Action Learning, Fragmentation, and the Interaction of Single-, Double-, and Triple-Loop Change

A Case of Gay and Lesbian Workplace Advocacy

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The action-learning framework is traditionally used to summarize complex change efforts as one of three methods: single-, double-, or triple-loop. Although this summary is quite useful for some kinds of organizational analysis, it can oversimplify and thus ignore the fragmented, contradictory nature of change. This summary also implies that action-learning methods are autonomous or even mutually exclusive: The characterization of a change effort as double-loop suggests that single- and triple-loop change did not happen. We propose an elaborated action-learning framework that decomposes action-learning method into three components: argument, practice, and outcome. This approach enables action-learning theory to illuminate the multiple facets of change and to analyze the interaction of the three methods in significant change processes. We apply this new framework to a case of gay and lesbian workplace advocacy and illustrate how different action-learning methods are woven together to create change.

Despite a rich and diverse history of research (e.g., Gersick, 1991; Sutton, 1987; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995), organizational change continues to captivate and challenge management scholars. Understanding change means

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understanding the fundamental nature of today's organizations as they strive to adapt to an ever more complex environment. Capturing the change process requires attention to three levels: the individuals and groups within organizations, the organizations themselves, and the societal contexts within which they operate. It also requires attention to how those levels interact—reinforcing, modifying, and opposing each other, often simultaneously. In this article, we propose a framework for understanding variegated, contradictory change processes, building on the substantial literature on action learning. By applying this framework to a case study of a change that challenged individuals, their organization, and the larger society, we illustrate both how change permeates all three levels and how that change can be dissected and then reconstructed.

Action learning, or the concept of single-, double-, and triple-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978, 1996; Nielsen, 1993b), is a very powerful tool for understanding change. Briefly, single-loop learning changes an actor's strategies, or the assumptions behind those strategies, without addressing the actor's driving values. Here, actors (individual or collective) change their approach to more effectively or efficiently reach existing goals. In double-loop learning, actors question and ultimately transform their driving values. Triple-loop learning goes beyond the actors' values, addressing the values of the actors' societal environments or tradition systems.

Most efforts to apply the action-learning framework (e.g., Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Nielsen, 1993a, 1993b, 1996a, 1996b; Nielsen & Bartunek, 1996; Torbert, 1994; Torbert & Fisher, 1992) have shared a similar unitary approach, equating method with outcome, and understanding a change process as a single method or level of action learning, either single loop, double loop, or triple loop. For example, a particular company's decision to include ethical criteria as part of its decision making might be characterized simply as double-loop learning because it may require a change in the values underlying that company's decision-making framework. In contrast, a company's decision to launch a new product line might be seen as single loop because it simply suggests a change that largely conforms to the organization's current strategy.

The action-learning framework enables relatively neat distinctions between tinkering with current conceptions about how things should be done (single-loop learning), thinking outside the box of the actor (double-loop learning), and questioning society's more encompassing box. The latter, questioning the nature of the tradition system itself, is an example of triple-loop learning. It provides a useful shorthand for both researchers and practitioners. But the power of action learning is diminished if variation along this continuum is reduced to a trichotomous global characterization. Can a radical change effort that takes on the current framework succeed without appealing to some of that framework's traditional values? Can a change effort bold enough to challenge societal norms happen without challenging organizational or individual values?

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In other words, can single-loop, double-loop, and triple-loop methods of change happen entirely autonomously? Or is it their interaction that ultimately determines the nature and extent of organizational change?

We argue that the interaction of single-loop, double-loop, and triple-loop methods (rather than their independence) should be the focus of analysis. Influenced by postmodern approaches to the study of organizations (e.g., Boje, 1993, 1995; Cooper & Burrell, 1988), we treat change efforts as multilayered and fragmented. Although the traditional use of action learning focuses on single, dominant understandings, we create an action-learning framework that goes beyond the simple trichotomous approach by attending to the contradictory facets of a single change effort. We then provide an illustration of this new framework with the case of a company’s decision to dramatically change its attitude toward its gay and lesbian employees. A shorthand characterization of this change effort might depict it as a story of remarkably successful triple-loop change. Our framework instead untangles the strands of single-, double-, and triple-loop learning, showing how they interacted to create a rough, unfinished change impossible to encapsulate with a simple triple-loop label. We offer this framework as a contribution to the action-learning lexicon, useful for analyzing other change efforts.

We start with the story of the change effort, followed by an analysis of the case. As part of the analysis, we summarize and apply the traditional approach of action learning to the case. We then argue for an approach influenced by postmodern perspectives. We then suggest and apply a new action-learning framework that facilitates such an approach by allowing the analysis of multiple methods within a single change effort.

THE FINANCIAL SERVICES COMPANY: INSURING ACCEPTANCE

Methodology

In early 1996, our research team approached the Minnesota Work Place Alliance (WPA), an alliance of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) employee groups in the Twin Cities and at the time one of the most advanced GLBT “group of groups” in America. Through the WPA, we were able to interview 65 individuals at 24 Twin Cities employers, including GLBT employee advocates, their allies, corporate diversity managers, and in some cases, key executive decision makers. Our focus was on the dynamics behind the adoption and diffusion of inclusive practices, particularly domestic partner benefits (DPBs), the role of key advocates or idea champions, and the nature of the debate surrounding GLBT-friendly policies.

