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Managerial Learning, Organizational Learning A Potentially Powerful Redundancy

In prior and forthcoming theoretical and empirical work (Torbert, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1994; Fisher and Torbert, 1994), I advocate and illustrate that only those relatively rare managers and organizations that undergo repeated developmental transformations are capable of intentionally and reliably engaging in their own learning and of supporting others and subsystems in transformational learning. In this short article, all the earlier work on detailed illustration and measurement of the earlier stages (see, particularly, Torbert, 1987) is taken for granted and represented only by Table 1.

Here, I would like to illustrate ways of organizing managerial and organizational learning so that both happen at once, during the real-time work of the organization. After offering two illustrations, I argue that developmentally later-stage managers and later-stage organizations (Stages 6–8 in Table 1) integrate individual and organizational learning, as well as productive work and self-challenging inquiry, as a matter of course. The two illustrations support this proposition in that the consultant and the company president in each of the illustrations are measured at one of the later managerial stages, and the inter-

ventions in each case reflect the integrative logic just mentioned.

If this argument and these illustrations are generalizable, for later-stage managers and later-stage organizations, productive work, managerial learning and organizational transformation occur simultaneously. This coincidence is a powerful redundancy that, when enacted, gives such managers and organizations

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Table 1 Stages of			
personal and			
organizational			
development			

Managers (N = 497) at stage (%)	Stage	Personal development	Organizational development
0	1	Impulsive Impulses rule reflexes	Conception Dreams about creating new organization
2	2	Opportunist Needs rule impulses commitments	Investments Spiritual, network and financial
8	3	Diplomat Norms rule needs	Incorporation Products or services satisfy market or political constituency
46	4	Technician Craft logic rules norms	Experiments Alternative structures and strategies tested
34	5	Achiever System effectiveness rules craft logic	Systematic productivity Single structure/strategy institutionalized
10	6	Strategist Principle rules system	Collaborative inquiry Self-amending structure to match dream/mission
0	7	Witch, clown, magician Process (interplay of principle/action) rules principle	Foundational community Structure fails, spirit sustains
0	8	Ironist Intersystemic development rules process	Liberating disciplines Widen members' awareness of splits or alignments among mission/ structure/operations/ outcomes

Source: Torbert and Fisher (1992a: 185), based on Torbert (1987, 1991a).

a significant competitive advantage in generating continual quality improvement over earlier-stage managers and organizations.

Obviously, the two illustrations offered prove nothing, being but two cases. Instead, they are intended to bring this idea to life in the imagination of the reader. Then, the reader may choose to test the underlying theory further by an action inquiry process in his or her own life and organization (see Fisher and Torbert, 1994, for guidance).

Illustration I

The president of a small, but rapidly growing and already geographically dispersed organization asks a consultant to design a two-day quarterly retreat for the 40 managers who constitute the top three layers of management in the organization. 'The people equation is the most difficult, recurrent, and intractable issue', says the president, 'and we need our managers to have new core competences that include recognizing and taking responsibility for the impact their actions have on one another and for the organizational values that their actions are creating'. The president proposes a lecture/discussion of the consultant's theory of managerial and organizational development and some skill-building sessions.

The consultant interviews six members of the organization by phone and returns to the president with a plan for the two days that interweaves managerial and organizational learning in ways which, if successful, will directly transform the organization. Instead of pure skill-building sessions, the consultant proposes (and the president agrees after some concern about the risks) that the staff meet in four cross-functional/cross-locational groups to develop new ways of organizing in the four areas that the interviews have indicated are of greatest concern: (1) Budget Development; (2) Recruiting and Training; (3) Internal Communications; and (4) Meeting Management. Senior management is asked to be prepared to make binding decisions with regard to the proposals before the end of the retreat (and such decisions are in fact made at the actual retreat). Thus are inquiry and productive action integrated at the retreat. We can also see that this procedure will result in organizational learning and change.

The meeting processes arranged for the retreat show how managerial learning and organizational learning are interwoven. Each of the groups of ten is to be managed through five leadership roles, and each leadership role will be held by two members. The two persons with the most influence over the ultimate implementation of any changes in that area serve in the 'expert and follow-through' leadership role. The other four leadership roles are 'meeting leader', 'decision clarifier and codifier', 'process facilitator', and 'clown' (whose express function is to make 'outside the box' comments, use humor, and turn suggestions inside-out in order to see whether they are thereby improved). Members are to be assigned roles that their fellow group members judge are most developmentally provocative for them. (For example, the president later finds himself assigned a 'clown' role, and plays it so well that several extravagant stories about his performance quickly make the rounds!)

