
Leadership Learning for the Future

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CHAPTER 4

THE ORGANIZATION LABORATORY

An Experimental Training Setting for Learning the Process of Organizing

Barbara Lesjak and Hubert Lobnig

As change becomes an abiding reality in most organizations today, individuals in organizations are both objects on which change is imposed and subjects codeveloping change on different levels and with different possibilities to have an impact on larger results. Senior and middle managers are expected to initiate, promote and implement change processes, but many times they also become objects of the changes they themselves initiated. Advanced managers therefore need profound knowledge of organizational dynamics which they are a part of and specific knowledge of how groups and organizations operate as social systems. But today these kinds of capabilities are not required only of those filling management positions; organizations are increasingly relying on “distributed leadership” (Bolden 2008)—a term designating management and leadership which are not restricted to designated managers. A great deal of knowledge about organizational dynamics can be acquired when a learning process based on practical experience in

social interaction is applied instead of or in addition to a more traditional “leadership- classroom” approach. As such, performance-based learning—when combined with reflective analysis and theory—allows the integration of “head, heart, body and soul” and thus provides a powerful tool for executive learning (Mirvis, 2008). In our chapter we describe the “organization laboratory” as a learning setting which differs considerably from prevailing methods of management education as it focuses on *learning about the process of organizing in the here and now* rather than learning about elements and functions of organizations.

ORGANIZATION LABORATORY—THE CONCEPT

The organization laboratory (OLab) as we practice it was developed at the Alpen-Adria University of Klagenfurt as an application of the principles of experimental learning as performed in “Training-group” settings (T-group) to the wider system of an organization. The underlying learning model is based on Lewin’s field theory (Lewin, 1963) his educational concept of action learning and his theory of change (Bradford, Gibb, & Benne, 1964; Kleiner, 2008; Lewin, 1947). The methodology was applied to a newly developing social science discipline—group dynamics—which is based on the principles of social learning, process oriented research, collective self-determination and participation.

In the 1940s Kurt Lewin and his disciples experimented with sensitivity training, inventing the concept of the laboratory method. For a longer period of time the laboratory concept was applied only to intragroup processes (social processes within groups) focusing on learning and behavioral change through feedback mechanisms, greater awareness of social perceptions and improvement of skills for social interaction. Although different methods, fields of applications and designs were developed over the years, the laboratory method remained within the area of small group practice and research, it provides learning about groups through focusing on the own group, observing and reflecting the “here-and-now-situation” as well as individual contributions and activities in the context of the group setting.

However the didactic of the laboratory method (training and learning) has been maintained to the present day, because the methodology can be used to work with different types of social processes; what is essential is the focus on interactional dynamics in and between social formations.

The founders of the first laboratory saw the group as the link between the individual person and the larger social structure. They saw the group, therefore, as a medium for serving two sets of interrelated functions: the

reeducation of the individual toward greater integrity, greater understanding of himself and of the social conditions in his life, greater behavioral effectiveness in planning and achieving changes both in himself and in his social environment; and the facilitation of changes in the larger social structures upon which individual lives depend. (Bradford et al., 1964, p. 5)

This didactic principle is still valid today, also for the organization laboratory.

It was in Europe in the early 1970s that the setting of the T-group was transformed into OLab and the concept of group dynamics found a home in large group applications. The first of these “labs” in the German-speaking countries was organized in Bad Tainach in 1970 and was led by Traugott Lindner, Don Nysten, and their colleagues. This first organization laboratory resulted in experiences with the relationship between large group plenums, official and informal subgroups, the necessity and opportunity to clarify one’s own purposes and their realization within the framework of group constellations (Rechtien, 2001). The concept of laboratory learning was adapted to the processes which are played out between groups and therefore reach an organizational dimension (Krainz 1991, 2006, 2010). The American description of the fundamental methodology of the laboratory setting is also still valid today:

Such notions about the creation of learning situations and their management are drawn both from the canons of scientific method and from the philosophy of science. The form they take in the laboratory may be thought of as action research. Action research is an application of scientific methodology in the clarification and solution of practical problems. (Bradford et al., 1964, p. 33)

