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Action learning: ripples within and beyond the set

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Action learning: ripples within and beyond the set

Abstract

Purpose – To explore the impact of action learning on an individual and an organisation, particularly the process by which each affected the other. The organisation is a UK National Health Service (NHS) Trust that includes two hospitals.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a single person case study involving a clinician, but we also hear the voice of an author. It involves the experience of the individual as they experience action learning as part of a leadership development programme leading to a Post Graduate Certificate. We explain our caution of the case study approach and in doing so offer our thoughts in how this paper could be read and impact on practice.

Findings – We show a process whereby an action learning set participant moves from being confident about their project to one of uncertainty as the impact of the project ripples throughout the organisation. Through this process of unsettlement, the individual's unnoticed assumptions are explored in ways that enable practical action to be taken. In doing so the individual's leadership and identity developed.

Originality/value – This single case study contributes to the debate on critical action learning (CAL) and the use of action learning in the NHS.

Key words: Critical action learning, action learning, leadership, assumptions, organisational impact, NHS, case study, confidence, unsettlement, clarity, power

Paper type - case study

Introduction

Action Learning (AL) has over time been used as a learning and development approach within the UK's National Health Service (NHS). A clinical leaders programme is the focus for this study. The programme comprised of 'taught' sessions as well as AL sets that led, for many, to a Post Graduate Certificate, Diploma or Masters qualifications. Reg Revans himself, the acknowledged pioneer of action learning, spent much of his career applying his methods to projects for the NHS and in Europe having previously developed his methods at the National Coal Board in the UK. As many who facilitate or experience action learning know, its founding *modus operandi* is to help managers ask insightful questions about complex problems. His original principles were sceptical of expert knowledge and even against too much facilitation of action learning sets; the emphasis should be on supporting participants (managers) in independently problem solving which he defines in four dimensions. These are familiar problem in familiar setting, familiar problem in unfamiliar setting, unfamiliar problem in familiar setting and unfamiliar problem in unfamiliar setting. An important feature is the building of teams around problem solving often across professional roles and functions within an organisation (Revans, 1998). Revans' enthusiasts have adapted, modified and developed the setting for action learning. Action learning is often now linked to what Revans would regard as programmed knowledge (Revans, 1998), for example DBAs and MBAs delivered by universities particularly linked to action research projects (Bourner et al., 2000).

In 1995 Revans supported the establishment of the Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research at the University of Salford that offered a PhD, Masters and post-graduate diploma in action learning

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3 research but remained true to original principles by letting the programme of learning develop from
4 problems being presented for resolution by the practitioner participants (Botham and Vick, 2008).

5
6 A more recent development is the practice of critical action learning (CAL) (Vince, 2004, 2008) that
7 attempts to address the tension between inaction that can arise from a cocktail of power and
8 politics with the expedience of conscious or unconscious risk-averse behaviour. The approach of CAL
9 brings these dynamics to the fore and enables participants to notice and destabilise these relating
10 tendencies. Therefore, CAL pays attention to reflexive processes of unsettlement as participants
11 become aware of and react to power relations; and in doing so comes to affect wider patterns of
12 organisational relating. To us CAL is a change of emphasis in action learning rather than anything
13 'new'.
14

15 16 **Research question**

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18 Taking the developments above into account it therefore seems to be helpful to iterate here what it
19 is that the deployment of action learning techniques seek to achieve in a leadership programme
20 before discussing the case study. Overall in Revans' (Revans, 1998) terms learning (L) arises out of
21 programmed learning (P) plus questioning insight (Q).
22

23 The questions addressed in this paper are:

- 24 1. To what extent the case presented here is evidence of an individual engaging in inquiry
25 around an unresolved problem, learning through exploration of possible solutions through
26 taking action and reflection and gaining insights? (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014).
- 27 2. How does action learning help leaders develop and practise leadership in the particular
28 context and setting in which they work? (Dinkin and Frederick, 2013).
- 29 3. Finally, is the individual able to confidently take appropriate risks through action that
30 provide experiences for further reflection and action that challenge established practice and
31 power relations?
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34 A note about language: given the fact that this case study is about our experience of action learning
35 we have written much of this paper in the first person. We do this so as to communicate the sense
36 of intensity that was evident in the experience. However, one person's experience features more
37 than others, where this is the case we have moved from the 'we/us' to the 'I/me'.
38

39 A note on confidentiality: to protect confidentiality names and identifying details have been
40 removed or altered.
41

42 43 **Approach taken**

44 The approach taken is that of a case study; long held as a means to explore complex events in
45 organisations and to draw some helpful conclusions (Eisenhardt, 1989; Hartley, 2004; Yin, 1981).
46 Czarniawska (1997, p64) cites Yin's definition of a case study as being an empirical inquiry that:
47 investigates contemporary phenomena in real-life context; where there are boundaries between the
48 phenomena and context; and uses multiple sources of information (Yin, 2011). However, the typical
49 approach of a case study distances the reader from the temporal nature of the ongoing interactions
50 that participants' need to make sense of and make decisions. It is this process of sense making,
51 decision making, enactment and effect in the real world which leads to further conversation in the
52 action learning set of what might happen next.
53

54
55 To address this problem, we have undertaken to write the case study and supporting material with a
56 sense of 'provisionality', by which we mean an essence of the difficulties and challenges we all faced
57 at the time and how we as a learning community took our next steps. We have therefore tried to
58 avoid writing the case study along the lines of post-hoc certainty. Instead we hear the reflections
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3 and sense making of one author, who we shall now refer to as 'T', in reflecting upon their experience
4 with one participant. In this spirit we extend out to you as the reader and ask that you relate the
5 events here with your own experience.
6

7 *Our learning community as authors*

8 Our case study shines a light on Christine told through the reflections of the learning set facilitator
9 referred to as T. However, just as action learning does not sit in isolation from the social processes of
10 an organisation neither does the work done by T to understand and reflect upon their work as a
11 facilitator and author. Each of us facilitated an action learning set on the programme which
12 consisted of three cohorts. As well as facilitating the action learning we were also present for the
13 knowledge exchange sessions and the breakfast meetings with senior management.
14

15
16 We are academics that come from different backgrounds that include nursing, general management,
17 microbiology and human resources amongst other practitioner roles. As part of our methodology we
18 regularly met for reflexive conversations about our thoughts and practice. Indeed, this paper is part
19 of a wider action learning research programme the results of which are in press.
20

