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Action Learning: Understanding interpersonal relationships within learning sets

Abstract

Purpose - This paper responds to calls for research into the use of action learning in management education (Hay, 2011). It reports on student experiences of action learning in a final year module for part time Master of Business Administration students. It focuses specifically on the development of an understanding of the interpersonal relationships that existed within those action learning sets; both positive and negative. The paper then discusses the subsequent impact those dynamics may have on the effectiveness of the action learning process.

Design/methodology/approach – An interpretivist philosophy underpins the research framework adopted in this paper. Data was captured by means of semi-structured questionnaires distributed at both the beginning and end of the module. The data was thematically analysed using open coding.

Findings – The paper used two contrasting views of the interpersonal relationships in action learning sets: Revans' (1982) 'comrades in adversity' and Vince's (2004) 'adversaries in commonality' as a framework for discussion. It found that various interpersonal dynamics existed within the sets, which in this case, had the ability to influence individual satisfaction and the overall effectiveness of the set.

Originality/value - The findings provide insights, via participant voice, into aspects of interpersonal relationships within action learning sets. In particular, the politics and emotions that occur within the learning sets, whilst considering the subsequent impact on both participant satisfaction and the effectiveness of action learning sets.

Keywords: Action learning, interpersonal relationships, learning set politics, emotions and effectiveness.

Paper type: Research Paper

Introduction

This paper responds to calls for research into the use of action learning in management education (Hay, 2011). The focus of the paper is to enhance the understanding of the interpersonal relationships that exist within action learning sets, whilst considering the subsequent impact those relationships may have on the effectiveness of the action learning process. The paper problematises Revans' (1982) notion of 'comrades in adversity', by introducing Vince's (2004) 'adversaries with commonality', a view that suggests that some aspects of interpersonal relationships experienced by people who attempt to learn from one another can sometimes be complex and difficult. Postulating that the interpersonal relationships that exist within action learning sets may be more problematic than Revans originally believed. The research presents the student voice giving consideration to both positive and negative views, which both challenge Revans' and Vince's views. The research findings and conclusions have utility for those engaged in management and facilitation of the action learning process.

Action Learning

Action learning has long been recognised as amongst the most effective means of delivering professional education and management development training (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002; Kramer, 2008). It is a continuous process of learning and reflection that occurs with the support of a group or 'set' of approximately six to eight colleagues, working on real issues with the intention of getting things done. The voluntary participants in the group or 'set' learn with and from one another and take forward an important issue with support of the other members of the set. The collaborative process, which recognises each set member's social context, promotes the premise that managers learn most effectively with, and from, other managers whilst dealing with the real world complexity of organisational life. Revans described these managers as 'comrades in adversity' (1982:720). However, this view is not universally shared as Vince (2004:64) understood the term 'comrades in adversity' to suggest a sense of togetherness, with the existence of a common aim and collective effort from all the participants in the set. However, he suggested that this ideology did not always capture both the complexity and reality of the interpersonal relationships that often exist within action learning sets, particularly those

within organisational contexts. Vince (2004) problematises Revans' assertion by suggesting that these comrades in adversity are equally likely to be 'adversaries with commonality', and that the emotions and politics experienced by people who attempt to learn from one another can sometimes be complex and difficult (Smith, 2001:36). Vince (2004) promotes the concept of Critical Action Learning (CAL), which undertakes to explore the power relations and political underpinnings that that can exist in action learning sets, particularly organisational based ones which have the capacity to either support or avoid learning. Here Vince (2004) notes the individual's own enthusiasm for learning and change, but also acknowledges the political dimension within which this may reside in the set. In this way, efforts to promote change can be undermined and as a consequence, managers cease to be comrades and become adversaries. This was underpinned by Rigg and Trehan's (2004:150) premise that 'tensions, contradictions, emotions and power dynamics' inevitably exist within groups of managers. This paper considers these two contrasting views of the interpersonal relationships that exist in action learning sets within the research project, whilst considering the subsequent impact of those relationships on the effectiveness of the action learning process. The findings seek to inform those who are currently engaged in the action learning on either academic or management development programmes.

