Action learning for leadership development

**Middle management leadership development through action learning**

Bob Dick

Independent scholar, Brisbane, Australia
bd@bigpond.net.au
Middle management leadership development through action learning

Abstract: This paper describes an action learning program used to improve the ability of managers, especially middle managers, to lead more effectively during times of rapid change. The program consisted of three major vehicles for developing leadership capability. In a weekly middle management forum, managers met to choose projects that deserved attention. For chosen projects, the same middle managers then set up a number of small action learning teams staffed by volunteer middle managers. Associated workshops provided “just in time” concepts and skills when project team members requested them. Middle managers are the people who carry much of the burden of keeping workforce officers informed and involved in change. With some top management support, they were therefore the main participants in the workshops and the project teams. A final section of the paper reflects on the outcomes of the program and the features that contributed to its effectiveness.

Keywords: action learning, project teams, middle management, leadership development, change skills

This paper is more of a practitioner document than an academic treatise. There are references to the literature in it, certainly, and the processes described here are not inconsistent with that literature. Many of the references, however, were tracked down after the event as part of the work in writing this paper. The intervention program described here developed, as many practitioner programs do, in response to events as they transpired. Schein (1996, p. 35) hints at the reason: “unless we intervene, we will not learn what some of the essential dynamics of the system really are”. We learn about complex situations by engaging with them. At the beginning of an intervention we don’t know enough to design the intervention in detail.

Faced with this obstacle, practitioners make choices within the constraints of the situation. In acting on those choices they discover whether or not the choice was effective. If it wasn’t they make a different choice and act again. In all but the simplest of situations this is likely to be unavoidable. It’s how the intervention described below evolved.

The paper describes and reflects on an action learning program conducted during 2002-2003 to develop leadership skills and understanding, especially in middle management ranks. The organisational unit where the program was implemented had reason to believe that future change would accelerate and there was some doubt if the unit would be able to cope. The program was designed to improve the ability to do so. As I wanted my own approach to model effective and flexible participation, and for reasons already stated, the program was not pre-designed in detail. It was negotiated as it unfolded.

Immediately below I describe the organisational unit, its reasons for embarking on this program, and the role I negotiated. I follow this in turn by a brief outline of action learning as a methodology, a description of the process, and an examination of the project teams and workshops and their facilitation. Finally, I use the benefits of hindsight to draw some
conclusions about the relevance of action learning for managers facing increasing change to develop pertinent leadership skills.

The organisation and its situation

The setting for the intervention was a mostly autonomous unit within a government department. I’ll call it the Agency. It employed several hundred people, many with professional qualifications. Those who were less well qualified usually had considerable relevant experience. The Agency prided itself on its ability to achieve its goals, and had a reputation for doing so. For present purposes other details are not important.

The Agency was faced with many substantial changes expected to take place over a period of little more than a year. Work pressures were already high. Some senior managers feared that their people did not have the necessary skills and understanding to manage the changes they faced. From their middle managers they wanted more display of initiative and a greater ability to engage subordinates in introducing change. I was approached to help the Agency develop the relevant skills and understanding.

Contracting

I agree with Quarry and Ramírez (2009) that it is important for an organisation and an external consultant to have clear expectations of each other. Before the intervention began I had several meetings with the CEO, whom I’ll call Keith, and with several other senior managers. In these early meetings we negotiated how the Agency and I would work together. In particular we decided the scope of the assignment, the intended outcomes and timeframe, and my role in facilitating the activity. I negotiated some flexibility with how the program would develop.

In addition, I arranged regular access to Keith and regular meetings with some other managers with direct responsibility for change management. Two of these, middle managers whom I’ll call Michael and Harold, became close allies during the contract. I also negotiated that as far as possible I was there for the benefit of everyone. Keith was not my only or primary client — everyone in the Agency was. Keith agreed to this.

