company, in which 120 of the top, senior, and middle management team worked through an integrated programme to develop their skills and opportunities for the business. The data collection format was derived from both structured and informal questioning of managers from all levels on the nature of interaction between the members of the management team, with the questions supplemented during the intervention in order to probe the dynamic and emergent themes and to expand upon explanation. The approach follows the example of using qualitative data only (e.g. Harris and Sutton, 1986), rather than using any form of quantitative data. Throughout the duration of the management development programme, the researchers gathered data which might be categorized as falling within the general emergent categories of 'can do/no can do'.

Data were gathered first from a workshop with top management, followed by a series of three-day workshops with groups of 12–15 senior and middle managers, drawn from across the organization. Data collection was carried out using observation, field notes and informal discussions with delegates, in order to probe and understand issues in more detail. From the raw data, categories of emergent themes were identified, using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and these were critically compared with the primary conditioning features and secondary support mechanisms of the coherence model (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991).

Findings

Using the raw data drawn from the initial set of six workshops, the writers firstly conducted clustering around themes derived from the data themselves, identifying commonality of language, expression, explicit meaning, and underlying implication through metaphor etc. From this initial clustering, the following emergent categories were drawn, and the key descriptors and driving forces identified, as described.

The role of the CEO and the dominant management style

The dominant management style relates to the nature of managerial relationships, communication, structure and control, and the organization's ability to detect and sense signals from the external environment. It establishes the norms for the key relationships amongst the top and senior management team, which permeate throughout the organization. In the case study organization, the dominant style of management is perceived by senior and middle management as 'paternalistic' and controlling, which is the opposite intention of the espoused theory — and the espoused intent of top management — of facilitative development and devolved responsibility. In the related-constrained organization top management's primary role should be that of serving to gather and disseminate resources and promoting their company wide exchanges (Michel and Hambrick, 1992), rather than that of bureaucratic control.

The cycles of response to the perceived paternalistic and controlling approach drives the thinking and acting of the top and senior management team, which then impacts on the upward and downward flow of information and leads to development of a 'good news only' flow of communications. This subsequently affects the middle managers' perception of their involvement and influence in the decision making process. They come to believe that no matter their good ideas, insights or foresight, that any decision is made only at the very top of the organization. Middle managers believe they are irrelevant. This results in managers thinking and acting as if decisions are made elsewhere in the organization; decisions to which they are not party, but to which they are mere recipients of outcomes for implementation.

The gap between espoused theory and theory in use establishes the norms for communication and dialogue within the organization. Middle managers talk about responses from senior managers, such as that of the 'feedback scenario'—where upward flow of information is met with 'no response', or 'there's going to be a re-organization—wait and see', or 'you are missing the big picture'. This seriously undermines the opportunity to develop lasting relationships and networks both within and across the organization.

Middle managers believe they are irrelevant

The ability to develop meaningful dialogue within the organization is impeded, which restricts the development of a broad understanding of forces driving change in the business environment. The sharing of ideas is missed and cross-synergistic business opportunities are left unexplored. The management team develops a narrow understanding of the business environment, which either leads to managers ignoring the outside world, or if signals are detected by middle managers they are ignored, due to behaviour which tends to minimize risk rather than manage ambiguity in the 'good news company'.

The management team develops a narrow understanding of the business environment

This perceived approach by the top management is reinforced by the structure and controls developed to allow the organization to function. The espoused theory of the top management is facilitative development and devolved responsibility, yet the control system in place requires that all transactions of more than £5 need top management sign-off. Trust is not established, which has a significant impact on the senior managers' ability to deliver organizational objectives. The control system develops a structure that is about 'seeking approval' rather than delivering goals as middle managers seek to minimize personal risk and implicitly acknowledge that decisions can only be made at the top.

Lack of effective interface between levels of management

The observations during the research intervention generated a wide range of data on senior management perception of top management behaviour exhibited during the interaction between the two groups. This ranges from authoritative and controlling, and relationship avoidance at one extreme; to subgroup mutual, and collaborative support for separate agendas at the other. This perception of behaviour reduces the ability of top management to establish any form of shared dialogue and understanding. The perception of top management behaviour by groups of senior managers was observed as being largely driven by observation of behaviours directed at groups other than themselves. Those from within the businesses that were obtained by acquisition with cultures of bureaucracy and structure, perceive the behaviour as being entrepreneurial and innovative. However, those acquired businesses that were entrepreneurial and innovative perceive top management behaviour as bureaucratic and defensive.

