

NOTE

THE POLITICS OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING: INTEGRATING POWER INTO THE 4I FRAMEWORK

THOMAS B. LAWRENCE
Simon Fraser University

MICHAEL K. MAUWS
Athabasca University

BRUNO DYCK
ROBERT F. KLEYSEN
University of Manitoba

We argue that power and politics provide the social energy that transforms the insights of individuals and groups into the institutions of an organization. Moreover, we propose that different forms of power in organizations are connected to specific learning processes—intuition is linked with discipline, interpretation with influence, integration with force, and institutionalization with domination—and that an examination of these different forms of power provides a basis for understanding why some insights become institutionalized while others do not.

This note is intended to contribute to the development of a comprehensive theory of organizational learning by providing an analysis of the politics of organizational learning. Although organizational learning recently has been acknowledged as a fundamentally political process (Blackler, 2000; Burgoyne & Jackson, 1997; Coopey & Burgoyne, 2000; Fox, 2000), there has been relatively little theory development systematically connecting organizational politics and organizational learning.

There are at least three critical reasons to connect politics—the dynamics of power in organizations—to organizational learning. First, scholars interested in organizational learning have called for the development of research and theory that are cumulative and integrative (Crossan & Guatto, 1996; Huber, 1991), but power and politics have remained largely ignored. Second, we believe that any theory of organizational learning without an understanding of its political dynamics will always be incomplete; organizations are inherently political and, con-

sequently, so are the processes of organizational learning. Third, bringing power and politics into research on organizational learning should provide a more effective foundation for understanding why some organizations are better able to learn and why only some of the available useful innovations are embraced by organizations.

In examining the politics of organizational learning, we take as our point of departure the model of organizational learning developed by Crossan, Lane, and White (1999). Their model provides a rich, coherent framework that specifies four general processes through which organizational learning occurs. Three characteristics of the model stand out as particularly important in the development of a general model of organizational learning: (1) it is multilevel, bringing together individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis; (2) it is dynamic, bridging the levels with specific mechanisms; and (3) it clearly articulates four processes—intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing (the “4Is”)—that allow learning to feed forward to the organizational level and feed back to the individual. Nevertheless, their model typifies

We thank Dev Jennings and three anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments.

the tendency in studies of organizational learning to focus on learning as a principally social psychological phenomenon, with less attention paid to its political dynamics.

We begin this note with a brief overview of Crossan et al.'s (1999) framework, highlighting the points within it where the value of considering the politics of organizational learning is most apparent. In the section following that, we describe a framework for understanding politics in organizations and use it as a basis for integrating power into Crossan et al.'s (1999) framework. We formalize our arguments in this section by developing a set of propositions that specify the political conditions under which organizational learning is most likely to take place. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our note for research and practice.

THE 4I MODEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Crossan et al. (1999) argue that organizational learning is a multilevel process that begins with individual learning, that leads to group learning, and that then leads to organizational learning. These levels, they argue, are connected by bidirectional processes that involve both the creation and application of knowledge. More specifically, they describe four processes that connect individual learning to organizational learning: *intuiting*, *interpreting*, *integrating*, and *institutionalizing*.

Crossan et al. define *intuiting* as "the preconscious recognition of the pattern and/or possibilities inherent in a personal stream of experience" (1999: 525). *Intuiting* is located within the individual; individuals develop novel insights based on their experience and their ability to ascertain underlying or potential patterns in that experience, and they then translate those insights into metaphors that provide the possibility of their communication.

The next step in organizational learning is *interpreting*: "the explaining, through words and/or actions, of an insight or idea to one's self and to others" (Crossan et al., 1999: 525). Thus, *interpreting* begins at the individual level and moves on to include other individuals through conversation and dialogue. Through *interpreting*, ideas are made explicit, named, and incor-

porated into cognitive maps that relate the new idea to other ideas and to external domains.

An important but underexamined issue with respect to both *intuiting* and *interpreting* is *which* ideas will successfully progress through these processes. With respect to *intuiting*, only some new ideas will form the basis for metaphors that can be effectively communicated and considered; half-thoughts, momentary puzzles, and ephemeral insights are common occurrences in organizational life. Moreover, through *interpreting*, some ideas will be explicitly named and form the basis for cognitive maps, whereas other ideas will stagnate, remaining simply interesting or pleasing metaphors because their creators fail to translate them into interpretations (i.e., language and cognitive maps) that are accepted by others.

Although many factors may affect these dynamics, and Crossan et al. (1999) point to some of them, the role of power and politics in deciding these questions is left unexamined. While we might imagine that it will be "the best" or "most valuable" new ideas that are successfully intuited and interpreted, this would ignore the fact that organizations are often political arenas populated by self-interested actors. Thus, we believe that failing to incorporate organizational politics undermines our ability to understand and predict which ideas will successfully proceed through these learning processes.

The third process—*integrating*—is the first that occurs at the group level. It is "the process of developing shared understanding among individuals and of taking coordinated action through mutual adjustment" (Crossan et al., 1999: 525). The focus of *integrating* is the accomplishment of coherent, collective action.