Without reproducing here any of the detailed supports provided, the schedule in outline calls for an initial presentation/discussion, led by the consultant, that connects the managerial and organizational development theory to the history and dilemmas of this organization.

Then, the conference splits into the four topic areas. In each case, one sub-group of five is to develop a set of proposals in one hour, while the other sub-group of five observes their role-mates and gives five minutes of feedback at the end of the first half hour and again at the end of the hour. After a short break, the observers and the actors switch roles, with the same feedback arrangements, and the new actors come up with a different set of proposals for the same concern (e.g. budget development). After another short break, the entire group of ten develops an agreed-upon proposal. These organizing processes provide individual managers with an unusual amount of immediate feedback about their leadership choices, while at the same time increasing the likelihood that divergent views on the organizational issues are developed, considered seriously, and resolved.

The next morning, each of the four groups makes 10-minute presentations to the other 30 managers, followed by five minutes of discussion and written feedback from each person. Each group is given half an hour to digest the feedback they have received. Then the entire group reconvenes for two-minute comments by their (senior management) 'follow-through' leaders on how their proposals have been influenced by the feedback and what they are committing to do as of the next day in the office. The consultant next leads a discussion debriefing the entire exercise and then leaves the room while the management group develops feedback for him.

At the end of the actual meeting, the feedback included suggestions such as 'needed more leadership for group assignments at outset', as well as positive comments such as 'great to see branch participation without corporate interference', 'meetings in this organization will never be the same again', and 'progression and program was great and lack of structure strengthened learning'. On a scale of 1–7 (where 1 meant 'time wasted', 4 meant 'As good as an average quarterly retreat', and 7 meant 'best quarterly retreat ever'), this retreat was rated 6.5 on average. Major changes in all four areas of concern followed.

The point of this illustration and the next is not to document any particular changes in managerial or organizational learning, but rather to illustrate a context in which both occur at once as a matter of course, and where inquiry and productive work are also integrated.

Illustration II

A fast-growing organization hires a new vice-president of marketing after the resignation of his predecessor (see Torbert, 1992b). After nine months, the new vice-president appears to be generating some of the same problematic effects as his predecessor, despite significant differences in managerial style. Whereas the predecessor was relatively loud, enthusiastic, and motivating, the new vice-president is relatively quiet and concerned with accountability. Nevertheless, both have

spoken up relatively little in senior management meetings despite repeated invitations; both have seemed to underinform their areas about company-wide direction; and both have generated enough discomfort among their subordinates about the ethical nature of some of their actions for the president to hear about it.

The president is very careful not to pre-judge the new vice-president on the basis of limited information, and also recognizes that the apparently close analogy between the predecessor and the current vice-president may point to an organizational issue rather than a personnel issue. Indeed, the president proposes that the entire senior management group create an executive development process for itself. The senior management team agrees, deciding to define together: (1) standards for the 'ideal' senior management team member; (2) developmental issues that the team as a whole faces; and (3) a first-year set of developmental objectives for each member. At the same time, the president raises the specific issues she is aware of with the marketing vice-president and, together, they hire a consultant to work with the vice-president and the marketing managers.

In this initial sequence of events, we see how the president generates two whole sets of organizational learning processes (one for senior management, one for the marketing managers) as part of her response to the dilemma with the marketing vice-president.

After interviewing the vice-president and the six marketing/sales managers (see Table 2 for interview schedule), the consultant offers the vice-president feedback about the findings (including direct quotes, but no identification of particular speakers). The findings show, among other things, that the team meetings are viewed as unimaginatively led by the vice-president (V-p leads the meetings. They are one gigantic "to-do" list, with routine check-ins.' There are no discussion items at meetings, no strategy, no decision-making, no discussion of relationships within the team.') The foremost challenge for the next six months is described as curing 'the lack of respect and lack of trust within the team'.

