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Taking power seriously in strategic organizational learning

Taking power seriously

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper argues that failing to grasp thoroughly the influence of power on the strategy-making process can severely inhibit the potential of strategy making as a vehicle of organizational learning.

Design/methodology/approach – First the organizational learning perspective on strategic management is sketched and an attempt is made to show how it takes the social aspects of organizing more seriously than earlier perspectives on strategy. It is also noted how this iteration responds or at least has the potential to respond to some of the critiques directed at earlier thinking on strategy from critical management studies (CMS). Then CMS's critique of organizational learning theories is noted and the critiques to re-conceptualize blockages to learning and knowledge creation are built on.

Findings – An attempt has been made to show that, as in earlier perspectives on strategy, there is still insufficient attention being paid to the role of power in strategic change. This places severe limitations on strategic learning that is possible.

Originality/value – Concludes by joining other writers in calling for a less managerialist research in strategy.

Keywords Emergent strategy, Learning organizations, Management power, Politics

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Conceptualizing strategy as an organizational learning process has improved on more traditional rationalistic approaches to strategy by demystifying the strategic process, taking the social processes involved more seriously, and offering useful insights for translating strategic intent into strategic action. However, the inadequate attention to power and politics that has characterized the earlier thinking on strategy has to a large extent persisted in these newer perspectives. In this paper, we argue that a deeper understanding of power is essential to successful strategic organizational learning and suggest that insights about power derived from critical management studies (CMS) can facilitate a better understanding of power and politics involved in strategic learning.

We begin by sketching the organizational learning perspective on strategic management and attempt to show how it takes the social aspects of organizing more seriously than earlier perspectives on strategy. We also note how this iteration responds or at least has the potential to respond to some of the critiques directed at earlier thinking on strategy from critical management studies (CMS). We will then note CMS's critique of organizational learning theories and build on the critiques to re-conceptualize blockages to learning and knowledge creation. We suggest that rather than seeing these obstacles as largely accidental and benign, they are more effectively seen as systematic and inherent in organizational practices that tend to institutionalize sectional interests, resulting in systematic inhibition of certain interest groups and



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organizational learning. We conclude by arguing that effective implementation of strategy making as a vehicle for organizational learning requires continuing examination of power dynamics in organizations and overcoming the processes that silence and marginalize various groups and interests.

From rationality to learning in strategic management

In the following sections we review some criticisms directed at traditional thinking on strategic management and highlight some of the ways in which organizational learning theories have changed or have the potential to change strategic management.

Criticisms of traditional strategic models

Scholars writing from the mainstream and those writing from the critical management studies perspectives have expressed criticism of traditional strategic models. Traditional rational approaches to strategy have emphasized the role of planning, developing increasingly sophisticated planning techniques (Palmer and Hardy, 2000, Ch. 6). Strategizing is conceived as separate from implementation (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Raimond and Eden, 1990).

Traditional rational approaches have been criticized for presenting an idealized view of the decision making process (Palmer and Hardy, 2000), while neglecting both the process of strategy formulation (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Raimond and Eden, 1990) and implementation (Hardy, 1996; Mintzberg, 1990; Mintzberg and Westley, 2001). Some commentators have criticized these approaches for neglecting politics and negotiation that must take place in order for strategies to be successfully formulated (Eden and Ackermann, 1998) and implemented (Hardy, 1996). Yet others have pointed out the false separation between deliberate and emergent strategies (Hardy, 1996; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985).

Scholars writing from the perspective of critical management studies (CMS), which is concerned with the “questioning of taken-for-granted, both about practice and its social and institutional context ... Identifying and questioning both purposes, and conflicts of power and interest” (Reynolds, 1998, p. 192), have accused the field of strategy of perpetuating and reproducing systems of domination. According to some scholars:

It is a powerful rhetorical device that frames issues in particular ways and augments instrumental reason; it bestows expertise and rewards upon those who are “strategists”; and its military connotations reinforce a patriarchal orientation to the organization of work (Levy *et al.*, 2003, p. 97).

