

2012

Action learning for middle manager development: the case of an Australian state-based large organisation

Silvia A. Nelson
Southern Cross University

Roland K. Yeo
University of South Australia

Publication details

Postprint of :Nelson, SA & Yeo, RK 2012, 'Action learning for middle manager development: the case of an Australian state-based large organisation', *International Journal of Human Resources Development and Management*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 292-307.

Published version available from:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1504/IJHRDM.2012.049784>

ePublications@SCU is an electronic repository administered by Southern Cross University Library. Its goal is to capture and preserve the intellectual output of Southern Cross University authors and researchers, and to increase visibility and impact through open access to researchers around the world. For further information please contact epubs@scu.edu.au.

Action learning for middle manager development: the case of an Australian state-based large organisation

Silvia A. Nelson*

Business School,
Southern Cross University,
Locked Mailbag 4, Queensland 4225, Australia
E-mail: silvia.nelson@scu.edu.au
*Corresponding author

Roland K. Yeo

Professional Development Department,
Saudi Aramco,
P.O. Box 12979, Dhahran 31311, Saudi Arabia
and
International Graduate School of Business,
University of South Australia, Australia
E-mail: yeokkr@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper describes an action learning approach designed to assist a group of middle managers in an Australian public sector environment by enhancing their performance in the area of managing staff. The programme is described as an embedded action learning approach, where, in addition to a specific action learning project, the programme provided action learning skills development, mentoring support and ongoing evaluation of participants learning. The action learning process serves as a model for a management development programme, based around the action learning model of 'plan, act, reflect and re-act'. Learning primarily occurred through engagement in the form of action-by-doing as well as self and collaborative reflection. The learnings captured were largely spontaneous in nature occurring through role play and feedback loops. Learnings about the organisational context and requirements are discussed, with particular reference to the management development, HRM and the HRD relationship to an action learning methodology.

Keywords: action learning; management development; human resource management; HRM; human resource development; HRD.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Nelson, S.A. and Yeo, R.K. (2012) 'Action learning for middle manager development: the case of an Australian state-based large organisation', *Int. J. Human Resources Development and Management*, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp.292–307.

Biographical notes: Silvia A. Nelson is a Lecturer in the Business School of Southern Cross University. Her PhD, from Griffith University Australia, was focused on HRM/HRD in the aquatic theme park segment of the tourism industry. Her current research interests are in the area of health and nursing management and organisational learning and employee commitment, with a focus on professional staff.

Roland K. Yeo is a Management Learning Researcher based at the Professional Learning Division of the Professional Development Department in Saudi Aramco and an Adjunct Senior Researcher with the International Graduate School of Business in the University of South Australia. He holds a PhD in HRM from the Leeds Business School at the Leeds Metropolitan University in UK and his research focuses on the individual and social aspects of learning in organisational contexts. His most recent research examined the nature of knowledge sharing participation in organisational contexts.

1 Introduction

Action learning applications to human resource management (HRM) and human resource development (HRD) have been well-recognised since before the 1970s, when the work of Revans (1971, 1980) thrust the theory and praxis into the consciousness of many scholars and HRD practitioners. Revans worked for 50 or more years to develop the basic insights he conceived while he was the Director of Education for the British Coal Board, where he spent time ‘down the pits’ observing how teams of miners identified a problem, clarified the nature of the problem, developed a solution or solutions to the problem, applied the solution, evaluated the solution, and used an iterative process, where necessary, to develop a new solution. In the process, the capacity for learning and confidence of the team grew. However, it was many years before these insights into the learning process were accepted and adopted, and Revans was long regarded as a maverick, despite his academic credentials. ‘Expertise’ was prized, rather than ‘learning’ and the proper way to solve a problem was to have an expert address the problem and come up with a solution. The Revans dictum that “there is no learning without action and no action without learning” [Revans, (1998), p.83] was not accepted in academia for many years until major players sought to incorporate action learning into their organisation change, and management development strategies.

Unfortunately, despite the high level of legitimacy now accorded to action learning, the mindset in many organisations is still dominated by problem solving led by the ‘expert’ or ‘consultant’. Some HRM units are also very possessive about ‘learning’ expertise and where it resides, appearing to feel that their role is to be the repository of knowledge about personal and organisational learning. The HRD, in such cases, consists of training programmes conducted by external or internal subject matter experts, an approach often referred to in a typically colourful Australian simile as ‘sheep-dipping’, or putting people through a course designed to have them conform with predicated organisational needs. Although the need for training has been demonstrated, and the role of HR professionals emphasised (O’Regan et al., 2010), the number of programmes utilising action learning processes for individual and organisational development still remains relatively small. Another aspect of HRM and HRD perspectives on action learning is that it is all too often only mentioned in passing in the standard HRM and HRD textbooks, usually in the context of problem solving. There is often little reference to the place of action learning as a powerful personal, social and organisational development process, and seemingly little appreciation of the contribution of action learning towards building effective learning organisations. There are exceptions to this comment, such as Mankin’s (2009) human resource development (2009), where he

advocates a 'facilitator' role for HRD personnel in order to support action learning initiatives. Mankin's facilitator may be a sign of a better level of acceptance of action learning processes providing more than just another problem-solving approach.