Here learning is strongly connected to the idea of participation:

It is important to emphasize that democratic methodology is seen here as closely akin to scientific methodology. Both depend ultimately upon consensual validation of results achieved. Both build safeguards against ‘false’ consensus into their ways of operating. Both are experimental in approach. Both are committed to incorporating a maximum induction from relevant individual experiences and from alternative models of interpretation into learning results sought. Both insist on public processes of validation. (Bradford et al., 1964, p. 35)

The laboratory method as applied in an organization laboratory is an innovative instrument for forming and steering larger social organizations—an instrument which is intended to realize the connection between learning and doing, focusing on learning-as-practice. Certain

theoretical concepts of organization and development play an important role in analyzing the underlying organizational dynamics.

As already suggested, "system theory" also plays an important part in the designing of laboratory learning. It is through analyzing the encounters, conflicts, and confusions between systems at many levels of human organization that motivation to learn about human behavior and, hopefully, actual learning, in a context of use and application, are accomplished. (Bradford et al., p. 31)

Drawing on the American laboratory concept, the OLab is a learning setting whose goals are directed toward social learning within a framework of organizational dynamics.

The OLab provides a learning arrangement in which organizations both are established and can reflect on their processes. It has less to do with dynamics within clear sub-groups, and also not primarily with so-called large group processes, but rather with dynamics between groups, with the creation of cooperation on a scale larger than the single group and the possibilities or difficulties of steering larger social associations. (Krainz 2006, p. 28, translated by the authors; see also Krainz, 2005)

There are some learning goals: First the experience and understanding of organizational dynamics as a special form of social dynamics; second, social competence in dealing with steering organizational dynamics is further developed; and third, understanding of the difficulties of the "process of organizing" (e.g., decision making with collective effects) is deepened. As described by E. Krainz (2006) the content as well as the process of the OLab include dealing with hierarchies and the inevitability of the emergence of hierarchical structures, the desire to follow one's own individual needs (and their frustrations) and the wish to be integrated, to participate in creating and determining something larger (and their frustrations), the analysis of the role of power in general, and the search for influencing decisions in the parts of the organization which are formed in the laboratory in particular. The focus is on problems of *collective* decision making, representation and delegation, on communication and control and the resulting collective and partially collective atmospheres which are created by the organization's culture and subcultures.

Under normal conditions it is not easy to approach these emotional streams; in the OLab using self-designed methods and instruments, it is possible to follow up the changing relationship between social structures which develop and emerge unnoticed and consciously applied organizational actions, above all, however, the system decisions, that is, those metadecisions, which affect the decision-making mode.

APPLICATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KLAGENFURT

At the University of Klagenfurt Organization Laboratories have been offered since 1970 (Krainz, 2006, 2010; Rechten, 2001) to students, to attendees of postgraduate courses in organizational change, conflict management and mediation, and to consultants and managers from outside the university context. The number of participants usually lies between 40 and 100; there are normally between three and eight staff members. The idea is based on the laboratory concept: to learn about organization while performing the process of organizing. With an organization created in the laboratory, it is possible to experience, observe, shape and reflect upon the most important phenomena of the complex social system which organizations are. In contrast to the T-group, which analyzes the process in the group, OLab focuses on processes at the organizational level, integrating roles of individuals and teams within organizations and intergroup relations.

The didactic application of this learning setting is as follows: The OLab starts with some required minimal pre-settings of structures and procedures; basically the starting time as well as the end time, the plenary as structure at the beginning, the staff members and their roles and the aim of the OLab as a setting for *learning about organization through organizing in the here and now* are predefined. This way some structures and instructions are provided at the outset, but compared to other trainings or seminars no additional agenda is provided intentionally which results into the experience of a lack of leading and orientation by the participants. The basic assumption is that a leadership vacuum fosters the competence of self-monitoring and “self-leading.”

