

# A Critical Analysis of Power in Organizational Learning and Change

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is twofold: first, we want to critically examine the currently existing theories of organizational learning and change in light of the phenomenon of power. Grounded in this analysis, we secondly want to make recommendations as to how to conceptualize and ultimately practice organizational learning while taking power and power relationships into account.

This article is furthermore grounded in two underlying assumptions. First, we make the assumption that learning in and of organizations can never be a goal in itself. Learning, in the context of organizations, makes sense only in terms of change. In other words, learning is a means, a tool, or a resource that can, and increasingly must be mobilized in order to foster organizational change. Such change, in turn, is made necessary by rapid environmental transformations.

This leads us to the second core assumption and point of departure of this article. Indeed, based on our past practical and conceptual work, we have come to the conclusion that such learning in organizations can be significantly perverted if it ignores a sociological reality, i.e., if one does not take power and power relationships into account. More precisely, we had formulated three different critiques, which can be addressed to the dominant literature on organizational change and learning. First, our analysis of the different schools of thought in the field of organizational learning had shown that their underlying pedagogical conceptions strongly favor individual learning over the learning of groups or organizations (Finger & Bürgin, 1999a). As a matter of fact, conceptualizations at the organizational level either see learning as an abstracted information processing systems or as a context that favors or not individual or group learning. Secondly, we had identified the consequences of not taking power into account when it comes to such learning, resulting in

particular in the inability to learn, in the resistance to learning, and in the instrumentalization of learning for strategic purposes. Thirdly, we had noted the lack of a strategic approach to organizational change by means of learning. Indeed, if most organizations do develop strategies as to how to address and cope with environmental change, they rarely develop similar strategic considerations when it comes to their own organizational transformation.

Therefore, our starting point in this article is that power and power-relationships are part and parcel of organizational life, even if most management authors shy away from power. It is, in our view, particularly important to pay attention to such power in situations of organizational change. Thus, power must not be conceptualized as an unwanted effect or as an obstacle to change, but as a normal characteristic of any organization. We will therefore not try to identify the obstacles of organizational learning in terms of power related phenomena, but rather try to conceptualize organizational learning in a organizational context that takes the role of power into account. This is why we will, in a first section, clarify the notion of power. In a second section, we will then clarify the concept of organizational change. In a third section, we will consequently relate power to organizational change. In a fourth section, we will introduce the notion of organizational learning, and in a fifth section relate it again to power. This will enable us, finally, to relate learning to change and to power, and by doing so explore how learning can be used in order to foster organizational change while taking power into account.

## POWER IN ORGANIZATIONS

There are basically three ways of looking at power in general, and at power in organizations in particular (e.g., Mintzberg, 1983). Power can be

either seen as an attribute of an actor, which is the original political science approach, as a structural phenomenon, which is the sociological approach, or as being located in the interface between actors and structures, which is the so-called structuration-theory approach, which is preferred in this article. In this section, we will briefly present each of these three approaches of power, as well as their usefulness for the purposes of understanding organizational behavior.

#### *Power as an attribute*

Attributing power to specific actors is the approach rooted in American political science (e.g., Dahl, 1961). According to this approach, actors have different degrees of power depending upon their resources (generally money, e.g., financial power), their reputation (reputational power), or their ideas (epistemic power). In all three cases, power resides with the individual actor (individual, group, or organizational entity) and stems from his/her attributions.

There has been, over time, a significant evolution in the literature as to the growing complexity of actors' relationships, leading to a similarly growing complexity in terms of power relationships (Mintzberg, 1983). Indeed, from a quite simplistic agency theory (one actor, one goal), we have moved to the so-called contingency theory (one actor, multiple goals), and today to the stakeholder theory, whereby multiple actors and multiple goals coexist. In other words, while still sticking to power as an attribute, the interactions of the various actors with power is becoming increasingly complex and determined by the surrounding environment. This means that, though the actors still have the attributes of power, their leeway is diminishing parallel to the amount of relevant actors.

#### *Power as domination*

Power as domination is the basic approach among organizational sociologists (e.g., Clegg, 1989; Etzioni, 1964). This approach is grounded in some core ideas, namely the idea that the organization is basically a "mini-society", i.e., a complex social structure composed of multiple interests and groups representing them. Among these interests some are incompatible, thus

inevitably resulting in conflicts. Given this, different actors or groups of actors seek to impose their will upon other actors. They want to control the other actors in order to get them to do what they want, and this by using either formal or informal norms and means. However, and unlike the attributional approach, the means used are less related to the actors and their attributes, than they are to the organizational structures and institutional arrangements. One can thus distinguish between physical and coercive, material or utilitarian, and symbolic or normative (or social-normative) means of (organizational) control. In all cases, this sociological approach sees organizational rules and structures as a means to exert domination of the actors inside the organization.

