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# The Future of Management Education:

## Reconsidering Professional Education and Action Learning

*We are currently witnessing a duality in management pedagogy: an objective approach represented by the professional education model, and an interpretative approach represented by action learning. Professional education emphasizes theory, academic assessment, breadth of subject matter, and technical problem-solving. Action learning values practice, managerial assessment, depth of subject matter, and problem finding. The author suggests a reformulation of graduate management education that goes beyond a synthesis of the two extant approaches.*

Management education at this time is struggling with two important yet dichotomous approaches: the objective approach characterizing the professional education model, and the interpretative approach, of which a leading example is the action learning model.

### The Professional Education Model

The Professional Education Model is based on the idea that objective knowledge in the field of management can be discovered and isolated using positivist experimental methods that are themselves based upon objective modes of theory testing. Once developed in this way, objective knowledge can be codified and subsequently taught in the classroom with the presumption that the principles imparted can be universally applied in practice. There is thus a bifurcation of theory and prac-

tice into separate domains. Academics develop theory and practitioners apply it, and the latter contribute to knowledge production more as subjects than as original thinkers.

The principal difficulty confronting the objective approach is its contention that the managerial phenomena under investigation can be defined in terms of contextually independent units. Since much of what might be generalizable in managerial behavior cannot easily be observed, we theorize about it, that is, we develop propositions through which we can observe the consequences. Confident that such propositions can be taught to individuals without prior or concurrent experience, the professional education model is based on the notion that knowledge in a profession can be substantially learned prior to entering the field.

The professional education model was largely uncontested as the requisite learning paradigm throughout the bulk of this half-century. However, well-publicized critiques of North American MBA programs, suggesting the helplessness of their so-called professional students, let alone their recent unmarketability, have dethroned the model from its former lofty position. Most of the criticism is based on the contention that graduates of the prototypical MBA program learn analytic detachment over insight. They tend to be narrow, short-term oriented, and overly technical, and, after their training, they actually reduce their commitment to life-long learning. MBA programs risk leaving students with the impression that management problems can be nestled into neat technical packages. As a result, their graduates may not be able to think independently, function without sufficient data or extrapolate beyond given data, change their approach in midstream, negotiate, or continually reflect and inquire.

Nevertheless, the traditional model we associate here with professional education offers some distinct advantages, particularly to the extent that one values basic theory as it applies to practice. Indeed, theory's role is often to throw light on the assumptions underlying practice. Further, we cannot afford to leave the domain of practice exclusively to the busy practitioner. Theory, in illuminating and describing action, can provide managers with a common language and wide powers of analysis. Finally, aside from theory alone, there are some technical subjects, such as financial accounting and control, that are perhaps most effectively taught in a comprehensive and

self-contained manner, in other words, using the traditional classroom setting.

## The Action Learning Approach

The alternative, interpretative approach, upon which action learning (AL) is based, holds some very different assumptions. Embracing rather than discarding the idea that knowledge is contextually defined, it assumes that the reality of management may be interpreted differently by the observed and the observer. Hence, it is committed to bridging the gap between the formal knowledge derived from theory and the tacit knowledge acquired in practice. It shuns the introduction of theory without almost immediate exposure or application to practice. In the interpretive approach, practitioners are not only encouraged to contribute to knowledge but they are also given a critical role in determining its usefulness. Hence, generalization to management practice is not derived as much from theory as from reflection on the concrete cases in which one is involved. Under these circumstances, management education represents an opportunity for managers in action to pause, reflect upon, and reframe their problems not only from their own insight but from the feedback of other similarly disposed managers. Learning is thus just-in-time in the sense that it is delivered in the appropriate doses, at the most appropriate time, and with the proper developmental experience so that is can be immediately applied. Rather than learn about an approach, such as situational leadership, for example, the manager would learn the necessary metaskills to exercise judgment in leadership in real settings.

