

## Power, control and organisational learning

Filion, Normand; Rudolph, Hedwig

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

SSG Sozialwissenschaften, USB Köln

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Filion, N., & Rudolph, H. (1999). *Power, control and organisational learning*. (Discussion Papers / Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, Forschungsschwerpunkt Arbeitsmarkt und Beschäftigung, Abteilung Organisation und Beschäftigung, 99-104). Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung gGmbH. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-126163>

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## discussion paper

FS I 99 - 104

### **Power, Control and Organisational Learning**

Normand Filion\*, Hedwig Rudolph

December 1999  
ISSN Nr. 1011-9523

\* Dr. Normand Filion  
Institut de sciences sociales Raymond-Ledrut  
Université Toulouse-Le Mirail

e-mail: [Rudolph@medea.wz-berlin.de](mailto:Rudolph@medea.wz-berlin.de)

## ZITIERWEISE / CITATION

Normand Filion, Hedwig Rudolph

### **Power, Control and Organisational Learning**

Discussion Paper FS I 99 -104  
Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung

**Forschungsschwerpunkt:**  
Arbeitsmarkt und  
Beschäftigung

**Research Area:**  
Labour Market and  
Employment

**Abteilung:**  
Organisation und  
Beschäftigung

**Research Unit:**  
Organization and  
Employment

**Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung**  
Reichpietschufer 50  
D-10785 Berlin  
e-mail: [wzb@wz-berlin.de](mailto:wzb@wz-berlin.de)  
Internet: <http://www.wz-berlin.de>

## **Abstract**

A review of managerial literature highlights the crucial importance of shared culture and common schemes of interpretation in organisational learning. The interpretative and sensemaking approaches of organisational learning insert themselves deeply in the process of the construction of social uniformity and cognitive homogeneity. Individual learning, culture, beliefs and rationality - the shared mental models - are the targets of confirmation processes. Thus, this specific kind of organisational learning cannot be considered as normatively neutral, but as a political process.

A case study of a bank illustrates that organisational learning can be based on a structured social construction of cognitive homogeneity which generates an increase of control and enhances power of the management by reinforcing the legitimacy of decisions. However, this case study also shows that learning and non-learning are the two faces of the same process or, in other words, that organisational learning can produce unawareness and unintentional non-learning by too much cultural uniformity.

## **Zusammenfassung**

Eine Durchsicht der Managementliteratur verdeutlicht die zentrale Bedeutung gemeinsamer Kultur und geteilter Deutungsmuster für das Organisationslernen. Die interpretativen und deutungsbezogenen Ansätze des Organisationslernens basieren auf tiefgreifenden Prozessen zur Konstruktion sozialer Einheitlichkeit und kognitiver Homogenität. Die Absicherungsprozesse beziehen sich auf das individuelle Lernen, Kultur, Werthaltungen und Rationalität - die gemeinsamen mentalen Modelle. Insofern kann diese Form des Organisationslernens nicht als wertneutral angesehen werden; es handelt sich vielmehr um einen politischen Prozeß.

An einer Fallstudie in einer Bank wird illustriert, daß Organisationslernen auf einer sozial konstruierten kognitiven Homogenität aufgebaut werden kann. Dabei wird Management-Kontrolle erweitert und ihre Macht verstärkt, indem die Legitimität ihrer Entscheidungen abgesichert wird. Allerdings dokumentiert die Fallstudie auch, daß Lernen und Nicht-Lernen zwei Seiten des gleichen Prozesses sind, anders gewendet: Organisationslernen kann zur Ausblendung von Wahrnehmung beitragen und - unbeabsichtigt - Nicht-Lernen generieren, wenn zuvor ein zu hohes Maß an kultureller Homogenität etabliert worden ist.



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## 1. Introduction<sup>\*</sup>

Since the early '50s, learning appeared to be a basic feature of corporate life, and its organisational forms have been studied from many standpoints and conceptualised in different ways in organisational theory. The ever growing literature demonstrates the empirical and theoretical richness of the concept of organisational learning and, later on, of the learning organisation.

At first glance, it might seem surprising that despite this diversity, organisational learning has rarely been studied in view of such fundamental concepts as power and control, important for understanding organisations (Simon 1949; Burrell 1988) as well as social life (Dahl 1957; Giddens 1984). Managerial writings on this topic are usually typologies of a non-questioned phenomenon (Mintzberg 1983) or the approaches confine themselves to a dysfunctional view of illegitimate power (Crozier 1964; Mumby and Stohl 1991). The omission of the power component of organisational learning may be considered as a constitutive aspect of organisation theory, since a basic feature of its mechanistic/organic paradigm (Maggi 1990) is to address power in the restrictive terms of influence or leadership style (Barnard 1968; Machin and Lowe 1983), and to picture management only as a technical, politically neutral activity (Townley 1993). Rather, according to a political/cultural perspective, we conceptualise management as a reflexive social action the essence of which is *power over people* and *power through people* (Willmott 1984; Clegg 1989).

The aim of this paper is to provide a critical examination of underlying processes involved in applications of organisational learning theory, i.e. some interventionists' conception of the learning organisation. It presents a three-fold sociological analysis. In the first part, managerial organisation theory and consultants' writings within the interpretative perspective of organisational learning processes will be reviewed and analysed. Then a theoretical framework based on concepts such as power, domination and control will be proposed. In a third part, empirical work will be reviewed, in order to illustrate the processes by which some unanticipated and unwelcome consequences of the very act of building a learning organisation can appear in the long run.

Briefly summarising the approach developed here, one can state that:

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<sup>\*</sup> Research on this paper has benefited from financial support by the Gottlieb Daimler- and Karl Benz-Foundation. The Kolleg on „Organizational Learning“ initiated by Prof. Meinolf Dierkes and financed by the foundation has been intellectually inspiring context. We would like to thank Victor Friedman, John Child and Bo Hedberg for insightful comments on a previous version of this paper.



