**Action Learning: Practices, Problems & Prospects Conference 2008**

**Title: Making the case for action learning as an effective framework for strategy making**

**Abstract**

Action learning encourages individual reflection, insightful questioning and assumption breaking that result in changes in attitude and behaviour. This learning process provides the potential to explore and solve complex organizational problems, such as, the question of how to develop a future business strategy.

Existing literature on the process of strategy making presents a multi-faceted debate, with the 'Learning School' of strategic management being one of the main approaches to conceptualise strategy formation. This school of thought suggests that strategy making is a process of emergent learning over time, where strategy makers critically reflect on past experience and adapt their strategies accordingly. Learning from action, change and reflection, is therefore, considered to be more useful in strategy making than formal analysis and subsequent strategy formulation. The premises of the Learning School of strategy making are similar to the premises of action learning, yet, the action learning paradigm has made little or no impact in strategic management literature. This is particularly surprising since the fundamental tenets of action learning could enable it to make an important contribution to strategy makers and business strategy development.

This paper makes the case for action learning to feature more prominently in strategic management literature, and particularly, in the Learning School. It proposes that using an action learning methodology can effectively contribute to the development of business strategy, particularly for those organizations operating in competitive environments that are complex and unpredictable. In this type of environment, strategic responses tend to evolve from a process of experimentation, trial and error. Action learning is advocated as a suitable framework to encapsulate this emergent and experimental process and provide a platform for the development of effective strategy making.

Dr John Oliver is the DBA (Media) Programme Leader at Bournemouth University. He has published in international academic and professional journals in the field of relationship marketing, action learning and strategic management. He has also held management positions in firms serving business and consumer markets.

Bournemouth University
Fern Barrow
Poole
Dorset BH12 5BB

Telephone  : (01202) 965319
Email        : joliver@bournemouth.ac.uk
Fax          : (01202) 965530

**Introduction**

The process of making business strategy is an intensely contested and multi-faceted area of conceptual debate. This debate largely centres on whether strategy is 'formulated' through a prescribed and linear process of formal, rational planning, implementation and control (Andrews, 1980; Porter, 1980, 1985, 1996; Ansoff, 1965, 1991; Lynch, 2005); or whether an organizations business strategy simply 'forms' and emerges over time as a result of trial, error and learning about the competitive environment to the point where patterns of behaviour converge on successful working practices (Mintzberg, 1987; Senge, 1990; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel, 1998; Rees and Porter, 2006).

The strategy process debate in strategic management literature has, by and large, ignored the contribution that action learning could make in developing effective business strategy. Bibliographic analysis of two leading business and management literature databases illustrates this point. In the database Business Source Premier, 10,146 articles were found under the search term 'strategic management', 177 (1.74%) of which made reference to 'learning'; and of these, only 3 articles mentioned the term 'action learning'. Another search, in the same database, under the term 'strategic planning' found 34,435 related articles. Of these, 351 (1%) related to the 'learning organisation', 13 (0.37%) of which mentioned action learning in relation to management/executive development. The search results from another leading business and management database, ABI/Inform, revealed a similar pattern of results. Searches under the term 'strategic planning' revealed 71,875 articles, 274 (0.38%) of which referred to action learning; and 16,171 articles for the term 'strategic management' resulted in 190 (1.17%) items referring to action learning.

Based on this bibliographic analysis, it is fair to say that action learning has, by and large, failed to make an impact on strategic management literature, and probably the practice of making strategy. Indeed, the database searches revealed only three studies (Finlay and Marples, 1998; Smith and Day, 2000; and Oliver, 2006) that related specifically to action learning enabled strategy making.

The use of action learning in strategic management literature and practice paints a confusing, if not disappointing picture. The review of learning and strategy literature by Leavy (1998) revealed that most of the attention of researchers had been devoted to; innovation in research and development, business processes and developing institutional schemes that encourage creativity in staff. Leavy (1998:461) also develops a key theme in his paper, that is, the link between learning, strategy and competitiveness, pointing out that "the concept of learning has never been more central to our understanding of competitiveness and even more fundamentally to our understanding of the strategy process". Unfortunately action learning as a method to enable this learning did not surface in his paper, or indeed, the review of strategic management literature by Hoskisson, Hitt, Wan and Yiu (1999). However, in their review of Practices and Tools of Organization Learning, Pawlowsky, Forslin and Reinhardt (2003:788), identified action learning as a tool for "improved problem solving", yet as the bibliographic analysis discussed earlier has shown, adoption of this method remains largely unexploited by strategy makers. Hedberg and Wolff (2003: 553) may provide some insight to this conundrum as they argue that organisational learning has, in the main, been focused on tactical and administrative issues and that "learning for strategizing is much more difficult" because many organisations find it difficult to disentangle themselves from old ways of thinking and behaving.