A particular interpretative model, known as action learning, has become fairly well-established in the U.K. but is practically unknown in North America. It is based upon the idea that managers (as students) learn most effectively with and from other managers and teachers while all are engaged in the solution of actual, real-time problems occurring in their own work settings. It emphasizes learning by doing. Often, the "doing" is preceded by a theoretical modular unit on a given topic or functional area of management. Following the presentation of this conventional component, programs typically incorporate a real live project that is sanctioned by organizational sponsors and that has potential value not only to the participant but to the organizational unit to which the project is attached. Projects, then, have

recognized clients who take a genuine interest in the assignment, but who at the same time apply normal business pressures to ensure a high quality outcome within a particular period of time. Throughout the program, managers work through the projects with assistance from other participants as well as from qualified facilitators who help the managers make sense of their project experiences in light of relevant theory and managerial competencies.

As might be expected, not all organizational problems are solved. Moreover, proposed solutions may be deemed by management to be too costly in time or money. It is even possible that participants may realize that no quick solution is available. Hence, the experience tends to confront participants with the constraints of organizational realities, leading oftentimes to their discovery of alternative and creative means to accomplish their objectives. In any event, projects almost always require some kind of output that can be evaluated. Often, a lengthy written statement detailing project aims, performance, and recommendations is prepared. This report, however, is not meant merely to describe the "results" as much as to detail the learning and competencies addressed in the experience as well as the real constraints that may have blocked proposed interventions.

The action referred to in action learning cannot be temporary or simulated. Students need to take real positions, make moral judgments, and defend them under pressure. Dealing exclusively with simulated events risks defusing or abstracting their live conflicts. Cooperation typically is obtained where it otherwise might be impossible, and problems of an emotional or political nature get neatly analyzed into solutions. What action learning as a form of management education tends to elicit—as opposed to contrived experiential approaches or case analyses—is managerial behavior, not student behavior. Unfortunately, in most other experiential methods, students derive knowledge about management but are most likely lacking in knowledge about their own capacity to take action, or more simply, how to take action.

There is no more powerful learning device in the action learning method than the learning team or tutorial group that assembles managers working on real problems in their respective organizations. During the team sessions, the managers discuss not only the practical dilemmas arising from actions in their work settings, but the applications or misapplications of theories and concepts to these actions. Further, the team develops a social culture in its

own right that presents participants with lessons regarding group dynamics. Finally, learning team members provide encouragement to one another. Team dialogue, then, teaches the critical managerial lessons of providing and accepting criticism and support, and testing publicly one's espoused values and beliefs.

As is evident from the foregoing discussion of action learning, theory is not separated, be it temporally or epistemologically, from practice. Action learning disputes the view that management can be learned in an isolated lecture apart from experience. The principles introduced in an instructional module become meaningful only to the extent that they are deliberately introduced into practice. As suggested above, no laboratory or simulated experience can replace the test of real experience to assess the impact of theory.

Nevertheless, action learning detractors feel that most AL programs privilege practice at the expense of theory, at times to the point of being anti-intellectual. There is much in theory that can inform spontaneous inquiry. Theory releases practitioners to see the problems they confront in new lights; further, it might even reveal problems heretofore undiscovered or left fallow for lack of recognizable solutions. There are also concerns about whether action learning programs are truly concerned with management education per se, since their methods are more akin to what we commonly think of as management development.

Some of the methods of action learning have made their way into formal educational programs based on the professional model. They can also be used in a management development context, for example, by presenting students with prearranged, short theoretical modules and then exposing them to select organizational problems.

## The Contributions of Professional Education and Action Learning According to Six Pedagogical Domains

So management education now has its own duality to contend with as it searches for a resolution of its two extant traditions. This article takes the view that neither a formal synthesis nor a winner-take-all competition is the way to resolve this duality. Rather, we need to carefully examine the critical contributions offered by both schools in an effort to develop new pedagogical models. The resolution of the current dichotomy in management educa-

tion therefore may emerge not so much as a synthesis as a reformulation that both integrates some prior perspectives and at the same time develops some altogether new domains of practicing thought.