The findings also show that the performance of two members of the marketing management team is viewed as sub-par by three or more of the other members, and the vice-president is one of these two. Moreover, the vice-president is mentioned only once as one of the two most effective members of the seven-person team. And he is mentioned three times as a member of a relationship that inhibits the efficacy of the team. In addition, he receives one page of positive comments about his contributions to the team and two pages on perceived areas for improvement (e.g. 'has pressured more than one of us to misrepresent issues or our opinion to senior management and has himself directly misled them').

Perhaps because the feedback report contains no brief summary like

Table 2 Managerial interview schedule

- 1. What do you see as the two or three most critical strategic/business issues or managerial/process issues for your senior marketing management team to address in the next 3–6 months?
- 2. How would you describe the marketing management team right now its overall climate, sense of direction, cohesiveness, performance, ability to manage conflict?
- 3. How and how well do management team meetings work? Who takes leadership? How well?
- 4. Do any two-person relationships within the team inhibit its overall efficacy?
- 5. Is the managerial style of any or several of the team members a recurring problem for you and the team? If so, describe the patterns as you see them.
- 6. What problems, if any, do you think others on the team have working with you?
- 7. All things considered, who do you see as the two most effective members of the team, not counting yourself?
- 8. What skills do you see yourself most in need of improving in order to increase the team's effectiveness?
- 9. Other than changes in yourself, if two of your wishes for the team could be granted, what would you most wish changed?

the foregoing two paragraphs, but is, rather, spread across nine pages of quotations, the vice-president reviews the information with the consultant in a calm, concerned manner. He accepts the recommendation that a half-day retreat with the team be used to create a shared-leadership structure for meetings and to get team input and buy-in to the vice-president's own formulation of his developmental objectives for the next year.

At the time, the consultant is uncertain how to interpret the vicepresident's calm, constructive concern during this meeting. Is the vicepresident simply addressing the issues seriously? Does he not put together the pieces of evidence and therefore not yet appreciate the magnitude of his dilemma? Or is he playing his cards so close to his chest (there is a rumor he has been interviewing for positions outside the company) that he is hoping to evade the dilemma? In a sense, it doesn't matter which is the case because the president and the consultant are both committed to a process of confronting the vicepresident with information and giving him new choices at each step, rather than in manipulating a particular pre-conceived outcome.

In further phone conversations with the vice-president and the six marketing managers, the consultant develops an agenda for the retreat, attempting both in his process and in the meeting structure itself to model the kind of co-leadership that is being proposed for future team meetings. Each hour of the meeting is co-led by the consultant and a different member of the team. The first hour is devoted to developing an improved meeting structure and shared leadership. On the agenda, the challenge is presented in the following metaphor:

Imagine that each of you is blindfolded and gagged, and that all seven of you are gathered in a rather tight circle trying to hold a cooked apple pie together, with no baking pan underneath.

This has been going on a while. Juice has oozed out and dripped over you; you're getting exhausted holding your arms at the level the group's got the pie; more than one of you has faltered and momentarily lost his or her balance; several of you are fit-to-be-tied—deeply committed to the company, yet withdrawing or planning to withdraw if the situation doesn't change soon.

But that is just a dream, of course—a nightmare, but not a description of your waking reality. In fact, you are all neither blindfolded, nor gagged. Nor are you condemned for eternity to hold a single pie. You all put new pies together all the time, cook them well, and are gaining the company more and more unusually well-satisfied clients all the time.

Still, there is one small area of your lives at work together where you do look, from this observer's perspective, like that nightmare group—namely, in your (lack of) control of your overall structure and process as a team. The retreat is an opportunity for the group as a whole to wake up and regain control of your meeting/body.

The three managers viewed as most effective by the team are all asked to assume regular leadership roles for the coming year, with the notion that these roles may be redefined and will be rotated year by year to support individual managers' developmental objectives. The three new roles are: (1) agenda-manager, meeting leader; (2) executivesecretary in charge of monitoring and appraising implementation of meeting decisions; and (3) team facilitator, in charge of coaching members who so request and of intervening in cases of conflict or blockage. The vice-president is asked to take leadership with regard to strategic issues facing senior management and the company as a whole.

During the second hour of the meeting, the vice-president introduces the new senior management development process and presents his ten goals for the coming year. His goals reflect the feedback he has received from the consultant, but in relatively vague language. The discussion reorganizes these goals and consolidates them into three more concrete goals. The managers take the opportunity to press the vice-president to be sure that he recognizes the pattern of difficulties that his style has repeatedly created.

