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Deriving an Affinity for Collective Leadership: Below the Surface of Action Learning

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Would that there were an expeditious way to take advantage of the idea of learning right within the midst of practice, dedicated as it would be to the task at hand? Might we also add to this imaginary that this presumed method prepare people, as they engage together in their practice, for the assumption of collective leadership.

Regarding the first method, we arrive at this wish because of a need in the 21st Century workplace for knowledge to be less fixed as a taught resource and more mobile so as to help us improvise and learn our way out of ongoing questions within the workplace (Levi-Strauss, 1966; Lave, 1996; Robb et al., 2017). In the case of the second method, we recall Daniel Kahneman's quandary (2011) when, as a psychologist with the Israeli Army, he found his team's evaluation of leadership traits during officer training to be little better than chance when linked to subsequent performance (as per field commander assessments). The clear assumption to be drawn is that it may be better, rather than removing trainees from their practice to get their leadership training, to bring the leadership training to the group doing the work! This would be in the form of an action learning seeking to generate learning from human interaction arising in the solution of real-time work problems. In so doing, perhaps they would learn to lead together.

In this article I hope to present the proposition that the imaginary of a method to learn directly from practice while developing an affinity for collective leadership is already available to us via action learning but for its adoption as a collective leadership development approach. It is not that action learning is unknown or unused; it is that it has not been typically conceived as an appropriate method to prepare participants for *collective* leadership. To support my proposition, I will first provide some

background on both collective leadership and action learning so that we will can agree on terms and meanings. Next, I will seek to explain *how* action learning can transform participants towards an affinity for collective leadership, and not only at the individual level of experience, but at the team and organizational levels as well. We also need to acknowledge the drawbacks of action learning, especially the tendency to neglect the critical domain of collective reflection – an ingredient deemed essential to collective leadership. To understand the reasoning behind the properties of action learning, we need to consider *why* action learning can be a propitious method to acclimate to the world of collective leadership, especially due to its practice orientation. I will close with some applications to collective leadership along with a cautionary note, leading to some final remarks.

Background

My earlier acknowledgement of collective leadership was aimed at pointing out that leadership in the current knowledge era is less frequently an influence relationship originating from a single individual; it occurs more often as a dynamic practice that is distributed across a range of individuals oftentimes in a team setting (Denis, Langley, and Rouleau, 2010). There is not a uniform view of collective leadership; in fact, it is often referred to in different terms, such as shared, distributed, or plural (see, e.g., Pearce and Conger, 2003; Spillane, 2006; Denis, Langley, and Sergi, 2017). Most of the models, typified by the extensive review of Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone (2007), represent leadership as a “condition of mutual influence embedded in ... interactions” (p. 1218). Accordingly, the classic view of leadership as occurring in the relationship between leaders and followers tends to remain intact. However, some of the recent practice approaches to leadership (see, e.g., Crevani, Lindgren, and Packendorff, 2010; Raelin, 2016) see leadership as a co-construction of changes in work activity by those involved in the practice at hand. In a networked and knowledge-based economy, there is less need for any one person to make decisions and mobilize action on the part of those assembled. It is a process in which relations among individuals,

mediated by material and embodied resources, often within a network and across multiple levels, lend knowledge, skill, and meaning to the task at hand (Dansereau & Yammarino, 1998; Friedrich et al., 2009). It is thus a collective phenomenon rather than a purely distributed or shared approach in which non-managers are assigned or assume managerial duties. As a collective practice, there is a need among practitioners to negotiate roles, resources, time and space, material, divergences, and even the reality in front of them. The interaction that occurs, however, is more than an exchange between individuals. It is often 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 (Barad, 2003; Raelin, 2016).

Although collective leadership focuses on a group or organizational level of activity, its capacity to expand leadership beyond singular individuals requires a degree of psychological security in order to flourish. This starts with the presence of position leaders who are predisposed to collaborative agency and able to forego their own ego gratification for the benefit of the group. They are committed to a dispersion of control through a commitment to a participant-directed praxis. Participants need to find their voice and be willing to contribute to the leadership of the community. Using a dialogic model of communication, they commit to soliciting the diverse views of others while making themselves vulnerable to others' inquiry of themselves. In the latter condition, participants may need to lay aside their own world views through what developmental psychologists refer to as "post-conventional" thinking (Kohlberg, 1984; Torbert, 2004). They accordingly revise their mental models to incorporate the hopes and visions of others. In time through the dialogic process, participants develop personal roles and responsibilities that can be contributed to the community.