This argument is detailed by Knights and Morgan (1991), who outline power effects of strategic discourse, of which we list four that are particularly relevant to organizational learning, as we discuss later.

Explanations for successes and failures

The vocabulary of strategy allows “strategists” to take credit for successes. Successes are attributed to successful strategies, and their formulators are celebrated. Failures can be explained as a lack attention to particular factors or forces that can be “fixed” in future formulations of the strategy. As such strategy can too easily be turned into a tool of excusing managerial incompetence or even unethical behavior – frequently in

areas that have less to do with strategy formulation than with implementation of existing strategies (Grugulis and Wilkinson, 2002; Jackall, 1983).

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Source of security

Strategic discourse provides managers with a sense of security and control. They come to know themselves as strategic actors, thereby securing their identity, and their world appears more calculable and at least partly controllable. However, it is important for managers to pay attention to factors they are unable to control as well as to those they are able to influence (Watson, 1994). The sense of omnipotence engendered by the traditional strategic thinking can be detrimental to accurate assessment of the organization's situation (Starbuck, 1992).

Gendered identity

Strategic discourse is largely conceptualized in stereotypically masculine terms and privileges rationality, aggressiveness, and machismo. Such machismo, however, can make other important but not stereotypically masculine strategic activities, such as intuiting (Mintzberg, 1994), appear illegitimate.

Internal influence

Given the prestige associated with being "strategic", those groups in an organization that are best capable of portraying themselves in such a way tend to have a greater influence within the organization. This often makes it difficult for some "less strategic" functions, such as human resources, to obtain the necessary resources. These under-resourced functions, however, are not necessarily less important to organizational sustainability.

In summary, traditional rational approaches to strategy have been criticized for offering limited competitive usefulness, on the one hand, while reproducing systems of domination on the other. They have been criticized for providing idealized models of decision-making that mystify the process of strategy making and ignore social processes that are necessary for successful strategic action. At the same time they have been accused of manufacturing rhetoric that reproduces elitist ideologies and undemocratic institutions. The concerns with the pragmatic inadequacy of traditional models have prompted a number of scholars to emphasize the learning and knowledge management involved in both the content of successful strategies and more realistic strategy making processes.

Strategy and organizational learning

With increased influence of organizational learning theories, several of the more recent approaches to strategy making have emphasized the role of learning and knowledge management. However, based on their extensive literature review, Eisenhardt and Santos (2002) conclude that a knowledge-based view of strategy is not yet a theory. Therefore, the focus of the current discussion is not on a particular school of strategy or on specific theory. Instead, we focus on the general "inclination" toward learning.

Arguably, the most powerful influence of organizational learning on the field of strategy has been to acknowledge the importance of learning and social processes in strategy making (Eden and Ackermann, 1998; Mintzberg, 1991; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Hedberg and Wolff, 2001). As Mintzberg and Waters (1985, p. 271) neatly

summarized, "Strategy formation walks on two feet, one deliberate, the other emergent". The focus on strategy making process has brought to the forefront the political processes inherent in strategy making (Eden and Ackermann, 1998). Eden (1992) notes: "The people in the organization do things within a subtly *negotiated order*" (p. 800, italics in original). The process of strategy making tampers with this order. It is a process that results in certain key stakeholders gaining advantage while others losing it.

Some approaches to strategy making, for instance, have attempted to address these social and political processes by emphasizing the need to make explicit managers' implicit, taken-for-granted mental models of the perceived organizational reality (e.g. van der Heijden and Eden, 1998) in order to attain a greater alignment between these mental models to enable learning and negotiation. These approaches often rely on facilitators (Raimond and Eden, 1990; Schuman, 1996) and utilize cognitive maps (Bood, 1998; Jenkins, 1998) and computerized decision support systems (Eden and Ackermann, 1993, 1998; Huxam, 1996) to enable productive conversations. Others, such as Mintzberg (1990), emphasize that strategies are continually reworked and reshaped as unforeseen problems emerge and change dramatically during implementation. Yet others, stress the importance of unlearning for acquiring new learning, which is the new strategy (Bettis and Prahalad, 1995).

