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Psychological climates in action learning sets: A manager's perspective

Abstract

Action Learning (AL) is often viewed as a process that facilitates professional learning through the creation of a positive psychological climate (Marquart, 2000; Schein, 1979). An psychological climate that fosters an environment in which learning set members feel psychologically safe enough to reflect upon both the successes, and failures in their professional life without any form of repercussion. However, there has been little attention given to the ways that that psychological climate develops, and the differing facets that create that climate. In response to such deficit, this paper reports the outcomes of interviews with eleven managers, all of whom are former AL set members on their experiences of action learning set membership.

Drawing upon an interpretivist philosophy, the paper explores the key themes that emerged from the analysis of those interviews. The analysis serves to illustrate the differing facets that collectively contribute creation of a positive psychological climate that is conducive for learning.

Analysis points to the relative importance of such facets as: trust, honesty, vulnerability, reciprocity, confidentiality and personal disclosure, all of which have the capacity to lead to a positive psychological climate in action learning sets.

This paper is useful for developing an understanding of the differing facets in AL sets that create a psychological climate conducive for learning. As such, it has utility for action learning facilitators, set members, academics and educational consultants.

Key words: Positive psychological climate, psychological facets, manager's experiences

Introduction

Arguably within organisations, there has been a move towards team based structures for reasons of economy, market uncertainty, escalating levels of competition and the growth of knowledge economies (DeOrtentiss et al, 2013; Edmondson and Lei, 2014). AL as a collaborative approach to learning, arguably, is an example of the power in collective effort, and as such has become an invaluable part of management education. In essence, AL is a management development technique that facilitates professional learning in a group or team situation referred to as 'action learning sets' (ALS). A/L sets are considered to be safe places for managers to learn and develop in. Schein (1979) quoted in Coghlan (2012: 255) comments specifically on the 'environment' in which:

The AL environment creates a sense of psychological safety for the participants that enables them to face the anxiety of learning and so unfreezes the assumptions and embedded ways of managing.

Marquart (2000: 238), commenting specifically on the 'conditions', adds:

AL creates conditions in which managers learn from their own experience of a real-life problem, helped by and helping others in a similar or dissimilar situation.

However this may not reflect all **learners' experiences of A/L sets**. Vince (2010:33) is quoted as saying that the management classroom can also reveal the emotional and political 'dynamics' of the group and how these create structures for both action and inaction. **The author acknowledges these differing perspectives on the experiences and utility of an AL set, with some individuals having positive experiences and others who do not. However, the critical AL perspective postulated by Vince serves as an indicator for the need to develop a greater understanding of the psychological climate in AL sets and what facets are integral to that climate.** Therefore, this article focusses on the two quotations that of Schein (1979) and Marquart (2000) cited above as a way of encouraging debate. Both Marquardt and Schein specifically describe what they see can be achieved through the AL process, both paying particular attention to the environment and conditions that are conducive to learning, creating what Haith and Whittingham (2012:112) referred to as a 'mutually

supportive group' as an outcome. In many respects, the authors implicitly refer to the psychological climate or atmosphere exists in AL sets. However, there is little written on psychological climates in which members of the set feel safe enough to really engage with the AL process and subsequently learn from the outcomes of their own actions. Through eleven in depth interviews with managers, this paper aims to address that omission through discussions of the differing facets of psychological climate in action learning sets from the participant's perspective.

This paper begins with a brief introduction to AL, outlining the salient features of the process, thus introducing the reader to the subtle nuances that rest within the process. It then moves on to consider some of the salient points regarding the differing facets that make up a psychological climate. There follows a brief consideration of the method employed in this paper. Finally, the paper moves onto to consider the themes that emerged from the discussion with the managers on their experiences of AL set participation, from which conclusions are drawn. The paper concludes with the implication for practice and the limitations of this paper.

Action Learning (AL)

AL in its simplest form, is an experience based approach to learning that utilises Revan's (1982) premise that managers learn most effectively with, and from, other managers, whilst dealing with the real world complexity of organisational life. Pedler and Boutall (1991:7) defined AL as:

... management and organisational development. Over several months, people working in small groups tackle important organisational issues or problems and learn from their attempts to change things.