We assumed, as Holton and Baldwin (2003) affirm, that training room activities by themselves do not always result in on-the-job change. Instead we determined to use actual changes faced by the organisation as the vehicle for managers to develop the required skills and understanding. For our methodology we chose a form of action learning. We tentatively planned an overall program consisting of a number of small projects important to the Agency. Each of a number of project teams would work on a different project.

There is evidence (for instance from Delarue, Hootegem, Procter and Burridge, 2008) that enhanced teamwork improves productivity. That would help with workload. And as Yorks (2003) explains, action learning enhances the transfer of learning, which we were keen to achieve. We anticipated that the intervention would deliver several valuable outcomes:

• more systematic planning and facilitation on the part of managers, leading to more effective implementation of changes;
• members of the project teams enhancing their change management skills, including communication and facilitation, by actually planning and managing change;
• project team members developing a deeper understanding of the nature of organisational structure, as some of the projects involved structural change for the Agency;
• project team members using these skills and understanding to enhance their capability as managers and leaders, with more facilitative leadership styles;
• greater management openness and communication, building trust with staff and thus further improving communication;
• most importantly, managers becoming more confident in the use of their skills and their understanding, and their ability to apply them in new situations.

In addition to using action learning processes, we were guided by a model I learned from Edgar Schein during a workshop in 1980; also, see Schein (1980). Anticipating Goleman’s (1995) later work on emotional intelligence, Schein envisaged three categories of management skills: analytical, interpersonal, and what he called “emotional competence”. He believed that because managers achieve their outcomes through others, analytical and professional skills depend for their effective use on the possession of good interpersonal skills. In turn, and especially when it matters most, interpersonal skills depend on the willingness and therefore the emotional competence to act. In other words, emotional competence is a necessary foundation for the effective use of other management skills. Emotional competence includes a willingness to take informed risks and to exercise appropriate responsibility. You might call it self-management.

Michael, Harold and I reasoned that, as one learns to ride a bicycle by riding a bicycle, one learns emotional competence by exercising emotional competence. We assumed that experiential learning and adult learning principles would allow more effective transfer of learning to the work situation, as Leberman, McDonald and Doyle (2006) have since found. Our intention was that through being more proactive and intentional the managers would enhance their belief in themselves, their ability to learn from experience, and their relationships within the organisation. By planning and implementing change they would become more skilled at doing so. In facilitating a small project team they would practise a more facilitative management style.

Like Reynolds (2009) we believed that experiential learning was consistent with the competencies we hoped would develop. In a recent literature review Leonard and Marquardt (2010) conclude that action learning does develop skills similar to those we wished to strengthen. Taking program goals into account, action learning therefore seemed a suitable vehicle for the intervention. An action learning program consisting of multiple action learning project teams seemed appropriate.

Action learning

To simplify a little, there are two related families of action research. As originally devised by Revans (e.g. 1983/1998), action learning teams—‘sets’, as they were called—consisted of individuals (usually CEOs) from different organisations. Revans’ belief was that learning consisted both of knowledge and of the understanding that arises from questioning inquiry. He captured this relationship in his well-known formula \( L = P + Q \), where \( L \) is learning, \( P \) is programmed knowledge that is already known, and \( Q \) is new learning which arises from questioning. In this approach to action learning the CEOs met regularly in self-facilitated groups. They helped each other to improve their work as managers and to learn from their management activities.
Some present-day action learning follows this approach. An alternative form has arisen in which in-house project teams form around organisational projects. The teams are usually heavily facilitated for the duration of their existence. Marquardt (1999) and Raelin (2008), among many others, provide examples of this approach. In both varieties of action learning the facilitator encourages a climate of questioning inquiry. Our choice was a hybrid design that was project based with self-facilitated groups. Perhaps fortunately, we were unaware that Pedler and Abbott (2008) have reported that a strongly facilitated approach is now more common, and perhaps even necessary for best results.

**The overall process**

In initiating change within the Agency my preference would have been to begin with Keith, the CEO. I would then have liked to work downward through the Agency, developing the skills and securing the support of each level of management in turn. Senior managers would then be able to model the skills we were helping middle managers to develop. Keith was available whenever I wished to contact him. So were some of his direct reports individually. Access to the whole level of senior management proved to be more elusive.

