Action Learning and Leadership Development

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This panel will offer a critical view on the practice of leadership development via Action Learning, with reflections on the core philosophy of action/reflection learning.

Reflection on action is a staple of leadership development programs, usually enhanced by some reference to ‘critical’, which means to question the assumptions on which any particular reflective thoughts are based. Criticality is fostered by reference to relevant social theory and/or discussion with a coach, tutor or amongst an action learning set. Action learning is frequently used in leadership development programs as a way of encouraging program participants to experiment with solutions to organisational challenges whilst in a peer based supported environment.

In spring 2014 an action learning review panel was formed with an internationally diverse group of 11 scholars all of whom had an interest in critical reflection-oriented action learning approaches to leadership development. The panel members engaged in a rich on-line dialogue over a period of three weeks consisting of discussions centred on the review of a specific case study and leadership development more broadly.

The case study material was prepared by the MiL Institute⁴, Sweden and describes a leadership development project for a client of MiL. The leadership development project consisted of two leadership development programmes which ran for several years. A key element in the design of the programmes was action learning and reflection with observations, transcribed interviews and client feedback on this process and the programs themselves forming a substantial part of the case study material.

The contribution through the action learning review panel will feed into a larger project aimed at rethinking the basic philosophy of action learning and theoretical developments and societal changes that have occurred since Reg Revans pioneering work.

The review panel discussions raised a number of ethical, theoretical and pragmatic questions about the application of action learning and reflection techniques in leadership development programs. In this session we will present 4 short (10 minute) points of critique which were highlighted through the review of the specific program. We will then open the floor to discussion and debate.

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⁴ Sponsored by MiL, a detailed case study of a program was authored by Magnus Larsson (2014).
The Points of Critique are:

1) The point of entry: Tacit assumptions and plural – even contradictory – interests are smoothly occluded by all the good stuff about learning, action, reflection, insight, leadership … but what about power, competition, envy, exploitation? And why do so many participants in A/L quickly leave their roles and/or companies after completing a leadership development program? If we consider these programs as episodes in interweaving individual and social identity projects, can we distinguish identity-related motives beneath the rhetoric of efficacy?

2) The point of learning: what to learn about, and why is learning so valued by the participants? What do they prefer not to learn? And what kinds of learning might be possible but impolitic, inconvenient or unpalatable? What role in editing the learning is played by facilitators, participants themselves, researchers; and by what processes – agenda-setting, project selection and facilitation, surveillance, conscious and unconscious collusion?

3) The point of practice: There are long-standing and difficult questions about experiences vs. learning. While programs clearly produce a lot of experiences, how can we understand the learning and the ‘becoming’ that takes place and how this learning is associated with delegates practice beyond the A/L set? Do delegates learn a practice of ‘becoming’ a delegate of an A/L set and how does this fit with their other practices and identities? The development of a community of practice might be one way to think about this, but also a newer question concerns leader vs. learner identity, and how the relationship between these can be understood. Why do programs so clearly invite participants as learners, but so little as leaders?

4) The point of leadership: What has this to do with leadership, in the sense of disrupting the current ways of doing things and striking out in a new direction, taking others with you? Action-learning has a long history of valuing the challenge and engagement of leaders and their organizations in tackling systemic injustices, corrupting processes and institutionalized brutality. But how much of that is alive today? Will clients commission A/L with these objectives? And are even these too inward focused, more to do with the internal politics of organizations than leading collective efforts to organize for constructive change (or resistance)? These questions concern the leadership industry as a whole, and the dynamics it is shaped by. If the critique holds up, what would leadership development look like if it really did hit leadership?

References:

Larsson, M. 2014. “MiL Action Learning Programme case study” (unpublished, for discussion)