It is closely linked to professional education, as AL brings the workplace into the classroom by the use of participants' own real life experiences. The process of learning is carried out in 'AL sets' which are groups of between 6-8 people, invariably managers in organisationally based learning sets, or in the case of the authors experience, in academic programmes that have AL as the programmes underlying delivery philosophy.

Each set member brings a live problem or live issue to the set, something that has meaning in their immediate life. Working with the other set members, through a process of challenge and support via the use of carefully worded questions, the individual set member is encouraged to explore ways of seeing and of finding solutions to their own issue. Sets are the essential strand of the learning framework, and are the vehicle for bringing about change in the individual. Rimanoczy (2007:247) specifically describes the actual process within the **AL set as 'a form of learning through experience, by asking questions of each other, the task being the vehicle for learning'**. By focussing on both the environment and conditions in the learning set, it becomes necessary to briefly discuss both the concept of psychological climate, as it is arguably, a construct that is implicit within those quotations.

Psychological climate

The concept of a 'psychological climate', as distinct from that of an organisational climate, refers to the dominant psychological atmosphere or ambience in a particular group or in this context, an AL set (Jones and James, 1979; Koys and Decotis, 1991). The psychological climate is something that is felt by individual members and acts as the basis for the way that they behave in the group or set (Schneider, 1983). Rousseau (1988:140) describes it as '... individual descriptions of the social setting or context of which a person is a part'. In an AL set is desirable that its members feel that a positive psychological climate exists that facilitates the learning process, a climate that encourages learning through reflection, and subsequent discussion of an individual's success and/or failure of their actions.

Methodology

Epistemological position

An 'interpretivist' philosophy that draws upon the principles of grounded theory underpins the research framework adopted in this paper. The purpose of a 'grounded theory' is to 'generate or discover a theory'. Grounded theory is often cited as being the prime example of an inductive approach to data collection (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Yoong (1996:35) stated that 'the choice of grounded theory for the analysis and articulation of raw experience is supported in situations where there is little previous research in an area'. Pauleen et al (2007:228) added that grounded theory is:

An inductive process, in which concepts, insights, and understanding is developed from patterns in the data. It is this inductive process that allows for the development and articulation of theories or models in situations where little previous experience or knowledge exists.

The author felt that as there has been little attention given to the differing facets of a positive psychological climate AL sets, it seemed to use this approach. This approach also offers a rich insight into the nature of individual set member's experiences, adding the participant's voice to the paper, voices that are often overlooked, Lee (2006:96) writing from a set members' perspective on action learning said that 'It is only through sharing our perspectives that action learning can be fully explored.

Data Set

A convenience sample, comprising eleven interviewees, who were known to either myself or my colleagues was used. Interviewees were aged between 24 to 53 years old, and comprised 7 women and 4 men. All had been former students on either the MSc in professional Leadership through AL and Inquiry or the MA in Management by AL. All were full time employment at managerial level, either in education, local government or the health service; both public and private clinical.

From an ethical perspective, the data set **were** all former students had been awarded their respective qualifications. Therefore, they were under no obligation to actually

take part in the study, and when each person was approached they were advised that participation was voluntary. Current students on either programme were not part of the sample used for the research because of issues of asymmetrical power relationships (Oakley, 1981 cited in Rigg and Trehan, 2004).

