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In memoria del Prof. Gianluca Colombo

"Proprietà, governance e management oggi: le sfide della complessità e  
dell'innovazione strategica per imprese e studiosi/e"

Action Research Methodology and the  
Strategic Narrative Dimension in Strategy.  
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Colombo relevant?

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# Action Research Methodology and the Strategic Narrative Dimension in Strategy. Why is the contribution of Gianluca Colombo relevant?

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## SOMMARIO-ABSTRACT

Action research is a continuous, collaborative cycle in which researchers and practitioners work together to diagnose a problem, design and execute an intervention, and then assess the outcomes. There is a gap in knowledge in existing research regarding how action research, with its emphasis on strategic and narrative elements, contributes to the formulation of complex management strategies. This paper intends to fill this gap by analyzing the relevant contribution of Professor Gianluca Colombo.

L'azione-ricerca è un ciclo continuo e collaborativo in cui ricercatori e professionisti lavorano insieme per diagnosticare un problema, progettare ed eseguire un intervento e quindi valutarne i risultati. Esiste una lacuna nella ricerca esistente su come la ricerca-azione, con la sua enfasi sugli elementi strategici e narrativi, contribuisca alla formulazione di strategie di gestione complesse. Questo articolo intende colmare questa lacuna analizzando il contributo rilevante del Professor Gianluca Colombo.

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## 1 – Introduction

Professor Gianluca Colombo (1953–2024), a Full Professor of Business Administration at the University of the Swiss Italian (USI), made a significant academic contribution in the field of strategic management.

He focuses on the central role of language and storytelling in organizing reality, especially in contexts of media convergence (Colombo, 1991, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2003, 2004, 2009; Gazzola & Colombo 2014).

For the strategy is important to define and design brand storytelling (Brown & Humphreys 2006 (see Figure1), for the governance of the enterprise (Mella 1997, 2005, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2021; Gazzola & Mella 2003, 2006, 2021, 2014; Riva 2006, 2007, 2012; Pilotti 2003, 2011, 2017, 2019; Riva & Pilotti 2021; Gazzola et.al 2020; Pilotti & Rinolfi 2022a,b).

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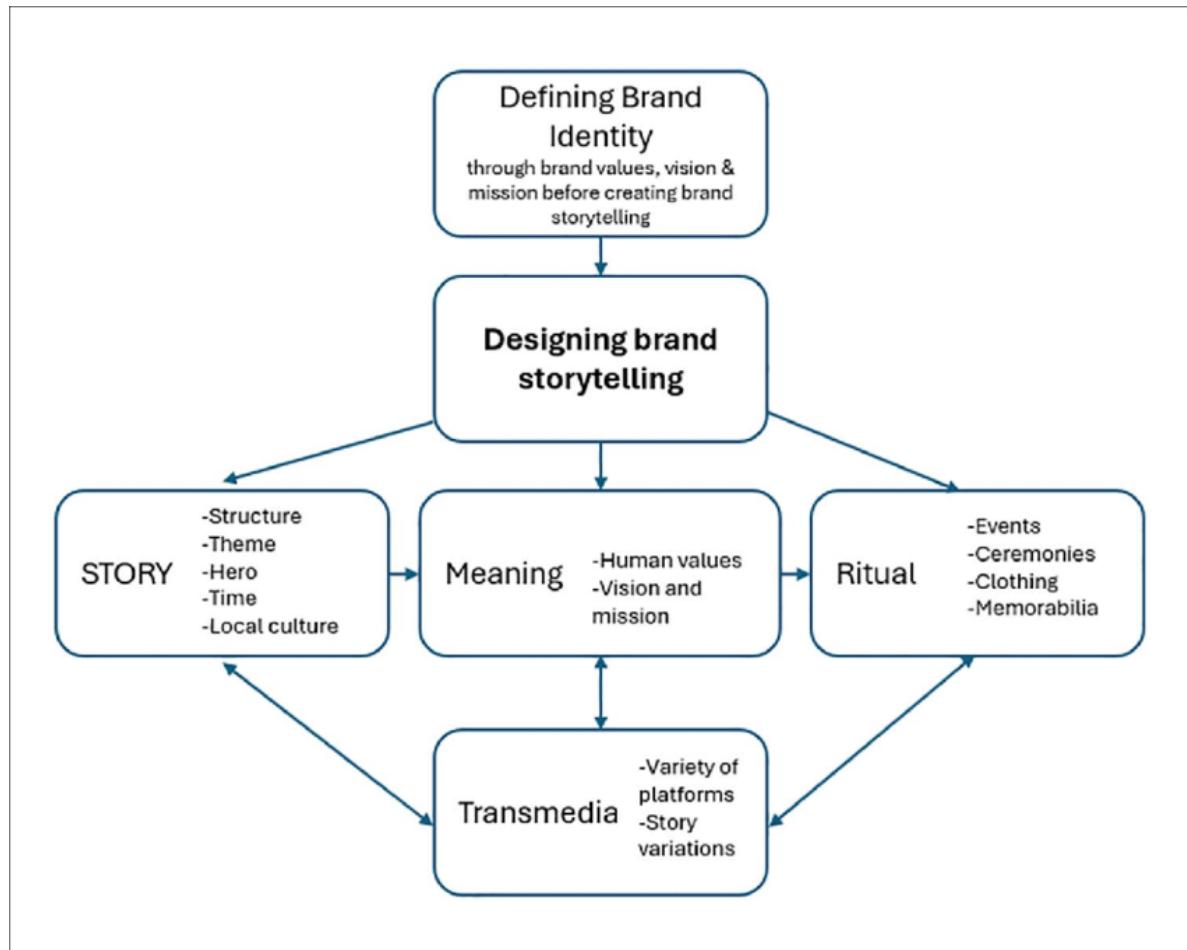
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**Fig. 1 – The process of designing brand storytelling**  
(Source: elaboration from Zimand-Sheiner)