#### *Power as relation*

A third way of looking at power is to locate it in the interface between actors and structure, an approach also called "structuration" theory (e.g., Giddens, 1984; Parker, 2000). We would like to refer here to Michel Crozier (1963), who has developed his original approach by reflecting on the State monopoly and the resulting bureaucratic phenomena. In such a situation, Crozier says, actors struggle for power, each at his or her level. More precisely, they struggle for the ability to define the norms and the rules, which structure the environment they operate in. In doing so, their rationality is quite limited, i.e., significantly surrounded by uncertainty: uncertainty, especially the control over a certain span of uncertainty, thus equals power. Oppressed actors strive for certainty, which allows them to better strategize, while actors in power try to preserve as much uncertainty as they possibly can. There are two sources of uncertainty, i.e., expertise and hierarchy. Both can be combined, thus the power of professionals. In other words, power is neither an attribute, nor cast in an organizational structure. Says Crozier:

"[Power] is the relationship, from which one can profit more than the other, yet where one is never totally powerless vis-à-vis the other ... power thus resides in the leeway of which each of the partners engaged in a power relationship disposes". (Crozier, 1963: 230)

In short, for Crozier power is a relationship: it is neither a structure nor a norm, as is the case of

organizational sociologists, nor is it an attribution of actors. Nevertheless, power is always personalized, which makes Crozier's approach particularly relevant for organizational learning. In short, for Crozier, power always results from a dialectical process of negotiation among actors on the one hand and between actors and institutional rules and norms on the other. As such, power depends on the mastery of spans of uncertainty, more precisely upon the depth of uncertainty one can master, upon the pertinence of this uncertainty, as well as upon the degree to which one can manipulate previsibility.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Much has been written about organizational change and transformation, much of it without taking power and power relationships into account. In this section, we will synthesize the different ways organizational change has been conceptualized so far by management literature into two separate axes. Indeed, one can see organizational change along an axis of either being constructed from the various parties involved or as being directed by someone. Also, one can see change as stemming either from inside or as being driven from outside. We will then construct from these to two axes one single matrix.

### *Constructed change versus directed change*

The "constructed" perspective of organizational change refers mainly to the *Organizational Development* school. For this school, change is a step along various stages. Lewin, for example, argued for a three-step model, moving from "unfreezing", to "change", to "refreezing" (Lewin, 1964). Burke described organizational change as a process, in which a so-called client system confronted to itself by an external agent, is able to develop new ways of solving its problems (Burke, 1987). Change therefore is the search for alternatives, i.e., basically a process a system of actors will go through (Schein, 1993). Thus change can be handled in very different, depending on the involved actors' attitudes. *Constructed change* means that the actors involved will transform their attitudes towards a given problem as well as towards change itself during the process of

transformation. Such constructed change, it is said, is thus a better way to change than is change, which is being imposed upon the actors without their active participation. For some French sociologists, change is actually not even a choice, but simply a fact. Touraine, for example, describes change as a "re-production" of a society by itself (Touraine, 1973).

On the other hand, change can be conceptualized as the result of a certain "direction" given to the actors involved. Actually, the large majority of the management literature focuses on leadership as the main lever of change. Drucker, for example, has written extensively on entrepreneurs and managers of the future insisting that they are the leaders of change (Drucker, 1996). In this conception of *directed change*, change is a given and as such calling for some direction. Bennis described the corresponding management tasks as providing vision and giving meaning (Bennis, 1991). In other words, it is the manager who must find the energy necessary to orient change and thus lead his/her organization. One can even say that direction is the only way of escaping chaos. Similarly, for Marxists, direction is the only way to change the status quo. The management and the Marxist school have therefore a different conception of change but the same approach to its process. The management school sees change as an unavoidable fact in need of direction, while Marxists describe it as barely existing and in need to be triggered and directed. But both schools describe it as being directed by a selected set of people, such as managers or political leaders.

### *Internalist change versus externalist change*

The question of the source of change leads to considering a second dimension, in which we distinguish "internalist" and "externalist" perspectives. In the "internalist" perspective, the analyzed system is conceptualized as a closed one, which means that all the factors influencing change can be identified and to a certain extent predicted. In the "externalist" perspective, instead, the system is open and can be subject to dramatic changes in the environment, as well as to unpredictable inputs from any of actors within the system, yet reacting to external change.

Internalist relationships are predominant in any change processes. On the one hand, the limited or "bounded" rationality of internal actors leads them to trigger and pursue a type of change, which satisfies their personal strategies (e.g., Simon, 1983). Yet, on the other hand, change processes do seem to need the help of so-called "change agents". But again, these agents can only be successful if taking into account the prevailing internal logic (Lenhardt, 1992). The conscious use of these two – i.e., a change agent combined with the respect of the internal logic – constitutes the specific approach as promoted by internalist authors. Doppler & Lauterburg, for example, tend to describe change as the result of the process of helping the system construct its own best way to achieve the goals its leaders have chosen (1994). As such, and from this internalist perspective, change is more or less the result of the confrontation between leaders and groups. For sociologists like Crozier or Friedberg, change can in fact be triggered by any actor of the system, yet the re-negotiation of rules remains internal (e.g., Crozier & Friedberg, 1977).

