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The Contradictions of Impact: Action Learning and Power in Organizations[1]

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Abstract

In this polemical essay, Professor Russ Vince argues that it is important to understand the contradictions that can be generated by Action Learning. This method is a powerful and effective approach to managers' learning that can underpin transformations of management practice. However, any method for learning, no matter how convinced we are of its efficacy, is tied to organizational power relations and their effects. It is likely that the radical potential of Action Learning sits side-by-side with the political purpose that the use of the approach might serve. Power relations create contradictions in how learning methods are felt, used and understood. Engaging with the contradictions of Action Learning has the potential to improve its impact and effectiveness.

Keywords: *contradiction, critical action learning, impact, power, emotion, learning inaction*

If you are reading this then, like me, you are probably an enthusiast for action learning. You and I both know that action learning is a powerful and effective approach to managers' learning and that it can underpin transformations of management practice. However, because you are an enthusiast for action learning I am going to ask you to be suspicious of your enthusiasm, to question your assumption that action learning is always only a good thing. I want you to be suspicious so that you can comprehend and accept the *contradictions* of action learning. This is important because any method for learning, no matter how convinced we are of its efficacy, is tied to organizational power relations and their effects. Power relations create contradictions in how learning methods are used and understood. Being aware of these contradictions is a starting point for an understanding of the emotions and politics that underpin and inform the impact of action learning. An understanding of the emotions and politics that underpin action learning (I would argue) leads to a more realistic approach to the design and implementation of action learning within the messy and complicated world of organizations. In other words, such an understanding enhances the potential for Action Learning to have impact.

What I Mean by Impact

When I speak of 'impact' I am talking about the benefits and changes that result from intervention, as well as the evidence necessary to prove that benefits and changes have occurred. These may be economic benefits, for example, that action learning has saved the health service £1.5 Million in training fees. They may be changes that produce social value. For example, action learning has been directly responsible for producing changes in activity, attitudes, awareness, behavior, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, process, or understanding. These changes may happen through influencing and informing public policy, improving corporate practice, shifting assumptions in companies, or through long term partnerships (e.g. with professional bodies). In general terms, when we talk about the impact of action learning we are mainly speaking of the ways in which transformations of individual thought and action influence changes in organizational practice. My argument in this essay is that we need to extend the impact that action learning can make. I believe that we can't expect action learning to make an impact unless we engage critically with the ways in which power relations undermine the impact of action learning.

What I Mean by Power

When I speak of 'power' I am talking about a range of different forces or dynamics that are integral to individuals' experiences and organizing processes. These dynamics are within the individual, between the self and others, they are generated in groups, and they inform, create and constrain organizational behavior, structure and action. I am by no means providing a complete picture of these complex and ever-present forces. In my description of these forces I am attempting to illustrate the link between emotion and politics at work – both within organizations and within learning groups.

Power is an embodied force that is part of our everyday selves. We carry power with us in our relations, in our experiences and in our conscience. For example, when a person shouts 'hey you' at us from behind we turn and think 'what do they want?' When a policeman shouts 'hey you' at us we think 'what have I done wrong?' *Power is implicit within interpersonal relations*. For example, hierarchies are present in organizations and these are both real and imagined. They are real because there are different positions in organizations (often called things like 'senior', 'middle' or 'front line') implying different skills, capabilities and opportunities to influence. They are imagined because we often invest others with more influence (and capability) than they actually have; with more influence than we have (even if they don't); and with opportunities that we do not have (even if we do).

Power is present in organizations as a result of social power relations – the differences of class, gender or race that make a difference to our everyday feelings and behavior at work. It is in the many attempts to avoid difference that power relations are revealed. For example, the white manager who is reluctant to assess a black member of his team for fear of being accused of racism has already perpetuated what he was seeking to avoid. *Power is generated through behavior within and between groups*. For example, the behavior that informs

feelings of security in 'my group' also underpins feelings of suspicion and blame of 'other' groups, which reinforce difficulties of communication across group boundaries. Such differences and divisions can be seen in the tensions between professional and managerial roles, as well as the ways in which these divisions are reinforced through emotion, language, status, attempts at control and patterns of blame. *Power is an over-arching organizational force* arising from the interplay between structure and agency. Our behavior and our actions create ways of working that shape 'how we do things here'. These ways of working come to constrain action, to limit behavior and to discourage change. We create and collude in the webs that constrain us, yet we are also capable of artfully navigating these webs in order to make change happen.