Before considering any new alternatives, it might be useful initially to outline the respective contributions of the professional education and action learning models, and, in comparison to one another, their limitations. We start by presenting in Table 1 some carefully chosen domains that can illuminate some of the key pedagogical decisions in graduate management education. For purposes of this exposition, the two sides are presented as endpoints along a continuum. In reality, they are closer together; for example, some professional education approaches emphasize practice in their use of experiential methods and skill-practice classes. Likewise, some action learning programs pay great heed to the exposition of theory in order to introduce particular functional subjects. Yet, the continuum format, though overdrawn, is designed to show substantially different philosophical approaches that might lead to integrative schemes or even reformulations of both the content and process of management education. The discussion to follow briefly considers the six pedagogical domains depicted in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**
**Professional Education vs. Action Learning:**
**The Domains of Graduate Management Education**

**Professional Education** ——————— **Action Learning**

| Professional Education | Action Learning |
| --- | --- |
| Theory | Practice |
| Academic Assessment | Managerial Assessment |
| Breadth | Depth |
| Technical Problem-solving | Problem-finding |
| Teacher-centered Focus | Learner-centered Focus |
| Protected Experimentation | Real Risks |

## Theory vs. Practice

As stated earlier, theory is the principal means of challenging the assumptions underlying day-to-day practice. Using theory, the manager/student is able to reflect upon and actively experiment on the outcomes of any meaningful intervention. It further introduces the manager/student to principles that can be applied across new and different problems in different contexts. Hence, theory is virtually necessary in management education if students are to develop the capacity to deal with change and with the future. Most conventional MBA programs, although increasingly skeptical of presenting theory in isolation, clearly find it convenient to present theory using traditional lecture and discussion methods. Their challenge seems to be one of introducing it so that its message leaps off the page and into the problems of the workplace.

Action learning has already been cited as privileging practice at the expense of theory. It starts with the assumption that practice must be experienced in real time, using actual live, not simulated, problems attendant to one's job with all its accompanying pressures and responsibilities. But, practice and theory must converge so that one may inform the other. Beyond merely engaging them, however, action learning needs to be developed in such a way that instructors as well as students create a theory of practice to assist in making sense out of the confusing situations confronting the manager each day. This latter development, which Donald Schön (1983) refers to as "reflection-in-action," would be characterized by a rethinking process that attempts to discover how what one did contributed to an unexpected or expected outcome, taking into account factors unique to the interplay between the individual manager and his/her local operating context as well as the interplay between theory and practice.

## Academic vs. Managerial Assessment

If theory's role in graduate management education is as much to inform practice as to be developed for its own sake, then assessment of theoretical competency using professional education formats, namely through formal, written examination, becomes inherently problematic. It is also commonly known that those managerial students receiving the highest grades do not always make the best managers. Furthermore, managerial excellence may

emerge at different stages in varying degrees during one's career. Hence, it may not be entirely appropriate to use standard academic criteria as the basis for assessment and even admission to graduate management programs. However, if a theoretical review of a certain literature is confined to a problem or project, as it tends to be in action learning, and not to an overall presentation of a subject cluster, then how can external examiners of programs be assured that students know enough about the principal theoretical contributions associated with a given managerial subfield to be regarded as having mastered it?

The problem for action learning in this instance is determining the criteria to be used in assessing project work or papers attached to specific company-based assignments. Perhaps the criteria should be those associated with everyday workplace assessment. The danger, of course, is that using managerial experience as the sole basis for the curriculum and using managerial performance as the sole basis for the assessment of educational performance might be insufficient indicators of the critical competencies that we would desire our managers to have once certified through our graduate programs.