In all, the focus on learning in the process of strategy making has de-emphasized the rationality and linearity in favor of sensemaking, negotiation, and exploration and has to a large extent dissolved the dichotomy between strategizing and implementation by locating successful strategy not on paper but in the organization's actions.

Organizational learning, strategy, and power effects

It appears that the application of organizational learning to strategy – in particular the emphasis on organizational learning in the process of strategy making – has addressed or at least has the potential to address some of the power effects of strategic discourse outlined by Knights and Morgan (1991) that we discussed above. It appears that the organizational learning perspective has the potential to counteract some of these power effects by transforming the nature of strategic discourse. Due to the infusion of organizational learning into strategic discourse, strategy becomes a less effective justification for successes and failures, since social processes, politics and coordination become more central than the stated strategy. Strategy no longer functions to guarantee personal security for managers. Far from it, the organizational learning perspective emphasizes the limited control that strategists have over the successes and failures of the ventures. The de-emphasizing of rationalistic linear thinking moves the process away from stereotypically masculine thinking style and leaves more room for intuition and creativity. The space is also opened up for more divisions and functions more easily constituting themselves as strategic, thus making strategy a less powerful tool in intra-organizational competition that creates, what Dougherty (2004) calls, anti-practice organizing – operating in a way that separates people's work from the strategic objectives that this work is supposed to serve, inhibiting knowledge creation and sharing. In addition, increased parity among the various functions within the organizations (due to the infusion of organizational learning into the strategy process) could facilitate better communication and

information sharing identified as central for organizational innovation and performance (e.g. Dougherty, 1999, 2001).

In actuality, however, it seems that while organizational learning has the potential to transform strategic discourse, the transformation has at best been slow (Firestone and McElroy, 2003; Voronov and Yorks, 2004), and the power effects outlined by Knights and Morgan (1991) are still widespread. Mainstream scholars suggest that rational models of strategy are still seductive to executives (Mintzberg, 1991), and that focus remains on devising the right strategy rather than on figuring out effective processes for devising strategies (Hardy, 1996; Pietersen, 2002). CMS scholars still maintain that strategy writers have neglected to question the managerialist assumptions in their work (Levy *et al.*, 2003). Power and politics are still not well attended to (Hardy, 1996), and as we argue below, the same aspects of strategy and organizational learning that perpetuate systems of domination are also prevent the organizational learning perspective on strategy from delivering on its promises.

Defining key concepts

Before proceeding with our discussion, it is important to define our key terms, organizational learning, and strategic organizational learning, since both have been defined in multiple ways in the literature. We also provide a brief description of CMS, as our insights about power are largely derived from CMS literature.

Organizational learning

The perspective adopted in this paper is that organizational learning is qualitatively different from individual learning and needs to be theorized and investigated differently (Popper and Lipshitz, 1998; Spender, 1998; Weick and Westley, 1999). Organizational learning and knowledge, or rather knowing (e.g. Orlikowski, 2002) are most productively theorized as embedded in organizational culture (Cook and Yanow, 1993; Weick and Westley, 1999) and routine organizational practices (Blackler, 1995; Dougherty, 2004; Orlikowski, 2002) that are made intelligible by organizational culture. While the researchers adopting this view attend to individual actions and behavior, they do not seek to make the conceptual leap from individual to organizational learning. Instead, organizational learning is understood as:

... the acquiring, sustaining, or changing of intersubjective meanings through the artifactual vehicles of their expression and transmission and the collective actions of the group (Cook and Yanow, 1993, p. 384, italics in original).

Operationalized in this way, organizational learning is not assumed to be the sum of individual learning, or require assuming a reified organizational "mind", which learns.

Strategic organizational learning

According to Pietersen (2002), strategic organizational learning: Has four key steps – *learn, focus, align, and execute* – which form a self-reinforcing cycle that combines learning, strategy, and leadership into one organic process. This cycle is designed to produce specific outputs: to generate insights, create focus, and translate focus into action, and then to repeat the cycle of transformation again and again (Pietersen, 2002, p. 4, italics in original).

