

# FROM ACTION LEARNING TO THE TEACHING ORGANIZATION

## An Experiential Approach

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*This paper expounds action learning for effective change leadership development using the learning-teaching helix as a paradigm for individual's introspection. Which consists of five phases – Awareness phase (ascertain your strengths and weaknesses), Alignment phase (identify your core competence), Action phase (synthesize your work, business and management skills), Adoption phase (becoming a leader) and Assurance phase (excel as an educator cum coach). In addition, to succeed, the individual has to plan, strategize, prioritize and integrate. As a holistic manager the individual needs to think, feel and do to evolve from continuous action learning to the cycle of teaching for continuous innovation in organizational performance capabilities.*

**Keywords:** action learning; leadership; organizational performance; teaching organization

## Introduction

Action learning is an organizational learning process that brings people together to find innovative solutions. As such, action learning develops not only the individual, but the team, as well as the organization. Action learning is learning by doing in the real world by questioning insight. It has gained popularity in the UK, US, Canada and Australia.

Many leading MBA business schools, universities and world-class companies have adopted it as a formal means of education and organizational learning (Pfeffer and Fong 2002; Rothwell 1999; Mumford 1997).

The concept of action learning was originated by Revans in the late 1940's (Crainer 1997). He formulated action learning as:

$$L = P + Q$$

where, *P* represents rote learning or programmed knowledge obtained from books, lectures and class work, whilst *Q* represents innovative learning or questioning insight based on brainstorming by a cross-functional team based on their different experiences, exposure and perspective to generate creative/innovative solutions. More importantly, to be effective, the rate of action learning must be equal to or faster than the rate of change.

However, Tichy (2002), Handy (2000), Slatter (2000), Drucker (1999), Marquardt, et al. (1999), and Dotlich and Noel (1998) contended that the future of action learning is to transform a learning organization into a teaching organization. According to Tichy (2002), in a teaching organization, the learning does not happen as passively as it does in a learning organization because leaders and managers of a

teaching organization take responsibility for making their people and themselves smarter, as well as challenging their successors to outsmart the competition. In this way, there is more emphasis on action learning with leaders and managers being directly involved in the teaching process. Developing human capital is no longer something that can be done offline; it has to be part of the everyday life of the company, woven into the very fabric of the organization. It has to come online, especially in this age of radical change in the global business environment. New attitudes and competencies must be taught and learned for personal and corporate survival.

According to Welch (2001), former Chairman and CEO of General Electric (USA), a learning organization is inadequate. He emphasizes the essence of a teaching organization. He made the following challenges to his people:

1. A need to have a mindset that placed great importance on teaching by senior executives, i.e. mind-share and heart-share with colleagues for alignment of vision, mission, purpose and strategy.
2. A need to adopt a teachable point of view, i.e. a willingness to change the mindset given new developments.
3. A willingness to stand up to him and to take him on.

Tichy (2002) observed that the pursuit of a teaching organization by firms is based on three prime endeavors:

1. Winning organizations are teaching organizations
  - everybody teaches; everybody learns
  - practices, processes, and values all promote teaching
2. They are built around virtuous teaching cycles
  - teaching is not one-way; it is interactive

- interaction generates knowledge; it makes everyone smarter
3. They create attributes needed in the knowledge economy
- maximum use of everyone's skills and talent
  - all level alignment needed for smart, speedy action

To quote Sir Richard Syke, the former Chairman of Glaxo Smith Kline and now the Rector of Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine in the UK, "what I am trying to do is to bring everything I have learnt about management throughout my career into a university environment, i.e. a teaching organization, which is where I can really add value; it is leadership that makes the difference and turn something mediocre into something excellent; good leadership tends to get the best out of people —and that means the whole team pulls together and you get much more productivity." In the corporate world, a teaching organization is one where learners and teachers can be found under