The externalist perspective, on the other hand, focuses on the specific role played by externally driven influences. On one hand, the environment of an organization creates the context in which change processes occur. There are indeed trends and schemes in each industrial branch, in each geographic region, as well as in each profession. The organization belongs itself to several specific supersystems with specific rules, which determine the way and the direction an organization will change. Also, the way the organization will answer to environmental changes will be vital for its own survival (Kanter, 1990). On the other hand, change can transform and redesign the interactions of the system with its environment. In this sense, external powers influence the solutions a system or organization will produce (Porter, 1982), not only by adapting to its environment but also by creating new and acceptable answer (Peters, 1997; Hamel & Prahalad, 1994). Nevertheless, the trigger and the overall framework of change remain, in this perspective, always externally driven. Change is thus seen as a macro-economic trend one has to respond to. Similarly, the socio-technical part of organizational systems theory describes change as the necessary adaptation of the exchanges between the system and the constant evolution of

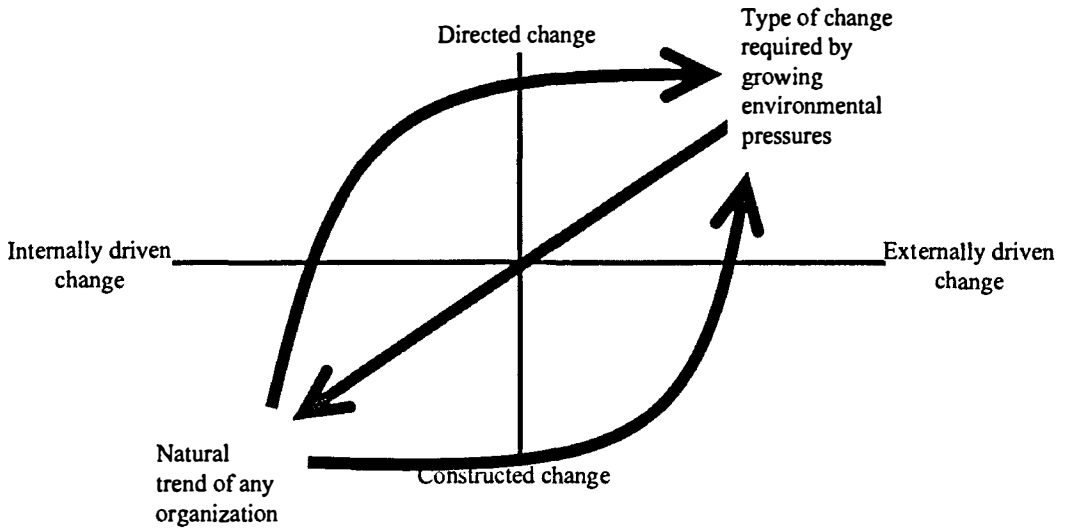
its environment, under the assumption that the reason of being of any system is to offer a proper output to other systems. In this view, change is not only an internal response to an external event, but the building of a new exchange between a system and its ever changing environment (Varela, 1989).

#### *A change matrix*

These two axes can now be combined: while the natural tendency of any organization or system is, as much as possible, to go only through internally driven constructed change, environmental pressures increasingly require the very opposite: externally driven and directed change. This trend can be explained by the growing pressures due to globalization and corresponding competition among organizations (including public organizations). And this trend can moreover be confirmed both empirically and in the literature (e.g. Kanter, 1989). Graphically, these two trends can be represented as follows:

#### *Power and organizational change*

It is obvious that power does play a key role in organizational change, even though the theories about organizational change do not give due credit to such power considerations at all. Indeed, regardless of whether change is directed or constructed, some sort of power relationship is always involved in order to make change happen. Indeed, the directed perspective of change implies "power over" others, as well as in structures, which codify the power of particular groups over other groups. On the other hand, the constructed perspective of change implies "power for" achieving something in common, as well as mobilization mechanisms capable of generating change. This second approach also refers to internal (power) games, as well as to corresponding organizational cultures (e.g., Alter, 1993). Indeed, if change is internally driven, some actors may see it fit to achieve their strategic goals, while others may see change as a threat. If change is driven from outside, this generally results from dramatic changes in the environment. We call changes "dramatic" when they cannot be ignored by an organization. These can be political, legal, technological, economic,



financial, legal, or social in nature, but in any case mean that the organization cannot afford to ignore some stakeholders. This thus automatically implies some power relation, even though it is often framed as a power relationship between the organization and some (threatening) outside actor.