In the vast majority of these interviews, the Financial Services Company (FSC), a Fortune 500 insurance company, was pointed to as the region’s leader in the area of GLBT-inclusive policies and programming. We therefore focus on FSC, where we interviewed seven people, including the chief executive officer (CEO), the executive vice president of human resources (VP of HR), the corporate diversity officer, the leaders of the GLBT network, and two of its members. Our case also draws on insights
from other WPA members who had witnessed events at FSC and from media coverage of the GLBT network and events at FSC.²

Our initial impression, fueled by the accounts of WPA activists from outside the company, was that FSC’s move to the cutting edge had been relatively easy and straightforward. This was especially surprising when juxtaposed with the experiences of many other companies represented in the WPA. Therefore, in our interviews with FSC insiders, we raised questions about the relative ease of the change process. These inquiries revealed that change at FSC was by no means smooth sailing.

The Advocacy Effort at FSC

In October 1994, FSC hosted the second WPA Executive Forum, bringing together representatives of Twin Cities employers to discuss GLBT employment issues. The CEO of FSC, Paul Lennox, opened the forum with an unexpected announcement: FSC would be offering DPBs to both the opposite- and same-sex unmarried partners of its employees. This is a frequently retold success story for GLBT advocates in the Twin Cities. The people behind it, especially Alison Guzman, are role models for Twin Cities GLBT employee advocates. But Alison and her allies all indicate that their successes must be understood within the context of FSC’s ongoing diversity initiative that laid the groundwork for what came later.

FSC’s diversity initiative began in the early 1990s when CEO Paul Lennox determined that to avoid becoming a “Hartford dinosaur” FSC needed to realize the potential of all its employees in responding to its diverse markets. In 1991, as part of this strategic change, FSC engaged diversity consultants and began a process of self-assessment that included culture audits, a look at its history and values, an all-employee survey, and employee focus groups formed along such lines as race and gender.

In 1992, two GLBT leaders from different areas of FSC emerged. Alison Guzman, a mid-level payables accountant with 14 years of service at FSC and a lesbian, was one of the few people HR had been able to enlist in a lesbian focus group. At this time, Guzman was neither fully out of nor entirely in the closet at FSC. Her participation was triggered by watching Pat Buchanan at the 1992 Republican National Convention on television. She wondered, “Why are not regular business people... coming out?... Why aren’t people stopping the hate that Pat Buchanan is talking about?” Following the lesbian focus group, Guzman began working with HR on the diversity initiative. According to the current corporate diversity officer, Alison’s firsthand account of GLBT experience at FSC was pivotal in shaping FSC’s definition of the dimensions of diversity and laying a foundation for what came later: “We included sexual orientation in our definition... a major thing... that made things that we did downstream a lot easier... [because then] we were continuing to manage against what we said we’re about.”

At about this time, a gay actuarial analyst, Kent Rosener, was mobilized by what he saw as FSC’s hypocritical behavior regarding diversity. FSC was, by early 1992, already outspoken about its ever stronger commitment to diversity and, he says, did have a good record on other diversity issues. Yet Rosener also encountered
insensitivity and sometimes outright homophobia in the workplace. In one team training session, the facilitator asked people to write the name of a celebrity dream date on a card. After they had come to know each other as a team, they would match participants to their cards. “Either I had to come out to the class in order to play the game, or I would have had to pretend I was straight… I kind of withdrew.” Rosener turned in a blank card and was chastised for not being a team player.

Finally, in the fall of 1992, Rosener read in a company newsletter an executive’s comment that FSC had not yet begun to deal with GLBT issues. Rosener took this as a cue that the company was ready for input. He joined his division’s diversity committee. During a planning meeting, Kent decided to out himself when proposing that the division take up GLBT issues. To committee members’ shock, the chair cut him off. The next day, the chair apologized, saying that Kent’s proposals were too controversial for a divisional initiative and that he would have to work with people at the corporate level.

Kent approached two women in corporate HR who recognized an opportunity to bring together a group whose members are often as hidden from each other as they are from management. The HR staffers, Rose Smith and Jan White, introduced Alison and Kent. Though this may come as a surprise to those not familiar with the power of the corporate closet, despite 5 years with FSC, Kent had not known a single GLBT employee. Alison relates, “We got together and met, all of a sudden it grew to like four of us. Then the next step was forming the network, which was the idea of FSC.” Smith and White, acting in the name of FSC, strategized with Rosener and Guzman that a systematic education program would have to pave the way for policy changes. They created an informal task force to design and implement these grassroots educational programs.

To launch the informal network, Smith and White obtained Alison’s permission to name her as the contact person for this new network. For Alison, it was a major hurdle.

I knew of high-level people at FSC who were gay or lesbian and I wished that they would’ve come out. I did not want to come out. I had lots of fears, but [the higher level people] weren’t [coming out] and… I don’t believe in outing people, so… I just finally said, “I gotta do it myself.”

She did it via an e-mail to FSC’s 10,000 domestic employees on January 1, 1993.

The network was named the Gay, Lesbian and Friends, or GLF, Network. Friends was meant to be a cover for bisexuals and transgender people; Kent and Alison reasoned that explicitly including those constituencies by name would make their job of educating and gaining acceptance even more difficult. Supportive heterosexuals understood the word friends to refer to them, however, and quickly signed up in large numbers.

The network’s next step was to contact John Stanton, the VP of HR, with a letter requesting DPBs. His terse, “homophobic” denial was very dispiriting for the GLF Network, according to Guzman, but in her e-mail response she said that they understood that there were difficult issues and that “we felt very strongly that this is something we should have, and we wanted to work with him. Anything that we could do, any information that we could provide, we would be there for him.” She then invited Stanton to lunch for a conversation both see as pivotal. Free to ask any question about a
domain many people are afraid to talk about, Stanton came to recognize he had to deal with "my own biases, my own background, set of experiences and my own baggage."

Quite quickly, Stanton made a dramatic shift and became a powerful advocate for GLBT employees inside FSC and the Twin Cities. Stanton took the issue to Paul Lennox, the CEO, who saw it was the right thing to do. But, as Craig Williams, corporate diversity officer, explains, "We didn't go all the way to bright on this thing; we just didn't say, 'Oh sexual orientation, we got everybody.' It was... evolutionary... You have to start to build some relationships... start to understand the things you're being exposed to."

