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Developmental Action Learning: Toward Collaborative Change

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Abstract

In this account of practice, the authors introduce a variant of classic action learning, called developmental action learning or DAL. The DAL model, derived from cognitive development theory, introduces conventional learning modules prior to the more intensive set experience. It also calls for facilitation designed to help participants, selected for their readiness to change, make the leap to deeper levels of personal and organizational development. The DAL approach is applied to a leadership development series among a group of high-level administrators within a university consortium. The case study gives promise to the use of developmental action learning to enhance collaborative leadership processes

Introduction

Despite the over 50-year presence of action learning as an increasingly reputable form of education, its contribution as a learning modality, especially within the management education and development world, still appears to pale in comparison to standard classroom and training provision (Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook, 2005). There are many reasons to be offered for this state of affairs. For example, locating learning in a specific place, namely within a classroom, seems to dominate most of our educational enterprises from the first days of formal schooling. It is both easier and cheaper to offer teaching from a single platform and from a text. We can measure the results from rote instruction far more easily than we can from experience (Mabey, 2002; Mintzberg, 2004). And, of course, learning from standard training is the way we have always done it!

Rather than knock our heads against the wall and decry this unfair neglect of action learning, it might be worth wondering if its classical format, characterized in this journal by Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook (2005), might be overly ambitious with audiences so unaccustomed to self-directed reflection and learning from experience. It may be particularly discomforting to throw people into a team and ask them to not only immediately learn to work together, but to also share their emerging feelings about one another. In some cultures and sub-cultures, achieving this level of directness in personal exchange may come across as overly blunt or even forced.

In this regard, we have experimented with a new developmental approach to action learning that takes into consideration people's variable readiness to open up to one another, especially within an action learning set. Although work organizations are increasingly relying on teams, these teams tend to operate on projects that may not require intensive interaction among members (Sundstrom, De Meuse, and Futrell, 1990; Guzzo and Shea, 1992; Cohen and Bailey, 1997). Some teams, for example, are merely called teams to designate a grouping of responsibility, though individuals may continue to work on their separate tasks. Action learning requires a deeper level of disclosure and feedback (Raelin, 1997).

Developmental Learning

The developmental approach espoused for action learning has roots in other learning models, especially those proffered by cognitive scientists. In particular, our approach is designed to be consistent with the ACT and more recent ACT-R theories of Anderson (see, e.g., Anderson, 1983; Anderson and Labiere, 1998). ACT theory, standing for the Adaptive Character of Thought, purports that learning progresses through stages that approximate the cognitive architecture of memory. In the first cognitive stage, the learner acquires declarative knowledge, or a set of facts relevant to the skill in question, and processes this knowledge very deliberately. In the second association stage, the learner converts the declarative facts into procedural knowledge, which no longer requires the declarative information to be methodically retrieved into working memory. The transition from declarative to procedural knowledge has been referred to as the natural conversion

from explicit to tacit knowledge or what Ryle (1949) referred to as moving from “knowing what” to “knowing how.” For example, a novice learning to play the piano starts by locating the keys on the piano but in time can make the transition to the tacit practice of playing the piano without even thinking of the keys. By the third, autonomous stage, as the skill becomes more and more automated, the learner is able to improve the search for new procedures and more efficiently transfer knowledge from one situation to the next.

The Contemporary Approach

Among some of the complaints leveled against the deployment of action learning is that learning is often sacrificed in favor of project work. In other words, these programs have a tendency to foster action at the expense of learning. Based on the aforementioned depiction of cognitive developmental theory, might it be possible that participants in action learning programs are thrust prematurely into autonomous learning situations without sufficient cognitive development or exposure to precursory forms of knowledge acquisition?

Consider how most programs operate. Participants are placed into either individual or team projects that have strategic value to the client organization. Once assigned to a project, participants are often expected to inductively and rather immediately work on the project, incorporating such requisite steps as project planning, resource acquisition, implementation, and evaluation. While pursuing the project, participants are also assembled into action learning sets or teams where they are encouraged to focus on their individual and team learning. The learning may also support a theme espoused for the program, be it leadership, team development, knowledge management, and the like. Although some participants may be psychologically ready for the level of openness required in these teams, others may not be and might consequently choose to resist personal exposure through the experience.