Essentially, a kind of social vacuum is produced. Leadership, agenda, procedures, expectations, usually pre-established by some authority, are blurred or missing. As tension produced by the vacuum mounts, members endeavor to supply the missing elements and their behaviour output also mounts. (Bradford et al., 1964, p. 41)

This vacuum causes the participants to (have to) work on and begin to develop these themes. Then they can reflect on their own assumptions and concepts about organizing and change and find blind spots in their thinking and acting, since they can immediately see what happens and receive feedback on their actions.

Having received only a very few defined prescriptions, the participants start the process of organizing primarily based on their own assumptions and “ways of doing things” rather than on tasks or working structures defined by the staff.

As a result of the leadership vacuum and “clear” guidance the audience is confronted with at the beginning, first patterns of organizing begin to emerge, usually either around some kind of decision-making procedure or the leadership dimension. First insights arise, suggesting that the plenary could be subdivided into smaller groups, but how and who should coordinate the whole? This is how the learning process starts. In each case there is from the very beginning a social (learning) process, which can take widely different forms—in the early years it was observed that groups were formed very early in the process; in recent years it has more often been the case that group formation does not happen automatically—rather, other forms of “networking” occur, which, however, are usually due to very individualistic motives and can actually worsen the problem of decision making in the organization which is being built. In whatever ways social reality is formed and social structures are built here, the goal is to explore these while creating them.

The staff interventions provide ideas about organizations and the principles of organizing according to the issues which emerge: organizations need to observe themselves, to develop decision making structures and to create roles for management and experts. Through OLab they are transformed into specific interventions for developing the skills of organizing and decision making. Throughout the entire process (see Figure 4.1) the staff has the function of supporting this self-exploration and advancing it with appropriate instruments; depending on the phase of the process and the occasion, different interventions will be made. In consideration of the learning goal of making the organization itself the object of the learning, there are various forms of interventions. One such form is the Group Organization Sociogram (GOS) (Arnold, 2004). This method is based both theoretically and technically on the concepts of Moreno (1954), but has been further developed at the University of Klagenfurt for use with large populations. The GOS is capable of “sociometrically representing coherent groups, interconnections among groups and internal group structures as they exist at the moment of observation” (Arnold, 2004, p. 1) Simply expressed, with this special sociometric method, informal groupings are made visible and their participants receive prompt feedback. The GOS makes it possible for groups to observe and describe themselves and others and is also an instrument for strengthening the group members’ perceptions of one another and improving their ability to act.

Staff interventions can be differentiated into “context interventions” (that is creating and developing designs and structural framework requirements for decision-making processes, like calling in for a plenary,

