

Developmental action learning: toward collaborative change

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In this account of practice, the authors introduce a variant of classic action learning, called developmental action learning (DAL). The DAL model, derived from cognitive development theory, introduces conventional learning modules prior to the more intensive set experience. It also calls for facilitation designed to help participants, selected for their readiness to change, make the leap to deeper levels of personal and organizational development. The DAL approach is applied to a leadership development series among a group of high-level administrators within a university consortium. The case study gives promise to the use of developmental action learning to enhance collaborative leadership processes.

Introduction

Despite the over 50-year presence of action learning as an increasingly reputable form of education, its contribution as a learning modality, especially within the management education and development world, still appears to pale in comparison to standard classroom and training provision (Pedler *et al.*, 2005). There are many reasons to be offered for this state of affairs. For example, locating learning in a specific place, namely within a classroom, seems to dominate most of our educational enterprises from the first days of formal schooling. It is both easier and cheaper to offer teaching from a single platform and from a text. We can measure the results from rote instruction far more easily than we can from experience (Mabey, 2002; Mintzberg, 2004). And, of course, learning from standard training is the way we have always done it!

Rather than knock our heads against the wall and decry this unfair neglect of action learning, it might be worth wondering if its classical format, characterized in this journal by Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook (2005), might be overly ambitious with audiences so unaccustomed to self-directed reflection and learning from experience. It may be particularly discomfoting to throw people into a team and ask them to not

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only immediately learn to work together, but to also share their emerging feelings about one another. In some cultures and sub-cultures, achieving this level of directness in personal exchange may come across as overly blunt or even forced.

In this regard, we have experimented with a new developmental approach to action learning that takes into consideration people's variable readiness to open up to one another, especially within an action learning set. Although work organizations are increasingly relying on teams, these teams tend to operate on projects that may not require intensive interaction among members (Sundstrom *et al.*, 1990; Guzzo & Shea, 1992; Cohen & Bailey, 1997). Some teams, for example, are merely called teams to designate a grouping of responsibility, though individuals may continue to work on their separate tasks. Action learning requires a deeper level of disclosure and feedback (Raelin, 1997).

Developmental learning

The developmental approach espoused for action learning has roots in other learning models, especially those proffered by cognitive scientists. In particular, our approach is designed to be consistent with the ACT and more recent ACT-R theories of Anderson (see Anderson, 1983; Anderson & Labiere, 1998). ACT theory, standing for the Adaptive Character of Thought, purports that learning progresses through stages that approximate the cognitive architecture of memory. In the first cognitive stage, the learner acquires declarative knowledge, or a set of facts relevant to the skill in question, and processes this knowledge very deliberately. In the second association stage, the learner converts the declarative facts into procedural knowledge, which no longer requires the declarative information to be methodically retrieved into working memory. The transition from declarative to procedural knowledge has been referred to as the natural conversion from explicit to tacit knowledge or what Ryle (1949) referred to as moving from 'knowing what' to 'knowing how.' For example, a novice learning to play the piano starts by locating the keys on the piano but in time can make the transition to the tacit practice of playing the piano without even thinking of the keys. By the third, autonomous stage, as the skill becomes more and more automated, the learner is able to improve the search for new procedures and more efficiently transfer knowledge from one situation to the next.

The contemporary approach

Among some of the complaints leveled against the deployment of action learning is that learning is often sacrificed in favor of project work. In other words, these programs have a tendency to foster action at the expense of learning. Based on the aforementioned depiction of cognitive developmental theory, might it be possible that participants in action learning programs are thrust prematurely into autonomous learning situations without sufficient cognitive development or exposure to precursory forms of knowledge acquisition?

Consider how most programs operate. Participants are placed into either individual or team projects that have strategic value to the client organization. Once assigned to a project, participants are often expected to inductively and rather immediately work on the project, incorporating such requisite steps as project planning, resource acquisition, implementation, and evaluation. While pursuing the project, participants are also assembled into action learning sets or teams where they are encouraged to focus on their individual and team learning. The learning may also support a theme espoused for the program, be it leadership, team development, knowledge management, and the like. Although some participants may be psychologically ready for the level of openness required in these teams, others may not be and might consequently choose to resist personal exposure through the experience.

Resistance can take a number of forms, such as active vs. passive (also called overt and covert resistance), conscious vs. unconscious, or counter-productive vs. non-productive. An active resistor can find many reasons why the experience is a waste of time and especially decry learning sessions that entail ‘staring at our navels.’ By actively opposing the learning opportunity, active resisters are signaling that they do not agree with the practical changes that may result from the learning sessions. A passive resistor may just sit through the experience, keeping closed to any learning, avoiding any implementation, and then rating it poorly or reporting its ill effects to others in the organization (Hultman, 1995).

While most resisters are consciously aware of their resistance, there are some who are unaware, often stemming from an unconscious fear that any new learning will result in their having to adjust tried and true routines (O’Connor, 1993). Finally, there is the distinction between productive and counter-productive resistance to change. A counter-productive resistor may engage in actions that sabotage any attempts to learn, whereas a non-productive resistor will instead remain apathetic and, like the ‘passivist,’ ensure that he or she remains unaffected by the experience.

The DAL approach

The developmental action learning (DAL) approach seeks to overcome some of the limitations of classical action learning while also taking into consideration the developmental nature of the interpersonal relations among staff engaged in the workplace. DAL is based on the fundamental assumption that people will open up with one another on a spectrum, from routines that are familiar and recognized as safe, to experiences that are less structured and that allow more self-disclosure and feedback among participants. The DAL program proceeds as a three-stage process:

1. Perspectives discussion—collectively study different perspectives of leadership.
2. Learning team—individually adopt some of the perspectives and apply them through experimentation in one’s own organization, reconvening to dialogue about it within the team.
3. Project—launch into a team project making use of the knowledge and new practices acquired.

