

Action learning and the ambidextrous organization

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Abstract

Purpose – This article couples organizational theory with practice with the union of action learning and the ambidextrous organization. It aims to show how action learning contributes to the creation and sustainment of an ambidextrous (learning) organization.

Design/methodology/approach – A side-by-side comparison of action learning and the ambidextrous organization was used.

Findings – Action learning “teaches” and promotes the framework and processes of ambidexterity and the practical creation of learning organizations. An action learning team in action performs like an ambidextrous organization to the extent that “acting” is synonymous with exploitation and “learning” with exploration.

Research limitations/implications – Action learning is a powerful tool for the ambidextrous organization, serving as a template for the practitioner to create a learning organization.

Originality/value – This paper extends the literature on organizational structure, leadership, culture and change as it relates to ambidexterity, learning organizations and action learning. It integrates learning theory through action learning with the practice of the ambidextrous organization. A synergistic theory/practice circle is created through the combination of the processes of “theory informing theory” from academia and “practice informing practice” from industry, creating a “theory informing practice and practice validating and updating better theory” circle.

Keywords Action learning, Organizational ambidexterity, Learning organizations

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

It takes an average of seven years to change an organization’s culture, whether for learning organizations or more traditional organizations (Liker and Hoseus, 2008). But what if that change could be faster? And what if the changes to culture and learning were more permanent and built upon the highest principles and norms? The coupling of organizational ambidexterity, with its balancing of *exploitation* (performance) and *exploration* (learning) and action learning, with its marriage of *learning* and *action*, is the way to achieve this. With action learning, work-based learning can be practiced in agile environments, like ambidextrous organizations at the individual and team level. Though this combination has yet to be discussed academically, the conversation is an easy one for the authors, as the union of *action learning* with *ambidexterity* is intuitive and its parallels compelling. This article explores how action learning can be used to create, and more importantly *sustain*, the ambidextrous organization, suggesting the effectiveness of action learning to promote and create dynamic capabilities in learning ambidextrous organizations.



2. Action learning: combining learning and action

Since Reg Revans first introduced action learning in the coal mines of Wales and England in the 1940s, multiple variations of the approach have appeared (Marsick and O'Neil, 1999; Cho and Egan, 2010; Pedler, 2011). However, all forms of action learning share the elements of real people resolving and taking action on real problems in real time and learning while doing. Cho and Egan (2010) pointed out that the most powerful forms of action learning balance the elements of learning with elements of action.

2.1 Learning components

Sofu *et al.* (2010) identified three building blocks that are valuable in enhancing and assuring learning in action learning, namely, an action learning coach, a focus on reflective inquiry and a focus on learning at the individual, group and organizational levels.

2.1.1 An action learning coach or facilitator. Unless there is someone with the power as well as the responsibility to ensure that time is spent in learning, groups tend to focus only on the urgent (i.e. the action) and neglect the important (i.e. the learning). The action learning coach helps team members reflect both on what they are learning and how they are solving problems. Through questions, the coach enables group members to reflect on how they can improve their work as a team and how they can better solve the problem. The learning coach can also help the team focus on what they are achieving, what they are finding difficult, what processes they are employing and the implications of these processes. The coaching role may be rotated among members of the group, or it may be a person assigned to that role throughout the duration of the group's existence. More and more organizations are utilizing a skilled, trained coach to serve in this role (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2011).

2.1.2 Focus on insightful questioning and reflective listening. Action learning emphasizes questions and reflection above statements and opinions. By focusing on the right questions rather than the right answers, action learning focuses on what one does not know as well as what one does know. Action learning tackles problems through a process of first asking questions to clarify the exact nature of the problem, then reflecting and identifying possible solutions and only then acting. The focus is on questions, as they build group dialog and cohesiveness, generate innovative and systems thinking, and enhance learning results (Marquardt *et al.*, 2009).