- In the voluntaristic kind of organisational learning, the *capacity* for building a learning organisation rests upon managerial power.
- Organisational learning, as a process involving others, has to be strictly and continuously monitored in order to ensure its realisation and to keep control over it.
- Monitoring of sensemaking processes requires a reinforcement of managerial control and organisational surveillance for the gathering of relevant information.
- Development of organisational shared mental models (sensemaking processes) is a social construction that tends to produce cognitive homogeneity.
- Shared mental models are not politically neutral, since social conformity enhances the leaders' legitimacy and, consequently, power (and „managerial comfort“). Thus, it has to be analysed as an ideology.
- Organisational learning through shared mental models can impede learning in the long run, by „blinding“ the organisation (with collectively bounded rationality) in which the non-conforming views are treated as illegitimate because based on ideas that are different from the dominant ones.

The empirical findings presented show that the interpretative perspective of organisational learning rarely works successfully for the organisation as a whole. Interpretative stakes and schemes of sensemaking are as a rule shared by only some team members or groups of subordinates. Since interpretation appears as politically connoted and since beliefs are part of the imperative to obey, sensemaking in an organisation seems closely related to domination. The functionalist assumption of organisational consensus that stands behind some trends of the organisational learning methodology appears rather incompatible with the structural reality of political and cultural disparities. Confronted with the imperative to share the normative system of the dominant group members of the organisation could resort to technical or organisational subcultures in order to save their endangered collective identities. As a result, conflicts of meaning between hierarchical levels (Filion 1991) and a kind of cultural and ideological „schism“ within the organisation can be engendered.

## **2. Organisational learning, cognitive homogeneity and power: an analysis of some managerial writings**

Despite the diversity of organisational learning theories (Fiol and Lyles 1985; Huber 1991), metaphors (Tsoukas 1993, Gherardi 1996) and models (Shrivastava 1983; Dodgson 1993), it is actually possible to find relative agreement among authors on the core importance of shared culture or common schemes of interpretation in the process of collective learning, even though there is still confusion about what is really organisational learning (Weick

1991).<sup>1</sup> That is, drawing from Daft and Huber's (1987) distinction between systems-structural and interpretative perspectives in the analysis of organisational learning, processes of sensemaking are crucial for learning if we consider them as related to decision making processes (Schneider and Angelmar 1993) on the one hand, and to decentralisation, delegation, and autonomy necessary to knowledge activities on the other hand.

Building a learning organisation is not a random process but a *voluntaristic* project (Pucik 1988), that needs *leadership* to exist, to be achieved (Greiner and Schein 1988). It is a *rational and target-oriented process* that generally responds to the *ideology of progress* (maximisation, optimisation, etc). Learning is usually viewed as „a key for competitiveness“ (Garatt 1987) and for organisational effectiveness (Schön 1975). Its aim is *usefulness*: „Essentially, learning can be seen to have occurred when organisations perform in changed and better ways. The goals of learning are useful outcomes“ (Dodgson 1993: 378). Therefore, learning does not just appear by itself, it is a social product and has to be created by leaders who „hold the keys“. Thus, in the interpretative perspective where sensemaking is the mainspring of learning, subjectivity and power seem closely interwoven: „organisational learning occurs through shared insight, knowledge, and mental models. (...) change is blocked unless all of the major decision makers learn together, come to share beliefs and goals, and are committed to take the actions necessary for change“ (Stata 1989: 64).

Argyris and Schön's (1974) well-known distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning and between model I and model II does not need presentation here. The authors' position is that organisational learning is impeded by the discrepancy between individuals' espoused theories (what they say) and theories-in-use (what they do)<sup>2</sup> which causes „fancy footwork“ and organisational defence patterns (Argyris 1990). For Argyris (1993a), as for most of his followers, a stake of organisational learning is *to make explicit tacit and instinctively understood ideas*. Double-loop learning may occur after „surfacing fundamental assumptions and gaining insight into why they arise“ (Isaacs

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<sup>1</sup> The continuous transformation of the organisational learning theory over the last twenty years - from a rational to a normative standpoint - should probably be analysed from the perspective of broad historical cycles. Barley and Kunda (1992) have shown alternated „waves“ of rational and normative rhetorics of control depict the „evolution“ of managerial discourses and organisation theory over the years. Those waves appear to be parallel to economic cycles of expansion and contraction. The transformation of organisational learning theories seems to correspond to their model.

<sup>2</sup> For over twenty years Argyris (and Schön) postulates a fundamental distinction between espoused theories and theories-in-use. But his writings rarely explore a frequent situation: the skilled but „straightforward and stubborn“ manager who does not realise the distinction of espoused and used theories, is especially problematic when he appears unable to learn in accordance with the dominant mental model. Diamond (1986) provides an insightful psychoanalytic critique of Argyris' model.

1993: 26). By making explicit „tacit thought (and) underlying thinking“ (Isaacs 1993: 31) by dialogue and confrontation, it is possible - so the argument - to create learning through changing the „rules about how to interact“ (Argyris 1990). This point of view is clearly based on the assumption of the political neutrality of interaction and of dialogue. This neutrality refers to a functionalist paradigm in which the political inequality of actors and the power-influence relations that define and structure to some extent at least the organisational interactions remain unconsidered. Therefore, this politically neutral paradigm is only partly applicable to the organisational life. According to social theory and especially to Giddens (1984) and Goffman (1959), the social agent who can define the rules of interaction exerts power on others and conditions the object of social control. This seems to be particularly true for hierarchical relations prevalent in most organisations since the interpretative process is embedded into the structural inequality of power and legitimacy among actors.

So, becoming a learning organisation means changing patterns of thinking (Senge 1990a), a process which „inherently involves the questioning of one's values“ (Argyris 1983: 355) and self-identity (Weick 1995). Individuals have to give up their theory-in-use (Argyris and Schön 1975; Argyris 1990) and adopt beliefs, values, norms, premises and rationality that form the culture (Schein 1985) promoted in the organisational ideology (Beyer 1981). If organizational learning relies on shared visions, this can only happen when individual mental models or cognitive maps converge.<sup>3</sup> This shared view of the world implies a similar process of sensemaking (Weick 1995) that links subjective viewpoints (beliefs, values) and rationality. As Nicolini and Mezner (1995: 741) argue, the organisational social construction of learning is one of the channels through which the managerial cognitive perspective and interpretation of the world is imposed as the exclusively relevant view and becomes the dominant way of acting and enacting. In this kind of learning, the collective sensemaking process - a specific way of grasping problems and developing creative responses - emerges from a relative homogeneity of individuals' subjectivity. According to Schneider and Angelmar (1993), convergence of cognition is the condition for consensus among top management teams. In this sense, the building of a learning organisation may be interpreted as *a purposive structured change which represents a social construction of cognitive and sensemaking homogeneity.*

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<sup>3</sup> One must admit that organisational learning, in its interpretative standpoint, remains conceptually quite vague. Despite the high complexity of the subject, it is barely possible to find precise and explicit definitions of such general notions as „ideas“, „beliefs“, „values“, „vision“, „internal pictures“, „mental models“ or even „cognitive maps“ (Lee, Courtney and Okeefe 1992). Major authors in the fields of social representations and social psychology are rarely quoted in spite of the relevance of their studies for organisational learning (Berkowitz 1982; Breackwell and Canter 1989; Fraser and Gaskell 1988; Duveen and Lloyd 1989; Farr and Moscovici 1984).