In the fourth and final process—*institutionalizing*—learning that has occurred among individuals and groups is embedded into organizations through "systems, structures, procedures, and strategy" (Crossan et al., 1999: 525). This process makes organizational learning distinct from individual or group learning; through *institutionalizing*, ideas are transformed into organizational institutions that are available to members on an ongoing basis, at least partially independent of their individual or group origins. Together, these four processes form a learning loop through the effect of new institutions on organizational members' experiences that feed into their individual intuitions.

As with individual-level processes, a key issue is understanding which ideas will be integrated into the activities of groups and which will become institutionalized in organizations. The transformation of new ideas into "coherent, collective action" is a precarious process, as has been demonstrated in a variety of contexts, ranging from technical innovation (Brown & Duguid, 1991) to social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000). A key factor in this process is the political will and skill of those attempting to make this transformation. Similarly, the establishment of new institutions is a political process. The institutionalization of new ideas and practices does not simply happen; it depends on the actions of interested actors who work to embed them in the routines, structures, and cultures of organizations (DiMaggio, 1988; Lawrence, 1999). The success of these "institutional entrepreneurs" will be affected significantly by their access to the right resources and their skills in leveraging those resources (Fligstein, 1997).

Taken together, the four processes of organizational learning described by Crossan et al. (1999) point to the importance of understanding the role of power and politics in organizational learning. Intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing constitute the basic elements of organizational learning. But as we already noted, without a theory of the political dynamics that support those processes, a general theory of organizational learning will always be incomplete and unable to fully explain or predict which new ideas evolve from intuitions to institutions. Thus, in the remainder of this note we focus on the role of power and politics in the processes through which the ideas of individuals are transformed into organizational institutions.

POWER, POLITICS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Although power is often still defined narrowly in management theory and research (Fiol, 2001; Shen & Cannella, 2002), in a significant stream of research, scholars have recognized the wide variety of forms power can take in organizations (Clegg, 1989; Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Sajan, 1998; Hardy & Clegg, 1996; Lawrence, Winn, & Jennings, 2001). For our purposes, we follow earlier work on power that emphasizes two dis-

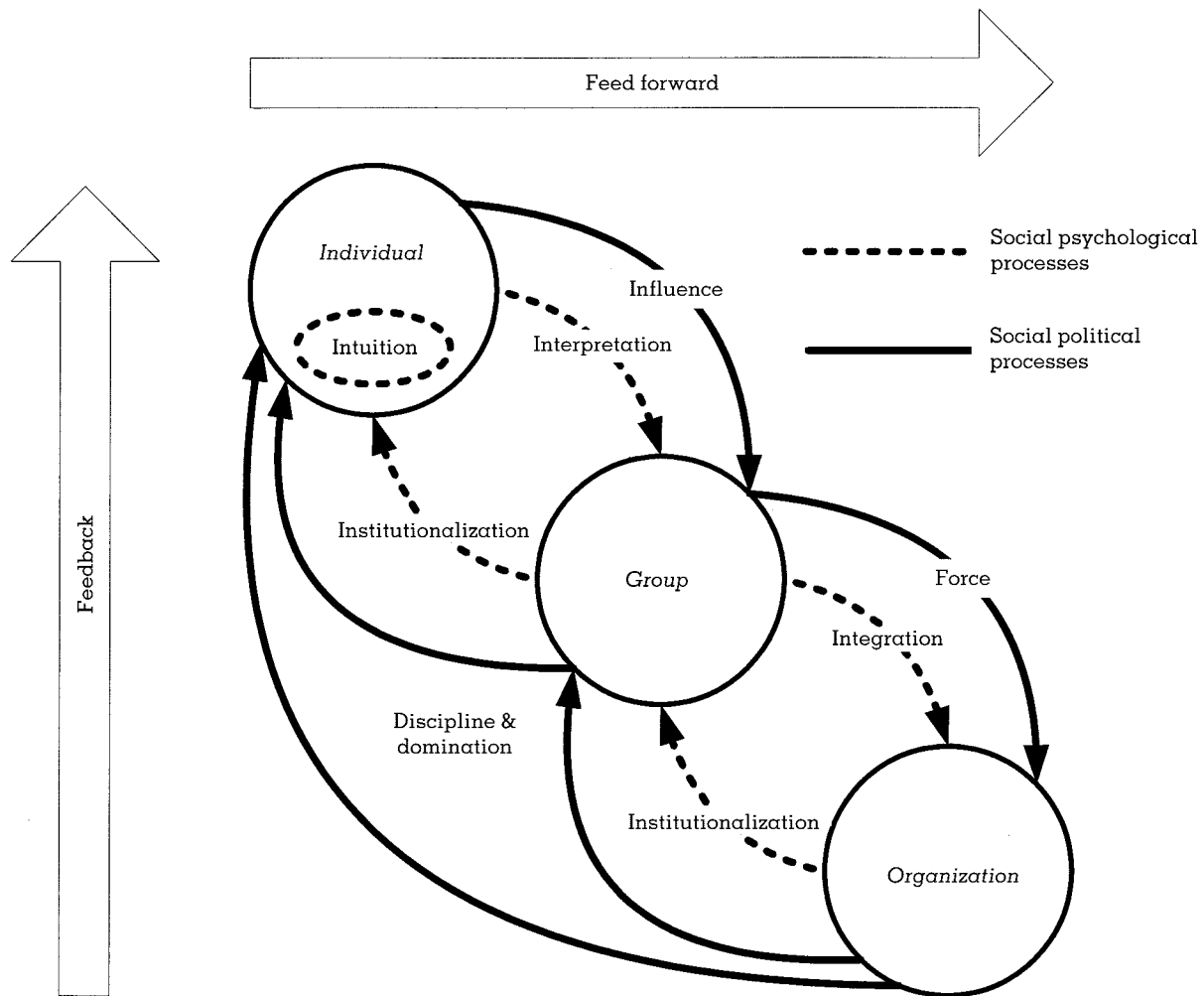
tinct modes in which it operates—systemic and episodic (Clegg, 1989; Foucault, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Hardy & Clegg, 1996; Lawrence et al., 2001)—and argue that both modes have distinct implications for organizational learning.