In greater detail, in stage one, the participants are assembled to intensely interact with an instructor and with one another regarding alternative perspectives concerning a topic of deep mutual interest. The participants decide in advance how many and which perspectives they would like to consider. Each perspective is supported by readings that are carefully selected not only to characterize the perspective in question, but also to provide alternative, even contrary, ideas in order to stimulate thoughtful discussion and provoke experiments in practice.

In stage two, the discussion group becomes prepared to entertain a new level of experience, evolving into what may be referred to as the learning team. Having digested some alternative theories in stage one, participants should be prepared to engage in a series of experiments in the workplace. In doing so, they attempt to change their behavior by deploying one or more of the new perspectives presented earlier. They journalize about their experiments in practice and, when the learning team next assembles, come prepared to share their experiences with their team members and receive feedback.

In stage three, the team transitions into an even higher level of experience. Those from the prior stage who wish to continue on embark on a team project of collaborative strategic change. At this point, they become a project team. This stage is based on the idea that there is no greater opportunity for real-time experience and collective reflection on that experience than from doing work together. It is the ultimate test of formulating and engaging in theory in practice. During stage two, participants were only able to provide ‘hearsay’ on what they tried to accomplish in their work setting. In contrast, during stage three, participants can directly observe each other as they attempt changes in their personal and professional behavior. They are able to provide direct feedback to one another on such practices as: interventions that did not go according to plan, real-time accomplishment of personal learning goals, and differences between what they said they were going to do and what they actually did. At stage three, the learning team and project team become one and the same.

Although the developmental sequence depicted above may be suggested by the facilitator in advance, the members, as the ultimate agenda setters, choose when and whether to advance from one stage to the next. The facilitator’s role is to take the group to where it wants to go, not where the facilitator wants to go. Self-pacing allows individuals the opportunity to hold back if they feel they are not ready.

The DAL process, though consistent with some classic action learning principles, also diverges from some of the foundations of action learning established by its founder, Reg Revans (Pedler *et al.*, 2005). DAL abides by the fundamental practice that people learn best when they reflect together with likeminded colleagues (‘comrades in adversity’) on real problems occurring in their own organizations. Gathering in sets, they support and challenge each other and, in so doing, achieve a profound degree of personal learning. In addition, through their thoughtful interventions working on problems with unknown solutions, they contribute to the development of their organization.

However, DAL departs from Revans’ classical principles by introducing theory and then reflection on experience prior to active project work. Especially during the early

stages of the process, instruction—in the form of readings and discussion—is provided to provoke thought and behavioral change on the part of the participants. Participants are chosen to participate based, in part, on their psychological readiness to experiment with their learning in action. They initially engage with an expert instructor in an active give-and-take regarding the subject matter under scrutiny. The instruction, during this early phase, sets the tone of the discussion, though participants are encouraged to question the value of the conceptual material in light of their everyday experience. They also rely on individual coaches to help them make sense of changes in their thinking as well as help them incorporate and reflect on changes in their work behavior. During later stages, the set is facilitated by an expert in group behavior who is skilled in bringing out everyone's contribution. However, the facilitator's interventions should wane as the group assumes collective leadership over the set.

It might be interesting to note that Revans himself was not opposed to introducing theory or what he called 'programmed instruction' into action learning experience. In his own six-month Belgian Inter-University Programme (Revans, 1971), he provided fellows with a four-month preparatory educational program that included visits to academic scholars. However, as Mike Pedler points out in his editorial in issue 2(2) of *Action Learning: Research & Practice*, Revans was emphatic in co-locating learning and action. It would not be sufficient for students to talk about action as much as take action with all its risk and anxiety and learn about it in concert with their colleagues.

Some of the differences between the classic model and DAL are outlined below in Table 1.

A case study in DAL

How can high-level administrators within a consortium of area universities and colleges develop a collaborative mindset and a commitment to collaborative behavior, both within and external to their own organizations? How can they develop a managerial approach that is collective and inclusive and that implants leadership, not necessarily into themselves, but into their host organizations and across their network?

This was the challenge that faced The Boston Consortium for Higher Education (TBC) in the fall of 2001. Founded in 1996, TBC's mission is to develop new and creative ideas that can improve quality and produce cost savings among Boston's world-renowned institutions of higher learning. Its primary modus operandi is to promote results-oriented collaboration among its member universities. It seeks to develop trustful relationships across its member schools so that each might engage the creativity and energy that reside within the network system. In this way, TBC attempts to create solutions to what may seem to be intractable problems. Furthermore, TBC hopes to involve its participating administrative managers and executives in processes that will pay them back several times over, not just in better solutions, but in job fulfillment and personal and professional development.

Table 1. Comparison of classical action learning and developmental action learning

	Classical action learning	Developmental action learning
Principles that converge		
<i>Learning team</i>	Work in sets of peers to support and challenge each other	Work in sets of peers to support and challenge each other
<i>Nature of project</i>	Focus is on problems, not puzzles	Focus is on problems, not puzzles
<i>Development</i>	Personal and organizational	Personal and organizational
Principles that diverge		
<i>Basis of learning</i>	Action through real project	Theory, then reflection, then action through real project
<i>Instruction</i>	Very limited instruction from expert at any time	Instruction and discussion initiate the process
<i>Readiness of participants</i>	People form sets when ready to learn from their work	Participants are chosen based in part on readiness to learn
<i>Focus of dialogue in sets</i>	Questioning takes primacy over expert knowledge	Equalization of questioning and expert knowledge
<i>Facilitation</i>	Set members facilitate themselves	Set is initially facilitated by an expert facilitator
<i>Coaching</i>	No formal coaching is called for	Coaches are assigned to individual participants

Committed to establishing collective leadership, TBC approached one of the authors, Joe Raelin, to see if action learning could be used as a platform for instilling collaborative leadership processes. Raelin thought that this was possible once participants in any program become sufficiently comfortable with one another to pull down their guard, develop trust, and thereby begin to share with and learn from one another. Subsequently, an experiment was organized to not only adapt action learning using an evolving developmental approach but to also study its potential application as a gateway to collaborative change.