However, in order to understand this power-related process of instrumentalisation of culture, it appears necessary to analyse the relationship between culture and learning. The growing use of the interpretative perspective in organisational learning can be considered as corresponding to the „organisational culture“ trend (Lawson and Ventris 1992). In fact, the proposed definitions of organisational culture are sometimes the same as those of the organisational learning process: shared beliefs and values (Deal and Kennedy 1982), shared meanings (Smircich 1983), shared interests (Young 1989) or shared ways of perceiving and thinking (Allaire and Firsirotu 1984; Meek 1988).

Schein (1985) proposes an integrated theory of culture and learning in which culture is defined as collective mental models, the assumptions of which being deeply influenced by values and beliefs. He describes three levels in organisational culture: the cultural artefacts (dress codes, ways of talking, etc), the espoused values, and the shared underlying assumptions. It is on the third level that organisational learning may take place. But Schein cannot ignore that culture and power are related in organisations. Since learning has to be implemented and depends on culture, it becomes *a target for power* („leadership is intertwined with culture formation“). A core function of management is the „cultural shaping“ - the social construction - of the organisation. Building an organisation's culture and shaping its evolution is the „unique and essential function“ of leadership (Schein 1985). Some authors are even more explicit about the instrumentalisation of culture. It has to be controlled (Kilmann and Saxton 1985) and become efficient (Ouchi and Wilkins 1983), but can be a source of alienation, too (Lincoln and Kalleberg (1990).

In later works, Schein (1993) - as well as Isaacs (1993) - stresses the virtues of dialogue and addresses „communication failures and cultural misunderstandings“ as indicators of differences between organisational subcultures. For the author, organisational effectiveness will „increasingly hinge on the ability to develop an overarching common language and mental model. [...] Any form of organisational learning, therefore, will require the evolution of shared mental models that cut across the subcultures of the organisation“ (Schein 1993: 41). Since this evolution „is inhibited by current cultural rules“ (1993: 31) - the entropy of the „preservation of form“ (Lovell and Turner 1988: 416-17) - the „unique and essential function“ of the leadership is to *change the cultural rules* of communication and common understanding, i.e. the nature of culture and identity.

Therefore, one may consider that power is applied to culture through the seemingly political neutrality of dialogue. An example for this perspective can be found in the following anecdote: „The frequent complaint one hears from CEOs (is) that, even though they have a lot of power and authority, they have great difficulty getting their programs implemented. They complain that things are not understood, that goals seem to change as they get communicated down the hierarchy, or that their subordinates „screw up“ because *they don't really under-*

*stand what is wanted*“ (Schein 1993: 50; our emphasis). One can hardly be more explicit about the aim of changing culture: effective power and obedience, on the basis of shared culture and recognition of ideological legitimacy. As we will see later, this new form of legitimacy consists of inducing the subordinates (or team members) *to adopt and internalise* as their own the constraints, rationality, goals and, more generally, beliefs and ideas of the leader or their superior.

The managerial writings of Peter Senge can be used as a significant example of the power-related underlying assumptions of this form of organisational learning (or learning organisation) model. Those assumptions can be grasped from his very first definitions of learning: „Learning is the process of enhancing our capacity for effective action“ (Senge 1991: 39) - which is, according to Clegg (1989) and Coopey (1995), a form of social power - and, in the same way, „a learning organisation is a group of people continually enhancing their capacity to create what they want to create (1991: 42) or „their capacity to create the results they truly desire“ (Senge 1990a: 3). Drawing from Giddens' theory of allocative resources (1984), one can associate this capacity for action to managerial power.

In order to understand the power-related assumptions of this mechanistic view, the critical paradigm seems to be adequate to analyse its hidden logic. Theoretical approaches (Foucault 1977) and empirical research (Filion 1994) have shown that a fundamental principle of power (and domination) is its *invisibility*. It has to *disappear* in order to be efficient, to make the will realised. It has to be *silenced* to persist. Thus, power can disappear in the impersonality of the rules (Clegg 1981), be disembodied in technology (Giddens 1984), or be negated by the discourse (Bourdieu 1982). As Schein (1993) uses the politically neutral concept of dialogue (in Habermas' sense [White 1988] but not in Foucault's), similarly, Senge refers to primitive cultures in which the leader's only power is to *talk* (Senge 1991: 42). However, anthropologists (Clastres 1974) have shown that the basis of legitimacy in such cultures are quite different from those of organisations in contemporary complex societies.<sup>4</sup> By making this analogy between corporate heads and „primitive“ leadership, Senge in effect contributes to the silencing of actual power structure, thus reinforcing it and its legitimacy.

Because „organisations face today the ever-growing complexity of the world“ (Senge 1990a), the challenge is to change „patterns of thinking“ through building new „mental models“ and „improving our internal pictures of how the world works“ (Senge 1990a: 174). This cultural change is similar to the concept

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<sup>4</sup> In so-called primitive, more traditional cultures, the leader has no authority, cannot impose discipline and does not represent the *truth*. Only the prophet does. The prophet tells the truth, can demand discipline and submission to it and to the leader because truth implies the recognition of its legitimacy.

that Schein alludes to. One should be „living life from a creative as opposed to a reactive viewpoint“ (Senge 1990a: 141). To come to this point, Senge proposes five steps to arrive to his „fifth discipline“: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, systems thinking. Personal mastery consists in „seeing reality objectively“ (1990a) and changing mental models is „making one’s thinking more open to the influence of others“ (1990a) so that it is possible to build a shared vision through dialogue and discussion. Yet, since the ontological nature of subjectivity (beliefs, ideas, assumptions about the world and the reality) consists in the truth for oneself, and since all subjectivities have equal value as soon as they are based on reason, *who is right?* Who can call on absolute legitimacy? Who can have the power to question other individuals’ mental models?