Resistance can take a number of forms, such as active vs. passive (also called overt and covert resistance), conscious vs. unconscious, or counter-productive vs. non-productive. An active resistor can find many reasons why the experience is a waste of time and

especially decry learning sessions that entail ‘staring at our navels.’ By actively opposing the learning opportunity, active resistors are signaling that they do not agree with the practical changes that may result from the learning sessions. A passive resistor may just sit through the experience, keeping closed to any learning, avoiding any implementation, and then rating it poorly or reporting its ill effects to others in the organization (Hultman, 1995).

While most resistors are consciously aware of their resistance, there are some who are unaware, often stemming from an unconscious fear that any new learning will result in their having to adjust tried and true routines (O’Connor, 1993). Finally, there is the distinction between productive and counter-productive resistance to change. A counter-productive resistor may engage in actions that sabotage any attempts to learn, whereas a non-productive resistor will instead remain apathetic and, like the ‘passivist,’ ensure that he or she remains unaffected by the experience.

The DAL Approach

The developmental action learning (DAL) approach seeks to overcome some of the limitations of classical action learning while also taking into consideration the developmental nature of the interpersonal relations among staff engaged in the workplace. DAL is based on the fundamental assumption that people will open up with one another on a spectrum, from routines that are familiar and recognized as safe, to experiences that are less structured and that allow more self-disclosure and feedback among participants. The DAL program proceeds as a three-stage process:

1. Perspectives Discussion – Collectively study different perspectives of leadership.
2. Learning Team – Individually adopt some of the perspectives and apply them through experimentation in one’s own organization, reconvening to dialogue about it within the team.
3. Project – Launch into a team project making use of the knowledge and new practices acquired.

In greater detail, in Stage One, the participants are assembled to intensely interact with an instructor and with one another regarding alternative perspectives concerning a topic of deep mutual interest. The participants decide in advance how many and which perspectives they would like to consider. Each perspective is supported by readings that are carefully selected not only to characterize the perspective in question, but also to provide alternative, even contrary, ideas in order to stimulate thoughtful discussion and provoke experiments in practice.

In Stage Two, the discussion group becomes prepared to entertain a new level of experience, evolving into what may be referred to as the learning team. Having digested some alternative theories in Stage One, participants should be prepared to engage in a series of experiments in the workplace. In doing so, they attempt to change their behavior by deploying one or more of the new perspectives presented earlier. They journalize about their experiments in practice and, when the learning team next assembles, come prepared to share their experiences with their team members and receive feedback.

In Stage Three, the team transitions into an even higher level of experience. Those from the prior stage who wish to continue on embark on a team project of collaborative strategic change. At this point, they become a project team. This stage is based on the idea that there is no greater opportunity for real-time experience and collective reflection on that experience than from doing work together. It is the ultimate test of formulating and engaging in theory in practice. During Stage Two, participants were only able to provide “hearsay” on what they tried to accomplish in their work setting. In contrast, during Stage Three, participants can directly observe each other as they attempt changes in their personal and professional behavior. They are able to provide direct feedback to one another on such practices as: interventions that did not go according to plan, real-time accomplishment of personal learning goals, and differences between what they said they were going to do and what they actually did. At Stage Three, the learning team and project team become one and the same.

Although the developmental sequence depicted above may be suggested by the facilitator in advance, the members, as the ultimate agenda setters, choose when and whether to advance from one stage to the next. The facilitator's role is to take the group to where it wants to go, not where the facilitator wants to go. Self-pacing allows individuals the opportunity to hold back if they feel they are not ready.

The DAL process, though consistent with some classic action learning principles, also diverges from some of the foundations of action learning established by its founder, Reg Revans (Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook, 2005). DAL abides by the fundamental practice that people learn best when they reflect together with likeminded colleagues ('comrades in adversity') on real problems occurring in their own organizations. Gathering in sets, they support and challenge each other and, in so doing, achieve a profound degree of personal learning. In addition, through their thoughtful interventions working on problems with unknown solutions, they contribute to the development of their organization.

However, DAL departs from Revans' classical principles by introducing theory and then reflection on experience *prior* to active project work. Especially during the early stages of the process, instruction – in the form of readings and discussion – is provided to provoke thought and behavioral change on the part of the participants. Participants are chosen to participate based, in part, on their psychological readiness to experiment with their learning in action. They initially engage with an expert instructor in an active give-and-take regarding the subject matter under scrutiny. The instruction, during this early phase, sets the tone of the discussion, though participants are encouraged to question the value of the conceptual material in light of their everyday experience. They also rely on individual coaches to help them make sense of changes in their thinking as well as help them incorporate and reflect on changes in their work behavior. During later stages, the set is facilitated by an expert in group behavior who is skilled in bringing out everyone's contribution. However, the facilitator's interventions should wane as the group assumes collective leadership over the set.