Episodic power refers to discrete, strategic political acts initiated by self-interested actors. This mode of power has been the traditional focus of organizational research and theory, with its emphasis on examining which actors in organizations are most able to influence organizational decision making (Pfeffer, 1981). In contrast, systemic forms of power work through the routine, ongoing practices of organization. Rather than being held by autonomous actors, systemic forms of power are diffused throughout the social systems that constitute organizations (Clegg, 1989; Scott, 2001). Examples of systemic forms of power include socialization and accreditation processes (Covaleski et al., 1998) and technological systems (Noble, 1984; Shaiken, 1984). This distinction between episodic and systemic forms of power can help us understand how organizational politics affect the movement of ideas from individuals through groups to the organization, and from the organization back to individuals.

The communication of ideas to others occurs through a process of interpreting that allows individuals' ideas to be shared with others. Crossan et al. (1999) emphasize the contingent nature of this process, with the results being dependent on the individuals involved and the environment within which the process occurs. These contingencies point to the precariousness of the process: only some interpretations will be accepted by others as legitimate or valuable. We argue that the ideas that are successfully transformed into such interpretations will depend significantly on the episodic power of the ideas' sponsors—their ability to influence the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of those around them. (See Figure 1 for an overview of our model.)

Similarly, we argue that the process of integrating also involves episodes of power on the part of interested actors. Crossan et al. (1999) argue that once an idea has been translated into a legitimate interpretation, it is then available in a form that can potentially be integrated into the activities of a group. However, if individuals' interpretations are to take hold at the group level, and thereby be integrated into the group's

FIGURE 1
The Social Psychological and Political Processes of Organizational Learning



Based on Gossan et al. (1999).

activities, they must be championed at opportune moments and affirmed during moments of doubt; stories must be told, revised, and retold in ways that capture the imaginations of coworkers, affirm their identities, and inspire collective action. Moreover, for these same innovations to move to the level of the organization, they must be brought to the attention of senior management by appropriate individuals at appropriate times and, in many cases, revisited on numerous occasions. Thus, we argue that both interpreting and integrating new ideas will be facilitated by and depend primarily on episodic forms of power.

In contrast to interpreting and integrating, institutionalizing involves the movement of ideas from the organization to the individual. As Cros-

san et al. (1999) argue, the institutionalization of ideas leverages the learning of individuals and groups through the embedding of new ideas into the procedures and systems that structure organizational life. The concept of systemic power begins to address the issue of which new ideas will become institutionalized. Whereas episodic power can provide the basis for the discrete transformation of ideas into legitimate interpretations and their integration into group activities, it is insufficient to achieve the institutionalization of new ideas, because this process depends on a mode of power that is able to maintain new ideas as part of organizational life, without repeated intervention by interested actors (Jepperson, 1999; Lawrence et al., 2001). This may not be a problem within the group in

which an innovation originates, but it can be problematic in other groups in which the innovation has no champion or, even worse, detractors. For this reason, fully institutionalizing innovations within an organization requires their incorporation within systemic forms of power, which is likely to be opposed by actors whose power is threatened.

While it may seem obvious that systemic forms of power underpin institutionalization, a more surprising role for systemic power may be in the intuiting process through which new ideas are initially generated. Intuitions are rooted in the experience of individuals and their ability to perceive or imagine novel patterns in that experience (Weick, 1995). A major factor in the experiences of organizational members is the set of structures, procedures, and systems that organize their working lives and provide context for this experience. Although perceived and imagined patterns are often understood as the idiosyncratic works of individual inspiration, in recent work on systemic forms of power, researchers have highlighted the ways in which power can affect not only the behavior of individuals but also their perception and imagination (Covaleski et al., 1998; Townley, 1993). Thus, we argue that both institutionalizing new ideas and establishing those ideas as the basis for further intuitions will depend primarily on systemic forms of power.