In October 1993, about 10 months after its emergence as an informal network, the GLF Network, along with networks for African Americans, Native Americans, women, and Latinos, was officially recognized. Rosener acknowledges that this might sound quick, but to him, at the time, it seemed like a difficult 10 months of hard work, significant personal risk, and exposure to scrutiny. For example, prior to recognition, the content of all the GLF Network's communications had been screened by senior executives. Executive support continued to grow, but the request for DPBs was yet to be granted.

Through many retellings, one story of CEO Lennox's public support has gained almost mythic status, both with GLF Network members and members of the WPA. In June of 1994, in FSC's daily broadcast e-mail to employees, the GLF Network announced a meeting in the headquarters cafeteria to plan for Gay Pride Week. To Lennox, such announcements were not unusual: "The day before, the garden club had been on." It sparked a furious reaction from two regional offices in particular: Dallas and Atlanta. In Dallas, half of the employees signed a petition excoriating Lennox for allowing such a meeting and saying he was unfit to lead the company. Lennox flew to Dallas the next week and met with all 400 employees in groups of about 50. "I would not let them get away with this. I challenged people... I don't care if you are brown or if you're black, you're going to have this kind of opportunity and would you deny that [to others]?" The next week, in Atlanta, he told employees,

"This is the way this company is going to run and if you are really uncomfortable with that then maybe you might be happier working some place else." I laid it right on the line, and in one week the whole issue was gone.

If by "the whole issue," Lennox meant open insurrection, yes, it was gone. But as Stanton and Lennox both related, the cultural challenges posed by any proposed changes in HR policy still would require extensive coalition building within FSC senior ranks and attitude change at all levels.

In October 1994—less than 2 years after Guzman's "huge outing" by e-mail but 2 long years of careful behind-the-scenes advocacy, extensive educational programming, extramural work on launching the WPA Executive Forum and cementing the infrastructure of a regional GLBT employee network, and extensive research on other companies' experiences with instituting DPBs—FSC announced the offering of DPBs to both GLBT and straight employees, effective January 1995. All involved describe these 2 years as a long journey. No one at FSC believes that the problem of
homophobia is solved, a fact that Rosener, Guzman, Stanton, and Lennox all pointed to as a continuing challenge in FSC's culture change effort.

**RESHAPING ACTION LEARNING AS AN ANALYTIC TOOL: A POSTMODERN APPROACH**

How can action learning help us analyze the events at FSC? We begin by briefly summarizing the traditional approach to action learning and applying it to this case. Then, we argue for understanding the change from a postmodern perspective, one that highlights complexity and discrepancy rather than integrated totality. Using the FSC case, we then suggest a new action-learning framework.

The concept of action learning comes originally from the work of Argyris and Schön (1978). They suggest that change efforts can be characterized as either single loop or double loop. In single-loop action learning, actors (whether individuals, groups, or organizations) consider more effective methods or strategies for achieving their guiding principles (which may be manifested as goals, policies, or values), but these actors are not open to questioning those principles. Actors modify their approach to better implement current policies or reach current objectives. These policies or objectives are closed to scrutiny. Double-loop action learning, on the other hand, results when actors do evaluate and change their guiding principles. Actors alter their approach by modifying driving values. The concept of triple-loop action learning, which places action learning in a larger social context, was suggested by Nielsen (1993a, 1993b). In triple-loop action learning, actors go beyond questioning their own values and consider the values of the societal tradition system in which their actions are taking place.¹

What kind of action learning took place at FSC? The traditional, unitary approach to action learning would suggest that triple-loop learning took place. Triple-loop learning occurs when actors change not only their own guiding principles but challenge the values of the larger tradition system. FSC adopted new rules and norms for behavior that both transformed the company’s posture toward its GLBT employees and implicitly challenged society’s norms about homosexuality as well. Although these norms have (to varying degrees) lost their previous hegemony, they remain strong in many sectors of American society, including our laws and workplaces. Only 11 states have outlawed job and other forms of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. FSC’s home state of Minnesota became the 8th such state in 1993, after the hard-fought “It’s Time Minnesota” campaign. Maine’s ban on such discrimination was passed and later overturned by ballot initiative in the past 24 months. In 1996, the federal Defense of Marriage Act¹ passed, while the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which would have prohibited workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, failed in the U.S. Senate. Nationwide, while more and more companies voluntarily include sexual orientation in their equal employment opportunity statements, fewer than 600 organizations—including colleges, municipalities, not-for-profits, and corporations—offer DPBs. The adoption of DPBs is commonly viewed as an important symbolic endorsement of GLBT families by both those in favor and those opposed
to these benefits. So, in fostering the GLF Network and becoming, to the best of our knowledge, the first in the insurance industry to adopt DPBs, FSC implicitly confronted the American tradition system.

Using the lens of the traditional unitary approach to action learning, we agree with this assessment. However, we believe that this totalizing approach glosses over aspects of this change effort that are subtler, more varied, and in many cases, more interesting. Taking a closer look reveals an intertwining of single-, double-, and triple-loop approaches, a maze that resists simplification.

Organizational scholars are increasingly interested in documenting this kind of complexity as opposed to "discovering" a central essence or core. Grouped loosely under a postmodern banner, adherents of this view suggest that unitary or totalizing approaches to organizational phenomena hide their multilayered and inconsistent nature. Martin's (1992) work on organizational culture has been quite influential in spreading the postmodern message. She suggests three different perspectives for understanding organizational culture. The first, integrationist, focuses on shared understanding and assumes an organization-wide consensus. Here, organizational culture is what we, as members of the organization, all have in common. The second perspective is differentiationist, which focuses on coherent subcultures within the dominant culture. It assumes tensions between the dominant culture and the subcultures, and among the subcultures themselves. Here, organizational culture is a battle site. The third perspective, fragmentationist, assumes no coherent culture or subcultures at all in the organization. This view focuses on ambiguities, shifting interpretations, and relative, rather than objective, truths. Here, a shared organizational culture does not exist.