Middle managers perceive themselves as precluded from any participation in strategic thinking and conversation, which further supports their self-perception of irrelevance to and exclusion from, the decision making process. They view both top and senior management groups as being differentiated from themselves, as they grapple with the problems and complexities of day-to-day operational management in response to the rapidly changing business context and processes.

As a result of both their own perceptions of top management and as a response to middle management's perception of them, senior managers feel themselves to be confined by barriers to effective interface and not of their own making.

Rewards system encourages SBU rather than organizational focus

The intention with the rewards system is the encouragement of a culture of innovation.

The intention with the rewards system is the encouragement of a culture of innovation

Top and senior managers espoused theory is constantly focused on the need for 'fleetness of foot' and 'being customer driven'. Yet the theory in use is full of paradoxes, as perceived by other levels of management. For example:

- *Paradox 1*—Senior management talk about financial constraint and refuse £20k to recruit staff with key skills to implement a project which is key to existing business one day, whilst the next day the company is announcing a multi-million pound acquisition which expands its field of business.
- *Paradox 2*—The organizational budgetary system is designed to control capital expenditure and to support intra-organizational business opportunities with capital, in order to maximize return on investment, yet maverick senior managers push for projects where there is no statement about return on investment. These mavericks act in their own interest (and that of their own SBU as a consequence) which undermines a cross business approach.
- *Paradox 3*—The 'budgetary game' of doubling requests for capital expenditure leads to a top management response of halving budget allocations. Managers who apply their energies to the construction of robust investment cases also find themselves subject to such reaction. Demotivation and scepticism become the norm for managers exposed to such a process.

Rewarding A whilst hoping for B

The espoused theory of the management team develops a number of key organizational values which become targets for managers, yet their theory in use rewards opposite behaviour, as shown in Table 1.

Lack of an inclusive strategic management process to facilitate dialogue

While expressing a desire for 'one company, one voice', the CEO and top management

Table 1. Expressed intent and perceived reward

Expressed intent towards	Perceived reward derived from
Establishing internal initiatives for action	Focus on teams developing operational systems
Creativity	Bureaucracy Failsafe systems — no more 'Black Tuesday'
Integration	SBU performance and turfs
Customer facing organization	Beating sales targets No customer relationship management strategy
Initatives for increasing/deepening customer relationships	New customer acquisition

also express the view that a 'process' approach to strategy development is bureaucratic, and a major block to decision making. They see the need for the organization to be agile and responsive in a rapidly changing market and to concentrate strategic decision making within the small group which can provide the rapid response needed. Other levels of management are therefore excluded from strategy development. The espoused theory reinforces the belief that middle managers have no role in shaping the thinking about the future. Top management's defensive behaviour, in support of their exclusive approach, creates a boundary or barrier for those middle managers from the bureaucratic and structural background who look to structure and processes as a basis of involvement. Conversely, those managers who might be classed as entrepreneurs or mavericks interpret this espoused theory as acknowledgement of informal networks and support for their initiatives. All levels of managers see fragmentation and their resultant actions are driven by consistency with their own beliefs.

> *Other levels of management are therefore excluded from strategy development*

Analysis of the observed behaviour

Coherence implies the organization working as a unitary actor, which suggests that as the organization learns, it does so in a coordinated manner with integrated action in adapting to changing circumstances and contexts. However, from the findings discussed here, it is clear that within the case study organization, human behaviour acts to undermine attempts at developing coherence and in reality, drives the organization towards increased fragmentation, in which case it is unlikely to see development of any meaningful learning.

In the case study organization, the top management expressed verbal commitment to the 'one company' concept and espoused the concept of coherence. In reality, however, there was no behavioural expression of explicit or shared understanding of the interdependency between strategy development, organizational structure and business policies across the top, senior and middle management teams. Thompson (1967) argues that there are three types of interdependency — pooled, sequential and reciprocal. Pooled task interdependence results when each department or group member makes a separate and independent contribution to the organization. Sequential task interdependence results when one department or individual group member performs their task before the next can complete their task. Reciprocal task interdependence results when all the activities of all the company departments or all team members are fully dependent on one another. In the case study organization, comparison of management words and actions in practice across the different teams would suggest that there is no explicit acknowledgement of, or drive towards, reciprocal interdependency.