2.1.3 Commitment to learning at the individual, group and organizational levels. Solving an organizational problem provides immediate short-term benefits to the company. The greater, longer-term, multiplier benefit is the learning gained by each group member (as well as the group as a whole) and how that learning is applied on a systemwide basis throughout the organization. Thus, the learning that occurs in action learning has greater value strategically for the organization than only the immediate tactical advantage of early problem correction (Dilworth, 1998). Accordingly, action learning places as much emphasis on the learning and development of individuals and the team as it does on the solving of problems. The smarter the group becomes, the quicker and better will be the quality of its decision-making and action-taking.

2.2 Action components

Yeo and Nation (2010) have identified three critical components to ensure that action learning groups take action after each session and implement the agreed-upon actions at the end of the program: (a) an urgent problem, (b) a diverse group with accountability and responsibility and (c) an expectation of action.

2.2.1 An urgent and important problem. Action learning centers around a problem, project, challenge, issue or task of high importance to an individual, team and/or organization. It should provide opportunities for the group to generate learning opportunities; to build

knowledge and to develop individual, team and organizational skills. Groups may focus on a single problem of the organization or on multiple problems introduced by individual group members (Marquardt *et al.*, 2018).

2.2.2 A diverse group with accountability and responsibility. The core entity in action learning is the action learning group (also called a *set* or *team*). The group is ideally composed of four to eight individuals who examine an organizational problem that has no easily identifiable solution. The group should have diversity of background and experience, so as to acquire various perspectives and encourage fresh viewpoints. Depending upon the action learning problem, groups may be volunteers or may be appointed; they may come from various functions or departments, may include individuals from other organizations or professions and may involve suppliers as well as customers.

2.2.3 Power and responsibility of the group to develop strategies and/or take actions. Action learning requires the group to be able to take action on the problem on which it is working. Members of the action learning group must have the power to take action themselves or be assured that their recommendations will be implemented, barring any significant change in the environment or the group's obvious lack of essential information. If the group only makes recommendations, it loses its energy, creativity and commitment. There is no real meaningful or practical learning until action is taken and reflected upon. One is never sure an idea or plan will be effective until it has been implemented. Action enhances learning because it provides a basis and anchor for the critical dimension of reflection. The *action* of action learning begins with taking steps to reframe the problem and determining the goal and only then determining strategies and taking action (Marquardt *et al.*, 2018).

3. Ambidextrous organizations: combining exploitation (action) and exploration (learning)

Organizational ambidexterity is “the ability of an organization to both explore and exploit—to compete in mature technologies and markets where efficiency, control, and incremental improvement are prized and to also compete in new technologies and markets where flexibility, autonomy, and experimentation are needed” (O’Reilly and Tushman, 2013, p. 324).

Duncan (1976) originally created the construct of the ambidextrous organization, identifying two major components, namely *exploitation* and *exploration*. Exploitation, the refinement of existing knowledge within an organization’s internal domains (Suzuki, 2013), is associated with existing improvements, increased efficiency and incremental adjustments (March, 1991). *Exploration*, the pursuit of new knowledge within an organization (Suzuki, 2013), includes variety generation, distant search, risk taking, experimentation and discovery.

3.1 Types of organizational ambidexterity

Traditionally, three types of organizational ambidexterity have been identified: (1) *temporal ambidexterity* (Duncan, 1976), (2) *structural ambidexterity* (O’Reilly and Tushman, 2013) and (3) *contextual ambidexterity* (O’Reilly and Tushman, 2013). A fourth type, *conscripted ambidexterity* (Zabiegalski, 2020), is debated here.

3.1.1 Temporal ambidexterity. Temporal ambidexterity, practiced by all organizations, involves the periodic switching from an exploitative posture to an explorative one and back again (Duncan, 1976). When an organization practices temporal ambidexterity, it takes a break from “converging,” focusing on what it does best, and switches to “diverging,” widening its focus in search of new things and new learning. Temporarily explorative ambidextrous practices might include annual company off-site team building or anything the company endorses that encourages employees to take in new learning and operate in an unstructured, less structured or differently structured space (Duncan, 1976; Moon and Huh, 2011).