21 *The single person case study*

22 A single person study is common in counselling, psychology and education, but less so in business
23 studies. It is generally used in two forms. One in which the relationships between a set of conditions
24 and an individual are explored (Morgan and Morgan, 2009) where the aim is to gain specific and
25 detailed information about one person's experience (Doughty Horn et al., 2016) and to help others
26 gain insight (Patton, 1990). A second that which (Ray, 2015) describes as a single case research
27 design, being underpinned by experimental control. There is a desire to be able to replicate the
28 study and account for a single variable: that of the intervention. This has become increasingly
29 common as measurable outcomes of interventions are required by fund holders. What we are
30 seeking is not empirical generalisations (Watson, 2009) but further understanding of how individuals
31 - Christine and ourselves make sense (Weick, 1995) of the experiences that unfold through the
32 action learning set. We are aware of the debates surrounding action learning and the individual
33 versus organisational benefits. Brook et al (2013, p274) write that 'a considerable amount of action
34 learning in the public sector seems to retain a strongly individualistic focus'.
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39 **Context and events**

40 *The trust*

41 The NHS Trust comprises of general hospitals and other services. Like much of the NHS estate the
42 hospitals consist of a variety of buildings of different styles and ages, with long confusing corridors
43 between buildings and departments.
44

45 *The programme*

46 The programme is a Post Graduate Certificate in Clinical Management with the aim to create a
47 cohesive body of leaders, equipped with the skills and knowledge to lead the Trust.
48

49
50 The day would start with a breakfast session. Typically, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and other
51 senior directors were there milling about talking with delegates. More often than not the session
52 would start a few minutes late with conversations continuing as they entered the meeting room
53 with tables arranged in a straight edged 'horseshoe'. With no presentation prepared, but with
54 thought given to the conversation, the Chief Executive would talk about recent developments and
55 happenings in the Trust. Typically, they would be knotty problems, by which we mean issues without
56 easy resolution. There was conversation, even gossip, about individuals and longstanding personal
57 relationships mostly couched in overly professional measured tones which seemed to have less
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3 measured undertones. With attention drawn to the Chief Executive, this was a process of communal
4 sensemaking (Colville et al., 2013; Weick, 2012), the frankness of which occasionally surprised us,
5 particularly when it came to sharing feelings of uncertainty and a willingness to seek the opinions of
6 others in the group; the themes of which would often bubble up during the course of the day.
7

8
9 After the breakfast conversation with the CEO the group would split into its three learning sets, each
10 with us as a facilitator. Ground rules would be re-iterated and their airtime commenced. Action
11 learning problems would be aired by set members, clarified with the set before the problem would
12 be engaged with prior to actions being determined by the individual. It was a traditional approach to
13 action learning along with accompanying check-in and check-out.
14

15 In the afternoon we would cover a management topic such as finance, continuous improvement,
16 leadership, strategy in what was termed Knowledge Exchange. The session would be prepared so
17 that it was grounded in the reality of the attendees often bringing people in from the Trust. Ideas
18 would be introduced but with most of the time spent with delegates exploring what those ideas
19 might mean for them and their practice.
20

21 There were two assessments leading to the necessary sixty credits at masters level for the Post
22 Graduate Certificate: 1) a project that they had to choose and implement in their area; 2) a
23 leadership essay that charted their personal development from where they had been to now, to
24 where they would want to be. The action learning sets were used to enable delegates to explore
25 topics, decide on action to take and reflect on that experience.
26

27 *The case of Christine (not her real name)*

28 This particular learning set, facilitated by T, comprised of four doctors, including surgeons and
29 anaesthetists along with two general managers. We offer three vignettes moving through the action
30 learning process which demonstrate: 1. an early sense of purpose and clarity; 2. getting to know
31 each other's working practices (and challenging stereotypes); and, 3. the creation of ripples of how
32 people related to each other throughout the organisation.
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35 *Vignette 1: An early sense of purpose and clarity*

36 Christine was a consultant surgeon, an expert in a certain surgical technique. She was affable,
37 outwardly confident and socially 'polished'. She came to T's learning set with her project, to
38 introduce a certain surgical technique that was shown to lead to better and safer clinical outcomes
39 and was less expensive. The project was framed in the context of the breakfast conversation taken
40 by the HR director rather than the CEO where there had been a frank conversation about the culture
41 of the organisation.
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44 Christine explained the project with clear explanations of how various steps were to be introduced
45 by when. As Christine set out the goals for her project confidently and with certainty her capacity to
46 make sense of what was happening was strongly connected to her professional operating model
47 (Abolafia, 2010). The target in sight was clear, however the complexity of the working relationships
48 in the hospital departments at this point was unconsidered. As we make this interpretation as
49 researchers and facilitators we are cognisant of Watson (2009, p 432) who writes that 'When people
50 offer us narratives of self, they are simultaneously talking "inwardly" as well as "outwardly"'. Here
51 Christine is externally presenting as a confident professional leader in control whilst she has also
52 made internal decisions as to 'the person or leader I want to be like'.
53
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55 The set was still finding its feet with the action learning process. Having just affirmed our ground
56 rules, questions were being asked and answered in a functional way where we were paying
57 attention to the process rather the flow of the conversation and its content. That would come at
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3 later meetings. The actions included: getting length of stay in hospital data; working with a manager
4 to write a business case; and obtaining specialist equipment. The actions were straightforward in the
5 sense of getting information and not addressing conflicting issues about how teams or departments
6 were to work together for example.
7

8 There was very little by way of challenge or curiosity, a process marked with overt politeness, and
9 reference (even reverence) to T when it came 'are we doing it right'. The exception was an
10 anaesthetist who was more critical, but stayed largely quiet. I (T) sensed this disquiet and found it
11 off-putting but not unusual.
12

13 *Vignette 2: Getting to know each other's working practices (and challenging stereotypes).*

14 At one learning set there was a conversation between Christine and the anaesthetist about medical
15 secretaries, a conversation that became quite animated. The crux was this: the anaesthetist had
16 been perplexed as to why some surgeons need a lot of secretarial support. The answer from
17 Christine was that she had to write to GPs, the patients and other healthcare professionals often
18 spanning months or years; something not required as much for an anaesthetist. The conversation
19 went on to explore the various technological options for dictation but the nub of the issue came
20 down to resource allocation and the importance of a close working relationship between the
21 secretary and the surgeon. What I (T) became interested in was the exploration of their different
22 worlds, brought to life emotionally though a discussion of resource (Ram and Trehan, 2010), an
23 interest that I shared with the set. This sparked off more conversation, but to a greater depth along
24 the lines of: to the surgeon, medical secretaries were an important part of the team, to the
25 anaesthetist, an expensive resource for which technology might be an answer. But in this
26 conversation that included the senior manager's perspective of how this resource was organised
27 there developed a different understanding between the parties that would otherwise have gone
28 unexplored.
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32 *Vignette 3: The creation of ripples of how people related to each other throughout the organisation.*