Raelin surmised that the connection of action learning to collaboration has to come from its reflective orientation. Actions produced are subject to inquiry about their effectiveness, including a review of the value of one's theories as guides to practice. Participants learn as they work by taking time to reflect with like others who offer insights into their workplace problems. In this way action learning addresses the pitfalls of conventional training that often overlooks the need to surface tacit knowledge to convert it to learning. By having peers serve as a sounding board to one another regarding the operating assumptions underlying project interventions, participants become more equipped to produce the outcomes they desire (Argyris & Schön, 1996). They learn from each other how to overcome the blockages that they themselves and others erect to deter project accomplishment (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). Their learning is tied to knowledge that is collectively and concurrently constructed.

Meanwhile, TBC saw its potential as a network coordinator to be based on an abiding belief that a leader's role should be one of promoting mutual learning and mutual action. It also began to characterize leadership as working with others to stimulate personal growth and learning. To TBC, the leader was the person who not only permitted but encouraged others to assume leadership roles.

Of course, many academic organizations are not eagerly waiting to embrace, what TBC began to refer to as, 'leaderful' practice. It's something that has to be developed; it may not even be a natural state in higher education institutions that have historically been based upon individual professional expertise on the academic side and command and control on the business side. A collective leadership approach may take some courage when it frames the position leader as the person without all the answers. It requires a certain level of vulnerability to rely on others to lead when it is their time. Yet, the net effect of this leaderful approach is thought to be the release of multiple perspectives and out-of-the-box thinking that can foster creative solutions to network problems.

In order to accomplish the purpose of exposing participants to TBC's new leadership approach, Raelin, along with TBC's directorate, developed an Executive Development Series. Their goal was twofold: to first develop a wide-ranging 'perspectives' approach to leadership that would secondly expose participants to action learning. Raelin, through his book *Creating Leaderful Organizations* (2003), has advanced 'leaderful practice' as leadership that is not only collective but concurrent, collaborative, and compassionate. As part of an emerging paradigm that sees leadership as a shared phenomenon, it is viewed as a form of leadership that can respond to our often chaotic world by stimulating employees to self-achieve and to respond independently and interdependently in their own domains of excellence. While many writers have suggested that leaders consult with their followers, or that leaders learn to step aside to let others take the reins, Raelin goes a step farther by advocating a truly mutual model that incorporates everyone in leadership—transforming it from being an individual property into a truly mutual practice.

The Series, based on developmental action learning, was designed to take the participants through systematic stages that required increased personal and professional risk. Yet, while going through these stages, the participants had complete control over the agenda. What was happening was an evolutionary process of releasing control. They were encouraged to create a supportive community—a veritable practice field, that allowed them to talk freely about their fears and failures as well as their hopes and successes. In time, they developed a collective resonance, what Renee Levi (2005) defines as a felt sense of mutual energy, rhythm, and intuitive learning. Their empathy toward one another provided a container—or what members referred to as an 'oasis', that encouraged internal authenticity and personal truth-telling. Eventually, they spawned a 'second-generation' of TBC administrators who, too, were encouraged to experiment with their leadership behavior in such a way that collective leadership could become contagious within their own organizations. Through these efforts a critical mass of network administrators are now attempting to not only adopt leaderful practice within their own universities, but to also reach out to one another across their network to effect collaborative change.

The learning journal

After the creation of the second-generation teams, the original executive team began to reflect on the ingredients that led to the success of this developmental action learning model of fostering collaboration within an intercollegiate social network. They decided to produce a 'learning journal' that would provide a historical account of their experience and that could be used by future consortia, be they in higher education or in other fields, to develop their own collaborative learning processes. Accordingly, an organizational researcher, the second author of this article, was commissioned to conduct a series of surveys with the individuals involved in TBC's action learning experiment. Using two predominant methods—in person interviews and on-line questionnaires—the learning journal was designed to address a number of such critical themes as:

1. Selection—how important the explicit selection of individuals was to the success of the team
2. Facilitation—how effective the facilitation was and would the team's outcome have been as successful under a different facilitator
3. Dynamics—how important psychological safety was in allowing the members to feel open and honest
4. Leadership—how the participants' attitudes about leadership changed as a result of their experience
5. Impact—what the impact of the experience was on members' lives (both professional and personal)

Once the first draft of the learning journal was produced, it became the subject of a number of feedback sessions with the original team. From these dialogues, the final draft was prepared. In answer to the question: what ingredients led to the success of this experiment, three critical factors emerged that can be used by future learning teams. The team found these three factors to interact as part of a tandem. In other words, to produce a high likelihood of success, all three need to be present since they are inter-related. Detailed below, these three factors are: readiness, facilitation, and peer exemplars.

Readiness

We know that when it comes to preparing oneself to embark on change at multiple levels of experience, individuals approach such change with varying levels of readiness. Consequently, in entertaining the prospect of a collective model of leadership within a social network, some administrators are likely to be more or less inclined to consider a shift in their own practices.

From the literature, we know that readiness has both personal and situational precursors. At the individual level, readiness appears to be a function of a felt need for change, a sense of one's ability to successfully accomplish change (self-efficacy), one's actual skill and ability to manage change, and the perception that the change

will be beneficial (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993; Prochaska *et al.*, 1994). At the situational level, readiness is enhanced when employees are given social support, when they work in active jobs that provide empowerment and high decision latitude, and when they are given a chance by the organization to participate in any change processes (Karasek, 1979; Spreitzer, 1995; Cunningham *et al.*, 2002).