## *Breadth vs. Depth of Subject Coverage*

In spite of the occasional call for more specialization in traditional MBA programs to distinguish them from undergraduate business degrees, the essence of professional education is breadth of coverage. The fundamental curricular assumption is that students should obtain a foundation in the core functional subjects, specialize somewhat in their majors or concentrations, and then fill in the gaps in their knowledge on the job. One cannot hope to be effective as a manager without at least some basic grounding in the core disciplines. Yet, reliance on course work has been called into question. Where courses have made an impact, they have been reported as being interlaced with experience, to have occurred later rather than during the initial phases of one's career, to have dealt with general management issues surfaced through interaction with other managers, and to have offered insight through direct application to current problems. So, there is some doubt about the value of presenting an overview of the critical subjects of management without applying some of the existing theory in depth to current issues.

In action learning formats, the student may pick one area of study using selected theories and probe to a depth that often exceeds the available resources supplied by a teacher or a learning team facilitator. However, this probing, though stimulating, search activity as part of the learning process is sometimes made at the expense of breadth of coverage.

### Technical Problem-solving vs. Problem-finding

One of the benefits of programs enrolling experienced managers is the value of applying classroom knowledge almost immediately to problems encountered in the work environment. Since full-time students do not have the luxury of untangling a messy problem as part of their job, they and their professors may find it more comfortable to work on technical problems that almost always afford a clear answer. Unfortunately, the same lectures prepared for the full-timers, indeed the same classroom methods, are typically recycled in the part-time classes. Yet, the technical analytic approach is limited in what it can offer the general manager. Even the exalted case method often suggests rather neat solutions to what are typically personal, emotional, and political problems.

Action learning presents the student with the need to acquire an aptitude (rather than a skill) to change one's approach in midstream and often to use new information and ideas never before taught. So, rather than seeking solutions to already formulated problems, it challenges students virtually to "find" problems in existing systems. Students develop confidence in questioning long-held assumptions and use both individual and collective imagination in proposing new ways of doing things. Nevertheless, without analytic problem-solving skills, client or peer-based approaches may deprive the manager of frameworks for interpreting familiar yet conditional phenomena.

### Teacher vs. Learner-centered Focus

Although the traditional teacher can be very creative in forming learning cells that simulate work experiences and present problems to students that they themselves must confront and resolve, the direction of learning typically leads from the teacher to the student. In part-time education, this need not be the case since the day-to-day operating problems of the student may constitute the basis for the lesson. Yet, the tradition in professional educa-

tion is still to rely upon the teacher to structure the lesson.

In action learning the role of the teacher changes. Although teachers introduce new material, once in learning teams their role changes to that of informed observer and reflector of actual experiences. Facilitators serve to expedite team development, provide support, and demonstrate both the use of theory in practice as well as bring out theory from practice. Of course, the roles of teachers and facilitators in here are those occupied in some programs by different people. Nevertheless, by relying on student problems as curricular input, are we not sacrificing the perspective of the academic professional—the teacher—who by initiating a lesson might demonstrate some established methods and ideas for responding to a variety of managerial dilemmas?

## *Protected Experimentation vs. Real Risk*

The academic environment provides a safe haven to study organizational life objectively and reflectively. It is critical that experienced managers take time during their careers to question their purposes and intentions with trusted colleagues. In this way, they may be able to narrow the persistent gap in management between one's espoused beliefs and one's practices. Although one can anticipate ethical dilemmas in subsequent experience, novices are often overcome by socialization pressures—to conform, to be loyal, to fit in —once they embark on their careers. It is perhaps more appropriate that experienced managers be given an opportunity to reflect upon their values in practice, but in a protected environment. Yet, in action learning, does the program afford the necessary security to allow public reflection when one may be discussing sensitive corporate matters with one's immediate peers present? Might there be a threat to academic autonomy and freedom when relations with corporate sponsors become dependent on minimal conformity to corporate standards and compliance with rules governing corporate secrets? As action learning occurs by definition in real time, there may be a limit as to how much experimentation one is willing to undertake when real risks are at stake. Of course, pressure to conform is not an unfamiliar constraint in the traditional academic environment and thus requires equal surveillance by the academic professional.