From a structural perspective, collective leadership tends to flourish in relational environments, such as social networks, and within organic configurations in which members engage in a high degree of self-direction. They are entrusted to work together, often in small groups or "circles," managing

themselves within their zones of autonomy. Leadership is restructured for decision making in the form of widely distributed knowledge. Workers have access to information that was once the exclusive domain of top management, and since work is increasingly interconnected, organizational structures are viewed as fluid rather than fixed (Lam, 2005).

As for my consideration of action learning, whereas most programs in leadership training concentrate on psychological properties focusing on “leader” development, leadership being seen as a person-centric experience, action learning is concerned with acute immersion into practices (Mezirow, 2002; Day et al., 2014). These practices are characterized as being embedded within social relations and between people, objects, and their institutions. Further, action learning is a form of learning associated with lived experience that occurs within specific historical, cultural, and local contexts (Nicolini, Gherardi, and Yanow, 2003). Rather than operate as a vertical pedagogy wherein knowledge originates from a single source of expertise, it is a lateral learning experience that is emergent, arising from a contested interaction among a community of inquirers (Bakhtin 1986; Chia and Holt 2006; Schatzki 1997). In action learning, then, participants need not be sent away for training; rather, the learning experience materializes among them as they are collectively engaged.

Readers of this journal hardly need a tutorial on the fundamentals of action learning, but just so we can agree on basic processes, let me say an extra word about projects and sets as part of some emerging “neo-classical” practices of action learning suggested by Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook (2005) in revising the classic model of founder Reg Revans (1998). Participants undertake a real project 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 (Marquardt, 1999; Yorks, O’Neil, and Marsick, 1999; Pedler, 2011). Throughout the program, students continue to work on their projects with assistance from other participants as well as from qualified facilitators or set advisers who help them make sense of their project experiences through real-time reflection and relevant

theory. Most recently in the post-Revans era, curricular modules have been added and delivered “just-in-time” to be helpful to the participants in overcoming substantive problems arising in their project work.

Feedback on participants’ handling of the project as well as on their participation in the team principally occurs in learning sets or teams typically composed of five to seven participants. During the learning team sessions, the participants discuss not only the practical dilemmas arising from actions in their work settings, but also the application or misapplication of concepts and theories to these actions. Further, the group develops a social culture in its own right, which presents participants with lessons in group dynamics, including the accomplishment of task and socio-emotional roles.

HOW Action Learning May Shape Collective Leadership

In this section, my purpose is to discuss how the principles and processes of action learning can lead to an affinity for collective leadership. I begin with the straightforward axiom that any leadership development approach should mirror the form of leadership that is being “covered.” We would not expect a passive training class with a teacher dispensing information to trainees to result in collective leadership, even if espoused by the teacher. Besides the orientation of the presentation, the original problem with this recipe, as already discussed, is that the locus of the training is already misplaced. It might beneficially occur with participants working on problems in a collective fashion. When it comes to the development of collective leadership, furthermore, we would start with managers immersed in their own practices, not taken away from their lived experience. For the sake of learning, we may prefer to accelerate the process by placing them in problem domains or dilemmas to see how they might “learn their way out!”

What action learning seeks to develop in learners, then, is a meta-competence that transcends the application of immediate skills in order to adapt to variability in work demands. This may entail a

host of unique learning processes associated with second and third-order learning that seek to uncover the assumptions and presuppositions, respectively, guiding current practices. Faced with unpredictable circumstances, participants rely upon collective reflection-in-action and incorporate such activities as exploring underlying assumptions and inferences, on-the-spot disruption of meaning followed by reframing, re-evaluation of standard practices, consideration of intersubjective differences, and spontaneous testing of available knowledge to arrive at a solution to the immediate problem (Schön, 1983; Raelin, 2008). Their learning arises not from prepared scenarios controlled by classroom trainers but from working through the messy, implicit, and real questions of practice.