3.1.2 Structural ambidexterity. Structural ambidexterity (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013) can be described as the organization's creation of a separate "explorative" space in which it is acceptable to explore and be creative, such as a research and development department, advanced prototype division or other designated creative space (Zabiegalski, 2019).

3.1.3 Contextual ambidexterity. Contextual ambidexterity is the most difficult type for an organization to achieve and the most desirable (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013; Zabiegalski, 2019). If contextual ambidexterity is present, it is likely the previous two types of ambidexterity are also present (Zabiegalski, 2019). Contextual ambidexterity can be understood using a biology metaphor because it works at an individual cellular level (Sapolsky, 2010), reaching an organization's culture and functioning as one productive and creative space (Gibson and Birkenshaw, 2004; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013).

3.1.4 Conscripted ambidexterity. A fourth type of ambidexterity is currently being discussed but is yet to be clearly defined (Tushman, 2020; Atiku and Randa, 2021; Widiana and Soetjipto, 2021; Christiansen, 2022). Conscripted ambidexterity (Zabiegalski, 2020) is the ambidexterity brought about by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). This new type of learning disrupter and ambidextrous trigger, referred to here as "conscripted" or "forced" ambidexterity, is defined as having a "punctuated," "revolutionary" onset (vs evolutionary over time); being irreconcilable under current behaviors, models and paradigms; having a conspiring forced nature (mandatory enrollment) and requiring immediate action (Zabiegalski, 2020). Unforeseen and unexpected, COVID-19 has quickly changed the face of humanity and business, forcing organizations to rethink and reinvent processes (Atiku and Randa, 2021; Widiana and Soetjipto, 2021; Christiansen, 2022).

3.2 Phenomena of ambidexterity

Ambidexterity is the ability to be exploitive and explorative, managing both in a balance promoting short- and long-term performance (Raisch et al., 2009). Research into high-performing organizations has found that *exploitation drives out exploration* (Levinthal and March, 1981; Denrell and March, 2001; Fang et al., 2010). As organizations exploit the marketplace by doing what they do best, they stop exploring (Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996). Companies that adopt an exclusive exploitation orientation risk losing ambidextrous balance and the ability to leverage learning in ways that guarantee long-term success (March, 1991; Fang et al., 2010).

The ambidextrous evolution model in Figure 1 illustrates what companies experience in their transition to ambidexterity, with most organizations stopping at the dotted line. Moving left to right, when companies start out looking for something to create or refine in the marketplace, they are exploring. Once that is achieved, they then exploit their product for profit and the model flips (second triangle). They then exploit the market with their product. While incremental refinement may continue, this is mostly a lather, rinse and repeat period in company learning and growth

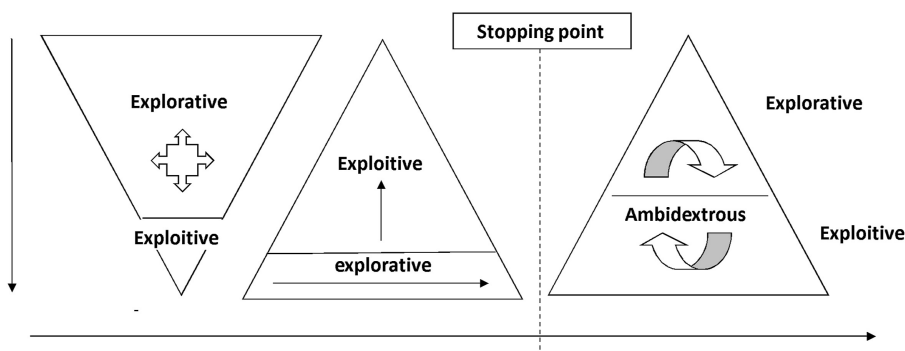


Figure 1.
The ambidextrous
organization model
(Zabiegalski, 2015)

(Zabiegalski, 2019). The final triangle depicts an ambidextrous organization. The model flips once more (internally), so that exploration becomes the capstone of the organization, exploitation becomes the base and the two segments support one another reciprocally in the engagement of both exploitive and explorative activities (Zabiegalski, 2015).

