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**Edmonstone, J, Lawless, A and Pedler, M**

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PAPER

## **Leadership Development, Wicked Problems and Action Learning: Provocations to a Debate**

John Edmonstone, Aileen Lawless and Mike Pedler

### **Introduction**

*"The problem is the domain of the leader; unlike the puzzle, it is charged with unanswerable questions as well as unformulatable ones"* (Revans, 1982: 712)

If leadership is defined by a willingness to tackle the intractable or wicked issues - rather than the technical or procedural (Revans 1982: 712-4; Grint, 2005; 2007; 2010) - then, given that action learning is commonly employed on leadership development programmes, do the participants on these programmes address the unanswerable and unformulatable questions of leadership?

This rather complex question arose in a conversation between the three of us at an editorial board meeting. It then led on to a protracted discussion over several months. We had all worked on leadership development programmes but had they actually tackled those challenges that formed the essence of leadership according to Revans, Grint and others? This felt like a straightforward query, yet we found it difficult to frame as a research question. The focus on the combination of leadership development, action learning and wicked problems<sup>1</sup> proved hard to formulate; depending on which was taken as the *"lead"* term, different, if related, inquiries might follow. The question lay in the conjunction of these notions, and in our individual and joint experiences of trying to grasp it we found echoes of Revans' descriptions of leadership work.

After several discussions we began looking for published accounts where action learning was being used on leadership development programmes. We thought it would be relatively easy to find relevant data, but this proved not to be the case. This was even true of *"scholarly practice"* journals such as *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, *Human Resource Development International* and the *International Journal of Human Resource Development*

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<sup>1</sup> This terminology is chosen for two reasons. First, whilst the term *"wicked"* arises in a different context to Revans' distinction of *problems* from puzzles, it shares many common characteristics with his descriptions including degrees of uncertainty, multidimensionality and as requiring collaboration and learning in any action strategy. Secondly, Revans used several and various terms and phrases to describe his problems at different points in his work of which *"intractable"*, *"unanswerable"* and *"unformulatable"* are but three, whereas *"wicked"* is both easier to use and more in current usage. However, it is important to acknowledge there are also differences between these usages, and between these and other related terms, which are explored in Pedler (2016).

*Policy, Practice and Research*, all of which feature case studies and accounts of practice alongside more traditional academic papers.

In the essay below, we first set the scene by briefly reviewing the three component that make up the focus of the inquiry, before discussing some literature on the interrelationships of leadership development, wicked problems and action learning. Following this we provide a more extended discussion of the questions which emerge from our sense-making and learning process. The questions and concerns that form the main part of the paper are presented here as provocations to a debate and as an invitation to further dialogue. We suggest, amongst other things, that action learning has largely been co-opted into the development of individual leaders, as distinct from leadership development.

### **Leadership, Problems and Learning**

The flourishing global business of leadership development has been valued as being worth up to \$50 - 60m billion (Burgoyne, 2004; Day, 2011). Despite this, evaluation studies of such programmes are relatively rare (Day, 2001; Burgoyne, 2004; Day et al, 2014), and it has been suggested that sponsoring organisations are not usually very clear about why they do them (Jackson & Parry, 2008:119).

This apparent faith in leadership development, and in leadership generally, may be a response to the perception that running work organisations is very difficult these days, especially with regard to hostile environments, sometimes described as VUCA, or Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (Johnson, 2009). Organisational leadership has often been depicted as a risky and demanding task. From the early 1990s, the notion of paradox has been employed to explain why leadership work is so difficult (Handy, 1993; Hampden-Turner, 1993). The association of leadership and paradoxes has been widely used to describe the complexities and enigmas of this work (Lewis, 2000; Vince, 2008; Lewis et al, 2014; Dotlich et al, 2014; Obolensky, 2014; Bolden et al, 2016; Robertson & Bell, 2017; Vince et al, 2017; Vince & Pedler 2018). From this perspective, leadership work is embedded in contradictions including the incitement (which some may dispute) that whilst leadership is something nearly everyone needs, hardly anyone wants to be led (Witzel, 2016).