Each participant was informed of the nature of the research when the initial contact was made. They were also informed of their role in the research process which was simply to talk about their experiences of **being** in a learning set. In accordance with both the principles of AL and the Universities policy on ethics, they were informed that whatever they said would be anonymised and remain confidential

Interview approach

The interviews were deliberately conversational in style, loosely designed in order to elicit rich and detailed accounts of participants' experiences (Kvale, 1996). Each interviewee was asked to reflect upon learning sets they had been a member of; either at their place of work or in a university academic programme as identified above. The rationale for the decision to enquire about both academic and organisational experiences was to **simply to give candidates as much scope as possible to reflect upon any experiences of action learning.**

They were all asked the opening question 'what's it like to be an AL set'. As, the interviews were unstructured as described above, this had the overall effect that some interviewee's comments are cited more often, upon reflection, this may be a limitation in some respects. However, regrettably, because of the loose nature of the interviews, views on the topic of psychological climate did not emerge with all interviewees. This has resulted in an unequal distribution of comments. This now clearly presents itself as an opportunity for further research. As appropriate to grounded theory, thematic analysis and theoretical sampling were continuously used across all of the data collection stages. The advice of Bryman and Bell (2003:435) were taken with respect to the various stages and methods of collecting **and analysing** data such as the use of field notes, memos and **theoretical sampling in order to illicit the various themes that emerged from the interviews.** in order to start to understand the data. The use of open coding ensured that various themes emerged at an early stage.

Discussion of findings

This section discusses the main findings of the interviews with the eleven managers. This discussion explores the key themes that emerged from the analysis, illustrating the differing facets that collectively contribute a positive psychological climate conducive for learning. These facets, analysed in order include: trust, honesty, vulnerability, reciprocity, confidentiality, these in turn lead to a feeling of psychological safety and willingness engage in personal disclosure and are purposely discussed in that order, although arguably, to discuss them in a linear order is taking rather a reductionist view of the complex relationships between each of the facets.

Illustrative quotations from the eleven interviews are included and are written in italics in order to differentiate that from academic citing's. To preserve anonymity, the discrete quotations listed have no names or identifiers attached to them, instead three xxx's denote the name of an organisation the interviewee refers to and for xxxx's denote any names used.

Trust

Bennis and Nanus (1985:43) viewed trust as '... the lubrication that makes it possible for organisations to work', conveying the idea that trust is essential for effective group and working relationships, and the creation of a positive psychological climate, as it is **trust that often has the effect of bringing** people together. West and Cheouke (2003: 216) in relation to the AL process stated that:

The fundamental principles of AL are mutual support, trust, empathy and challenge in a safe environment where creative ideas can be tested and debated.

Dirks (1999:30) argues that 'trust is commonly cited as a hallmark of effective relationships'... One participant commented that '*...you have to trust people and you can't trust people from day one, so you might introduce it as a concept but it takes time*'. Supported by another participant commented: '*I think we all understood the concept of trust and that it was about development of it*'. Acknowledging an understanding that trust is a facet of the process, but inevitably it takes time to

develop. Another participant added; *once I'd learnt to trust people, I knew that was time that I could actually come and talk openly and independently*' this indicating that AL is beginning to work, whilst introducing the dimension of honesty as a vital construct. **The next section takes the facet of trust, linking that facet to that of honesty, which in turn, engenders a positive psychological climate.**

Honesty

Honesty was one construct that interviewees were concerned with. One participant added *'in order to achieve trust in the set you needed to be open and honest.'* There is an expectation that if the learning set is to work successfully then set members should be open and honest with both themselves and other set members. One individual reported that she found the process *'quite liberating really, because we're not always open and honest with other people and we always have this face on at work and we always sometimes have to do and say things that we don't personally believe'*. There is a strong sense that honesty has to be present for success in this form of learning. One participant commented: *'The way I sort of expected other people to behave is that you're honest and open about what you're thinking and dealing with...'*. With another adding *'so you have to be open and honest then because otherwise you're just play acting'*. Maister et al (2000:24) wrote that for this to happen, set members are required to take risks, illustrated by the person who said: *sometimes it's about taking a bit of a risk..... Yes I did, by saying more than I normally would have said, like when I was talking about xxxx, that's not something that I would normally do with people that I don't know.* Honesty in AL sets **is an important facet that assists with the creation** of a positive psychological climate in which set members have the opportunity to become 'honest men' (Revans 1982) and are able to fully learn from their actions, as both success and failure are equally embraced as there is little concern for the need to protect themselves from other set members. In many respects they become vulnerable, **which can also be considered part of the process of creating a positive psychological climate.**