The writers argue that rather than the reciprocal interdependency espoused by top management, there is 'reactive fragmentation', as middle managers do not see or comprehend the action required by top managers. Senior managers sit between the two groups, with barriers to effective communication and mutual working in both directions. Both senior and middle managers perceive themselves as alienated from groups above them in the hierarchy and think and act with their own interpretation of the organization's objectives, which may or may not be consistent with their own intentions or those of the higher management groups. Whilst this disconnection may be contextual, derived from the organizational structure and processes, it may be symptomatic of a general alienation of senior and middle managers from those at the top levels of management (Scarborough, 1998; Hendry, 1999).

Whilst the top management team are simultaneously holding multiple goals and are trying to manage control and flexibility, structure and innovation, the middle managers in particular are unable to perceive and believe the messages intended for them regarding these multiple goals and in fact interpret the signals sent to others. This interpretation is seen as a mixed message from the top management and the middle managers either lose faith in the top, or fear for the future emerges. When this occurs middle managers behaviour is that of risk minimization, little innovation, and the resultant suppression of creativity and performance. The middle managers are unable to recognize organizational dilemmas that occur about key decisions, seeing the dilemmas as potential conflict. By adopting thinking and acting focused on minimizing risk they retreat from the situation—unhappy and demotivated. They are unable to manage contradictory ideas being held simultaneously. Top management on the other hand, must handle multiple beliefs and values simultaneously, even though they may be contradictory and must deal with ambiguity and conflict.

Middle managers behaviour is that of risk minimization, little innovation, and the resultant suppression of creativity and performance

The top management team adopts an approach to communications with other levels of management that is designed to support development of integration and cohesion, by moulding the dominant management style to suit the perceived cultural expectation of the receiver. In reality however, the receivers consistently interpret messages according to the style and value systems of the opposite management set. That is to say, that those managers from the entrepreneurial, innovator management set identify the dominant management style as bureaucratic and structural, suppressing risk-taking and centralising decision making. Similarly, the bureaucratic, structure-seeking managers interpret the dominant management style as entrepreneurial and innovative, lacking structure and direction. In addition, some of the top management behaviours, such as those on budgetary control, contradict the expectation of others, both at a practical and theoretical level. The expectation within related-constrained organizations, such as the case study business, is that controls will be more strategic and information related (Michel and Hambrick, 1992), whilst financial controls are considered rarely to address synergies and cross-business unit development (Hoskisson and Hitt, 1988).

In relation to the elements of cohesion (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991); of consistency, consonance, advantage and feasibility; they may be considered as being viewed in different ways by the different management groups. For top management, consistency may be derived from reliably inconsistent behaviours across different management groups from within the different acquisitions but internally consistent towards each sub-group. They may be unaware of the perceptions and interpretations placed upon this behaviour by the relevant groups, based upon cross-unit observation. Thus, top management may view their behaviour as entirely consistent, whilst other groups see it as wholly inconsistent.

Whilst top managers may deal with the complexity and ambiguity of the organizational context by seeking to maintain and balance dissonances according to Shoenberg's paradigm, in which dissonances are seen as 'merely more remote consonances' (Rothenberg, 1979, p. 187), senior and middle managers may seek consonance in terms of universal harmony. In dealing with the apparent incoherences and dissonances of the organization, top management may see themselves as seeking to create competitive advantage through being faster and smarter than the opposition, in reading and understanding drivers for change in the external environment. They may consider such ambiguities and apparent contradictions as being necessary for competitive success in the business field as a major European and global player, whilst those who report to them see only fragmentation and chaos.

The final element of cohesion, that of feasibility, relates to the organization's internal capabilities to respond to its perceived external drivers and market positioning and to exploit and maintain its competitive advantage. Again, top management may view the maintenance and management of ambiguity and diversity as being essential to that end,

Coherence develops only with the implication that coherence already exists

whilst senior and middle management may see only dysfunctional and divisive structures and systems, which they consider to limit the feasibility of response to future markets.