Methodology

An 'interpretivist' philosophy underpins the research framework adopted in this paper. It accepts the unique nature of individuals within the action learning sets and the inherent complexities within them (Schwandt, 1994). The sample comprised sixty-five part-time MBA students aged between twenty four to fifty three years old, mainly middle managers from both the public and private sectors, which included both the health and fire services. Within the sample, there was a dominance of females.

The MBA programme culminates in a final year research methods and dissertation module comprising a 3,000 word dissertation proposal and a 16,000 word dissertation. Selection of each individual set member's research topic, which was considered to be the sets 'live' issue, in spite of the individual outcome for each set member, was the focus of a four day residential that launched the nine action learning sets.

Subsequent learning sets were held at the university for the full duration of the module. Set composition reflected either the student's mode or location of attendance at the University, so in some cases there was a degree of familiarity within the sets; whereas, other sets comprised students who were relative strangers to one another.

Data was collected at two points during the research through an anonymous semi-structured questionnaire distributed at the end of the residential and the end of the module. Arguably, face to face interviews or focus groups would have been preferable for a study of this nature; however, it was simply a matter of convenience that dictated the approach, the thinking being that students would be reluctant to remain after the residential for either a focus group or interview, similarly at the end of the module, where there would be little appetite for analysis of events. With these thoughts in mind, an open ended questionnaire delivered at two points in the module seemed to be the most expeditious way forward. The primary interest of the research was how participants had experienced their time in the action learning set. Questions were concerned with different aspects of that experience. Specifically; what it had been like in the set; how useful they found the experience and what did they find difficult about the approach and enough room was provided on the form for respondents to write full comments.

Sixty five questionnaires were distributed on the residential and forty two were completed and returned. At the end of the module, again sixty five self-completion questionnaires were posted out to students, accompanied by stamped addressed return envelopes. A follow-up letter was sent to all students asking them to fill in and return their questionnaire. Disappointingly, only twenty were eventually returned. The difference could be viewed as understandable. There was a captive audience at the residential, whilst I was out of contact with students in January 2011, with hindsight, this should have been factored into the data collection process. However, as with many questionnaires, a possibility of non-response bias arises (Oppenheim, 1992). Given that this questionnaire was anonymous, there was the opportunity for respondents with strong feelings or opinions, either positively or negatively, to respond as a way of dealing with those feelings. In those questionnaires which were returned there were very few respondents who held strong towards, either positive or negative towards action learning. This coupled with the similarity of the participants themselves: all studying for an MBA,

all employed at middle to senior position with organisations, it was viewed that the responses not received should be not that dissimilar in many respects to those that had been received. Ultimately the view had to be taken that the twenty responses would still add to the quality and richness of the research.

The data was coded using an open coding approach. The process involved reading and re-reading the data. From that exercise a series of themes were generated which enabled the development of differing categories. Here it is useful to refer to grounded theory, in particular the thoughts of Strauss and Corbin (1998) on researcher prior experiences. In reality to bracket experience as academics is often problematic, accumulated knowledge inevitably informs the research generally, so this knowledge of action learning and the psychological processes within were used both prospectively in the way the initial semi structured questionnaire was designed, and retrospectively in the way the questionnaire was coded and analysed (Wright, 2008). Watson (1994:79) points out that researchers 'shape their findings', but they do not invent them and the following analysis reflects the interpretation of students' experiences of interpersonal relationships in the action learning sets.

Findings and discussion

Comrades in adversity?