In this case study, TBC's director was charged with deciding whom to approach from all the prospective business administrators from the member universities about joining the Series. Key to his decision was: 1) who appeared to be ready to undertake an experience of this nature, which would require a fairly high level of trust and openness, and 2) who was most able to integrate the learning from the Series into his or her work environment. Data from the learning journal pointed to the following five elements as critical to readiness for collective leadership:

- Openness to new experience
- Openness to feedback about self
- Willingness and ability to provide feedback to others
- Willingness and ability to change personal behavior
- Ability to reflect critically on experience
- Support from one's work environment

These elements suggest that administrators about to embark on an experiment in collective leadership need to have confidence that they can participate in leadership and cope with the changes that could potentially stem from openly reflecting on their practice. Self-efficacy research has disclosed that workers will likely resist changes that they believe will exceed their coping capabilities, whereas those who are confident in their ability to cope will demonstrate higher readiness (Bandura, 1982; Armenakis *et al.*, 1993). Administrators also need to have a moderate to low level of defensiveness so as to be reasonably open to new experiences. They need to be sufficiently curious to demonstrate a willingness to learn about self from the observation of others. One participant stated: 'It was essential to have people who were willing to learn and to view this as an opportunity to interact and perhaps understand further how their leadership style affects others'. Another added: 'One or two people can make a group not work by being cynical or uncomfortable, and it was key that this group not have anybody that reacted that way'. It was also determined that any feedback obtained from others should lead to self-reflection that, in turn, would lead to new behavior, endorsed by the participant's organizational environment. Therefore, it is preferable at the outset of an experiment in collective leadership to select people who have a love of learning, especially through others.

Facilitation

In line with the level of readiness with which members enter the group, the facilitator needs to enhance any propensity toward openness already present and help it become actualized. Accordingly, though he or she may initially make a number of

interventions to help the group get started on the right foot, the entire orientation of facilitation is to develop the capacity of the membership for collective leadership. After all, the goal of the Series was to reach a point in which the members could lead themselves. Since few teams are prepared for this form of leaderful practice at the outset of group experience, it is the role of the facilitator to ensure that members feel psychologically safe so that they can assume more autonomy. As one participant noted:

[the facilitator] created a container and then made people feel safe in that space by giving lots of time and opportunity for others to fill this created space. He was not afraid of silence and was terrific at being an active listener (allowing huge pauses, which set a pace).

Another participant explained:

[the facilitator] was very talented at providing enough information to spark a discussion without dominating it. He even relinquished what little power he had in the group so it could run itself by the time the later stages came around.

Facilitation and readiness can thus be viewed as somewhat reciprocal in that facilitators by their sheer skill can moderate the readiness level needed to advance from one stage to the next.

Consider the figure below. The initial selection of individuals will consist (ideally) of those in the white area at baseline readiness because these are the individuals who are ready to undertake the experience. At each stage, those who are on the readiness line or above it (in the white area) are those that will continue with the team. However, those individuals located below the readiness line (in the dark gray area) are the individuals who are at risk of feeling overwhelmed and, potentially, of dropping out.

The goal of selection is to ensure that as many individuals as possible are in the white area. The impact that the facilitator can have on the group is seen in the

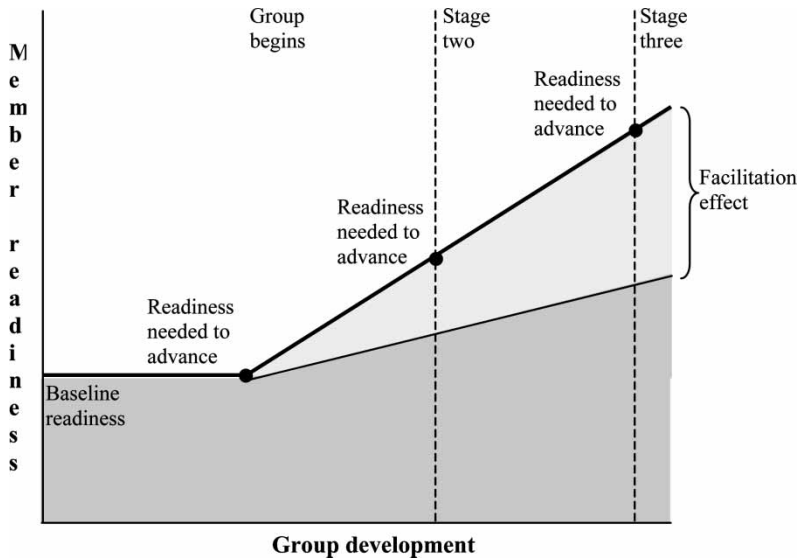


Figure 1. The effect of facilitation on the readiness level of team participants

facilitator effect (in the light gray area). As can be seen, a good facilitator can moderate the amount of readiness needed to advance to the next stage, while a mediocre one may have little effect on readiness (and may even raise it). However, even the best facilitator cannot guarantee that there will be no increase of readiness needed to advance from one stage to the next. He or she can merely stay attuned to the members and ensure that no one feels overwhelmed. If a participant is feeling overwhelmed, a good facilitator will attempt to ensure that the individual in question reaches a sufficient comfort level from which to move on.

Peer exemplars

We have seen that facilitator encouragement can, over time, allow team members to become more receptive to open reflection about their practice. However, it is not sufficient to rely only on a sensitive facilitator to be responsible for supporting the risk-taking of each and every member. Some participants might possess less defensive personalities, allowing them to take risks and open up with less difficulty than others. Others might not be as ready to take such a risk and, by having another person ‘get the ball rolling,’ the process can flow more easily. Thus, the ability to openly reflect tends to occur on a spectrum in which a few individuals with a high level of readiness take a risk first and then encourage other participants with lower readiness to take the same risk. These ‘peer exemplars’ are critical to reinforce psychological safety, the condition in the team that allows people to feel that they are secure, that they can take risks, and that they are not only permitted but encouraged to reflect on their practice (Schein & Bennis, 1965; Edmondson, 1999).

Peer exemplars thus assist the facilitator in helping the more hesitant members understand that there are no negative consequences for taking personal risks in the team environment. A personal risk is defined as bringing up a topic that reveals an otherwise secret fact or emotion that would ordinarily remain undisclosed. In some cases, the feeling may be about another team member or about the team as a whole.