Conclusions

Management theory (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991) implies that development of organizational cohesion requires that the organization acts and thinks like a unitary actor. From the case study business, the writers contend that coherence develops only with the implication that coherence already exists. That is to say that the development of unitary thought and action by the organization can only occur where there is already cohesion amongst members. Such cohesion will itself only arise from earlier unitary thought and action on issues ranging from strategic planning to managing ambiguity and conflict. Pettigrew and Whipp consider that attention to the elements of consistency, consonance, advantage and feasibility will facilitate organizational development through emergent secondary mechanisms of leadership, senior management team integrity, uniting intent with implementation, developing apposite knowledge bases, inter-organizational coherence, and managing series of related changes over time. Within the case study organization however, it is apparent that existing secondary mechanisms are in fact, drivers of interpretation and understanding of the primary elements. The lack of a coherent and consistent set of secondary mechanisms becomes a barrier to the development of the desired organizational cohesion. Until the 'prequel' state of coherence is reached, individual managers will act in their own self-interest whether perceived as the organization's interest or not. The emergent phase of coherence or the continuing stage of reactive fragmentation, presents researchers with an opportunity to study management acting and thinking. They can view and assess what drives management behaviour and action which, in the case study organization, simultaneously strives for and undermines coherence, and consequently undermines the ability to create learning in the organization.

The lack of effective interface between levels of management in strategy development precludes a platform for surfacing and testing assumptions. This prevents the development of a shared vision, or of a set of common assumptions to guide future action, which results in the top and senior management pulling apart rather than together. The senior managers perceive themselves as an island within the organization and think and act as though they were irrelevant to the strategic change process. Top managers see them as key to the change process but not to the strategy development process. They seek cohesion at one level, but reinforce fragmentation at another.

The implications of espoused support for 'coherence', without explicit attention to the four elements of consistency, consonance, advantage and feasibility, is observed behaviour which prevents or impedes organizational learning. Behaviour in the organization moves towards personal absolution and lack of strategic initiative. Managers bemoan the lack of shared vision, feeling paralysed to change this belief. Everyone thinks that someone else will do something about the situation and they then focus on protecting their own patch. Many initiatives pull against each other, rather than being complementary and consistent. Innovation is discouraged and managers adopt a defensive culture.

Managers bemoan the lack of shared vision, feeling paralysed to change this belief

In analysing the case study information, the writers considered that the public expression of commitment to cohesion by some senior and middle managers, whilst bemoaning the lack of cohesion in practice, may represent a response to the emerging management practice of 'moral coercion' (Scarborough, 1998) within the contemporary workplace. The approach of top management may be cynical and coercive, in thinking and acting according to the perception of the value systems of the subjects; either bureaucratic and structural, or entrepreneurial and innovative. On the other hand, this behaviour may be indicative of a genuine ability to live with the Janusian and homospatial constructs (Rothenberg, 1979), in which opposite views are held to be valid simultaneously, separately and in a dependent manner. In either case, top management appear unaware of the reactive response of the subjects, in attributing meaning from the opposing camp.

Further research into the types of relationships, interactions and interpretations which are manifested at the different levels of management within the case study organization requires consideration not only of the individual and organizational issues but must move beyond consideration of structural and processual issues. It must take account of the emotional interpretations and responses of the actors based upon their interactions with each other (Durand *et al.*, 1996). Whilst theoretical coherence may be considered to be derived from unitary action, consonance and consistency, real coherence may be required to address and incorporate ambiguity, designed inconsistency and dissonance. Whilst much of the theoretical and practice-based literature deals with polarities and comparative analyses, organizational coherence may only be created from acceptance of continuums and integrative analyses.

Whilst we would be cautious about generalizing on the basis of this case study, it offers particular circumstances of intra-organizational relationships which are worthy of study, in order to identify some of the pre-qualifying cohesive behaviours which may be necessary for organizations to seek cohesion. The writers suggest that the subject of cohesion requires and is worthy of further investigation across a range of organizational types over time, if strategic management theory is to develop to take account of the contribution of all members of the organization to strategy development and implementation.

Biographical note

Dr George Cairns, George Burt and *Dr Nic Beech* bring together wide-ranging experience from their respective professional backgrounds in architecture, accountancy and human resource management. They teach across a range of subjects on the MBA programmes of the Graduate School of Business at the University of Strathclyde. They have worked for, and with, many multinational, public and private sector organizations, including Coopers & Lybrand, British Airways, Allied Distillers, PE International, Royal Dutch Shell, Citibank, American Express, and various local authorities, health boards, and housing associations. They combine this experience with researches in their individual disciplinary fields in order to undertake transdisciplinary research into organizational strategy, culture and behaviour, combining a number of theoretical and philosophical perspectives.

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