Moreover, the leadership literature now usually includes action learning as a component of leadership development alongside coaching and mentoring, development assignments and course work (Hernez-Broome and Hughes, 2000). An Asian example comes from Hoe (2011), who describes his experience as an action learning coach or learning facilitator as part of an initiative by a multi-business group to improve their business growth. Bob Dick, a long term Australian leader in the development, promotion and use of action research and action learning, has contributed at many levels to the development and acceptance of action learning, and has made a significant contribution to action learning processes for skills development, such as role clarification, managing upwards, influencing and participative processes (Dick, 1991, 1997). Another Australian, Zuber-Skerrit (2002) emphasises the critical importance of senior management support for action learning initiatives, and the need for empowerment of action learning sets and individuals because of its transformational effects on organisations. Miller (2003) highlights the links between action learning and workplace learning to assist in moving towards the 'elusive' learning organisation.

This brief overview has a distinctly Australian flavour, which is hardly surprising, given that the present case has its focus on an action learning programme for middle managers in an Australian public sector environment. The case describes the practical linkages between action learning, management development, HRM and HRD. A brief discussion of the theoretical linkages follows.

2 Relevance of action learning to management development, HRM and HRD

This paper also explores the relevance of action learning to management development with wider implications for HRM and HRD. Action learning operates through powerful feedback loops and constant inquiry into issues underlying developmental challenges, reinforced through the collaborative reflective experience of participants. As such, action learning, as a process, can help examine real-time and critical organisational problems through appreciating and managing the specific issues of organisational dynamics lying behind those problems (Pedler, 2008; Revans, 1980). The impact of action learning on management learning and development therefore is potentially very significant. According to Lees (1992), management development encompasses the entire system of organisational activities aimed at improving the performance of managers or decision makers in significant ways going beyond mere education and training. Where management development consists of an integrated learning experience, the various processes are aimed at enhancing the cognitive and behavioural change of managers by focusing not only on their competence to handle day-to-day tasks, but on their level of commitment to creating greater value for the organisation (Akuratiyagamage, 2006).

There are two underlying processes of management development, the informal and formal, that mutually reinforce in a well-designed management development strategy (Mole, 2000). Informal processes occur in daily activities when managers attempt to accomplish a task, test out an idea, interact with team members, and disseminate information spontaneously. These activities often give rise to informal learning through

self-reflection and collaborative inquiry that contributes to managers' cognitive capability (Marsick and Watkins, 1997; Woodall, 2000). On the other hand, formal processes involve planned and structured activities, often institutionalised by the organisation, such as project work, training workshops, job rotation and coaching where there are more rigid boundaries than those that govern the informal processes of learning (Mumford, 1997). Action learning processes may well be embedded on formal management development processes but are primarily the vehicle or learning framework for informal learning processes. That is to say, managers take better control of their learning and become more aware of and sensitive to contextual cues in the structural, systems and strategic processes of the organisation through their self-directed and inter-dependent learning and collaborative inquiry. As an example of the importance of informal learning processes, the study of Akuratiyagamage (2006) with both line managers and HR managers in 207 organisations in the manufacturing industry demonstrated that daily organisational experiences provide the most immediate and effective opportunity for management development. Such ongoing development experiences, when applied within the framework of action learning, provide further opportunities to develop a learning orientation for managers dealing with urgent and complex organisational issues which then actually become catalysts for reflective learning and action taking (Marquardt et al., 2009).

As complex adaptive systems, organisations can utilise the systems of HRM and HRD to increase their responsiveness and adaptiveness towards external competition (Luoma, 2006). In the same way, HRM and HRD systems can be the vehicles for improved management learning and performance through the co-construction of meaning that bring order to organisational life (Anderson, 1999).

Since the 1970s, HRM has undergone profound development from a process driven, operational function focused on recruiting and remuneration to a strategic value-adding, culture shaping contributor to organisation health and prospering. A number of perspectives on these developments have been described, including the universal and contextual. The universal perspective has a broader focus on best practices and especially in the area of employee commitment and participation of individuals across different job functions (Dewettinck and Remue, 2011). Learning processes are generally recognised as crucial for organisational effectiveness and the role of HRM is to be concerned about the enhancement of problem-solving capacities, decision-making, team-working processes and relationship building within which action learning is subsumed. On the other hand, the contextual perspective recognises that HRM necessarily operates within a specific social and organisational dynamics. It posits that there is a much broader and more complex relationship between the HRM system and its context (Martin-Alcázar et al., 2005) which depends on the social organisational dynamics involved in satisfying specific tasks and influencing their completion (Dewettinck and Remue, 2011).

