

ALRP Editorial July

Have leaders got the questioning habit?

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Readers of this journal do not need to be reminded of the centrality of questions to the practice of action learning. This edition addresses the asking of better questions. It also considers action learning as a means of preparing for collective leadership. Finally, it addresses the extent to which leadership development programmes which employ action learning deal with the often intractable problems of leading by directly addressing their wicked problems. We find ourselves in a world in which immediate answers to difficult problems are all too often demanded. In the zeal for 'the quick fix' the power of what Revans called 'fresh questions' is overlooked. Goldberg (1998) suggests that what she calls 'the conditioned hunt for answers represents a desperate attachment to knowing, and a simultaneous avoidance of any anxiety associated with not knowing' (1998, p. 4). But what Edmonstone, Lawless and Pedler in this journal call the 'unanswerable and unformulatable' questions of leadership cannot be fully, certainly and quickly addressed. Leaders and managers may have to get used to protracted periods of 'not knowing' in relation to their most complex and wicked problems if they want to make a real advance in their treatment.

All those involved with novice action learners will have encountered the bewilderment which often accompanies an introduction to the process. For managers and leaders used to 'telling' and 'immediate solution giving' the lack of an imposed curriculum and the focus on developing a questioning approach can be, at best, perplexing. Some never quite adjust themselves to it. But questions are the engine of learning and Revans himself never tired of promoting the exercise of 'exploratory insight.'

Rasmus Pedanik's paper on how to ask better questions, offers a reflection on his practice as a facilitator as well as useful connections between theory (Dewey's ecological psychology) and practice. Revans took on the mantle of founder of action learning and at other times eschewed sole responsibility for it describing it as ancient wisdom. But he did acknowledge a debt to Dewey as one of the architects of the American philosophy of pragmatism and as an original thinker on education and learning. Dewey's influence is apparent; action learners must be interested in the difference their actions make to the real here-and-now world of practice.

Pedanik's Deweyan analysis contributes to our understanding of the action learning process and underscores the idea of action learning as a context sensitive approach. The knowledge gained through action learning is never absolute; it always depends upon time and context. The paper goes on to set out a case study centred on the author's own experience which focuses attention on the consequences of failing to give primacy to questions. He reflects on the kind of questions which might have led to a different outcome. Precisely because

questioning does not always come easily Pedler & Abbott (2013) encourage practitioners to think of questions in terms of the central processes of human action: thinking, feeling and willing. The set facilitator may 'model' such questions so that practitioners can go on to develop and make full use of the questioning habit.

Joseph Raelin's paper commends action learning as a collective leadership development approach which expressly calls for collective reflection to expand and even create knowledge while at the same time serving to improve practice. The development of collective leadership (or distributed leadership) via action learning begins, as we would expect, with managers immersing themselves in their practice and engaging with messy, perhaps even wicked, problems. But there must also be collective reflection, and this is a domain which Raelin finds is often lacking in action learning.

Finally, Edmonstone, Lawless and Pedler set out to examine the extent to which, if action learning is indeed commonly employed for leadership development purposes, wicked problems are actually being addressed. Edmonstone et al. find that there is little (published) evidence of leaders in sets dealing with wicked problems. Perhaps the focus is still too often too individualistic in character. They support Raelin's contention that nurturing collective leadership capacity using action learning is a much more promising avenue. Immersion in practice, involvement and engagement, developing the capacity for critical questioning, real action on wicked problems and collective reflection – these are some of the ways in which action learning can demonstrate that Revans was indeed correct when he claimed that action learning is the best way to educate managers.

References

Goldberg, M. (1998). *The Art of the Question: A Guide to Short-Term Question-Centred Therapy*. New York: John Wiley.

Pedler, M. & Abbott, C. (2013). *Facilitating Action Learning: A Practitioner's Guide*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.