Connecting episodic power to interpreting and integrating and systemic power to institutionalizing and intuiting provides a foundation for understanding how organizational politics affect organizational learning. These connections only begin, however, to address the issue of predicting which ideas will proceed successfully through each of the four organizational learning processes. Greater understanding requires examination of the specific political processes that are tied most tightly to each learning process and the resources on which they depend. In a major review of the literature on social power, Scott (2001) argues that forms of power can be differentiated based on the means through which they affect social action: by affecting the costs and benefits associated with different actions or by restricting the range of available actions. Lawrence et al. (2001) describe the episodic forms of these two strategies as *influence* and *force*, respectively, and the systemic forms as *domination* and *discipline*. While

a range of typologies of power exists, these four forms constitute a relatively exhaustive set that encompasses power's key forms in organizational life. Thus, we draw on this typology in the remainder of this section to examine the political processes associated with each stage of the organizational learning cycle.

The Politics of Interpretation

We begin our examination of the link between forms of power and stages of organizational learning with the politics of interpretation. The interpretation of new ideas in organizations is a social process in which members negotiate meaning through conversations, adopting particular language and constructing new cognitive maps (Crossan et al., 1999). This process takes place in relation to an environment that rewards particular interpretations and penalizes others (Daft & Weick, 1984), but that does so in a highly ambiguous manner. As a result, interested actors will exploit this ambiguity by using political strategies to affect the language and cognitive maps that others adopt and construct.

Although we recognize that the fluid nature of power means that any form of power might be evident in any of the four processes, we believe that for each process there is one form of power likely to be most effective. The form of power most effective during interpretation is influence—affecting the costs and benefits that organizational members associate with specific interpretations of a new idea. (See Table 1 for an overview of the relationships we are proposing.) The use of influence in affecting interpretation can involve a wide range of tactics, including moral suasion, negotiation, persuasion, ingratiation, and exchange (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980; Yukl & Falbe, 1990).

We associate influence with the interpretation of new ideas for two main reasons. First, the adoption of language and cognitive maps to describe some new idea involves choices that organizational members often perceive as having important but ambiguous consequences. Influence involves affecting the costs and benefits of action, which during interpreting will be made easier by the ambiguity of the process and will be made more effective by the importance that members place on choosing interpretations. Second, the precise language and cognitive

TABLE 1
The Politics of Organizational Learning

Process	Interpretation	Integration	Institutionalization	Intuition
Definition (from Crossan et al., 1999: 525)	The process of "explaining, through words and/or actions, . . . an insight to one's self and to others"	The process of "developing shared understanding among individuals and of taking coordinated action"	The process of "embedding learning that has occurred by individuals and groups into the organization"	The "recognition of the pattern and/or possibilities inherent in a personal stream of experience"
Key requirements	Managing ambiguity and uncertainty in the adoption of language and the construction of cognitive maps	Translating new ideas consistently across members in order to achieve collective action	Overcoming the resistance to change of organizational members	Developing organizational members with experience and identities that facilitate expert-level pattern recognition
Associated Form of Power	Influence	Force	Domination	Discipline
Mode	Episodic	Episodic	Systemic	Systemic
How it works	Affecting costs/benefits of behaviors	Restricting available behaviors	Restricting available behaviors	Affecting costs/benefits of behaviors
Examples	• Moral suasion • Negotiation • Ingratiation	• Agenda setting • Limiting decision alternatives • Removing opponents	• Material technologies • Information systems • Physical layout	• Socialization • Training • Team-based work

maps that will ultimately describe a new idea are likely to emerge in somewhat organic and unpredictable ways over time, which would make the use of force (the other form of episodic power) problematic: attempting to force predetermined interpretations on organizational members is likely to fail, meet with significant resistance, or involve high costs. Thus, we argue that interpreting an idea so that it becomes accepted by others necessarily involves influence, whether on the part of the originator of the idea or some other actor who champions the idea.

For influence to successfully support interpreting, however, the champions of the ideas being interpreted require access to the necessary resources. Although the resources that are critical for influence depend on the specific tactic actors are relying on, it is possible to make some general claims regarding those resources. Drawing on a range of literature examining the factors necessary for actors to influence others (Cialdini, 2000; French & Raven, 1959; Lachman, 1989; Pfeffer, 1981), we see three sets of resources as critical for effective

influence: (1) control of scarce resources, (2) domain-relevant expertise, and (3) culturally appropriate social skills. Access to these resources is critical because organizations are political arenas in which multiple actors may be engaged in influence contests aimed at gaining acceptance of their own ideas. Thus, for example, we expect the use of influence for interpreting will often be met by political opposition, because even new ideas borne out of organizational structures and systems that are associated with a particular dominant coalition may nevertheless threaten the status quo (e.g., Dyck, 1997). Taken together, these dynamics lead to our first proposition.

Proposition 1: The interpretation of a new idea will be best facilitated by a political strategy that involves the use of influence and is based on access to scarce resources, relevant expertise, and/or culturally appropriate social skills.