Then, during the third hour, the marketing managers discuss creating their own individualized development agendas analogous to the new senior management process. In particular, the manager who

has received the feedback that four members of the team experience his style as a recurring problem speaks up to express his surprise at the feedback and his desire to rectify the situation. A meeting is set for the next week among the consultant, the vice-president, and two of the managers identified as having relational issues.

The first meeting appears to have been highly successful in terms of organizational learning, in that the team is re-energized by the new structure. But the managers are not sure how confident they can be that the vice-president is learning and will change. They point to several comments he has made that seem to minimize past problems.

The president, in turn, is shocked that the vice-president says nothing whatsoever to her about the meeting the first time they see each other afterwards, and is shocked again when they meet a day later and the vice-president says simply that the meeting has been a good one and seems to have overcome all prior problems. The president, in a moment of consternation and inspiration, asks the vice-president to write down on a single page over the weekend how he has understood the feedback from the consultant and on what basis he believes that this single meeting has resolved all the problems.

On Monday, the vice-president meets, as previously scheduled, with the marketing manager who is to become the new 'team facilitator'. The manager's explicit agenda is to increase the trust between herself and the vice-president, in order to increase the probability of success in his proposed role. The vice-president suggests that this manager is the only one who experiences the problems that she is describing. The manager, who has no knowledge of the president's request of the vice-president, responds by making an almost identical request. She asks the vice-president if he would be willing to write a short summary of how he understands the feedback he has received from the team through the consultant.

Shortly after this meeting, the vice-president delivers a short handwritten note of resignation to the president. A week later, after discussion with the consultant and the senior management team, the president appoints two of the six managers as Acting Vice-Presidents for Sales and for Marketing and recommends that the two sub-groups (Sales and Marketing) continue their common meetings with the new shared-leadership structure.

Clearly, we cannot know whether the vice-president learned anything valid through this entire process. On the other hand, the two managers who have accepted the promotions to Acting Vice-President are putting themselves into position for significant managerial learning. And the president has learned a great deal. He has learned, in a way that he can feel confident, that the vice-president was not prepared to participate actively in transformational learning. At a more abstract level, the president has learned that there is a way of

making difficult personnel decisions that is not unilateral but mutual. Moreover, he has learned that he can use a difficult dilemma like this one to leverage a great deal of organizational learning.

In this case, the president, the senior management team as a whole, the consultant, and the marketing management team developed a number of organizational learning processes for both the senior managers and the marketing/sales managers: (1) the set of 'ideal' standards for a senior manager; (2) a new senior manager development process; and (3) a new shared-leadership structure for the marketing/sales managers. In addition, the senior management team is currently considering developing an analogous shared-leadership structure for its own meetings, and the marketing/sales team is considering setting annual individualized development goals for its members. Furthermore, several of the other vice-presidents are currently crafting shared-leadership structures for their management teams.

Thus does this second case illustrate a process of simultaneous managerial and organizational learning, as well as a process of simultaneous inquiry and decisiveness.

Whereas the first case illustrated a very short intervention at an offsite quarterly retreat, this case illustrates a longer-term process occurring during regular working hours. And, whereas the first case illustrated the accomplishment of productive work during what was initially viewed as a more reflective, learning occasion, the second case has illustrated the possibility of building powerful learning processes into regular working hours.

Barriers to Developing Simultaneous Managerial and **Organizational** Learning

As stated at the outset of this article, the president and the consultant in each of the foregoing cases are measured at one of the later development stages in Table 1. According to developmental theory, neither the risks nor the benefits of integrating managerial and organizational learning are sufficiently meaningful to persons at earlier stages for them to commit to leading such an effort. Since some 90 per cent of all managers measured to date inhabit one of the earlier stages of development, one barrier to such integrations is that in many situations there will be no one with sufficient authority committed to initiating such a process.

A second barrier to integrating action with inquiry and managerial learning with organizational learning is that to do so effectively requires repeated non-coercive, but confrontative interventions, such as those of the consultant, the president, and the marketing manager in the second case. Few managers are found, however, who exercise such behavior as part of their regular practice. Such interventions require the rare capacity for what Argyris calls Model II behavior (Argyris & Schon, 1974;

Argyris et al., 1985). There are strong theoretical reasons for arguing that only managers at later stages become capable of exercising such non-coercive, confronting behavior (Souvaine, 1985; Torbert, 1991b).