The review of action learning literature conducted by Smith and O'Neil (2003) also revealed a similar pattern of inactivity for action learning enabled strategy making, in so far as, a significant proportion of literature related to; management/executive development, organizational development, and the learning organisation. There was no literature categorized in relation to strategy making in this study.

In the arena of practice, the picture is a little more perplexing. For example, the American magazine, Business Week, predicted that that action learning would be a key management tool in 2005, yet beyond this fleeting publicity the take up of this tool would appear to be infrequent, or at least not promoted as a tool that had been used in practice. Recent research by Rigby and Bilodeau (2007) from the management consultants, Bain & Company, substantiates the view that action learning is not considered as a valued management tool. The findings of their research indicated that the key management tools used in practice were, not surprisingly; strategic planning, customer relationship management, customer segmentation, benchmarking and so on. Again, action learning did not feature in the top 25 key management tools used in business.

It can be concluded from the above analysis and discussion that action learning is principally used as a tool for the development of managers/executives, rather than a tool used 'by' managers to develop their business. The lack of impact made by action learning in strategic management literature and practice is somewhat surprising given that the 'Learning School' of strategic management has been a significant contributor to the debate about the most effective way to develop business strategy for more than 40 years. In addition, both disciplines are concerned with the effective management of organizations, both disciplines emerged at broadly similar periods of time, and both have a relatively

long history of practice based and theoretical development. The mutually exclusive development of these two disciplines is more surprising given that both are based on the experiential learning paradigm, and thus, share the same or similar premises and assertions.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to present the case for action learning as an effective framework to harness and build organizational learning capability in the strategy making process. The starting point in making the case is to present the fundamental premises of both disciplines, drawing together literature from each domain and concluding that action learning can provide an effective framework for strategy making.

**Making the case: the premises of each discipline**
The Learning School of strategy making argues that competitive environments are complex, volatile and unpredictable, and the strategic direction an organization should take is largely unclear. Strategy making, therefore, involves individual and collective learning over extended periods of time to the point where organizational attitudes and behaviours converge on successful working patterns that have been enabled by retrospective sense making. To the action learner, this process of strategy making should sound all too familiar. Both the Learning School and Action Learning disciplines share the same experienced based learning model that involves an iterative process of action, reflection and change. The premises of each discipline are shown in Table 1 below, with a more detailed discussion forming the main body of this paper.

Table 1: The premises of the Learning School and Action Learning

| Premises of the Learning School of Strategy Making | Premises of Action Learning |
|---|---|
| An organization's environment is often complex and unpredictable | Learning is an exploration into the unknown |
| Strategy making is an informal and experimental process that emerges over time | There is no obvious solution to a problem. Learning is iterative and experiential. |
| Strategy is made by a process of interaction between the leader, informed individuals and groups | Learning is an individual and group activity. |
| Strategic learning is emergent and changes in behaviour stimulate retrospective sense making of action. | Learning is centered on raised consciousness of a problem through an iterative process of action, reflection, insightful questioning and assumption breaking. |
| Strategy formation and implementation are indistinguishable and based on experimentation. | Problem resolution is achieved by learning and adaptation. |

**An unpredictable environment suggests exploration and learning**

An unpredictable and unfamiliar working context is a common notion in both strategy and action learning literature. Both disciplines, as a result, are based on an experiential learning model, with experimentation and incremental change regarded as the way to move an organisation or organisational issue forward.