## Toward a New Approach to Management Education

The foregoing discussion has highlighted the contributions made by the two current dominant traditions in management education according to six pedagogical domains. It has further suggested that these traditions are in a dichotomous state and thus ripe for resolution. The analysis will continue by reconsidering each of the six domains in turn and offering a resolution which, in some cases, will be a synthesis, in others, a somewhat new formulation. The resolution is depicted in Table 2 below.

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**Table 2**
**Resolution of Professional Education and Action Learning**
**Domains:  Toward a New Model of Management Education**

| From | To |
|---|---|
| Theory | |
| Practice | Theory of Practice |
| | |
| Academic Assessment | |
| Managerial Assessment | Strategic Assessment |
| | |
| Breadth | |
| Depth | Wisdom |
| | |
| Technical Problem Solving | |
| Problem-Finding | Contradiction |
| | |
| Teacher-centered Focus | |
| Learner-centered Focus | Learning Environment |
| | |
| Protected Experimentation | |
| Real Risks | Collaborative Forum |

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## *A Theory of Practice*

Although theory and practice each make important contributions to man-

agement education, their continued separate treatment can become dysfunctional unless we concurrently develop an epistemology of inquiry that can allow practitioners to contribute to the knowledge base. We are still quite uninformed about the tacit processes and sense-making underlying managers' work and thus have very few cognitive models to consult in order to appreciate their epistemic development. For example, we don't know enough about how experts develop the ability to reframe in action rather than stop and think as novices are inclined to do. Some of the skills that theoreticians of practice need to help us differentiate would be frame analysis, pattern recognition, and reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983; Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986). For example, if a pattern conventionally used to respond to a given situation no longer fits because of changes in the situation, how does a practitioner learn to reframe the situation online and perhaps alter the ineffectual pattern? Deeper understanding of reflective practices can be particularly important in these instances to help free practicing managers from habitual and oftentimes inflexible ways of viewing phenomena (Freire, 1970).

## *Strategic Assessment*

Regarding the role of assessment, student evaluation should include academic and managerial components but should incorporate a broader strategic perspective focusing on the student's recognition of the complexity of the environment of business, including an appreciation of the organization's key markets and constituencies. In this way, management education and development become linked to corporate strategy. The strategic process, a form of future sense-making to enhance the readiness and competitiveness of the organization and all its systems to respond to unpredictable environmental demands, requires a team effort and thus should be applicable at all levels of management. The development of strategic leadership, defined by Vicere (1992) as the ability of managers to stay the course in an organization while continually "rocking the boat," should be ongoing so as to insure the full participation by all managers in the strategic process. Strategic assessment casts a wide net around the manager's potential in order to incorporate such orientations as interpersonal relations, development of others, network-building, development of new markets, and even self-worth. Hence, while strategy shapes management education, management education in its own

right, in its development of leaders and corporate citizens, becomes a key source of competitive advantage.

## *Wisdom*

Although management phenomena are usefully examined in both breadth and depth, both approaches may be insufficient when preparing to confront novel or even contradictory situations. Each tends to be applied with a supposition that the field of management can be known in advance using systematic, logical inquiry. It's just a matter of correctly compartmentalizing the field or applying the right criteria to fit the right problems.

Once managers enter the world of practice, no matter how hard they try to apply universal criteria or use advanced analytic techniques, they confront cultural, moral, and personal idiosyncrasies that defy categorization. Moreover, probing for the most elegant solution to a heretofore undefinable solution has little value without an understanding of the social construction of the organizational system in question.

Heretofore deemed unteachable in many quarters, the fundamental domain of wisdom needs revisiting, that is, for ways to add values back into knowledge. Wise people go far beyond scientific explanations of puzzling phenomena, for they also consider what needs to be explained. They recognize that theories and techniques are themselves value-laden and thus become subject to ethical as well as empirical criticism. Pedagogical approaches that encourage students to explore the personal processes through which they construct reality, and that invite their peers to share their own enactments might serve to accelerate the acquisition of wisdom. Finally, although long proposed by Argyris (1982), we need to create online learning environments that permit and encourage managers to test their mental models, especially their inferences and assumptions about others and their own behavior.