Vulnerability

A common facet of the creation of a positive psychological climate is the concept of vulnerability, and the willingness of the individual to be vulnerable to another which

often has a bonding effect. (McKnight et al, 1998) and Mayer et al (1995), cited in Dirks (1999:4), and conceptually define vulnerability as:

A willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that party

Maister's point is illustrated by one of the participant who commented on the experience of first entering the AL set by saying *'Initially a bit scary because you were coming into a situation with individuals that you didn't know...'* However, over time a sense of psychological safety emerges.

Reciprocity

Another facet that is important in the creation of a positive psychological climate in AL sets is that of reciprocity. Reciprocity is ably illustrated by the saying *'you help me and I'll help you'*. 'Maister et al. (2000:26) stated that individuals must act in a way that shows other individuals that they can be trusted. As one participant commented *'what bit of personal tit for tat are you going to give up'* illustrating the expectation part of the relationship. This was elaborated upon by the interviewee who understood the nature of the relationship that would enable her to receive honest feedback on her actions:

'would actually get an independent response back because these were people that didn't know the situation I was in, and didn't know the people I was dealing with, so as a result it was a very honest response back and actually offered me guidance as to how I could manage situations and manage things and do things differently...'

Reciprocity adds to the creation of a positive psychological climate through individual set member's actions that demonstrate that they can be trusted. 'Maister et al. (2000:17) said that "You must do something to give the other people the evidence on which they can base their decisions on whether to trust you". An example of those actions would include that of confidentiality, which is essential in this context, as psychological safety depends on it.

Confidentiality

Bulach & Peterson (1999:2) add an interesting dimension to the creation of a positive psychological climate with the concept of confidentiality. Stating that 'an interpersonal condition that exists when interpersonal relationships are characterised by an assured reliance or confident dependence on the character, ability, truthfulness, confidentiality and predictability of others in the group' There may be possible differing interpretations of what is meant by the terms honesty and openness, and the extent to which set members are prepared to be honest and open. **However**, if set members are to be honest in their discussions within the learning set, there will be an expectation that will be a high degree of confidentiality in the set (Willis, 2012) **which leads to a feeling of psychological safety**. This was important to one interviewee who said '*there is that confidentiality between you all what you say within that room stays within that room*'. He continued by saying:

I think we had to do a lot of ground work to start off with just to build up that level of trust and confidentiality really, that that was something that we could rely on from the others....'

Cain (1998:159) commented that confidential information is commonly said to be 'secret information that is disclosed or entrusted on the understanding that it will not be divulged to a third party'. McGill and Beatty (1992:37) add that confidentiality was seen as an important element **of psychologically safe learning set**, illustrated by the interviewee that cautioned:

Well at first you have to be very wary because, certainly within the xxx I suppose it's everywhere you go, because certainly if certain things got out they could be very career limiting to say the least

There was a need for the set members to feel that what was said in the learning sets would stay within the confines of the learning set. This assurance encouraged members to explore feelings and future actions. Robinson (2001:69) reinforces the idea of confidentiality and offers the following comment from a student who was a member of an AL set:

There was certainly an atmosphere of confidentiality there so we felt we could discuss issues and people did. Quite personal things because the nature of the course was that to a certain extent you are talking about something very personal to people and I felt that people did do that. It was quite successful, the confidentiality and the support element that was achieved. If set members are to be honest in their discussions within the learning set, there will be an expectation that will be a high degree of confidentiality in the set.