The Contradictions of Action Learning

In organizations (and therefore in learning groups of organizational members) power relations are visible in the tensions or contradictions that occur between attempts to control and attempts to change. Such contradictions, for example, are an integral aspect of leadership roles. Leaders and managers are often expected to be *both* the champions of change and the guardians of the status quo in organizations. Such tensions are inevitably part of attempts to learn and to change in organizations. As practitioners of action learning our tendency can be to try and ignore these contradictions – or worse – to try and resolve them. My view is that it is important to acknowledge the contradictions that action learning can generate and to allow them to inform our practice and to enrich it.

If we are to understand the impact of action learning then we must accept that action learning can serve forces of control as much as it serves forces of change, that the impact of action learning can be both positive and negative. For example, it may be the case that senior managers decide that action learning, as a largely self-managed process, makes it possible for an organization to significantly reduce the cost of training. Action learning can be seen as a cheap alternative to other forms of intervention, and its use can be driven by the need to save money more than a desire to support learning. Managers might say that action learning 'offers value' *and* it 'supports learning' – but often it is the support for learning that is lost in struggles for efficiency. Therefore, it is important for enthusiasts of action learning to be aware that there is always a tension between the radical potential of action learning to make change happen and the political purpose behind the use of action learning in organizations.

If we are capable of recognizing the tension between radical potential and political purpose then we can begin to perceive a more general issue. The fact is that we have spent much more time thinking about the impact of action learning in organizations than we have considering the impact of organization on action learning. The central idea in action learning is that taking 'action' is the key to learning (learning by doing). However, both emotional and political dynamics shape how individuals and collectives are able to take action. Therefore, all attempts to organize learning are prone to the creation of activities that are potentially self-limiting as well as developmental. Action Learning is designed to mobilise 'learning-in-action' – through membership of a Learning Set, individuals

develop strategic actions that can be tested and transformed in practice. However, Action Learning also gives rise to 'learning inaction' – our (conscious and unconscious) awareness or knowledge of when it is emotionally and politically expedient to refrain from action, when to avoid collective action and the organizational dynamics that inform a failure to act. Action Learning Sets are groups, and all groups create ways of working that defend against anxiety, difference and competing needs and desires.

There is a strong idea that I find to be prevalent among action learning set members and facilitators, which is that working with others in learning sets, working alongside 'comrades in adversity', means that the method supports an intrinsic equality between set members. I often hear set members say that 'we are all equal here' that 'we are all working together' to improve individual and organizational practice. Such fantasies are reinforced by our enthusiasms for an approach that we know can be very positive and productive. However, the power relations I have described above mean that we are not 'all equal' in learning sets, and that there will always be differences that make a difference. There is one particular approach to action learning that is currently attempting to focus our efforts in this area – critical action learning

Critical Action Learning

Critical Action Learning (CAL) seeks to reveal how power relations are part of action learning. The emphasis of CAL is not only on the 'empowerment' of the individual learner but also on the various ways in which learning is supported, avoided and prevented within Sets and in organizations through relations of power. Power may be represented by, for example, individuals' risk-averse behaviour in Sets; collective defensiveness and denial; or Set members' unconscious compliance to certain habits, norms and expectations. An assumption at the heart of CAL is that power relations are an inevitable and integral aspect of Action Learning. Therefore, while we may be 'comrades in adversity' within learning sets, it is important to recognize that we may also be *adversaries with commonality* and *accomplices in compliance.*

One of the key theoretical developments to inform critical action learning is the idea of 'organizing insight'. Revans' original formula to define how learning is generated through action learning is L (learning) = P (programmed knowledge) + Q (questioning insight). In other words, learning occurs through a mixture of existing knowledge that can inform individuals' actions *and* the insights that arise from taking action and reflecting on action. However, individuals' questioning insight is undertaken in the context of collective emotional dynamics, linked to unconscious processes and complex inter-personal relations, as well as the everyday politics that surround them. In addition to insights that are generated by individuals' reflection and action, learning is promoted and prevented in organizations through networks and relations of power. Therefore, CAL uses a different formula ('L = P + Q + O' where O is organizing insight) to acknowledge that it is not only important to support individuals' learning in organizations, but also the ways in which organizing and organizations create limits to and possibilities for learning.

An Example of organizing insight and the impact it might make

I have recently completed a six-month research project on 'Power-sharing Between Clinicians and Managers in the National Health Service (NHS)'.[2] When I started the research I was convinced that it might generate knowledge about how to support power sharing between clinicians and managers. When the research was completed I realized that the differences between clinicians and managers are a significant part of the glue that holds the management and leadership of the health service together.