In this particular context, the aim of action learning was to support participants in the design and completion of a final year postgraduate dissertation. This required participants to work as action learning sets. Working as a learning set in this context involved both supporting and challenging one another until the research idea became feasible. This took the form of a round table approach in which each student was given air time to present their thoughts, whilst being supported by the remainder of the set who engaged in a questions that sought clarification of the proposal idea. Analysis of data suggested that this had been broadly achieved; this was evidenced by one student reporting on the early stages of this process who said that: '*It was very beneficial to get an objective perspective and pin down my research idea*' supported by another who stated: '*It was interesting to listen and embrace other opinions on an issue and the clarity they provided was great*'. These comments suggest that the individuals concerned had felt that synergy had

emerged in their set, coupled with a sense of collective efficacy (Hogg and Tindale, 2007:15), underpinned with reciprocity within the interpersonal relationships (Maister et al, 2000). Another participant gave testament to the set's effectiveness by saying: *'the questions/suggestions from members of the group about every proposal made me think about my proposal in more depth and question some of the assumptions I had made'*. Here the student acknowledges the need to question oneself without recourse to embarrassment, something that so often is experienced when people share their work. In this instance, the strength of the interpersonal relationships seen in the sets appears to have encouraged the individual to reframe their particular view of the issue (Schon and Rein, 1994). Very often an individual student's topic is a reflection of how they see the organisational world they live in, their views acting as a window to the student's organisational culture, often illustrating the acculturation process the student is likely to have undergone. Consequently, it can be difficult to see alternative views on a particular issue or, in this case, a research project. Speaking very candidly on this subject, one student commented that the process was: *'very useful as it showed me that my opinion was narrow and I was blinkered'* supported by another student who was keen to *'reduce the risk of personal biases'*. Through challenge within the set (Mumford and Gold, 2004:148) individuals are encouraged to entertain the idea of re-framing their dissertation issue as a way of embracing possible new meanings and focus for their dissertation. One participant concluded that this process had: *'helped to refine ideas and process and reassure me about the feasibility of the intended project which was valuable'*. Challenge, in this context is seen as the measure of positive interpersonal relationships and an indicator of an effective action learning set.

In relation to the task itself, positive responses from the data included the issue of differing opinions. One student reported that: *'it was good to get the opinions of all the group members and help in defining the dissertation project'* and that these opinions were welcomed. This was illustrated by the participant who commented that: *'it was very beneficial to get an objective perspective and pin down my research idea'* reinforced by another who remarked that the process was a: *'very worthwhile exercise. The input from the other members of the set proved valuable in the formation of the dissertation'*

proposal. The data presented here so far has identified that the interpersonal relationship within the sets were very positive. A sense of synergy emerged for some as the sets began to work. This was succinctly put by the student who remarked that *'the power of five minds bouncing ideas and challenging views and opinions was great'*. In unpacking that last comment, it is useful to ask why he or she found action learning a positive experience. I will now explore this issue.

One of the philosophies that underpin action learning is humanistic (Rogers, 1983; McGill and Brockbank, 2006), where such values as support, trust and safety are paramount. This is a feature of the psychological climate that exists in any group (Koys and Decotis, 1991; Jones and James, 1979). The humanistic approach focuses on the human element of learning and is concerned with the subjective nature of each individual and their unique view of the world. McLeod (2003: 447) describes the central aim of a humanist approach as the creation of a 'cultural island' where set members feel able to experiment with different behaviours, share experiences and receive feedback from others in a setting that is outside everyday life and thereby allows greater freedom. This is clearly evidenced by one student who felt working in the set was a *'positive experience, at times we strayed outside the rules and made suggestions and observations'* with another student adding that the process was: *'insightful, uninhibiting, beneficial and comfortable'*. The creation of an effective cultural island depends on differing factors, one being the presence of psychological safety. Positive responses included one participant who felt that, although the experience had been challenging: *'everyone in the group worked really well together and demonstrated advanced emotional intelligence evidenced by mutual respect, negotiation and a real willingness to manage differences of opinion in a way that ensured that there was no animosity in the group'*. Another student commented on his set, stating that he felt that the: *'the group worked well together, lots of useful debates and discussions'* another added that: *'it is really beneficial if you are the person putting your issues out for discussion'*. Summing up, one participant felt that the sets were: *'supportive, chance to explore ideas, fun, participative, a learning experience*. Another added: *'the support mechanism from learning within the group gives the feeling of safety'*. These comments also resonate with a high degree of psychological safety