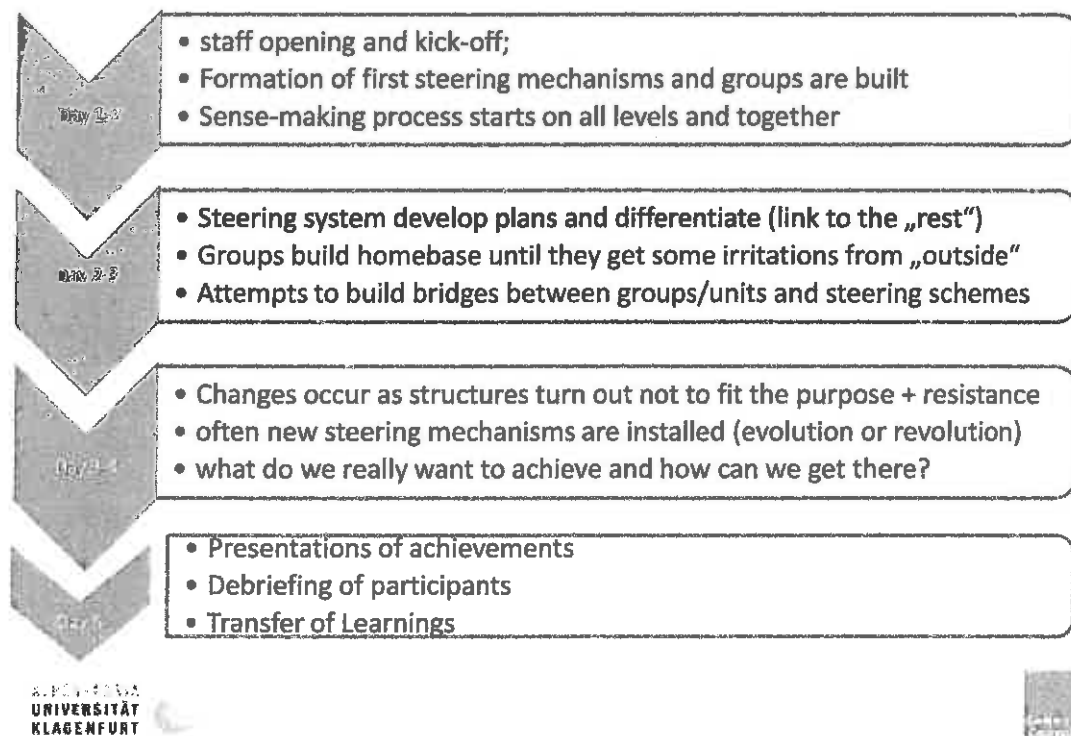


Figure 4.1. The development of the O-Lab—generic perspective

introducing a special meeting for delegates) and “process interventions” (more direct forms of intervention in the respective organizational dynamics processes like comments, feedbacks, questions, written and oral messages) (Krainz & Lesjak, 2004). Both forms of intervention focus on the special themes, problem situations and solution strategies which emerge during the process of organizing. As the OLab generates a special type of complexity because its group processes and organizational dynamics processes overlap and influence each other, the timing and “fitting” of staff interventions are crucial. “The syntax of the group association interferes with the syntax of the group continually and unavoidably” (Claessens, 1977, p. 61). In other words, the various intrinsic logics of the system’s groups and organizations must continually be balanced and attuned to each other.

A typical problem which regularly arises here in connection with the dilemma of delegation is linked to the necessity of creating adequate forms of communication (e.g., meetings, newsletters, delegation systems) and the organizational ability to act, specifically the ability to make decisions. These problems together with the need to create an “internal self-image and the group association’s external presentation” require, according to Claessens (1977, p. 61), specific qualifications in effective group

behavior and taking over various group roles. When a representative or delegate of a group meets with another group's representative, a second order group is formed with its own syntax. Group members then play a triple role: first as members of their dispatching group, second as representatives, agents or speakers of their dispatching group, and third as member of the group of representatives of groups, that is, group members on a higher level. This complex set of roles is usually a demanding learning experience for the participants and often accompanied with the experience of frustration and the dissolution of old behavior patterns.

Our experience from observations, reflection papers, feedback from participants, for example, shows that this phenomenon of the delegates' dilemma occurs repeatedly in various shapes. Sooner or later the participants' insights mature, and they realize that social structures are necessary for decision making. This forces them to master various conflicts which are linked to the different and occasionally contradictory demands of the roles they must play. In the best case, by so doing they also learn to differentiate among the various cooperation and decision making strategies required by groups and the emerging organization. In small groups or working groups consensus can be reached relatively easily; in contrast, in the second order group coalitions and the building of majorities are of great importance. Decision making and the development of the structures necessary to do so are also challenges which are mastered in various ways by the participants, not always successfully. It happens frequently that at the end of an OLab there is something resembling a structure, but the participants will not find it satisfactory if they have not managed to set up a decision making modes appropriate for the entire organization. The analysis of and reflection on the processes which have led to that point are nonetheless equally educational as those in a "successful" OLab.

However it is interesting to note that most participants can deal well with the processes in small groups but have difficulties separating themselves from those small groups and involve into the organizational dynamics of larger systems. In general, it can be said that learning increases with the commitment to the laboratory situation: the ability to act and make decisions in organizations develops differently in each individual, depending on his or her degree of readiness to become involved in the processes.

In our continual examination of the didactic fundamentals, one question repeatedly needs to be answered anew: How can the participants confront the organization with their problems in such a way that they first perceive them and then try to solve them?