3.2.1 Ambidextrous sustainment. The occurrence of ambidexterity (exploration and exploitation) is common (Bloom, 2010; Zabiegalski, 2019). Creativity and exploration emerge against the backdrop of status quo activities (exploitation) and either propagate or dissipate (Amabile, 1998; Holmqvist, 2004; Owens, 2012). Research supports that while the periodic occurrence of ambidexterity is common, its sustainment is rare (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013; Zabiegalski, 2015). Successful ambidextrous organizations accomplish sustainment through their cultural, structural and leadership models (Jaussi and Dionne, 2003; Dover and Dierk, 2010; Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2011) and in the different types of ambidexterity practiced – temporal, structural or contextual (Moon and Huh, 2011). Benefits of ambidexterity include promoting learning (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000), successfully addressing complexity as a complex adaptive system (Sapolsky, 2010) and leveraging updated scientific language and concepts by embracing quantum physics and mechanics (Bohm, 1979).

3.3 Components of an ambidextrous organization

Ambidextrous organizations have a unique (1) culture, (2) structure and (3) leadership.

3.3.1 Ambidextrous culture. Organizational culture, a discipline borne out of anthropology and sociology first hypothesized in the Westinghouse studies of the 1920s, is still open to new interpretation. Seminal cultural theorists continue to theorize as to the presence and importance of culture in organizations (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952; Geertz, 1973; Schein, 1992, 1993, 2003; Hatch, 1993, 2004; Hatch and Schultz, 2002; Hatch and Zilber, 2012). According to Schein (1992), a learning culture is built on the shared assumptions that humans are “proactive problem-solvers and learners, pragmatic, fully connected, near-future oriented, and diverse, balancing between individualism and groupism, and between collegial and authoritative relationships” (pp. 364–365).

3.3.2 Ambidextrous structure. The ambidextrous structure is readily capable of shifting from a horizontal to a vertical alignment as circumstances warrant (Zabiegalski, 2019). This requires different and flexible organizational structures already in place (Afuah, 2001). Jansen *et al.* (2005) concluded that organizational units with decentralized and densely connected social relations were able to act ambidextrously and were better equipped to cope with the contradictory pressures of exploitative and explorative innovation. Pursuing exploratory innovation is more effective in dynamic environments, whereas pursuing exploitive innovation is more beneficial to a unit's financial performance in competitive environments, equating to vertical or horizontal structures (Jansen *et al.*, 2005).

3.3.3 Ambidextrous leadership. Ambidextrous leadership is primarily composed of two different shared leadership models, each made up of three different types of leaders present in the organization (Dover and Dierk, 2010). In an *ambidextrous leadership* model, *managers*, *entrepreneurs* and *leaders* bring different skills and capabilities to their organizations and company roles. Managers focus on current complexity, leaders focus on change and entrepreneurs focus on opportunities; ambidexterity occurs at the intersection of these roles (Dover and Dierk, 2010). *Complexity leadership* is made up of an *adaptive leader* focusing on change, an *administrative leader* focusing on current operations and an *enabling leader* focusing on members' success (Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2011).

4. How action learning builds an ambidextrous organization

Culture, structure and leadership are the hallmarks of successful organizations. Action learning builds ambidextrous (learning) organizations because it trains culture, leadership

and structures to the highest of norms and simplest of principles by focusing on learning, inclusion, diversity and the power of asking questions (Marquardt, 2004). This section outlines how action learning supports and builds the ambidextrous culture, structure and leadership, engineering the ambidextrous organization.

4.1 Building an ambidextrous culture

The practice of action learning can drastically reduce the time needed for organizational change, transforming an organization engaged in *organizational learning* into one that becomes a *learning organization* in a much shorter amount of time (Weick and Westley, 1996; Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000; Marquardt, 2004). Action learning affects culture in six ways.

