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Yeadon-Lee, Annie

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## **Action learning: the possibility of differing hierarchies in learning sets**

### **Abstract**

This paper presents the proposition that a variety of differing hierarchies exist in an action learning set at any one time, and each hierarchy has the potential to affect an individual's behaviour within the set. An interpretivist philosophy underpins the research framework adopted in this paper. Data was captured by means of eleven in depth interviews that formed part of wider research into set members' perceptions of what makes an effective action learning set. The interviewees were all former students of the researcher and her colleagues. The research draws upon grounded theory as a dominant research paradigm and uses thematic analysis to interpret the research findings.

The findings of the research serve to simply illustrate that there is the potential for a variety of differing hierarchies to exist in an action learning set at any one time. Some of the hierarchies may exist for the full duration of the set, others are somewhat ephemeral. The findings from this research also present themselves as points of consideration for academics and practitioners who have used or are about to use action learning as a learning vehicle.

## Introduction

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 both normal and abnormal social situations. Important factors include age, gender and ethnicity. Hierarchy in this context refers to the categorisation of an individual according to their ability and status. Hogg and Tindale (2007:353) suggest that status relations can be differentiated into either 'status structure' and 'status value'. Status structure refers to "ranked ordered pattern of influence and deference amongst a set of actors" whereas status value refers to the "actors' shared beliefs or social representations". Weber (1947) developed various ways that societies are organised in terms of hierarchical systems of power. These included social status, class power and political power. An individual earns their social status by their own achievements such as the type of occupation they have, with some occupations seen as more prestigious than others e.g. medical doctors, lawyers and members of the judiciary. Alternatively a person has status by their inherited position achieved through birth e.g. son/daughter. Axiomatically, a hierarchy or pecking order is likely to exist in action learning sets. Buchanan and Huczynski (1997:209) stated that:

Group members will be accorded different amounts of status and hence a group will have a status hierarchy. They will be able to exert differing amounts of power and thus a power structure will emerge

As with any group in both society and organisations generally, action learning set members will measure themselves against one another in the action learning set and some form of hierarchy will emerge. This paper presents the proposition that a variety of differing hierarchies exist in an action learning set at any one time, and that each hierarchy has the potential to affect an individual's behaviour, and therefore, impact on that individual's contribution to the operation of the set.

The paper is divided into the following sections. The first section gives a very brief introduction to action learning and critical action learning, the intention being to introduce the reader to this way of learning and teaching and some of the issues with it. This section is then followed by a brief discussion of the methodology that underpinned the research

approach, outlining the method that was used to generate the data. The findings section addresses a variety of hierarchies that were identified in the course of the research. This is followed by a brief a discussion and analysis of interviewees' responses that would suggest the presence of a hierarchy. The paper then discusses the findings considering how they further develop our understanding and practice of action learning. Finally, the implications of the findings are considered with respect to future research. Extracts from the interviews carried out for this research are presented in italics.

### **Action learning**

Action learning, originally devised by Professor Reg Revans (1980,1982), has long been recognised as amongst the most effective means of delivering professional education and training (Zuber-Skerritt, 2006; Kramer, 2008), often viewed as an alternative to conventional management education. Action learning in its simplest form is understood to be an experience-based approach to learning that utilises Revans' (1982) view that managers learn most effectively with, and from other managers, whilst dealing with the real world complexity of organisational life. It is one of the most commonly used forms of experiential learning, which places learning by doing at the centre (Hay, 2010). As Weinstein (1995:32) states, 'it means different things to different people' suggesting there is an absence of both universal understanding and consensus of the term, therefore leaving it open to differing interpretations.

The process of action learning revolves around the group or 'set' of six to eight people working together to take understand and take action in relation to individual set members problems. Essentially the learning set them has two elements, the learning that takes place in a socially constructed environment of the learning set through discussion, challenge and support. The set member at this point gaining knowledge of his/her own problem (Lave and Wenger (1991) cited in Lawless (2008). He or she is then in a position to take action or to 'practice' on that problem, a view supported by Ashton (2006:5) who stated that 'the purpose of action learning is to learn through devising solutions and strategies in response to problems and implementing them through deliberative action'. Rittel and Webber (1973) refer to the nature of these problems as 'wicked' in that they are often messy, contradictory and complex in nature with no apparent obvious solution. The type of problem that now characterises a changing and complex world. 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). The philosophy that underpins action learning is primarily a humanistic one, where such values as support, trust and safety are paramount. As such this approach focuses on the human element of learning, concerned with the subjective nature of each individual and their unique view of the world. McLeod ( 1998 : 447) describes the central aim of a humanist approach is 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.