The answer is, for the author, quite obvious: „the core leadership strategy is simple: be a model“ (Senge 1990a: 173). A model of humility? Schein (1993) pointed out how threatening such a position can be. On the contrary, in Senge’s model the leader *is* superior to the subordinates or the team members because „the first responsibility of a leader (...) is to define reality“ (1990b: 11). He is the *prophet*. We can understand this in terms of a four-step procedure. First, „the role of the leader as teacher starts with bringing to the surface people’s mental models of important issues“. Second, „leaders as teachers help people *re-structure their views of reality*“ (Senge’s emphasis). Third, „influence people to view reality“, the one defined by the leader. Fourth, *internalisation of the dominant mental model*: „the vision becomes more real in the sense of a mental reality that people can truly imagine achieving“ (Senge 1990b: 12-13).

With some of the new ways of re-organisation of work and delegation of decision-making process, the threat of losing power and authority is at stake since „local decision making and individual autonomy lead to management anarchy unless (...)“ (Senge and Sterman 1992: 137). According to Frerichs (1992), the goal is to build new alliances with the aim of minimising frictions. Delegation of decision-making as a means of organisational learning implies changing the mode of using power, not losing power. Leaders - top management - have to find a new way to obtain *obedience* and to gain a new form of *legitimacy*. Here, the problem is clearly stated: „Just granting power, without *some method* of replacing the discipline and order that come out of a command-and-control bureaucracy, produces chaos“ (Senge et al. 1994: 14; our emphasis).

Interpretative organisational learning finds here its ultimate goal: „We have to learn how to disperse power so self-discipline can largely replace imposed discipline“ (ibid). The core idea for success is therefore: „distributing power while increasing self-discipline“ (Senge 1994: 15). The underlying political idea with this type of organisational learning is to obtain cognitive homogeneity as a means of gaining a fully accepted obedience through self-discipline. Since We-

ber (1978) has defined the basic principle of the effectiveness of authority as *the will of the subordinates to obey* (i.e. the legitimacy of authority is *given* by the subordinates), self-discipline can be seen as the ultimate way of obtaining obedience.

As our empirical studies have shown, this basic principle also works for changing the individuals' mental models. Only those who are ready to be convinced can be convinced, i.e. those who already have the idea and the desire of being convinced by the ideas of the leader, or in other words, the individuals who are *committed*. This is why, according to Senge, one of the basic rules in building a learning organisation is to start with „small groups that form around commitments“ (1991: 38) and that „in any case, the first step is to find your *natural* partners“ (1991: 39; our emphasis).

It is important to consider here the very special status of the writings of Argyris and Schön. Largely used in the field of organisational learning and by interventionists, they elaborate a useful methodology for organisational learning. One can hardly find a call for cognitive homogeneity by these authors and indeed, they do not propose an explicit approach of rational or normative convergence. Anchored in the functionalist paradigm, their work rests on the hypothesis of mutual trust, confidence and openness. In this sense, the „social virtue of model II“ is really a virtue: difficult to find in reality. Not to speak of the political inequality of actors, of domination and of power-influence relation is precisely what makes the power to be *invisible*. Thus, although Argyris and Schön did not launch the specific trend of organisational learning which brings and rests on cognitive homogeneity, they „opened the door“ for the use of their theory for cognitive control. Because concertive control - as defined later - rests upon an extended knowledge of everybody, Argyris' methodology can be used as a brilliant tool to ensure the full transparency of others. Moreover, if, for Argyris, organisational learning rests on a „reeducative process“ (1990:154), this is the runway for a teacher to rise, a leader - maybe a prophet - who will define the rules and will represent the social virtue. The „move“ from Argyris' objective and neutral position to a position of „cognitive control“ is effected by a school of thought represented by Senge, Schein and Isaacs. But Kim (1993) is maybe the one who explicitly considers that organisational learning will take place by the construction of an overarching rationality that will encompass and go beyond the rationality of individuals.

Other authors have more explicitly associated human resources management with organisational learning. Solomon (1994) has coined the notion of „servant leaders“ which identify „people who lead because they choose to serve one another and the higher purpose“ (1994: 59). Because learning should not be the sole privilege of the top management but must spread in the organisation through „servant leaders“, he defines the role of human resources management as to detect „real commitment“ in order to know „who the innovators are in the

organisation“ (1994: 61). If „real commitment“ is maybe not cognitive homogeneity, it can be, by the empowerment of a certain type of actors, a crucial step to the social construction of conformity. This idea can also be found in Argyris' writings (1993b): organisational learning can be initiated by promoting the learning of key individuals. Pucik (1988) proposes „learning-driven career plans“ (1988: 90) and, in any case, personnel appraisal must be linked to learning in order to evaluate and reward learning activities and the „cognitive fit“ (Filion 1998). Related to our argument, this implies that if co-optation and cognitive affinities may be adequate means to set up convergence and homogeneity at the top managerial level, a social construction of cognitive conformity has to be carried out at group or organisation levels, involving monitoring of individuals and control of learning processes.

### **3. Concertive control, power and legitimacy**

Anyone who is aware of the changes that occurred in the business field during the last twenty years knows that corporations act less and less as bureaucracies even if some of their organisational foundations still persist. Human relations, sociotechnical systems, semi-autonomous groups, quality circles, flexible production, participative management, MBO, TQM, just-in-time and numerous other innovations concerning delegation or decentralisation of decision making and involving all organisational strata changed the manner in which command-and-control is performed.<sup>5</sup> It is our argument that these multiple changes are targeted at a new balance of organisational coercion and legitimacy of authority. Therefore, a new theory of control is needed. Recent studies converge to indicate that a new form of control progressively emerged from the trends of organisational culture and organisational learning.