experienced by some set members. An important feature of a positive psychological climate is psychological safety (Dindia, 2002), which is the concern for another's competence, caring about each other as people and trust in another's intentions. Thereby an individual feels safe from physical, and in the case of action learning sets, psychological or emotional harm. Bourner and Frost (1996:13) wrote that action learning sets should be "a safe place to explore self and project" and Smith (2001:35) added that the action learning process 'permits risk taking within a psychologically safe environment'.

The voices given above have tended to support Revans' (1982) notion of 'comrades in adversity'. The common foe in this instance is likely to have been a combination of the research process itself and the task of writing a dissertation, which is something the participants had not experienced in this context before. There was a sense of togetherness within the task with a willingness to work collaboratively and take personal risks. Collectively, there was a strong sense of positive interpersonal relationships existing within some of the sets, with set effectiveness becoming a distinct possibility.

Adversaries with commonality?

Generally speaking, it is an accepted part of life that on many occasions we work in groups even though not everyone likes or enjoys been part of a group. In the context of this research, the action learning sets were pre-determined by the teaching team, so both inevitably and unfortunately, there were some participants who were asked to work in sets with participants they were unfamiliar with. This inevitably creates a variety of differing issues when considering the group dynamics involved in the process. There are differing reasons for this and it may simply be a random combination of personality types (Eysenck, 1947) or the value of group work (Tajful and Turner, 1986) that make some groups more effective than others. Alternatively, it may be the individual's preferred learning style (Honey and Mumford, 1984) which makes a difference. The next voice illustrates one of the four learning styles: activist, pragmatist, theorist and reflector, that of the reflector, who usually stands back and observes, preferring to take a back seat as seen by one participant who felt that they had been: '*prone to being dominated; too much too often; didn't always feel it supported my learning styles*'. Another added that:

'initially I was reserved about their ability to understand my issue...' One participant was quite emphatic about this and said that the: *'reality for me is I dislike team-working and sharing ideas'*. This student will probably remain on the periphery of the set, unlikely that there will be any form of psychological engagement in the set as the student showed no real evidence of a collective identity. Another added: *'too much contact in too short a time for me to fully embrace and feel comfortable with the concept'*.

One of the early concerns individuals in a group encounter at the start of the group's life is the issue of leadership in the set (Tuckman, 1965). Often what happens in a group is that dominant members assume the responsibility of leadership as part of the establishment of both hierarchy and roles within the set (Hogg and Tindale, 2007). Dominance hierarchies are often observed in society in general and have important implications for the way organisations, groups and families are understood in terms of politics and power in normal and 'abnormal' or 'not usual' social situations. The mode of delivery for this module; action learning, would be characteristic of those situations, where in some cases, relative strangers are brought together and asked to function as a set. Here important factors which include age, gender and assertiveness of individuals in these situations are brought to the fore. One female participant initially felt intimidated by the set, reporting that: *'working in a group of six men I felt a little intimidated until I got to know everyone'*. At this stage, it is appropriate to bring into question the composition of the set in terms of the role gender plays, as illustrated by this woman's initial thoughts. Fortunately, she carried on to say: *'at the end of the weekend my confidence in taking part in the discussions grew'*. As her confidence grew, the set became more balanced, thus creating a more positive experience for her. Unlike the male participant who apparently had a negative experience in his set and reported that gender was an issue stating that: *'being in such a female dominated group was tough. At times I felt like a poodle! In a handbag!'* One can only assume that a sense of equality in the set did not emerge for him. Assertive individuals with greater hierarchical and social status tend to displace those ranked lower than themselves as illustrated by the participant who reported that *'one or two colleagues had a more leadership role and felt that they need to lead it'*. As Hogg and Tindale (2007: 352) stated, these hierarchies are not fixed and are dependent upon any