These same approaches can be applied to a variety of organizational phenomena, including organizational change. Whereas an integrationist approach to change highlights crucial shared facets, differentiationist and fragmentationist approaches could highlight other facets just as important to understanding change in its complexity. For example, Scully and Segal (1994), in discussing change efforts, point to the dangers of totalizing stories that crown winners and isolate losers. They suggest instead that attention to "local accounts" reveals how every change holds seeds of both revolution and restoration. More recently, Bartunek and Lacey (1998) argue that work-group dynamics are fraught with contradictions and that contradictions, far from being marginal, are at the heart of organizational change. They suggest the use of multiple narratives to elicit contradictory understandings of a single change.

But despite the increasing use of a "postmodern temperament" (Scully & Segal, 1994, p. 44) in analyzing organizations, no one has yet critiqued action learning from this perspective. The traditional use of action learning to label change as single, double, or triple loop inherently ignores alternate perspectives and rebellious voices; it blinds itself to the very subtleties, anomalies, and irregularities that make organizational change processes so fascinating. For that reason, we have adapted the analytic tool of action learning so that it can disentangle the multiple threads of a change process.

To hone or sharpen action learning as a tool able to make finer distinctions, we break it down into component parts. As Table 1 illustrates, the term action-learning
method actually refers to three different components of a change effort: the arguments (or justifications) given for change, the practices used to bring about change, and the outcomes of the change. In most action-learning literature, method and outcome are assumed to be one and the same (e.g., Nielsen, 1993b, 1996b). A single-loop learning method will lead to a single-loop learning outcome: The method is in fact inferred from its outcome. Nor has method been broken down into constituent parts such as argument and practice. At most, there has been some effort to distinguish outcome from critique of the learning process. We suggest changing this approach. These three separate components—argument, practice, and outcome—can be decoupled and analyzed in isolation from each other, rather than treating the action-learning method as an indissoluble whole. To illustrate how this can work, we will describe each component in turn and illustrate its analysis with examples from the case of FSC. Tables 2 and 3 summarize this analysis.

Action-Learning Arguments

Single-, double-, and triple-loop arguments all refer to the actor’s justifications for creating change. A single-loop argument would appeal to the actor’s governing values or framework. An action would be justified on the basis that it conformed to the actor’s current beliefs. This justification is often automatic and unconscious. For example, a manager might decide to hire a white candidate over a black candidate because no positions at that level have ever been filled by a nonwhite employee or because the manager believes that a black candidate, by definition, could not possibly be qualified for such a position. The manager is simply applying her current understanding of the world to her decision making. A double-loop reason for action, on the other hand, would involve an actor changing his or her values. In this case, the manager might change her governing framework and decide that adding diversity to her work group would benefit the company, or that, although the black candidate does not have the same qualifications as other people who have held the position, he brings another kind of expertise that could be helpful. A triple-loop reason for action shifts attention to higher levels of influence. Now, the actor sees him- or herself as part of the larger society and addresses larger societal dynamics or objectives. Perhaps the manager decides that changing her own thinking is not enough; challenging institutional racism as a societal issue is the only way to really level the playing field for African Americans. The manager is engaging in triple-loop learning.

The case of FSC provides a more complex illustration. The change agents at FSC gave a number of reasons for taking action regarding their GLBT employees. As
Table 2 illustrates, these arguments and their implications for single-, double-, or triple-loop learning were quite varied.

1. "The business case" (Paul Lennox). All of the key players at FSC argued that a strong business case for creating a GLBT-friendly workplace was essential if change was to happen. One such argument is to point to market demographics. According to VP of HR Stanton, “If you care about market share, if you care about growing your business, if you care about profitability, you better be paying attention to segments of your markets that represent significant opportunity for you." The logic: Only companies that treat their GLBT employees fairly will be able to tap the GLBT market.

But both Stanton and CEO Lennox also pointed to the competitive advantage of a committed workforce. According to Lennox,

> Our markets were changing. The nature of the employee/employer relationship was changing. People who were working here were going to be changing. . . . I got paid to think about where we are 5 years from now and we have got to make those changes.

For Lennox, this meant building a more culturally diverse workforce with everyone able to realize his or her potential. Lennox argued that if FSC did well by its employees, they would respond in turn. As an insurance company, FSC does not have significant assets in patents, machinery, or products; according to Lennox, "It’s not trite to say that people are our most valuable asset."
In making the business case, Lennox emphasized that it would have been a mistake to take "this on as a flag-burning, major crusade," even though at the "end of the day" it was just "the right thing to do." Craig Williams, the corporate diversity officer, referred back to the company's definition of managing diversity: "[a workplace] where all employees contribute to their full potential to achieve our business objectives." Williams argued that the "business objectives were critical because . . . what moves people, what moves the organization the most was business success."

All these respondents are saying that openly welcoming FSC's GLBT employees would further the company's mission and enhance its profitability. All agreed that making this bottom-line argument was crucial to the effort's success. These arguments are all single loop: They justify taking action within the already established goals and values of the company. In reality, it is that very limitation that made them so potent and that allowed other, more far-reaching justifications as well (cf. Austin, 1997).