Edwards (1981) proposed a three-level typology of control forms that are historically successive even though not totally substituting each other. The first type is „simple control“, i.e. the direct, face-to-face, surveillance and command relationship that takes place between superior and subordinates or boss-employees in small or family-owned companies. Although, according to Edwards, simple control has inherited from the XIXth century the image of authoritarianism and alienation, it is still an effective control mode. The second type is „technological control“ which had its apogees in scientific management and the assembly line. Control is here embodied in technology and work organisation (Clegg 1975). More recent forms of technological control and surveillance are represented by integrated production and computerised systems for management. The third type is „bureaucratic control“. Impersonal rules and staff-and-

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<sup>5</sup> Still, the structure of domination remains in principle unchallenged (Leflaive 1996). In the same way, Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) have shown how just-in-time systems reinforce discipline and surveillance, while Tuckman (1994) indicated clearly how total quality management (TQM) can take place in a bureaucratic organisation.



line divisions provide sets of roles which integrate control of work processes and of individuals. Bureaucratic control is particularly efficient because it is incorporated in every day supervision, in legal-rational rules and routines, making the bureaucracy a powerful form of domination, i.e. an iron cage (Weber 1978).

From Marx's factory to Taylor's scientific management; from Mayo's human relations to Ouchi's corporate culture, the „problem of order“ (Whitley 1977) remains of crucial concern. This main problem in modern organisations has been - and is ever still - to *discipline*, to ensure the compliance of the individual to the domination structure where a small group of individuals have authority over a larger one (Weber 1978). Unlike *total institutions* (Goffman 1963; Giddens 1984), the disciplinary domination of the modern business enterprise rests upon two principles: coercion and legitimacy.

Following Foucault (1977) and Clegg (1998), organisational coercion is functioning *via* disciplinary power in order to fulfill the compliance of all individuals to sets of roles, actions and procedures codified in disciplinary rules. The capacity of dominant actors to *define the rules* of action, to monitor their implementation and to punish disobedience or incompetence is the capacity to produce uniformity of social conducts. Administrative regulations and devices of human resource management like personnel appraisal systems are contemporary forms of disciplinary power (Townley 1993; Filion 1998). Surveillance is thus a basic feature of modern organisations (Dandeker 1990) and a means of administrative power (Giddens 1984) since management can be defined as information processing for decision making. Concerning our topic of organisational learning, Chandler, in his study of General Motors (1964) pointed out the core importance of surveillance - bringing flows of information to the management - that made the organisation more „intelligent“. Direct or sensorial surveillance of individuals, work process control, and information gathering are parts of the *monitoring activity* (Giddens 1976 and 1984). More recently, computerised information systems modified the traditional distinction between surveillance and control in bureaucracies and industrial business. However, this is before all a change of form and does not indicate an erosion of power structures. To the extent that these power structures are still rather visible there is a risk concerning the basis of legitimacy.

In this context, concertive control can be considered as a fourth type of control. Designated as „unobtrusive control“ by Tompkins and Cheney (1985), this form is defined by Perrow as „the control of the cognition premises underlying action“ (1986: 129). Concertive control rests upon „a set of core values, such as the values found in a corporate vision statement. In a sense, concertive control reflects the adoption of a new substantive rationality, a new set of consensual values, by the organisation and its members“ (Barker 1993: 411). In this „post-bureaucratic“ model, *control is achieved by controlling the self-control*. It is functioning the way that the top management, team members and/or sub-

ordinates, all adopt value-based discourses which „infer ‘proper’ behavioural premises: ideas, norms, or rules that enable them to act in ways functional for the organisation“ (Barker 1993: 412). Concertive control rests upon a *displacement* of the control: *from action to the premises of action* (or from decision to the premises of decision). The previous section has illustrated the way in which this displacement can occur according to the literature on organisational learning. But yet, this is not at all brand-new. Simon (1947) already drew attention to the control of the factual and ethical premises as a key in the decision making process, and stressed that this control is directly related to the exercise of authority. Therefore, homogeneity and control of the premises of decision are of crucial importance, *a fortiori* if the actors are at the top level of the hierarchy (Lovell and Turner 1988). As a precursor, Simon (1947) pointed out early on what has been recently re-discovered by managerial and organisational theorists: the role of *indoctrination*.

Concertive control cannot be conceived nor achieved without a prerequisite ideological apparatus which defines and states what is at stake. As it has been said, ideas, beliefs, mental models and shared views of the world are usually not defined *a priori* and they can change according to various conditions. Nevertheless, the characteristic of any ideology is the imperative of sharing the ideas. In accordance with the basic principle of any ideological apparatus, the organisational ideology refers to subjectivity as the basis for rational action or decision making. This is why action is not anymore the object of control but the individual itself, the way he/she thinks, his/her identity, his/her way to internalise the stated norms and values (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The question may be different for top managers who elaborate the shared vision (they have to convince each other, even if the hierarchical-political status may play an important role at this level, too). But concerning the diffusion and sharing of the ideology across the organisation, the pre-existence of the ideological apparatus (the dominant discourse to be internalised) to the very act of believing transforms the prescribed ideology in a new form of cultural domination which involves concertive control. Here, concertive control is quite near to the „ideological control“ defined by Czarniawska and Hedberg as one of the four modes of the „control cycle“. Referring also to Robbins (1983) and Smircich and Morgan (1982) they speak of ideological control as „producing commitment and a perception change in people“ (Czarniawska and Hedberg 1985:22-23) by the use of organisational myths, rituals and metaphors. But a difference can be pointed out: concertive control mainly rests on the structural reinforcement of the interpretative process through human resources management. Commitment and belief is not anymore a *wish* of the leaders but an *imperative* made to subordinates.

Implementation of ideology and concertive control can be achieved through provisions for detection, recognition and empowerment of „cognitively conforming“ individuals. But the literature - and some of our case studies - show that the preferred way for implementation is the *social construction of homogeneity*.

Cognitive homogeneity can be partly based on affinities, but can also be enlarged to ideological convergence. Coopey (1995), Mintzberg (1983) - as well as Schein (1968) - have pointed out the link between power and ideology. Ideas, values, norms and beliefs which constitute the dominant ideology have to be shared by members of the management and subordinates in order to ensure the efficiency of power. Since the organisational dominant ideology serves the leaders' power the imperative to internalise the ideology implies a social construction involving sensemaking processes and affecting the identity of individuals (Berger and Luckmann 1966).<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the social construction process is to be defined as *the use of power for shaping culture and identity*. Concertive control thus means being in „cognitive control“ of the individuals who constitute the human/social substance of the organisation.