Professor Colombo underlines the application of Action Learning (AL) (Carr & Kemmis 1986) for improving strategy, managing governance and organizational complexity, especially in family businesses; it is more than a simple problem-solving methodology (Cochran-Smith, & Lytle 2009)

At the heart of the research are the relationships between the logic and rhetoric of corporate discourse; the analysis of strategic discourse begins with the study of the grammars (morphemes and syntax) of strategy. Companies change through sequences of thoughts and actions, always conducted through conversation; dialogue thus becomes the primary tool for strategic change. Two areas of dialogue are considered: the one within organizations and the one among strategic management scholars. (Colombo 2004, pag.1)

The result of AL is increased family-business longevity through improved, objective relational dynamics. It leads to a fundamental shift in organizational culture in complex environments. It underlines the practice of learning from action.

For Professor Colombo, AL (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014) permits management of complex issues, particularly in family Businesses and SMEs. The process of action learning is based on some phases (Figure 2).



**Fig 2 – Action learning process** (source: Leadership Center-Revans)

Gianluca Colombo emphasizes (Colombo 1991,1993,1997) the strategic narrative dimension in strategy and the role of storytelling in strategy.

By placing dialogue at the center of our research, we are led to highlight the epistemological premises of the dialogue participants, be they managers or researchers, to understand how the concepts that actors construct through dialogue are formed. The intervention research method is consistent with building a collective discourse that involves not only academics but also managers, thus creating an extended community of actors engaged in the production of innovative and actionable knowledge. (Colombo 2004, p. 1)

The structure of the paper consists of several sections; following the introduction, the second section describes the description of objective and aims, the third section outlines the material and methodology used in the research, the fourth section describes the results and discussion, and the fifth section summarizes the key results and provides a conclusion.

## 2 – Objective and aims

The existing research is incomplete and lacking in some areas (Colombo 1998, 2004, 2003, 2009). The objective is also to establish a framework that integrates Action Learning (AL) with the principles of Narrative Theory. Therefore, this study aims to investigate (see Table 1) (Colombo 1991,1993, 1997).

The following research questions are based primarily on the contribution of Professor Gianluca Colombo:

**RQ1:** *How is the contribution of action learning and the strategic narrative dimension in strategy?*

and

**RQ2:** *Is it possible to integrate action learning and strategic narrative dimension in strategy?*

**Table 1 – The main questions and sub-questions** (Source: our elaboration)

Main questions	Sub-question
<b>RQ1</b> How is the contribution of action learning and strategic narrative dimension in strategy?	(1) What are the main areas of studies? (2) What are the main topics? (3) Why they are relevant?
<b>RQ2</b> Is it possible to integrate action learning and strategic narrative dimension in strategy?	(1) What are the areas of integration? (2) What are the achieved benefits? (3) How is possible integrate these methodologies?