This is not to suggest that being exposed to simulated problem-solving activities in a classroom setting, such as case studies, is inopportune. Classroom learning of this experiential nature can be preparatory for the ultimate application in real-life settings of desired meta-cognitive critical skills. However, action learning sees the location of learning as shifting from a single place to the sites of collective practice, in some cases through the assistance of virtual learning (Dickenson, Burgoyne, and Pedler, 2010). Whether through virtual or face-to-face engagements, workers participate in reflective dialogue to become more critical about their work and organizational practices while concurrently enhancing their self-awareness and socio-political consciousness (Trehan and Rigg, 2015). Action learning thus makes use of spontaneous knowing as a process to encourage its use in service of action. Through the interplay between action and feedback, learners acquire more valid social knowledge, more effective social action, and greater alignment among self-knowledge, knowledge-of-other, and action (Raelin, 2009).

The Drawbacks of Action Learning: Action learning may not produce collective forms of leadership due to institutional forces that may limit participants' learning (Edmonstone, Lawless, and Pedler, 2019). The principal barrier is that host or sponsoring organizations or units, operating as they may under acute political tensions, may lean on participants to accept managerial orthodoxies and face real, even if

subtle, performance pressures. Organizations are political entities and are not immune to attempts to colonize learning on behalf of dominant interests. Participants may find, for example, that any attempts they make in their project work to challenge the prevailing social order or insert themselves into leadership capacities may be met with attempts to silence or isolate them (Reynolds, 1999). This effect may occur especially in cases where programme managers and set advisers 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 (Trehan and Pedler, 2009). Focusing on and attempting to change such conditions can lead to marginalization of well-intentioned change agents, who may be seen as disruptive or disloyal resulting in the undermining of their collective agency (Reynolds, 2011; Vince, Abbey, Langenhan, and Bell, 2018). Standard administrative practices when involving action learning programmes may be compromised when, for example, project recommendations from action learning teams challenge current strategies or managerial responsibilities. Changes in any one particular function could also indirectly impact nodes in the target persons' wider social network.

In response to these pressures, action learning needs to strive at a minimum to expose participants to the socio-cultural conditions that may constrain their self-insight (Fournier and Grey, 2000). It should encourage participants to search for individual and collective meaning that may arise from open discourse where critical questions can be raised, such as: how are we relating to one another as humans; who has been excluded from our deliberations; why have we and our managers organized in the way we have; what cultural or historical processes have led to our current state (Reason, 1994; Fenwick, 2004). Action learning, then, requires an organizational culture of risk-taking and openness that permits the surfacing of organizational dynamics that support rather than undermine reflection, especially of complex emotional, social and political relations (Reynolds and Vince, 2004). It works best when organizational sponsors, including top executives, agree to submit even their core values to scrutiny (Argyris, 1977).

Facilitators and set advisers have a special role to play to encourage reflective conversations in the set focusing on the location of the self within social systems (Maclean, Harvey, and Chia, 2012).

Facilitators need to develop their skill in becoming sensitive to and entertaining such cultural and identity issues in the set as power positioning, hierarchical control, gender submission, and feelings of helplessness (Vince and Saleem, 2004; Mughal, Gatrell, and Stead, 2018). Set dialogues need to also incorporate how to engage the organization in considering and even confronting these emotional, cultural, and political issues.

Levels of Experience: Next we need to point out how levels of experience need to be separately and conjointly considered when entertaining the inner workings of action learning. I will review three levels: individual, team, and organization. At the individual level, action learning tends to relax participants' need for control within social settings. As they are encouraged to advocate their positions as hypotheses to be tested rather than as ironclad conclusions (Argyris and Schön, 1978), they become more interested in arriving at mutual understanding than agreement. Meanwhile, participants as listeners engage in nonjudgmental inquiry, which leads to a reduced need to oblige others to defend their positions.