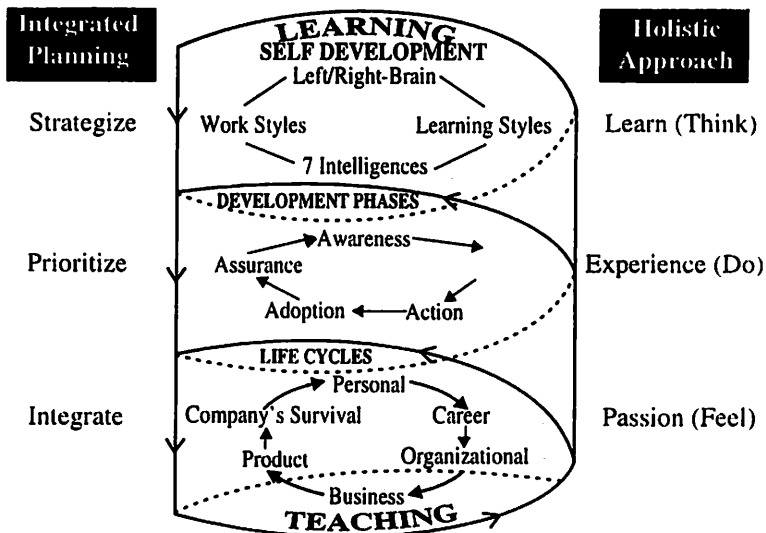
one roof. Learning and teaching happen at the same time (Lucas 2002).

We learn from cradle to grave. New knowledge, skills and competencies can be found in the various disciplines of business and management. Teaching makes the learning journey ever more exciting and enriching. This article attempts to explain the shift from action learning in a learning organization towards the imperative of a teaching organization for effective change leadership development.

### The Learning — Teaching Helix for Effective Change Leadership

Figure 1 is a description of the Learning —Teaching Helix. The dotted line suggests a dynamic model with continuous actions and interactions with the business environment. We grow and develop in the context of organizations located within the national, regional and global business environments. So far, most lit-

Figure 1. The Learning - Teaching Helix



Source: Authors

eratures dwell on the theoretical aspects as mentioned earlier. However, this article deals with the experiential approach experienced by the writers. This paradigm can be pursued by the reader to chart his/her journey of continuous action learning to the cycle of teaching for effective change leadership.

### **Holistic Approach**

The concept of holism suggests that we are "thinking people," "feeling people" and "doing people." We must feel for what we think and do to ensure commitment and success. The head and the heart give impetus to the body. Constant review and reflection will carry us to an even higher stage of learning where we are ready to teach and again to learn from what we have taught. To reach the pinnacle of action learning, we need to unlearn, relearn and learn again. Just like the motion of the helix when it hits the bottom of the spiral, the motion will ascend again.

### **Integrated Planning**

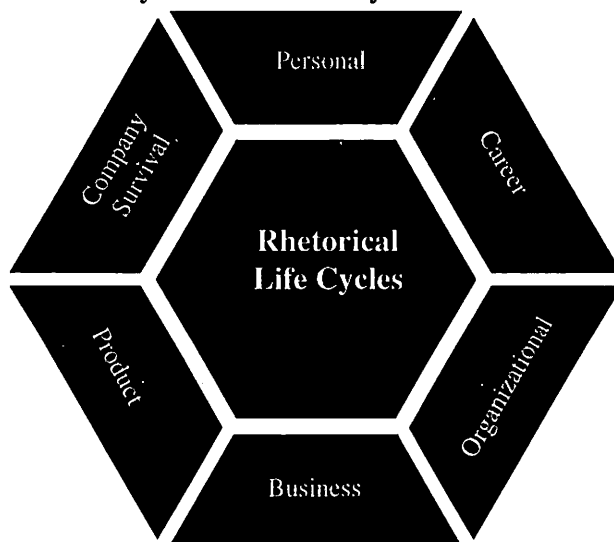
The concept of integrated planning suggests that it is coherent and purposeful. In all aspects of life, we need to strategize, prioritize and integrate the activities for more effective control of our destiny.

### **Self Development**

All real learning and teaching begin with the self. Introspection can be done using Left Brain vs Right Brain: rational process vs creative process; 7 Intelligences: music smart, word smart, number smart, picture smart, body smart, self smart, people smart; Work Styles: methodical, practical, interactive, creative; and Learning Styles: activist, reflector, theorist, pragmatist.

At the personal level, we must think and learn to strategize for growth along four dimensions – mentally, physically, socially and spiritually (Covey and Merrill 1994).