Two questions will be uppermost: How can problems be adapted to the laboratory? And how can the laboratory be adapted to the problems? Persons

often find it difficult to adapt problems to the laboratory because they retain “real world” variables that are salient but irrelevant, because they are unwilling to alter the values of variables, and because they misunderstand the purpose of experimentation and the process of generalizing data. Relevant to the question of adapting the laboratory to the problem, persons often underestimate the versatility of the laboratory. (Weick, 1965, p. 194)

We can confirm the finding that participants often underestimate the learning possibilities of an OLab. It can also be observed that learning through experience is often easier when one either does it repeatedly or acquires a conceptual tool with the help of study of literature and theories.

FURTHER APPLICATIONS

Organization development consultants and OD researchers have elaborated different concepts of laboratory learning settings within larger groups, such as simulation methods (e.g., Davies, 1993) and conference models including different settings for doing, reflecting and learning as offered with the “Leicester Conference” at the Tavistock Institute (www.tavistock.org); or they can be organized to learn around specific issues of organizational problems, as with the role of power and influence in “power labs” (Oshry, 1999) or the use of models of organizational change and feedback as in the “SYMA-concept” (Rieckmann & Weissengruber, 1990). The OLab is different, because the organizational elements set as preconditions for the organization are limited as there are no externally given tasks or a predefined authority to follow than the process which emerges through actions from the participants, the groups which are formed and processes which are developed. We would argue, that the learning is very basic and pure and there is no excuse for whatever happens in the organization and it is parts than the process in which the members of the organization engage.

IMPROVING MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP— WHAT CAN BE LEARNED IN THE OLAB?

Most importantly, the OLab helps participants to alter their knowledge and mindset on process interventions: What should be discussed/decided/reflected on with whom, when and where in order to move the organization forward? These questions point to a row of individual learning goals but also to typical problem situations in organizations. Although the processes in an OLab are always unique, certain basic problems occur repeatedly, and these can be generalized.

Generally spoken, the capability to act observed by an entire system and its parts is essentially dependent upon how well the system mobilizes its potential for conflict and deals with it as much as possible through conscious reflection. In the OLab there is always the opportunity to look into this potential for conflict closely and to explore the functioning or non-functioning of the organization. This makes the OLab different to "real organizations" in which conflicts arise but one cannot explore them due to time or work pressures. (Krainz, 2005, p. 320-321, translation by the authors)

"The problem with 'growing' our own organization is that it takes time. And experimenters are an impatient lot. What is needed is techniques to influence the rate at which groups develop, but these techniques are scarce" (Weick, 1965, p. 217). Today the techniques are no longer so very scarce as researchers and trainers are usually eager to point out; but one can say that the resource of time plays a great role. In the early days of group dynamics many goals were formulated for the laboratory, not all of which could be reached, as experience showed. However, some of the learning opportunities designed by the Americans for laboratory learning can be partially adapted for the OLab, additionally it offers further learning opportunities: *the opportunity to experience and reflect on complex social dynamics and to experiment with a wide repertoire of roles and the behavior patterns related to them.*

However, our evaluations and research (see also Auer-Welsbach, 2005) suggest that there are different individual patterns for organizational learning, as some participants prefer acting in groups, some like to communicate with other groups, some take over responsibility and perhaps risks as well, whereas others rather like to remain in an observing position. Each of these types of organizational behavior creates different patterns of learning. But all participants have to deal with complex organizational processes and their role within them, thus developing their "organizational competence" (Grossmann & Heintel, 2000). Based on what we know so far we have identified three different levels of learning, which are related to the multiple forms of growth in effective membership and the mastery of the various difficult situations and conflicts throughout the process of the OLab (see Figure 4.2).

Group-Learning: The Relationship Between the Individual and the Group

Our research and experience show that the group is the first "escape" for the individual, as groups provide safety, connectedness, face-to-face communication and trust building. But when it comes to making a difference in the whole organization, the group is of limited value. The group