The Politics of Integration

Crossan et al. argue that "the focus of integrating is coherent, collective action" (1999: 528) and that this is achieved through conversation and shared practice among community members. As Fox notes, however, such processes are inherently political and may involve competition among more and less experienced members, since "what is sacrosanct to one generation may be changed by the next" (2000: 856). We argue that the most important political strategy during this process is force, which involves the construction of circumstances that restrict the options available to organizational members. Although the most extreme version of force, creating "circumstances that permit no options" (*The American Heritage Dictionary*), may be somewhat unusual in organizational life, the ability of some organizational members to restrict the range of action available to others is very common.

The use of force to support the integration of new ideas into group-level activities would involve creating circumstances in which the options of organizational members were restricted such that they were unable to do other than enact those new ideas. This might involve restricting the consideration of alternative practices, restricting issues for discussion on formal and informal agendas, and removing/transferring opponents of the innovation.

The importance of force in the integration of new ideas stems from the difficulties associated with accomplishing collective action without some restriction of alternatives on the part of those involved. Whereas individual action may be amenable to direction through influence, we argue that force will be the most effective political means to integrate new ideas into group activities. The use of influence would rely on the willingness of all group members to cooperate and on their ability to uniformly translate a new idea into actions. The use of force, in contrast, can move groups forward uniformly by providing them with a predetermined course of action.

For force to successfully support the integration of new ideas, however, actors attempting to employ it must be able to determine the range of alternative actions available to other members. Whereas influence often depends on informal networks (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993), the use of force in organizations is tied much more closely

to formal organizational hierarchies. Much like the association of the legitimate use of force in society with the state (Scott, 2001), legitimate force in organizations is tied to formal positions that are granted the authority to restrict the action of members (Pfeffer, 1981). These dynamics lead to our next proposition.

Proposition 2: The integration of a new idea into group activities will best be facilitated by a political strategy that involves the use of force based on formal authority.

The Politics of Institutionalization

Crossan et al. argue that institutionalization involves embedding organizational innovations in the "systems, structures, strategy, routines, prescribed practices of the organization, and investments in information systems and infrastructure" (1999: 529). While we agree this is a crucial step, we argue further that not all such systems and structures are equally effective in achieving the institutionalization of an innovation. Organizational members and groups are often resistant to changes in established practices and engage in acts of resistance that can undermine attempts at institutionalizing organizational learning (Jermier, Knights & Nord, 1994). Thus, the pivotal issue in understanding the politics of institutionalization is understanding the ability of forms of power to overcome potential resistance to change.

We have argued that the institutionalization of organizational innovations depends on systemic forms of power, and we are therefore interested in which form of systemic power is best able to overcome potential resistance and, consequently, support institutionalization. As with episodic forms of power, systemic forms work by either altering the costs and benefits associated with the actions available to organizational members, which Lawrence et al. (2001) refer to as *discipline*, or by restricting the range of available actions, which Lawrence et al. (2001) describe as *domination*. Although the institutionalization of practices in broader settings has been linked to a variety of political mechanisms (Lawrence et al., 2001; Scott, 2000), we argue that, within the context of organizational learning, the most effective political strategy for institutionalization is domination. As a form of power,

domination can be found in a variety of systems, including material technologies, such as the physical layout of a manufacturing plant, and information systems that provide knowledge workers with predetermined decision paths. These phenomena, in many ways disparate, have in common their ability to support patterns of practice in an ongoing way, without the complicity of those on whom they act.

The importance of domination as a political basis for institutionalization is tied to the manner in which it addresses potential resistance to change. Systems of domination do not rely on the potentially unreliable or unpredictable choices of individuals. Instead, these systems manage organizational stakeholders "in place," thereby affecting their behaviors without necessarily shaping their preferences, attitudes, or beliefs.

Although the term *domination* may have negative connotations and potentially suggest a coercive environment, we in no way mean to imply that it is simply repressive; systems of domination can be enabling, productive, and enjoyable for the members they affect. A manufacturing system can, for example, structure the behaviors of line workers in ways that significantly restrict the actions available to them; if they are going to work at all, they need to do so on the bases that are provided by the equipment and materials available to them. The same dynamics can apply to information systems that restrict the effective range of action available to knowledge workers. Institutionalizing an innovation on this basis can therefore sidestep a great deal of potential conflict and resistance; it is not that such systems are impervious to resistance but, by minimizing reliance on the choices of individuals, they can institutionalize innovations in a quick and stable manner (Lawrence et al., 2001). Moreover, by routinely restricting the actions available to organizational members, systems of domination can, in the longer term, establish an organizational innovation as taken for granted; without alternative actions, organizational members may come to accept the inevitability of what was once a controversial innovation. This leads to our next proposition.

Proposition 3: The institutionalization of an innovation will best be facilitated by a political strategy that involves systems of domination.