Above, we have presented three approaches to power, namely power as an attribute, power as structure, and power as relationship. Each of these approaches will have a different look on change, and this is what we want to discuss now:

- If one sees power essentially as an *attribute* of actors, change becomes basically a matter of alliances and coalitions among actors. In other words, organizations change when different actors want them to do so, and when they can leverage sufficient support among fellow actors in order to do so. Generally, single actors do not, by themselves, have enough clout in order to change, but by mobilizing other actors who also have power, they can do so. Organizational change is thus mainly an act of will, of vision, and of leadership on behalf of some of the actors, namely the powerful ones. The view of organizational change resulting from attribution theories is thus also quite simplistic, but widespread in management literature. This approach, in particular, ignores the structural dimension, which structures the different actors' behavior and channels their strategies when it comes to building alliances and coalitions.

- If one sees power as a matter of *structural arrangements*, change basically depends on the norms and rules in place. The approach here is quite tautological: if one is in a position to define the dominant rules and norms, he or she dominates, yet has no interest in change. If on the other hand, one would like to change the organization – which means that he or she is oppressed – then he or she does by definition not have power. In short, the norms and rules define who has power, whereas the ones who have power are in a position to define the norms and rules. Change is either absent or revolutionary. In this approach, it can only result from the conflicting power relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor(s). Unlike the attribution theory of power, which can successfully conceptualize external actors' (with power) contribution to change, this structural approach is basically internalistic: change will result from internal switches in the power-relationship among relevant actors. Finally, this sociological and structural approach ultimately leads to a cyclical view: change basically means the replacement of old rules and norms by new rules and norms, both having the same objective of domination. In other words, one form of domination will simply be replaced by another. This approach in fact ignores the various actors' strategies, who, by strategizing, do have the ability to lead change

within the limits set by organizational rules and norms.

As for Crozier and his relational approach to power, change, basically results from actors' strategies: actors constantly strategize in order to increase their span of uncertainty over others. In doing so, they negotiate new rules and norms with other actors, which in turn defines the degree of change of the organization. However, the organization, on the other hand, retaliates by constantly seeking to reduce this very span of uncertainty, basically in order to minimize the actors' discretionary power. There are several means to do so, namely the creation of impersonal rules, the centralization of decision-making, and the clear separation of hierarchical levels. These means, according to Crozier, are particularly well developed in the State monopoly, yet can be found in all organizations. These means, however, trigger additional responses on behalf of the actors who can strategize even better in a context of formalization. For Crozier, this natural evolution of the organizations' reactions to actors' strategies tends to lead to gridlock and ultimately to the inability of an organization to change. There are however many intermediary situations, where change can be fostered, namely if it is seen as tenuous equilibrium between the actors' strategies on the one hand and the norms and rules in place on the other.

## ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING: A CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Having identified three different approaches of power in organization and related them to a specific conception of change, we will now briefly discuss the literature on organizational learning and the learning organization, before relating, in the next section, learning to power. In doing so, we refer here to the excellent classification already proposed by Easterby-Smith and Araujo (1999). With these two authors, we identify two dimensions that are prevalent in the literature, namely first the dimension "organizational learning" versus "learning organization", and second the dimension "technical view" versus "social perspective".

Let us first analyze the dimension of "organizational learning" versus the "learning

organization". The latter, i.e., the "learning organization", is conceptualized as an ideal of an organization, towards which organizations eventually have to evolve if they want to be able to respond to today's environmental challenges (complexity, pace of change, competition, etc.). This learning organization is thus an ideal form of an organization, characterized by both individual and collective learning. Authors here are concerned with the development of normative models and methodologies for creating and sustaining such learning processes. On the other hand, authors interested in "organizational learning" are more concerned with understanding the nature and processes of learning. In that sense, they favor a more descriptive approach. Here, organizational learning describes a particular type of organizational transformation, i.e., a type where learning plays a more important role than other forms of change.<sup>1</sup>

The second dimension distinguishes the "technical view" versus the "social perspective". In the technical view, the organization is conceptualized as a quite abstract information processing system (generation, diffusion, storage, utilization, and interpretation of information). The acquisition and interpretation of such information gives valuable inputs for decision-making, control and coordination within an organization. On the other hand, in the "social perspective", the focus is on the broader social system in which learning is embedded. In this perspective, learning basically emerges from social interactions. This perspective is concerned with the meaning people make of information. Learning emerges from the common understanding of experiences and events occurring in the environment. In this perspective, authors also are interested in the question why organizations do not learn as well as they might.

The following figure classifies the currently existing theories in the field along the two above dimensions:

In the "organizational learning technical view", we can find authors like Argyris and Schön: "*Organizational learning is a process in which*

<sup>1</sup> This leaves us with the question whether there can be change without learning. We have said above that, from our point of view, any form of sustained change necessarily involves learning of sorts. Thus learning, from our perspective, is but an instrument or a resource for organizational change.