## *Contradiction*

Not replacing but supplementing both problem-solving and problem-finding is the notion of contradiction. This domain brings out the stark observation that many of our ideas and analyses of managerial and organizational phenomena are assumptions and only assumptions, and that, at times, we really cannot forecast the future let alone understand the present. Learning

in this instance may be characterized more by interpretation than by description and analysis.

There is a place, nevertheless, for traditional problem-solving, especially when dealing with recursive processes that would be pointless to re-craft. Likewise, problem-finding is called for when the need to sustain a vision becomes primordial to the organization or unit. Whereas traditional professional education excels at teaching technical problem-solving and analysis, action learning formats do a better job helping students develop problem-finding capacities, such as developing creative responses or questioning current practices.

Action learning typically does not go far enough, however, in exposing students to work contradictions or situations never before conceived. Managers need to learn how to conduct themselves when faced with persistent change and uncertainty. They need to reformulate continuously how to do their job and develop new tools on the spot to address altered work scenarios. What is being called for is a broadening of action learning to make it as much experimental as existential. Hence, action learning project work might address not only existing problems in the field but also novel or even at times mundane issues that, although not classically problematic, could be framed or reframed and then acted upon. For example, a manager might be asked to examine an accounting system that is functioning perfectly well but has neglected the accounting of a social cost, be it environmental degradation or employee malaise, heretofore not borne by the company.

### Learning Environment

There are naturally times when teachers should take responsibility for learning within a group and other times when the responsibility should shift to the student. It is not so much a question of which focus to emphasize but rather one of creating a learning environment where everyone is free to study and to grow. Teachers in a learning environment, then, being as committed to the learning process as their students, would not impose interpretive schemes on the problem field. They might, of course, volunteer their frame of the situation online and might propose various inquiry modes. For example, they might contribute their skills in individual creative processes or in group decision making techniques, much as a facilitator would do in a

learning team.

The learning environment values diversity, not so much of preconceived demographic categories, but of perspectives. It benefits from the full contribution of various stakeholders, who view the content of the problem field from personalized dimensions, as well as of thinkers, who contribute various modes by which to consider the process of the activity. A learning environment thus seeks to establish a functional interdependence among diverse perspectives in order to account for changing circumstances, values, and needs.

## Collaborative Forum

Rather than choose untested experimentation in the superficial academic environment or real problems constrained by organizational conformity, the educational setting might be configured as a collaborative forum wherein academic programs and their far-sighted corporate sponsors might mutually engage to develop new ideas and approaches. Using the aforementioned concept of learning environment, the collaborative forum assembles not only a diverse set of stakeholders but an unbounded set of perspectives so as to receive the input of a wide range of opinions and values in the inquiry process. The structural principle represented here is often referred to as a heterarchy wherein responsibility for learning becomes everyone's responsibility. The structure is fluid and open and is purposely not meant to settle into a fixed hierarchical mode. Indeed, leadership of the forum might shift according to the capacities of those who are able to contribute. Finally, although these democratic procedures receive a good deal of attention, the collaborative forum would nevertheless focus ultimately on the consequences of democratic action. The consequences refer to change and transformation at the institutional level and learning and growth at the individual level.

The six domains just depicted represent ideas that together may form the cornerstone of a new model of management education and development. It has evolved as a resolution of our two current traditions and is not so much a unique model as a proposed improvement of professional education and action learning. Whereas some of the new domains are syntheses of current dichotomies, for example, a learning environment interconnects and expands upon the contributions of teacher and student-centered modalities, others

offer somewhat new and experimental formulations. For example, wisdom, heretofore considered largely unteachable, goes far beyond the coverage of breadth and depth of subject matter to the questioning of underlying values and mindsets. It is hoped that the resolution proposed here represents just one among many anticipated reformulations to extend the boundaries of management education and development.

NOTE: Portions of this article appeared in *Management Learning*, 25 (2): 1994, and are reprinted with permission of Sage Ltd.

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