### 3 – Materials and Methodology

This paper employs a conceptual and theoretical approach, drawing upon relevant contributions of Professor Gianluca Colombo. He analyzes his original point of view on the methodology of Action Learning (AL), and the Narrative Theory that are linked in the strategic process (see Table 2).

**Table 2 – Important contribution of Professor Gianluca Colombo and other important scholars** (Source: our elaboration)

Author(s)	Title	Theoretical Perspective	Methodology	Main Findings
Colombo G. (2004)	“La dimensione discorsiva del management strategico” Quaderno n. 8 University of Insubria	Strategy language and communication	Theoretical analysis	Importance of language and to consider the strategy as a game
Argyris, C. (1991).	“Overcoming defenses in organizational learning: A developmental approach to action science”. <i>Organizational Dynamics</i> , 20(2), 24-37.	Action Learning	A.L is a participatory, qualitative approach where the researcher collaborates with organizational members	It follows cycles of 1)Diagnosis 2)Action Planning 3)Action 4)Evaluation. The goal is dual: to solve a real organizational problem while generating theoretical knowledge.
Colombo G (1998)	“Mappe cognitive” in <i>Enciclopedia dell’impresa</i> UTET (EDI), vol. Strategia aziendale	Cognitive map	In fine food and beverage sector, where strategy hinges on the authenticity and emotional resonance of the brand's story	Important for (e.g., family heritage, terroir, and quality journey)

<b>Coghlan, D., &amp; Brannick, T. (2014)</b>	"Doing action research in your own organization" (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.	Action learning	AR provides a framework for managers to become researchers of their own practice, creating a dynamic,	Importance of earning-driven strategy.
<b>Colombo G. (1991)</b>	"La complessità nelle aziende e nelle discipline manageriali" in AA. VV., <i>Complessità e managerialità</i> , Milano, EGEA	Complexity	Strategy is understood not merely as an analytic plan but as a cohesive, persuasive narrative	The result is a richer understanding of how managers build "narrative lines" to frame change and overcome resistance.
<b>Colombo G. (1993),</b>	"Da Atena a Hermes: pensare e agire la strategia", <i>Economia e management</i> , "N. 5, Milano, Etas.	Strategy	Involves analyzing verbal and written texts (interviews, documents, public speeches, corporate histories) to identify key narrative	Importance he results is a shift from viewing strategy as a static blueprint to a dynamic process
<b>Colombo G. (1997)</b>	"L'impresa nella complessità", <i>Sviluppo e Organizzazione</i> ", N. 143 maggio – giugno 18	Complexity	Importance of use comparative Case Studies and empirical research (qualitative and quantitative)	to analyze corporate governance structures, strategic processes, and the performance of firms.
<b>Gazzola P. &amp; Colombo G. (2014)</b>	"Csr Integration into The Corporate Strategy," <i>Cross Cultural Management Journal</i> ", issue 2, pages 331-338, November.	Communication and strategy	CSR of communication	Importance of Strategy of communication and CSR
<b>Colombo, G. (2003).</b>	"Managing the family business transition" (Quaderno n. 304). Dipartimento di Economia, Università dell'Insubria.	Strategy	Family strategy dimension	The successful <i>result</i> is a strategy that secures both profitability and the non-economic values (prestige, family control) often conveyed through the firm's historical narrative)
<b>Humphreys, M. (2006).</b>	"The narrative line in strategic change". <i>Organization Studies</i> , 27(5), 651–671.	Narrative strategy	Narrative Analysis	change emerge from disrupting defensive routines (AR) and successfully re-storying the organization's identity
<b>Colombo, G. (2009).</b>	"Actualizing Bergson's lesson: a post-post-modernist perspective". <i>Journal of Management &amp; Governance</i> , 13(3), 261-267	Strategy as process during the time	Primarily conceptual and methodological, related to the philosophical underpinnings of process-based strategy, time, and change.	The importance of Bergson's lesson

The methodology involves an analysis of some important Professor Gianluca Colombo's contribution, focusing on:

### A) Action Learning methodology

Gianluca Colombo, underline the importance of AL (Problem, Group, Question, Action, Learning). Particular attention is paid to the role of questioning and reflection for define a creative strategy.