The very fact that development-inducing actions are non-coercive suggests a third barrier to integrating managerial and organizational learning. There are, simply, no actions or organizational designs that will unilaterally and reliably cause transformational managerial or organizational learning. Although this will probably seem like the most serious and absolute barrier yet mentioned to some, it is actually not a barrier at all, but a condition of transformational learning that protects the process from authoritarian overtones.

A fourth barrier to integrating managerial and organizational learning is that the type of organizational structure that does so (non-coercively, and, therefore, in a rather unpredictable rhythm and at an unpredictable rate) is radically unfamiliar to virtually all managers and scholars. This type of structure creates challenges and constraints and feedback loops, but simultaneously leaves each actor in a choice-making position from moment-to-moment that frequently feels structureless to many of the actors (as the vice-president for marketing in the second illustration was left in a choice-making position after each encounter with the other actors in that situation). Such a 'liberating structure' (Torbert, 1991) also makes heroic demands on its leadership for inspired and open, yet also disciplined and strong, real-time actions that may include restructuring or deconstructing the original structure. Once again, the risks and benefits of leading this kind of organizing are likely to be meaningful only to persons already at, or in transformation toward, one of the later developmental stages.

All of these related barriers can give the impression that we are faced with an insurmountable Catch-22. We need later-stage managers and organizations that can integrate managerial and organizational learning, in order to create liberating, transformational contexts that permit managers and leaders to develop to later stages. In short, we need developed leaders in order to help leaders become developed.

But this is not truly a Catch-22. Modern industry and modern science have created an attractive challenge for people, organizations, and societies to develop toward Stage 5 in the developmental sequence. During the past generation, the limits and shadow sides of modernity have become more and more evident to ordinary citizens, and have been expertly deconstructed in conceptual terms by scholars. The post-modern, information age that we are entering creates a challenge, that is just beginning to be articulated, to develop beyond Stage 5 to the later stages. As this developmental challenge becomes better articulated and illustrated, more persons and organizations will be attracted to meeting and wrestling with the challenge.

If we are not put off by the apparent Catch-22 of needing developed leaders in order to develop leaders, we may nonetheless be put off by the aura of masculine elitism that initially seems to emanate from developmental theory and that has been criticized from a feminist perspective (Gilligan, 1982). Kegan (1994) addresses this issue carefully, reforming the masculine, individualistic bias of earlier developmental theory toward the more interactional, relational understanding of the later stages that is also suggested throughout this article.

Nevertheless, it is true that there are today very few later-stage leaders (even relatively large samples of managers have found none measured at Stages 7 and 8; Torbert [1994] describes a small 'found' sample of Stage 7 and 8 leaders). Therefore, one cannot deny that laterstage managers are, statistically, a very small elite. To be a member of a small elite, however, or to suggest that the leadership actions of members of such a small elite may have special significance, is not to be elitist. Elitism is associated with elites of power and of status who seek to maintain and enhance their power and prerogatives at the expense of others, or who, at best, exercise power on behalf of an apathetic mass rather than acting in ways that potentially empower the mass.

However, the developmental elite is not elitist, according to the theory and data so far available regarding the later stage developmental elite (Alexander and Langer, 1990; Torbert, 1991). Members of this elite make no attempt to achieve and protect a group identity; they are not publicly recognized and thus wield no special social prerogatives; they foreswear coercive power insofar as possible; they invite and support others' developmental efforts; and they empower everyone as a peer insofar as possible.

Single-loop, Double-loop and Triple-loop Learning

Another way of framing the two stories in this article, as well as the possible developmental learning progression of managers and organizations, is to speak in terms of single-loop, double-loop, and tripleloop learning and awareness.

Chris Argyris and Don Schon are primarily responsible, through their modeling, teaching, researching and publishing, for the good currency that the cybernetic metaphor single-loop and double-loop feedback and learning enjoys (Argyris & Schon, 1974, 1978; Argyris, 1981; Schon, 1983; Rein & Schon, 1994). Most readers are, no doubt, familiar with the idea (though it is actually quite a slippery one, when one attempts to probe it seriously and experience it in one's own action).