Notions of paradox partly revolve around the distinction between tasks or problems that can be effectively managed and those that cannot. Terms for the latter include "*intractable*" (Revans, 2011); "*adaptable*" (Heifetz, 1994) and "*wicked*" (Rittel & Webber, 1973, Grint, 2005; 2007). Wicked problems have "*no solutions in the sense of definitive or objective answers*" and are commonly found in situations in which there is "*no undisputable public good and no objective definition of equity*", (Rittel & Webber, 1973: 155). They can be contrasted with "*tame*" problems which, although they may be complex, are amenable to planning and management (Grint, 2005; 2007). Building a new hospital or launching a space satellite for example are tame problems in more or less "right" ways of accomplishing these exist; by contrast resolving

problems of homelessness, drug addiction or climate change are wicked. Wicked problems require the work of leadership to progress them, which includes the willingness to embrace uncertainty, the acceptance of new learning and the necessity of collaborative working. In the context of working across the boundaries of units, agencies and governments, Heifetz (1994) describes leadership work as confronting the "*adaptive problems*" which are resistant to existing solutions and require learning to find new ways of working, whilst Revans' action learning (1971; 1982; 2011) is specifically devised for organisational and societal leaders confronting problems which are resistant to currently known solutions.

This linking of leadership, difficult problems and learning is common to the authors cited in the previous paragraph, and perhaps explains the frequent use of action learning on leadership development programmes alongside other "context-specific" approaches such as coaching, work-based learning and problem-based learning (Mabey & Thomson, 2000; Horne and Steadman Jones, 2001; Bolden, 2005). Whilst the mutability of the action learning idea covers a range of practices from "business-driven" (Boshyk, 2000) to more critical and emancipatory approaches (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013), according to one estimate more than 70% of USA corporations claim to use it for leadership development purposes (Marquardt, 2010).

### **Searching & Making Sense of Published Accounts**

As action learning practitioners also working in Higher Education, we like to think of ourselves as "scholarly practitioners" addressing "critical problems of practice through the use of theory, inquiry, and practice-oriented knowledge." (MacGregor & Fellabaum, 2016: 53). This perspective challenges a received view that knowledge flows linearly from research towards practice, and suggests instead that socially useful research can be approached by a "form of engaged research that utilizes dialogical sense-making" (Cunliffe & Scaratti (2017: 29).

Our engagement with this research came partly from our own experiences and also from reading other peoples' accounts, seen as potential sources of new knowledge in the context of complex practice-based problems of contemporary interest (Lawless et al. 2012; Anderson et al, 2017; Coghlan, 2017; Rynes & Bartunek, 2017). In seeking a way forward in a combination of reading and conversing about what we were learning, and whilst not pretending to Cunliffe & Scaratti's methodological rigour, we found resonant their descriptions of the lived experience of research as being in conversations which involve "surfacing, questioning and exploring multiple meanings and imagining new possibilities for moving on" (2017: 29). We surfaced and explored these (and many other) questions: Are we really doing action learning as Revans would have intended? What sort of action learning problems are being tackled on leadership development programmes? Can personal development projects ever be wicked problems? Do wicked problems only occur in the public sector? and Can wicked problems ever be written up anyway?

To do a search of relevant literature, we employed *Scopus*<sup>2</sup>. An initial search for *leadership development* produced 4,099 documents, showing this to be a topic of considerable interest. A further search using *action learning* within these results produced 277 documents and also revealed that 11 journals had each published four or more of these papers (Table 1). Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Action Learning: Research and Practice* tops the list with 19, (though it did not appear until 2004 whilst Scopus starts in 1993). Next up is the *Journal of Management Development*, followed by *Leadership in Health Services* and *Advances in Developing Human Resources*.