Michael reported that his middle management colleagues were enthusiastic. Michael, Harold and I therefore decided to work directly with them rather than wait for the involvement of senior managers. After all, much of the success of the projects would depend on the middle managers’ energy and ability. In fact, at that time we didn’t know of Huy’s (2001) claim that middle managers often display valuable ideas and put them into practice. Later, Taylor (2008) found that middle managers were more likely than senior managers to initiate change, especially if there were discussion forums available to them. And there were.

The middle managers supposedly met regularly. Attendance, however, had been patchy. As the meetings had been set up by others to allow efficient downward communication, the middle managers didn’t “own” them. We signalled a change in focus, accompanied by a change in name. We worked with the middle managers to improve the effectiveness of their meetings. We sought their collaboration in spreading the changes through the Agency. Again they cooperated readily.

A project team was set up for each of the change projects already required. In addition, the middle managers themselves set up other project teams to address issues they believed were also important. For example because managers found it difficult to provide time for the program, one of the early project teams explored ways of freeing up time to work on the change program.

Michael and Harold attended many of the early project team meetings. The two of them and I also became a steering committee for the strategic aspects of the projects. We met regularly (sometimes with Keith or other senior managers) to discuss the program and plan our future actions. To make it easier for people to escape their usual Agency mindset we sometimes held these meetings over coffee in a nearby café. I sought regular feedback from Keith, Michael and Harold. I also provided regular feedback to them in face-to-face discussions. The reconstituted middle management forum was also important in providing ongoing support and guidance to project teams.
Middle management forum

While I was working with the project teams Michael assisted the middle management forum, which I attended occasionally. At the forum the middle managers determined to take more control of their own work together. They made several decisions.

- They would continue the regularly meetings, which they would make a greater effort to attend.
- One of them would facilitate each meeting. Typically, a given facilitator took responsibility for about four meetings while a “deputy facilitator” prepared for taking over the facilitation in due course.
- The middle manager doing the facilitation would be more reflective about the way the group worked and how it might continue to improve. To this end, the facilitator met with Michael and the deputy facilitator between forum meetings.
- They would be more proactive in their relationships with senior management and in preparing their teams for the impending changes.

Project team facilitation

The escalating changes that the Agency anticipated favoured a more participative management style; for example see Laszlo, Laszlo and Johnsen (2009). As mentioned, the development of such a style was one of the aims of the program. We therefore encouraged the project teams to become self-facilitated as a way of practising the relevant skills. I provided initial facilitation only. As teams began to take responsibility for their own facilitation we provided them with coaching help. Doing this confirmed our view, and that of Gorrell and Hoover (2009), that action learning and coaching form a useful combination.

I attended the first two or three meetings of project teams, usually accompanied by either Michael or Harold. I facilitated the first meeting, while also encouraging team members to take some of the facilitation tasks — for instance, timekeeping, or capturing the team deliberations on flip chart or whiteboard. At this first meeting each project team worked through four agenda items intended to improve project team functioning.

- Building relationships between team members. I used exercises that were relevant to the task and also encouraged people to disclose something of themselves beyond their usual work roles.
- Being clear about the outcomes that were expected from the project. We did this by listing the outcomes that would tell us that the project had been effective.
- Reaching agreement on some “process guidelines” to help the team to work together effectively.
- Identifying absent stakeholders, so that the project team could later decide how to involve them or otherwise take their views into account.

From the second meeting onward the team members were expected to provide their own facilitation. We intended the teams to become quickly self-sufficient. Team members took turns in facilitating so that all of them were able to practise the relevant skills. At this meeting I spoke up only to offer feedback or to provide supportive coaching. As mentioned earlier, team self-facilitation goes against the recommendation of some literature. In retrospect, it may be that our initial activities explain why self-facilitation was effective in this program.
In subsequent action learning programs (so far unpublished) I have continued to use the same approach. I give volunteer project teams genuine responsibility for important tasks, genuine autonomy to work on them, and adequate support from the organisation and from their colleagues within the team. When this has been done, most people have risen to the challenge, sometimes to an extent that has surprised their organisation.