Table 1: Clinicians and Managers views of each other

Clinicians' view of Managers	Managers' view of Clinicians
"Managers see us like babies in prams – throwing their toys around and fussing around. Managers then become those adults who are rational and objective while we are the toddlers"	*"They [clinicians] feel bureaucracy is wrong and they are moral and right"*
"They [managers] don't understand that it is emotionally upsetting when due to cost we are not able to provide good services"	*"They [clinicians] have a desire to preserve the status quo. They have huge sense of loyalty to their profession when it is challenged. They are happy to criticize themselves amongst themselves but not outside"*
"Managers pontificate more and take the theory more seriously than the doctors. This may be due to doctors having more time pressure to act at work rather than theorise!"	*"They [clinicians] lack respect for NHS as an institution and hence the Managers"*
	"They [clinicians] are problem focused but don't come up with solutions"

The research was organized around six-month 'leadership fellowships', which were available to both clinicians and managers. Over the six-month period, clinicians and managers worked on specific quality improvement projects. The data were collected in a variety of ways – including from action learning sets. In Table 1 (above) I have provided a short extract of clinicians and managers' perceptions of each other.

My reason for sharing this example is in order to point towards the 'organizing insights' that emerged from the action learning sets. These included: 1. Both clinicians and managers have an investment in maintaining these views of each other. For example, it is very common to hear that their clinical colleagues see clinicians who have taken on managerial roles as having 'gone over to the dark side'. Similarly, managers' see clinicians, even of those who take on managerial roles, as 'locked into their professional loyalties'. 2. I realized that the statements (like the ones in Table 1, above) are not complaints about each other, but rather they are an ongoing expression of views that serve as implicit rules about behavior. 3. Once established, these rules are difficult to change – making mutuality, collaborative endeavor and power sharing in the organization more difficult. 4. I am forming the opinion that a strong divide between managers and clinicians is integral to organizing in the NHS. If this is true, then such a divide has profound implications for learning and development in the NHS

In effect, these differences change the way we think about leadership development in the NHS. The current thinking about leadership development is based on a generic framework of individual skills and knowledge. The National Leadership Council claim is that the framework '*is applicable to everyone in health and care, no matter what their discipline, role or function*' and '*it is designed to enable staff to understand their progression as leaders...*' (NHS National Leadership Council: http://nhsleadershipframework.rightmanagement.co.uk/what-is-the-lf)

I do not believe that I am over-emphasizing my point when I say that the claim that there is a framework that is 'applicable to everyone... no matter what their discipline' is ridiculous. In my opinion this idea would be ridiculous in relation to any organization, but it is particularly ridiculous when applied to such a large and complex organizational context as the NHS. A one-size-fits-all approach to development in the NHS is a symptom of a poor understanding of the emotions and politics that inform and underpin attempt to learn about leadership. The current framework does not attempt to account for everyday power relations and their consequences for service delivery. It is focused on individual development and takes no account of the contradictions that are generated within such a highly political context. Such a framework is not designed to engage with power relations that both inform *and* undermine development. For example, it emphasizes setting direction, working with others and managing services without any insight into the fact that managers and leaders in the NHS regularly misdirect, work without others and mismanage the services they are responsible for. If we deny the contradictions that are integral to the practice of leadership then our development processes will only reinforce the problems they are seeking to address.

Critical Action Learning in Practice

There are times when, despite an individual's own enthusiasm for learning and change, organizational politics limit the scope or impact of individuals' learning and the organizational change that might arise from it. The efforts we make to promote change can be undermined by an organizational context that is driven

by a perceived need to maintain the status quo. CAL highlights the individual and collective *emotional dynamics* that are part of Action Learning Sets. Individuals' questioning insight is undertaken in the context of group dynamics, linked to unconscious processes and complex inter-personal relations. All groups, including Sets, are subject to unconscious and unspoken emotions (both individual and collective) that create self-limiting structures for the group. CAL invites Set facilitators and members to be aware of the power relations they are creating, representing and enacting. For example, facilitating (whether as a Set leader or member) is always a double-edged issue. Sometimes it can be difficult for us to recognise the harm our 'helpfulness' might cause for others. We may well believe that we are empowering others when we are in fact controlling, restricting or undermining them.