A peer exemplar may also be viewed as a co-facilitator of the team because not only does he or she model personal disclosure, but he or she may also attempt to solicit critical information from others. Exemplars in many cases also display exceptional sensitivity toward the feelings of others and tend to make statements demonstrating empathy and understanding. The notion of peer exemplars is tied to the other two critical success factors since, like facilitation, they help to increase the readiness of members of the team by encouraging open communication. They also serve as a supplement to facilitation. Since the facilitator of a collective leadership team is already predisposed to sharing leadership, the facilitator not only acknowledges the co-facilitation of others but encourages its emergence.

Discussion

The developmental action learning model is proposed as a method to introduce action learning as a change vehicle into an organization without suffering so

much counter-resistance that it upends the experiment before it can become successfully implanted. It also appears to have a great deal of potential to link action learning with collaborative processes within organizations. Let's consider this link in more detail.

The first principles connecting action learning and collaborative action are common to both classic and developmental approaches to action learning. In each, participants learn in the midst of practice, often needing to coordinate activities with others in their own work environment. Although abstract knowledge can assist them, they tend to rely on the context—its culture, its expectations, its tools, and other institutional arrangements—to help them solve challenging workplace dilemmas (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

As participants work and learn with others, they experience the give-and-take of inquiry. They come to see that solutions are far more robust when others get involved in the process and participate as part of a collaborative venture (Lewin, 1951).

Collaborative learning occurs at multiple levels of experience; namely, individual, team, and organization. At the individual level, action learning promotes personal transformation that relies upon a relaxing of people's need for control within social settings. As a participant in a variety of interpersonal sequences, one learns that a viewpoint is just that. It is no more than a hypothesis for action (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Action learning might also increase people's capacity to collaborate because of its effect on participants' intrinsic motivation (Passfield, 2002). In particular, participants are stimulated by the experience of peer challenge and support, by feelings of empowerment as they gain access to people and information, and by the growth opportunity of working on personal learning goals outside of their comfort zone. These internal processes can, in turn, produce greater self-efficacy along with heightened states of autonomy, meaning, and responsibility.

The addition of one-on-one coaching within the developmental model is potentially a powerful vehicle to promote individual receptiveness to a collaborative model of behavior. The achievements of coaching or mentoring, in turn, stem from its practice as a medium for reflection and learning. The parties commit to exploring the social, political, and even emotional reactions that might be blocking their own operating effectiveness (Raelin, 2000). Otherwise confidential issues, be they working relationships with other managers, strategic business issues, or the participant's own growth and development, are given a forum for open consideration (Allen *et al.*, 1997; Hargrove, 2003). Individuals get a rare opportunity to think out loud and receive constructive feedback on critical and even potentially undiscussable problems (Kram, 1985).

At the team level of experience, action learning takes place within a learning team environment. During any given session, members can be observed listening intently to one another, posing questions, and offering suggestions to other team members whose project is under scrutiny. Occasionally, the focal member might just sit back and listen as other team members brainstorm ideas regarding his or her issue or project. Participants often decide to experiment with new approaches in light of the group discussion, leading to new theories or ideas to be tested in the intervening periods

between meetings. The experience is designed to encourage participants to challenge their own views and behaviors and become critical about actions in their own organizations. Some sponsoring units may not be initially hospitable to the probing that characterizes the dynamics of this form of learning. Hence, participants appreciate the opportunity to test their ideas and examine their values and assumptions in the learning team. With the help and encouragement of their team members, especially their facilitator, they can also try out some new interpersonal skills or managerial competencies based on reframed assumptions derived from public reflection within the team (Pedler, 1996; Marquardt, 1999).

The role of the facilitator in the developmental action learning model appears to be critical to change agency (Raelin, 2000). The facilitator observes the team during learning team meetings and provides feedback both to individual members and to the team as a whole on its interpersonal processes. The facilitator is not thought to be a conventional meeting moderator. Rather, facilitators, through their process consultation, seek to ensure that the members of the team maintain ownership of their own agenda and increase their capacity for reflection on the consequences of their own actions. For instance, the facilitator might moderate a discussion or reflection session, if requested by the team, to deal with a particular issue the team has not been able to resolve on its own (e.g., a repeated absence of a member, a theoretical question, an unproductive pattern of interaction). Ultimately, these issues gradually fall upon the team members themselves to manage collectively. They need to choose how they wish to share the team leadership to produce the most value from the experience.

Finally, at the organizational or institutional level of experience, action learning practices may systematically or informally diffuse both within the sponsoring organization, and in some cases, across the organization into other stakeholder entities. For example, since action learning promotes strategic change through its project structure, senior sponsors are obligated to work with their own peers to develop interesting ideas, monitor progress, and disseminate results. Through this process, they too learn to challenge existing mindsets and to dialogue across their own sub-cultural boundaries (Schein, 1993). Moreover, because of the emphasis on reflective conversation, action learning has the capacity to change the nature of stakeholder relationships toward more sustainable partnerships.

When it comes to organizational change processes, action learning's culture of reflection and inquiry is thought to permeate the wider organization once a critical mass of participants have gone through the profound change in their leadership induced through their set and project experiences. However, participants are likely to affect change when they have the self-efficacy belief that their interventions will produce positive results. In other words, as in the case of our developmental action learning experiment, programs should pay some attention to the readiness level of the participants who may be enrolled in the program. Not only will they likely benefit personally from the experience, but they may be more psychologically prepared to take the risk to encourage the endorsement of a culture of learning within their organization (Senge, 1990; French *et al.*, 2000).

Conclusion

In their seminal article on the productive use of derivatives of action learning's classic model, Pedler *et al.* (2005) argued that there may be no harm in exploring thoughtful variations, learning from them, and modifying our practice accordingly. In this article, we offer the alternative of a developmental approach to action learning that might permit its penetration within otherwise less receptive institutions, while offering the potential of instigating collaborative leadership processes.

In the case described for this account of practice, participants discovered that collaboration was not merely a question of sharing data or services; it was a question of learning how to truly learn together so as to invent new ways to lead collectively and unlock the knowledge hidden from view. The capital to be generated was not only economic; it was social. One participant in the program concluded:

I have forged connections with colleagues whom I would not have ordinarily talked with. It has increased my confidence in my own preparation, learning, and judgment. I am eager to continue to extend this experience into my work environment.