Action learning can also induce collective leadership by stimulating a commitment to authentic communication, intrinsic motivation, and collective self-efficacy (Chen and Bliese, 2002; Passfield, 2002). Participants are given the rare opportunity to think out loud and receive constructive feedback on critical and even heretofore undiscussable problems. Confidential issues, such as working relationships with other managers, strategic business issues, or participants' own growth and development are given a forum for open consideration (Lewicki, Tomlinson, and Gillespie, 2006; Hargrove, 2008). They work on projects that are designed for real organizational change while receiving collective support to face the inevitable challenges that surface along the way, as pointed out in the last section.

At the team level, participants experience lessons in collective practice simply by virtue of their working together with others on their projects. The learning team, as a team, is also a safe space in which to experiment with emerging team dynamics, including interpersonal communications, conflict, and power dependency (Raelin, 2006). With the assistance of their team members and their facilitator, participants are also given the chance to try out new interpersonal skills and meta-competencies based on reframed assumptions brought out by public reflection within the team (Dixon, 1990; Marquardt, 2004). In addition, the learning team facilitator in his or her process consultant role ensures that participants maintain ownership of their agenda and increase their capacity for collective reflection on the consequences of their actions. For example, the facilitator might convoke a team dialogue on an unresolved team issue (e.g., a repeated absence of a team participant, an unproductive pattern of interaction, or a communication blockage between members). Ultimately, these issues fall upon the team participants themselves to manage collectively. They need to decide how they wish to share leadership to produce the most value from the experience.

At the organizational level, action learning practices may accumulate, as successive cohorts replace prior ones. Eventually, a shift in the culture of the organization often occurs as a critical mass of participants, along with any cooperating sponsors, spread their collective know-how throughout the organization. For example, since action learning projects often shape strategic practices, senior sponsors frequently need to coordinate with their own peers to extend fertile ideas. Through action learning methodology, they too learn to challenge existing mind-sets and to dialogue across their own subcultural boundaries (Schein, 1993). Moreover, the emphasis in action learning on reflective dialogue often impacts the nature of stakeholder relations toward more sustainable partnerships based on generative learning (Andriof et al., 2002; Antonacopoulou and Meric, 2005). Lastly, there is every expectation that there will be synergy across these levels of experience to produce a lasting collective outcome.

WHY Action Learning Shapes Collective Leadership

In this section I will discuss the rationale for the use of action learning; it is not enough to know how action learning leads to a collective consciousness, but why it does. In the first instance, it imbues participants with habits and attitudes that extend well beyond the characterization of leadership as residing in one individual. It develops in participants a peripheral awareness of one another (Langan-Fox, Anglim, and Wilson, 2004). Participants become comfortable relying on their peers for coaching and support. They see value in sharing leadership. In both the project and learning team features of action learning, team members begin to make use of the team's resources and recognize the strengths (and shortcomings) of their teammates, e.g.: who provides support to team members in need, who fosters team spirit, who knows where to find answers to the most intractable of problems, who explores and reports on opportunities outside the team. These issues are learning issues. Action learning does not insist that they be lodged within any one person; rather, they become the knowledge responsibilities of the entire team (Smith, 2001).

The reflective features of action learning also enhance dialogic understanding which incorporates three explicit practices (Raelin, 2013). First, it brings about nonjudgmental inquiry. Participants are encouraged to express genuine curiosity about others' points of view and to avoid maintaining hidden intents. Second, participants as speakers are encouraged to submit their own ideas and views to the critical scrutiny of others. In this way, they become receptive to challenges to their own ways of thinking. Third, they entertain the view that something new or unique might arise from the dynamic mutual inquiry that could reconstruct the team's view of reality in an entirely new way. Participants become willing to disturb their own preconceived world views on behalf of a collective purpose.

A by-product of dialogue in action learning is an appreciation of other cultures and a sensitivity toward views that are less privileged than those in the dominant culture. As a grass roots form of

learning, action learning emphasizes such critical democratic values as humility and sustainability. Participants appreciate any social transformation because they participate in it and see their contribution as dependent on others. By bridging their inner and outer worlds, they act with integrity in any effort to heal the ecological, economic, and social systems in which they live (Waddock, 2007).