It is interesting to note that at this point, a situation where all of the above constructs are present: trust; honesty; vulnerability; reciprocity and confidentiality, the process of AL has a strong probability of leading to a situation in which members of set feel that they are able to start to disclose issues about themselves, and their actions and begin to learn. Thus acknowledging Revans early premise that reflection on both an individual's successes and failures on actions are vital for learning, and can only be achieved by a willingness to disclose them, whereby, the individual becomes 'an honest man'. **Arguably at this stage, it is relevant to discuss the concept of psychological safety, and how that engenders a positive psychological climate that has become safe enough for individuals to fully engage in the process of action learning.**

Psychological safety

Edmondson (2002:3) refers to the concept of 'psychological safety' and defines it as 'a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking' with 'interpersonal risk taking' taken to mean 'a sense of confidence that others will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up'. Psychological safety includes: 1) respect for each other's competence, 2) caring about each other as people and 3) trust in each other's intentions. Kahn (1990: 708) describes it as 'feeling able to show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career.' DeOrteniis et al (2013:525) adding that 'the team will not harm individuals or their interests'. One interviewee remarked that '*it became a very safe place, because you kind knew everyone and had a good idea of where they were coming from and their issues they were dealing with and you were able to be a bit more free and were able to disclose stuff that you ordinarily wouldn't have done at the beginning*'.

Psychological safety in AL creates a positive psychological climate where set members are able to concentrate on learning from their actions, embracing both success and failure, and there is little concern for the need to protect themselves from other set members. One interviewee remarked *"I think it was because people felt safe to do so that it would be understood and that it would be alright and no-one got any mixed messages after that"* This, as Schein (1985:298) remarks assists set members in overcoming any defensiveness or 'learning anxiety' they may experience. Smith (2001:35) refers to the concept of psychological safety in stating that AL:

Permits risk taking within a psychologically safe environment, much like the safe practice area we choose when learning to ride a bike

Bourner et al (1996:13) describe the AL set as 'safe place to explore self and project' with respondents in his research stating that the set was safe place to take risks and be honest with one's self. Young et al. (2010) describes an AL set (ALS) as being 'safe reflective environment that inspired personal growth and empathetic interaction'. One interviewee added *'Yes it was. It was safe. The first couple of times it was like what are the boundaries? What are the limits?'* Psychological safety assists individuals in overcoming the anxiety that is often associated with learning, particularly when faced with opposing views or insights that contradict an individual's perception of themselves, demonstrated by the interviewee who said *"It was somewhere where you don't feel threatened; you don't feel like you're going to be ridiculed or judged, made to feel a fool"*, illustrating the anxiety of perhaps losing face or feeling silly can be detrimental the learning process. In discussing working collaboratively in organisational life, Edmondson and Lei (2014:39) in referring to the implications for practice in relation to psychological safety state that:

One practical takeaway from the literature on psychological safety is that this positive interpersonal climate, which is conducive to learning and performance under uncertainty, does not emerge naturally.

However, for AL process to work, there ideally should be a sense of psychological safety set members will start to open up to one another (DeOrtentiss et al, 2013).

The next section discusses personal disclosure, acknowledging that this is the very essence of what is required for the process of AL to work for individuals. All the other facets combined lead the individual to a place where he/she feels secure enough to challenge themselves with the task of becoming an honest man, as the climate that they are working in is now conducive for individuals to learn through their experiences, both positive and negative.

Personal disclosure

Personal disclosure or self-disclosure as (Dindia,2002) is sometimes referred to is a primary way in which individuals become acquainted with one another, and in the initial encounters they will reveal information such as names, place of work, where they live, moving onto thoughts and feelings as the conversation progresses over time. Inevitably this is a difficult process for some, one participant remarked that they felt that *'some people were uncomfortable with it straight away'*, another participant in describing their uncertainty said *'to go in and to find out that you would be talking about your personal feelings and emotions and experiences, I wasn't sure at first'*. Supported by the person who captured the essence of the collective reservations about the process said *'so to actually sit round a table and basically open your heart out and share very personal and sensitive information...a bit scary!* However as Weinstein has said previously, honesty through disclosure can be a problematic process in terms of the organisations politics. One participant remarked *'I'm not a person that trusts easy so it was an element of whom would be feeding this back to whom, to make sure that whatever was said in that room stayed in the room'* However, membership of an AL set inevitably means a certain amount of self-disclosure, particularly when occupying the role of presenter (Dindia, 2002:175). The premise that this disclosure will 'beget' disclosure from other set members, on the basis of that the presenter reveals personal information about themselves, **and then it is likely that a positive psychological climate will emerge**. Jourard (1971:66) introduced the idea that disclosure is reciprocal and describes how:

In ordinary social relationships, disclosure is a reciprocal phenomenon. Participants in dialogue disclose their thoughts, feelings, actions etc. to the other and are disclosed in return. I called this reciprocity the 'dyadic effect'; disclosure begets disclosure.