**Table 1: Publications by Source: *Leadership Development & Action Learning* (Source: Scopus, 1993 - October 2017)**

Action Learning Research And Practice	19
Journal Of Management Development	12
Leadership In Health Services	11
Advances In Developing Human Resources	10
Journal Of Nursing Management	6
Management Learning	6
Industrial And Commercial Training	5
Leadership And Organization Development Journal	5
Advances In Health Care Management	4
Development And Learning In Organizations	4
Human Resource Development International	4

We focussed initially on the most recent papers published in 2017, also nineteen in number. Five of these were discarded as they contained no empirical data or problem descriptions. To identify the presence or absence of wicked issues in the remaining fourteen cases, we arrived at five criteria by making longer individual lists which were then discussed and composited. To be classified as dealing with the "wicked" problems of leadership, case examples had to be:

- organisational or social in nature, as well as personal.
- novel/unique/specific to a local context, so not generic.
- not cost benefit analysis-able.
- possessing of wicked aspects e.g. complex, dynamic and ambiguous, difficult to fully describe or paradoxical in nature and have multiple stakeholders with different perspectives and definitions of "success".
- those in which action carries a real risk of failure.

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<sup>2</sup> Scopus claims to be "*the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature: scientific journals, books and conference proceedings.*" <https://www.elsevier.com/en-gb/solutions/scopus>. Scopus offers "smart tools" to track, analyse and visualise research and enable overviews of the selected published literature.

At this stage in our conversations we were feeling quite hopeful but this changed when we found out that these criteria didn't help much. Careful reading of these fourteen cases of leadership development practice showed that whilst they varied in the amount of contextual data offered, they generally contained insufficient detail to enable the criteria to be applied, much less allow for comparative scoring via a five-point Likert scale, as we had planned. At this point, we decided to search our own personal databases and bring in papers that we thought reported the addressing of wicked problems. This surfaced another problem: that of disentangling the accounts of action learning and leadership development, not least because the literature revealed many different varieties and usages of both. For example, within action learning the emphases vary between being largely instrumental (most North American usage) and emancipatory (exemplified by the Southern Hemisphere based Action Learning and Action Research Association (ALARA)). Likewise, within leadership development variation exists between competence-based and emergent approaches. Now we were feeling stuck. After our initial difficulties in framing and holding the research question, we were still finding difficult to get a purchase on the problem. The focus of the inquiry remained unstable and blurred, resisting easy findings.

### **Surfacing and questioning**

Cunliffe & Scarlatti (2017) highlight the processes of surfacing and questioning in the exploring of multiple meanings and the imagining of new possibilities. Given the volume of published papers resulting from our Scopus search, it surprised us when it did not produce much that was germane to our inquiry. What emerged were yet more questions to be debated. The outcomes of this "dialogical sense-making" are discussed below as a series of linked and overlapping questions. These begin with the obvious question as to whether we had looked hard enough, or in the right places, to find relevant data. This leads into questions about academic motivations for writing and publishing and the practical and political difficulties of writing-up accounts which deal with the experiences of tackling the wicked problems. An exploration of the notions of wicked and tame, and what these terms are supposed to distinguish, follows. Further discussion then highlights the difference between individual leader development and the nurturing of the collective capacity to lead and their relevance to wicked problem situations.

#### Looking under the light?

Were we looking in the wrong places? Experiential accounts of tackling wicked problems in leadership development action learning sets might actually exist outwith the peer-reviewed journals searched by SCOPUS and other search engines. Though the electronic scanning of academic journals has now become standard research practice, the sort of knowledge we were seeking might exist elsewhere, hidden from the conventional academic gaze. Can such accounts be found "*under the radar*" in non-academic sources such as trade and professional publications? Or do they exist in more private

places like participants' and researchers' notes, diaries, blogs and other locally shared forums?<sup>3</sup>

### Academic motivations

This prompts another set of speculations: if such material exists, authors might choose not to write it up or make it available for a variety of reasons, amongst which issues of career progression and organisational prestige are likely to feature. Do those who are writing about action learning and leadership development do so largely for the purposes of personal career aspirations and institutional enhancement? And, if so, is this likely to lead to an aversion to narratives of what might be perceived as “failures”? In our limited search we were only able to find three papers acknowledging such an outcome (Oliver, 2008; Edmonstone, 2010; Dovey & Rembach, 2015 - all in *Action Learning: Research & Practice*). Yet, as Revans points out, reverses and unsuccessful actions are ever-present in leadership work: the tackling of the intractable problems always carries significant risk of failure (2011: 6).