In a paper on action learning, Sofo, Yeo and Villafañe (2010) examined the role of reflection in helping action-oriented managers to become more aware of their learning. For similar reasons I urged project teams to use the last ten or fifteen minutes of every meeting to reflect on their experience and review how well they had worked. At this time they compared their team’s operation to the process guidelines that they had already developed. They agreed on future changes to their style of operation or to their guidelines. In this way they developed the habit of regular reflection on their operating style and their progress. To my knowledge all teams continued to do this as a regular discipline. Most teams rapidly assumed responsibility for their own operation. I then negotiated that in future I would attend again only occasionally, at their invitation.

“Just in time” skill development and understanding

It’s not uncommon for action learning to emphasise Q, the learning that emerges from questioning inquiry. Programmed learning, P, is sometimes given much less attention. In general I support this emphasis. I believe that the learning that emerges from experience is deeper and more impactful and does more to develop real capability. I think that skills learned through action are more likely to be used again. Sometimes, however, experiential learning is not efficient in its use of time. It became apparent that for many of the managers a superficial understanding of the principles of organisational structure and team operation hindered the changes we were pursuing. Michael and I therefore decided some relevant information on these topics would be useful. In addition, Michael surveyed the managers to determine if there were skills they believed they required.

It became clear that better interpersonal skills would help team operation. As the consulting budget was limited, I was able to spend only a few meetings with each project team. We therefore decided to offer some workshops that all managers were invited to attend. We planned these workshops to address the knowledge and skills for which team members would have immediate use.

The knowledge component

For the programmed learning (“P”) component I focussed on a small number of “strategic concepts” — concepts I thought would help managers think about their experience in far-reaching and different and more useful ways.

The most important of these were about organisational structure, including the following.

- The role of organisations is to manage the interdependencies between people or teams.
- Bureaucracy had been an efficient way of doing this for many years. Now it is ineffective because of the increasing rate of change.
- Team-based structures are a more change-friendly alternative, but require different skills.
I tried always to address the practical implications of concepts. For instance the workshops examined the relative outcomes in job satisfaction of team based and bureaucratic structures. Where possible the workshops drew on managers’ own experience. Specific examples were used when available.

**The skills component**

The workshops addressed two skills in particular: communication, and facilitation. As far as possible I used experiential methods. For example I used Robinson’s (1993) framework for planning more effective communication in difficult situations. I chose it because it was itself based on the seminal work of Argyris and Schön (1974), which I find powerful. I think that people have most difficulty communicating in awkward or threatening situations. Learning a fairly simple and memorable technique for such situations would increase their confidence with their peers and others.

Briefly, the framework views a difficult communication act as desirably having three components:

- information about the assumptions the speaker has formed about what is happening or has happened
- the evidence on which those assumptions are based
- encouragement to others to challenge the assumptions, the evidence, or both.

The participants used worksheets based on Robinson’s framework to plan how they might deal with specific difficult situations in actual relationships. In small groups they then helped each other to explore constructive ways of doing so. The sessions were accompanied by activities through which participants examined such issues as the difference between evidence and assumptions, or the effect on a listener of the way information was communicated. In this and in the more theoretical components discussed above the intention was to integrate theory and practice.

**Outcomes**

By the time my contract with the organisation ended, the important structural changes were still to be implemented. They had been announced, however. A survey by Michael revealed that, compared to previous structural changes, staff were more than usually satisfied with the information they have been given. Middle managers were mostly responsible for communicating the changes. I therefore believe we achieved some success in encouraging the middle managers to be more proactive and to communicate more effectively.