It might be interesting to note that Revans himself was not opposed to introducing theory or what he called 'programmed instruction' into action learning experience. In his own

six-month Belgian Inter-University Programme (Revans, 1971), he provided fellows with a four-month preparatory educational program that included visits to academic scholars. However, as Mike Pedler pointed out in his editorial, “A General Theory of Human Action” in the last issue of this journal, Revans was emphatic in co-locating learning and action. It would not be sufficient for students to talk about action as much as *take* action with all its risk and anxiety and learn about it in concert with their colleagues.

Some of the differences between the classic model and DAL are outlined below in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of Classical Action Learning and Developmental Action Learning

Principles That Converge	Classical Action Learning	Developmental Action Learning
<i>Learning team</i>	Work in sets of peers to support and challenge each other	Work in sets of peers to support and challenge each other
<i>Nature of project</i>	Focus is on problems, not puzzles	Focus is on problems, not puzzles
<i>Development</i>	Personal and organizational	Personal and organizational
Principles That Diverge		
<i>Basis of learning</i>	Action through real project	Theory, then reflection, then action through real project
<i>Instruction</i>	Very limited instruction from expert at any time	Instruction and discussion initiate the process
<i>Readiness of participants</i>	People form sets when ready to learn from their work	Participants are chosen based in part on readiness to learn
<i>Focus of dialogue in sets</i>	Questioning takes primacy over expert knowledge	Equalization of questioning and expert knowledge
<i>Facilitation</i>	Set members facilitate themselves	Set is initially facilitated by an expert facilitator
<i>Coaching</i>	No formal coaching is called for	Coaches are assigned to individual participants

A Case Study in DAL

How can high-level administrators within a consortium of area universities and colleges develop a collaborative mindset and a commitment to collaborative behavior, both within and external to their own organizations? How can they develop a managerial approach that is collective and inclusive and that implants leadership, not necessarily into themselves, but into their host organizations and across their network?

This was the challenge that faced The Boston Consortium for Higher Education (TBC) in the fall of 2001. Founded in 1996, TBC's mission is to develop new and creative ideas that can improve quality and produce cost savings among Boston's world-renowned institutions of higher learning. Its primary modus operandi is to promote results-oriented collaboration among its member universities. It seeks to develop trustful relationships across its member schools so that each might engage the creativity and energy that reside within the network system. In this way, TBC attempts to create solutions to what may seem to be intractable problems. Furthermore, TBC hopes to involve its participating administrative managers and executives in processes that will pay them back several times over, not just in better solutions, but in job fulfillment and personal and professional development.

Committed to establishing collective leadership, TBC approached one of the authors, Joe Raelin, to see if action learning could be used as a platform for instilling collaborative leadership processes. Raelin thought that this was possible once participants in any program become sufficiently comfortable with one another to pull down their guard, develop trust, and thereby begin to share with and learn from one another. Subsequently, an experiment was organized to not only adapt action learning using an evolving developmental approach but to also study its potential application as a gateway to collaborative change.

Raelin surmised that the connection of action learning to collaboration has to come from its reflective orientation. Actions produced are subject to inquiry about their effectiveness, including a review of the value of one's theories as guides to practice. Participants learn as they work by taking time to reflect with like others who offer insights into their workplace

problems. In this way action learning addresses the pitfalls of conventional training that often overlooks the need to surface tacit knowledge to convert it to learning. By having peers serve as a sounding board to one another regarding the operating assumptions underlying project interventions, participants become more equipped to produce the outcomes they desire (Argyris, and Schön, 1996). They learn from each other how to overcome the blockages that they themselves and others erect to deter project accomplishment (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001). Their learning is tied to knowledge that is collectively and concurrently constructed.

Meanwhile, TBC saw its potential as a network coordinator to be based on an abiding belief that a leader's role should be one of promoting mutual learning and mutual action. It also began to characterize leadership as working with others to stimulate personal growth and learning. To TBC, the leader was the person who not only permitted but encouraged others to assume leadership roles.