33 In contrast to the first meeting Christine's project was now being implemented and had come up
34 against resistance. People were questioning the viability and the safety of the project and she was
35 concerned she was being set up to fail. She reported that a mood or tone of negativity was bubbling
36 up in meetings and general conversations but, very little in ways of direct challenge. Others
37 identified with this. Her polish and confidence slipped.
38

39 What I (T) found striking were the organisational ripples that were starting to occur for a project that
40 began several months ago. Christine's demeanour was both puzzled and frustrated at the barriers of
41 what to her was a project with very few drawbacks. In the learning set different points of view were
42 expressed including nursing perspectives, resources in terms of hearing how people worked as well
43 as how this might link with emergency care. Also we talked about who Christine might want to talk
44 with and what were the politics of different relationships. Christine's mood at the end was very
45 different with a number of actions and names jotted on her iPad.
46
47

48 With the support of the other learning set members Christine identified a number of actions to be
49 taken that included identifying where negativity was coming from, what actions might constitute
50 confidence building steps even in the form of a pilot and getting more data about safety and
51 efficacy. From our analysis, Christine's professional mode of operating was being shaken and her
52 identity as a successful leader who was in control was now provisional. By offering different
53 perspectives and challenging questions the set members were revealing assumptions to Christine,
54 many of which required different actions to be taken than would otherwise be the case (Reynolds,
55 1998). The set offered Christine the option of processing her thoughts and emotions around the
56 project differently. For Christine this process was creating the opportunity for a provisional change in
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3 her leader identity and the use of power. How Christine responded and made sense of her
4 unsettling, as well as the recreation of her leader identity in the set and within the organisation, was
5 a critical point for the set and T as facilitator.
6

7 By the end of the 10th learning set the trial project had been piloted and had been seen as a success
8 and full roll out of the new procedure was planned. Subsequently this was carried out and it was
9 seen as an important step forward.
10

11 **Discussion and implication for practice**

12 *Useful humility when it comes to the claims we make*

13 The paper so far offers a case study involving one person, one learning set and a facilitator (T). As we
14 have already discussed, we do not offer generalizable insights in a linear or rationalistic sense.
15 Indeed, in our commentary of case study methodology we are sceptical of such claims, particularly if
16 they imply the observer, be it the researcher or indeed the reader, has some explicit or implied
17 detached privileged position. Instead in the paper we are keen that you as the reader are involved in
18 the bridge building work to relate our action learning insights to yours. In this sense we are drawing
19 less on an episteme nature of knowledge, whereby insights are true irrespective of context, towards
20 one sympathetic with the Aristotelian notions of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom (Baumard, 1999). In
21 doing so we draw attention to lived experience as a temporal process with all its hesitation, knowing
22 and not knowing and sensing. The questions that this raises for you the reader are reflexive (Cunliffe,
23 2009; ██████████) in nature: do you relate to the case, and if so how? How might it
24 come to affect your practice and understanding? If we were to have a conversation what would you
25 say to us as authors to move our action learning practice? In other words, how can this paper
26 prompt our development in the spirit and curiosity of action learning?
27
28

29 *An early sense of purpose and clarity.*

30 To recap, some people seemed accepting that they were part of a process and went with it, trying to
31 work out what to do next. It was stilted whereby the gaze would revert to T to move ahead in the
32 style of 'is this right'. Conversations lacked of support and challenge and were unreflexive. Some
33 participants were sceptical, although they kept their council.
34
35

36 In 1916 John Dewey, from the pragmatist tradition of philosophy, discussed the issue of method and
37 content. Dewey makes a point relevant here: 'Experience, in short, is not a combination of mind and
38 world, subject and object, method and subject matter, but a single continuous interaction of a great
39 diversity of energies' (Dewey, 2007, p127). In citing examples from the act of eating to the playing of
40 a piano he states that there is no distinction between subject matter and method in a well
41 functioning activity. But as we have noted, the experience of the first meeting the interaction
42 between action learning method and subject matter was not well functioning, that had to wait.
43
44

45 In terms of practice as a facilitator there are a number of implications. Having facilitated many action
46 learning sets we recognise these characteristics are not uncommon, albeit each is unique. The
47 sceptical participant, came to trust the process once he saw it working, at which point he shared his
48 unsaid scepticism, but this was more to do with the other set members showing how it worked, it
49 had little to do with T: it was a form of vicarious demonstration.
50
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52 *Getting to know each other's working practices (and challenging stereotypes).*

53 To recap, a few months later we have a surprising conversation about letters and secretarial
54 support. On the face of it mundane and not significant to the participant's task, but it became
55 politely heated. At times support was outpaced with challenge. It was a surprise for me (T), but one
56 that I became curious about, both in terms of what it was revealing about the working relationship
57 but also in relation to the action learning process. This was a pivotal point, after which we related to
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3 each other slightly differently; assumptions became the subject for exploration and the questions
4 were less often routed via T as the 'expert' in action learning.
5

6 Edgar Schein, the US academic interested in group processes and culture, invites us to think about
7 culture in the form of three layers. Firstly there are the artefacts (eg visible organisational structures
8 and processes); secondly the espoused beliefs and values (eg strategic goals, justifications,
9 philosophies) and finally underlying assumptions (Schein, 2004, p25-37). These underlying
10 assumptions comprise of unconscious taken for granted ways of working made more so by
11 reinforcing attitudes and actions of those around the person, and as a result they are difficult to
12 notice and talk about. It is this last layer, the one that is hardest to recognise and talk about, that is
13 relevant to the experience here of noticing and talking about assumptions.
14

15
16 In terms of practice the facilitator could have suggested the conversation move onto something
17 more 'substantial', perhaps relating to their projects. However, the facilitator let it flow and in doing
18 so the participants energetically challenged each other. The screw continued to turn and the set
19 became enlivened by this. At the end there was a change of understanding that was useful, both in
20 the subject matter and how we got there. It is relevant to note that this related to the dynamics
21 within the set only. The development of personal relationships and local knowledge built upon the
22 first two categories of Rooke et al's taxonomy of action learning (Rooke et al., 2007).
23