HRM today involves both a micro and strategic orientation (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009). Micro HRM focuses on HR policies and practices regarding the individuals in the organisations such as recruitment and selection. In contrast, strategic HRM focuses on the performance aspect of the organisation and in so doing plays a critical role in knowledge creation, utilisation and storage within organisational contexts. Major issues for strategic HRM also include creation of a learning organisation or learning environment, optimising competitive advantage through people, including customer service and developing new skill sets for the future of the organisation. A key role for HRM, therefore, is to develop a

strategic link between the value created through learning in the form of knowledge application and the impact it makes on the organisation's competitive advantage. Integrating the micro and strategic orientation of HRM through action learning processes allows participants to make sense of their personal experience through their conceptualisation and generalisation of organisational and workplace action plans to devise future roadmaps for learning.

Action learning is also relevant to HRD as it facilitates integrated learning and development with performance outcomes that in turn influence the human resource functions in organisations. HRD therefore contributes to career development, talent management and the advancement of organisational learning and performance (Egan, 2011; Ruona and Gibson, 2004). HRD promotes management development by providing the process for management competencies to be developed through various structured and contingent activities, including such HRM initiatives as job rotation, job enrichment and training, facilitated through coaching and reflexive learning. At the strategic level, the development of individual managers or management development can be supported at the systems level through strategic planning and organisational development. The developmental needs of managers are aligned with managerial practice in the form of complex problem solving, decision making and timely action taking (McGraw and Peretz, 2011) and this alignment is strongly facilitated by an action learning approach to HRD.

Exploring the trends and present issues for management development, HRM and HRD have illuminated the relevance of action learning, particularly when it is facilitated through teamwork, cross-functional collaboration and learning sets, allowing participants to make sense of the meanings derived from understanding and challenging each other's mental models to determine the influencing power of action taking (Rimanoczy and Turner, 2008). Through management development, HRM and HRD, action learning provides the process for participants to explore new ways of reflection and cognitive engagement without falling back on old mental schemas and experience in order to produce new actions (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993). Action learning processes are constructed through the exchange of meaning based on dialogue, feedback and reflection and emerge into shared cognitions that situate learning. The processes involve acting, interpreting and cultivating diagnoses of problems confronted by individuals, teams or the organisation (Rudolph et al., 2009) as part of a sensemaking process (Weick, 1995).

3 The case of an Australian State-based large organisation

The subject organisation for this case is a large state-based public sector organisation in Australia, with a wide geographical dispersal of large and smaller organisational units and a significant central office with a strong political focus, due to the organisation's high public profile and historical community concerns with performance. The management workforce is quite diverse and includes highly skilled professionals managing technical operational units, administrators responsible for policy and resource control and managers of local area operations, many with rudimentary management skills. Some managers possess long experience in their own and similar roles.

Executive management at the corporate level is seen by the operating managers to be remote from the reality of the front-line, a view that is shared by many senior line managers. Senior management, however, is also seen to be not well connected to

operational/middle management and not necessarily very interested in the issues facing operational managers, except in so far as such issues have negative effects for those senior managers. The HRM function typifies this distance from the front-line, with several organisational layers separating the most senior HRM leader from the operational HRM staff who are responsible for 'making things happen' in the HRM and HRD functions at operational level. The most senior HRM officer is two levels removed from the CEO and the operating HRM staff responds to both HRM area and regional operational managers. The consequence of this organisational 'distances' is that HRM staff sometimes have an inadequate understanding of organisational strategies and senior management has less adequate feedback about human resources issues in the operating and supporting areas of the organisation.

4 The challenge

The objective of senior (and executive) management was to improve the performance of the middle managers in the area of managing staff, with the aim of optimising middle management contributions to organisational effectiveness, in terms of both reducing organisational mistakes and meeting political objectives and community expectations. Allied to this challenge was the need to improve levels of self-confidence and people management skills among middle managers and consequently enable senior managers to feel more confident in the levels of performance of individual middle managers and the organisational units under their care.

5 The programme

The programme outlined below was designed to provide an action learning environment for participants over a four or five-month period where participants would be immersed in action learning based skills development, learning to learn as well, as carrying out a specific action learning project as a key ingredient in the programme. Drawing from a state public service-wide initiative known as the practical people management programme (PPMP) approved for use in a number of critical State agencies in 2007, the framework for the action learning initiative (the programme) was advertised as follows:

PPMP aims to clarify the managerial role and functions and empower managers to undertake their role. Emphasis is placed on the management of employees. The transferable skills and knowledge gained through this course will support participants in their personal and professional lives as well as in fulfilling their workplace responsibilities for the effective management of people.