	Organizational learning	Learning organization
Technical view	Focus: organizational learning is about the effective processing, interpretation of and response to information.	Focus: implement information systems to support the collection of relevant data
Social perspective	Focus: organizational learning is about the way people make sense of their practical experiences	Focus: implement systems in order to promote the ability of individuals to learn from their experience and from each other

Source: based on Easterby-Smith & Araujo (1999)

Figure 1. Classification of organizational learning theories.

members of an organization detect error or anomaly and correct it by restructuring organizational theory of action, embedding the results of their inquiry in organizational maps and images" (Argyris & Schön, 1978). But also Huber (1991) who says "An entity learns if through its processing of information, the range of its potential behaviors is changed ... an organization learns if any of its units acquires knowledge that is recognizes as potentially useful to the organization" (p.89).

In the "learning organization technical view" we find authors who are preoccupied with the relationship between learning and organizational productivity. Some of the authors of the early research have demonstrated the effects of learning curves (Buzell & Gale, 1987). More recently, an important literature has developed in the area of "Knowledge Management" (van Krogh & Roos, 1996; Probst et al., 1999), where different tools and techniques are proposed to support the management of relevant information and knowledge, in order to optimize decision-making.

Authors of the "organizational learning social perspective" have made three important contributions to the understanding of the nature and the process of learning (Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999), namely:

- learning as a social construction (Nicolini & Mezner, 1995);
- learning as a political process: understand how informal factors like coalitions, conflicts or power structures have an impact on learning (Coopey, 1995; Kanter 1989); and

- learning as a cultural artifact (Schein, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In the "learning organization social perspective" authors propose interventions in order to increase the ability of individuals to learn from their experience and from each other. They especially show the importance of dialogue, participation and empowerment (Pedler et al., 1994). Furthermore, some authors have defined linear or cyclical models to conceptualize learning. Dixon, for instance, has extended the experiential learning cycle of Kolb and proposes successive stages in an organizational learning cycle: information is generated through experience, then shared and interpreted collectively what leads to responsible action being taken by those involved (Dixon, 1994).

The political dimension is in fact only taken into account by the "organizational learning social perspective". Indeed, when they speak about political processes, the authors of the "technical" view see power as "a persistent problem which needs to be overcome and nullified if learning is to take place" (Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999, p. 5). In the "Knowledge Management" approach for instance, power is seen as an impediment to the diffusion and sharing of knowledge, and has to be overcome by incentives (Probst et al., 1999). Only in the social perspective, power is seen as an intrinsic part of social processes (Coopey, 1995), yet there is need for further clarification of the relationship between learning and power, and this is what we want to turn to now.

## LEARNING AND POWER

In order to further explore the relationship between learning and power, we have to go back to the pedagogical conceptions underlying the organizational learning theories. Each of these theories, as we will show in this section, ignores power. In our earlier papers, we have identified the different pedagogical conceptions of learning underlying three different schools of thought, namely cognitivism, humanism and pragmatism. We have shown how these schools conceptualize learning on three different levels, i.e., the individual, the group and organizational levels (Finger & Bürgin, 1999a). Let us briefly discuss each of these to highlight the very dangers of ignoring power.

In the *cognitive-systemic approach* the organization is conceptualized as a "learning system" which interacts with its environment and has to adapt to it and change in order to survive. The organization is moreover viewed as an abstract information processing system, which fulfills the functions of generating, diffusing, storing, and utilizing information. In this systemic approach, the pedagogical conception of learning is cognitive. It is based on theories of individual learning processes and corresponding stages of cognitive development (of children). To conceptualize organizational learning, these authors transpose the insights about individual learning onto a systemic level. Without going into the details, learning is described here as a process through which experiences and corresponding cognitive structures evolve by integrating new information. On the organizational level, these cognitive structures correspond to shared meaning structures inside the organization (assumptions about how things are related with other things). Authors of this approach identify organizational learning as the growth (qualitative and quantitative) of the knowledge basis of an organization (accessible and collective meaning structures) (Probst & Büchel, 1994; Pautzke, 1994). The systemic-cognitive approach pertains mainly to the individual and by analogy is transposed to the organizational level. Groups are seen as a means of fostering learning thanks to the interaction of the different perspectives of its members that provides new cognitive inputs. Power is not conceptualized at all, and, if mentioned, is seen as an impediment to the free flow of information and thus to learning.

In the *humanist or psycho-sociological approach* the organization is conceptualized as a group of "resourceful humans", whose potential should be better mobilized in order to contribute to the organization's success. This approach considers that through individual and collective learning the organization will be able to continuously transform itself (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Referring to humanistic psychology, this approach identifies the adequate conditions that allow a person to develop and "grow". Such conditions are to be developed in organizations, in order to make the most of the abilities and learning capacities of the members of the organization. The implicit assumption is that the organization will grow if the people grow. In this approach, the conception of the learning process is centered on the individual alone. The organization is in fact only a context, which allows (or does not allow) the individual to grow. Power, again, is not conceptualized at all.