number of changing variables, as seen in the woman's changing view of her confidence in the set and changing position within it. In the assertive participants example, the individual concerned, by virtue of their position within their own organisation, appeared to assume control of the set based on an understanding of themselves as leaders, albeit leaders in their own organisational context. Other members, on this occasion took a subservient role with another student reporting: *'one or two were rather quiet and were good listeners but did not defend their own argument when challenged'* therefore being unwilling to defend their own position and to challenge the self-appointed dominant leader. One student reported that: *'certain members were very vocal and 'took over', causing some resentment'*. In this particular instance, a strain is placed on intergroup relations in some sets. This was supported by the student who added that: *'we had issues of one person tending to dominate proceedings, which became distracting'*. These examples illustrate that a dominant character in the set can create negative consequences if that situation remains unchallenged.

A change in the composition of previous groups that had worked together and which had been reconfigured for the purposes of the module did have an adverse effect on some individuals. One participant reported that: *'half the group had worked together previously and therefore had already 'formed' and there was an obvious 'divide'*. This coupled with group size may also be a factor (Jessup and Valacich, 1993); Nunamaker et al, 1991). This was demonstrated by the participant who said: *'There are seven people in our set and I would have found it more useful if there had only been four: the four of us that took a year out between the DMS and MBA and we get on and support each other quite well'*. The participant went onto explain that the change in the composition of the set had affected the relationships and added: *'It has felt a little like we have had the other three inflicted upon us. It was difficult to get people to engage with the process and support others rather than talk about themselves'*. In addition to impacting on the nature of the interpersonal relationships that existed in the set, it also impacted specifically on the type of communication in the set. Communication became problematic, showing signs of tension and unrest (Bales, 1950), risking compromising the effectiveness of the set. In this instance, both sets had previously worked together and members clearly had

psychologically engaged with one another in the past (Schein, 1980), demonstrating that they had already moved through Tuckman's (1965) various stages of development, reaching the performing stage. Introducing new members had the effect of disturbing the existing group's sociometry, risking creating division with one element of the set becoming neglected (Moreno, 1953). At this stage there is also a strong likelihood that that particular set may revert to the forming stage. The set's inability to engage all members risks task failure and assures member dissatisfaction. The second part of the quotation relates to the norms that had been previously created in the original group, where there is a sense that the norm may have focused on collegiality, with the new group have a more singular view of participant, which affronts the previously established norm. Analysis of the data revealed dissatisfaction with diversity in the sets, illustrated by the participant who said that: *'it was difficult to work in a diverse group of people with different perceptions of the understanding of dissertation.* This relates back to the concept of the set's 'sociometry'. If the set is too diverse, then member engagement may become problematic for some individuals, although a diverse set presents itself as an opportunity for others and therefore strength. These particular participant's opinions reveal dissatisfaction with the action learning process and a reluctance to engage psychologically (Schein, 1980) with other members of the set, therefore making task completion a distinct possibility.

The above voices suggest that there has been little psychological engagement in some of the sets, with an unwillingness to work collaboratively for a variety of differing reasons. The reasons are likely to include a threat to existing relationships that participants had formed, either formally in the context of other modules on their programme and informally because of personality traits. As a result, reconfiguring existing relationships and forming new sets had a negative impact on individual morale. Other reasons revolved around the concept of personality itself and the emergence of dominant characters in the sets, having the effect of creating hierarchy and uneven power bases. Additionally, there may have been a general dislike of collaboration, which prompted a resistance to working as a set member. Overall, there was a strong sense that difficult interpersonal relationships existed within some of the sets, making task completion as a set unlikely and increasing the risk of member dissatisfaction.