The key messages of the programme are:

- Management skills are important.
- Management skills can be learned, developed and refined.
- New management strategies and skills are required to meet changing social, economic, technological and organisational contexts.

- Managers need to identify and understand agency and government priorities and operate within this context.
- Managing people well leads to greater productivity and improved organisational climate.
- People management is based on behaviours that treat all people with respect and dignity.
- Managers pay attention to their own development needs in order to enhance the career prospects of themselves and their team, and the productivity of their organisation.
- Managing the workforce well needs a strategic and proactive approach – it is about thinking ahead, planning and creating positive environments for growth. It is not about responding to isolated critical situations on an *ad hoc* basis.

Table 1 Action learning project

ALP guidance

The ALP should be part of ongoing personal work or the ongoing work of the participant's work area, focused on people management issues and challenges.

The ALP could address a specific problem or people management challenge in the work place (examples: investigating and fixing a problem, working out and/or implementing a new system, improving the quality of team meetings etc.).

It is often helpful for small groups of course participants (a learning group) to choose an ALP that is relevant and important for all of them and work on the project together.

Prior to attending the first coursework the participants need to:

- Think of a need in your workplace where you are in a position to do something constructive about it.
- Talk to your manager and check that the project is something that she or he will support you in undertaking.
- Begin to document the project, using the pro-formas supplied.

It is not necessary to have completed implementation of the chosen project by the end of the programme, but report as follows at the ten minute presentation at the completion of the PPMP, using OHT's, power point or charts:

- Scope of ALP including goals, benefits and outcomes.
- Approach adopted, including Gantt chart for project management.
- Successes and problems encountered and next steps.
- People management learnings.
- Thanks to supervisor/sponsor.

A central component of PPMP is applying the skills and techniques discussed (and briefly practiced) in the coursework, through an action learning project (ALP) back in the workplace. It is only through applying skills in real work situations that managers build confidence in managing their workplaces. One of the principles of action learning generally is that effective learning occurs through doing, another is that working on a problem with peers assists effective learning. The ALP approach supports the work of the

Agency, the team and the participant through value adding. ALP is a cooperative exercise between each participant, their work team, their supervisor/manager and the PPMP facilitators. It is intended to provide learning and transferable skills for participants to use in their day-to-day work. Within this framework, action learning processes for PPMP were embedded and provided with focus by the inclusion of a specific, required action learning project undertaken by each course participant in accordance with the ALP guidance illustrated in Table 1.

5.1 Participants

Participants were drawn from across the organisation at both central and regional levels and from larger and smaller organisational units. All participants were at middle manager or supervisor level and managed organisational units ranging from 3 people to 35 staff in both professional and administrative units. Experience levels ranged from 'newly appointed' to 'veteran supervisors' with more than 15 years in such roles. Age range was from mid 20s to mid 50s. Qualifications included post-graduate degrees to no formal qualifications.

Most participants were keen to improve their people management skills with the exception of a few who had been placed in the programme by their superior for remedial reasons. After the first course was conducted and feedback spread around the organisation, primarily by word of mouth, the number of participants seeking a place on PMPP exceeded the planned number of places and a further course was arranged. Over a two-year period, 112 middle managers participated in the programme in six course groups of approximately 20 participants.

5.2 Programme structure

The programme was structured to engage participants over a four or five-month period. At the beginning of each individual programme, a two-hour introduction session was given to both participants and their supervisors. Two weeks later, a first two-day block of coursework was undertaken, including the development of individual and group-based action learning projects and skills development in areas such as giving and receiving feedback, negotiation and role clarification in addition to some project management guidance. A month or six weeks later, a second two-day block of coursework was undertaken, structured around needs identified by participants themselves and including review of progress of action learning projects. A further month later, participants presented their action learning projects and self-assessment of ongoing learning to an audience of their own supervisors and senior departmental management.

5.3 Learning support

Programme participants were both nominated by their supervisor and/or self-selecting with supervisor support. Supervisors were well-briefed and maintained an involvement with their participant(s) throughout the programme. Supervisors attended the final ALP presentation session to demonstrate support for ongoing learning in the workplace.

HRM staff, including those with specific responsibilities for HRD activities, who were responsible for the delivery of PPMP in their particular geographic or organisational

area of responsibility were available to participants as support for their engagement in the processes. However, this support was patchy and ranged from 'absent' to 'sometimes available' to 'strongly supportive and involved', seemingly at the whim of the particular HRM staff member. Early in the programme, it appeared that some HRM staff were primarily interested in defending their territory rather than supporting the learning processes for participants. Later in the programme, again with some outstanding exceptions, the HRM staff were largely uninterested in PPMP. In this organisation, as in many others, the HRM function subsumes the HRD function. Where a distinction is made in this paper, the inference is that HRM is operating primarily as a HRD manager and provider.