Of course, many academic organizations are not eagerly waiting to embrace, what TBC began to refer to as, "leaderful" practice. It's something that has to be developed; it may not even be a natural state in higher education institutions that have historically been based upon individual professional expertise on the academic side and command and control on the business side. A collective leadership approach may take some courage when it frames the position leader as the person without all the answers. It requires a certain level of vulnerability to rely on others to lead when it is their time. Yet, the net effect of this leaderful approach is thought to be the release of multiple perspectives and out-of-the-box thinking that can foster creative solutions to network problems.

In order to accomplish the purpose of exposing participants to TBC's new leadership approach, Raelin, along with TBC's directorate, developed an Executive Development Series. Their goal was twofold: to first develop a wide-ranging 'perspectives' approach to leadership that would secondly expose participants to action learning. Raelin, through his book *Creating Leaderful Organizations* (2003), has advanced "leaderful practice" as leadership that is not only collective but concurrent, collaborative, and compassionate. As part of an emerging paradigm that sees leadership as a shared phenomenon, it is viewed as

a form of leadership that can respond to our often chaotic world by stimulating employees to self-achieve and to respond independently and interdependently in their own domains of excellence. While many writers have suggested that leaders consult with their followers, or that leaders learn to step aside to let others take the reins, Raelin goes a step farther by advocating a truly mutual model that incorporates everyone in leadership—transforming it from being an individual property into a truly mutual practice.

The Series, based on developmental action learning, was designed to take the participants through systematic stages that required increased personal and professional risk. Yet, while going through these stages, the participants had complete control over the agenda. What was happening was an evolutionary process of releasing control. They were encouraged to create a supportive community – a veritable practice field - that allowed them to talk freely about their fears and failures as well as their hopes and successes. In time, they developed a collective resonance, what Renee Levi (2005) defines as a felt sense of mutual energy, rhythm, and intuitive learning. Their empathy toward one another provided a container – or what members referred to as an ‘oasis’ – that encouraged internal authenticity and personal truth-telling. Eventually, they spawned a ‘second-generation’ of TBC administrators who, too, were encouraged to experiment with their leadership behavior in such a way that collective leadership could become contagious within their own organizations. Through these efforts a critical mass of network administrators are now attempting to not only adopt leaderful practice within their own universities, but to also reach out to one another across their network to effect collaborative change.

The Learning Journal

After the creation of the second-generation teams, the original executive team began to reflect on the ingredients that led to the success of this developmental action learning model of fostering collaboration within an intercollegiate social network. They decided to produce a “learning journal” that would provide a historical account of their experience and that could be used by future consortia, be they in higher education or in other fields, to develop their own collaborative learning processes. Accordingly, an organizational researcher, the second author of this article, was commissioned to conduct a series of surveys with the individuals involved in TBC’s action learning experiment. Using two

predominant methods – in-person interviews and on-line questionnaires – the learning journal was designed to address a number of such critical themes as:

1. Selection – how important the explicit selection of individuals was to the success of the team
2. Facilitation – how effective the facilitation was and would the team's outcome have been as successful under a different facilitator
3. Dynamics – how important psychological safety was in allowing the members to feel open and honest
4. Leadership – how the participants' attitudes about leadership changed as a result of their experience
5. Impact – what the impact of the experience was on members' lives (both professional and personal).

Once the first draft of the learning journal was produced, it became the subject of a number of feedback sessions with the original team. From these dialogues, the final draft was prepared. In answer to the question: what ingredients led to the success of this experiment, three critical factors emerged that can be used by future learning teams. The team found these three factors to interact as part of a tandem. In other words, to produce a high likelihood of success, all three need to be present since they are inter-related. Detailed below, these three factors are: readiness, facilitation, and peer exemplars.

Readiness:

We know that when it comes to preparing oneself to embark on change at multiple levels of experience, individuals approach such change with varying levels of readiness. Consequently, in entertaining the prospect of a collective model of leadership within a social network, some administrators are likely to be more or less inclined to consider a shift in their own practices.

From the literature, we know that readiness has both personal and situational precursors. At the individual level, readiness appears to be a function of a felt need for change, a sense of one's ability to successfully accomplish change (self-efficacy), one's actual skill and ability to manage change, and the perception that the change will be beneficial (Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder, 1993; Prochaska et al., 1994). At the situational level, readiness is enhanced when employees are given social support, when they work in active jobs that provide empowerment and high decision latitude, and when they are given

a chance by the organization to participate in any change processes (Karasek, 1979; Spreitzer, 1995; Cunningham et al., 2002).