In both fields [logic and rhetoric], two complementary dimensions of dialogue can be observed: innovation, aimed at producing and disseminating new actionable knowledge; and politics, aimed at selecting, on the one hand, the actions to be taken within organizations, and, on the other, the theories within the scientific community. With regard to the first dimension, logic and rhetoric play a creative role; they also constitute useful tools for analyzing the political dimension, that is, the negotiation and decision-making process. (Colombo 2004, pag. 1)

The importance of action learning permits to analysis of the problem in a systematic way (see Figure 3).

### B) Narrative Theory and Communication Studies

Gianluca Colombo describes the convergence of media, industry, and social meaning-making, where the narrative acts as a key element for assembling diverse experiences and enabling consumer/learner co-creation (Pilotti 2013,2017,2019,2011; Pilotti, & Ridolfi 2022, 2022b; Porter & Kramer 2002, 2006).

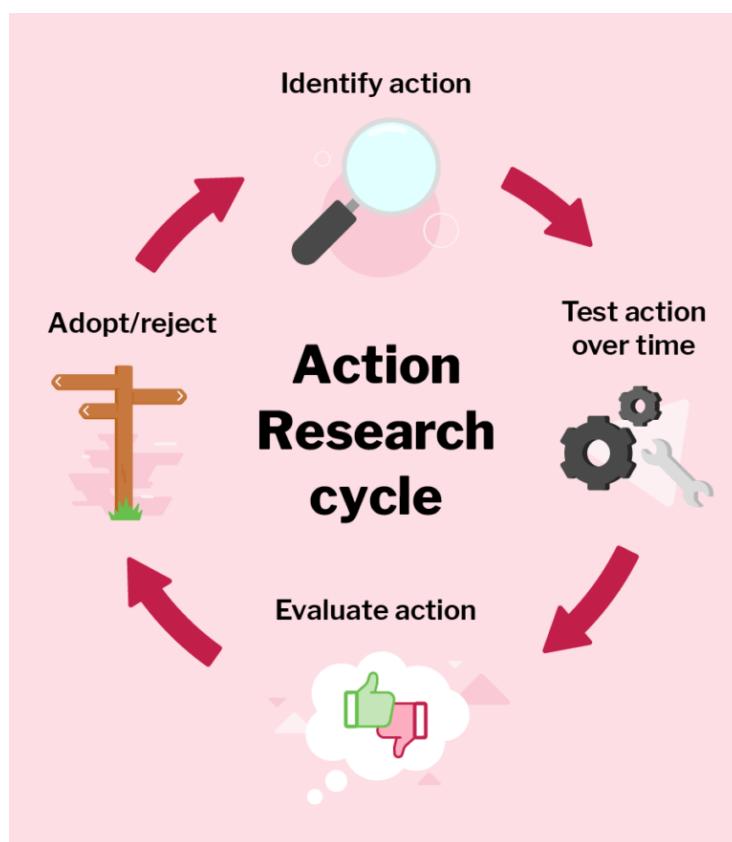


Fig. 3 – Action. Research Process (source: elaboration from Futerel)

For Gianluca Colombo, we can analyze some level of narrative and communication in strategy (language, discourse, communication) (see Table 3)

**Table 3 – Level of communication in strategy** (Source Colombo 2004)

Level	Dimension
Language	Morphological and syntactic rules of corporate strategy.
Discourse	Logic and rhetoric of strategy in business and the scientific community.
Communication	The interactive dimension in the formulation and implementation of corporate strategy and in strategy studies.

## 4 – Results and Discussion

The contribution of Gianluca Colombo is relevant in several areas: Action Learning, strategy in the food and beverages sector, and the symbolic dimension of narrative analysis.

### 4.1 – Action Learning through a Narrative Lens

The "narrative dimension" of strategy permits an improvement of strategic actions and identity. Colombo describes the importance of language in strategy and action learning

