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Action Learning as a Human Resource Development Resource to Realize Collective Leadership

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Several months ago, I was pleased to speak at a conference on “Action Learning in a Changing World,” sponsored by the University Forum for Human Resource Development. In my presentation I featured action learning as a potential resource of human resource development for adopting collective leadership. I use the word *potential* because it is not necessarily the conventional purpose of action learning when adopted as a human resource development tool. It is primarily used as a form of work-based learning. However, its components can be aptly constituted for the former purpose; in fact, action learning may be one of the best HRD methods to prepare participants for collective leadership in the organization.

Following the presentation, a number of questions were raised by the audience that were not fully addressed because of time limitations. Fortunately, Dr. Yonjoo Cho, *HRDR's* Editor, has given me the opportunity of writing this editorial to elaborate on the issues raised at the conference as well as on other matters that can allow me to more fully explain my position that action learning can indeed be a human resource development resource to realize collective leadership.

Collective Leadership and Leaderful Practice

Before outlining the inter-connection between action learning and collective leadership, let's first briefly define terms so that we start on the same page. First, what is collective leadership? I approach it as a dynamic co-constructed democratic process in which constellations of individuals working and making decisions together contribute knowledge, skill, and meaning to the task at hand. Unlike shared leadership, it is not a case of non-managerial employees assuming leadership roles, nor, like distributed leadership, is it a case of workers

being allowed to join together in collaborations. It is rather an opportunity for individuals to freely associate in their practice not dependent on any one authority to mobilize action on their behalf. The members co-create their community often through dialogue and this process includes questions of direction and values. It is also more than an exchange between individuals; rather it is a process in which the relations among individuals, mediated by material and embodied resources, bring about change and meaning to the project they are working on. These relations can be described as an in-the-moment intra-action – not *inter*, but *intra*-action – during which a dynamic unfolding may emerge that in an agentic fashion reorients the flow of practice.

In my own version of collective leadership, referred to as *leaderful* practice (Raelin, 2010), I present four tenets of such a practice called the four C’s:

Collective leadership	Everyone in the group can serve in leadership; the team is not dependent on one individual to take over. The members of the group co-create the enterprise.
Concurrent leadership	There can be more than one person operating in leadership at the same time. Members contribute to leadership in different and important ways.
Collaborative leadership	Anyone can speak for the entire team. All members commit to each other’s learning. Together they engage in a mutual dialogue to determine what needs to be done and how to do it.
Compassionate leadership	All participants commit to preserving the dignity of every single member of the team, regardless of their background, social standing, level, or point of view.

Action Learning

Let’s turn next to action learning, a contextualized HRD method that seeks to generate learning from human interaction arising from engagement in the solution of real-world work problems.

There are many variants of action learning, but all seem to have four common principles based on the “neo-classical” practices of action learning suggested by Pedler et al. (2005) in revising the classic model of founder Reg Revans (1998):

- That learning be acquired in the midst of action and dedicated to the task at hand.
- That participants work on problems aimed at organizational as well as personal development and the intersection between them.
- That learners work in peer learning teams to support and challenge each other.
- That its users demonstrate a learning-to-learn aptitude entailing a search for fresh questions over expert knowledge.

In terms of practices, participants in action learning undertake a real project most often in their own organizations that is sanctioned by organizational sponsors and that has potential value not only to the participants but also to the organizational unit to which the project is attached. Throughout the program, participants continue to work on their projects with assistance from other participants as well as from qualified facilitators or set advisers who, in learning teams, help them make sense of their project experiences through real-time reflection and relevant theory. Action learning thus relies upon feedback that by focusing on the participants' practices and values ensures that any actions are seen not as neutral stances but as positions with points of view and anticipated consequences. So, in action learning, the "action" is there as the pathway to learning. Solving the problem is anticipated, but it is just as critical that there be learning from experience.

Having provided these brief explanations of collective leadership and action learning, let's proceed now to their relationship: how might action learning serve as a resource for human resource development to realize collective leadership? In scrutinizing this relationship, I will use the aforementioned four C's of leaderful practice as an investigative lens.