The key difference between organizational learning as commonly used in the literature and strategic organizational learning is that in the latter view organizational learning is not seen as something deployed in service of a predefined strategy or in order to help an organization realize or implement its strategy. Subjugating organizational learning to strategy would involve making, as Firestone and McElroy (2003, Ch. 8) put it, a “strategy exception error”. It is a failure to recognize that strategy is as much an outcome of organizational learning as it is a guide for further organizational learning. Thus, we see strategic organizational learning as a process of continuously reformulating and crafting strategies, in much the same ways as Mintzberg (e.g. 1991) has advocated. The focus of this perspective is on institutionalizing the “capacity for ‘rethinking’ the nature of its [the firm’s] business and its current strategic posture in the most fundamental way” (Leavy, 1998, p. 459). Thus, strategy making is organizational learning (see Figure 1).

To summarize, we view organizational learning as embedded in organizational culture and in routine and frequently tacit organizational behavior. Strategic organizational learning is understood as a process of continuously crafting and reformulating strategies. A practice-based/cultural view of strategic organizational learning implies that the process of strategizing is less a rational and deliberate activity of a select few members of an organization, but rather is a process of routine behavior and activity, including formal planning meetings but also informal conversations throughout the organization out of which the realized strategies emerge, and to which organizational members react, and this stimulates further reflection and rethinking of the strategy. Thus, the process continues, and in all, the four recurring activities of Pietersen’s (2002) strategic learning model are to a great extent more tacit and less formal than they may appear if we focus our attention exclusively on the aspects of strategy-making traditionally attended to in the literature.

Critical management studies

Scholars, whose work has been broadly classified as CMS, have sought to challenge the assumption that management is a neutral and value-free activity concerned with attaining the instrumental goals of organizations that serve a common good. According to the domain statement of the Critical Management Studies Interest Group of the Academy of Management (n.d.):

We observe that management of the modern firm (and often of other types of organizations) is guided primarily by the interests of shareholders and other elites. We are critical of the notion

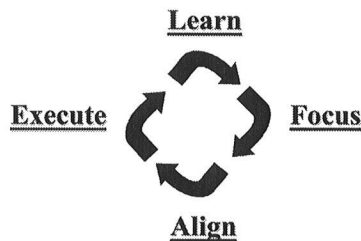


Figure 1.
Strategic organizational learning

Source: Adapted from Pietersen (2002)

that the pursuit of profitability will automatically satisfy society's broader interests. Such a system extracts unacceptably high social and environmental costs for whatever progress it offers. We believe that other priorities, such as justice, community, human development, and ecological balance, should be brought to bear on the governance of economic and other human activity.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a more thorough overview of CMS. Suffice it to say, that it is a loosely coupled community of scholars concerned with the critical examination of management research and practice in societal context. One of CMS's well noted contributions to the broader management discourse has been generation of keen insights about power (Coleman and Voronov, 2003), and here we attempt to use some of these insights to examine the importance of power in strategic organizational learning.

Conventional understanding of blockages to learning

Although barriers to organizational learning have been addressed by a number of scholars, there is a tendency to conceive of these as benign. Schein (1993), for example, conceptualizes barriers to learning as psychological anxiety. Argyris (1992) notes the self-perpetuating cycle of attempting to enact new modes of behavior, while the old modes are encouraged and rewarded. According to Bettis and Prahalad (1995), it is sometimes difficult for organizations to learn because of what they call dominant logic, which places severe constraints on what can be learned. In their recent review of the literature on the barriers to organizational learning, Antal *et al.* (2001) identify three broader categories of barriers: interrupted learning (e.g. ambiguity, inability to influence others, role constraints, etc.), psychological and cultural (e.g. anxiety, over-reliance on particular competencies), and structure and leadership related (e.g. over-centralization, autocratic leadership). The authors point out that overall the conceptualization of barriers to organizational learning is still under-developed, and this is where we pick up. Dougherty (2004) notes that conventional organizing is anti-practice in that it dissipates practice-based knowing by chunking the activities through which people's work gets done and separating the means from the ends. There is a tendency to overlook the role of power (Coopey, 1998; Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000) in sustaining these blockages to learning. We suggest that the same mechanisms that often turn organizations into instruments of domination and place heavy constraints on human agency (i.e. being able to make decisions that impact oneself) are also detrimental to organizational learning and effective strategy making.