Figure 2. Interconnectivity of Different Life Cycles



Source: Authors

### ***Development Phases***

From Individual To Action (or Team) Learning, the journey of action learning consists of five development phases namely: Awareness: know your strengths and weaknesses; Alignment: understand your core competence; Action: accumulate your work and people skills; Adoption: becoming a leader; and Assurance: excelling as an educator and coach.

Throughout the development phases, we need to strategize, prioritize and integrate our limited resources, manage the scope of our endeavor and optimize the life cycle or schedule.

### ***Different Kinds of Life Cycles***

Figure 2 depicts the key life cycles, i.e. Personal: this refers to the physical age and maturity of a person, i.e. 20s – 30s – 40s – 50s – 60s – 70s; Career: this refers to a career choice from a number of disciplines, e.g. engineering, finance, marketing, production; Organizational: this refers to organizational development, i.e. formation, growth, maturity, decline; Business: this refers to the cyclical changes in the type of business; Product: this refers to the product life cycle of introduction, growth, maturity, decline; and Company Survival: this refers to the need to grow the company from domestic – regional – international – global; this is driven by the forces of globalization to shift gear.

We need to integrate the different life cycles impacting our lives. A passion for success can only be realized when these cycles are in equilibrium.

### **The Writers' Evolution from Learning to Teaching**

The writers apply the Learning-Teaching Helix in an analysis of their

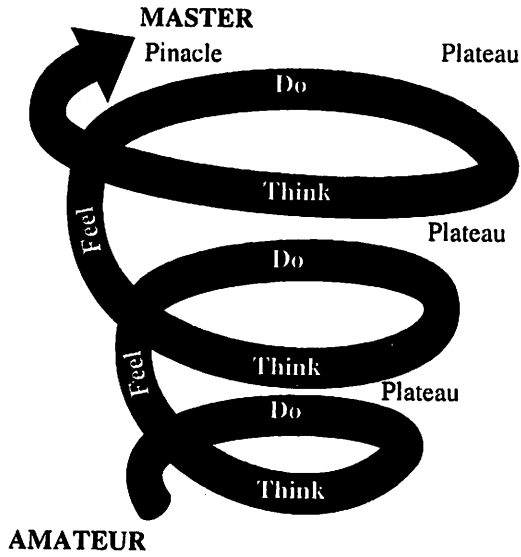
personal, business and management development over 30 years.

To bridge the "knowing-doing" gap or "smart talk trap," the writers filter all the theoretical irrelevant stuff in the course of carrying out their work. However, to enable them to leverage their practical experience to greater heights, it is essential to share their learning with "learners of excellence." Hence, the writers have been maintaining a balance between industry and academia for the past 30 years by engaging in teaching the executive training programs, given to their executives internally and externally to adult learners on BSc, MSc, MBA, PhD and DBA programs in different business and management disciplines. Teaching is the quickest way to learn. Everyone can become a mentor in some areas. This strengthens teamwork and promotes the paradigm shift from action learning to a teaching organization. According to Pfeffer and Sutton (1999), this is to transform knowledge to action into results.

To become a "Master," a mastery beyond action learning, it is imperative for the writers to bring the learning process and its growth to a different plateau. The time invested on the plateau grows longer as the climb becomes steeper and the refinements more subtle. Mastery is a process and not an endpoint to be reached. The challenge is to learn to have an eternal passion for the plateau since that is where you invest the bulk of your life. The growth spurts are peaks, moments that are not sustained. They motivate you to continue practicing on the plateau, knowing that eventually you will elevate from this plateau to another. See Figure 3.

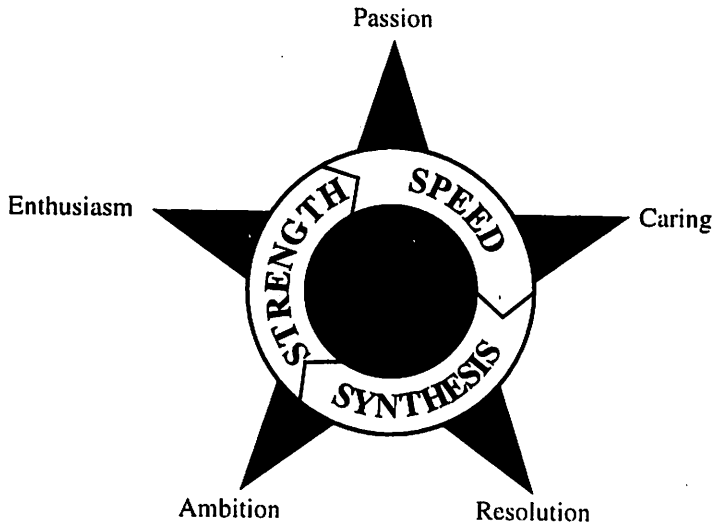
The process of mastering requires a holistic approach of emotional, spiritual, physical and social balance fuelled by passion, caring, resolution, ambition and