Action Learning and the Four C's of Leaderful Practice

Action Learning → Collective Leadership

A key component of action learning especially via the learning team is the establishment of a reflective practice. Participants through their questioning of each other and themselves become receptive to challenges to their own way of thinking. They become willing to disturb their own worldview on behalf of a collective understanding (van Woerkom, 2008). Some reflective practices would include testing available knowledge, challenging assumptions and inferences, exploring inter-subjective differences, and disrupting familiar meanings followed by reframing.

Among the norms that permeate the learning team would be inquiry and curiosity. Any plan for change becomes not a verdict but a hypothesis that requires individual and collective scrutiny. Through this process of what was earlier referred to as an intra-action, participants begin to develop a deep and peripheral awareness of one another. They seek new ways of understanding rather than agreement or truth. And finally, especially in support of collective leadership, they see value in sharing leadership with others.

Action Learning → Concurrent Leadership

Within the learning team, we find that participants begin to assume a variety of roles to create a team that is committed to enhancing everyone's learning while accomplishing the tasks required to become a successful project team. Some of these roles might be providing support to other team members, fostering team spirit, knowing where to find answers to intractable problems, or exploring and reporting on opportunities outside the team. Over the course of time, participants begin to see such roles as leadership roles which initiates a realization that many members can be contributing to the collective leadership of the team at the same time.

Action Learning → Collaborative Leadership

Another facet of the learning team is the gradual assumption of collaborative decision making and action. Everyone is invited to advocate their views, but they are equally prepared to listen and deeply consider those of others. This form of leadership can initially take more time, but in the end, it can not only serve to quicken decision making, especially during moments of immediate need or crisis, it can lead to more comprehensive solutions. Further, it has HRD implications across the enterprise in fostering collaborative networks. Consider that action learning projects often shape strategic practices; consequently, senior sponsors frequently need to coordinate with their own stakeholders to extend fertile ideas. Thus, they may learn to challenge existing mind-sets and to dialogue across their own inter-subjective boundaries.

Action Learning → Compassionate Leadership

Action learning in its basic structure constitutes a democratic process. Members convene in a spirit of equal participation and the other principal affiliate is the facilitator who in the sense of praxis performs his or her role in the service of reflection and learning, not in the sense of control (Raelin, 2006). Consequently, action learning endorses a number of critical democratic values, in particular, humility and sustainability. In humility, one takes the stance of the learner who sees his or her contribution as dependent upon the contribution of others. In sustainability, action learning honors other cultures and publics along with their viewpoints and brings them into the learning process.

Critical Issues and Concerns

Now let's consider some of the issues and concerns about the proposed collective leadership role for action learning that were of interest to AHRD members and to the HRD community generally. I will present this section using a question-and-answer format. Of course,

this interchange would just begin the process of collective inquiry. It is my hope that the critical views shared herein serve as a take-off point for fuller dialogue among our readers.

Q: Why is action learning a better resource to realize collective leadership than other training events?

A: If one were to compare action learning to such HRD activities as high potential programs that offer leadership training at lavish off-sites, these latter programs tend to focus on training individuals, separated from their teams, to become better leaders often through the vehicle of leader competencies. In the case of action learning, rather than training one member in the group to be a “leader,” it essentially brings leadership development to the group to facilitate the capturing of the meta-competencies to help members learn with each other. There is a long history concerning the poor transference from training of leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities (Raelin, 2008). The problem of course is that through such training, the trainee learns but the team at home does not. In most cases, trainees find that they need to “unlearn” their newfound practices before it is too late and they lose the commitment of their team members.

Q: Aren't there institutional forces that limit the critical learning from action learning, let alone about how to engage in collective leadership practices?

A: There are certainly such inertial forces that inhibit change, such as when host or sponsoring organizations may lean on participants to accept managerial orthodoxies or otherwise face silences or isolation. This effect may occur especially in cases where program managers and facilitators engage in critical action learning in which the inequalities, emotional tensions, and power relations in groups, organizations, and cultures are brought out into the open. Perhaps an early warning signal needs to be expressed to chief executives willing to sponsor action learning

that it is not particularly safe for the preservation of the status quo! The case has to be made that action learning flourishes in an organizational culture of risk-taking and openness. It does so by permitting the surfacing of organizational dynamics that support rather than undermine reflection, especially of complex emotional, social and political relations, be they gendered differences or concerns regarding structures of inequity (Fenwick, 2005; Rigg & Trehan, 2004). In such a culture, participants can develop the courage to speak up at times against the tide of popular opinion. It is under these circumstances that the skillful intervention of a trained facilitator can be especially helpful to encourage participants to face tough emotional issues, be they between themselves or with their organizational sponsors, management, or colleagues.