Questions about academic motivations in the writing-up, or not, of practice cases, extend beyond authors to their employing institutions and to the academic journals themselves. Do academics, universities and academic publishers value research of this nature? Pragmatic researchers and publishers might of course simply note that such material is of little interest to their audiences in the performative worlds where leadership development is an important preoccupation. Business school staff, for example, are usually encouraged to publish in Association of Business Schools (ABS) ranked journals rather than in more practice-oriented publications with more interest in “warts and all” accounts. Matters of individual career progression and institutional prestige are likely to be important motivations in the production of academic papers; do these outweigh any desire to publish the convoluted and contentious detail likely to accompany the intractable problems of leadership?

### Practical and political difficulties of writing up wicked issues

Among the practical difficulties of telling a wicked problem story is the gaining of permissions and freedoms to be both an honest observer and a reporter of organisational practices. Wicked problems are inevitably political in nature and are characterised by different stakeholders with sometimes conflicting interests, so that any accounts are likely to be partial or constrained. Any faithful study addressing a wicked leadership issue in an organisational setting is likely to record instances of failure and confusion alongside any successes and insights. As suggested above, such accounts may be deemed embarrassing or damaging to organisational actors or stakeholders, and not

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<sup>3</sup> A reviewer's comment on the second draft of this paper provided a useful case study of action learning being used on a leadership development programme in a housing association to develop organisational leadership as well as individual leaders (Denyer & Turnbull James 2016). Though beyond our current reach, these possibilities suggest directions for further inquiry.

least to the academic author, who might fear the consequences of even describing problematic situations.

This is an especially acute issue for "*insider researchers*" (Brannick & Coghlan, 2014) who might otherwise be well placed to observe such situations. Feelings of organisational loyalty or self-preservation may inhibit the exposure of backstage conditions and result in self-censorship and subordination to conventions of proper behaviour. In a case describing a leadership development programme using action learning in a university, Dovey & Rembach (2015: 286-287) describe various forms of resistance and inhibition to the addressing of problems in the institution, including structural inertia (routinised processes and procedures); personal politics (violation of hierarchical authority and bureaucratic protocols); fear of creating a precedent (too risky); reified mental models; fear of loss of control and inappropriate assumptions (about "the way the world works"). This is a valuable narrative because, as noted earlier, such accounts are scarce. Whilst Alvesson (2009) suggests that academics tend not to study the "*lived realities*" of their own organisations because it is difficult to study something in which one is heavily involved, Brannick & Coghlan nicely highlight the dilemma by commending researchers to ponder how they can "*undertake academic research in their own organisations while retaining the choice of remaining a member within a desired career path when the research is complete*" (2007: 59).

Pressures towards loyalty and self-preservation may also incline researchers to study and write narratives of undisputed success focussed on tame rather than wicked problems. This includes the temptation to treat the wicked as if it is tame and as amenable to managerial solution. This has the considerable practical advantage that describing a tame problem and its resolution is likely to be a much simpler task than the capturing of wicked problems and issues. Considerable technical and political skills might be required to tell a complex and convoluted organisational story and condense such a rich picture into a suitable size and format for publication.

Another consideration is the attitudes of the work organisations, including those academic ones, who sponsor leadership development programmes and provide the wicked problem contexts. To what extent are these organisations and their leaders, who may not have very well worked out motives for doing leadership development in the first place (Jackson & Parry, 2008:119; Bolden et al, 2016), be willing to support the exploration and tackling of such issues? Enquiries into scandals such as the mis-selling of financial services (Perkins et al, 2016) or the sexual exploitation of vulnerable people in cities (Jay, 2014) often reveal a history of the suppression of awareness and the continuation of out-dated practices. Are organisational leaders willing to sponsor development work and experiment with new ways of working on their intractable problems? Or are they also more likely to avoid these in favour of interpretations that can be addressed by the adoption of tame approaches? Where institutional leaders are even willing to address difficult questions, do they have the "*learning architectures*" (Wilhelm, 2005), or organisational systems of supervision, appraisal, assessment and rewards, to support learning on these challenging issues? Even where action learning is well



supported, there remain many cultural processes that can encourage the avoidance of wicked problems and promote “*learning inaction*” (Vince, 2008).