Concertive control as a form of obedience relationship may enhance the leaders' power and authority. Shared mental models and cognitive homogeneity not only provide a feeling of security, reinforcing leaders' self-image but can also - and are meant to - engender collective action that is conforming to the dominant view. It would not be adequate to draw from Foucault's „docile bodies“ a direct analogy, such as „docile minds“, since „cognitive discipline“ can strongly enable action - although within fixed limits of pre-determined rationality and selected „cognitive tracks“. Instead, „compliant thinking“ seems a suitable expression to describe the means and the goals of organisational learning in the interpretative perspective. In this context, the basic principles of power remain unchallenged: to ensure the *full visibility* of others (to make explicit looming tacit ideas and assumptions - Argyris' Model II) and - conversely - the invisibility of power (by consensus and shared meanings in discourses). It is the subjectivity that forms the target for managerial action, via surveillance and control. As a metaphor, the „mental panopticon“ is probably the best way to illustrate the interpretative perspective of the learning organisation.

Thus, the legitimacy of authority is much stronger if we consider, as mentioned before, that obedience rests upon the will of the subordinates to obey and the agreement to the „substance“ of the decision or the way of seeing the world (the sensemaking process). Legitimacy (as the effectiveness of authority through the voluntaristic and enthusiastic nature of obedience) is therefore more plainly recognised since *collaborators and subordinates already share the premises of the decision*. In other words, organisational learning on the basis of shared mental models enhances power on the top by enhancing the willingness of subordinates to obey, i.e. to *agree*. Maybe the term „substantive legitimacy“ is suitable to indicate this „twist of legitimacy“ (compared to bureaucratic legal-rational legitimacy): Individuals do not conform because *they have to*, but because *they agree to* the substance of decision, sharing the underlying premises.

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<sup>6</sup> There are also other ideologies in every organisation such as class ideology among the workers or technical cultures, but they are not dominant.

A previous study (Filion 1994) has indicated that concertive control does not replace bureaucratic control. In fact, the political nature of the organisation remains unchanged: The demand for cultural and ideological conformity adds up to political domination. In this form of organisational learning that requires the spread and adoption of a specific culture and ideology, the power resources (Giddens 1984) are applied on culture as a new object, thus reinforcing the very status of authority.

The consequences for organisational learning – still in its interpretative perspective - are tremendous since the shared premises and rationality do not have to be made explicit. The participants are already *chosen* and *built* to reach consensus, to share the same view of the world and to anticipate a similar learning. The resulting „managerial comfort“ of homogeneity, however, is achieved at the expense of diversity of views, a fact that can ultimately produce some kind of organisational blindness.

But reality and organisational life are rarely as they *should* be from a political point of view. Can ideological and cognitive homogeneity be achieved and sustained for a long time without countervailing effects? The fieldwork conducted in different organisations has shown some unintended critical implications.

#### **4. Hierarchical networking and „cognitive trap“: some empirical findings**

The theoretical framework presented above rests on empirical studies carried out by the first author in various types of organisations and using the interpretative paradigm of organisational learning. Despite important differences concerning technology, structure, product, culture and history among those organisations, undeniable similarities have been found as well relating to the underlying processes and implications of organisational learning and especially concerning aspects of power and control.

In order to point out some unanticipated consequences of learning organisation based on concertive control, the case of the Bank Central Back-Office (BCBO) will be presented here. The choice of this organisation - part of one of the largest French banks – rested on its very special status: It had a key position in the bank's global strategy which was to modernise the banking activities. The fieldwork has been done in two parts: the first wave of interviews was conducted around the mid 80s, one year after the arrival of the new general manager; the second part has been done four years later. All together, 120 interviews of at least two hours each have been conducted, ranging from the bank's human resources manager to the „boy“ (who carries the checks and business papers), in accordance with the quotas method. In this two-steps procedure, we re-interviewed (at least) the same persons in order to analyse the

„time effect“ on their appraisal of this type of organisational change and learning.

Frequently named - both by management and employees - „the factory in the bank“, this 700 people bureaucratic/taylorist organisation was, despite the highly routinised procedures, a world of stress, time pressure and heavy work load. Acting as the central treatment office of all internal and external banking transactions realised by the 620 local banks of the French capital, the BCBO had a long history marked not only by a strong inertia due to taylorism, top-down bureaucratic organisation, old technology and low productivity, but also by problematic work relations which had engendered many labour conflicts during the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties.

Before the so-called „modernisation“ process was started, the BCBO was composed of six functional departments (finance, human resources, accounting, etc.) and seven „production“ departments. Among them, five handled all commercial (portfolio) and savings operations allocated on a geographical basis (corresponding to an area of the city). The two others were specialised departments, one for all bank transfers (before all with corporate clients), the other for credits and special financial operations. It was therefore no surprise that we observed during the first fieldwork a strong technical culture where skills have been developed in the long run, by shared experience, for better coping with the daily, weekly and monthly time constraints.

Challenged by a stronger competition resulting from changes in the economic environment but also triggered by new demands from corporate clients, the bank's top management developed a new strategy of providing banking service based on flexibility, quick response to the customer and total quality management. As it is often the case, the arrival of a new general manager at the BCBO with full support from the bank's top management has been the starting point of major structural and cultural changes. According to the general manager, the main aim of this „modernisation“ project was not about changing the technical procedures and routines but rather the *way of seeing* technical problems and the relationship to the clients. The aim was to become a more flexible and efficient organisation through delegation of responsibility, multi-skilling, autonomy and collective learning. In fact, the reorganisation through interdependent structural and cultural changes was considered as the prerequisite for learning to take place and, progressively, to autonomously learn how to learn.

Right from the start, the social construction of cognitive homogeneity has been conceptualised by the new general manager as a political process comprising a structural and a cultural side. Both of them have been based on a *view* of management resting on value-based mutual trust and agreement (shared ideas) as a basis for co-operation and hierarchical relations. As a first step, the

organisational structure has been deeply modified. Intermediate levels have been removed, the pyramidal structure being flattened from a six to a three-level hierarchy. All operational departments were directly placed under the authority of the general manager to avoid „interferences“ of intermediary levels or assistants and to ensure direct collective decision making. The aim of increasing „direct control“ on the lower management level and to improve information and communication flows has also been an opportunity to transfer out of the BCBO (with full support from the head-office) staff members considered as „non-conform“, „bureaucratic“ or „narrow-minded“; those judged as reluctant to learning, not willing to adopt the new ideas and to agree with the new dominant ideological view on management. The two specialised departments have been progressively „dried out“ as multi-skilling took place in the other departments. Changes in the work process using computerised technology have been set up. Moreover, the operational functioning has been reorganised by introducing the delegation of both management and technical organisation tasks.