The *pragmatic approach* to organizational learning is also rooted in psychology, though based on another conception of learning. This pragmatic conception takes its roots in the learning theories of American philosopher John Dewey. In line with this tradition, Kolb has developed what he calls the "experiential learning cycle", which defines the four steps a person goes through when learning (a person makes experiences, receives feedback and information about his/her experiences, analyses this information, and derives conclusions (interpretation), which will orient his/her action in the future) (Kolb, 1984). Dixon has subsequently adapted this cycle to a collective level (Dixon, 1994). In fact, at the collective level, this cycle corresponds to a collective problem solving process. This pragmatic approach conceptually and practically deals with learning on the individual and the group levels. However, it is not (yet) suited to deal with organizational level. The organization would be seen as a series of groups learning together. The link between groups and organizations isn't thus yet properly conceptualized. Even though this pedagogical approach is linked to the social approach to organizational learning, power, again, is not conceptualized at all. Rather, it is assumed that people participate in collective problem-solving, because this is intrinsically a good thing.

This short presentation of each of the three pedagogical approaches underlying organizational learning shows that none of them fully takes the



organizational, especially its social dimension into account. This lack of taking power into account leads to serious problems, when it comes to using learning as a means of organizational change and transformation. Indeed, all three pedagogical approaches do not properly conceptualize the organization and how it functions on a social level. In the systemic-cognitive approach, the organization is seen as an abstract, disembodied system, which fulfills functions essentially for production. In the humanist and the pragmatic approaches, the organization is seen as a big community or even as a family with basically common interests. These conceptions do not take into account, among others, the considerations of organizational sociologists on power. In the humanistic approach, there is indeed a strong assumption that people in organization are willing to learn and have the capacity to do so. A second assumption of this approach is that the people or more precisely the learners in an organization share common of interests. The risks of these two assumptions are, on the one hand, that individuals do learn, but primarily for individual interests. On the other hand, people might learn for strategic purposes, which might actually be counterproductive for the organization.

In the systemic-cognitive approach, there is an assumption that individuals would transfer their knowledge over to the organization in order to make it accessible for all. This approach also implies that the organization can capture what the individuals have learned, so that when individuals leave the organization, their knowledge will remain in the organization. However, knowledge can be very strategic in an organization. Giving or retaining information and knowledge can be used as a source of power. Therefore, if this risk is not problematized, organizational learning activities are subject to actors' strategies. Another risk is that people become cynical. They do no longer believe that learning is useful and that it is worth contributing to it. The assumption in the pragmatic approach is that the context, in which the teams work, permits the experiential learning cycle to take place. However, there are many factors that will refrain the members of the group to actively participate in it and thus to learn collectively. For instance, when the members have strong interests not to share knowledge or when the hierarchical relationships between the members hinder them to take all views into account in the interpretation

phase. It can also be that after having gone through the learning cycle, external (hierarchical, political) interference hinder the group to act upon its interpretation. All these factors will prevent the group from learning collectively and will generate dysfunctionalities in the learning cycle.

All three pedagogical approaches to learning actually contain the risk that learning only enhances the dangers of the three approaches to power (and change) we have identified: in the attributional approach to power, the danger is that change is not directed, and reflects at best a compromise among the various actors' powers. Learning, here, would simply enhance the various actors' powers over each, thus further contributing to a fragmented organization that is not directed. In the structural approach to power, the danger is that change never occurs. As a result, learning will cement, rather than transform the structures of domination: the ones in power will become more powerful thanks to learning, while the oppressed will become more cynical. In short, learning that does not take power into consideration will further enhance organizational structures. In the relational approach to change, the danger is Crozier's vicious circle of bureaucracy: actors' strategies will trigger organizational responses, which further bureaucratize the organization, i.e., further prevent it from changing. Consequently, actors will use learning in order to better strategize and by doing so seek to increase their discretionary power over others. While such strategies might lead to organizational change, this is not likely to be a change that is going to be beneficial for the organization as a whole, as the basic motivation for change is the increase of discretionary power.

This analysis shows that organizational learning theories and their underlying pedagogical approaches do not properly conceptualize and even less so address the issues of power, and the relationship between power and change. This, however, needs to be done if one does not want learning to contribute to organizational gridlock and other forms of perversion resulting from power-related dynamics.