4.1.1 *Creates cognitive diversity, changes attitudes and makes questions safe.* Perhaps the single most important thing a chief executive officer does for an organization is set the organization's culture (Schein, 1992). If a leader is aware of and values both explorative and exploitative behavior, it will be reflected in the culture through artifacts, symbols, values and assumptions (Hatch, 1993, 2004; Schein, 1992, 1993, 2003). Additionally, problemistic search (Suzuki, 2013), perturbation (Brunner *et al.*, 2010), the cultivation of divergent thinking attitudes (Williams, 2004), allowance for open expression (Zhou and George, 2001) and safety to explore (Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996) are supported with action learning.

4.1.2 *Promotes learning, giving learning equal voice alongside performance.* An ambidextrous organization is a learning organization. Action learning encourages learning and creativity through questions (Amabile, 1998) and promotes compromise between short- and long-term performance (Benner and Tushman, 2003; Raisch *et al.*, 2009). Performance rarely takes a respite for learning in an organizational context (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000). To balance the scales, effective companies have learned the practice of "learning in action," in which programmed knowledge is combined with questioning and reflection, and group learning shares an equal place with problem-solving and performance (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000).

4.1.3 *Creates a diverse, inclusive and respectful environment.* A diverse, inclusive and respectful learning culture is created by action learning through questioning and making statements in response to questions. It is built on shared assumptions that human beings are "good, proactive problem solvers" (Schein, 1992, pp. 364–365). Ambidextrous organizations, which use action learning for strategic thinking and problem-solving, make better use of their explorative processes, exercising them and their explorative thinkers and linking them to exploitative actionable activities (Zabiegalski, 2019).

4.1.4 *Builds high-performing teams.* Action learning creates organizational allowance for the open expression of voice in job dissatisfaction in a nonthreatening way as a function of the ground rules of the action learning coach and the use of questions (Zhou and George, 2001; Bogosian and Mockler-Casper, 2014). When action learning members behave with an active and constructive response vs a destructive or passive response, this leads to building high-performing teams, fostering creativity and encouraging positive deviance, successful outliers in organizations whose behavior is seen as nonthreatening (Pascale *et al.*, 2010).

4.1.5 *Creates a dynamic learning culture.* Action learning creates a dynamic learning culture by promoting "problemistic search" (Suzuki, 2013) in perturbed environments (Brunner *et al.*, 2010) by way of the action learning process, effectively creating rapid learning for companies (Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996) and creating "learning organizations" (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000).

4.1.6 *Promotes courage in learning (grit) with difficult problems (vs hiding).* Action learning promotes courageous learning and safe learning and questioning environments because of its focus on learning with questions, diverse perspectives and display of nonjudgment and respect in problem-solving (Dweck, 2015; Marquardt *et al.*, 2018). In ambidextrous organizations, action

learning sessions create an ambidextrous structural space, creating “structural ambidexterity” and encouraging exploration and questioning (Zabiegalski, 2019).

4.2 Building an ambidextrous structure

The architectural approach of ambidexterity is the view that ambidextrous organizations are aligned in a dual pattern, differentiating activities between *exploitive* and *explorative*. Ambidextrous structures have a variation of different types of learning models they employ to support both exploitation and exploration (Zabiegalski, 2019). These include action learning (Marquardt, 2004), the Cynefin framework (Snowden, 2010) as well as traditional consulting decision models (Zabiegalski, 2019). The ambidextrous organization structure is supported and modeled in many ways by action learning. The two ground rules of *only making statements in response to questions* and *giving the coach intervening authority* demonstrate the operation of a vertical and horizontal structure modeling exploration and exploitation, respectively (Marquardt, 2004; Zabiegalski, 2019). In addition to how action learning supports an ambidextrous culture, the six components of action learning also support the dual structures associated with ambidextrous organizations, vertical (exploitive) or horizontal (explorative). The additional process of developing leadership skills, such as *developing systems thinking*, *practicing clear communications*, *displaying comfort with ambiguity* and *conflict management*, also points to skills associated with ambidextrous structure and its dual operation of exploitation and exploration (Marquardt, 2004). As outlined below, action learning affects structure in six specific ways.