Writers on strategy with an organizational learning inclination have to some extent acknowledged the role of power and politics in strategic management. As mentioned above, a number of writers (e.g. Eden and Ackermann, 1998) have conceptualized the strategy making process as inherently political. Nonetheless, they have mainly focused on the surface manifestations of power and politics and have not attended to the way power can operate systemically and unobtrusively (e.g. Lawrence *et al.*, 2001). In the remainder of the paper we argue for the need for a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of power and politics for a more effective strategic organizational learning. We suggest that insights from CMS can be beneficial for fostering such an understanding.

Understanding power in strategic organizational learning

At this point we highlight some insights from CMS about power that are of special relevance to the thinking and practice of organizational learning and strategy making and attempt to demonstrate how power can be a useful lens for understanding the blockages to organizational learning. We then argue that the same mechanisms that perpetuate systems of domination in organizations and marginalize various stakeholder groups can also result in the loss of certain competencies and may inhibit the process of strategy making.

Considering two faces of power?

The literature on power in organization studies is immense, and a glance at it reveals that many writers mean different things when discussing power (Coleman and Voronov, 2003). Specifically, more functionalist writers tend to focus on the surface manifestations of power and politics, while critical scholars tend to focus on the systemic and societal aspects of the phenomenon. Coleman and Voronov (2003, see also Voronov and Coleman, 2003) offer the distinction between primary and secondary power as a heuristic to illuminate the distinction between surface power and politics that have received some attention in organization studies and strategy literatures and the more systemic/cultural power that has been mainly neglected.

Primary power refers to the socio-historical process of reality construction. This is the process by which our sense of reality, as we know it, is constructed.

As Chia (2000 p. 513) writes:

Social objects and phenomena such as “the organization”, “the economy”, “the market” or even “stakeholders” or “the weather”, do not have a straightforward and unproblematic existence independent of our discursively-shaped understandings. Instead, they have to be forcibly carved out of the undifferentiated flux of raw experience and conceptually fixed and labeled so that they can become the common currency for communicational exchanges. Modern social reality, with its all-too-familiar features, has to be continually constructed and sustained through such aggregative discursive acts of reality-construction.

Primary power defines the domain. It is not to be seen simplistically as either negative or positive, because it both enables and limits our understanding of the world and our reflexive experience of ourselves (Deetz, 1992). Hence, our reason, knowledge, and sense-making are inextricably bound up with power.

A manager is able to give orders and to expect them to be followed because the role of a manager has been historically constructed so as to include notions of order giving. It is important to recognize that the various sources of power (e.g. French and Raven, 1959) are not concrete but socially constructed. “Legitimacy”, for example is not objective but is created through management of meaning, and thus legitimacy requires power to be demonstrated (Hardy and Phillips, 1998). Only once the domain has been defined does it become possible for power as conceived of in conventional theories to be exercised (Hardy *et al.*, 2000).

Secondary power refers to the exercise of power in the conventional sense – the ability to get one’s goals met. This can take a coercive or positive form (Coleman and Voronov, 2003; Deutsch, 1973; Oshry, 1992). A well-known example of what we would classify as secondary power can be found in Kotter’s (1977) article, in which he notes four types of power that a manager should effectively leverage: instilling a sense of obligation in others, establishing a perception of oneself as an expert, getting others to

identify with oneself, making others feel dependent on oneself. It is crucial to note that such overt political behavior takes place within a largely pre-defined domain. For example, it is difficult for a manager to establish oneself as an expert if she/he is not proficient in using those tools that are considered most valuable to an organization. For example, a human resources manager, who may in fact be perceived as an expert in her or his function, is unlikely to be seen as an "expert" at a meeting where the marketing and finance are in charge of the agenda. Thus, primary power limits the kinds and the amount of secondary power that a manager may exercise. Other examples of secondary power can be found in Mintzberg's (1989, Ch. 13) discussion of political games in organizations, such as insurgency, counterinsurgency, sponsorship, budgeting, and so on. While important, the shape and effectiveness as well as relevance of these games is to a great extent shaped by primary power.