Action learning is not without its own complexities, a view that the concept of critical action learning seeks to address. Critical Action Learning (CAL) seeks to demonstrate how the power relationships within the set are part of the action learning process by considering the ways in which learning is supported, avoided and prevented within learning sets. If action learning is concerned with engendering a climate of collaborative enquiry, problem-solving and personal development, the potential for criticality in action learning derives from the emotions, hierarchies, politics and power dynamics that inevitably exist both within the sets itself and in individual members own lives. CAL can be seen through the problematisation of Revans' term 'comrades in adversity'. Vince (2004:64) understood this 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) challenges 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.

## **Methodology**

This paper has emerged from the author's doctoral research into participants' experiences of action learning sets. An interpretivist philosophy, that drew upon the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) underpinned the research framework was adopted in the thesis. This was largely as a result of limited research in the area of participant's experiences of action learning set membership. The purpose of a 'grounded Theory' is to 'generate or discover a theory'. Grounded theory is often cited as being the prime example of an inductive approach to data collection (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theory can be generated in differing ways, which include: observation, interviews, member's individual narrative accounts, learning logs from set members and extracts from a research diary. Interviews with former action learning set members who were students at the university was the approach taken in this research. Pauleen et al (2007:228) wrote that grounded theory is:

An inductive process, in which concepts, insights, and understanding is developed from patterns in the data. It is this inductive process that allows for the development and articulation of theories or models in situations where little previous experience or knowledge exists.

They were very influential in the decision to use grounded theory as the principal methodological approach in the original thesis. This is because this remains a topic in which the individuals themselves have remained largely voiceless. As Yoong (1996:35) stated that 'the choice of grounded theory for the analysis and articulation of raw experience is supported in situations where there is little previous research in an area'. Grounded theory is, however, not without its critics. Thomas and James (2006) asked 'is what is produced really theory?' and the claim to use and develop inductive knowledge.

There is also suggestion that it is impossible to bracket the researchers own preconceptions in the collection and analysis of data in the way that Glaser and Strauss say is necessary.

Data collection tools consist of unstructured, in-depth interviews with former action learning set members who because they were former students were a convenience sample because of the specific nature of the topic. Current students were not part of the sample used for the research because of issues of asymmetrical power relationships (Oakley, 1981 cited in Rigg and Trehan ,2004). All the former students had been awarded their respective qualifications, therefore were under no obligation to actually take part in the study, and when each person was approached they were advised that participation was voluntary.

The interviews were loosely designed in order to elicit rich and detailed accounts of participants' experiences and a conversational style was adopted that allowed relevant topical areas for discussion to emerge (Kvale, 1996). Each interviewee was asked to reflect upon learning sets they had been a member of; either at their place of work or in a university academic programme. They were all asked the opening question 'what's it like to be an action learning set'. This approach was appropriate for the thesis, however, for the purposes of thesis research paper it has proved to be somewhat lacking. The interviews were unstructured, which has the overall effect that some interviewee's comments are cited more often. This may seem unbalanced; however, the original premise of this paper was to suggest that differing hierarchies exist in action learning sets, each hierarchy presenting itself as a part of the individuals constructed understanding the set, therefore rendering the imbalance as being unproblematic. Each participant was informed of the nature of the research when the initial contact was made. They were also informed of their role in the research process which was simply to talk about their experiences of been in a learning set. I assured them, in accordance with the principles of action learning, that it would be confidential.

The convenience sample comprised eleven interviewees who were known to either myself or my colleagues. All had been former students on MSc programmes that had used action learning as the learning approach within the University Business School. All are full time

employment at managerial level, either in education, local government, the health service; both public and private clinical.