### But, when is a problem wicked?

The above discussion reveals a difficulty in either spotting or acknowledging the wicked issues and distinguishing them out from those more amenable to being managed. Are the wicked problems really separable from the tame ones, or are they intertwined or bound up together? Kellie et al's (2010) case begins with the practical and technical business of wound dressing and tissue viability in healthcare, but it soon becomes apparent that changes in practice necessitate wider cultural behaviour changes. Olsen & Carter's (2016) account starts with professionals' questions about how to help people with learning disabilities who had been raped, and quickly reveals large gaps in their knowledge and understanding. Progress is made via an action learning and research process in which those who had been raped and those wanting to be of help worked together to learn and to develop new practice. These examples point to wicked problems as underlying or semi-submerged. Such problems are not capable of being worked on by the rational-empirical method of problem-definition and solution (Sarason 1978) but are intractable, not permanently solvable and possibly deeply-rooted in the human condition. Such problems are never resolved once and for all and have to be continually addressed in unique contexts bounded by time, place and historical circumstance. Any “solution” lasts only until the problem recurs in another form, in another place.

In many of the cases reviewed, participants addressed personal leadership development problems in their sets, including for example, entering new roles (Richardson et al, 2008). Whilst personal development issues may be intractable, we pondered whether they can be wicked, concluding that, whilst working on a wicked problem would almost certainly lead to personal development, personal development issues on their own are unlikely to meet the criteria set above.

### Private and public

Another avenue for further inquiry is whether there is a difference between the problems addressed on leadership development programmes in public and private sector organisations. Do the latter tend to focus on the technically resolvable, rather than the socially difficult, and do the wicked problems lie largely, if not exclusively, in the former? It is the case that the original concept of wicked problems arose in the domain of urban planning, and that the term is often used in connection with the big problems of public concern such as drug abuse, crime, housing and climate change (Rittel & Webber 1973; Levin et al 2012; Pedler 2016).

A related question is whether action learning on difficult questions is seen as inappropriate or as being “*too slow*” for the perceived “*fast-moving*” contexts of the private sector? Does the private sector tend to adopt a more instrumental view of action learning as a tool to achieve certain ends, rather

than as a means of encouraging the wider reflection and collaboration likely to be required for the wicked issues? Such questions need more study. However, when it comes to leadership development programmes all senior leaders, under various pressures to produce results, avoid reputational damage and so on might well choose to substitute difficult questions for simpler ones. Whilst these pressures might be felt most urgently in the private sector, they equally apply to public sector leaders.

### Leader development and leadership capacity

The leadership development programmes in the papers examined in this study focused mainly on individual leaders rather than on the collective leadership capacity of an organisation. They demonstrated a strong personal development orientation with less attention paid to the world outside. Where participants addressed a work challenge this was likely to be one which could be managed within constrained time and resources available to the individual, rather than being a more complex enquiry whose investigation and tackling required wider collaboration with other parties (Lynch & Verner, 2013; Doyle, 2014; Radcliff, 2017). There was also the possibility of an over-emphasis on action at the expense of learning (Willis, 2011).

These tendencies may be reinforced where individually-oriented leadership development courses also carry qualifications, as in MBA programmes (Masters in Business Administration) which have a track-record of enhancing individual careers, but little reputation for organisational impact through projects and dissertations. As in the earlier discussion, what influences the MBA student's choice of project? Are they likely to choose tame problems where they can demonstrate competence and tell success stories, or tackle "*no one right answer*" situations, where there are less obvious rewards? Do assessments reward clear conclusions and recommendations, rather than attempts at more tangled appraisals and judgement, thereby strengthening the tendency to treat wicked problems as resolvable by the adoption of tame approaches?