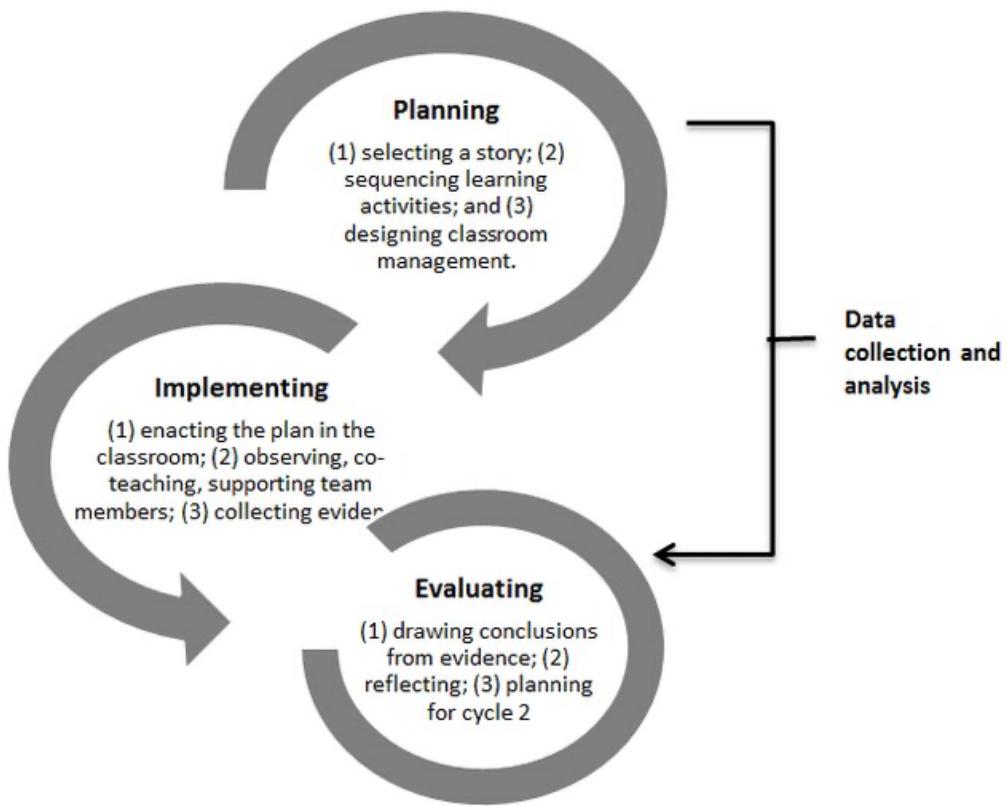
The theory of knowledge aims to limit the perverse effects of an abuse of symbols, which are necessarily at least partially ambiguous. This, by extension, could be considered a general function of the linguistic interface, a function that is both epistemic and founding, in our case, of the organized order (the enterprise, the organization, the academic community, etc.). This interface thus ensures a relatively objectifiable interaction with the extralinguistic, while not excluding the evolution of interpretations and even of interpretative rules, that is, of grammars. In the history of scientific thought, it is not uncommon to observe processes of differentiation of interpretations; they give rise to progressively divergent schools of thought, also through the invention and consolidation of their own linguistic means. (Colombo 2004, pag.6)

The methodology focuses on solving real problems based on the formula  $L = P + Q$  (Learning = Programmed Knowledge + Questioning Insight). The importance of narration of a story for the creative process of discovering new solutions to strategic problems (see Figure 4).

The link between Action Learning and the theoretical work of Gianluca Colombo lies in recognizing AL as a powerful process for problem definition and problem solution.

Our interest is directed to the cognitive grammar of a specific scientific discipline and to that applied in business practices; it therefore seems useful to recall the following quote by Pearson (1912) "It is often said that the scientific method applies only to the external world of phenomena... The object of the present work is to insist on the exact opposite proposition, namely, that science is a reality, a classification and an analysis of the contents of our spirit (mind)...". Pearson's quote, if applied with reference to business strategy, provides a perspective for the analysis of managerial discourses as symbolic actions. The passages

reported above constitute, for example, a very rich sample of recurring symbols (value, the market, growth, connections, and so on). (Colombo 2004, pag. 5).



**Fig. 4 – Planning-Implementing-Evaluating Loop** (source: adapted from Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon 2014)

The most significant contribution lies in the use of narrative analysis to manage organizational complexity and strategy for sustainability (Gazzola & Colombo 2014; Gazzola, & Mella P. 2003, 2017). Narrative elements (like plot, characters) are importances to define the strategy (see Table 4).

**Table 4 – Map the organization's current strategic reality** (Source: our elaboration)

Element	Aims
F&b company	This involves understanding the brand dimension
The hero	The founding family or chef/manager
The plot	The path of growth, succession challenges, or the quest for Michelin stars
The setting	The territorial roots that define the brand's identity

Professor Colombo's focus on the logic and rhetoric of strategic conversation to analyze the problem. The narrative approach (Boje 2001) recognizes that learning (Argyris, 1991) is an

interpretation of experience, and subjective components are often embedded in their problem-solving in an interactive game of players.