The interviewees were simply asked to reflect upon any action learning set they had been a member of, either at the University or within a work context. The open question asked was 'what's it like being in an action learning set? The rationale for the decision to enquire about both academic and organisational experiences was to ensure the insights appealed to both an academic and organisational audience, achieved by offering insights into all the interviewee's experiences. Given that the nature of these two environments is very different, there was opportunity for richer data to emerge, which affords greater insight and offers an opportunity to carry out further research into potential similarities and contrasts within action learning.

However, because of the loose nature of the interviews, views on hierarchy did not emerge from all interviewees. This has resulted in an unequal distribution of comments, with discussion of some of the hierarchies appearing to be asymmetrical. This clearly presents itself as an opportunity for further research.

As appropriate to grounded theory, thematic analysis and theoretical sampling were continuously used across all of the data collection stages. The advice of Bryman and Bell (2003:435) were taken with respect to the various stages and methods of collecting data such as the use of field notes, memos etc. in order to start to understand the data. The use of open coding ensured that various themes emerged at an early stage. One of these themes; hierarchy in learning sets is the focus of this particular research paper.

## **Findings**

The following section discusses the various hierarchies that emerged from the data. Each section starts with a brief overview of the hierarchical typology. The hierarchy is then illustrated through extracts from interview transcripts. This is accompanied by theoretical discussions that address the main themes of the participant's experiences in relation to the operations within the learning set.

### ***Academic experience and qualifications hierarchy***

This hierarchy is specific to action learning sets operating in an academic environment. This hierarchy is based upon academic achievement and the subsequent experience of being in an academic environment that qualification brings. The purpose of the set is to support members in the pursuit of an academic qualification at the end of the set's life. Set members interviewed stated that when starting their action learning sets it became apparent that differing levels of academic and professional qualifications existed within the sets in question, such as some members had a degree others did not. From their perspective, this created inequalities within the sets in the minds of some individuals. In conversation with J, in referring to her university action learning set, said she didn't feel equal to other members in her set because she didn't have a degree. She elaborated by saying: "*I hadn't got my degree and everyone else had one, and so I always had it in the back of my mind 'would I be out of my depth?', 'would I be able to achieve things?'*" J viewed her absence of a degree as a differentiating factor which apparently prompted self-doubt. At this point J has placed herself at the bottom of the sets academic hierarchy and begins to doubt her ability to achieve, in this context, the assumption would be achieving a pass of the programmes qualification. This was echoed by C who also referred to her university learning set said:

*Yes and coming into it without a degree was one of the worries that I had because you think they are used to academic writing and I'm not. So in a way I came in I suppose, to me, as less experienced than them because in a university situation they had already been through that process*

Similarly, C's concerns revolved around her not having a degree and the subsequent experience of academia that being in possession of a degree accords an individual as seen when she said:

*...I was at a disadvantage to them so it never occurred to me that there might be a hierarchical structure and if there was it would be those that had been through the process and those that hadn't.*

Here, participants perceive there is a hierarchy based upon academic achievement and the subsequent experience of working in an academic environment that it brings. Both participants felt disadvantaged at the start of their action learning programme, raising concerns in their minds about their ability to contribute to the operations in the set.

### **Seniority hierarchy**

This hierarchy was concerned with differing levels of organisational or occupational seniority within the membership of the action learning set located in an organisational setting. For example the members of one set may comprise differing levels of seniority within the same organisation if the set is an in-house one. Bourner and Weinstein (1996:57) discuss issues in placing people of very differing employment status in the same action learning sets and the problems attached to this. Those issues include the possibility that people who held dissimilar positions would have a limited understanding of one another's roles and responsibilities, and therefore questioning insights may be limited. They also discussed the possibility that the person in the subordinate role may feel intimidated by the person more senior to them. Conversely, there is also a possibility that the person occupying the more senior position may be dismissive of the subordinate's opinion. Both views risk a reduction in the participant's contribution to the set. B illustrates this hierarchy by in his university learning set by saying:

*I was very aware right at the very beginning that we had General Managers in there, and again as I always do, I always assume that they have more knowledge than I have so then I'm thinking they all have degrees as well, am I going to be able to do this?*

B refers to seniority regarding their respective positions within the organisation's hierarchy, and makes the assumption that person must also have a degree as well. At that point, B begins to question her own ability to cope in the learning set.