In all, secondary power involves working in a domain that already has been largely defined. Thus, the various political strategies that a manager may use to obtain others' compliance or commitment would constitute secondary power. The manager indeed has a choice whether to attempt to sell her or his ideas to the employees or to force them to obey. However, it is primary power that has made entertaining these options possible. Although organizational scholars traditionally have attended to secondary power, there has been much less focus on primary power (Hardy and Clegg, 1999), such as the socio-historical definition of the executives as the only group entitled to devise strategies (Knights and Morgan, 1991) and the equation of managerial interests with those of the organization (Brief, 2000; Watson, 1994).

The two forms of power are interconnected. Primary power opens and constrains the possibilities for exercising secondary power. Secondary power can be seen as expressing and reproducing primary power relations. Individuals' identities are constituted by primary power, and these identities determine how these individuals can exercise secondary power. However, as the work of Smith (1982), Alderfer (1987), Oshry (1992), Deetz (1992) and Weick (1979, 1995) remind us, we should not separate the structure from the individuals that enact it. Hence, primary power is reproduced or transformed through the mundane behavior of organizational members over time as well as through their overt political behavior (Voronov and Coleman, 2003)

The power effects revisited

Hardy (1996) argues that a thorough understanding of power is key to a successful strategic action. In this paper we attempt to show how insights from CMS can constructively inform our thinking about strategic learning. A key element is a more complex treatment of power than is currently available in the mainstream literature on strategy. In other words, we argue for a need to shift the analytic focus from secondary to primary power. As an illustration, we return to two issues highlighted earlier in this paper: the power effects of strategic discourse and their relationship to blockages to learning.

The power effects of strategic discourse detailed by Knights and Morgan (1991) are only detected through the examination of primary power. The lack of attention to them in the strategy literature is an outcome of the narrow focus on secondary power and/or a total lack of interest in the issues of power and politics. As is the case within the broader discipline of management and organization studies, writers in strategic management too often assume that the manager's point of view as the only valid

perspective on organizational reality (Frost, 1980), which ironically limits the utility of such writings because they exclude important factors outside of managerial control (Watson, 1994). Hence, the power effects of strategic discourse have been promulgated by writers in strategic management as much as by managers themselves by deploying “scientific” legitimacy in service of perpetuation of existing primary power relations.

We are not suggesting here that primary power is necessarily “bad” or that it should be done away with – that is not an option. According to Deetz (1998, pp. 152-3):

The processes of enablement and constraint arise together; one cannot exist without the other. So the point of looking at these technologies is not to argue for some form of autonomy or freedom through the critique of these constraints. Rather, the attempt is to resist the freezing and generalization of constraints and to ultimately reclaim social actor efficacy in working within these arbitrary bounds to make more satisfying choices.

In other words, we argue that by continually reflecting on primary power we may be able to carve out more space for genuine decisions, rather than pseudo-decisions and engage in more effective strategizing processes that are likely to be hindered by the habitual routines and taken-for-granted assumptions through which primary power operates. The power effects of strategic discourse not only perpetuate hierarchies based on occupational status, race, gender, and organizational functions, but also stifle strategic learning. We offer two examples of these processes.

Power as an obstacle to disorganizing

A number of organizational learning scholars have emphasized disorganizing, the breaking of routines or increasing levels of chaos in the system, as sources of learning. Weick and Westley (1999), for instance, argue: “To learn is to disorganize and increase variety” (p. 190). Blackler (1995, pp. 1037-8) writes:

New ways of knowing and doing can emerge if communities begin to rethink what, in a different context, Unger (1987) has called the “false necessity” of everyday life.