In this case study, TBC's director was charged with deciding whom to approach from all the prospective business administrators from the member universities about joining the Series. Key to his decision was: 1) who appeared to be ready to undertake an experience of this nature, which would require a fairly high level of trust and openness, and 2) who was most able to integrate the learning from the Series into his or her work environment. Data from the learning journal pointed to the following five elements as critical to readiness for collective leadership:

- Openness to new experience
- Openness to feedback about self
- Willingness and ability to provide feedback to others
- Willingness and ability to change personal behavior
- Ability to reflect critically on experience
- Support from one's work environment

These elements suggest that administrators about to embark on an experiment in collective leadership need to have confidence that they can participate in leadership and cope with the changes that could potentially stem from openly reflecting on their practice. Self-efficacy research has disclosed that workers will likely resist changes that they believe will exceed their coping capabilities, whereas those who are confident in their ability to cope will demonstrate higher readiness (Bandura, 1982; Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder, 1993). Administrators also need to have a moderate to low level of defensiveness so as to be reasonably open to new experiences. They need to be sufficiently curious to demonstrate a willingness to learn about self from the observation of others. One participant stated: "It was essential to have people who were willing to learn and to view this as an opportunity to interact and perhaps understand further how their leadership style affects others." Another added: "One or two people can make a group not work by being cynical or uncomfortable, and it was key that this group not have anybody that reacted that way." It was also determined that any feedback obtained from others should lead to self-reflection that, in turn, would lead to new behavior, endorsed by the participant's organizational environment. Therefore, it is preferable at the outset of an experiment in collective leadership to select people who have a love of learning, especially through others.

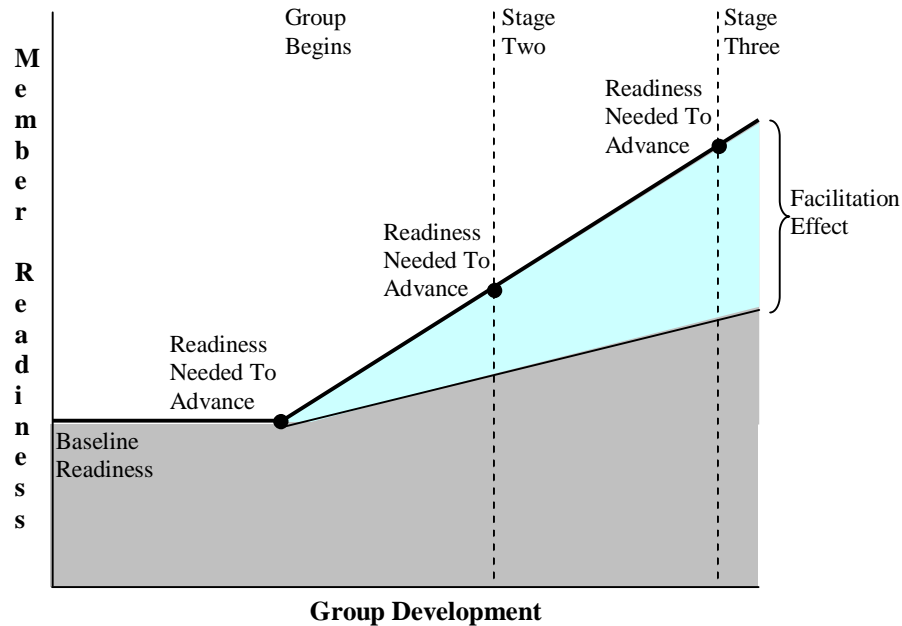
Facilitation:

In line with the level of readiness with which members enter the group, the facilitator needs to enhance any propensity toward openness already present and help it become actualized. Accordingly, though he or she may initially make a number of interventions to help the group get started on the right foot, the entire orientation of facilitation is to develop the capacity of the membership for collective leadership. After all, the goal of the Series was to reach a point in which the members could lead themselves. Since few teams are prepared for this form of leaderful practice at the outset of group experience, it is the role of the facilitator to ensure that members feel psychologically safe so that they can assume more autonomy. As one participant noted: “[the facilitator] created a container and then made people feel safe in that space by giving lots of time and opportunity for others to fill this created space. He was not afraid of silence and was terrific at being an active listener (allowing huge pauses, which set a pace).” Another participant explained: “[the facilitator] was very talented at providing enough information to spark a discussion without dominating it. He even relinquished what little power he had in the group so it could run itself by the time the later stages came around.”