24
25 This made me (T) reflect on how I was seen by the set, I was less of a facilitator, but more of a set
26 member, whereby my influence was used to nudge, rather than direct. Increasingly my (T) presence
27 related to silence and what I did not say rather than what I said.
28

29 *The creation of ripples of how people related to each other throughout the organisation.*

30 To recap, it was interesting to note that towards the end of the process Christine's confidence had
31 taken a knock when her project was being taken up in the wider organisation: involving other
32 professional groups and situations that required persuasion rather than direct control. The
33 objections were unexpected and surprising, which affected her confidence and demeanour. In the
34 learning set it was the other participants that spoke. My role as facilitator (T) was again to listen and
35 give the occasional gentle steer, but there was a difference. Attention was focused on other
36 participant's knowledge on the wider goings-on in the organisation, this was in contrast to earlier
37 meetings where the gaze was on the goings on in the set. The learning set was creating ripples of
38 impact, in this case that of Christine, and these were being responded to in the organisation causing
39 reflection and further action amongst the set. The conclusion of the project was very much in doubt
40 at this point and the conversation had both rational and logical elements but also important
41 emotional themes too, what the Greeks might refer to as *logos* and *pathos*.
42

43
44 When it comes to practice it is relevant to notice the continual shifting nature of the set, both for the
45 facilitator and the wider set. The organisational impact of projects was being noticed, reflected upon
46 and further actions considered. The facilitator's (T) role now shifted to the occasional invitation to
47 pause, reflect and consider. T was now largely redundant.
48

49 *Holistic sense of the process*

50 The events of the set were not just created within the set; they were affected by other dynamics
51 too, an amplification of which was the regular breakfast meetings with the CEO or his directors. This
52 related both the actual conversation with all the participants in the room but also the informal
53 conversations beforehand. It was notable how this came to affect the learning set, particularly when
54 there was a sharing of knotty and difficult issues that defied straightforward resolution. We saw
55 with Christine how some of these comments provided a springboard for reflection and conversation
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3 in the set. The question for practice is how can we enable these reflexive prompts to focus the
4 conversation on issues that both the organisation and the individual cares about.
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6 Looking to contemporary fiction to enable some reflexive prompts is not unusual when it comes to
7 shining a light on practice (Knights and Willmott, 1999; Rhodes and Brown, 2005; ██████████). At
8 the time of writing this paper the thriller writer Robert Harris published his latest novel, a story of
9 the fictitious events of the election of a new Pope and one individual's personal doubt, a doubt that
10 was paradoxically reassuring at the point of greatest need. Off the cuff to the assembled cardinals
11 and laity we hear the otherwise troubled Lomeli explain:
12

13 ... Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance. ... Our faith is a living thing precisely *because* it
14 walks hand in hand in with doubt. If there was only certainty, and if there were no doubt,
15 there would be no mystery, and therefore no faith (Harris, 2016, p91).
16

17 We are not making any religious points here, instead we are illustrating how the acts and processes
18 that keep a group together and to work productively on problems are the very same processes that
19 might bring about its collapse. There is therefore an enabling interaction between group destruction
20 and cohesion, something that we see most vividly in the account of the medical secretaries and the
21 implementation of Christine's project; the former focused within the set, the latter affected by the
22 organisation. And as stated previously, these factors were a mix of both the logical and rational as
23 well as the more emotional.
24

25 Coming back to critical action learning (CAL) (Vince, 2004, 2008), where there is an emphasis on
26 organisational impact, we can see in this case study the flux between the events outside of the set
27 and the wider organisation. This occurred between meetings, but was made more intense with the
28 breakfast conversations with the CEO and his team. Issues of uncertainty and the friction inside and
29 outside of the set were both uncomfortable, but never the less vital (both in the sense of importance
30 and giving life to) for the process.
31

32 In terms of practice the paying attention to the enlivening dynamic of stability/instability of the
33 group is important. As is the acceptance, that sometimes it will not work out. It might have been
34 easy to suppress moments of emerging conflict at the early stages, but this would have been
35 counterproductive in this instance.
36

37 **Conclusions**

38 In this case study we pay attention to one individual in an action learning set. In three vignettes at
39 the start, middle and end of a leadership programme sponsored by an NHS Trust we explore issues
40 of certainty, doubt and progress that they experienced. We add to the debate as to how action
41 learning can come to affect wider patterns within an organisation and how this might be intensified,
42 and in doing so we contribute to recent discussions on critical action learning. We noted that
43 certainty and confidence at the start became dented as the impact of their project came to have
44 ripples throughout the organisation. However, through this the individual became aware of their
45 barriers and own assumptions, which were noticed and challenged by the set, enabling useful
46 progress to be made. This unsettlement of assumptions not only related external events, but also
47 within the set. Earlier in the action learning process a trivial matter became heated. This enabled an
48 exploration of each other's long held assumptions and views of each other. It was the facilitator's
49 view that this was a pivotal moment in the set, yet one that could easily have been skirted over. We
50 also draw attention to the intensification of organisational problems with the inclusion of breakfast
51 meetings with the CEO and their team. Problems were aired and discussed in a way that infused and
52 amplified the conversations of the set.
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55
56 What is offered to you the reader are vignettes of practice and the offer of reflexive questions that
57 might include: do you relate to the case, if so how? How might it come to affect your practice? And
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3 what would you say to us about our practice? In other words, how might this paper prompt the
4 development *our* action learning practice in the spirit and curiosity of action learning.
5

6 7 **Limitations**

8 This is a single person case study in one organisation thus affecting wider generalisation.
9

10 **Funding**

11 No funding was received to support the writing of this paper.
12

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Action learning: ripples within and beyond the set

Abstract

Purpose – To explore the impact of action learning on an individual and an organisation, particularly the process by which each affected the other. The organisation is a UK National Health Service (NHS) Trust that includes two hospitals.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a single person case study involving a clinician, but we also hear the voice of an author. It involves the experience of the individual as they experience action learning as part of a leadership development programme leading to a Post Graduate Certificate. We explain our caution of the case study approach and in doing so offer our thoughts in how this paper could be read and its impact on practice.

Findings – We show a process whereby an action learning set participant moves from being confident about their project to one of uncertainty as the impact of the project ripples throughout the organisation. Through this process of unsettlement, the individual's unnoticed assumptions are explored in ways that enable practical action to be taken. In doing so the individual's leadership and identity developed.

Originality/value – This single case study contributes to the debate on critical action learning (CAL) and the use of action learning in the NHS.