The two external learning facilitators assigned to each course maintained regular contact with participants and their supervisors for the duration of the course (and often beyond) to assist with honing learning skills, working and reworking strategies for ALP and building participant confidence in their capabilities as functioning people managers. It was not unusual for individual participants to strike a crisis point, often accompanying a realisation of their need to re-evaluate and relearn the skills of effective people management. The learning facilitators were all senior and experienced managers who offered a temporary mentoring support for the duration of the programme and who sought to help participants to establish or strengthen sound mentoring processes with their supervisors.

Participants were given the option to work on their own ALPs to form a 'learning set' of up to five people to work on a common problem or challenge. While most participants chose to work on their own projects, some levels of collaboration and support often developed spontaneously within participant groups. A representative list of action learning projects is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Representative list of individual and group action learning projects

<i>Individual/group</i>	<i>ALP</i>
Individual	Development of management processes and cultural change re individual performance management.
Individual	Linking staff accountabilities with tasks, procedures and policies. Collaborate with team on performance standards.
Individual	Streamline processes for increased efficiency and awareness. Create an environment where people get the job done.
Individual	Address a longstanding staff member performance issue.
Individual	Operationalise flexible working styles/conditions.
Individual	Managing the transition to team leader.
Individual	Identify a training programme for staff and encourage good performance. Upskill and implement time management strategies.
Group	Achieve a clearer role definition of for the senior management group to create more of a team.
Group	Establish a consultation process with unions to address rostering etc.
Group	Review of admin arrangements re professional/technical processes and practices.

6 Results and outcomes

A quantitative evaluation for each phase of PPMP for all participant groups was conducted using a five-point Likert-type scale. This was an attempt to collect some preliminary data to support the response towards action learning from the participants. Descriptive statistics were used to provide the following summative results as shown in Table 3, where the score indicates the median of all scores in the category.

Table 3 Summary of scores for each phase of the PPMP for all participant groups

<i>Question</i>	<i>Mean</i>
The topics and issues covered were useful for my work as a manager	4.5
The programme was structured in a useful way to support my learning	4.0
The balance of theory and practice helped hone my management skills	4.0
I felt well challenged by the programme	4.2

A qualitative evaluation was also conducted at the end of each group workshop session to gather feedback on the action learning process. Qualitative data were collected as part of the survey through open-ended questions and the data were analysed descriptively based on representative quotes to illustrate responses to certain aspects of the action learning process.

The questions and a representative sample of the feedback of the participants are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4 Questions and feedback from the qualitative evaluation

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Representative comments</i>
The most useful thing I got out of the session	Being a good supervisor is an ongoing work in progress. Identifying and practicing useful management skills.
The least useful thing I got out of the session	Endless de-briefing of exercises, discussion of history, Australian public service (APS) structure etc.
The thing I'd like more of	I'd like more role-plays. I'd like more practice dealing with difficult employees.
The thing I'd like less of	I'd like less role-plays. I'd like less de-briefing.
Improvements could be made in some areas – yes/no and list	Most of the participants said 'no' A comment for a participant who said 'yes' to improvements: a shorter programme, more intense.
Further comments: feedback regarding 'action learning'	Seeing links between action learning projects The action learning aspects of the course were very worth-while and the effort required was re-paid in full.
Further comments: feedback regarding 'course content'	Well done. You kept it real and people can really identify with the content. Thanks for the opportunity to develop my skill sets. There are some important tools that I will take away from this course.
Further comments: feedback regarding 'learning experience'	In the course environment, we felt comfortable to talk freely and helped all of us to communicate and learn how to be a better manager. Sharing of ideas and experiences from others – useful mix of theory and practical discussion.

Various participants made particular mention of insights and skills that they had developed during the course of the programme, for example performance management, managing expectations of boss and work team, conflict management and resolution, influencing styles, managing upwards and behaviour feedback. It was clear, from participants' feedback, during project review days that participants regarded the learning experience as transformative for themselves. Comments ranged from "Now I understand my roles" to "This program opened my eyes to be an effective supervisor". The most highlighted learnings were in respect of Performance Feedback. One group's summary of one of their learnings is found in Table 5.

Table 5 Participants insights about performance management

Insights:

Performance feedback is one of the most difficult but important things that a manager does.

When giving positive feedback:

- Remember the quiet achievers.
- Remember those at risk.
- Persist with the positives.
- Pass on the good feedback to senior people in the organisation.

When giving constructive (or negative) feedback:

- Deal with the 'little' things.
- Don't let unsatisfactory things run on unchecked.
- Feedback must have specifics.
- Work on the espoused organisational values – are they real? – Have the conversation with other managers and your own staff.
- Ensure you stay calm (observe yourself).
- If things get 'hot', brief up the line and keep a record of the conversations.
- Sometimes people who seek your opinion, don't take your advice!
- Some situations need a longer term strategy – follow through.