2. "Helping us move in the direction we needed to move" (John Stanton). Both Lennox and Stanton positioned their taking on GLBT issues as part of a larger cultural shift the company had to make. According to Stanton,

My challenge was a huge organization culture and business culture challenge. . . . [The GLBT advocacy effort] fitted very nicely into helping us move into the direction that we needed to move. Culturally, we were . . . a standard, top-down, command and control, very paternalistic culture. . . . You can't go from pretty good to great with that kind of a culture, with employees that were afraid to take risks, wouldn't take initiative.

How could top management model the kind of risk-taking behavior it expected from its employees? Taking bold action regarding their GLBT employees was an unmistakable example, particularly action that was a response to grassroots initiative. Lennox used the gay advocacy effort to signal his new approach. "I knew that I had to drive this company into a much more international sphere. . . . [FSC] was incredibly parochial and narrow in its views."

In this case, the company's top management team attempted double-loop learning—a transformational change—in the company's belief systems. They identified a bold move on GLBT issues as significant leverage for this larger goal. This reason for action, then, would be double loop.

3. "A company. . . that has always been family friendly" (John Stanton). Stanton pointed out that the FSC culture

has always been family friendly and open to things like a child care center. . . . [and] flexible work schedules, long before this stuff was in vogue. So you bring the best of the culture forward and try to apply it with the needs of the company.

Interestingly, Stanton seems to be arguing that expanding benefits to GLBT families was a within-culture change, a change within the boundaries of the best the culture had to offer. Lennox offered a kindred argument when responding to board criticism by depicting the adoption of DPBs as a "modest change . . . because in terms of cost, it is not a major, significant cost item." Although the experience of many companies
suggests that DPBs do not add significantly to costs, to evaluate the change only in terms of costs is to diminish the moral and cultural issues at stake. Both Stanton and Lennox defend their decision using single-loop arguments, suggesting that DPBs represented a small change in current personnel policies.

From another standpoint, however, including GLBT families in the FSC family album was a radical departure from the current practice of both the company and the country. As noted earlier, taking the step of providing benefits to the partners of gay employees was hardly status quo. We would argue that the inclusion of GLBT families into FSC's family album is more than double loop, more than just a challenge to the company's norms. It is a challenge to the prevailing conservative norms of much of American society and therefore would constitute triple-loop change.

It is unlikely that Lennox and Stanton ever would have deliberately used triple-loop arguments to make their case. As businessmen, their principal concern is their organization's success in both the near and far terms. But we do not always have control over the implications of our actions. Despite their consistent use of single- and double-loop arguments, their choices were in some ways inevitably in conflict with American norms, elevating their arguments to triple loop.

This reinforces our doubts about simple labels to summarize complex events. Key players at FSC used single-, double-, and despite their more cautious inclinations, triple-loop arguments, providing them access to different audiences. The narrow, single-loop arguments allowed them to reach and unite more conservative constituencies. The broader, more challenging double-loop arguments are part of a larger cultural change program, an effective justification for company leaders. The triple-loop arguments put the company on record about a controversial social issue and gained the company a supportive constituency of GLBT workplace activists in the Twin Cities area. A simple single-loop, double-loop, or triple-loop label for what happened at FSC would erase these distinctions.

Action-Learning Practices

Single-, double-, and triple-loop practices follow a framework similar to that of reasons for action. Single-loop actions operate within the actor's current framework of what is acceptable practice. For example, let's take a centralized and hierarchical company with strict norms about employees approaching managers other than their own direct supervisors. The company, in the interests of better communication, might modify its practice so that employees can address their supervisors' direct superiors if there is some reason why approaching one's own supervisor is problematic. As opposed to that single-loop change in practice, the company might decide instead to decentralize the company, creating project teams that cut across divisions and hierarchical levels—a double-loop change in practice. A triple-loop change, however, would challenge societal norms about authority and control in business. The company could decide instead to become an employee-owned and -managed business, with employees holding the majority of the seats on the board of directors. As Table 3 illustrates, the actions at FSC provide a good example of how individuals used different action-learning practices.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Action-Learning Level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;We knew the atmosphere, we knew the culture.&quot;</td>
<td>Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender advocates were careful to work within corporate norms as much as possible.</td>
<td>Single loop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The reason we're called the Gay, Lesbian and Friends Network is because we were a very conservative company.&quot;</td>
<td>The name for the employee network was initially meant as a cover for bisexual and transgender employees because advocates thought explicit mention would decrease support. Other employees interpreted the name as an invitation for straight employees to join, a manifestation of the company's current, inclusive culture.</td>
<td>Single loop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Try to do some personal work.&quot;</td>
<td>Both gay advocates and key corporate leaders emphasized the need for individuals to work through the issue on their own so they could achieve their own sense of comfort about gay issues.</td>
<td>Double loop</td>
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1. "We knew the atmosphere, we knew the culture" (Alison Guzman). Informants, both activists and company leaders, agreed that the GLBT advocates’ actions were careful, measured, and sensitive to FSC culture. "We didn't want to burn any bridges and to be in people's faces because we didn't think it was the way to go," noted Guzman. From his perspective as VP of HR, Stanton agreed. In response to a query about why it seemed easier to institute GLBT-friendly policies at FSC, Stanton said, "I don't think it was easy. I think that it was a group of dedicated people who understood the culture here and who understood the way that we needed to do things." This is single-loop practice, actions that operate within the clear boundaries of the acceptable in a given situation.

The gay advocacy effort was also within-culture in a different way: The company had already made a commitment to diversity issues. It had well-functioning diversity structures in place as well as an ideological investment in valuing and realizing the potential of individual differences. Guzman stated that the foundation for their success was built “6 or 7 years ago with the diversity initiative. . . . If it was not there we wouldn’t be where we are right now." CEO Lennox also made this clear, noting, “I wasn’t driving this because it was a gay/lesbian issue. I was driving this because I considered it an integral part of our diversity efforts.”