Advocates of the Learning School of strategic management (Argyris and Schon, 1974; Quinn, 1980; Mintzberg 1987; Senge, 1990; Argyris, 2004; Rees and Porter, 2006) argue that an organisation's competitive environment is often complex, turbulent and unpredictable. In his formidable paper "Strategy as Revolution" Hamel (1996:74) illustrates this uncertainty observing that "in industry after industry, the terrain is changing so fast that (management) experience is becoming irrelevant". Proponents of the Learning School argue that the competitive landscape is undulating, twisting and turning in such a way as to obscure the horizon view.

The process of strategy making is, therefore, reactive, experimental, gradual, and where the implementation of strategy forms an integral part of strategic options development (Senge, 1990; Leavy 1998). At best, the strategist can only hope to learn about the recurrent patterns in their markets and react to the opportunities and threats presented (Sull, 2005).

This unpredictable environment that strategists refer to is the type of working environment that action learners often find themselves in. Action learners are faced with an exploration into the unknown in their "search for the unfamiliar" (Koo 1999: 89) in times when there is no single course of action that can justifiably be considered to move an organisation forward. Much of the literature pertaining to action learning (Revans, 1982, 1998; Mumford, 1985; Pedler, 1997) suggests that one of the underpinning features contributing to an effective learning environment is that learners are often working in a setting that is characterised by adversity, conflict, frustration and where the need to solve complex managerial problems is achieved through experiential and emergent problem investigation and insight (Beaty et al, 1997; Johnson, 1998; Zuber-Skerrit, 2002).

**Strategies emerge over time, through iterative and experiential learning**

The Learning School of strategic management argues that business strategies "simply emerge over time" (Quinn, 1980:15) and are a consequence of external competitive conditions and their influence over organizations and their management who take adaptive action to remain competitive. The nature of the strategy development process is, therefore, iterative and characterised by a largely informal process of trial and error where individuals, and or groups, within the organisation learn more about the environment they are competing in and how best to take advantage of it (Senge, 1990; Stopford 2003).

Strategies tend to consist of a series of small actions that, when viewed retrospectively, produce "major changes in direction" (Mintzberg et al, 1998:178) in order to remain in touch with the environment.

This experimental and experiential learning approach to strategy making, is by it nature, closely aligned to the discipline of action learning. Indeed, McGill and Beaty (2002:183) argue that experiential action learning is based on the idea of "action emerging" from the cyclical process of action, reflection, theory building and change in practice. Furthermore, many researchers in the field of management research would argue that it is only through the adoption of an experienced based learning model that real insight into management problems can be found (Sanford, 1981; Elliot, 1991; Ellis and Kiely, 2000; Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

Action learning can facilitate effective strategy making by providing strategists with a framework to capture action, change, reflection and learning. Indeed, research by Finlay and Marples (1998); Smith and Day (2000); and Oliver (2006) illustrate this point. In each of these studies, the researchers were engaged with organizations in healthcare, manufacturing, and health and fitness industries in the development of strategies relating to information management and technology, the strategic planning process, customer service and retention, respectively. In each case an action learning programme lasting between six and 15 months was devised to support the process of gaining insight into an important organizational issue, which subsequently resulted in a strategy emerging and being implemented.    In these cases, strategic learning, strategic options development and strategic implementation was made possible by using an action learning methodology.

**Strategy making is a process of interaction between the leader, informed individuals and groups who learn from each other**

The Learning School argue that strategy emerges from interaction between different groupings of people with different amounts of expertise, influence, and interest in an organisation. De Geus (1988:71) states that this interaction between people provides the basis for collective learning to emerge, as "individual mental models" change to a "joint model" of organizational consensus on how to adapt to the changing competitive environment. Whilst the Learning School promotes individual and collective learning of stakeholders, strategic evaluation and choice is essentially a top-down process where strategic output is assessed and controlled by the Chief Executive, and or, a small group of top executives.

The advantages of the learning organization are its ability to create a working environment that promotes flexible, adaptable working patterns and structures where workers, individually and collectively, question and learn from their changing environment. If, as McGill and Beaty (2002:196) suggest, that the "only consistent feature of organizational life is change" then instilling an organizational culture of adaptability and change is the only basis on which emergent strategies can be effectively implemented.

The learning organization is a living, evolving and adaptable organism, that is based on individual and collective learning. Again, it is surprising to note the lack of action learning being used in strategy making, particularly as Leavy (1998:456-7) points out, that the notion of "learning…as a model for the strategy process itself" is becoming increasingly important when considering organizational transformation. He goes on to suggest that the concept of 'strategy as learning' may

well be more effective than "simply planning or decision making" in uncertain competitive conditions.