Facilitation and readiness can thus be viewed as somewhat reciprocal in that facilitators by their sheer skill can moderate the readiness level needed to advance from one stage to the next. Consider the figure below:

Figure 1

The Effect of Facilitation on the Readiness Level of Team Participants



The initial selection of individuals will consist (ideally) of those in the white area at baseline readiness because these are the individuals who are ready to undertake the experience. At each stage, those who are on the readiness line or above it (in the white area) are those that will continue with the team. However, those individuals located below the readiness line (in the dark gray area) are the individuals who are at risk of feeling overwhelmed and, potentially, of dropping out.

The goal of selection is to ensure that as many individuals as possible are in the white area. The impact that the facilitator can have on the group is seen in the facilitator effect (in the light gray area). As can be seen, a good facilitator can moderate the amount of readiness needed to advance to the next stage, while a mediocre one may have little effect on readiness (and may even raise it). However, even the best facilitator cannot guarantee that there will be no increase of readiness needed to advance from one stage to the next. He or she can merely stay attuned to the members and ensure that no one feels overwhelmed. If a participant is feeling overwhelmed, a good facilitator will attempt to ensure that the individual in question reaches a sufficient comfort level from which to move on.

Peer Exemplars:

We have seen that facilitator encouragement can, over time, allow team members to become more receptive to open reflection about their practice. However, it is not sufficient to rely only on a sensitive facilitator to be responsible for supporting the risk-taking of each and every member. Some participants might possess less defensive personalities, allowing them to take risks and open up with less difficulty than others. Others might not be as ready to take such a risk and, by having another person ‘get the ball rolling,’ the process can flow more easily. Thus, the ability to openly reflect tends to occur on a spectrum in which a few individuals with a high level of readiness take a risk first and then encourage other participants with lower readiness to take the same risk. These “peer exemplars” are critical to reinforce psychological safety, the condition in the team that allows people to feel that they are secure, that they can take risks, and that they are not only permitted but encouraged to reflect on their practice (Schein and Bennis, 1965; Edmondson, 1999).

Peer exemplars thus assist the facilitator in helping the more hesitant members understand that there are no negative consequences for taking personal risks in the team environment. A personal risk is defined as bringing up a topic that reveals an otherwise secret fact or emotion that would ordinarily remain undisclosed. In some cases, the feeling may be about another team member or about the team as a whole.

A peer exemplar may also be viewed as a co-facilitator of the team because not only does he or she model personal disclosure, but he or she may also attempt to solicit critical information from others. Exemplars in many cases also display exceptional sensitivity toward the feelings of others and tend to make statements demonstrating empathy and understanding. The notion of peer exemplars is tied to the other two critical success factors since, like facilitation, they help to increase the readiness of members of the team by encouraging open communication. They also serve as a supplement to facilitation. Since the facilitator of a collective leadership team is already predisposed to sharing leadership, the facilitator not only acknowledges the co-facilitation of others but encourages its emergence.

Discussion

The developmental action learning model is proposed as a method to introduce action learning as a change vehicle into an organization without suffering so much counter-resistance that it upends the experiment before it can become successfully implanted. It also appears to have a great deal of potential to link action learning with collaborative processes within organizations. Let's consider this link in more detail.

The first principles connecting action learning and collaborative action are common to both classic and developmental approaches to action learning. In each, participants learn in the midst of practice, often needing to coordinate activities with others in their own work environment. Although abstract knowledge can assist them, they tend to rely on the context – its culture, its expectations, its tools, and other institutional arrangements - to help them solve challenging workplace dilemmas (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

As participants work and learn with others, they experience the give-and-take of inquiry. They come to see that solutions are far more robust when others get involved in the process and participate as part of a collaborative venture (Lewin, 1951).

Collaborative learning occurs at multiple levels of experience; namely, individual, team, and organization. At the individual level, action learning promotes personal transformation that relies upon a relaxing of people's need for control within social settings. As a participant in a variety of interpersonal sequences, one learns that a viewpoint is just that. It is no more than a hypothesis for action (Argyris and Schön, 1974). Action learning might also increase people's capacity to collaborate because of its effect on participants' intrinsic motivation (Passfield, 2002). In particular, participants are stimulated by the experience of peer challenge and support, by feelings of empowerment as they gain access to people and information, and by the growth opportunity of working on personal learning goals outside of their comfort zone. These internal processes can, in turn, produce greater self-efficacy along with heightened states of autonomy, meaning, and responsibility.