Figure 3. The Spiral of Action Learning



Source: Authors

Figure 4. The Learning – Teaching Spirit



Source: Authors

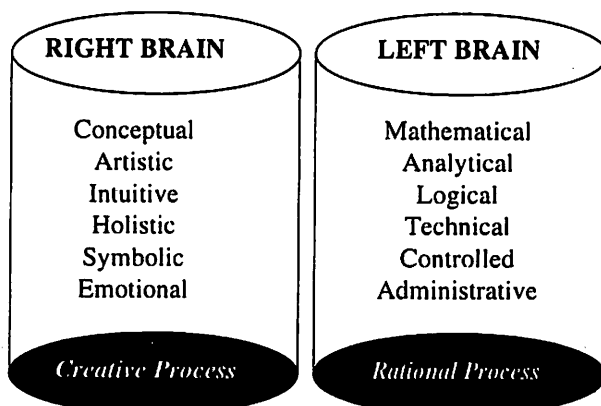
enthusiasm. The degree of strength, speed and synthesis in the way of execution will determine the success rate (see Figure 4). Therefore, mastery as a holistic approach to learning promotes transformation, another paradigm shift to a teaching organization.

Action learning is a philosophy aimed at healing the split that Revans and Marquardt (1999) saw as having developed historically between thinking and doing, between ideas and actions. In pre-

sending action and learning as part of each other, they aimed to contribute to more effective action on the many urgent and pressing problems facing man and society.

A holistic approach to action learning would attempt to integrate thinking, doing and feeling (i.e. ideas, actions, emotions) as an educational idea. The individual has to plan, i.e. strategize, prioritize and integrate, to become a holistic person who thinks, does and feels to evolve from

Figure 5. The Whole Brain Manager



Source: Authors

Table 1. The Development of the Writers' Intelligence

Strength: HTM		Age				
		20s	30s	40s	50s	60s
1.	Musical	L	L	L	Steady State	
2.	Linguistic	L	M	H		
3.	Logical / Mathematical	M	H	H		
4.	Spatial	M	H	H		
5.	Body / Kinesthetic	H	M	L		
6.	Intrapersonal	M	H	H		
7.	Interpersonal	M	H	H		

H: High      M: Medium      L: Low



continuous learning to continuous teaching. In other words, to be a whole brain manager (see Figure 5).

Further, there are seven intelligences. Table 1 traces the development of the writers' intelligences through the years. A key driver to fuel the writers' journey is the possession of intrapersonal intelligence earlier in life. It is the recognition of personal weaknesses and inadequacies that propels the writers to seek the realization of the other types of intelligence which takes them through an odyssey of action learning development over 30 years to date.

As concluded by the writers' friends, colleagues and business associates, the preferred work styles exhibited by the writers are in the order of methodical, practical, creative, interactive. The results of their learning styles assessment profile indicated very strong preference as a pragmatist (down-to-earth problem solver), theorist (logical and analytical), activist (open-minded and enthusiastic about learning) and strong preference as a reflector (cautious and observant).

