TAKING POWER SERIOUSLY IN STRATEGIC ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

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

We begin by sketching the organizational learning perspective on strategic management and attempt to show how it takes the social aspects of organizing more seriously than earlier perspectives on strategy. We then note CMS’s critique of organizational learning theories and build on the critiques to re-conceptualize blockages to organizational learning. We suggest that rather than seeing these obstacles as accidental and benign, they are more effectively seen as systematic and inherent in organizational cultures that tend to institutionalize sectional interests, resulting in systematic marginalization of certain interest groups and inhibit organizational learning. We conclude by arguing that effective implementation strategy making as a vehicle for organizational learning requires continuing examination of power dynamics in organizations and overcoming the processes that silence and marginalize various groups and interests.

We conclude this paper by joining other writers in calling for a less managerialist research in strategy. Watson (1994) suggests three criteria for non-managerialist organization theory: it does not privilege the managers’ view of reality, it does not exclude concepts that might be distasteful or ideologically discomforting to managers, and it can potentially inform the actions of any other interest group – not just managers (p. 216). This kind of research would perhaps be more managerially relevant because it would provide a deeper understanding of organizational behavior, since it would cover not only “variables” that can be manipulated by managers but also those that are outside of managerial control (Watson, 1994), which is particularly important for fostering organizational learning and strategic learning. It would therefore provide more realistic and non-faddish prescriptions to managers. It would also help them make more informed decisions about whether their organizations are ready to implement the highly destabilizing processes needed for strategic learning. One way to generate more non-managerialist but managerially relevant research in strategy is to take seriously the role of power in organizational behavior in general and in strategy making and strategic organizational learning.