As I noted earlier, however, some cultural practices may be precisely the ones that inhibit the operationalization of the norms of open inquiry characterizing classic action learning. In some sets, for example, there may be an attempt to manage or patch over cultural/ gendered differences or concerns regarding structures of inequity rather than learning from them (Reynolds and Trehan, 2003; Fenwick, 2004; Yapp, 2006). Participants would consequently be encouraged to voice their concerns in the set through the deft intervention of a trained facilitator who is willing and capable of engaging tough emotional issues, including the relationship between participants, between participants and facilitator, and between participants and organizational sponsors (Dehler, 2009; Mughal, Gatrell, and Stead, 2018).

Action Learning's Practice Approach: In this subsection the rationale for action learning's collective leadership orientation will focus on its distinctive practice approach as a method of learning. In its epistemology it views knowledge not as a permanent resource but rather as a fluid property that can be constructed as learners engage with others in useful work (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2016). The practice "turn" is embraced by action learning exponents in its referral to unfolding collective activities, normally interacting with particular materials or tools in use, all of which leads to a change of trajectory in the flow of practices towards new meanings and directions (Ramsey, 2016; Crevani, 2018).

The practice approach embedded in action learning views leadership as a self-correcting construction. As practitioners engage and learn with one another, they commit to reflecting on their own actions and consequently learn to reconstruct them according to their mutual interests. This public form of reflection has the potential not only to advance new skills and beliefs but to open up space for innovative ways to accomplish work, or even to reconceive how the work is done in the first place.

Practitioners gradually become “co-subjective,” suggesting a penchant to take distance from themselves (Spiegelberg, 1975; Tsoukas, 2009). They begin to recognize their limitations or the limitations of the “natural attitude” which in phenomenology refers to an encultured way of normally viewing things (Luft, 2002). By opening themselves up to how others see them, they can occasionally overturn the *habitus* (Bourdieu’s way of referring to how we are historically conditioned) that they inherit (Bourdieu, 1977).

There are two persistent questions that remain to be addressed in action learning that pertain to its collective orientation, in particular, its application of collective reflection. First, there tends to be a lag between the action and the reflection, although compared to classroom learning, there is at least real action to be reflected upon even if not always in-the-moment. Nevertheless, for learning to occur, there needs to be critical reflection within sheer moments of leadership or collaborative agency (Reynolds, 1998). The question that remains is when to accomplish this public reflection while not disrupting the improvisational practical coping that may be going on at the time.

Secondly, although action learning can be proposed as having an emancipatory collective agenda, this contention can be disputed since ostensibly successful leadership practices inherently generate their own resistance, hide overt or passive practices of dissent, and embed contested gender relations (Ford, 2016; Ybema and Horvers, 2017). Philip Woods (2016) argues that the practice approach can have democratic tendencies because it subscribes to a philosophy of “co-development,” in which people discover and unfold from within themselves. It seeks to engage people in critical dialogue in which they learn to question the language and the practices that bear the imprint of social domination. Nevertheless, even when participating in critical action learning (Trehan and Rigg, 2015), which affords exposure to power relations, there is a risk that collective practices can become compliant rather than liberating.

Collective Leadership Applications

I next point to two examples of action learning's potential to bring out collective leadership practices, while also adding a caution to having overly optimistic expectations. The two examples demonstrate two forms of leadership transformation in practices, the first in its reference to an individual approach to interpersonal communications with staff and the second in its broader application to facilitation within the team and organization. In the first instance, we find Jim, a senior vice president of sales for a large retailer, who was part of a post-experience leadership development programme (involving the author) focusing on change for the common good. Jim chose as his action learning project a persistent problem in his company's chains having to do with the heavy turnover of part-time check-out clerks. Before the project, Jim reported that the problem was informally recognized by human resources but thought to be a normal pattern given the nature of these jobs. Jim had also spoken to some of the clerks, quizzing them on why some of their colleagues had left the store.