Without a dynamic and interactive vision of strategy (Colombo 2004), there is a lack of comprehension of the true complexity of strategic management, since environments and organizations are groups of people who interact rather than adapt to one another.

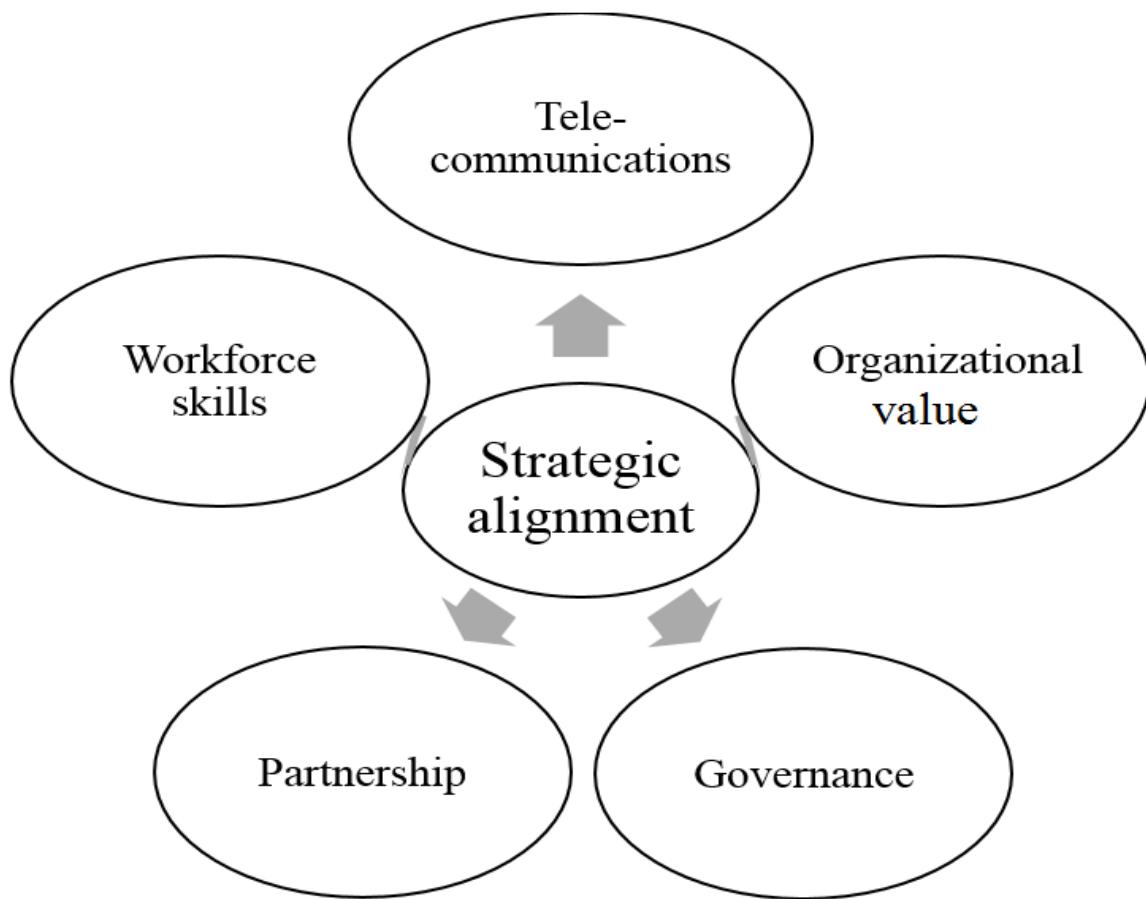
Professor Colombo's work emphasizes that family firms in the fine food and beverage sector balance economic results with socio-emotional dimensions like reputation, tradition, and family harmony.

#### **4.2 – Formulating strategy in the food and beverages sector**

Professor Colombo's work emphasizes in the "fine food and beverage" sector the assets like reputation, tradition, and family harmony (Mella & Gazzola 2018; Mella 1997, 2012, 2014; 2015, 2017, 2018, 2021).