### **Experience hierarchy**

An experience hierarchy in this instance refers to the set member who has the most knowledge of the presenter's issue or problem. Therefore is able to offer either a degree of both sympathy and empathy by their unique insight into the nature of the presenter's live issue.

This has the effect of creating a hierarchy based upon a member's ability to contribute to the presenter's live issue. L in discussing her organisational learning set illustrated this point by saying:

*I think there is one thing that stands out in an action learning set, certainly for me, it's that some people have greater experience than others, some people have greater length of time in the role rather than seniority, it's about experience.*

L added:

*You sense it and sometimes they'll say "you know about this, you've got more experience in this". You also know that some of the group have more kudos than others because they have more experience.*

P's following comments could be seen to demonstrate an example of a university set member who was singled out and seen as different, perhaps being seen to have an element of 'kudos'?

*Towards the end of the course a few people used to say to me you've got lots of experience, you're a much high flyer than us, which was really weird because I didn't feel any different to them, in fact at our graduation I was introduced to somebody's wife as "this is P, she's going to be a high flyer.*

The focus of this hierarchy is the amount of experience a set member has of the presenter's live issue, and how they can use that to enhance the discussions in the set. It could be argued that too much contextual knowledge by some set members can act as a barrier, as naive but inadvertently insightful questions are unlikely to be asked of the presenter. Encouragement to look at the live issue differently, because of over familiarity, as McGill and Brockbank (2004:122) refer to the 'taken-for-granted ( tfgs) aspects risks perpetuating a single loop learning approach, denying the presenter the opportunity to reframe the issue (Revans, 1984) if desired by challenging personal assumptions (Mezirow, 1991). Conversely, too little contextual knowledge may result in set members

abdicated from the discussion, believing that they have little to add to the presenter's issue. Either scenario can risk impacting negatively on the effectiveness of the set.

### **Elevated position hierarchy**

A positional hierarchy is concerned with the set member who receives an organisational promotion whilst being a member of a learning set. For learning sets specific to individual organisations, this creates a positional hierarchy as some of the set members may now occupy a subordinate position to others in the set. A in describing what had happened in his university learning set said:

*Yes she achieved a very senior position in organisation and I think at that point the dynamics of the group changed a little bit in terms of her relationship with her colleagues. I think she sort of became more of a mentor for some of her colleagues because I think she could guide them into contacts and show them how to solve problems, so I think the hierarchy came into its own a little bit then.*

A continued to say:

*She would have known the right person to talk to, and possibly would have access to information which would potentially be a blocker for them.*

He further elaborated by saying how he felt the dynamics in the university learning set had changed, citing examples of a change in participant's behaviour, he said:

*I just got the impression that the dynamics of the set had changed because people would go to her and almost seek support within the set, whereas previously that hadn't been there because she had been working at a similar level interaction. I guess it's almost like you use the word hierarchy and it's almost as if there's a different type of respect because someone is seen as having an elevated position which they previously didn't have.*

At this point in the interview, A started to speculate about the ways in which the now subordinate set members in the same organisation could potentially benefit from the newly appointed participants elevated position. His thoughts move to the instrumentality that he felt had inevitably entered the learning set, he said:

*I just think they possibly saw her as a slightly different 'tool', for want of a better phrase, in terms of here's someone who could potentially influence for me or tell me the right people to influence, it's all about the level at which you work,, and what I'm saying is I think that she had got herself in a position where she was possibly working at a much more senior level than some of the other managers in the group and because of that they would ask questions like "who's the person that I should contact about that", "how can I influence that change"?*

A's understanding of the set now is that a new hierarchy has emerged within the set, with the newly promoted member now occupies an elevated position in the set. This new dynamic raises a series of questions about set member contribution, both in terms of levels and quality of the interactions, underpinned by the potential for personal instrumentality that he felt had entered the set. Analysis shows that the impact on the set was evident as there appeared to be a change of attitude from some of the set members due to the other member's promotion as seen in A's review of what happened in his set.. He felt that there was opportunity for increased overt political behaviour which may compromise some of the quality of the set discussions. Possibly as there may now be a reluctance to challenge the newly promoted member for reasons outlined in positional hierarchies as set members attempt to extend their personal networks via contacts from the newly appointed set member. Ultimately changing power dynamics that have the effect of both reducing and diminishing some members' contribution to set discussions and outcomes, often with increasing political behaviour which ultimately impacts on the quality of the discussions.