Ultimately a manager needs to decide on appropriate standards of performance and behaviour.

Several participants commented that they found the workshop processes rather repetitive covering the same ground several times. The feedback from the managers of participants was gained through informal debriefing after the ALP presentations, rather than through formal channels. The managers were asked whether or not they had observed changes in the workplaces following participation of their staff in PPMP. Their responses included the following representative comments. One manager commented that he had already seen an improvement in the performance of his supervisor and her work team. Another comment from a regional senior manager was to the effect that she and her management team were now using action learning processes to work together on resolving issues confronting the management team. In another instance, the leader of a professional team said that he was now a believer of action learning as he had seen the enthusiasm of his staff to implement their action learning projects with some concrete results.

Both quantitative and qualitative data supported the occurrence of learning during the action learning process. Overall, it was found that learning primarily occurred through engagement in the form of action-by-doing as well as self and collaborative reflection.

The learnings captured were largely spontaneous in nature occurring through role play and feedback loops. Clarifying participant roles and mental models through the negotiation and sensemaking of contextual stimuli such as the resources and number of participants available allowed the learners to draw on appropriate frames of references for subsequent action taking. The learnings that occurred were therefore reflective and thoughtful in nature, guided by social and contextual dynamics influencing participants' decision making and problem solving.

7 Discussion

Action learning and action research have been well recognised in the HRD literature since Reg Revans' ground breaking work in the 1970's. Action learning became the preferred mode of training for a number of international companies, including GEC under the leadership of Lord Weinstock in the 1970s, and later IBM, Lend Lease, NAB, Nokia, Samsung and Motorola (Marquardt et al., 2009; Stone, 2008). However, enthusiasm for action learning at the organisational level in Australia has waxed and waned over the past 40–50 years and the number of lasting initiatives has been sparse. In the particular case described in this paper, it was clear that political and senior management sensitivity to public criticism of agency performance was a decisive factor in the decision to try a different, HRM-led approach with a specific level of management, specifically middle or operating management, to whom many of the perceived performance deficits were attributed, rightly or wrongly. It was also clear that the traditional remedy of a 'sheep dip' training programme would not suffice and so, an action learning strategy was accepted by the senior management, with encouragement and support from the State public sector central agency.

The action learning concept was familiar to a number of the HRM professionals in the agency, including those with a specific responsibility for HRD, although it became clear that their comprehension of the strategy requirements of action learning was lacking. The prevailing idea was that action learning required each participant to bring a problem or challenge to the course sessions and resolve it with the help of the trainers, as real-time, personal and organisational challenges (Pedler, 2008; Revans, 1980). It took some time to break through that sort of mindset and it was only when several senior managers realised that action learning involved an in-depth, long-term commitment to the planning-action-reflection-renewed action learning cycle that the programme gained real traction. Without such senior management support (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002), PPMP would have died a slow death and accomplished little. The HRM professionals were the gatekeepers for the programme and they only became more than nominally supportive when the first cohort of participants registered a high level of enthusiasm and commitment to the programme. This reality merely reinforces the action learning insight that there is no learning without action and no (sober) action without learning (Revans, 1998). For some organisational HRM officers, the link between action learning, management development and HRD was tenuous at best – "just another training programme for us to administer!" The senior HR manager responsible for the organisation of the majority of the PMPP courses never participated in the programme, despite performing conscientiously in his administrative capacity.

The reaction of the participants was critical to the success of the programme. Many came to the programme from stressful work situations, and were quite suspicious of any attempt to impose 'extra' work in the form of an action learning project. It took some time before they realised that the action learning project that was central to the programme was, in fact, likely to make their jobs a little easier and less stressful, and would provide a focus for tackling issues that they had previously shelved as too difficult or too time-consuming. This realisation translated into enthusiasm for action learning as a way of doing their management job more effectively and even more efficiently. By the time of the second block of coursework, with the experience of learning facilitator support, most participants were discovering the great advantages of an action learning approach to their management work. This was the experience of both 'learning sets' of participants who shared an action learning project and also individuals, with very few exceptions. By the end of the second two-day block of coursework, many participants recognised that the course design actually modelled action learning processes and that, what some had seen as repetition and covering old ground was, in fact, the reflective processes in operation. Some participants came to that realisation earlier than others but it was clear that, with very few exceptions, the participants came to value the learning processes themselves, rather than just the intellectual content of the programme.