Action learning has been used extensively for management and executive development, yet the 'individual and collective' of the learning organization seems to have been an irrelevance when discussing the impact that an action learning programme could make in the development of business strategy. When reviewing organizational learning literature, it appears that much of the learning being discussed seems to occur naturally in formal meetings, and informally, in corridors and around the coffee machine. The question then, is whether this is an effective way to develop organizational learning? The learning School argue that the learning process is slow, largely informal, and may result in important issues being ignored, forgotten and unactioned. Action learning, by its nature, can overcome these problems through the formal, structured process it offers. It can also speed up the learning process and can provide a sound basis for strategic implementation to be more effective as a result of the buy-in and group consensus that has developed over learning cycles and set meetings. As a consequence, action learning can stimulate and accelerate organizational learning, adaptability and responsiveness, which in uncertain times, is essential for competitiveness.

**Strategic learning and changes in behaviour stimulate retrospective sense making**

As previously discussed, the Learning School argue that strategic learning is emergent and changes in behaviour stimulate retrospective sense making of action. Strategies emerge from small adaptive attitudinal and behavioral changes in organizational practice that attempt to respond to the demands of the changing competitive landscape. However, these changes are based on learning, and this learning is based on individual and collective reflection of what has, and is, happening in the environment.

As both strategic learning and action learning are founded on the same experiential learning model, it is no surprise to find that retrospective sense making features significantly in both disciplines.

Action learning is a process whereby an individual or group raise their levels of consciousness of a problem through an iterative process of action, reflection, insightful questioning and assumption breaking and change. Brockbank, McGill and Beech (2002:22) argue that action learning involves a process of "reflective dialogue" which involves the learner making sense of their actions by reflecting on their previous assumptions and new ways of thinking, and by engaging in discussion with other managers and staff that involves progressive questioning "to continually explore and question suppositions by surfacing new insights and evolving fresh questions leading from (our) ignorance" (Smith and O'Neil, 2003:63).When learners undertake this reflective process they adopt new behaviours and new attitudes (Isabella, 1993; Marquardt, 2004, 2007) as they try to understand what is happening in the competitive environment. Established cognitive and behavourial organizational routines are transformed as the previous and established ways of thinking and acting are called into question. This de-stabilisation process often occurs to action learners as they are encouraged to be self reflective, self critical and question their previously held assumptions. As Revans (1982, 1998) points out, for effective action learning to take place, managers must translate this new cognitive belief system into obvious, clear and palpable action by incorporating new practices into the organization in an attempt to resolve their management problem. Culpan and Akcaoglu (2002:175) support this view by arguing that action learning is often regarded as a "process of cognition and behaviour" whereby managers are made aware of their own inner decision-making processes and how this will inform their assessment of the problem and the actions that they take as a result of this action-change-reflection cycle.

Does the depth in this reflective process occur in the same degree with emergent strategists? It is unlikely. Eden and Ackermann (1998:75) illustrate the reflective process by arguing that organizational learning should focus on "standing back from everyday life, detecting emergent patterns of behaviour, reflecting upon these, and designing ways of thinking and working". As such, emergent strategists seek to adapt to change through retrospective sense making and corrective action. One must, therefore, conclude that whilst emergent strategy making exploits the use of reflection, action learning seeks to take the level of reflection a step further, formalising it and expressing it as a series of reflective and developmental cycles that could, if used, enable emergent strategists to break their pre-existing assumptions and make them aware of their own inner decision-making processes.

**Strategy formation and implementation are based on experimentation: problem resolution is achieved by learning and adaptation**

Emergent strategies evolve and are formed through a process of trial and error over time. This view is where the disciplines of strategy making through learning and action learning digress. The Learning School argues that the idea of emergent strategy making "opens the door to strategic learning, because it acknowledges the organizations capacity to experiment" (Mintzberg et al, 1998:189). Strategies are formed through adaptation, evolution and convergence on successful working patterns. As such, strategic implementation is not regarded as the 'solution' to a changing competitive landscape. Instead, implementation is inextricably linked in a dynamic and non-linear process of strategic analysis, strategic choice and strategic implementation, where experimentation and learning are a continual and evolving process.