Single-loop, sequential, cognitive-empirical feedback is feedback whereby one learns that one's actions are not achieving the goal and then 'proves' one's learning by adjusting one's actions to increase the probability of achieving the goal (Bateson's [1973] Learning I). According to developmental theory, single-loop learning does not occur consistently for anyone or any organization who has not yet reached Stage 5 (the *Achiever* stage for managers; the *Systematic Productivity* stage for organizations; refer to Table 1). So, single-loop feedback does not always register on the person toward whom it is directed and therefore does not always generate single-loop learning and more effective action.

Double-loop, eternal, passional-behavioral feedback is feedback whereby one learns that the (eternal) structure of one's meaning-making, goal-seeking, status-maintaining system is problematic (Bateson's Learning II). Argyris' work focuses on one particularly powerful kind of double-loop feedback that demonstrates the problematic nature of all early-stage meaning-making-and-action-taking systems—namely, feedback that highlights the inevitable occasions when one's espoused theory is not consistent with one's actual pattern of action (one's theory-in-use). For example, a particular Japanese woman says she does not believe in lying, but may then lie over the phone late one night when her sister asks her if she is at her boyfriend's home.

According to developmental theory again, only persons and organizations at or beyond Stage 6 are at all likely to register double-loop feedback which highlights incongruities or incompletenesses within one's meaning-making-and-action-taking system. Therefore, if the woman in the example just offered is developmentally transitioning between the *Diplomat* and the *Technician* stages, she is not likely to change her behavior at all, even to the extent of apologizing later to her sister; and she is still less likely to respond to explicit feedback about the incongruity between her espoused theory of not lying and her actual practice of lying by revising either her espoused theory or her actual practice. A more likely response will be to dismiss the lie as her sister's fault because it was none of her business to ask in the first place. This action is, in fact, the one taken by the woman in the example.

Thus, although the Argyrisian double-loop feedback about incongruity between espoused theory and theory-in-action can have a powerful impact on someone who is developing beyond Stage 5, or on the insight of a third party (as the reader is a third party to the example of the Japanese woman), only double-loop feedback adjusted for local coloring and developmental timing specific to this unique occasion is likely to spur the development of an earlier-stage person or organization, such as the Japanese woman in our hypothetical example.

Triple-loop feedback/learning/awareness generates this capacity to learn on a moment-to-moment basis as one acts, so that one's action is uniquely suited to this particular developmental time and place (this recent notion of triple-loop feedback and learning takes us beyond the

Argyris-Schon theory and is related to Bateson's Learning III [Hawkins, 1991; Torbert & Fisher, 1992a]). Such triple-loop learning may have occurred for the president and the organization in the first illustration in this article, when he enacted the 'clown' role. The 'clown' role is clearly not the only, nor always the best, role for a CEO to play; but it was just as clearly an inspired role for that time in the organization's development, played in an inspired way by that CEO at that moment. Such learning may also have occurred for the president and the marketing manager in the second illustration, when both independently invented the gesture of asking the vice-president of marketing/sales to write down his impressions. In each of these three cases, a qualitatively new action was invented and produced and had a demonstrable effect in a timely, harmonious flow. Some of my students have come to call such moments 'magician moments'.

According to developmental theory, persons begin to develop a 'taste' for triple-loop action-and-feedback as they transform towards Stage 7 (witch/clown/magician). The aim is to widen awareness of self, other, or organization to include simultaneously: (1) the outside world, (2) one's own behavior/operations at that moment, (3) the ongoing strategizing, and (4) the feeling for the distances, incongruities, or harmonies among one's never-fully-explicated, intuitive life-aim or mission and the other three qualities of experience (the outside world, one's own behavior, and one's thinking/strategizing) (Torbert, 1973). Thus, the actor becomes aware of three simultaneous action-feedback loops, between behavior and effect, between cognitive-emotional structure and behavior/effect, and between an ever newly rediscovered free attention and structure/behavior/effect.

What kind of science—what kind of research-in-the-midst-ofaction—can guide us toward simultaneous triple-loop managerial and organizational learning? Such in-the-moment, destiny-altering learning-and-acting, I am arguing, is a necessary part of leading any liberating structure and of generating the potentially powerful redundancy of simultaneous managerial and organizational learning.

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