Key words: Critical action learning, action learning, leadership, assumptions, organisational impact, NHS, case study, confidence, unsettlement, clarity, power

Paper type - case study

Introduction

Action Learning (AL) has over time been used as a learning and development approach within the UK's National Health Service (NHS). Willcocks and Wibberley (2015) point to the increasing importance of inter disciplinary collaboration in healthcare so as to meet the increasing demands in health and suggest that action learning has an important part to play in enabling this. However in a recent report West and others (West et al., 2015) point to a lack of evidence that action learning has and what exists is often retrospective and self-reported. Vince (2012) highlights the issue of power relations, particularly amongst differing groups, notably managers and doctors. In this study we draw on evidence of the impact of action learning in the process of learning. We also show how this learning has been enabled and constrained by the power relations the individual here is part of, both within and beyond the set.

A clinical leaders programme is the focus ~~for~~of this study. The programme comprised of 'taught' sessions as well as AL sets that led, for many, to a Post Graduate Certificate, Diploma or Masters qualifications. Reg Revans himself, the acknowledged pioneer of action learning, spent much of his career applying his methods to projects for the NHS ~~and in Europe~~ having previously developed his methods at the National Coal Board in the UK. As many who facilitate or experience action learning know, its founding *modus operandi* is to help managers ask insightful questions about complex problems. His original principles were sceptical of expert knowledge and even against too much facilitation of action learning sets; the emphasis should be on supporting participants (managers) in independently problem solving which he defines in four dimensions. These are: familiar problems in familiar settings, familiar problems in unfamiliar settings, unfamiliar problems in familiar settings

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3 | and unfamiliar problems in unfamiliar settings. An important feature is the building of teams around
4 problem solving often across professional roles and functions within an organisation (Revans,
5 1998). Revans' enthusiasts have adapted, modified and developed the setting for action learning.
6 Action learning is often now linked to what Revans would regard as programmed knowledge
7 (Revans, 1998), for example DBAs and MBAs delivered by universities particularly linked to action
8 research projects (Bourner et al., 2000).
9

10
11 In 1995 Revans supported the establishment of the Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research
12 at the University of Salford that offered a PhD, Masters and post-graduate diploma in action learning
13 research but remained true to original principles by letting the programme of learning develop from
14 problems being presented for resolution by the practitioner participants (Botham and Vick, 2008).
15

16 A more recent development is the practice of critical action learning (CAL) (Vince, 2004, 2008) that
17 attempts to address the tension between inaction that can arise from a cocktail of power and
18 politics with the expedience of conscious or unconscious risk-averse behaviour. The approach of CAL
19 brings these dynamics to the fore and enables participants to notice and destabilise these relating
20 tendencies. Therefore, CAL pays attention to reflexive processes of unsettlement as participants
21 become aware of and react to power relations; and in doing so comes to affect wider patterns of
22 organisational relating. To us CAL is a change of emphasis in action learning rather than anything
23 'new'.
24
25

26 **Research question**

27
28 Taking the developments above into account it therefore seems to be helpful to iterate here what it
29 is that the deployment of action learning techniques seek to achieve in a leadership programme
30 before discussing the case study. Overall in Revans' (Revans, 1998) terms learning (L) arises out of
31 programmed learning (P) plus questioning insight (Q).
32

33 The questions addressed in this paper are:

- 34 1. To what extent the case presented here is evidence of an individual engaging in inquiry
35 around an unresolved problem, learning through exploration of possible solutions through
36 taking action and reflection and gaining insights? (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014).
- 37 2. How does action learning help leaders develop and practise leadership in the particular
38 context and setting in which they work? (Dinkin and Frederick, 2013).
- 39 3. Finally, is the individual able to confidently take appropriate risks through action that
40 provide experiences for further reflection and action that challenge established practice and
41 power relations?
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43

44 A note about language: given the fact that this case study is about our experience of action learning
45 we have written much of this paper in the first person. We do this so as to communicate the sense
46 of intensity that was evident in the experience. However, one person's experience features more
47 than others, where this is the case we have moved from the 'we/us' to the 'I/me'.
48

49 A note on confidentiality: to protect confidentiality names and identifying details have been
50 removed or altered.
51

52 **Approach taken**

53 | The approach taken is that of a case study (with caveats); long held as a means to explore complex
54 events in organisations and to draw some helpful conclusions (Eisenhardt, 1989; Hartley, 2004; Yin,
55 1981). Czarniawska (1997, p64) cites Yin's definition of a case study as being an empirical inquiry
56 that: investigates contemporary phenomena in real-life context; where there are boundaries
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3 between the phenomena and context; and uses multiple sources of information (Yin, 2011).
4 However, the typical approach of a case study distances the reader from the temporal nature of the
5 ongoing interactions that participants' need to make sense of and make decisions. It is this process
6 of sense making, decision making, enactment and effect in the real world which leads to further
7 conversation in the action learning set of what might happen next.
8

9
10 To address this problem, we have undertaken to write the case study and supporting material with a
11 sense of 'provisionality', by which we mean an essence of the difficulties and challenges we all faced
12 at the time and how we as a learning community took our next steps. We have therefore tried to
13 avoid writing the case study along the lines of post-hoc certainty. Instead we hear the reflections
14 and sense making of one author, who we shall now refer to as 'T', in reflecting upon their experience
15 of working with one participant.
16

17 ~~In this spirit we extend out to you as the reader and ask that you relate the events here with your~~
18 ~~own experience.~~
19

20 *Our learning community as authors*

21 Our case study shines a light on Christine, a consultant surgeon and an expertise in a certain surgical
22 technique. Drawing on notes written shortly after the action learning set meetings her story is told
23 through the reflections of the learning set facilitator referred to as T. However, just as action
24 learning does not sit in isolation from the social processes of an organisation neither does the work
25 done by T to understand and reflect upon their work as a facilitator and author. We are academics
26 that come from different backgrounds that include nursing, general management, microbiology and
27 human resources amongst other practitioner roles. Each of us facilitated an action learning set on
28 the programme which consisted of three cohorts. As part of our methodology we regularly met for
29 reflexive conversations about our thoughts and practice in the face of what was happening.
30 Checkland and Howell (1998), in a paper on the validity of action research, point to the importance
31 of a 'declared epistemology' (p16) that binds social heuristic processes of the researchers to the
32 validity of insights in an overt exploration of: 1) research findings, 2) methods; and, 3) the way that
33 the endeavour was envisaged. It is in the process of entering "the "social practice" of the real world
34 situation' that we can pay attention to multiple possibilities with researcher and participant alike to
35 prove useful knowledge of the journey and the outcome. This enables us to draw away from the
36 linear track of events of a post-hoc singular outcome towards equipping us for the multiple
37 possibilities that seem real in the moment of happening. In this spirit, and that of Judi Marshall in a
38 chapter titled *The practice and politics of living enquiry* (Marshall, 2011) we extend out to you as the
39 reader and ask that you relate and imagine the events here with your own experience.
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42
43 ~~As well as facilitating the action learning we were also present for the knowledge exchange sessions~~
44 ~~and the breakfast meetings with senior management.~~
45