Conclusions

This paper has outlined various aspects of the interpersonal relationships that exist within one university's cohort of part time MBA students. As discussed in the methodology section, the response rate of the second questionnaire was disappointing, so the results from this research cannot be generalised to the experiences of other MBA programmes that have used a similar approach. Nevertheless, the research does provide an insight into the thoughts and feelings of those participants who were interested enough to respond to the questionnaires. However, in order to confirm the findings with a greater degree of confidence, the research would need to be repeated using a modified approach. Given this, the paper has considered respondents' views within two opposing perspectives. Revans' (1982) perspective of 'comrades in adversity' was evident in the data, demonstrating that action learning sets are places where mutual respect is shown and a climate of trust exists. This climate creates synergy and reciprocity within the sets, thus encouraging individuals examination of individuals own views, with opportunities to reframing where appropriate. In contrast, Vince's (2004) perspective of 'adversaries in commonality' was also evident in the action learning sets, illustrating the view that not all individuals thrive in a group setting, citing issues as hierarchy, gender and politics as barriers to collective performance and set effectiveness.

The research has immediate implications for practitioners, both in academic and organisational settings. In relation to the practical aspects of action learning, there are various concerns which include whether sets are self-selected or not, which addresses the issue of creation or reconfiguration of participants. In relation to academia, students may already be in existing work groups; change to this arrangement can have implications for how the set will work in the future. In organisational contexts, the sets may be affected by issues which may include seniority within the sets themselves, work team membership agendas and organisational cultures. All of which have the capacity to impact on the workings in the set. Facilitation may be an issue; the question of whether the sets should be facilitated or self -facilitated by university or organisational staff members, with each permutation presenting its own challenges. Sets that facilitate themselves can wrestle

with issues of power, politics and seniority. Sets facilitated in universities or colleges may have issues of psychological buy in by the facilitator, as not all academics buy into an action learning approach or are proficient at facilitating action learning sets. Specifically relating to organisational settings, the neutrality of the facilitator, or the set's perception of the neutrality of the facilitator may be a factor for consideration. All the above considerations have the potential to impact on the experience and effectiveness of the action learning process. Specifically in relation to the content issues of action learning set. It is essential that the sets gel in the early stages, so the practical issues outlined above are vitally important. If set members are to disclose their own triumphs and failures then a supportive set environment needs to be present. A supportive environment is also an environment which views challenge as a positive process, understanding that the outcome has utility for the individuals and is not simply a destructive personal process. This is particularly pertinent in situations where a person has identified so strongly with their organisation that they have become absorbed in their organisations culture. To rethink and reframe a perspective on an issue is likely to be problematic for some. This will not be achieved without the presence of both a supportive and neutral environment in which the student feels safe to do so. At this point, facilitators are encouraged to think through Vince's perspective and consider some of the practical issues such as: facilitation or self- facilitation; facilitator neutrality and other such associated issues.

Limitations of the paper largely revolve around the methodology. The data collection method was influenced by the constraints of time. Ideally face to face interviews offer in-depth insights, opportunity for further probing and honesty. Alternatively, focus groups offer breadth of data capture. Either of these approaches would have been preferable. However, at the residential there was no realistic opportunity to use either of those approaches. Questionnaires certainly can be problematic, but, by guaranteeing anonymity, they offer the respondent the opportunity to be both frank and honest, therefore ensuring quality of response, which may add credibility to the research findings. The second stage of the data collection could have been carried out in a different manner as postal questionnaires can be problematic in terms of response rates. Questionnaires administered in the final learning sets would have been preferable. Finally the

composition of the nine actual learning sets themselves were set members were not exclusively members of one organisation missed the opportunity to discuss organisational politics.

This paper has presented itself as an opportunity for future research papers. Reworking the study with postgraduate students using focus groups and face to face interviews would be useful, in a sense that it would be a natural extension to this paper. It would also address the methodological shortfalls within this research paper. This coupled with a similar study on participants populating the same organisation would also be interesting in its own right, drawing out differing aspects of inter set dynamics.

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