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Editor's note

This paper presented a challenge to our reviewing system being neither an obviously academic 'refereed paper' nor a reflective *'Account of Practice'* but a case study of practice with elements of both theorising and reflection. In consultation with the authors, we hit upon the idea of a dialogical piece and invitations to comment went out to six academics, practitioners and executives. By the time limit, we received four thoughtful contributions which now follow, only lightly edited, together with concluding comments from the authors.

We would be very keen to have readers' reactions to this type of 'dialogical paper'—would you like to see more or less of this? Could it be improved? For myself, I like the way our commentators, unlike more formal reviewers, are able to be personal, sharing their own experiences, contrasting and comparing them with those of the authors. For me, this dialogue, when embroidered on the essential and on-going arguments concerning Revans' Classical Principles, makes for a richer cloth. Whether it also makes for a better guarantor of action learning practices, by promoting an awareness and an acknowledgement of the differences as well as the commonalities between us, remains an open question.

Mike Pedler

Comments from Phil DiChiara, Managing Director of the Boston Consortium

As a practitioner working closely with Joe Raelin, I can't in good conscience suggest that I am objective about our work. Joe's commitment to developmental action learning within the Boston Consortium is one of the key reasons for our success and growth. That said, I would make the following observations.

I am bemused that action learning has been relatively slow to be adopted. Having come from the boomer generation and the era of the first best-selling business book, *In Search of Excellence*, those of us like myself with senior operational responsibility in the healthcare sector were faced with a bubbling cauldron of increasing chaos. Most of the change management efforts of the 1980s were less than successful. By the time of the pinnacle of the American Quality Movement, we all understood that work is a process. No one seemed to recall, however, that work is also a social activity. By the late 1990s, many in healthcare had adopted combinations of various methods and theories based upon their own experiences. In my own case, they looked a lot like action learning without the reflection, a theory of which I had no knowledge at the time. Unfortunately it did not work in many situations, and being under pressure, I didn't find the time to determine why 'team' efforts worked with some and not with others. Maybe that is why adoption has been slow.

As my career moved into Higher Education, where a scholarly basis for management is desirable, my search brought me to Dr Raelin and the Reg Revans school of thought. The issue of readiness turned out to be a critical issue in assembling our groups. Joe helped us to understand the need for a period of 'ramping up',

which extended the already significant time we took to insure that trustful relationships were, to the best of our understanding, in place and stable. This period of reflection prior to a project annealed the relationships and created enthusiasm for problem solving. There are so many nuances in getting the group ready, often beyond the control of the facilitator.

It should be noted that projects within the consortium are rarely assigned top-down. By starting the first group with the most senior of staff, we stated that the first objective of the effort is to learn. Not to sound cynical, but although senior people accept learning as a necessary part of their development, many feel less generous with their department managers, who should already know what to do. 'I've already paid for that. Your job is to implement, not learn more'. As senior people experienced the 'oasis' of a facilitated set, they understood the importance of this aspect. It is now a given. Importantly, new groups are not formed with a project in mind. That is determined by the set upon their graduation to this level of action taking. Chosen projects can vary widely.

One might ask why large institution(s) would permit such independence and permit 'random' projects? First, we are focused on collaborative projects across several entities, not just one. The collective prioritization will often differ from the individual organizational priorities. We had informally tested the correlation between a given College/University strategic plan and the priorities for the institution as stated by middle and upper middle managers. For the most part, individuals identified 6 to 8 or more of ten key objectives as being important to their school, though most translated the strategic need, rather appropriately, into terms consistent with their own functional responsibility. With this level of overlap, the action agenda of the several institutions frequently meshed quite well with the individually perceived objectives as the group progressed from reflection and learning to action and outcome. Secondly, it is important to note those individuals who participate in the Boston Consortium tend to be the innovators and early adopters. They join in with a bias to action, and a preference for certain types of projects over others.

Collaborative activities across several entities within a consortium or alliance seem to respond particularly well to DAL. At the Consortium, we would like to learn why. We have a few guesses, but if we can make a good case for other consortia, maybe we can advance the rate of adoption of what we have found to be a very effective tool. I believe this role is best undertaken by research, and its subsequent publishing. At this time, we in higher education administration can't afford not to enable any tool that advances cost-effective and individually fulfilling roles and efforts within our schools.

Scholarly discussion of case studies such as Joe presents here can help managers in understanding the nuances of a given practice. Though I have been directly involved, after reading this article, I myself felt as if I had digested aspects of the rationale and background that I must have missed or not adequately focused on! A web-enabled threaded conversation might further enhance understanding among those practitioners so inclined.

Comments from Ann Heywood Ph.D. BSc (Hons), FRIC, a UK practitioner

I found the paper interesting and informative—and comforting in, yet again, demonstrating the value of Action Learning (AL) in all its many forms. I don't believe Revans would have wished his 'method' (termed classical AL in this paper) to become stuck or held up as the only way forward; it is natural for systems to evolve.

When reading the paper a number of issues and questions came up for me, not in criticism of what was described or asserted but, in the spirit of this process, provoking a need for dialogue. These fall under six headings:

Team selection—volunteers or pressed men?

The case suggests that the AL teams were hand picked ('selected') in order to ensure readiness for the process; this will undoubtedly speed matters up and meet commercial imperatives, but may create deep, and counter-productive, divides within organizations, between the chosen and the not-chosen. There may also be, even in hand picked teams, resisters who will need to be accommodated or excluded in the interest of the greater good.

Do the work teams and the AL Sets (in the UK) need to be one and the same? If different, this may overcome any reticence amongst members. Even with willing participants in AL there will be 'variable readiness' to participate fully and share deeper thoughts and feelings. This doesn't necessarily hamper the learning process and may make it more effective in the end.