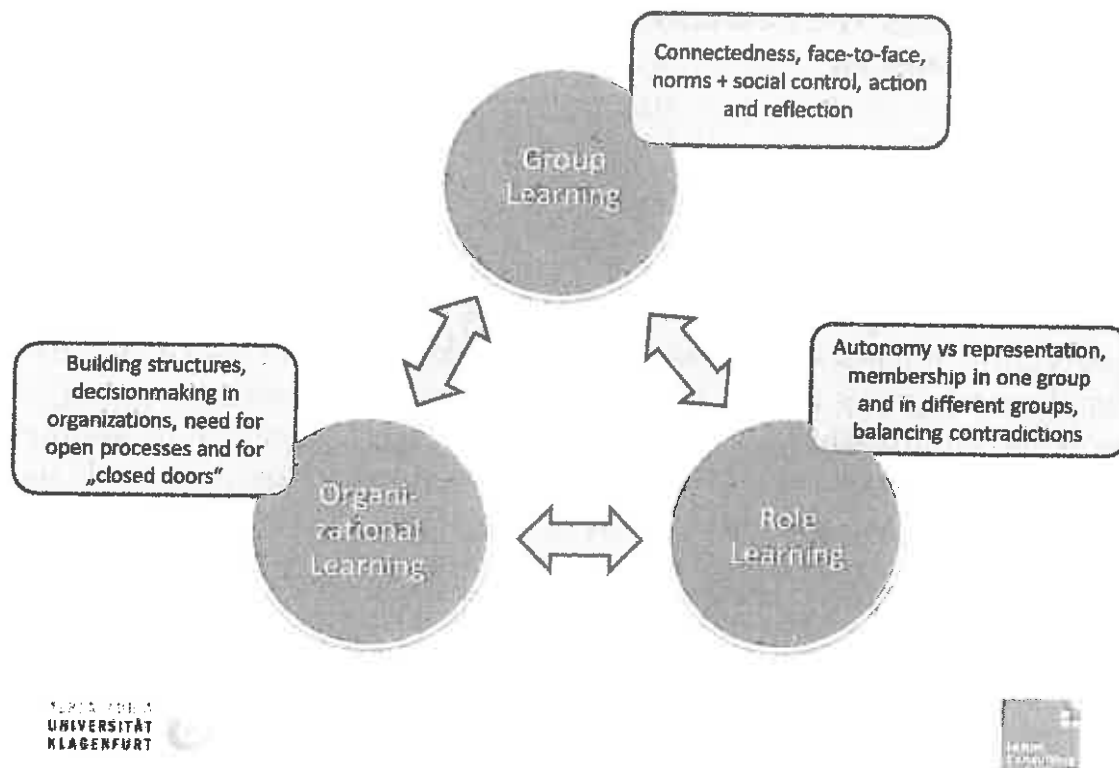


Figure 4.2. Learning levels of the organization laboratory.

offers very specific learning opportunities: If the group functions even halfway well and a friendly climate of trust is established, then metacommunication can surface and the group can make itself the object of reflection and steering. This requires that the membership of the group is clear and the group experiences strategies for mastering problems. Typical group issues then can become learning themes: building trust, group leadership, external presentation of the group, building coalitions, forming subgroups, integration versus personal freedom, group pressure, social control, for example. The members of the group are responsible for making these themes relevant for their learning, that is, widely varied themes will be dealt with, depending on what the group considers to be important. Experiences in the OLab show that in this context groups react with widely differing degrees of professionalism: There are groups, for example, which are extremely disciplined in managing their time and work—it is important to them to deal with themselves. We also observe, however regularly that some groups are lacking self-discipline: Groups are “not available,” “scattered” or even falling apart which often is a symptom of lack of steering. When one studies these difficulties more precisely, group problems such as unsettled questions of power or unresolved conflicts are revealed.

Role-Learning: The Relationship Between the Individual and the Organization

Unavoidably, some participants will deliberately leave their home groups to collaborate with other groups and with “management groups” to target collective decisions. The main learning here is that there is a basic difference between the social systems of a group and an organization. The participants learn about delegates and roles “between” different parts of the organization—the “dilemma of delegation”: How can we master the ambiguous role of being a representative of one group (e.g., a working group) while we are at the same time a member of another (board, committee, etc.). Additionally, the importance of formal and informal roles and processes and how they relate to each other is experienced, since both are important means of creating impact. The laboratory method also intensifies the dilemma of delegation because roles must often be changed very quickly. For many participants it is evidently difficult to become aware of and act out the demands of the various roles and the expected behaviors related to them. Various inclinations can be observed here: Few participants have difficulty with the role of the delegate, but there are always some who seem to have absolutely no difficulty with the idea of breaking ties with their dispatching group and adjusting to cooperation with others. Most are, at least at the beginning, irritated and disoriented because they are emotionally attached to their group and therefore often act forcefully in its interests without noticing that the dominance of a single group can paralyze an entire organization (for a comprehensive description of the specific potential for conflict, see Krainz, 2005).