On the cultural side, the organisational ideology promoted by the general manager through corporate statements rested on the assumption that management and employees should share the same ideas if they were expected to co-operate efficiently. Consequently, a value-based culture has been constructed through a „corporate project“ stipulating core ideas, values and norms. The social construction of cognitive homogeneity rested on detection, symbolic reinforcement and promotion into key functions (empowerment) of conforming persons. In concrete terms, it started with a diagnosis and selection. All staff members - after meeting and discussion - have been „ranked“ according to a three-level classification: „synergetic“ (sharing the same mental model and ideas); „more or less acceptable“ (to be convinced); and „intolerable“ (to be transferred out of the organisation or in a functional position). As a second step, the same procedure has been conducted for employees by each department manager. Because delegation of responsibilities and collective decision-making implied the acknowledgment of a set of basic principles (the stated values), norms and ideas represented a crucial part of personnel appraisal. Salary raises, rewards and symbolic recognition were linked to criteria such as autonomy, skills in creative problem-solving, „good initiatives“ and „real involvement“ - all defined from the dominant standpoint. Although „cognitive maps“ or „mental models“ were not explicitly parts of the communicative culture of the organisation, expressions like „sharing the same ideas“, „being able to work together“, „to be open minded“ and „having synergy“ were currently employed to characterise the qualities of the subordinates sharing the dominant view in the organisation.

In five years, about 230 work groups - of various size and for different duration - have been created. Ranging from strategic decision committee to quality circle, from technical problem-solving to co-ordination and communication groups, those work groups involved almost every member of this organisation at least for some time. In general, there were two types of groups: reflection

groups and operational groups. Those temporary structures were linked by the same goal: knowledge creation, collective learning and institutionalisation of the newly developed procedures. At the beginning, participation was voluntary, each group being handled by a „synergetic“ manager who had personally received his mandate from the general manager after being trained particularly concerning rhetoric skills and control of discussion. In fact, besides the official goal of knowledge creation, those discussion groups were targeted at three un-stated aims:

- To make explicit usually tacit assumptions in cognition processes of the participants and, therefore, to detect and publicly recognise the value-conforming actors;
- to convince „in-between“ participants to join the leader’s position;
- to ensure that decision-making processes in which the discussion groups were involved - and their results - are in conformity with the general orientation of the BCBO so as to consolidate the organisational coherence.

Taking these various aspects, the knowledge creation process was from the very beginning targeted to confirm the dominant view in the organisation.

In daily life, the rise of autonomy - due to computerised technology and delegation of decision-making to the work teams - has been accompanied by increasing surveillance and control. Since most of the employees had about 20 years of seniority - which explains both the high level of competency and of „defensive footwork“ - the crucial stake for management was about preventing „divergent autonomy“, i.e. to make sure not to lose control over work teams. Arguing that it was necessary to „know everyone personally“, monitoring activities have been conducted in two ways: by hidden computerised control of the work as well as by direct (visual) and/or indirect (hearsay) surveillance. The basic rationale was the same: to detect and empower the conforming persons and to convince or to delegitimise the non-conforming ones.

After all, the Bank Central Back-Office has been, according to our analysis, an excellent learning organisation. Technical debugging and innovative changes were rapidly accomplished through collective problem-solving, and by the capacity of all involved persons - at least in the first years - to understand others’ assumptions, to push discussion forward and to develop creative ideas. The involvement in quality circles and other structures was high and a sense of membership - of being part of something - progressively arose during the first two to three years, creating a stimulating emulation at all levels. Quality improvement were documented by significant decreases of the monthly rate of complaints from customers. The organisation clearly *learned* and changed.

But after almost four years of constant learning and improvement, the organisation has tended to stabilise and, later on, started to „unlearn“: Unsolved problems being pushed away, new problems with corporate clients not being

taken into account, people being less motivated and disagreement arising in decision-making processes in some departments at various levels. The reappearance of „already solved“ problems puzzled the top management team which had not thought of the possibility of a cultural and political crisis. Blinded by part of the subordinates and other team members sharing the same view of the world, the general manager had not grasped the importance of the moaning from parts of the employees and their management teams. What had happened?

The first unintended - and unwelcome - consequence of the management of a learning organisation via “cognitive homogenisation” was a feeling of mistrust appearing among more or less conforming actors due to the contradiction noticed between the official/ideological discourse on mutual trust and the reality of monitoring and control activities, even those that seemed justified. For most of the employees and parts of management teams, *autonomy meant autonomy* and learning implied an opportunity to increase their know-how *and* their collective autonomy. This is why the feeling of a cultural mismatch progressively developed. To summarise the position of employees, learning, improving one’s own performance, doing a good job and actively working for the well-being of the company did not mean „being on the side of the boss“. As one of them said: „I am here to do the best I can. Not to be brain-washed and to think like the boss“. As a kind of counter-effect, learning reinforced collective identity formation among the groups of employees and among their direct managers. And since the political nature of the organisation implies a structural inequality between strata of actors, subcultures were developing in contrast to the official political structure. Although unintended, this outcome should not be surprising: The process of forging an organisational/cognitive homogeneity has lead „naturally“ to a cultural crisis because the very foundation of this form of organisational learning is political domination.