My experience at the Revans Institute, where teams (or sets) arose in date order (those who expressed an interest joined those who expressed an interest at the same time) is that mixed, rather than project-specific, sets are not only extremely effective, but can outlive single project foci, and therefore be of greater value to the individual component members.

Dumbing down AL?

I have no problem in principle with the introduction of learning modules early on in the DAL process as there is no doubt that effective advice early in the process is of value to Set/Team creation and evolution.

My concern arises on two counts: first, embarking upon a course of AL requires a degree of maturity to deal with the inherent uncertainties of the process, and the provision of learning modules could represent an unnecessary degree of spoon-feeding for willing Team/Set members (but see the section below about Set facilitators).

Secondly, DAL could be seen as proceduralising AL, a process which relies on uncertainty and individuality, within joint effort, for its success. I personally escaped from proceduralised, traditional forms of education in order to research those things which emerged as important for me during my practice. The provision of learning modules would have been a comfort but may have been less effective for

my personal learning in the longer term; it would be interesting to know more about the content of the modules and what proportion of total team time they cover. A final comment on this point is that the investigation of relevant theory is a requisite part of AL—it is the Set members' practice at that time and as appropriate.

Facilitator, advisor or expert?

I agree entirely that the position of Set advisor (the same as team facilitator in the paper?) is a difficult one, requiring a light touch on advice and a heavy touch on empathy. In DAL, we are told that 'readings are carefully selected'—by whom? Surely AL should encourage self-discovery of information or sharing of material amongst Set members?

The paper on DAL talks of 'instruction' and 'expert instructors' which seems to be in distinct contrast to classical AL. If the Advisor adopts the 'superior' position of 'teacher' it may prove a longer and more difficult process to foster self-managed Teams/Sets.

Leaderful practice or self managed teams?

This question arises directly from the section above: if the objective is to grow self-managing teams, why appoint someone as team 'leader' at the outset? I don't see how this squares with the Raelins' assertion of the importance of everyone taking a role in leadership.

Of course, I recognize the declining role of Set advisor with the passage of time; I also note the value of a team of people across an organization or organizations who have common grounding (from the learning modules) and high levels of mutual trust.

The learning journal—contemporaneous record and/or post hoc examination?

I was interested in the creation of a team learning journal. Did this draw on participants' individual journals, giving contemporaneous accounts of practice and learning, or was it created with the benefit of later reflection and consideration? I applaud the idea of a team journal for knowledge capture and management, for personal and organizational benefit, but hope that this is not at the expense of personal learning records.

My experience is that my view of events and processes changed, often mellowing, over time and I needed to refer to my personal Journals in order to recall the emotions, behaviours and actions occurring at the time, not how I wished or thought they had been, with hindsight.

Personal coaching

This gets only brief mentions as part of the methodology of DAL and I wonder how big a part it forms of that process—is it obligatory or voluntary? Are coaches selected

for participants, or can they choose a coach from outside the workplace? Could this individual coaching detract from the team learning and weaken the collaborative picture?

Congratulations to the Raelins on such a thought-provoking paper; when I started writing. I didn't think I had too much to say!

Comments by T.J. Elliott, Chief Learning Officer of ETS, a US company sponsoring an action learning program aiming to develop collaborative leadership.

My comments may appear divergent to the authors' views. Therefore, they come with the following caveat: we're delighted that a paper like this one exists, and grateful to the authors for the exploration of the subject and the chance to participate in the conversation about this subject. The need for more practice-based exploration of work-based action learning efforts is significant. Those of us doing this work want the opportunity to learn more about what works for others in realistic settings.

Resistance to reflection is a phenomenon that we have also observed in our leadership development programs. Over 100 promising executives at ETS have experienced our 'Learning for Business Results' initiatives, which are work-based action learning leadership development. However, we have not experienced the same negative consequences associated with the initial resistance. It has neither been universal nor intractable. There are degrees of success in having individual participants embrace the cycle of theorizing, acting, experiencing results, and reflecting on what would be a better theory of action.

It would be useful to know whether the problem of resistance to reflection is widespread, or manifest in different populations (i.e., are scientific types more resistant than sales executives?), and also how much of a problem this is in achieving the objectives of leadership development initiatives.

The resistance emerges in part from not being in action. If 'participants are chosen . . . based, in part, on their psychological readiness to experiment with their learning in action' then resistance is likely to be minimal. However, these are not necessarily the people that the organizational leaders in many corporations will want to select for further development. In succession planning, the readiness of participants may take a back seat to the selection of those seen as 'ready now future leaders.' The powers that be want to place certain individuals in highly visible leadership development initiatives and these might not be those who would get the most out of action learning.

The main criterion in succession planning, even when unexpressed, is that those individuals have exhibited a predilection for action. Action learning programs are attractive to both existing leadership and participants because they promise the immediate opportunity to act, and to attack some pressing or distant problem or opportunity. It is possible, we believe, to use this very predilection for action as evidenced by the group's early actions as the platform from which to examine their sensemaking. That is a theme that we continue to pursue throughout the six month course of the program.

My final comment concerns the choice of an academic setting for this case study. While TBC appears from its description to be a dynamic organization, does it approximate the conditions under which most work-based action learning leadership development would/occur? (That term may seem redundant but not all work-based learning is action learning and vice versa. Hence, we used the longer term.) The most salient considerations are the schedules of the participants, the support of the CEO, and the bottom line of the organization. The interrelationship of these three dimensions is significant; e.g., the schedules of participants selected become much more flexible if the CEO's support is persistent and tangible. Does TBC mirror the realities of most corporations where the lack of a clear financial connection for leadership development activities marginalizes (no pun intended) those efforts? I do not know enough about TBC, but academic settings, while more attuned to business concerns than even a decade ago, may not be the ideal setting to test participants' appetite for not being able to take action before learning. The authors sagely observe that 'many academic organizations are not eagerly waiting to embrace . . . 'leaderful practice'. It is probable that other corporations are even less likely. The good news is that experiments such as the one described in this paper will encourage practitioners to reflect on the revisions and refinements that would benefit their work-based action-learning programs, and the organizations that are those programs hosts.