The power effects of strategic discourse, however, maintain managerial control over the organizations at the expense of inhibiting an organization’s ability to disorganize to the extent that is necessary for effective learning (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2001). For instance, Coopey (1998) notes a fundamental lack of trust that pervades most organizations. It results in overemphasis on keeping all employees doing their predefined and predetermined tasks with few opportunities for experimentation and creative problem solving.

The managerial control imperative as an obstacle to learning

The issue of managerial control as an organizational imperative is related to our previous point. According to Seo (2003, p. 13):

... although forms and rhetorics of managerial control have changed or alternated over time, the fundamental control imperatives of managers – how to control complex organizations – have not changed.

Further, he points out that the processes needed for organizational learning often contradict these imperatives. This sentiment is echoed by Alvesson and Kärreman (2001), who argue that the more knowledge there is, and the more the organization relies on knowledge, the less room there is for managers to control or manage the

knowledge. According to them, “technocratic and socio-ideological types of management will, we claim, *streamline* knowledge production and *trivialize* knowledge” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2001, p. 1012, italics in original). Managerial control imperative then denies employees space for learning, and creates environments where people are expected to but are not trusted to learn (Coopey, 1998; Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000; Schein, 1999).

Related to that point, few writers appear to conceive of strategic organizational learning or strategy-making, in general, as something that should involve anyone except for top management. There are occasional references to the role of middle management (e.g. Floyd and Lane, 2000; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Westley, 1990). However, few writers and few organizations seem to conceive of a strategic role for non-management, Saturn (in its earlier years) being a rare exception (see Deetz, 1995; Kochan and Rubenstein, 2000).

It is not our intention to get into the stakeholder-shareholder debate. However, given the importance of emergent and decentralized processes that are needed to facilitate strategic organizational learning (as emphasized in the earlier sections), it would appear that strategic organizational learning is more likely to thrive under the stakeholder-model of the firm (see Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Kochan and Rubenstein, 2000). In the very least, management needs to recognize the plethora of interest groups that make up the organization and have potentially competing, yet legitimate interests, and rather than try to suppress them, note the organizational learning potential inherent in these conflicts (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000; Deetz, 1995, 1998; Rhodes, 2000).

To sum up, we have argued that strategic organizational learning is hindered by the lack of critical examination of the traditional strategic discourse. Not only does this lack of critical examination of power effects of strategic discourse make strategy an effective instrument of excessive control and domination, but this control gets in the way of processes, such as disorganization and exploration that are necessary for effective strategic organizational learning and creating mechanisms for continuously developing and realizing successful strategies. We are not suggesting that it is feasible or even necessarily desirable to do away with strategy as a tool for control. However, it is important to differentiate between control for the sake of organizational well-being and control for control’s sake (or worse for the sake of profiteering).

Implications for practice

In this paper we highlight the importance of power – especially primary power – in the process of strategic organizational learning (and, by extension, strategizing in general). Having noted some problems that may result from the lack of attention to primary power, we make several tentative suggestions for “managing” it more effectively.

Critical reflection

First step toward a more effective management of primary power is recognizing it. Hence, the importance of critical reflection cannot be overstated. According to Reynolds (1998), critical reflection is distinct from self-reflection in four ways:

- (1) it is principally concerned with developing the capacity to question “common sense” assumptions;
- (2) its focus is social, political and historical rather than individual;

- (3) it pays particular attention to the analysis of power relations, hierarchies and privilege; and
- (4) it is concerned with emancipation and, as such, is ideological (see also Yorks and Marsick (2000) for a related framework of conditions necessary for transformative learning in organizations).

It is also important to note that some organizations practice what Yorks and Marsick (2000) dub “bounded critical reflection”, which involves reflecting on certain aspects of the organization’s business but is more benign and relatively apolitical. We are advocating a more orthodox critical reflection, which is highly political.