It has to be said that it took some time and experience for an action learning approach to management development to be accepted by the HRM staff of the organisation, with some notable individual exceptions. The reasons for this can only be speculative, as there were no specific data available to support this assumption. However, it is likely that the engagement problem by the HRM professionals in the organisation was most likely an issue of power and control. The implicit attitude expressed by a number of HRM people, even some with specific HRD responsibilities appeared to be that, "We are the experts, this is not our initiative and we will only provide tacit support in order not to be seen as disloyal to senior management." It may be that the basic problem is one that has been referred to earlier in this paper, that many HRM and HRD academics and professionals have not always supported action learning as anything other than a problem-solving mechanism. It may also be that the organisational culture, as understood and transmitted by the HRM people does not readily accept new approaches to old problems. It is also likely that the HRM staff were influenced by the current wave of 'credentialism' in Australia, where management development initiatives are given credit towards a formal qualification by universities and training and further education (TAFE). Action learning approaches to management development do not readily fit into this model. However, it is clear that, even with strong senior management support, HRM and HRD support for action learning approaches to management development is a critical long-term factor for the ongoing impact and success of such initiatives.

Was PPMP an unqualified or perhaps, a qualified success? That judgement can only be made in the long term based on specific outcomes. By the time this particular programme had been completed and evaluated, a major change in senior management occurred but was unrelated to the programme. Subsequently, senior management attention was diverted to other issues rather than the middle management action learning programme. However, a number of operational managers engaged successfully with action learning processes and became enthusiastic and committed to the programme. It is certainly recommended that a review of PMPP in the particular agency should be undertaken within the next 12 to 18 months. However, in the short and medium term, reports from the frontline managers indicate that the benefits of the programme continue

to accrue and that a significant number of participants attribute their ongoing managerial performance improvement to PPMP. The most anecdotally garnered observations from participants are that senior management, and the HRM and HRD staff should be required to undertake a similar programme and that participation in PPMP should be a prerequisite for promotion. In particular, for professionally qualified leaders of professional or technical groups, professional learning could be significantly advanced by providing opportunities for reflection and interaction based on people management issues (Kwakman, 2003). Unfortunately, the political climate has changed and the commitment to action learning at the senior management level may have dissipated. The major prospect for the future of an action learning approach to manager development lies in one or more of the 2007, 2008 and 2009 participants achieving a level of influence in senior management. In today's complex adaptive systems, these engaged participants may enable the adoption of an action learning strategy for building the future management capability for the organisation.

8 Conclusions

Action learning is a very viable management development approach and significantly accelerates the development of management skills, insights and strategies, especially in the key area of people management. The action learning process serves as a model for a management development programme, based around the action learning model of 'plan, act, reflect and re-act'.

The experience described in this case highlights the strong nexus between action learning, management development, HRM and HRD in a typical public sector organisational setting. Where senior management becomes convinced that a standard two-day training course will not provide the outcomes they seek, an action learning approach will be a viable option for management development. When HRM and HRD functionaries in an organisation develop a clear understanding of the impact of action learning on the systems and culture of the organisation and embrace this approach to manager development, the outcomes of action learning initiatives will be optimised. At this intersection, action learning becomes part of the sensemaking and interpretive processes (Weick et al., 2005), and embedded in the processes of the organisation at micro and strategic levels (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009). Irreversibly, the culture of the organisation will be profoundly changed.

The success of action learning programmes will depend heavily on senior management support and the preparedness to commit to longer term learning programmes rather than two-day 'sheep dip' training sessions, which accomplish very little at great expense. The experience described in this study highlights the need for training for a broader role of HRM and HRD as action learning catalysts and facilitators of on-the-job training, as suggested by Wognum and Bartlett (2003). Discovering and nurturing champions of action learning methodologies within any given organisation is a task of great difficulty, due to the prevailing short-termism in many Australian organisations which focus on short-term gains at the expense of long-term success. The significant contribution of organisations such as Action Learning and Action Research Association (ALARA) is to cultivate influential organisational members to promote action learning methodologies and prepare the ground for organisational development

initiatives that employ action learning processes and embed them within the functions and, ultimately, the culture of the organisation. There are, however, no strong indications that major Australian organisations in either the public or private sectors are taking lead positions in this respect.

The next phase of development of action learning initiatives for manager development needs to be designed with a stronger and more robust evaluation in order that the strengths and weaknesses of action learning methodologies for management development be more rigorously assessed. HRM and HRD professionals need to make a contribution to the strategic thinking of their organisations, in particular the development of optimum learning environments.

One limitation of this paper is that it tells the partial story of only one public sector agency and how it approaches action learning. In addition to the non-traditional remedy of action learning to the 'sheep dipping' programme, there are other exciting stories to tell of accelerated and effective management development using action learning. The other major limitation of this paper is that, in hindsight, data collection could have been more comprehensively designed, primarily because PMPP was not designed as an investigation into the effectiveness of action learning as a management development methodology. Further exploration of the long-term influences of the engaged 2007–2009 participants may well demonstrate sustained performance improvements. Future research could explore the empirical linkage between action learning and management development in more specific terms in both the private and public sectors across industries. A comparison of action learning programmes in different contexts would be useful for HRM and HRD research and practice.