The Politics of Intuition

Intuition involves the largely subconscious processes whereby individuals "come to discern and comprehend something new, for which there was no prior explanation" (Crossan et al., 1999: 526). It is the process through which individuals first recognize patterns in their experience that allow them to imagine new solutions or opportunities. Crossan et al. (1999) follow other recent work that links intuition to expert-level pattern recognition (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). These studies suggest that experts rely on intuition, which involves the perception of holistic patterns and improvisation based on those perceptions, allowing for the development of complex, creative solutions. The transition to expert status, however, demands extensive experience in the domain, along with the facility to channel that experience in imaginative ways.

The political dynamics of intuition, therefore, involve forms of power that help organizational members gain expertise; acquiring extensive experience along with an orientation leads these members to see the patterns and possibilities in the situations they face (Bourdieu, 1977). We argue that discipline is the most effective form of power in this regard and, thus, the key political basis of intuition. Discipline as a form of power involves an ongoing, systemic engagement with the target of power and affects the actions of organizational members by shaping their understanding of the costs and benefits of different behaviors and courses of action (Foucault, 1977; Knights & Wilmott, 1989; Lawrence et al., 2001). Important forms of discipline in modern work organizations include such practices as socialization, compensation, training, and teamwork (Knights & Wilmott, 1989; Sewell, 1998; Townley, 1993).

Two aspects of discipline underpin our connection of it to intuition. First, disciplinary systems support the development of expertise through the establishment of routinized organizational systems and structures that can provide individual members with deep levels of substantive experience in a domain. Disciplinary practices such as socialization and training provide the deep experience that is fundamental to gaining expertise and, consequently, fostering intuition (see Nonaka, 1994, on the importance of tacit knowledge during socialization). Indeed, the dual meanings of the term *discipline*—

linked both to power and to a domain of knowledge— suggest this connection.

Second, unlike domination, disciplinary systems shape not only the experience of organizational members but the ways in which members understand themselves in relation to that experience. Like influence, discipline affects the costs and benefits associated with organizational members' actions, and, consequently, it relies on the agency of those actors: organizational members must actively choose some course of action in order for discipline and influence to be effective. Unlike influence, however, which is concerned with shaping organizational members' perceptions and actions, discipline focuses on shaping the actual formation of members' *identities* such that they "come to recognize themselves as discrete and autonomous individuals whose sense of a clear identity is sustained through participation in social practices which are a condition and consequence of the exercise of power" (Knights & Wilmott, 1989: 538). In other words, identities are not only self-descriptions; in addition, they provide organizational members with psychological and discursive resources for relating themselves to organizational experiences (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998).

Thus, discipline supports and shapes the intuitions of organizational members by providing them with an ongoing stream of experience and affecting the ways in which they perceive that experience by shaping their identities (Covaleski et al., 1988; Giddens, 1984). Organizational members, however, are always subject to multiple disciplinary systems, emanating from both inside and outside the organization (Clegg, 1989; Foucault, 1977). Just as multiple sources of influence compete to affect the interpreting process, the variety of disciplinary systems in which actors are members will overlap and conflict in their effects on intuition. Consequently, disciplinary systems that provide deeper levels of experience in a domain and more positive, consistent bases for identity formation will tend to have the greatest effect on members' intuitions. These dynamics lead to our last proposition.

Proposition 4: The fostering of intuitions that are consistent with and extend an innovation will best be facilitated by a political strategy that

involves systems of discipline providing deep levels of experience and consistent bases for identity formation.

Our aim in this section has been to establish what we believe are the most critical links between stages of organizational learning and forms of power in organizations. We do not mean to suggest, however, that, in examining organizational learning at any stage, we will only find one form of power in operation. Influence, force, discipline, and domination are all ubiquitous in organizations, as are the different stages of learning; thus, in observing organizational life, we are very likely to see all possible combinations. Our point, therefore, is not that the connections we have proposed are the only possible ones but, rather, that they represent the combinations most likely to successfully advance the cycle of organizational learning.

CONCLUSION

In this note we have explored the political dynamics of organizational learning. To do so, we have drawn on and extended the model of organizational learning developed by Crossan et al. (1999), which provides a multilevel, processual framework that links the intuitions of individuals to the institutions of organizations, and vice versa. We have argued that although this framework provides a compelling basis for research on organizational learning, it neglects the role of power and politics and, consequently, is insufficient to address the issue concerning which new ideas will be transformed into organizational institutions and which institutions will provide the basis for further intuitions. From our perspective, power and politics provide the social energy that fuels these processes. Thus, the politics of organizational learning are not a dysfunctional aspect that needs to be remedied but, rather, are an intrinsic part of the process that should be appreciated and understood by organizational researchers and leveraged by managers and employees.

We have argued for a set of specific connections between political strategies and processes of organizational learning. More specifically, we have argued that influence is useful to overcome the ambiguity and uncertainty associated with interpretation, force facilitates the accomplishment of collective action in the integration

process, domination overcomes potential resistance to change and thus supports institutionalization, and discipline supports the development of the expertise that is necessary to foster intuition. We believe that our arguments have important implications for both research and practice.