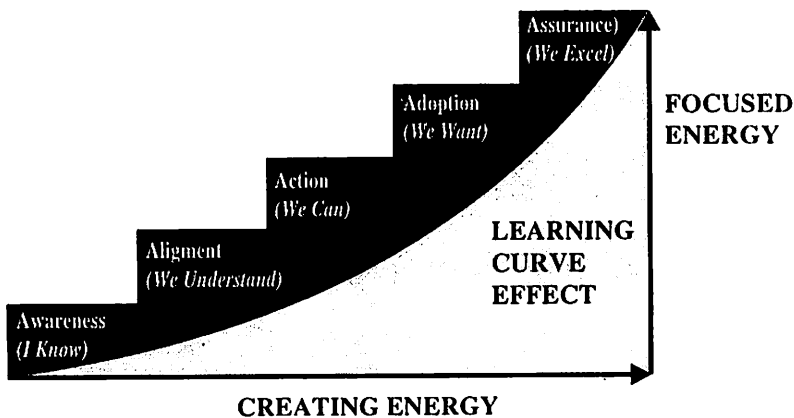
## Action Learning Development Phases

The writers' journey of development phases in action learning is given in Figure 6. Action learning is about effective change management to transform knowledge to actions into business results. Convert low energy into focused energy to synergize individual efforts into superior team performance.

### *Awareness Phase (You are probably in your 20s)*

*Ascertain your Strengths and Weaknesses.* This requires self assessment and awareness of an individual's strengths and weaknesses. This is dynamic as an individual grows and develops through time. According to Buckingham and Clifton (2001), there is a need to identify personal uniqueness, marketability and skill sets that are difficult to imitate. Some models for self evaluation are: Left Brain / Right Brain, 7 Intelligences, Learning Styles, and Work Styles.

Figure 6. Action Learning Curve Effect



Source: Authors



**Alignment Phase (You are probably in your 30s)**

**Identify your Core Competence.** Alignment starts with an end game. There is a need to strategize to achieve the end game. Thus, it is an imperative to have a game plan or strategy. There is a need to chart a career road map. See example given in Figure 7. The writers' shift from a technical orientation to a general orientation in business and management can be traced to their climb up the corporate ladder and their multi-cultural exposure to business opportunities in the global village. Different degree of skill sets are needed at different levels of management hierarchy. Alignment takes a broad perspective of integrating personal career goals with your core competence. Mentors and coaches are particularly helpful to offer guidance on your training and developmental needs in the context of personal

vision and organizational compatibility. All stakeholders need to align their needs with their expectations, then "We can Understand."

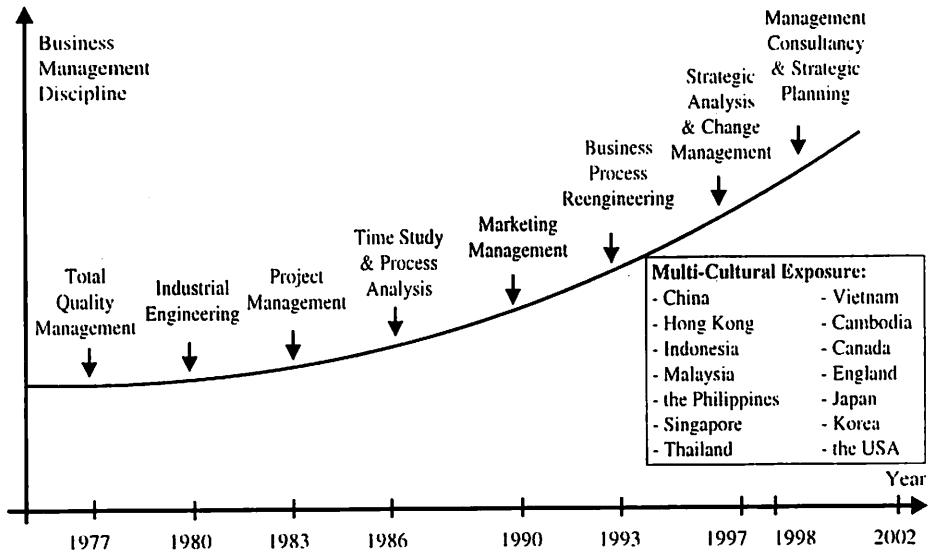
**Action Phase (You are probably in your 40s)**

**Synthesize your Work, Business and Management Skills.** This translates strategies into projects, i.e. resources / scope / schedule. Anything that you do in this phase is critical because you should be in your career overdrive where your track records will be based on the magnitude and number of successful projects.

**Adoption Phase (You are probably in your 50s)**

**Becoming a Leader.** This is the time of consolidation and making a contribution to society. A change of role begins from one of learning to one of teaching.