However, some individuals may not want to disclose information, possibly because they feel that at an early stage of the group's development they are not yet comfortable with the idea of disclosure. Limited self-disclosure impedes group progress (Doxsee & Kivlighan, 1994). Bourner and Frost (1996:12) carried out research on people who had been members of an AL set; one set member reported that:

My feelings before the first set were mixed; part of me was excited about the new possible learning but part of me felt very scared. Did I really want my fellow managers knowing I had weak spots? Was this from 'big brother' above needing to find out how we rated as managers? Did I really want or need the stress?

Edmondson (2002:2) noted that largely people are both consciously and unconsciously impression managers, and are therefore reluctant to engage in behaviours that are likely to damage the image others may hold of them. There is, however, a balance to be achieved in the disclosing of personal information. McGill and Brockbank (2006:147) describe self - disclosure as a 'leap of trust' but caution that 'Too much self-disclosure is embarrassing. Too little and we may find we do not relate to others and reduce our capacity to reflect upon ourselves in the set'. McGill and Brockbank (2006:154), in elaborating on this theme, discuss the idea of appropriate disclosure, defining appropriate as an amount in terms of how much disclosure; the depth, in terms of how deep it will go; the duration (how long); the target (to whom) and the situation (time and place). So, when asked how they felt about personal disclosure, participants said that initially they felt a little uncomfortable with the idea of disclosure, conversely, one adding emphatically that *I'm absolutely sure it was a safe place because I got to choose how much I disclosed, I'm talking personal stuff* and thus illustrated that not all individuals feel the same way.

Conclusion

The two articles cited at the start of this paper: Marquart (2000) & Schein (1979) refer specifically to the AL environment and the creation of the right conditions for learning, they do not comment specifically on what conditions that should ideally to

be present in order to create that environment. Interviews with managers, who are former AL members, revealed a number of facets, when combined, **have the capacity to create a feeling of psychological safety for the set members, this in turn forms** the positive psychological climate, implicit in both quotations, that is conducive for the AL process to work and real learning to occur. This learning occurs when participants are able to go back to Revans' (1982) original premise of the 'honest man' and share successes, but perhaps more importantly, failures that exist in their lives in a positive psychological climate that is psychologically safe for its individual members. The analysis of the interviews revealed the importance of the presence of these facets in creating a positive psychological climate.

In consideration of the facets themselves, analysis revealed the interconnected nature of them. Trust takes time to develop and confidentially has to be **both** assured and demonstrated. Reciprocity has to be evident in each individual's conduct in the learning sets. Consequently, a willingness to be vulnerable is an inevitable part of the process. All the ingredients are likely to lead to personal disclosure. Disclosure being one of the key ingredients for the AL process to work. This situation requires individual members that be willing to disclosure both the success and failures of their action, and reflect upon them publicly, whereby gaining the opportunity to learn from those actions. This comes about when all the constructs previously discussed in the paper, come together to create a positive psychological climate, or 'environment' (Schein, 1979) and with 'the right conditions' (Marquardt, 2000) for participants to learn in.

Implications for practice

These insights are important to various groups which include business managers, academics and practioners who are currently engaged in the facilitation of AL or who may be considering its use or have employees on programmes where it is used. It gives an insight into the facets that ideally should be present in a learning set in order to create a positive psychological climate in which set member can learn.

Limitations of the paper

In discussing the differing facets of a positive psychological climate in a linear order is taking rather a reductionist view of the complex relationships between each of the facets, which may not be fully appreciated by the presentation of the narrative.

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