

**Improving Executive Group Decision Making  
With a Focus on Undiscussables**

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the degree of  
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## **Declaration**

I certify that the work in this portfolio has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree.

I also certify that the portfolio has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the portfolio itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the portfolio.

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Paul Donovan

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# **Improving Executive Group Decision Making With a Focus on Undiscussables**

## **Abstract for Whole Portfolio**

The impact of the pervasive and persistent problem of undiscussables on executive group decision-making is as deep as it is far reaching. Executives struggling to discuss the most important issues facing their companies are required to negotiate a complex and undiscussed terrain of anxieties, threats and embarrassment in relation to various topics that appear, or might appear on the agenda of their meetings. My own long-term experience as a corporate facilitator supports these claims and has prompted this Action Research investigation into how to improve executive group decision-making, with an emphasis on undiscussables. Interestingly, our understanding of undiscussables had not significantly grown since Argyris first coined the term 30 years ago; of particular note is the absence of research addressing the relationship between undiscussables and power. This professional doctorate includes an analysis of data generated from the practice field of senior executive groups and literature within and beyond the broad field of Management Studies to provide new knowledge about the problem of undiscussables, and how to manage them, as they relate to executive groups and their decision-making. Transcripts over a six-month period of a senior executive group who became an Action Learning set were studied. Conversation patterns at precisely the time when organizationally important topics were being avoided were mapped and presented in a Company Report and subsequently in a published peer reviewed article. Via a second peer-reviewed article, the implications of undiscussables on organisational learning are explored, particularly in the context of our emerging understanding in relation to the collective nature of learning. A third peer reviewed article, utilizing data from multiple senior executive teams operating as Action Learning sets, proposed a new relationship between undiscussables, power and conflict. That article significantly widens the conversation about undiscussables, especially in relation to the role set leaders may play in

generating undiscussables as they exercise power afforded them by their rank. Also, recent discourse in managerial magazines in relation to the topic of senior executive decision-making is reviewed, including two articles published by the author that addressed that audience. All components of this portfolio add to knowledge in this important area, and work to significantly enhance the practice of those interested in strengthening the capacity of executives to make collective decisions on issues that matter.

## **Meta Statement**

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – Research Problematic and Questions .....	9
Chapter 2 – Composition of the Portfolio and Purpose of the Components .....	18
Chapter 3 – Conceptual Framework.....	27
Chapter 4 – Methodology .....	69
Chapter 5 – Reflection on the Artifacts .....	93
Reflection on the First Article Published in Action Learning: Research and Practice Journal .....	99
Reflection on the Second Article Submitted to the Action Learning: Research and Practice Journal .....	107
Reflection on the Article Published in the Proceedings of the 6th ICBM Conference. ....	115
Reflection on the Company Report.....	121
Reflection on the Managerial Articles.....	132
Chapter 6 - Reflection on Personal, Professional and Academic Development throughout the Doctorate.....	146
Chapter 7 – Conclusions .....	163
References .....	169

## List of Illustrations and Tables

Table 1 – Summary of Portfolio Components.....	23
Figure 1 – Chronological Order of Completion and Intended Audience of Portfolio Components .....	24
Figure 2 – Power, Conflict and Undiscussables .....	53
Table 2 – Clegg’s Circuits of Power (1989).....	59
Figure 3 – Adaption of Clegg’s Circuits of Power.....	62

Figure 4 – The ALAR approach.....	77
Table 3 –Portfolio components, research questions and doctoral contribution .....	95
Figure 5 – Relationships of Artifacts to each other .....	98
Table 4 – Revise and Re-submit for Action Learning Article .....	104