Implications for Research

One important implication of this note involves the development of more finely grained conceptualizations of organizational learning. The importance of different forms of power in organizational learning means that organizations in which some forms of power are under- or overdeveloped may be unable to complete the whole organizational learning cycle. This could result in pathological learning modes that include only a subset of the whole process.

One example of this involves the short-lived adoption of management fads. Adopting a political perspective on this phenomenon allows us to see that one situation in which this innovation without real learning is likely to occur is when the episodic politics of an organization are disconnected from its systemic forms of power; new ideas appear and might become integrated into group-level activities, but the systemic forms of power that might institutionalize those ideas and engender new, consistent innovations are not employed.

A second pathological pattern would involve organizational change without innovation. This pattern might be seen in highly centralized organizations where senior managers rely on systems of domination to institutionalize practices but quash all of the episodes of influence and individual acts of force that might engender the trickling upward of learning from individuals to the organization.

A third possibility would involve institutionalization without intuition. If organizations rely solely on systems of domination to institutionalize an innovation and fail to enact systems of discipline in parallel, the result may be convergent behavior but uninspired thinking.

In this light, our analysis addresses what Crossan et al. (1999) identify as one of the main areas requiring future research—namely, developing a richer understanding of the tension between exploitation and exploration. Our argument suggests that organizations that lack

balance among the various types of power will also fail to manage the exploitation/exploration tension adequately: organizations where the expression of episodic power is inadequately nurtured will suffer from a lack of exploration, whereas organizations characterized by relatively weak systemic power will perform poorly in terms of exploitation. To paraphrase Mintzberg and Waters (1985), organizational learning walks on two feet—episodic and systemic power—and a lack of balance in power will result in an endless merry-go-round of activity without any real progress.

Implications for Practice

The most important practical implication concerns the role of champions in organizational learning. While the importance of innovation champions has been recognized for some time, the model we have developed suggests that a more nuanced understanding of champions is required in order to effectively foster organizational learning. Most critically, perhaps, our model suggests that the championing of an idea may require very different skills and resources (and consequently different champions) as the idea passes through the different processes of organizational learning.

The likelihood that an idea will successfully find its way through the interpreting process will be greatly improved if its champion has the will and skill to engage in the influence tactics necessary to gain its acceptance by others; such a champion will need to be able to access informal networks, frame the idea in a compelling manner, and manage the ambiguity of the process. In contrast, when an idea progresses to the point of being integrated into group activities, it is best championed by someone who has the authority to ensure that collective action is enforced and who has a direct link to the organization's dominant coalition.

If an idea has successfully survived these processes, it will then need a champion who is able to design and implement systems of domination in order to institutionalize the idea at the organizational level; such a person will likely come from within the organization's dominant coalition and will understand the dynamics of pan-organizational systems. Finally, for a new idea to spawn further intuitions that are consistent with and build on it, creative experts in the

organization will be needed: members who are sufficiently steeped in the disciplinary systems of the organization to recognize or imagine novel patterns and who can transform those patterns into compelling metaphors that might restart the whole set of processes.

In conclusion, we believe that having smart employees with great ideas is not enough. Managers who want to foster learning require a slate of employees with the appropriate political skills and resources, as well as connections among those employees so that ideas can flow from one process to the next. Managers must also recognize that organizational politics and organizational learning are not antithetical; in order to learn, organizations need active, interested members who are willing to engage in political behavior that pushes ideas forward and ensures their interpretation, integration, and institutionalization. Without that political behavior, new ideas may be generated by individuals, but organizations will never learn.