As the wicked problems are likely to require more deliberated, collaborative and concerted action by numbers of individuals and agencies (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Grint, 2005; 2007), a more promising approach to leadership development may be the nurturing of collective leadership capacity, termed as "*leaderful practice*" (Raelin, 2003; 2011) or "*systems leadership*" (Ghate et al, 2013). Collective approaches to leadership put an emphasis on the involvement and engagement of all those found in the situation. Raelin (2011: 203) describes it as a relational approach informed by democratic values, Drath et al (2008) refer to the whole collective being engaged in developmental practices which bring about a new leadership culture.

In the light of encouraging the collective capacity to lead it is interesting to note that, in some of the cases we reviewed, the featured participants did not see themselves as "*leaders*" at all, but rather as engaged in practical local innovations in wound dressing or end-of-life care (Kellie et al, 2010; Machin & Pearson, 2014; Gillett et al, 2017). These cases show professionals who are

not in formal managerial positions and who are focused on local innovation and as *“developing practice”*. It is an intriguing thought, that where the really difficult problems are concerned, it might be better not to call it *“leadership development”*.

## **Conclusion**

The starting point for this essay concerned the relationship of action learning to wicked problems and leadership. The latter we defined (after Revans and Grint) as the willingness to tackle the intractable or wicked issues of leadership, rather than technical or procedural puzzles of management. We posited that, if action learning is commonly employed for leadership development purposes, the participants in such programmes should be addressing the wicked issues and questions. However, our selective search failed to provide much evidence to support this proposition and our attempts to make sense of this have resulted in the questions raised above. Much of what calls itself *“leadership development”* may, in fact, be individual and hierarchical leader development which is inevitably valued by participants in such programmes, but which does little to develop social capital or collective leadership capacity. We therefore suggest that action learning may have been *“co-opted”* by leader development and, as a result, opportunities to develop such collective capacity may be being lost, although perhaps such matters are being pursued by professionals who seek to innovate their practice and to improve the services they provide.

## **Discussion**

Whilst our study of a few published accounts hardly amounts to an *“initial systematic literature review”* (Armitage & Keeble-Ramsey, 2009), our engagement with what we did find and our attempts at *“dialogical sense-making”* (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017) engaged us all and resulted in the questions and concerns that form the main part of the paper. This exploration reveals points of particular significance for our starting question: do the participants on leadership development programmes employing action learning really tackle the intractable or wicked problems of leadership? These are first, that most leadership development is leader development which may be at odds with the needs for the sort of leadership required in wicked problems situations; and secondly, that action learning as it is used on such programmes may contribute to this leader development orientation and that other interpretations of action learning are likely be more appropriate to the nature of leadership work.

Our paper does, we think, confirm that most of what calls itself *“leadership development”* is in practice individual leader development. As others have pointed out, most (so-called) leadership development does not seem to be aimed at the intractable or wicked problems of organisational and social life, but instead at individuals and their personal skills (Jackson & Parry, 2008; Bolden et al, 2016). This development of individual *“leaders”* carries with it the implicit hierarchical implication that this status has been conferred or bestowed on them by their employing organisations. Leader development

serves an "*identity regulation*" function within institutions (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) embodying taken-for-granted assumptions that leadership is an elite practice and a rational endeavour which arises from characteristics possessed by a few special and gifted individuals (Rogers, 2007).

Perhaps not surprisingly then, participants in such programmes usually value them highly, commonly reporting increased confidence and enhanced feelings of self-worth. However, the focus on individual skills and competencies has wider consequences for the overall development of leadership capacity in an organisation. How well does leader development prepare people for the complexity of leadership work as described by Revans, Grint and others? Critiques of mainstream programmes such as MBAs assert that developing judgement about leadership uncertainties and paradoxes or embracing ethical and social responsibilities play almost no part in the academic narrative (Bennis & O'Toole, 2004; Vince & Pedler, 2018). Rather to the contrary, leader development may encourage individuals to divert their energies into career management and confirm commonly held assumptions that salvation lies in finding the right person rather than, say, working towards more apposite collaborative efforts.