4.2.1 *Changes complex systems to complex adaptive systems.* Action learning changes complex systems to complex adaptive systems by infusing learning with action, promoting adaptation (Marquardt, 2004; Sapolsky, 2010). Complexity, balance and equilibrium, emergence, chaos and living systems are all characteristics of ambidextrous organizations. The ebb, flow and balance of the complex components within ambidextrous organizations are all addressed using action learning due to its ability to navigate the dichotomous nature between action and learning and between exploitation and exploration (Pascale, 1999).

4.2.2 *Develops systems thinkers.* Action learning develops systems thinkers by combining learning with performance and exploitive with explorative behavior and by promoting a holistic approach that focuses on how parts contribute to a whole (Pascale, 1999; Marquardt, 2004; Zabiegalski, 2019). Thinking of organizations in terms of biological complex adaptive systems, entropy and negative entropy, exploitation and exploration, and ebb and flow are also promoted by the action learning process (Pascale, 1999; Sapolsky, 2010).

4.2.3 *Perturbs learning (shakes up structure).* Brunner *et al.* (2010) viewed injecting intentional “perturbation” into an organization as the missing mechanism that allows exploitation and exploration to work successfully. Action learning promotes perturbation by virtue of its questioning nature, nurturing organizations comfortable with intentionally “shaking things up” or “perturbing” specialized exploitive routines to break cultural inertia and stimulate explorative learning (Brunner *et al.*, 2010). Action learning by virtue of its process naturally promotes and renews an ambidextrous organization by tying learning to performance, keeping them at equal rankings and balancing exploitive and explorative activities in a professional environment (Zabiegalski, 2019).

4.2.4 *Keeps exploitation at bay (keeps it from driving out exploration).* Action learning keeps exploitation from driving out exploration (Zabiegalski, 2019) by suspending decision-making *in lieu* of questioning and developing a better picture of the nature of the problem in the creation of better questions. Attitudes toward divergent thinking (Williams, 2004) are also changed in action learning due to its use of diversity in groups, promoting greater comfort with exploration and less reliance on exploitive structures and practices (Marquardt *et al.*, 2018; Zabiegalski, 2019).

4.2.5 Improves upon traditional group models and allows new models. Action learning improves upon traditional group models by introducing both exploration and exploitation practices in model use. Action learning alleviates the need for limiting and conflicting “storming” phases in group creation (Marquardt, 2004) and a reliance and overuse of traditional categorization consulting models in which frameworks precede data and known data is plugged into a four-by-four matrix and reviewed, a practice best used in exploitation (Snowden, 2010). The introduction of new types of models is made possible due to action learning, like complexity sensemaking models (Snowden, 2010) in which data “emerge” in a social process and precede frameworks and problemistic search models (Brunner *et al.*, 2010) in which hidden underlying problems are actively searched for (Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2011).

4.2.6 Utilizes the science language of quantum physics vs Newtonian physics. Action learning promotes the use of new operational guiding languages, like quantum physics and relativity, in ambidextrous structures because it deals with complexity and the world at a subatomic level (Bohm, 1979; Sapolsky, 2010; Marquardt *et al.*, 2018). Newtonian physics is a world of *cause and effect, predictability, certainty, distinct wholes and their parts*, it is a reality of an *observable world, quantifiable determinism, linear thinking and a controllable future* and it is *slow moving with expected outcomes, mechanistic and reductionist thinking*. Quantum physics by comparison is the world at a “sub-atomic” level using *discreet events, emergence, complexity and fractals* (Zabiegalski, 2021), and it is an environment rich in relationships and the relationships between objects (Marquardt *et al.*, 2018). Because the human mind sees concepts, constructs and pictures in language and words organizations can be profoundly affected structurally by the language they embrace. Action learning provides a voice for adopting both scientific languages in an ambidextrous organization. Using Newtonian language and thinking helps focus on macro-pictures and traditional known “exploitive” concepts and behaviors while quantum physics captures a world at a subatomic level and allows a more explorative stance. Action learning links an explorative/exploitive (ambidextrous) structure and approach (Zabiegalski, 2021).