REFERENCES

- Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. 2000. Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26: 611–639.
- Blackler, F. 2000. Power, mastery and organizational learning. *Journal of Management Studies*, 37: 833–851.
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, J. S., & Duguid, P. 1991. Organizational learning and communities-of-practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning and innovation. *Organization Science*, 2: 40–57.
- Burgoyne, J., & Jackson, B. 1997. The arena thesis: Management development as a pluralistic meeting point. In J. Burgoyne & M. Reynolds (Eds.), *Management learning: Integrating perspectives in theory and practice*: 54–70. London: Sage.
- Cialdini, R. B. 2000. *Influence: Science and practice*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Clegg, S. 1989. *Frameworks of power*. London: Sage.
- Coopey, J., & Burgoyne, J. 2000. Politics and organizational learning. *Journal of Management Studies*, 37: 869–885.
- Covalesski, M. A., Dirsmith, M. W., Heian, J. B., & Sajay, S. 1998. The calculated and the avowed: Techniques of discipline and struggles over identity in the Big Six public accounting firms. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 43: 293–327.
- Crossan, M., & Guatto, T. 1996. Organizational learning research profile. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 9: 107–112.
- Crossan, M., Lane, H., & White, R. 1999. An organizational learning framework: From intuition to institution. *Academy of Management Review*, 24: 522–537.
- Daft, R. L., & Weick, K. E. 1984. Toward a model of organizations as interpretation systems. *Academy of Management Review*, 9: 284–295.
- DiMaggio, P. J. 1988. Interest and agency in institutional theory. In L. G. Zucker (Ed.), *Institutional patterns and organizations: Culture and environment*: 3–22. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.
- Dreyfus, H., & Dreyfus, S. 1986. *Mind over machine: The power of human intuition and expertise in the era of the computer*. New York: Free Press.
- Dutton, J. E., & Dukerich, J. M. 1991. Keeping an eye on the mirror: Image and identity in organizational adaptation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 34: 517–554.
- Dyck, B. 1997. Understanding configuration and transformation through a multiple rationalities approach. *Journal of Management Studies*, 34: 793–823.
- Fiol, C. M. 2001. All for one and one for all? The development and transfer of power across organizational levels. *Academy of Management Review*, 26: 224–242.
- Fligstein, N. 1997. Social skill and institutional theory. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 40: 397–405.
- Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Fox, S. 2000. Communities of practice, Foucault and actor-network theory. *Journal of Management Studies*, 37: 853–867.
- French, J. R. P., & Raven, B. 1959. The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright & A. Zander (Eds.), *Studies in social power*: 150–167. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research.
- Giddens, A. 1984. *The constitution of society: Outline of a theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hardy, C., & Clegg, S. R. 1996. Some dare call it power. In S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy, & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of organization studies*: 622–641. London: Sage.
- Huber, G. 1991. Organizational learning: The contributing processes and the literatures. *Organization Science*, 2: 88–115.
- Jepperson, R. L. 1991. Institutions, institutional effects, and institutionalism. In W. W. Powell & P. J. DiMaggio (Eds.), *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*: 143–163. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jermier, J. M., Knights, D., & Nord, W. 1994. *Resistance and power in organizations*. New York: Routledge.
- Kipnis, D., Schmidt, S. M., & Wilkinson, I. 1980. Intraorganizational influence tactics: Explorations in getting one's way. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 65: 440–452.
- Knights, D., & Wilmott, H. 1989. From degradation to subjugation in social relations: An analysis of power and subjectivity at work. *Sociology*, 23: 535–538.
- Krackhardt, D., & Hanson, J. R. 1993. Informal networks: The company behind the chart. *Harvard Business Review*, 71(4): 104–111.

- Lachman, R. 1989. Power from what? A reexamination of its relationships with structural conditions. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 34: 231–251.
- Lawrence, T. B. 1999. Institutional strategy. *Journal of Management*, 25: 161–187.
- Lawrence, T. B., Winn, M., & Jennings, P. D. 2001. The temporal dynamics of institutionalization. *Academy of Management Review*, 26: 624–644.
- Mintzberg, H., & Waters, J. 1985. Of strategies, deliberate and emergent. *Strategic Management Journal*, 6: 257–272.
- Noble, D. 1984. *Forces of production: A social history of industrial automation*. New York: Knopf.
- Nonaka, I. 1994. A dynamic theory of organizational knowledge creation. *Organization Science*, 5: 14–37.
- Pfeffer, J. 1981. *Power in organizations*. Marshfield, MA: Pitman.
- Scott, J. R. 2001. *Power*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Scott, W. R. 2000. *Institutions and organizations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sewell, G. 1998. The discipline of teams: The control of team-based industrial work through electronic and peer surveillance. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 43: 397–428.
- Shaiken, H. 1984. *Automation and labor in the computer age*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Shen, W., & Cannella, A. A., Jr. 2002. Power dynamics within top management and their impacts on CEO dismissal followed by inside succession. *Academy of Management Journal*, 45: 1195–1206.
- Townley, B. 1993. Foucault, power/knowledge, and its relevance for human resource management. *Academy of Management Review*, 18: 518–545.
- Weick, K. E. 1995. *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Whetten, D. A., & Godfrey, P. C. 1998. *Identity in organizations: Building theory through conversations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Yukl, G., & Falbe, C. M. 1990. Influence tactics and objectives in upward, downward, and lateral influence attempts. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 75: 132–140.

Thomas B. Lawrence is the Weyerhaeuser Professor of Change Management at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. He received his Ph.D. in organizational analysis from the University of Alberta. His research focuses on the dynamics of power, change, and institutions in organizations and organizational fields.

Michael K. Mauws is associate professor of business strategy and entrepreneurship at Athabasca University in Athabasca, Alberta. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Alberta. His current research interests vacillate between the textual construction of organization identity and the effects of organization on individual morality.

Bruno Dyck is a professor in the I. H. Asper School of Business at the University of Manitoba. He received his Ph.D. in business from the University of Alberta. His research interests include organizational learning, radical management and organization theory, a theology of management, and moral points of view of management.

Robert F. Kleysen is doing outreach to homeless men and women in Toronto and lives in a Catholic Worker community. He was a Ph.D. student in the I. H. Asper School of Business at the University of Manitoba when this article was first being written. He has an MBA (Fordham) and an MSW (NYU). His interests include organizational learning, voluntary simplicity, social ethics, and radical gospel.

Copyright of Academy of Management Review is the property of Academy of Management and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.