The second - and the most important - unanticipated consequence is a side-effect of the social construction of cognitive homogeneity. Since there is no equality among individuals and since the management of homogeneity rests upon strong personal affinities, the top management team tended to be like a court. Cultural/cognitive convergence does not annihilate power-related strategic games. So, privileged team members or subordinates behaving as culturally conforming actors gave positive feedback to the higher levels, each of them delegitimising the non-conforming views, ideas and values. Thus, effective power and strong „management comfort“ have been experienced by the general manager. However, disinformation, too, has been growing gradually as the dark side of this management comfort. Moreover, the hierarchical networking used to build the consensus-style decision making led to unintended consequences of concertive control. Cognitive homogeneity was an imperative, which means to conform to ideas, beliefs and assumptions that had been developed at the top level by managers *already* sharing those ideas. Indeed, those mental models were considered as *truth*, as *the best way* to work collectively. In fact, hierar-



chical networking was implemented when there was a need - such as time-saving, efficiency and effectiveness - to work with the ones that were judged *truly loyal* or, in other words, „really with us“. Collecting information on the individuals' ways of thinking, concertive control and classification had provided the basis of networking. In order to secure influence on all organisation levels, the idea was to cooperate with people only who share the basic ideas on how management should be done. Those individuals were called „relays“ or „efficiency channels“. Mutual trust, obedience, legitimacy of actions and team working were high, but only among the individuals sharing the dominant view of the reality. A sense of inequity progressively emerged across the company, since the rewards and bonuses were systematically reserved for conforming individuals, despite the involvement of the others. Finally, cultural inequality had reinforced political inequality. Divergences of mental models had only „disappeared“ temporarily, but they were just „under cover“. Because the credo of ideological homogeneity asked for total devotion, it was quite difficult for culturally non-conforming actors to „voice“ (Hirschmann 1970). Their only alternatives were apathy (Bajoit 1988) or to politically play „loyalty“, if they were not prepared to chose the „exit“ solution.

In the end, the major unintended consequence has been relative blindness of the organisation, a specific form of bounded rationality (Simon 1991). First, the hierarchical networking through cognitive homogeneity had given a biased view of the reality of the organisation, disguising the character and strength of existing subcultures. Second, the incapacity to consider non-conforming views of innovation or problem-solving as creative alternatives entangled the organisation in „closed thinking“. As a consequence, identification of problems and solutions were confined to the range of possibilities that the officially institutionalised cognitive routines described and prescribed. This phenomenon, known as „cognitive trap“ or „learning trap“ (Levitt and March 1988), should however be understood in a slightly different way. Here, the blindness is not due to routine or to a false sense of confidence. Instead, it has to be interpreted as an unintended consequence of the will to create cognitive homogeneity and to obtain full legitimacy for the leader's ideological system.

## **5. Conclusion: evading the „cognitive trap“**

In this paper, we have proposed a critical rereading of some managerial writings on the interpretative perspective of organisational learning. Our aim was to highlight how the premises of those theories rest upon a new form of domination in organisations based on the imperative of cognitive compliance. The role of ideology and the imperative of cognitive homogeneity as major means to obtain discipline in organisational settings appear to be the key for understanding this form of domination.

The processes involved in the implementation of the interpretative concept of organisational learning insert themselves deeply in the procedures of control and are normatively loaded with the aim of producing social and cognitive homogeneity inside the organisation. This seems to be a powerful way of stabilising or enhancing the legitimacy of decisions. Consequently, organisational learning via cognitive compliance appears to be a particularly fitting methodology to cope with quickly and deeply changing environments without risking internal chaos or resistances. In fact, the power structure in organisations may be enhanced by interpretative and concertive control because it is generating knowledge on rationalities and subjectivities (Foucault 1980), and, therefore, control on individuals (Dahl 1986).

However, a critical element is built into the process of organisational learning if it is conceptualised as making explicit tacit thoughts with the aim to form a common and unique mental model. By making mandatory ideological convergence of all members of the organisation this form of concertive control undermines the very basis of concerted organisational action: individual identities and - at least - some diversity of (bounded) rationalities.

Our empirical findings indicate that the conceptual distinction between systems-structural and interpretative perspectives in organisational learning (Daft and Huber 1987) appears to be partly inoperative since the social construction of cognitive homogeneity rests upon systems-structural aspect of management. Moreover, while concentrating on a maximum of homogeneity for power-related and management reasons, an organisation may sacrifice its potentials for adaptation that are associated with diversity. The unintended consequence of cognitive homogeneity and hierarchical networking may force, in the long run, the organisation to unlearn (in the sense of Hedberg, 1981) its own beliefs, values, cognitive patterns and underlying ideological assumptions and to restart from new premises.

How can an organisation avoid the „learning trap“ and prevent to get caught up in too restrictive „cognitive tracks“? The wisdom of considering that power can not rest for a long time on the control of interpretative schemes - or any cultural dimension- appears to be one of the best advises, because leadership is to stay of a political nature. If the leaders' legitimacy has to be reinforced through the imperative of a „one track cognition“ conforming to the dominant view of the world, the leadership practice may deserve a serious reappraisal. When being contradicted or isolated in one's view of the world appears to be difficult to bear, it's time for a critical self-evaluation. *Learning to learn also means learning to doubt - and learning to fail* - about one's own certainties, about one's own rationality. It also means to refrain from the deeply rooted desire to obtain from subordinates and team members full legitimacy and absolute recognition of one's truth. This implies trusting others and others' autonomy as

well as admitting that being in a position of leading a group or a company does not mean having always the best view of the world and of reality.

While it is seducing for the top managers to enlarge and reassure both their power and legitimacy through enforcing cognitive homogeneity, it may be wiser - at least on a longer term perspective - to institutionalise a kind of countervailing structures, e.g. union representatives/work councils (Czarniawska and Hedberg 1985). An alternative could also be to create so-called „weird think tanks“ and encourage their members to produce divergent visions based on radically different premises and rationalities as well as alternative interpretations of political and socio-economic environments. With entire freedom of thinking institutionally safeguarded against marginalisation or sanctions the chances increase that organisations are able to catch up the right ideas at the right time. However, if, as it was stated at the beginning of this paper as a premise, management represents power over people and power through people, how can a countervailing structure or even a „weird think tank“ prevent from falling into the „cognitive trap“? The answer is maybe to make the power visible or, at least, to consider it as a basic feature of dialogue. To hold a dialogue, to understand others' position and to make explicit everyone's assumptions and tacit ideas does not automatically imply or assure agreement and the construction of a cognitive consensus. On the contrary, dialogue can also mean *discussion* on the basis of hardly reconcilable standpoints. Compromises are among the hallmarks of enlightened companies. Organisational learning theory rejoins here decision making theory. In contrast to the ideal of attaining optimal and perfect rationality in reality, only a bounded rationality is possible, bounded by available information but also by norms, values and ideas. Thus, one could consider organisational learning in a context in which different interests, cultures and rationalities articulate in the construction of compromises: temporary solutions to specific problems, collectively elaborated by specific actors agreed upon for an unknown but limited period.

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