More inclusive strategizing

As implied above, the view of an organization as a cohesive entity is unrealistic and unhelpful. It is crucial to recognize the plethora of interest groups that are inevitably competing to shape the organization’s direction. This, however, is not necessarily a problem in and of itself, unless we are more concerned with creating cohesive organizations rather than adaptive ones. Having acknowledged the diversity of interests inherent in an organization, it is advisable to include as many of them in the process of strategizing as possible (Deetz, 1995). The early Saturn’s efforts in this regard offer useful suggestions for facilitating such processes (see Kochan and Rubenstein, 2000).

Also, rather than attempting to suppress political activity, it is advisable to attempt to create more open forums for it (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000). In addition, it is important to ensure that undistorted information about key aspects of the organization’s situation, its effects on various stakeholders, and about the processes by which decisions are made circulates freely throughout the organization (Coopey, 1998). This is likely to minimize the negative aspects of political activity that managers so often fear.

Pro-practice organizing

One of the ways to facilitate strategic organizational learning is what Dougherty (2004) calls pro-practice organizing, that is, organizing around accomplishing the actual practices that are necessary for attaining the organization’s key objectives rather than by pre-specified functions or departments (i.e. traditionally). This involves:

- framing the strategic organizational objectives in terms of the practices that need to be performed (e.g. providing solutions to clients’ needs);
- defining people’s work in terms of activities needed to perform the practices (e.g. multi-functional collaboration at all stages of product development and roll-out with on-going refinement); and
- formal organization of R&D around the practices, rather than around basic science or technology development (e.g. focusing on developing a new IT database with the client’s needs in mind).

Pro-practice organizing is particularly desirable whenever a project requires coordination of activities across disciplinary or departmental boundaries, such as developing a new product or implementing complex organizational change initiatives that require collaboration of specialists in different disciplines. It facilitates the creation and utilization of practice-based knowing that enables the team members to coordinate

their efforts in such a way as to allow each individual's particular expertise to have the most beneficial impact on the collective task; and keep the individuals' divergent disciplinary expertise from inhibiting the multidisciplinary collaboration that often results from "interpretative barriers" (Dougherty, 1992) between disciplines or functions.

In contrast, conventional organizing is believed to be frequently anti-practice (Dougherty, 2004), in that by chunking the activities by which the practices are accomplished by departmental or disciplinary boundaries, it creates situations in which individuals tend to perform their own work without understanding the ways in which it relates to that of others'. We should add, however, the importance of attending to primary power and inclusive strategizing for sustaining pro-practice organizing in actuality and not merely on the organizational chart.

Conclusion

Organizational learning and knowledge management have brought crucial novel insights into the field of strategic management. However, in this paper we have attempted to show that, like in earlier perspectives on strategy, there is still insufficient attention being paid to the role of power in strategic change. This places severe limitations on strategic learning that is possible. We have attempted to make the link between the frequently reported failures of strategic change initiatives and learning blockages and mechanisms of domination – that the same processes that perpetuate systematic exclusion of certain groups in organizations also limit the effectiveness of strategic conversations and strategic actions.

We suggest that there is a need to be mindful not only of the overt exercises of power and obvious organizational politics, which we labeled as secondary power, but that there is a need to identify the socio-historical processes that are fused into the very process of social construction of organizational reality – primary power – which enables such overt exercise of power.

We conclude this paper by joining other writers (e.g. Levy *et al.*, 2003) in calling for a less managerialist research in strategy. Watson (1994) suggests three criteria for non-managerialist organization theory:

- (1) it does not privilege the managers' view of reality;
- (2) it does not exclude concepts that might be distasteful or ideologically discomfoting to managers, and
- (3) it can potentially inform the actions of any other interest group – not just managers.

This kind of research would perhaps be more managerially relevant because it would provide a deeper understanding of organizational behavior, since it would cover not only "variables" that can be manipulated by managers but also those that are outside of managerial control (Watson, 1994), which is particularly important for fostering organizational learning and strategic learning. It would therefore provide more realistic and non-faddish prescriptions to managers. It would also help them make more informed decisions about whether their organizations are ready to implement the highly destabilizing processes needed for strategic organizational learning. One way to generate more non-managerialist but managerially relevant research in strategy is to take seriously the role of primary power in organizational behavior in general and in strategy making processes in particular.

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