An indicator of the new spirit of the managers’ forum was their great willingness to share staff when a section was experiencing overload. Previously, overloaded sections had called for expressions of interest from staff willing to transfer to the section temporarily. This had been only partially effective, as managers competitively saw this as “taking from each other”. Instead, they now began to bring their requests for help to the managers’ forum, and the resources were more often and more willingly provided.
Other evidence about improvement was more anecdotal. After the formal completion of the program, Michael reported that members of the senior management team were communicating more. He also said they were giving more attention to the way they related to each other and how they managed their subordinates. I know that they began to meet informally more often, as I was invited to some of these meetings. Some relationship-building activities took place. There were reports of more willingness to encourage initiative on the part of middle managers. Michael said that at all management levels he observed more willingness to spend time on the people aspects of management.

One emphasis of the program was the development of team skills that would make change management more effective. We are confident that work in teams improved substantially. We observed this both within the middle management group and in the project teams that middle managers took part in and facilitated. We also have indirect evidence that facilitation improved within the teams where middle managers were team leaders. The satisfaction of their team members with the communication of the new structure (mentioned above) is an example.

There were also signs that the relationships between middle and senior management improved. Much of this arose because of the greater willingness of middle managers to take the initiative. In turn, this encouraged senior managers to display greater trust in middle managers, further enhancing the relationship. Michael and I interpreted this as evidence for greater self-efficacy and more willingness to initiate action.

We also claim that managers enhanced their willingness and ability to learn. Initially they changed meeting procedures because of our facilitation and questions. They continued to improve them because of the regular reflection and review that they adopted. The indications were that by the formal conclusion of the program, the Agency was better placed to manage change, with middle managers who had enhanced their skills and understanding.

**Conclusions**

Michael and I monitored the program as it progressed, and reflected on it after its conclusion. We noted several factors that appeared to contribute to the outcomes. I describe them briefly below.

Support from the top was important. Keith was available to talk about the program at any time. He readily accepted feedback on his own behaviour. He often changed his behaviour towards the managers as the program progressed. He spoke publicly in support of what we were doing.

It was an advantage that the steering group consisted of Michael and Harold from within the Agency, and me from outside. Internal facilitators are likely to have a better knowledge of the organisational politics. Michael certainly did. He was also willing to take informed risks in encouraging people to try new approaches. I brought wider experience to the organisation, and perhaps greater credibility because I was external.

Michael and Harold were keen to learn from the program. As a result, they were able to play a greater role in subsequent change, reducing the dependency of the Agency on consulting help.
In all that we did within the program, Michael, Harold and I tried to model the skills and mindsets that we hoped the program would develop in the middle managers.

As mentioned, self-facilitation was strongly encouraged. We didn’t want the teams to become dependent on us. Helping the project teams to start well also influenced team behaviours in day-to-day Agency work.

The middle managers proved to be good catalysts for change. As I said earlier, at the time I would have preferred more involvement from senior managers. I now think that the middle managers were well placed to introduce important and relevant changes. In future I will be more inclined if necessary to bypass senior managers to work with middle managers.

The middle managers were enthusiastic. They chose many of the team projects. Almost all members of a project team were volunteers. Consequently, their ownership of the projects and the program was high.

We used multiple means to enhance the capability of the middle managers. On different occasions Michael and I worked directly with managers and their teams, or the managers’ forum, or other impromptu meetings with managers. Initially we provided direct facilitation to project teams. When managers took over the facilitation we provided initial coaching for them.

Skills and theories were provided when they are needed (that is, “just in time”), to be more likely to be used in practice. Much of the learning happened in the project teams. Whenever we provided concepts and skills we were guided by the present needs of the participants.

Now, looking back after many years, I’m pleased we chose a flexible approach that was responsive to the emerging situation. Faced with an equivalent situation with similar goals I would very possibly again recommend a multi-faceted and flexible action learning program using multiple project teams. Learning by doing and theory–practice integration, which action learning suits well, would again be emphases. I would again give priority to encouraging self-efficacy and reducing the dependence on others.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Keith, Harold and the middle managers for their cooperation and enthusiasm, and especially to Michael for his courage and initiative. Thanks to David Andrews and Camilla Andrews for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

References