Figure 7. Odyssey of one of the Writers' Action Learning Development



Source: Authors

**Assurance Phase (You are probably in your 60s)**

**Excelling as an Educator and Coach.**

Put experience to good use by offering to be a mentor, coach, counselor or advisor with the organization or to other organizations.

Harrison (1995) questions the purpose of organizations and suggests that, given the dominating and powerful institutions they are today, they should be attuned to planetary purposes. Thus, a primary task of an organization is the discovery of its place and purpose in the larger system. In a similar vein, this quest applies to the search for meaning by man. Hence, the writers embark on their odyssey in search of their place in industry and the academia.

**The Teaching Organization**

The coming shape of organization is a teaching organization because it will be project-centric (Belbin 1996). In a project-centric organization, effective and efficient teamwork is crucial to the successful

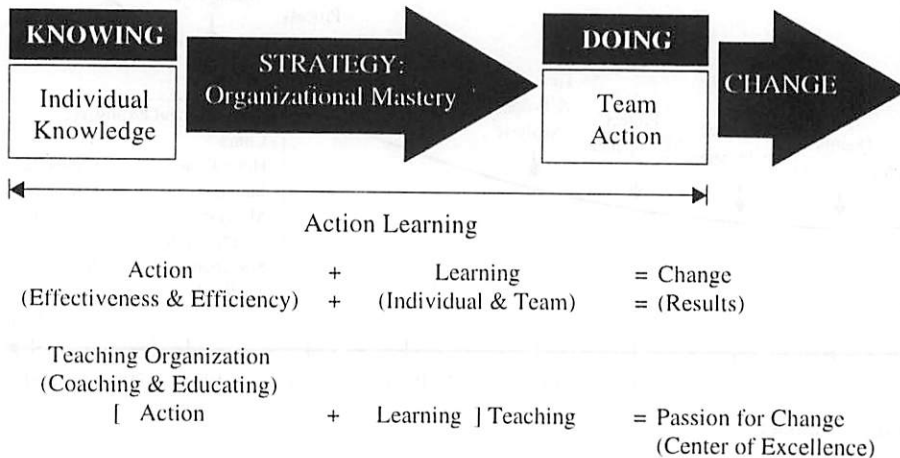
implementation of the strategy. Revisiting the Learning-Teaching Helix (see Figure 1), the learning organization needs to evolve into a teaching organization pursuing the following goals:

- (1) Strategize (people-driven): Clarity in planning resulting in doing the right things, i.e. effective,
- (2) Prioritize (process-driven): First things first resulting in doing things right, i.e. efficiency,
- (3) Integrate (technology / tools-driven): Bridging the performance and communication gap resulting in sustainable competitive advantage, i.e. convert knowledge into action into business results.

Integrating the teaching element into the action learning equation (see Figure 8).

Therefore, it is obvious that organizational mastery of action learning through a teaching organization initiative will produce far superior results than a learning organization which encourages individual learning. As an analogy, a coach can train many players, but a player can only play one game at a time.

Figure 8. Action Learning Equation



A coach-cum-educator, i.e. leader, should have the passion for change. Goleman et al. (2002) contended that effective change leadership quality is a potent combination of emotional intelligence and adversity quotient, i.e. self-awareness (awareness phase), self-management (alignment phase), social-awareness (action phase) and relationship management (adoption and assurance phase).

## **Conclusion and Prospect**

Learning is both a process and a value. As a process, it involves concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. As a value, we learn how to use our own selves as tools. Interpersonal skills, creativity, responsiveness to change and learning how to learn are the skills that serve a person in the knowledge-based economy. Efficient and effective learners re-create and re-invent themselves to stay relevant in an age of discontinuous change. The learning edge is a key source of competitive advantage in the knowledge-based economy.

Learning is an individual responsibility and the individual must be alert to learning opportunities in the environment rich in stimuli—colors, shapes, textures, tastes, sounds. Learning must be in the culture and values of the individual. Until learning is a focus of attention in every experience, the individual will miss opportunities to integrate and internalize learning into the culture. Therefore, the individual must build and cultivate learning relationships.

Work can be an opportunity to practice what we have learned and what we are learning. Many professionals call their work just that - a practice. Physicians have medical practices; lawyers practice law,

therapists and counselors have private practices. The implication is that they are still learning, still searching for truth. Learning is the foundation for what they do. The more they practice, the more learning they do, and the better they get. This is the meaning of being a true professional.