In this case, GLBT advocates were able to take advantage of a double-loop change—the commitment to diversity—that had started years earlier and that made their own efforts justifiable with a single-loop argument congruent with that change. Diversity had now been institutionalized, opening up options for single-loop change.
This example suggests that action-learning actions may be variable and relative. Whether actions or arguments are single, double, or triple loop may not be inherent but a function of other factors, such as the analyst, the context, or the audience.

2. "The reason we’re called the Gay, Lesbian and Friends Network is because we were a very conservative company" (Alison Guzman). A hallmark of GLBT advocacy at FSC is its inclusiveness, with its employee network as both a symbolic and concrete manifestation of that. The main network, called the Gay, Lesbian and Friends Network, includes both homosexual and heterosexual employees. This inclusiveness, as Guzman’s quotation suggests, was a way of staying within the company’s norms of inclusivity and friendliness; in other words, a single-loop, nonthreatening practice. Interestingly, the history of the employee network reveals two different manifestations of single-loop practice, one deliberate and the other accidental.

The network was initially called the Gay, Lesbian and Friends Network to avoid stating explicitly that bisexual and transgender employees were also welcome. Network leaders made a judgment that gay and lesbian orientations would prove more palatable than bisexual or transgender orientations, and they did not want to “rock the boat” (Guzman). Ironically, network leaders were pushing the envelope by setting up a gay advocacy network while trying to keep it within acceptable corporate practice by veiling the inclusion of other, nonstraight orientations. The advocates’ careful balancing act was a very deliberate attempt to remain single loop.

Unexpectedly, supportive straight employees joined the network in large numbers, creating an inclusiveness that the original leaders had not planned for, though they welcomed it. This inclusiveness was also reflective of the organization’s culture; in fact, it appears to have been spontaneously sparked by a culture that assumed an open and welcoming posture. Here, again, is a single-loop action influenced and circumscribed by prevailing corporate culture, though not initiated by the key grassroots activists. In some sense, the culture itself forced a single-loop practice by influencing employees’ expectations of inclusiveness. With their cultural savvy, Guzman and Rosener took advantage of the opportunity, recognizing it as a powerful message of support and a useful lever for change.

3. “Try to do some personal work” (John Stanton). Embedded in this change effort was a fundamental belief that individuals needed to work through the issue on their own, to achieve their own sense of comfort with GLBT issues in the workplace. Stanton’s own personal transformation on the issue has been very influential.

It’s just like anything, as you [go] through this personal exploration the light bulb tends to go on. . . . My wife will tell you it was like this personal transformation took place, and I said I just dealt with the fear. . . . It’s really why I believe, and I still have a hard time in influencing and persuading even our own executives around this notion of personal work. . . . Try to understand. . . . your own biases and your own prejudices and your own baggage.

The GLBT advocates also had a similar framework. “We understood that they had a lot of learning to go through just like we did” (Guzman). Rosener noted,
We’ve always had the argument that we’re not getting equal pay because we’re not getting the same benefits, but that was always really aside. . . . It’s never where we really pushed it as far as education. It has always been the acceptance of who I am.

Although policy changes are crucial, for Rosener the fundamental issue is people’s ability to accept individuals different from themselves.

This emphasis on individual reflection and change is, really, an emphasis on double-loop practice, which requires actors’ willingness to reevaluate their own driving values. Both advocates and organizational leaders went beyond simply suggesting single-loop changes in behavior; they very explicitly encouraged individual transformations as essential to the open inclusion of the company’s GLBT employees.

In this case, key actors used both single-loop and double-loop practices: single loop to carefully stay within company norms and double loop to encourage individuals to evaluate and possibly change their beliefs. Triple-loop actions that would have directly challenged overarching societal norms (e.g., an action in the vein of ACT-UP, with overt challenges such as, “We’re here. We’re queer. Get used to it.”) were rejected as too risky. Indeed, using more confrontational methods might have undermined the actors’ double-loop strategy of emphasizing personal change. In this setting, at least, the patient, understanding attitude of key GLBT advocates perhaps fostered a safer climate in which individuals felt more comfortable thinking through their own issues.

**Action-Learning Outcomes**

Having now analyzed reasons for action and the practices themselves, we turn to outcomes. In line with our previous analyses, we suggest that outcomes can also be characterized as single loop, double loop, and triple loop. This departs from previous use of the action-learning framework, which did not distinguish between action-learning method and action-learning outcome. In most action-learning literature, method and outcome are assumed to be one and the same. If a single-loop change has resulted, then a single-loop method must have been used. We believe it would be helpful to disentangle action-learning method and action-learning outcome and consider them as two separate concepts.7

The outcomes of the GLBT advocacy effort at FSC are complex and not easily summed up with a unitary action-learning label. The clearest outcomes are that FSC has created a formal network that encourages GLBT people to come out of the corporate closet—freely and openly associating with one another and affirming their traditionally stigmatized identities—and that FSC has made its HR policies more inclusive. GLBT employees and their partners in committed relationships (and unmarried heterosexual employees) have access to the same array of partner benefits as their married colleagues. Given that FSC has traditionally been a conservative company, that represents a transformation of the company’s earlier framework. Of course, these changes also challenge the prevailing societal norms regarding public acceptance of GLBT orientations and what constitutes a legitimate family. FSC has also enabled the GLF Network’s participation in regional advocacy networks and supported its leaders’
teaching workshops on workplace organizing at such events as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's annual Creating Change Conference. The events at FSC have spread ripples across the Twin Cities, the Midwest, and the country, an indication of triple-loop change.

But tracking the change effort in more detail reveals a muddier picture. Many of the informants agreed that change has been incomplete. CEO Lennox noted, "We know that we still got lots of barriers around here." VP of HR Stanton suggested there was still work to be done "in the execution and . . . development in our policies to make them as open and inclusive as we can."