Day (2001) proposes leadership as a social process taking place within a specific context, and as emphasising leadership practice and the development of social capital or collective capacity for effective working and social relationships. In this view, leadership is not a position, but a behaviour that can show up anywhere, as in some of our examples given earlier (e.g. Kellie et al, 2010; Olsen & Carter, 2016). Where the wicked problems are concerned, Grint suggests that an engagement in collaborative dialogue with all stakeholders is required to craft partial, emergent and "*clumsy*" approaches which are "*good enough*" for now to move things on. This "*bricolage*", or stitching-together of actions and initiatives using whatever resources are to hand, implies improvisation, experimentation and exploration, where the potential outcomes cannot necessarily be known at the outset (Pina e Cunha et al, 2009). Or, as has been suggested, for such problems it is necessary for people to "*act themselves into a new way of thinking*" (Pascale et al, 2010).

However, the emphasis in much action learning practice on "*own job*" problems and individual development may contribute to, and even enhance, the orientation to leader, rather than leadership, development. Observers have noted various pressures which align action learning sets towards individual rather than organisational development. For example, sets may be seen as sources of "*rest and refreshment*" in the context of intense performance management and frequent "*re-disorganisations*" (Pedler & Attwood, 2011); or sets may function to divert attention away from matters of organisational performance and towards the personal agendas of individual members (Rigg, 2008); or perhaps action learning set participants simply find work on organisational problems "*too difficult*" (Donnenberg & De Loo, 2004). In this sense, action learning may be seen to have been "*co-opted*" into leader development. Venner (2011: 214 - 218) offers an alternative to this oppositional view of individual versus organisational orientations in reporting that sets may develop individuals' capacities in "*facilitative leadership*", where

action learning increases a person's effectiveness as a leader through "*facilitating peers as they tackle complex organisational challenges*".

If addressing the wicked issues of leadership work involves a collective effort, then are real opportunities being missed by current approaches to action learning? For social capital to be developed, alternatives to what action learning has now become may be necessary. Nicolini et al (2004), for example, report on attempts to link action learning to whole system change conferences, where dialogue and collective engagement is mobilised between a number of sets ("*a structure that reflects*") and larger conferences where reflections are linked to power ("*a structure that connects*"). Similarly, Pedler & Attwood (2011), reviewing action learning in NHS pathology services, identify factors that extend the impact of action learning beyond the sets, including the involvement influential persons within the wider system, linkages to other relevant activities and networks and awareness of the wider context together with national policies and initiatives. Such findings seem to echo Revans' original prescriptions for action learning, of the need for clients, sponsors, "*supporting assemblies*" and "*structures of welcome*" for successful action within organisations or systems (2011: 17-39). However, perhaps because it has proved too difficult to implement (Donnenberg & De Loo, 2004), action learning practice has moved away from Revans' original model (Pedler et al, 2005).

This raises important questions about changes in the nature of organising since Revans formed his ideas, including as to where "*permission*" to act on problems comes from within an organisation or system. Permission may imply consent or mandate from some source of authority outside the person. However, notions of "*discretion*", or acting on one's own authority and judgement, and "*agency*", or the capacity to act and make one's own choices, seem closer to the sense of being a professional, as distinct from being a manager or leader. In many "*knowledge-based*" and human service organisations, professional judgement and discretion are perhaps as much likely as any managerial decision to determine successful outcomes. It may be therefore that the people who emerge from leader development programmes are not necessarily the most important actors in dealing with the wicked issues of organisation and "*leadership*". Such examples as we have found of people using action learning to address the intractable and the unknowable issues have not been on leader development programmes. Perhaps those on such programmes don't tackle the difficult leadership issues because these are addressed, if at all, largely by professionals seeking to innovate and to improve their services?

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