Learning is a key value in the writers' culture. Work presents intractable problems. Colleagues are all "comrades in adversity" trying to ride the wave of intense competition. Opportunities are prevalent to make sense out of chaos through the development of business models and frameworks. Teaching leverages learning as opportunities to test these theories are present in the writers' many and varied teaching appointments with the universities. Real learning takes place when they are challenged by mature students who come from different industry, discipline, position and country. This is a rich hotbed for dialogue. The purpose of dialogue is to go beyond individual understanding and to open to the flow of a larger intelligence. The value of dialogue is in dealing with intractable solutions that are not amendable to normal strategies. This is the litmus test for the learning and teaching leader.

The Learning-Teaching Helix serves as a conceptual model for the writers in the context of their personal, business and management life over a period of 30 years. Ultimately, the writers aspire to be a "Great Professional." According to Sheth (2000), a Great Professional is defined as an Educator who unselfishly shares his wisdom (bridging the knowing-doing gap) resulting in mass production of human capital through a multiplier effect. An educator is one who enthusiastically imparts expertise into learning by transforming creativity (ideas) into innovation (solutions), thereby adding value in the transformation

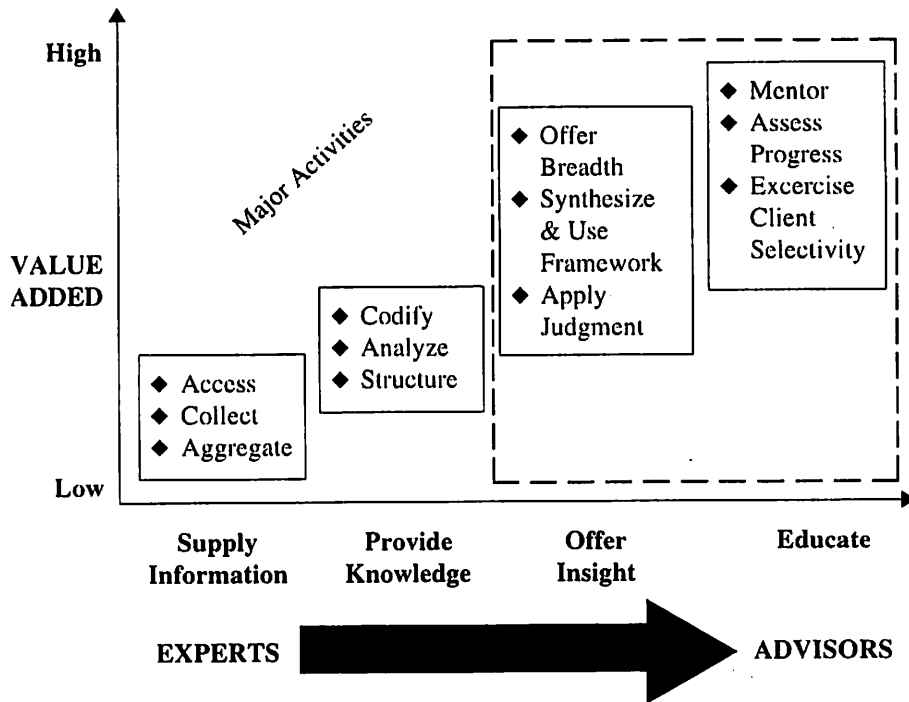
process. Hence, the writers believe in three key components in all their deliverables, i.e. sustainable performance through integrated project management, effective and efficient solution through supply chain management, and value innovation through customer relationship management for organizational performance capabilities.

To be a great professional and educator (Figure 9), there is a need to continue to sharpen core expertise and create distinctive expertise, brand yourself as a subject

matter expert and evangelize it, cultivate synthesis —big picture thinking skills— rather than just analysis, take a wide variety of assignments and deliver results, focus on self-renewal in the content of the entire business ecosystem.

Finally, the writers will welcome feedback from both academics and practitioners in their journey of learning-teaching development for continuous innovation in organizational performance capabilities.

Figure 9. Value Added Dimensions of a Great Professional



Source: Adapted from Sheth and Sobel (2000: 250)

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