Organizational Learning: The Relationship Between Groups and the Rest of the Organization

On this level learning is at its most complex level because making collective decisions is a great challenge for individuals and groups. When delegates collaborate, they are also affecting a group process, so the group dynamics interfere with the organizational dynamics. The main learning happens around developing structures and the role of hierarchy: What is the function of hierarchy? What are the problems related to this organizational element and how we can cope with effects created through hierarchy? We repeatedly see, that groups which have a steering role try to establish other modes than delegating the decision power to one group and installing a hierarchy. While experimenting with other types of steering like network-organizations or forms of representative steering, very

soon the complexity of the required information-flow, involvement and engagement surfaces. When other leadership-models than hierarchies are established, those in leadership positions are very much challenged.

Besides the decision making other issues are of importance: How can we work across organizational boundaries (vertically and laterally)? Why is it necessary for organizations to go beyond groupthink and partial interests, and how can the decisive element of "responsibility for the whole" be implemented?

Above all, it is also important for comprehensive control that a form of communication develops which is capable of bringing inherent potential for conflict to the fore and developing strategies for its resolution. This can work when the second order group (delegate group) has developed so well that it can value the meaning of the organizational dynamics more highly than the meaning of the individual group's interests. In other words, the empowerment of the delegate group must be accepted in the group to an extent that at least its fundamental conditions of existence are not questioned. Not until that point it can be assured that the decisions of the entire organization can have sufficient effect. Experiences show that this process of empowerment does not always succeed; frequently the seminar ends before the second order group succeeds in translating its decision making power to the entire organization. Evidently the pull of the original group is so strong that insights into the organization's imperatives are subordinated to it. However, whether "successful" or not, the insight and analysis of this problem advances the organizational competence; in the best case it is also possible to test this in the laboratory.

These three learning dimensions individually and in relation to each other can be activated in an OLab which is open to the processes and not predetermined into a special direction. Through this the OLab setting provides learning opportunities which extend simulation methods or role play. The methods and the special research and training concepts of the laboratory are not new; but what is new are the real problems in our society which are connected to increasing organizational change and the need to steer and to organize that change. In this respect the OLab is an appropriate learning setting because it consequently focuses organizational change and development as explicit objects of learning.

In the future we see the OLab not only as a learning hub for process oriented management skills reaching beyond traditional management education but also as a setting for experimenting with cross- and transcultural attempts to organize. As more and more organizations are confronted with these issues, dealing with authority, communication and collaboration will require advanced skills and mindsets for managers, and those who are acting in extended leadership functions.

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Management makes the world go round. This is a strong belief of the authors of this volume. The current tumultuous economic and financial crisis and the intensifying threats caused by climate change are symptoms of a global system that is out of balance. It is increasingly assumed that managers share the responsibility for these developments. After all, management as a major force in the shaping of global economic conditions and social relations make the world go round. At present an alliance of business schools, publishers, and certification agencies is rapidly organizing the learning of executives and leaders into a global industry developed by professional managers.

But under these circumstances do MBA courses and executive education programs in business schools offer the appropriate learning for current challenges? And can managers learn the lessons of the crisis in these learning environments? Or does the transformation of learning into a global business rather tend to discourage critical thinking and reflective patterns of learning?

Management makes the world go round." This was also the title of an international conference on management learning, where the authors of this volume presented their ideas, shared their experiences, increased their knowledge, and contributed to a fascinating debate in a context with a great professional and cultural diversity. This inspired the group to hold on to this debate and develop the ideas further on. So this book was created and brought into the IAP division of management education.

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