46 ~~We are academics that come from different backgrounds that include nursing, general management,~~
47 ~~microbiology and human resources amongst other practitioner roles. As part of our methodology we~~
48 ~~regularly met for reflexive conversations about our thoughts and practice. Indeed, this~~This paper is
49 part of a wider action learning research programme considering the effect and evaluation critical
50 action learning and the impact on individuals, groups and the organisations the results of which are
51 in press.
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54
55 *The single person case study*

56 A single person study is common in counselling, psychology and education, but less so in business
57 studies. It is generally used in two forms. One in which the relationships between a set of conditions
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and an individual are explored (Morgan and Morgan, 2009) where the aim is to gain specific and detailed information about one person's experience (Doughty Horn et al., 2016) and to help others gain insight (Patton, 1990). As Secondly that which (Ray, 2015) describes as a single case research design, being underpinned by experimental control. There is a desire to be able to replicate the study and account for a single variable: that of the intervention. This has become increasingly common as measurable outcomes of interventions are required by fund holders. What we are seeking is not empirical generalisations (Watson, 2009) but further understanding of how individuals - Christine and ourselves make sense (Weick, 1995) of the experiences that unfold through the action learning set. We are aware of the debates surrounding action learning and the individual versus organisational benefits. Brook et al (2013, p274) write that 'a considerable amount of action learning in the public sector seems to retain a strongly individualistic focus'. We therefore offer these insights in the hope they might strike a chord with practitioners of action learning enabling further reflexive steps to be made.

Context and events

The trust

The NHS Trust comprises of general hospitals and other services. Like much of the NHS estate the hospitals consist of a variety of buildings of different styles and ages, with long confusing corridors and staircases between buildings and departments.

The programme

The programme is a Post Graduate Certificate in Clinical Management with the aim to of create ing a cohesive body of leaders, equipped with the skills and knowledge to lead the Trust.

The Each day would start with a breakfast session. Typically, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and other senior directors were there milling about talking with delegates and us. More often than not the session would start a few minutes late with conversations continuing as they entered the meeting room with tables arranged in a straight edged 'horseshoe'. With no presentation prepared, but with thought given to the conversation, the Chief Executive would talk about recent developments and happenings in the Trust. Typically, they would be knotty problems, by which we mean issues without easy resolution. There was conversation, even gossip, about individuals and longstanding personal relationships mostly couched in overly professional measured tones which seemed to have less measured undertones. With attention drawn to the Chief Executive, this was a process of communal sensemaking (Colville et al., 2013; Weick, 2012), the frankness of which occasionally surprised us, particularly when it came to sharing feelings of uncertainty and a willingness to seek the opinions of others in the group; the themes of which would often bubble up during the course of the day. Being a part of this conversation enabled us to develop insights into their worlds, insights that would often come up later in action learning set conversations.

After the breakfast conversation with the CEO the group would split into its three learning sets, each with us as a facilitator. Ground rules would be re-iterated and their airtime commenced. Action learning problems would be aired by set members, clarified with the set before the problem would be engaged with prior to actions being determined by the individual. It was a traditional approach to action learning along with accompanying check-in and check-out.

In the afternoon we would cover a management topic such as finance, continuous improvement, leadership and strategy in what was termed Knowledge Exchange. The session would be prepared so that it was grounded in the reality of the attendees often bringing people in from the Trust. Ideas would be introduced but with most of the time spent with delegates exploring what those ideas might mean for them and their practice.

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4 There were two assessments leading to the necessary sixty credits at masters level for the Post
5 Graduate Certificate: 1) a project that they had to choose and implement in their area; 2) a
6 leadership essay that charted their personal development from where they had been to now, to
7 where they would want to be. The action learning sets were used to enable delegates to explore
8 topics, decide on action to take and reflect on that experience.
9

10
11 *The case of Christine (not her real name)*

12 This particular learning set, facilitated by T, comprised of four doctors, including surgeons and
13 anaesthetists along with two general managers. We offer three vignettes moving through the action
14 learning process which demonstrate: 1. an early sense of purpose and clarity; 2. getting to know
15 each other's working practices (and challenging stereotypes); and, 3. the creation of ripples of how
16 people related to each other throughout the organisation.
17

18 *Vignette 1: An early sense of purpose and clarity*

19 Christine ~~was a consultant surgeon, an expert in a certain surgical technique.~~ She was affable,
20 outwardly confident and socially 'polished'. She came to T's learning set with her project, to
21 introduce a certain surgical technique that was shown to lead to better and safer clinical outcomes
22 and was less expensive. The project was framed in the context of the breakfast conversation taken
23 by the HR director rather than the CEO where there had been a frank conversation about the culture
24 of the organisation.
25

26
27 Christine explained the project with clear explanations of how various steps were to be introduced
28 ~~and~~ by when. As Christine set out the goals for her project confidently and with certainty her
29 capacity to make sense of what was happening was strongly connected to her professional operating
30 model (Abolafia, 2010). The target in sight was clear, however the complexity of the working
31 relationships in the hospital departments at this point was unconsidered. As we make this
32 interpretation as researchers and facilitators we are cognisant of Watson (2009, p 432) who writes
33 that 'When people offer us narratives of self, they are simultaneously talking "inwardly" as well as
34 "outwardly"'. Here Christine is externally presenting as a confident professional leader in control
35 whilst she has also made internal decisions as to 'the person or leader I want to be like'.
36

37
38 The set was still finding its feet with the action learning process. Having just affirmed our ground
39 rules, questions were being asked and answered in a functional way where we were paying
40 attention to the process rather ~~than~~ the flow of the conversation and its content. That would come
41 at later meetings. The actions included: getting length of stay in hospital data; working with a
42 manager to write a business case; and obtaining specialist equipment. The actions were
43 straightforward in the sense of getting information and not addressing conflicting issues about how
44 teams or departments were to work together for example.
45

46
47 There was very little by way of challenge or curiosity, a process marked with overt politeness, and
48 reference (even reverence) to T when it came ~~to~~ 'are we doing it right'. The exception was an
49 anaesthetist who was more critical, but stayed largely quiet. I (T) sensed this disquiet and found it
50 off-putting but not unusual.
51