In the fine food and beverage sector, the product is deeply intertwined with reputation. The strategy must describe the unique story of the firm (e.g., mission, origin, commitment, family tradition).

Communication should be aligned with the core brand identity, creating differentiation that justifies premium pricing (see Figure 5).



**Fig. 5 – Strategic alignment** (Source Joumana et al. 2023)

The communication should balance both economic results and the family's continuity.

### 4.3 – *The symbolic dimension of narrative analysis*

The symbolic dimension of communication is very important; for Carl Jung these are the 12 archetypes with symbolic importance (see Table 5).

**Table 5 – Carl Jung's 12 Character Archetypes** (source our elaboration from Jung)

Archetypes	Results
<b>Caregiver</b>	A parental figure who cares for your protagonist.
<b>Creator</b>	Inartistic character like a musician, artist, or scientist.
<b>Explorer</b>	Like a pilgrim, adventurer or wanderer.
<b>Hero</b>	He seeks to prove his worth through courageous and heroic acts.
<b>Innocent</b>	Positive and optimistic.
<b>Jester</b>	Fun-loving and mischievous.
<b>Lover</b>	A loyal companion who fears being unwanted.
<b>Magician</b>	Charismatic and intent on finding win-win solutions.
<b>Orphan</b>	She fears being left out and alone.
<b>Rebel</b>	Rules should be broken.
<b>Ruler</b>	He wants control and can be perceived to be authoritarian.
<b>Sage</b>	Sage seeks truth.

For Colombo, all individual actions are based on a narrative that permits a more effective organizational solution. This vision permits a structured way to improve business models, ensuring that the strategies are aligned with the family's long-term values for the firm's competitive advantages.

## 5 - Conclusion

Concerning the first research question: "**RQ1: How is the contribution of action learning and strategic narrative dimension in strategy?** we discover:

**A- FIRST**, the result describes the importance of Colombo's analyses of action learning in business strategy for analyzing the problem and improving the ability to innovate and change. There are some main phases of the action learning process (see Table 6).

**Table 6 – Phases of action learning process** (Source: our elaboration from Colombo)

Phase	Main focus	Key activity	Learning goal
1. Problem presentation	Contest Setting	The Presenter outlines the real, urgent problem. The Set asks initial clarifying questions.	To align the Set on the nature and urgency of the challenge.
2. Questioning & re-framing	Challenging Assumptions	The Set asks only open-ended questions of the Presenter (advice is forbidden).	To help the Presenter re-frame the problem, uncovering root causes and implicit assumptions.
3. Individual & group reflection	Insights	The Set discusses what was learned from the Questioning process and what new insights emerged.	To translate discussion into explicit knowledge about the problem and the process.
4. Action planning	Concrete Commitment	The Presenter defines and communicates the specific action they will take before the next meeting.	To translate learning into a concrete and measurable step.
5. Taking action	Real-World Experimentation	The Presenter implements the agreed-upon action in the work environment.	To test hypotheses and gather new data in the field.
6. Review & Learning From Action	Cycle Closure and Feedback Loop.	In the next session, the Presenter reports the outcomes (successes and failures) to inform the next cycle.	To evaluate the action's impact and inform the next iteration of the cycle.

**B - SECOND**, the importance of the strategy definition and implementation of the action learning process based on the cycle of PQAL (problem-question-action-learning) follows the formula L=P+Q (learning programmed knowledge and questioning insight) (see Table 7).

**Table 7 – Action Learning and PQAL Cycle** (Source: our elaboration from Revans 2011; Colombo 1991, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2003, 2004, 2009 and Gazzola & Colombo 2014)

Action Learning And PQAL Cycle	
<b>PQAL CYCLE</b> <b>Action Learning</b> a small group of 5-6 individuals who meet regularly to work on real, organizational problems.	<b>1. PROBLEM (P):</b> <b>2. QUESTIONING (Q):</b> <b>3. ACTION (A):</b> <b>4. LEARNING (L):</b> analyze back on the action taken and the learning derived Completing the cycle of L=P+Q.