Q: Isn't there more of a chance to develop collective leadership in teams that focus on a common challenge than on versions of action learning in which each participant brings an individual problem to the team?

A: It is true that public and academic programs often offer a version of action learning that brings individual projects into the learning team, but such a variant does not negate the opportunity for collective leadership to progress. Just as in the case of a common project, participants serve as sounding boards to one another and provide useful feedback that can be mobilized once in action. Further, as we have heard so often from individual assessments of action learning: one learns as much or even more from engaging with other members' problems than with one's own. Lastly, there is so much opportunity in leadership from serving as a peer coach to others (Johnson, 2019). Participants often use coaching as a way to orient their subsequent communications within the organization resulting in a tendency to be more inclusive and less directive. Among their coaching skills include active listening, asking open-ended

questions, and assisting others to discover their own answers rather than giving advice – all practices that enhance one’s faculty for collective leadership.

Q: In order to make a difference in the world by transforming structure or mobilizing social action, must there not be the exercise of individual agency?

A: It is not necessary to make a difference in the world only through individual agency as if other parties are passively awaiting the “word from on high” to thrust them into action. Are not people already in motion in most cases, and when it comes to individual agency, most often referred to as influence in leadership annals, does it pay to distinguish each micro-move in the course of a leadership endeavor? Focusing on influence might at times distort the interactive or intra-active nature of the effort. I submit, then, that agency can be an intersubjective collaborative process. Through dialogue, the parties look to coordinate with one another to complete their singular and mutual activities. The agency becomes intersubjective, reciprocally constituting both the individual and the social. The individual may retain his or her interpretation of activity while considering and possibly incorporating the current and forthcoming meanings from other participants (List & Pettit, 2011).

Q: We know there cannot be leaders without followers, so in collective leadership do we need group followership?

A: The *leaderful* version of collective leadership questions the very premise of this question. Through its four C’s of leaderful practice, it stipulates that leadership does not require a single authority in front. Hence, it is not important for anyone to take his or her place in line. Followership, in other words, becomes outdated. Rather than sustain personalistic accounts of leadership, collective leadership sees it as a mutual social phenomenon. Even in consideration of

social movements, collective actions can take precedence over the out-in-front actor. Social activities may start out as dispersed, or even latent, but they can morph into more organized movements as participants join together in community. Together they may generate strategies of resistance as a means of identity formation and as an expression of human solidarity (Haber, 1994; Schatzki, 1996).

Q: Is the conduct of dialogue in the learning team transferable to the discourse of the organization?

A: I have long argued that dialogue is the engine of collective leadership practice. Dialogue is not just designed to have us learn from each other but also to help us organize our way of acting together, and, once mastered, it is largely irreversible because of its transformative potential. From GH Mead's sociality (1934), we engage with others without detaching thought from body; rather we focus on our embodied state, our response, and the perspective of the other toward the self. Though difficult and destabilizing, holding together a multiplicity of perspectives (including temporal awareness of past and future) can help us to engage in deep understanding, unlearn our prejudices, and create new worlds.

Conclusion

In this editorial, I have provided an explanation and entertained a variety of queries about the possible use of action learning as a resource for HRD practitioners in promoting the practice of collective leadership throughout the organization. There is no guarantee that action learning will automatically produce collective leadership. In particular, action learning's potential rides on the practice of critical reflection without which participants may not derive the deep and peripheral awareness that is fundamental to collective leadership. There are also pressures on

participants going through action learning to accept particular organizational doctrines and institutional norms that may obviate the necessary freedom to participate freely in collective inquiry. Facilitators of learning teams also need to have sufficient degrees of freedom to extend the lessons of action learning into the domains of power, politics, and cultural pre-dispositions.

In sum, through reflective dialogue action learning participants acquire a voice to shape their own organizational life. With emancipatory voice within the enterprise comes an enhanced commitment to decisions made and a concomitant responsibility for outcomes. The net result should be a culmination of human flourishing in which people participate through their own exploratory, creative, and communal discourses. When action learning is shaped in this way, it equips participants with particular habits and attitudes that give rise to an appreciation of leadership as a collective process.

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