4.3 Building ambidextrous leadership

Leaders’ attitudes have a great deal of influence in ambidextrous organizations (Williams, 2004). Organizations must have an appreciation for not only convergent exploitive thinkers but also explorative divergent thinkers (Williams, 2004; Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009). It is important for exploitative structures to recognize and support divergent thinking and different structures within organizations (Duncan, 1976; March, 1991; Siren and Kohtamaki, 2010; Boisot *et al.*, 2011), and complexity leadership models (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007) and ambidextrous leadership models (Dover and Dierk, 2010) are designed with this purpose in mind. In addition, action learning helps nurture other ambidextrous leadership qualities helpful in creating and sustaining healthy ambidextrous organizations, including servant leadership and learning and possessing emotional intelligence (Burt, 2004; Schein, 2014; Zabiegalski, 2019). The action learning group exercise of developing chosen leadership skills also supports ambidextrous leadership models (Marquardt, 2004; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007; Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2011; Zabiegalski, 2019) and an option to choose leadership skills that are either exploitive or explorative in nature dependent upon personal preference. Thus, action learning affects leadership in six ways.

4.3.1 Balances tactics with strategy. The balancing of tactics with strategy is the balancing of exploitation with exploration (Zabiegalski, 2019). Long-term success is marked by increasing alignment among strategy, structure, people and culture and is driven by performance problems or environmental shifts, with less successful firms reacting to environmental jolts and successful firms proactively initiating innovation, reshaping their market (Tushman and O’Reilly, 1996). Action learning with its ground rules and components balances tactical behavior with strategic thinking by asking questions and taking action (Marquardt, 2004).

4.3.2 *Develops learning, helping and open-minded leaders.* The action learning process naturally develops leaders. Some of the most significant ways are in learning, helping others, increasing open-mindedness and asking questions (Zabiegalski, 2019). Managers, entrepreneurs and leaders bring different skills and capabilities to their organizations (Dover and Dierk, 2010), and leaders' diversity also brings significant context to an organization's culture, adding to learning, open-mindedness and attitudes (Williams, 2004; Dover and Dierk, 2010).

4.3.3 *Encourages respect, dignity and meaning in the workplace.* Action learning encourages and promotes respect, dignity and meaning with the inclusiveness of questions and diverse groups (Marquardt, 2004; Zabiegalski, 2019). Learning involves collaboration and motivation, is both intrinsic and extrinsic and relates to professional bureaucracies and operating adhocracies (Amabile, 1998; Lam and Lambermont-Ford, 2009). In ambidextrous organizations and action learning groups, leaders and members view performance and learning as having equal importance (Zabiegalski, 2015; Marquardt *et al.*, 2018).

4.3.4 *Develops systems-thinking leaders.* A holistic approach to organizations that focuses on how parts contribute to a whole is often lacking (Bohm, 1979; Pascale, 1999; Zabiegalski, 2019). Thinking of organizations in terms of biological complex adaptive systems, entropy and negative entropy, exploitation and exploration, and ebb and flow involves seeing heterogeneity and homogeneity, incremental innovation and radical innovation and entails evolutionary as well as revolutionary change (Bohm, 1979; Pascale, 1999; Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000; Sapolsky, 2010; McGilchrist, 2011; Suzuki, 2013; Carroll, 2019; Zabiegalski, 2019).

4.3.5 *Supports ambidextrous leadership models.* Ambidextrous leadership is primarily composed of two shared leadership models: *ambidextrous leadership* and *complexity leadership* (Dover and Dierk, 2010). Action learning supports both leadership models and each of their characteristics.