It was at this point that Jim brought up the problem to his learning team and received feedback that he might consider whether the clerks were "clamming up" when he quizzed them because of his position and manner. He subsequently rehearsed a communication approach that was more inquisitive than interrogational in its style. He also approached the clerks with his own views but not with any hint of accusation but as merely hypotheses to be challenged. Between his own assessment as well as that of other interviewers, he discovered that the main reason for the departures of the clerks was not due to pay but from a dissatisfaction of being treated like "second-class citizens." Unfortunately, his next move compounded the problem because rather than continue his dialogue with the staff, he sent out an inspirational message about the clerks' value to the company. Again through learning team feedback, he realized that the message did little to change the company culture, that any accommodation would require a major change in the treatment of the clerks across managerial ranks.

The tutors and participants in the programme began to notice a change in Jim after these incidents. Jim became more committed to reflective conversation and began to work not only on his own individual development but on human resource development within the company. Rather than operate as a “lone ranger,” he became committed to collaborating with all his staff on both strategic and operational issues.

In the second example, we can see how action learning shaped a broader set of leadership practices. The programme was called Leadership Facilitation Skills (LFS) and was reported by Katie Venner (2011), who was part of the team commissioned by the UK Cultural Leadership Programme to bring leadership development to emerging and senior leaders in the creative and cultural sector. The programme acknowledged at the outset a commitment to follow the “Gold Standard” (Willis, 2004) or classic model of action learning while teaching the skills of facilitation. It also called for participants to engage in a leadership challenge in their home organization in order to practice their newly learned leadership and facilitation skills. Among the many reflections shared by the participants about the programme was a sense that action learning had challenged their assumptions about leadership which were based on “command-and-control” models that they saw customarily modeled in cultural organizations. Accordingly, they reported experiencing opportunities to make a gradual and subtle shift to a more facilitative style, such as through cultivating curiosity. One participant wrote in her journal:

Although I was acting in a leadership role, my voice was on an equal level to other team members. Often as a manager I can feel very responsible for making decisions which affect the team and I sometimes can feel guilty if I am not decisive or clear in direction. Through the process of action learning, I felt that I managed to create a very collaborative atmosphere.

Venner also made a number of observations about the participants’ changed perspectives on leadership in light of their participation in action learning. Among them, she observed small and subtle shifts in how they saw themselves facilitating others’ learning and practice. The participants saw themselves as resourceful individuals relating to others as allied individuals irrespective of differences in position.

Rather than being the responsible party with all the answers, they found that by asking more and better questions, their relationships with their colleagues improved.

Although these and other examples that could be pointed to are hopeful about the opportunity of action learning to prepare participants for collective leadership in the face of organizational complexity (Marquardt, 2000), I need to add a cautionary note that these examples are still rare in the annals, as per a recent review by Edmonstone, Lawless and Pedler (2019). Their literature review found most attention in action learning-based leadership development programmes to be focused on individual leader development, such as one's own career management, rather than on the development of collective capacity for effective working and social relationships. Among the conclusions to be drawn from this finding is the conspicuous one that action learning strategy needs to be dedicated to collective rather than individual lines of practice if collective leadership is to be realized.

Conclusion

This article has been designed to open a dialogue about the value of action learning as arguably the most propitious way to prepare managers and other organizational members for collective leadership – a form of leadership that is not typically the default in the assumption of leadership. There is, by no means, an unconditional cause-effect relationship between these two practices – action learning and collective leadership. In particular, without sufficient attention to action learning's emphasis on critical reflection, there is unlikely to be a carry-over to the peripheral awareness required for collective leadership. There are, in addition, variances and even flaws in the implementation of action learning that may result in sets not dedicating themselves to learning issues as much as individual or project concerns. The need for dexterous facilitation is also required to extend the lessons of action learning to questions of power, politics, and cultural inhibitions. Perhaps a qualification needs to be added to the relationship between action learning and collective leadership and inquiry that it may hold far more in

instances when action learning is practiced in its neo-classical traditions as suggested by Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook (2005). I hope, therefore, to have made a case both through practice (hows) and theory (whys) that action learning, while not promising the automatic delivery of collective leadership, has the potential to create an affinity for it – that may ultimately lead to its practice.

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