CAL encourages Set leaders and members to recognise that political dynamics are always present within the organizations in which we work. When I speak of *political dynamics* I am talking about the everyday contradictions that arise in organizations from relations of power. This might include: attempts to control others as we pretend to facilitate them; avoiding the conflicts and differences that might make change possible because we fear their effects for us; or acquiescing to others' bad ideas in order to ensure an easy life. CAL also encourages us to recognize that individual 'problems' may well be a representation of broader power relations in the social context within which they work. We have the opportunity in Critical Action Learning Sets to raise and address these power relations in order to help individuals to comprehend the complex political dynamics surrounding their everyday work. My view is that doing this helps Set members to be more realistic in the development of action and to recognize that all their actions will be bound up with relations of power that both promote and prevent learning and change.

The desire to engage with emotional and political dynamics in organizations raises the question: how should we facilitate 'Critical Action Learning' Sets? The primary concern of the *critical facilitator* is to ensure that learning does not become detached from the underlying emotional and political context in which individual transformations of practice take place. This occurs at the same time as helping Set members to be effective 'comrades in adversity' and to improve their own practice. There are various ways in which this can be achieved. However, I want to mention two particular methods – one reflecting the emotional dynamics of learning and the other representing inter-personal politics within the Set.

The emotional dynamics of learning: Instead of asking the individual (who is sharing a problem or issue) how he or she feels about the issue, it is more effective to ask the other set members what feelings were evoked in them when they were listening to the individual. The feelings that are picked up and internalized by other set members are often the ones we find it difficult to see in ourselves. For example, Set members may start to feel discomfort at what is being said even though the individual seems comfortable in his or her description of events. Communicating this feeling of discomfort helps to address the consequences of emotional mixed messages, both personal and organizational. This approach challenges patterns of individual defensiveness

and (more importantly) creates collective associations with defensive behaviour in organizations. Defensive behaviour gives rise to self-limiting structures (which then reinforce defensive behaviour) in Sets and in organizations.

Inter-personal politics within Sets: It is important to focus on the avoidance of difference. Action Learning often promotes a strong feeling of togetherness within a learning process. While this can be valuable for learning it can also create an idea in the Set that 'we are all in the same boat'. Emphasizing the equality inherent in learning with and from our peers is productive, but it also allows Set members to avoid the differences that are present in the Set. In this way, the Set unconsciously defends itself against the differences (e.g. of power, knowledge, understanding, enthusiasm, gender, social and cultural diversity) that are inevitably part of the Set and (more importantly) that contribute to the implicit structures that determine its effective and ineffective functioning. The individual and collective desire to minimize conflict and difference and to emphasize togetherness will get in the way of learning about power relations both in the Set and within organizations.

Conclusion

In this polemical essay, based on my presentation to IALC 2012, I have highlighted several issues that become apparent in using (critical) action learning within the complex and messy world of organizations. In summary these are: 1. Despite my own dedication to this method, I think that it is important not to have unquestioning enthusiasm for action learning. We need a corresponding suspicion of action learning to help us become aware of the emotional and political contradictions that may be generated by using this approach. 2. I do not think that we can expect to have impact unless we engage critically with the ways in which power relations undermine impact. Power relations have a profound effect on why, how and when action learning is being used in organizations. Within learning sets, it is important to remember that we are not only comrades in adversity, but also adversaries with commonality and accomplices in compliance to organizational rules, norms and expectations. 3. The emphasis of Critical Action Learning is not only on the 'empowerment' of the individual, but also on the ways in which learning is supported, avoided and prevented through relations of power. The thinking that underpins CAL helps to dispel the fantasy of a generic framework for leadership development in organizations. Instead it provides the basis for understanding the contradictions mobilized within organizations through attempts to learn and change.

I will finish by restating why I believe that a focus on the *contradictions* mobilized by Action Learning is important. We are *not* 'all equal' in Action Learning Sets and if we continue to work from this fantasy then we will never be able to engage with differences that make a difference. We are *not* only 'comrades' in Action Learning Sets. If we are honest then we recognize that human nature also involves (e.g.) envy, competition, control and manipulation. If we over-emphasize togetherness then we deny Set members an appreciation of the ways in which we simultaneously work with and against others in organizations. We are *not* separated from the organizations in which we work.

Individuals in Action Learning Sets are not only engaged in personal attempts to transform our own practice. If we over-emphasize the impact I can make on the organization then we are in danger of underplaying the impact that the organization makes on me. This final point is connected to the difference between learning-in-action (individuals' attempts to transform their own practice) and 'learning inaction' – our implicit understanding of the limits on learning that are characteristic of the organizations in which we work. Working with these contradictions does *not* undermine the impact of Action Learning – it enhances it.

Notes on Contributor

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