4.3.6 *Develops emotionally intelligent leaders.* Emotional intelligence, a skill developed in action learning, is now considered by many organizations to be as important as or even more important than intelligence quotient and comprises qualities such as self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills and empathy (Stein and Book, 2006). Action learning develops emotionally intelligent leaders by focusing on learning, helping, awareness in asking questions and being part of a contributing group.

Table 1 summarizes action learning's effects on each of these elements of the ambidextrous organization: culture, structure and leadership.

5. Action learning in action

The biggest way an action learning group models an ambidextrous organization is in how members combine and balance action with learning, effectively modeling exploitation and exploration, respectively. Often, when performance paired with learning is discussed, we fear subpar performance. Ambidextrous organizations have learned to successfully *explore* (productively diverging) and *exploit* (successfully converging) without fear of inaction. Action learning is a powerful tool well suited for learning organizations, like ambidextrous organizations. To study how ambidextrous organizational teams function, there are no better teams from which to learn than action learning groups in action.

6. Implications

Coupling organizational theory and practice is difficult. Organizational theory developed in the halls of academia updates and informs better theory, producing informative research papers. Similarly, stalwart practice repeated in industry is passed down through successors, updating better practice, but the two seldom meet. This article contributes to the learning

Element	Effects
Culture	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Creates cognitive diversity, changes attitudes and makes questions safe 2. Promotes learning, giving learning equal voice alongside performance 3. Creates a diverse, inclusive, respectful environment 4. Builds high-performing teams 5. Creates a dynamic learning culture
Structure	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Promotes courage in learning (grit) with difficult problems (vs hiding) 1. Changes complex systems to complex adaptive systems 2. Develops systems thinkers 3. Perturbs learning (shakes up structure) 4. Keeps exploitation at bay (keeps it from driving out exploration) 5. Improves upon traditional group models (forming, storming, etc.) 6. Utilizes the science language of quantum physics vs Newtonian physics
Leadership	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Balances tactics with strategy 2. Develops learning, helping and open-minded leaders 3. Encourages respect, dignity and meaning in the workplace 4. Develops systems-thinking leaders 5. Supports ambidextrous leadership models 6. Develops emotionally intelligent leaders

Table 1.
How action learning
builds an
ambidextrous
organization

organization literature by combining action learning theory with ambidextrous practice, effectively integrating learning theory with the practice of a powerful learning organization in the field, the ambidextrous organization (Gold and Pedler, 2021).

6.1 Implications for research

This paper offers insights that warrant further research—including the use of updated operating language, concepts and theories taken from relativity and quantum physics, replacing traditional and outdated Newtonian business language (Marquardt, 2004; Zabiegalski, 2021)—by providing literature exploring the sustainment of ambidextrous organizations using action learning (Suzuki, 2013) and literature exploring the use of action learning to bolster ambidextrous leadership models (Tushman *et al.*, 2011; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007; Dover and Dierk, 2010; Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2011). Finally, further discussions using the ambidextrous evolution model are encouraged (Zabiegalski, 2015, 2019) and will assist scholars in understanding the creation and sustainment of ambidextrous organizations.

6.2 Implications for practice

Action learning processes bring contributions to learning organizations, like ambidextrous organizations, by intentionally “perturbing” processes with powerful questions, creating new learning (Brunner *et al.*, 2010).

7. Summary

This paper has explored learning at the intersection of action learning and the ambidextrous organization. It started with an overview of action learning and ambidextrous organizations and then examined how action learning supports, builds and helps create the ambidextrous organization. At the center of action learning and ambidextrous organizations are learning, curiosity and questions. Ambidextrous organizations have learned to keep exploitation (action) from driving out exploration (learning) by viewing exploration as the equal of exploitation. Remarkably, action learning does the same by utilizing the power of questions to mediate judgment, allowing learning to accompany action in performance.

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