Concerns focus on whether employees' values, their attitudes, have changed along with the rules. Many agreed that behavior has changed. "We've been successful at turning over the set of rules that we've had here around diversity. You get a lot of people lined up, because that is just what we do around here," said Stanton. In many cases, language has changed. "I would challenge you to find anybody, somebody who cannot repeat the litany [about diversity]," Lennox said, but he then added, "They may not always agree with it." Clearly, deeper attitudinal change, double-loop learning, has not necessarily followed suit, though it certainly has occurred. Stanton noted,

In some ways I see true sensitivity within our population, but in other pockets it's more acceptance that this is the way it is but I don't really—on a personal level, "I'll do what you tell me here at work, but when I go home I'm kind of going back to my home."

A number of people expressed concern about "the field," the vast network of FSC offices around the country. Lennox notes, "We only have 25% of our employees in the United States who live here in Minnesota. The rest of them are all over the rest of the country. How do we reach them?" Stanton was quite clear:

I hope you come away from your interviews here with the notion that there's been a breakthrough and we're at a certain level with this here at [FSC]. It is not equal across the entire organization. We have places in the organization where we have a lot more work to do.

One HR professional noted, "Most of our field offices don't have any gay employees who are out," because employees perceive these environments as less safe.

Perhaps the most significant area of concern—the one that detracts most from the generally positive picture—is the dearth of gay men out of the closet. Because of this, Rosener questions whether the company has created a truly safe workplace for gay men. He noted that "we have some very high-level openly gay lesbians in the company. We don't on the male side and this is the reason for the reluctance on the part of gay males [to come out]." He also wondered if the inclusive employee network, so positive in many ways, has backfired in at least one respect.

We have somewhat failed in providing that support mechanism for the gay [male] employee . . . . The gay male seems very reluctant to join the network and once joined very reluctant to be involved . . . . When we have a meeting, it's 70 to 80 percent friends [heterosexuals] and as the chairman of the woman's network said, "We're thrilled to have a man or two come to our meetings, but I can't imagine how we'd feel if 70 to 80 percent of the members at the meeting were all male."
For Rosener, the change effort remains unfinished and inadequate until more gay men are out and active with the network.

**ACTION LEARNING, FRAGMENTATION, AND THE INTERACTION OF SINGLE-, DOUBLE-, AND TRIPLE-LOOP CHANGE**

What happened at FSC? A once hidebound company placed itself at the cutting edge of HR policy, a change that has inspired GLBT employee advocates in and beyond the Twin Cities, that has triggered discussions among senior management at other major companies, and that represents another step in the diffusion and institutionalization of DPBs as an HR policy. And yet, many of FSC’s employees and offices lag behind. Most gay employees apparently do not feel safe in the field, and many do not even feel safe in corporate headquarters. Public actions and language may conform, but private attitudes often rebel. Simply naming this process as triple-loop learning ignores the niches and pockets, fragments and factions of resistance and inertia that accompany any substantial change effort.

Simple, unitary labels also have another consequence: They imply a separation between single-, double-, and triple-loop methods of change. Using only one method—single-loop, double-loop, or triple-loop—to summarize a change effort implies that only one method has been used. Sometimes there is an implication that the three methods are mutually exclusive: Triple-loop change happens when single- and double-loop change are not present.

This wall of separation has started to come down. Austin (1997), in his application of action learning to the story of Branch Rickey, Jackie Robinson, and the integration of baseball, suggests that the different methods can be present in one change effort. He suggests a serial application of different action-learning methods—for example, an individual experienced his own triple-loop transformation and then employed a single-loop justification to pursue change—leading to desegregation of the national pastime, what we would call triple-loop change.

We are building on Austin’s (1997) more nuanced application of action learning in two ways. First, we argue that in many change efforts the action-learning methods do not happen in such a linear, serial way, with one kind of action learning following another and preceding a third. Rather, we suggest that at any one moment in the course of a change effort, different actors are using different methods in different situations with different audiences. It is impossible to clarify what method happened first, second, or third because many change efforts are complex, layered, and even chaotic. Not only can action-learning methods occur sequentially, but they can also be applied simultaneously in many different configurations, without any real order at all.

Second, we want to take the wall of separation between the three different methods down even further. The FSC case suggests that, far from action-learning methods being mutually exclusive, higher change levels—double- or triple-loop—cannot happen without lower level changes happening concurrently. That is, triple-loop change cannot occur without simultaneous double- and single-loop change, while double-
loop change cannot happen without single-loop change. This notion is at the heart of the change effort at FSC.

To begin with, single-loop arguments and practices were central to the success of the FSC effort. All the key players agreed that creating new markets and fostering employee commitment were their most persuasive justifications. In fact, it was those single-loop arguments that laid the foundation for the use of double- and triple-loop arguments. Without that foundation, those more challenging reasons would have been ignored. If at least some of the behaviors of key actors had not remained congruent with prevailing company culture, the effort would likely have stalled immediately. This suggests a powerful linkage: that single-loop justifications and actions must accompany any transformational change—whether double or triple loop—for it to succeed. After all, the organization has been unified on the basis of the current framework and practice; it must be moved, at least partially, on the basis of them as well.

Furthermore, change that takes on societal norms cannot happen unless organizations and individuals within that society challenge their own value systems. To arrive at the point where one is ready to challenge the tradition system, one has to have undergone some kind of transformation oneself. Both FSC and many of its members transformed their thinking on GLBT issues. Once this had happened, they could not help but question the traditional way American society has viewed homosexuality.