52 *Vignette 2: Getting to know each other's working practices (and challenging stereotypes).*

53 At one learning set there was a conversation between Christine and the anaesthetist about medical
54 secretaries, a conversation that became quite animated. The crux was this: the anaesthetist had
55 been perplexed as to why some surgeons need a lot of secretarial support. The answer from
56 Christine was that she had to write to GPs, the patients and other healthcare professionals often
57 spanning months or years; something not required as much for an anaesthetist. The conversation
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3 went on to explore the various technological options for dictation but the nub of the issue came
4 down to resource allocation and the importance of a close working relationship between the
5 secretary and the surgeon. What I (T) became interested in was the exploration of their different
6 worlds, brought to life emotionally though a discussion of resources (Ram and Trehan, 2010), an
7 interest that I shared with the set. This sparked off more conversation, but to a greater depth along
8 the lines of: to the surgeon, medical secretaries were an important part of the team, to the
9 anaesthetist, an expensive resource for which technology might be an answer. But in this
10 conversation that included the senior manager's perspective of how this resource was organised
11 there developed a different understanding between the parties that would otherwise have gone
12 unexplored.
13

14
15 *Vignette 3: The creation of ripples of how people related to each other throughout the organisation.*
16 In contrast to the first meeting Christine's project was now being implemented and had come up
17 against resistance. People were questioning the viability and the safety of the project and she was
18 concerned she was being set up to fail. She reported that a mood or tone of negativity was bubbling
19 up in meetings and general conversations but, very little in ways of direct challenge. Others
20 identified with this. Her polish and confidence slipped.
21

22
23 What I (T) found striking were the organisational ripples that were starting to occur for a project that
24 began several months ago. Christine's demeanour was both puzzled and frustrated at the barriers of
25 what to her was a project with very few drawbacks. In the learning set different points of view were
26 expressed including nursing perspectives, resources in terms of hearing how people worked as well
27 as how this might link with emergency care. Also we talked about who Christine might want to talk
28 with and what were the politics of different relationships. Christine's mood at the end was very
29 different with a number of actions and names jotted on her iPad.
30

31
32 With the support of the other learning set members Christine identified a number of actions to be
33 taken that included identifying where negativity was coming from, what actions might constitute
34 confidence building steps even in the form of a pilot and getting more data about safety and
35 efficacy. From our analysis, Christine's professional mode of operating was being shaken and her
36 identity as a successful leader who was in control was now provisional. By offering different
37 perspectives and challenging questions the set members were revealing assumptions to Christine,
38 many of which required different actions to be taken than would otherwise be the case (Reynolds,
39 1998). The set offered Christine the option of processing her thoughts and emotions around the
40 project differently. For Christine this process was creating the opportunity for a provisional change in
41 her leader identity and the use of power. How Christine responded and made sense of her
42 unsettling, as well as the recreation of her leader identity in the set and within the organisation, was
43 a critical point for the set and T as facilitator.
44

45
46 By the end of the 10th learning set the trial project had been piloted and had been seen as a success
47 and full roll out of the new procedure was planned. Subsequently this was carried out and it was
48 seen as an important step forward.
49

50 **Discussion and implication for practice**

51 *Useful humility when it comes to the claims we make*

52 The paper so far offers a case study involving one person, one learning set and a facilitator (T). As we
53 have already discussed, we do not offer generalizable insights in a linear or rationalistic sense.
54 Indeed, in our commentary of case study methodology we are sceptical of such claims, particularly if
55 they imply the observer, be it the researcher or indeed the reader, has some explicit or implied
56 detached privileged position. Instead in the paper we are keen that you as the reader are involved in
57 the bridge building work to relate our action learning insights to yours. In this sense we are drawing
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3 less on an episteme nature of knowledge, whereby insights are true irrespective of context, towards
4 one sympathetic with the Aristotelian notions of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom (Baumard, 1999). In
5 doing so we draw attention to lived experience as a temporal process with all its hesitation, knowing
6 and not knowing and sensing. The questions that this raises for you the reader are reflexive
7 () in nature: do you relate to the case, and if so how? How might it
8 come to affect your practice and understanding? If we were to have a conversation what would you
9 say to us as authors to move our action learning practice? In other words, how can this paper
10 prompt our development in the spirit and curiosity of action learning?
11

12
13 *An early sense of purpose and clarity.*

14 To recap, some people seemed accepting that they were part of a process and went with it, trying to
15 work out what to do next. It was stilted whereby the gaze would revert to T to move ahead in the
16 style of 'is this right'. Conversations lacked of support and challenge and were unreflexive. Some
17 participants were sceptical, although they kept their ~~council~~counsel.

18
19 In 1916 John Dewey, from the pragmatist tradition of philosophy, discussed the issue of method and
20 content. Dewey makes a point relevant here: 'Experience, in short, is not a combination of mind and
21 world, subject and object, method and subject matter, but a single continuous interaction of a great
22 diversity of energies' (Dewey, 2007, p127). In citing examples from the act of eating to the playing of
23 a piano he states that there is no distinction between subject matter and method in a ~~well~~
24 functioningwell-functioning activity. But as we have noted, the experience of the first meeting the
25 interaction between action learning method and subject matter was not well functioning; that had
26 to wait.
27

28
29 In terms of practice as a facilitator there are a number of implications. Having facilitated many action
30 learning sets we recognise these characteristics are not uncommon, albeit each is unique. ~~The One~~
31 sceptical participant, came to trust the process once he saw it working, at which point he shared his
32 unsaid ~~scepticism~~concerns, but this was more to do with the other set members showing how it
33 worked, it had little to do with T (~~an author of this paper~~): it was a form of vicarious demonstration.
34

35
36 *Getting to know each other's working practices (and challenging stereotypes).*

37 To recap, a few months later we have a surprising conversation about letters and secretarial
38 support. On the face of it mundane and not significant to the participant's task, but it became
39 politely heated. At times support was outpaced with challenge. It was a surprise for me (T), but one
40 that I became curious about, both in terms of what it was revealing about the working relationship
41 but also in relation to the action learning process. This was a pivotal point, after which we related to
42 each other slightly differently; assumptions became the subject for exploration and the questions
43 were less often routed via T as the 'expert' in action learning.
44