The addition of one-on-one coaching within the developmental model is potentially a powerful vehicle to promote individual receptiveness to a collaborative model of behavior. The achievements of coaching or mentoring, in turn, stem from its practice as a medium for reflection and learning. The parties commit to exploring the social, political, and even emotional reactions that might be blocking their own operating effectiveness (Raelin, 2000). Otherwise confidential issues, be they working relationships with other managers, strategic business issues, or the participant's own growth and development, are given a forum for open consideration (Allen, Poteet, and Burroughs, 1997; Hargrove, 2003). Individuals get a rare opportunity to think out loud and receive constructive feedback on critical and even potentially undiscussable problems (Kram, 1985)

At the team level of experience, action learning takes place within a learning team environment. During any given session, members can be observed listening intently to one another, posing questions, and offering suggestions to other team members whose project is under scrutiny. Occasionally, the focal member might just sit back and listen as other team members brainstorm ideas regarding his or her issue or project. Participants often decide to experiment with new approaches in light of the group discussion, leading to new theories or ideas to be tested in the intervening periods between meetings. The experience is designed to encourage participants to challenge their own views and behaviors and become critical about actions in their own organizations. Some sponsoring units may not be initially hospitable to the probing that characterizes the dynamics of this form of learning. Hence, participants appreciate the opportunity to test their ideas and examine their values and assumptions in the learning team. With the help and encouragement of their team members, especially their facilitator, they can also try out some new interpersonal skills or managerial competencies based on reframed assumptions derived from public reflection within the team (Pedler, 1996; Marquardt, 1999).

The role of the facilitator in the developmental action learning model appears to be critical to change agency (Raelin, 2000). The facilitator observes the team during learning team meetings and provides feedback both to individual members and to the team as a whole on its interpersonal processes. The facilitator is not thought to be a conventional meeting moderator. Rather, facilitators, through their process consultation, seek to ensure that the

members of the team maintain ownership of their own agenda and increase their capacity for reflection on the consequences of their own actions. For instance, the facilitator might moderate a discussion or reflection session, if requested by the team, to deal with a particular issue the team has not been able to resolve on its own (e.g., a repeated absence of a member, a theoretical question, an unproductive pattern of interaction). Ultimately, these issues gradually fall upon the team members themselves to manage collectively. They need to choose how they wish to share the team leadership to produce the most value from the experience.

Finally, at the organizational or institutional level of experience, action learning practices may systematically or informally diffuse both within the sponsoring organization, and in some cases, across the organization into other stakeholder entities. For example, since action learning promotes strategic change through its project structure, senior sponsors are obligated to work with their own peers to develop interesting ideas, monitor progress, and disseminate results. Through this process, they too learn to challenge existing mindsets and to dialogue across their own sub-cultural boundaries (Schein, 1993). Moreover, because of the emphasis on reflective conversation, action learning has the capacity to change the nature of stakeholder relationships toward more sustainable partnerships.

When it comes to organizational change processes, action learning's culture of reflection and inquiry is thought to permeate the wider organization once a critical mass of participants have gone through the profound change in their leadership induced through their set and project experiences. However, participants are likely to affect change when they have the self-efficacy belief that their interventions will produce positive results. In other words, as in the case of our developmental action learning experiment, programs should pay some attention to the readiness level of the participants who may be enrolled in the program. Not only will they likely benefit personally from the experience, but they may be more psychologically prepared to take the risk to encourage the endorsement of a culture of learning within their organization (Senge, 1990; French, Bell, and Zawacki, 2000).

Conclusion

In their seminal article on the productive use of derivatives of action learning's classic model, Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook (2005) argued that there may be no harm in exploring thoughtful variations, learning from them, and modifying our practice accordingly. In this article, we offer the alternative of a developmental approach to action learning that might permit its penetration within otherwise less receptive institutions, while offering the potential of instigating collaborative leadership processes.

In the case described for this account of practice, participants discovered that collaboration was not merely a question of sharing data or services; it was a question of learning how to truly learn together so as to invent new ways to lead collectively and unlock the knowledge hidden from view. The capital to be generated was not only economic; it was social. One participant in the program concluded: "I have forged connections with colleagues whom I would not have ordinarily talked with. It has increased my confidence in my own preparation, learning, and judgment. I am eager to continue to extend this experience into my work environment."

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