In other words, triple-loop change cannot happen without single-loop and double-loop change. Single- and double-loop change are embedded in and are constitutive of triple-loop change. Similarly, single-loop change is embedded in double-loop change. They happen concurrently, sometimes cross-fertilizing and sometimes at cross-purposes, but ultimately, it is that continuous interaction out of which change efforts grow. But although higher levels of action learning are constituted by lower levels, the reverse is not true. Single-loop learning, by definition, is learning that is not influenced by double-loop considerations. Single-loop learning stays within the actor’s governing values. Similarly, double-loop learning is learning that does not consider larger societal values but transforms only the actor’s framework.

Some action-learning literature, particularly the work of Argyris and Schön, acknowledges the interaction of single- and double-loop learning (Davidson, 1995). Less work acknowledges the interaction of single-, double-, and triple-loop learning, perhaps because there is less work on triple-loop learning in general. However, very little work in this area focuses on the interaction of the three levels of action learning, and there is even less empirical work that teases out the different levels and how they contribute to an overall change effort. Highlighting this connection will deepen action learning’s understanding of organizational change and enhance its use as an analytic tool.

Acknowledging this connection also holds two important lessons, both seemingly contradictory, for change strategists. To foster frame-breaking change, one must begin within the frame. To foster company-wide change, one must highlight individual work. But our analysis brings up other lessons as well. Most important, given that change is fragmentary, multilayered, and contradictory, in a sense change strategy must be as well. Change strategists must be protean strategists, able to speak to multiple audiences with multiple justifications as part of a multiplicity of practices.
On the other hand, we should beware of suggesting that such protean strategists can completely create and circumscribe change. The FSC case can also be cited to support the notion of a kind of contextual forcing. When Guzman and Rosener named their network the Gay, Lesbian and Friends Network, they had no intention of building a network that included heterosexuals. But the context in which they operated gave people other ideas, and suddenly, the inclusive network was born. Stanton and Lennox had no interest in making a radical statement about the American family, but adopting DPBs put them at the leading edge of American industry, and this cannot help but play a role in influencing societal norms about sexual orientation and the legitimacy of non-traditional families such as those built around same-sex partnerships.

Although these strategic insights are very preliminary, they suggest that our framework enhances the larger strategic potential of the action-learning literature. Decoupling argument, action, and outcome allows change strategists to consider each component separately, design multiple approaches, tailor these to different constituencies, and weave them back together to create a coherent whole. By leveraging multiplicity and flexibility, this tool provides a vehicle for more nuanced methods.

Acknowledging the connection between single-, double-, and triple-loop methods of change is important in another respect. If scholars are to look at organizational change from the postmodern perspective, then localized accounts become much more salient. One cannot understand a broader organizational change without attention to individual sites of struggle: how individual employees have participated or resisted, how different work groups have adapted or rebelled, and how different subcultures have modified the effort. Scholars cannot understand organizational change without detailed attention to the broad and shifting range of reactions and effects it creates.

Our framework of action-learning arguments, practices, and outcomes facilitates a postmodern approach because it allows a more variegated, more contextual understanding of the multiple elements of organizational change. By adding this ingredient to the already robust action-learning brew, we hope to give it even greater power as a force for understanding organizations.

NOTES

1. Transgender refers to individuals whose self-concept and/or social presentation is inconsistent with social norms based on their biological sex. It is not necessarily related to sexual orientation.

2. Financial Services Company is a pseudonym, as are all of the names used. All interviews were transcribed, and transcript copies are available from the authors. To preserve the integrity of the pseudonyms, citations for media coverage are available only on request.

3. Although Nielsen is not explicit on this point, it appears that for triple-loop learning to take place, the tradition system must be addressed and challenged, though not necessarily changed. Nielsen (1996a) writes of "working with" or "questioning" larger social values as triple-loop learning.

4. The Defense of Marriage Act permits states to disregard gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) marriages performed and recognized in other states, such as Hawaii, which had recently passed legislation recognizing GLBT marriages. Hawaii's legislation has been enjoined, and in November 1998 Hawaiian voters passed a referendum effectively outlawing same-sex marriages. Alaskan voters passed a similar proposition.
5. In their 1996 book, Argyris and Schön present a new distinction, that between the product and the process of action learning. Because there could be confusion between their terms and our terms, we offer a brief explanation here. Their term product and our term outcome are the same concept. However, their term process is not what we call action and argument. For Argyris and Schön, process refers to questioning the learning process itself. A company might ask itself, “How do we learn, as a company? Are there more efficient or productive ways for us to learn? What barriers inhibit our learning?” and so on. For us, argument and action simply add detail to (rather than interrogating) the change process; we suggest that all change processes include both argumentation and action.

6. Again, actor could refer to an individual or to some larger grouping such as a team, a department, or a company.

7. Some scholars have analyzed action-learning method and outcome as two separate concepts and have decoupled them (Nielsen & Bartunek, 1996). However, in discussing outcome, these scholars have relied on the concept of first- and second-order change rather than creating the concept of action-learning outcome. The notion of order of change comes originally from the family therapy literature (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). First-order change is incremental; it involves behavior changes within an actor's existing framework. Second-order change is transformational and results in the creation and adoption of a new framework (Bartunek & Moch, 1987).

For the sake of consistency and clarity, we suggest substituting the concept of action-learning outcome for order-of-change outcome. The action-learning and order-of-change frameworks share some similarities, but they are different enough that their similar numerical frameworks can sow confusion. Most important, the order-of-change framework provides no change level that is comparable to the larger contextual shift of triple-loop action learning. The concept of third-order change refers to a person's ability to not simply change frames but to take on different frames as called for in different situations (Bartunek & Moch, 1987). This is a useful and intriguing idea, but it differs from triple-loop action learning, which refers to an actor's challenging the larger tradition system within which it is operating. Creating the concept of action-learning outcome that can be single loop, double loop, or triple loop takes care of this confusion.

REFERENCES