Action learning, in contrast, attempts to overcome learning closure whereby the learning generated from a succession of individual and collective organizational projects is captured and used to build knowledge in order to take action that leads to more effective change outcomes. Action learning is often used to gain insight into unfamiliar organizational issues, and where the resulting adaptive cognitive and behavioural changes result in actions that are aimed to solve the issue at hand. This 'finality' to the project is important to action learners who seek a resolution to their problem. This finite life span of an action learning project is at odds with the emergent strategy view and the preference for continual evolution and adaptation. By examining the 'strategy enabled by action learning' studies mentioned earlier in this paper, we see a mixed response to the issue of problem resolution. For example, the research by Finlay and Marples (1998) and Oliver (2006) both identified strategic issues through the action learning process, insight was gained, a strategy formulated and subsequently implemented. Both studies stated a case for problem resolution. However, it was encouraging to note that in the Smith and Day (2000) study the featured organization had embedded strategic planning, enabled by action learning, into the working practice of the company and their annual business planning process. Problem resolution in this instance had not been sought or achieved by the company, who instead opted for an emergent process of strategy making, enabled by action learning.

**Conclusions**

Strategic management literature on organizational learning has largely ignored the contribution that action learning could make to the process of making strategy. This is surprising as both disciplines are based on the experiential learning model. The discussion above has examined the premises of both disciplines and advocates that with such similarities in the aim and processes of each discipline,

action learning should have made more of an impact in the theoretical development and practice of emergent strategy making. One of the main criticisms leveled at organizational learning theorists revolves around the question of how to harness and build an organisational learning capability. The response is normally centred on the notion that learning is an informal process and is so ingrained inside organizational practices that it is difficult to isolate, access and develop. If this response is true, then action learning should be seen by strategists as a means to provide an effective methodology to capture and formalize organizational learning, particularly in relation to strategy making.

So we come back to the original question; why hasn't action learning made a greater impact on the theory and practice of strategy making? There would appear to be two answers to this question. Firstly, the majority of action learning literature is focused on individual management/executive development, and as such, action leaning is often considered as a human resource development issue by both academics and practitioners. Action learning is largely regarded as a reflective learning process that benefits the individual, albeit, with the aid of a group of people. This individualism is also reflected in strategic management literature where the tensions between organizational learning and individual learning are clear. If the learning at organizational level has no relevance to the individual, it is extraneous. If individual learning has no relevance or is not captured in organisational learning, then it is equally irrelevant.

A second and more pragmatic response to the question may lie in the adoption (or not) by the potential users of this methodology. There has been a significant take up of action learning by educationalists who encourage individuals to reflect, to question and act on their new thinking.

The individuals in this context tend to be academics or students where the prime objective is to develop reflective pedagogic practice, and not develop their industry practice skills.

As for the practitioner, the concept of action learning is likely to be alien to them, unless they have been exposed to it in academic study somewhere along the line; and even if they are aware of the concept, they are unlikely to find the time to use it and engage in reflective practice due to the time pressures of coping with daily work issues. Reflection is a luxury that they simply cannot afford, or believe provides them with any added value in their working lives. When considering the idea of adoption we should also return to the studies of Finlay and Marples (1998); Smith and Day (2000); and Oliver (2006) and ask why they are unique in tackling the issue of strategy making by using an action research methodology? The common denominator in these studies is that they were undertaken by practitioners, or in the case of Oliver (2006) an academic with a practiced based background, which implies that the communities of action learning theorists and practitioners, in the main, do not collaborate when strategic thinking and strategy making are required.

Is there a way forward? Well yes. The academic community has a dual role to play in the development of both action learning theory and practice. Firstly, there has to more research conducted into the role that action learning can have in strategic management theory, drawing closer links to literature in the field of organizational learning and strategising; and how action learning can access, capture, harness and formalize the emergent strategy making process. Academics gaining access to organizations and live business issues can be difficult in itself, never mind being involved in and facilitating organizational strategy making. However, this type of engagement is likely to prove beneficial to both academic and practitioners in many respects, for example, more thoughtful

and efficient learning leading to better informed strategy making for the practitioner and more informed shaping and development in the  theory strategy making for the academic community.

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