## LEARNING, CHANGE, AND POWER

The previous section thus leaves us with a challenge: How can we break out of the vicious circle which perverts organizational learning? In

fact, each of the perspectives seems to end up in gridlock. In the "internal directed" approach, change is dependent upon one or a few actors or "leaders" to conduct change, thus reinforcing the power structures in place. We also came to the conclusion, that an "internal - constructed" approach to change will foster a vicious circle in which the responses of the actors' strategies will even worsen the situation, since learning at the individual and group levels always takes place within a given set of rules. In the "external-directed" approach, change will be imposed by an external leading actor (external influential stakeholder). This, however, will not bring about sustainable change, as the new rules that the external actor tries to implement will hardly be adopted by the internal actors. And finally, in the "external - constructed" approach, change consists in the permanent adaptation to external pressures. The weakness here, is that the organization does not learn as a system (only some parts change in reaction of the pressure of the environment), and that some actors will take advantage of their privileged situation at the interface with the environment. We therefore would like to suggest a strategic perspective to organizational change that advocates the selection of the four approaches as different steps in a change process.

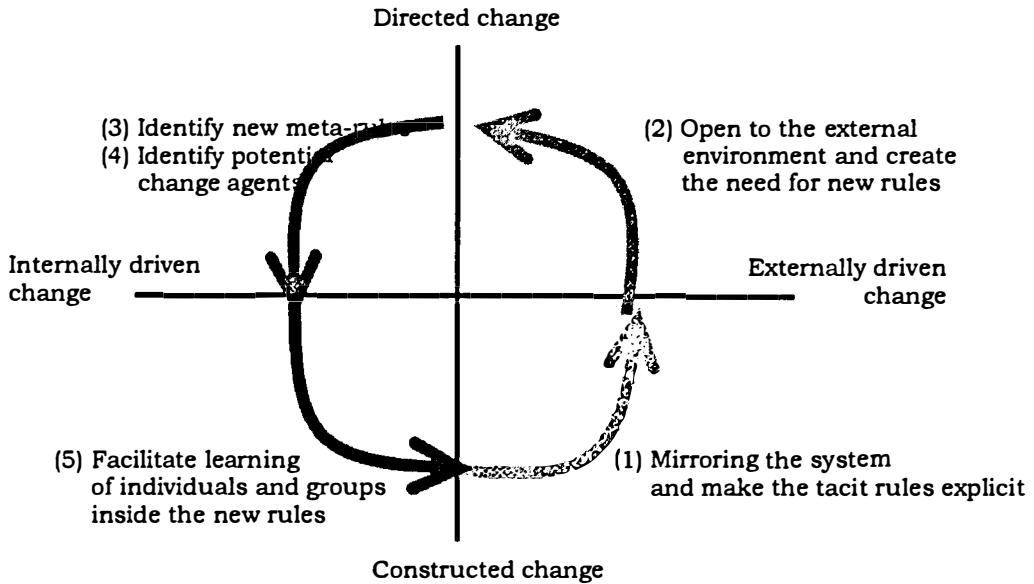
As explained before, we favor the relational approach of power in organizations, which conceptualizes the interaction between the actors and the structure (rules, norms). What this school offers as prerequisite to change is the obvious need of an outside actor to help the process along. This opening up towards the external environment and the corresponding inputs can take different forms. For Crozier, it is the role of the "marginal-séant", i.e., an actor who has a stake in different organizational logics and by this very fact can play a useful role as intermediary between these different or even contradictory logics (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977: 86). For March, it is personnel turnover, as he finds that a 20% yearly renewal of the composition of any system is a prerequisite for maintaining its learning capacities (March, Sproul & Tamuz, 1991). Finally, it can also be a "consultant" or a mediator, who helps to create a tension between the inside and outside of the organization. This outside actor does not only represent a source of information. For the Organizational Development (OD) school, he or she is the necessary consultant, who diagnoses the system and helps it to confront

itself. He or she is a kind of mediator who is not embedded in power play and can therefore position himself/herself between the actors and the rules. He/she helps the actors understand the rules they are currently building and can lead the main players to re-discuss the set of rules they are playing under. Therefore, this outside actor does not only play the role of "presenting a mirror" to the actors in an organization, but he can also help these actors to re-negotiate the institutional norms and rules (Schein, 1993). In doing so, he does not only help the actors see beyond their power plays, but also helps them to reinvent new set of rules better corresponding to their current environment.

Successful organizational change thus builds on this tension between the inside and the outside, and seeks to guide it into a direction, which is desirable for both the actors and the organization. The only way out of this gridlock, according to Crozier, is the constant reference to a third actor, who needs to be located partly outside of the organization, and who has the ability to lead such change by creating a constant tension between the actors' strategies on the one hand and the organizational norms and rules shaping such strategies on the other. Nevertheless, there is a constant danger that even this outside actor becomes part of the organization, i.e., subjected to the organizational norms and rules. More precisely, we can identify five different functions of the outside actor in the strategic approach to organizational change. None of these functions are new in themselves, yet what is new is the logical sequence of these five functions, as arranged in the figure below.