Comments by Lyle Yorks, Teachers College, Columbia University

I enjoyed reading this paper. AL is powerful when it is consistent with adult learning theory, especially the principles of learning from experience that have been articulated through the years by John Dewey, John Burgoyne, Nancy Dixon, David Boud, Rosemary Keogh, David Kolb, Peter Jarvis, Victoria Marsick Alan Mumford, Jack Mezirow, John Heron, Mike Pedler, Karen Watkins, and David Walker and many others. This is an eclectic group of writers that underscores the nuance of learning, especially learning that is developmental and transformative. Their respective work highlights in various degrees both the cognitive and the affective dimensions of the experiential learning process.

My concern for AL (especially in American corporations) is that many programs are designed and implemented in contexts that require significant compromises in terms of budget, timing, and visible senior executive support as learning and development professionals strive to demonstrate the use of action learning as a 'best practice'. Action learning is an intensive and demanding approach to development, and participants can struggle with the requirements of working on projects while also being accountable for their work responsibilities in downsized workplaces characterized by '24/7' work loads. The consequence is that some (perhaps many of these programs) are really 'worst practice'. To be clear, it's about the learning, and not dogma. AL works because it rests on principles (as opposed to rules). Principles need to be adapted to circumstances without violating the essence of the principles. Which brings me to the Raelins' contribution.

Their paper represents a useful illustration of applying principles to practice. I agree with the importance of assessing and designing the program based on the readiness of participants to learn, and providing opportunities for participants to ‘vote with their feet’ in terms of progressing to new stages. In many programs there is a balance in the mixture between new content and ideas, reflecting on previous experience, and the project work providing new experience. The sequencing of these varied forms of learning ‘platforms’ needs to be skillfully considered, taking account of both learner needs and the context of program. Whose purposes are being served, and in what priority?

Actually, most of the AL programs I see in organizational contexts incorporate theory and content learning with the AL process. For me, one of the interesting contributions in the Raelins’ paper is the emphasis on the developmental aspects of the program, which influences the sequencing of content. Their discussion in this regard has theoretical implications for bringing the work of developmental theorists like Bill Torbert and Robert Kegan onto center stage in the AL literature. (Forgive me, as an academic, I think of the theoretical as well as the practical aspects of new thinking.) Additionally, what is important about their project and the DAL approach is the competence of the facilitators in creating the ‘learning space’ or ‘container’—what Torbert has called a ‘liberating structure’.

Having taken in their remarks what is essentially a contingency approach to AL, I think it is important that writers identify what is at the core of Action Learning (which they do) and be specific about the theoretical and practical changes that have been made in a particular approach (their paper is a good example of this as well). Otherwise the term AL becomes meaningless. Our opportunity for learning from different approaches requires these specifics.

Which brings me to my final point about their paper. For me it stimulates a wish for a more self-critical assessment, both of the experience and the theoretical implications. While the program was successful, what were the strains? What was important that adds to our theoretical understanding? What should a practitioner consider in modifying or adopting their approach? In short, I would encourage them to write a more robust case study paper on the example given that would even further enhance our understanding.

A response from Joe and Jonathan Raelin

For us as authors, the commentaries have lent insight to the characteristics of developmental action learning (DAL) that are the most controversial and, thus, most potentially generative. In particular, we note that the advanced selection of ‘ready’ individuals followed by a process of intellectual preparation and reflection prior to action have caught the eyes of our commentators.

Although selectivity was a clear theme emerging from our learning journal, we recommend it with some hesitation, as it echoes perhaps one of the most contradictory of themes in the history of democracy: whether to privilege the group at the expense of the individual. We also recognize the values of diversity and equal opportunity. At the

same time, we have become aware of instances reported by facilitators of action learning and action research groups becoming mired in the personal issues of a single often self-declared deviant member. Action learning exponents are quick to counter that we learn as much or even more from focusing on the problems of others, yet at times this imbalance in attention can stall or even halt group development. Action learning also informs us that we learn from negative experiences as much as from affirmation. Yet, we wonder if higher levels of insight might be achieved when especially in the early going, we can limit the capture of the learning time by one individual exhibiting such psychological issues as passive-aggressiveness, hostility, or irruptive defensiveness. What we are proposing is not so much a contingency approach to AL, as per Yorks, as a threshold design that requires a baseline of receptiveness at the time of launching the endeavor.

Our call for instruction and reflection prior to action is no less debatable than the issue of selection. Preparation is necessitated by our belief that in our Anglo-American cultures in particular, action will drive out thought unless time for reflection is systematically earmarked. However, in our call for intellectual preparation, are we forsaking in DAL the value of constructionism in which the purpose of education is the learner's own development and knowledge formation rather than the transmission of information? We believe that the participants' freedom to establish their own agenda was consistent with a constructionist orientation. Furthermore, an exhaustive review of the pure discovery method of education over a 30-year time period found its effect on learning to be wanting unless supplemented by trained facilitation (Mayer, 2004). Support for facilitated methodology comes from the cognitive theories that we cite in which learning from experience often requires integration of new information into a taught knowledge base. We would point out, moreover, that the instructor is not the leader of the learning team and, in fact, may be a subject matter expert brought in from the outside. In our experiment, indeed, leadership did not devolve to a single individual but was rather collective.

Finally, we note that Ann Heywood has picked up on our use of journaling and coaching, two often inter-related practices that we consider among the most exciting innovations in action learning. Although initially private, journaling often begins the process of collective reflection in which one's inner world meshes with an outer reality. Coaches or mentors dedicated to individuals (distinct from the learning team facilitator or adviser who is dedicated to the team as a whole) can assist members translate theory into practice or practice into theory in a complementary way to the ongoing set experience.

We realize that our model of action learning may raise many more questions, all of which we invite so that others can contribute to ongoing experimentation into action learning and the practice of collaborative change.

Reference

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