### **Political hierarchy**

Greenberg and Baron (1997) cited in Curtiss (2003:293) define organisational politics as "those actions not officially approved by an organisation taken to influence others to meet

one's personal goals". Political hierarchy is not that dissimilar to an elevated positional hierarchy as it is concerned with members of the same organisation operating in the same learning set, and what they are prepared to disclose because of the political environment they work in. Politics is seen to be somewhat inevitable within organisational life. It is not uncommon for both individuals and groups to take advantage of circumstances at work that will benefit them personally. There is an expectation that if the learning set is to work successfully then set members should be open and honest in their dealings with other set members, which for some may be problematic. Weinstein (1995:218) asked "Is total honesty always possible, even desirable? Are there times when it is appropriate to be 'economical with the truth?'" M gave an insight into the impact of organisational politics on how much personal disclosure she engaged in whilst at a learning set in her organisation, illustrating Weinstein's view by saying:

*Well at first you have to be very wary because, certainly within my organisation I suppose it's everywhere you go, because certainly if certain things got out they could be very career limiting to say the least.*

M's comments highlight a wariness of the impact of politics occurring within the set. Stating that her initial reaction was to be cautious about what she revealed about herself to other members of the set. In the following extract from a paper written by Bourner and Frost (1996:13) a set member considers the outcomes of self- disclosure in action learning sets, specifically the experience of the first action learning set meeting:

My feelings before the first set were mixed; part of me was excited about the new possible learning but part of me felt very scared. Did I really want my fellow managers knowing I had weak spots? Was this from "Big Brother" above needing to find out how we rated as managers? Did I really want or need the stress? We had been asked to bring a task to work on, my way out could be to produce a task that did not reveal any weak spots. This would allow me to sail through without revealing anything about myself.

McGill and Brockbank (2003:116) recognised this, acknowledging that there is a political dimension to any action learning set. Much like any other group in organisational life,

individuals may feel either powerless or powerful in relation to other members in the set and, as such, a situation where a set member sees an opportunity or feels that another set member has an advantage over them personally may occur. Vince and Martin (1993:213) said that:

The political nature of action learning is expressed through the strategic choice available to learning groups to move in a direction that promotes learning, or a direction that discourages learning. In other words, movement towards either risk or denial/avoidance is often political, as well as emotional act on behalf of the individual.

A political hierarchy may affect the effectiveness of the set in that participants will be selective about their contribution because of the concern of what may or may not be discussed outside the learning. Their perception being that the Chatham House rule may not be applied in reality, with ill-guarded comments having the potential to be detrimental to careers. Again, this will impact upon the quality of the work carried out by the set, and the subsequent impact upon effectiveness.

### **Manager/subordinate hierarchy**

This hierarchy emerged from a situation where both manager and subordinate from the same organisation were in the same action learning set in a university based learning set. Kraine (1993:14) wrote that “all large managerial systems are by their very nature hierarchies of managers and subordinates whose relationships are defined on the delegation of work and accountability”. Within this framework it is difficult for either manager or subordinate to admit in the action learning sets that failures have happened within both their endeavours, as to do so present as a dichotomy for both parties involved. The manager, wearing the managers hat; does he or she take any action outside learning sets, risking breaking to the ground rules of confidentiality that exist within action learning sets. The subordinate facing the dilemma of whether or not to admit failure within the learning set. Failure to disclose is to not enter into the spirit of action learning. G who managed another member in the same university set said:

*I work with x (subordinate set member) every day and some of the people I might be talking about might be her colleagues, you know people she works with.*

G's comment illustrates how this relationship does influence what can and cannot be said, inevitably placing G in that position of having to screen or filter her contribution because of her position within the organisations hierarchy. It may also limit what others ask of the participants in that position Edmondson (2002:3) captures one of the probable concerns in this situation by saying:

Most people feel a need to manage this risk to minimise harm to their image, especially in the workplace and especially in the presence of those who formally evaluate them

Other concerns would include the possible political dimension that results in the censoring of each member's contributions to the set, therefore risking limiting input from subordinate who may feel intimidated by the manager. Conversely, the manager may feel that the subordinate colleague has little to offer because of the subordinate's position in the hierarchy; perhaps the subordinate individual is unaware of the issues at a more senior level. For participants to disclose issues relevant to them, they have to feel safe within the learning set. Edmondson (2002:3) refers to the concept of 'psychological safety' defining it as "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" with "interpersonal risk taking" meaning "a sense of confidence that others will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up". Psychological safety also includes each other's intentions, in that one individual intends to use information received in a negative way. Clearly this dynamic has the potential to impact on the overall effectiveness of the set.