45 Edgar Schein, the US academic interested in group processes and culture, invites us to think about
46 culture in the form of three layers. Firstly there are the artefacts (eg visible organisational structures
47 and processes); secondly the espoused beliefs and values (eg strategic goals, justifications,
48 philosophies) and finally underlying assumptions (Schein, 2004, p25-37). These underlying
49 assumptions comprise of unconscious taken for granted ways of working made more so by
50 reinforcing attitudes and actions of those around the person, and as a result they are difficult to
51 notice and talk about. It is this last layer, the one that is hardest to recognise and talk about, that is
52 relevant to the experience here of noticing and talking about assumptions.
53

54
55 In terms of practice the facilitator could have suggested the conversation move onto something
56 more 'substantial', perhaps relating to their projects. However, the facilitator let it flow and in doing
57 so the participants energetically challenged each other. The screw continued to turn and the set
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3 became enlivened by this. At the end there was a change of understanding that was useful, both in
4 the subject matter and how we got there. It is relevant to note that this related to the dynamics
5 within the set only. The development of personal relationships and local knowledge built upon the
6 first two categories of Rooke et al's taxonomy of action learning (Rooke et al., 2007).
7

8 This made me (T) reflect on how I was seen by the set, I was less of a facilitator, but more of a set
9 member, whereby my influence was used to nudge, rather than direct. Increasingly my (T) presence
10 related to silence and what I did not say rather than what I said.
11

12 *The creation of ripples of how people related to each other throughout the organisation.*

13 To recap, it was interesting to note that towards the end of the process Christine's confidence had
14 taken a knock when her project was being taken up in the wider organisation: involving other
15 professional groups and situations that required persuasion rather than direct control. The
16 objections were unexpected and surprising, which affected her confidence and demeanour. In the
17 learning set it was the other participants that spoke. My role as facilitator (T) was again to listen and
18 give the occasional gentle steer, but there was a difference. Attention was focused on other
19 participant's knowledge on the wider goings-on in the organisation, this was in contrast to earlier
20 meetings where the gaze was on the goings on in the set. The learning set was creating ripples of
21 impact, in this case that of Christine, and these were being responded to in the organisation causing
22 reflection and further action amongst the set. The conclusion of the project was very much in doubt
23 at this point and the conversation had both rational and logical elements but also important
24 emotional themes too, what the Greeks might refer to as *logos* and *pathos*.
25
26

27
28 When it comes to practice it is relevant to notice the continual shifting nature of the set, both for the
29 facilitator and the wider set. The organisational impact of projects was being noticed, reflected upon
30 and further actions considered. The facilitator's (T) role now shifted to the occasional invitation to
31 pause, reflect and consider. T was now largely redundant.
32

33 *Holistic sense of the process*

34 The events of the set were not just created within the set; they were affected by other dynamics
35 too, an amplification of which was the regular breakfast meetings with the CEO or his directors. This
36 related both the actual conversation with all the participants in the room but also the informal
37 conversations beforehand. It was notable how this came to affect the learning set, particularly when
38 there was a sharing of knotty and difficult issues that defied straightforward resolution. We saw
39 with Christine how some of these comments provided a springboard for reflection and conversation
40 in the set. The question for practice is how can we enable these reflexive prompts to focus the
41 conversation on issues that both the organisation and the individual cares about.
42
43

44 Looking to contemporary fiction to enable some reflexive prompts is not unusual when it comes to
45 shining a light on practice (Knights and Willmott, 1999; Rhodes and Brown, 2005; ██████████). At
46 the time of writing this paper the thriller writer Robert Harris published his latest novel, a story of
47 the fictitious events of the election of a new Pope and one individual's personal doubt, a doubt that
48 was paradoxically reassuring at the point of greatest need. Off the cuff to the assembled cardinals
49 and laity we hear the otherwise troubled Lomeli explain:
50

51 ... Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance. ... Our faith is a living thing precisely *because* it
52 walks hand in hand in hand with doubt. If there was only certainty, and if there were no
53 doubt, there would be no mystery, and therefore no faith (Harris, 2016, p91).
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55 We are not making any religious points here, instead we are illustrating how the acts and processes
56 that keep a group together and to work productively on problems are the very same processes that
57 might bring about its collapse. There is therefore an enabling interaction between group destruction
58 and cohesion, something that we see most vividly in the account of the medical secretaries and the
59 implementation of Christine's project; the former focused within the set, the latter affected by the
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3 organisation. And as stated previously, these factors were a mix of both the logical and rational as
4 well as the more emotional.

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6 Coming back to critical action learning (CAL) (Vince, 2004, 2008), where there is an emphasis on
7 organisational impact, we can see in this case study the flux between the events outside of the set
8 and the wider organisation. This occurred between meetings, but was made more intense with the
9 breakfast conversations with the CEO and his team. Issues of uncertainty and the friction inside and
10 outside of the set were both uncomfortable, but never the less vital (both in the sense of importance
11 and giving life to) for the process.

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14 In terms of practice the paying attention to the enlivening dynamic of stability/instability of the
15 group is important. As is the acceptance, that sometimes it will not work out. It might have been
16 easy to suppress moments of emerging conflict at the early stages, but this would have been
17 counterproductive in this instance.

18 19 **Conclusions**

20 In this case study we pay attention to one individual in an action learning set. In three vignettes at
21 the start, middle and end of a leadership programme sponsored by an NHS Trust we explore issues
22 of certainty, doubt and progress that they experienced. We add to the debate as to how action
23 learning can come to affect wider patterns within an organisation and how this might be intensified,
24 and in doing so we contribute to recent discussions on critical action learning. We noted that
25 certainty and confidence at the start became dented as the impact of their project came to have
26 ripples throughout the organisation. However, through this the individual became aware of their
27 barriers and own assumptions, which were noticed and challenged by the set, enabling useful
28 progress to be made. This unsettlement of assumptions not only related external events, but also
29 within the set. Earlier in the action learning process a trivial matter became heated. This enabled an
30 exploration of each other's long held assumptions and views of each other. It was the facilitator's
31 view that this was a pivotal moment in the set, yet one that could easily have been skirted over. We
32 also draw attention to the intensification of organisational problems with the inclusion of breakfast
33 meetings with the CEO and their team. Problems were aired and discussed in a way that infused and
34 amplified the conversations of the set.

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38 What is offered to you the reader are vignettes of practice and the offer of reflexive questions that
39 might include: do you relate to the case, if so how? How might it come to affect your practice? And
40 what would you say to us about our practice? In other words, how might this paper prompt the
41 development of our action learning practice in the spirit and curiosity of action learning.

42 43 **Limitations**

44 This is a single person case study in one organisation thus affecting wider generalisation.

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48 49 **References**

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