References

- Akuratiyagamage, V.M. (2006) 'Management development practices: empirical evidence from Sri Lanka', *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 17, No. 9, pp.1606–1624.
- Anderson, P. (1999) 'Complexity theory and organization science', *Organization Science*, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp.216–232.
- Dewettinck, K. and Remue, J. (2011) 'Contextualizing HRM in comparative research: the role of the Cranet network', *Human Resource Management Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp.37–49.
- Dick, B. (1991) *Helping Groups to be Effective: Skills, Processes and Concepts for Group Facilitation*, 2nd ed., Interchange, Brisbane.
- Dick, B. (1997) *Action Learning and Action Research*, available at <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/actlearn.html> (accessed on 19 October 2011).
- Egan, T.M. (2011) 'Key intersections between HRD and management', *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp.223–234.
- Hernez-Broome, G. and Hughes, R.L. (2000) 'Leadership development: past, present, and future', *Human Resource Planning*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp.24–32.
- Hoe, S.L. (2011) 'Action learning: reflections of a first-time coach', *Development and Learning in Organizations*, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp.12–14.
- Kwakman, K. (2003) 'Professional learning throughout the career', *International Journal of Human Resources Development and Management*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp.180–190.
- Lees, S. (1992) 'Ten faces of management development', *Management Education and Development*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp.89–105.
- Lengnick-Hall, M.L., Lengnick-Hall, C.A., Andrade, L.S. and Drake, B. (2009) 'Strategic human resource management: the evolution of the field', *Human Resource Management Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp.64–85.

- Luoma, M. (2006) 'A play of four arenas: how complexity can serve management development', *Management Learning*, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp.101–123.
- Mankin, D. (2009) *Human Resource Development*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Marquardt, M.J., Leonard, S., Freedman, A. and Hill, C. (2009) *Action Learning for Developing Leaders and Organizations: Principles, Strategies, and Cases*, American Psychological Press, Washington, DC.
- Marsick, V.L. and Watkins, K.E. (1997) 'Lessons from informal and incidental learning', Burgoyne, J. and Reynolds, M. (Eds.): *Management Learning: Integrating Perspectives in Theory and Practice*, Sage, London.
- Martin-Alcázar, F., Romero-Fernández, P.M. and Sánchez-Gardey, G. (2005) 'Strategic human resource management: integrating the universalistic, contingent, configurational and contextual perspectives', *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 16, No. 5, pp.633–659.
- McGraw, P. and Peretz, M. (2011) 'HRD practices in local private sector companies and MNC subsidiaries in Australia, 1996–2009', *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 22, No. 12, pp. 2539–2557.
- McLaughlin, H. and Thorpe, R. (1993) 'Action learning – a paradigm in emergence: the problems facing a challenge to traditional management education and development', *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp.19–27.
- Miller, P. (2003) 'Workplace learning by action learning: a practical example', *Journal of Workplace Learning*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp.14–23.
- Mole, G. (2000) *Managing Management Development*, Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Mumford, A. (1997) *Management Development: Strategies for Action*, IPM, London.
- O'Regan, N., Stainer, L. and Sims, M. (2010) 'Training in SMEs and its relationship to profitability', *International Journal of Human Resources Development and Management*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp.166–181.
- Pedler, M. (2008) *Action Learning for Manager*, 2nd ed., Gower Publishing, Hampshire.
- Revans, R.W. (1971) *Developing Effective Managers*, Praeger Publishers, New York, NY.
- Revans, R.W. (1980) *Action Learning – New Techniques for Managers*, Blond and Briggs, London.
- Revans, R.W. (1998) *ABC of Action Learning*, Lemos and Crane, London.
- Rimanoczy, I. and Turner, E. (2008) *Action Reflection Learning: Solving Real Business Problems By Connecting Learning With Earning*, Davis-Black Publishing, Mountain View, CA.
- Rudolph, J. W., Morrison, J.B. and Carroll, J.S. (2009) 'The dynamics of action-oriented problem solving: linking interpretation and choice', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 34, No. 4, pp.733–756.
- Ruona, W.E.A. and Gibson, S.K. (2004) 'The making of twenty-first-century HR: an analysis of the convergence of HRM, HRD, and OD', *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp.49–66.
- Stone, R. (2008) *Human Resource Management*, 6th ed., Wiley, Australia.
- Weick, K. (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Weick, K., Sutcliffe, K.M. and Obstfeld, D. (2005) 'Organizing and the process of sensemaking', *Organization Science*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp.409–421.
- Wognum, A.A.M. and Bartlett, K.R. (2003) 'An examination of HRD in response to strategic learning needs in SMEs', *International Journal of Human Resources Development and Management*, Vol. 2, Nos. 1/2, pp.170–186.
- Woodall, J. (2000) 'Corporate support for work-based management development', *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp.18–32.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2002) 'The concept of action learning', *The Learning Organisation*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp.114–124.