### **Dominance hierarchy**

Dominance hierarchies are hierarchies that contain assertive individuals who perceive they have greater hierarchical and social status, and therefore tend to displace those ranked lower than them. Hogg and Tindale (2007:352) said that:

Several decades of research into psychology and sociology have demonstrated that widely held status beliefs about actors' distinguishing social characteristics play a powerful role in organising the patterns of influence, respect, and deference that develop among actors as they interact. They shape who speaks up with confidence, who gets noticed and listened to, whose ideas 'sound better', and who becomes influential in the group.

Bales (1950) in a seminal study found that the amount of air time an individual had in a group influenced their standing in that group. In that their ideas were given greatest consideration, they were invited to contribute more often and ultimately had more influence on the group and were more likely to emerge as the group leader. This process was highlighted by M, who commenting on her experience of her learning set at university said:

*It depends on personalities doesn't it, if you're someone that's quite assertive, I think there is potential for someone to try and take over and I think at that point then people might see them as a higher being type thing.*

A's comment illustrates aspects of an individual set member's personality, in this case assertiveness has the potential to create a form of hierarchy, in that the more assertive set member may dominate, in that they receive more air time than the others, they dominate the discussions and ultimately their opinions are seen as more valid. This hierarchy was revealed to concern a member's strength of 'personality' and 'presence' in the set and the subsequent impact on the effectiveness of the set. Examples include members who are seen by other set members as more dominant and therefore more powerful tend to shape the set's behaviour (Lieberman et al 1973). This often reflects their own values which may not always benefit the set; possible outcomes include a less effective action learning set. Additionally, members who hog airtime, dominating with their issue, will take away time from other set members, creating a rush at the end to ensure that all members receive airtime. In the sense that the set is not operating effectively as not everyone gets the chance to contribute, as such, the focus is on the equity of the process as opposed to the content of the discussions, risking the creation of tension for the facilitator who may begin to hurry set members.

## Conclusions

As with any group in both society and organisations generally, action learning set members will inevitably measure themselves against one another. This presents the opportunity for differing hierarchies to emerge at various stages in the sets life time. In the context of this research, which is not without its limitations, the research found that a number of participants perceived there to be a variety of differing hierarchies in existence within action learning sets they had experienced. These hierarchies: Academic; Seniority; Experience; Elevated position; Manager/Subordinate and Dominance operated within the sets at various times. As the set matured, the relative importance of each of the differing hierarchies changed. From a critical action learning perspective, the presence of these hierarchies reveals some of the problematic nature of action learning, a view consistent with Vince (2004) who posited that there are issues with individuals learning with and from one another in action learning sets.

The findings from this research, present themselves as points of consideration for both academics and practioners who have used, or are about to use action learning. The research draws attention to set demography, location and focus of the sets endeavors. Additionally, it prompts consideration of the way participants are introduced to the concept of action learning in terms of recruitment onto programmes that use action learning.

The limitations of this paper largely emanate from its provenance. The original research was much broader in its perspective, so to some extent there remains more to be learned about this issue of hierarchy in this context. Arguably, a grounded theory approach could be considered to be a 'scatter gun approach'; yet to allow the researcher to clearly define the parameters of the interview would have risked losing new insights into to this area of research. There is now an opportunity to revisit this research with a new data sample. By taking a more structured approach to the notion of hierarchy with action learning sets, and the way participants are interviewed, would allow for the creation of depth with the now known themes. This would add richness to the current research by addressing the obvious questions of whether and how an individual's behaviour changed as a result of the perception of the existence of differing hierarchies. Following on from that is the opportunity to consider the differing composition of the sets, to include organisationally based sets, ones within the university and sets that comprise both contexts. Results from

these would allow a compare and contrast consideration, therefore adding to both knowledge and knowledgeable practice.

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