Let us now describe each of these five functions, thus outlining how organizational change can be fostered by means of learning while taking power and power relationships into account:

1. *Mirroring the system and make the tacit rules explicit.* The outside actor triggers a reflection by confronting the actors of the organization with a diagnosis of the tacit norms and rules of their organization, as well as by showing them how these norms and rules lead to dysfunctionalities. As systems tend to learn how to reinforce their norms and rules, this step is only possible through the mediation of an outside actor. However, this is not sufficient. Mirroring the system allows to "unfreeze" the situation (Lewin, 1964), but does not imply



**Figure 2.** A model for fostering organizational change through learning.

change. The confrontation with other logics (alternative possibilities) remains necessary. This first step pertains to the square "external - constructed".

2. *Open up to the external environment and create the need for new rules.* As we have already observed, the system is not able to produce new rules from within itself. However the outside actor cannot him- or herself suggest new rules without becoming part of the internal power play. One way to trigger change is therefore to confront some parts of the organization to new environments, in order to bring the members of the organization to challenge the norms and rules and to renegotiate their relationships. This function corresponds in fact to the "facilitation" of external networking and the redesign of interactions between pertinent internal groups and external agents. The creation of these interactions is a strategic process, in which the priorities of change are defined. The outside actor will help the directing team identify, which subsystems do need to change first. By doing this the directing team can reduce the complexity of change and concentrate on selected parts of the organization. This step

implying interaction with the external environment will give a direction to the change as it creates a sense of the need for new rules in order to cope with the environment. This step pertains to the "external - directed" square.

3. *Identify new meta-rules.* The learning of the sub-systems in interacting with the environment will only lead to effective change if its results will not systematically be disapproved and invalidated in regards to the norms and rules of the organization. This is why the outside actor has to support the definition of meta-rules within the system, which will allow and encourage the confrontation of sub-systems with external organizations. The primary aim of these meta-rules is create the space for the sub-systems to escape from the "usual way of doing things" in order to build new relationships and new norms by themselves. More precisely, those meta-rules give an indication as to how to confront and interact with the environment. Moreover, they define the structures for helping people and groups understand what the environment they are confronted with actually means. It is also important to note these meta-rules can hardly be defined by the organization itself, considering in particular the fact that the

existing power relationships tend to reinforce the existing rules and norms. The mirror function of the outside actor is in this sense vital. He or she has to confront the organization with itself, thus making the existing rules explicit by diagnosing and mirroring the norms of the system. The trick is then not to try to change those norms by a simple mediation between the actors and them, but by the definition of the so-called meta-rules. Indeed, a simple mediation would just reinforce the existing rules in the long run, while the definition of meta-rules will permit to confront these rules to their own incompatibility with their external environments. The consequence of doing so is that the mirror cannot be a diagnosis addressed only to the directing team. Indeed, the directing team can hardly chose the new meta-rules without being itself confronted to the (external) need of change. Rather, the meta-rules must be defined by the directing team as a result of the mirroring of the system by the outside actor. This redefinition represents the learning of the directing team and pertains to the "internal - directed" square.

4. *Identify potential change agents.* These change agents will play an essential role for the diffusion and implementation of the new behaviors and attitudes. These are the "leaders" mentioned in the management literature. Confronted with new constraints, they are able to envision new ways to cope with those. These ways will define the framework, in which the different actors will invent and negotiate their new power relationships. It is the role of the outside actor to identify and support these change agents, since these change agents are not necessarily the key people of the previous power plays.
5. *Facilitate the learning of individuals and groups inside the new rules.* Stimulating the learning from individual and groups confronted with the new environment implies coaching of people and groups. This coaching process helps people understand the meaning they give to their experiences (e.g., Lenhardt, 1992). Indeed, as we have seen above, organizational learning is about the way people make sense of their practical experiences (e.g., Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999). The outside actor has therefore also a role to play in helping people make sense of the process of change. If they are successful in doing so, they will be able to

behave strategically and "consciously infect the system" (e.g., Sattelberger, 1991). Yet, for economic reasons, one cannot offer external coaching to every member of the organization. However, every unit of an organization can be coached by a member of another subsystem of the organization, considered as external at least to this unit. In this way, the outside actor has to focus on multiplication by coaching the coaches who will support the learning teams. These coaches can then become the change agents we identified above. This step pertains to the square "internal - constructed".

This strategic perspective to change in and of organizations thus implies the conscious use of the five above approaches and the intervention of an "outside actor" to support them. This outside actor is not necessarily only one single person. But the danger for the outside actor is that the interaction between him- or herself and the organization goes both ways. By helping the organization evolve thanks to his or her external inputs, he him- or herself becomes part of the organization, infected as he or she is by the organizational norms and rules. Therefore, this role of "outsider" cannot be successfully played over a long time. There must be no confusion between the actor and its function. In other words, in order to maintain organizational learning, a system has to ensure the permanence of those functions by regularly changing the outside actor(s).

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