Cycle of L=P+Q.	
<b>L = Learning</b>	<p><b>The ultimate outcome is changing vision</b>, develop new, practical solutions to novel problems. Increase personal and collective competence.</p> <p>The goal is adaptive learning that is the capacity to continually learn from and respond to changing, complex, and unpredictable environments</p>
<b>P = Programmed knowledge</b>	<p><b>Programmed Knowledge</b> represents existing, validated, and readily available knowledge. This includes <b>formal education and prior Experience</b>:</p>
<b>Q = Questioning Insight</b>	<p><b>Questioning Insight</b> is the most critical and distinct part of Action Learning. It is the learning generated by <b>self-reflection, critical inquiry, and collaboration</b> in the face of an unprecedented challenge.</p> <p>This process happens when a group works on a real-life problem and asks some questions like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "What assumptions are we making?"</li> <li>• "Why are we doing it this way?"</li> <li>• "What is it that we do not know about this problem?"</li> </ul>

**C - THIRDS**, the results of the first question are coherent with past research (Pettigrew 1987, Revans 2011; Rhodes & Brown 2005; Riva 2007; Riva & Pilotti, 2019; Slotegraaf, & Atuahene-Gima, 2011; Mella 1997, 2005, 2012; Pilotti 2017 2019; Riva & Pilotti 2021; Gazzola et.al 2020; Pilotti, & Rinolfi 2022a,b).

In relation to the second research question: **RQ2: Is it possible an integrate action learning and strategic narrative dimension in strategy?** we find:

**a -First**, there are some benefits of the integration of action learning and the strategic narrative dimension in strategy (see Table 8).

**Table 8 – The integration of action learning and strategic narrative dimension in strategy**  
(source our elaboration from Colombo)

Area	Importance and benefits
<b>Increased engagement</b>	Narratives capture attention with real-world challenge (the Action Learning problem) as a conflict immediately clarifying the objectives with sense of urgency
<b>Relevance</b>	Storytelling, relatable context for the problem

<b>Fostering empathy</b>	Narratives expose learners to diverse viewpoints
<b>Structured reflection</b>	A clear narrative arc (beginning, middle, and end) permits to structure the Action Learning cycle of "problem, action, and reflection
<b>Test alternative actions</b>	Story environment, explore the consequences of their choices, and refine their strategy before applying it in the real world
<b>Knowledge transfer</b>	The solutions and insights developed through Action Learning can be analyzed

**b – Second**, there are some relevant benefits of using narrative and storytelling communication (see Table 9).

**Table 9 – Benefits of narrative strategy and storytelling for strategy** (source our elaboration)

Area	Focus
<b>Differentiate the brand</b>	It gives <b>consumers reason to choose</b> one brand over another
<b>Build emotional connection</b>	Much <b>more effectively</b> than facts alone.
<b>Establish authenticity and trust</b>	Consumers prioritize brands that are transparent and <b>authentic</b> by <b>stories about sourcing, heritage, and values</b>
<b>Communicate value</b>	<b>Storytelling allows a brand or challenging journey</b> behind the product, rather than just listing features.

**c – Thirds**, the results of the second question are coherent with past research (Freire, 1970; Gabriel, 2000; Gazzola et al. 2020; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Lewin 1946; Liedtka 2007; Marangoni et al. 2004; McNiff, 2016; Mella 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2021; Gazzola e Mella 2003, 2006, 2021, 2014; Riva 2007; Pilotti 2003, 2011).

The original contributions of this research (highlights) regarding the production of new knowledge in the field:

I) The original description and analysis of the role of Professor Gianluca Colombo for the integration of action research methodology and strategic-narrative dimension in strategy.

II) It permits to find a few areas of research in the field of his study.

A limitation of this research is based on the method of the review study.

Further research can analyze the impact of action research methodology and strategic-narrative dimension in strategy based on a set of case studies.

In conclusion, the integration of action learning and narrative theory provides a richer understanding of how organizations can improve their strategy.

Action Learning is not merely a problem-solving technique, but it is a powerful tool for strategy in the family-business contest. Action Learning method, in Professor Colombo's perspective, is as an important strategic tool for complexity management.

## Remember

Professor Gianluca Colombo's thinking is significant for his passion and innovation in the field of strategy, and on action-research methodology and the strategic-narrative dimension in strategy. often working in family businesses where theoretical knowledge was combined with managerial practice in many family businesses.

## Ricordo

Il pensiero del Professor Gianluca Colombo è rilevante per la passione e per avere innovato nel campo della strategia e sulla ricerca sulla metodologia di ricerca - intervento e della dimensione narrativa della strategia spesso in imprese famigliari dove la conoscenza teorica era abbinata alla pratica manageriale svolta in molte imprese famigliari.

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