Facilitating organizational development through action learning – a framework integrating practical and theoretical considerations

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Summary

Action learning programs are supposed to result in both personal and organizational development. Recent research indicates however that although more and more programs lead to personal development, organizational development is negligible. This may be caused by the fact that organizational development implies that a connection must be made between what has been learned by action learning participants and other organizational members. We hypothesize that when an organization has repeatedly been involved in action learning, the principles and outcomes of the method can be institutionalized. Thus, the aforementioned connection may be achieved. We find this a valuable interpretation of organizational development. A theoretical framework is laid out that describes how the institutionalization of action learning principles and outcomes comes about. This framework is built around the following concepts: scripts, lean thinking and presencing – the importance of which has been exemplified in various recent action learning applications. We conjecture that it is possible to devise action learning programs that strengthen organizational development from the outset, in which the mindset of the set advisor is imperative.

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1. Introduction

From a recent survey amongst action learning practitioners, Pedler *et al.* (2003) concluded that 85% of the action learning programs that are carried out solely aim at individual learning and development and not at organizational learning (albeit the authors' results were preliminary at the time of publication and the definitions of personal and organizational growth used unclear)[1]. Their finding, nevertheless, seems to be in line with a conclusion drawn by Parkes (1998) in his analysis of a number of action learning programs in North America, which even goes a little further. Parkes stated that the action learning programs he studied paid relatively little attention to processes of individual and organizational learning and emphasized team-building applications. He summarized this as follows:

> … there is very little effort, or interest, in ascertaining the action learning that has occurred [in action learning programs], individually or organizationally. For the most part, the project or "action" is the reason for action learning, and "learning" the by-product. (p. 168)

Conclusions such as these are at the least peculiar, since action learning has been developed to facilitate both personal and organizational development (Revans 1971)[2]. Although it is stated in the action learning literature that organizational growth can only be reached through personal growth (Garratt 1983), the fact that, in 2003, organizational growth is apparently not an incentive at all to use the method in many a case is striking.

Of course, it is easier to accomplish individual development via an action learning program than organizational development, for as Miller (2003) tells us:

> It is clear that if action learning is to move to workplace learning and subsequently to a learning organisation, it must involve more than action learning set members and eventually connect with a much wider body of organisational members. (p. 16)

How this connection process with other organizational members takes place, is an issue that already attracted a lot of attention in the 1960s (Argyris 1964) but that is as of yet unresolved. This may be one of the reasons why action learning programs nowadays mostly refrain from focusing on organizational growth[3]. Although attempts have been made in the literature to describe how organizational development may be facilitated through action learning (Inglis 1994, McGill and Beaty 1992), De Loo (2002) contends that such descriptions start, among others, from a too optimistic, oversimplified view of an organization. No organization is alike, and the circumstances and motives for managers and firms to take part in an action learning program can differ substantially. Not studying these circumstances and examining how they may affect the implementation of an action learning program can greatly diminish the effectiveness of the method.

Brown (1960) makes a distinction between the manifest, assumed, extant and requisite organization. The manifest organization is the organization that is formally described and displayed on organizational charts. The assumed organization is the organization that individuals perceive. There may or may not be consistency between the assumed and manifest organization. The extant organization is the organization that is revealed by systematic exploration and analysis[4]. Finally, the requisite organization is the prototypical organization, which functions exactly like it should when

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[1] The terms 'organizational development', 'organizational change', 'organizational learning' and 'organizational growth' will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. 'Organizational growth' thus does not necessarily have to imply that an organization gets bigger or more profitable.

[2] Smith (1997) thinks that "(…) the development aims that Revans was striving for [with action learning] are essentially the same as those most action learning practitioners claim to be aiming for, i.e. personal development as opposed to skill or technology, etc." (pp. 366-367). This seems to be in line with the results found by Pedler *et al.* (2003). However, although Revans (1971) indeed finds that action learning starts with individual learning, this is assumed to have its effects on organizational learning too (under certain conditions). If this were not the case, no organization would be willing to use the method, since it would not necessarily benefit from its use. We therefore feel that we can safely say that in a management context, action learning should lead to both personal and organizational development – a view that is reinforced by Revans (1976). Pedler *et al.* (2003) sustain this viewpoint as well, namely when they assert that "(…) the emphasis on personal issues chosen by the individuals [involved in an action learning program] suggests there has been a drift away from Revans' classical principles" (p. 44).

[3] O'Neil (1996) states in her study among set advisors that "AL [action learning] is sometimes used to help bring about organizational change … Some advisers feel that the pressure to effect this kind of change can create obstacles to the group's learning (…)" (p. 44). This may be another reason why action learning programs do not seem to focus on organizational growth anymore. However, if set advisors dictate whether a program should aim for organizational development or not, we feel that action learning is deprived of one of its key features for the wrong reason by the wrong persons.

[4] Brown believes that the extant organization can never be completely known, as it may be a little heroic to assume that careful investigation will reveal *everything* that happens in an organization.

taking into account all the environmental forces it faces. Brown describes an ideal situation in which the manifest, assumed, extant and requisite organization are closely in line with one another, but notes that at the same time:

> The circumstances [surrounding an organization], of course, are always dynamic, so that the tendency is of these four to move out of adjustment with each other. (p. 24)

It is our impression that in setting out how organizational learning occurs, the point of view taken on organizations in the action learning literature is mainly a requisite one[5], while extant organizations are the ones in which organizational development should actually take place. In that respect it is interesting that Donnenberg (2003a) feels that in his own activities as an action learning advisor and facilitator, studying extant organizations is becoming an increasingly important factor in making action learning programs a success.

This paper contains an attempt to move organizational development back into the action learning picture for extant organizations, and does so by considering both theoretical and practical elements. How can organizational development be facilitated in extant organizations? One of us has had many experiences with action learning ever since 1987 and can thus reflect on a lot of action learning programs. In many a program, organizational development was at the heart. Since organizational development was originally intended to be an outgrowth of action learning, we see no reason why this should not be so anymore, as Pedler's *et al.* (2003) research among extant organizations suggests.

In section 2 a theoretical framework is laid out that examines how organizational development can come about through action learning. In section 3, the framework is set against various action learning programs with which one of us has been involved. Section 4 describes the consequences of this confrontation for future action learning applications. Finally, section 5 summarizes how we feel that organizational development may be structurally approached in an action learning program, thus hopefully stimulating more and more action learning practitioners not to take organizational growth for granted and go for (the more easily obtainable) individual growth alone.

2. Points of leverage for organizational development

In this Section it is argued that business development may be strengthened via presencing and continuous improvement via lean thinking. In order to analyze the connection between these two concepts, we deem that individual and organizational behaviour must first be examined at the meta level. This is done by using scripts.

2.1 Scripts

Garvin (1994) identifies three separate and quite general stages through which an organization must move before it can become a learning organization. The first stage is a cognitive stage, in which managers are encouraged to share ideas with one another, work with an open mindset and be willing to leave their comfort zones. The second stage is called 'behavioural change'. This occurs when managers internalize the insights and knowledge they have gained in the previous stage and act accordingly. The third stage is effective improvement in organizational performance – or, organizational development itself.

Interestingly, Garvin's set-up contains several links with the process of institutionalization as it is sometimes described in institutional theory (Burns and Scapens 2000). Institutions may be defined as socially constructed templates for action. Examples include national culture, laws, past decisions, organizational culture, accounting rules, and norms and habits. They exist both outside (like laws and

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[5] That is to say, descriptions of action learning programs have traditionally focused on organizations and set members that are open and willing to embrace the method, without analyzing what would happen if a less positive attitude towards the method is taken, and how this may be redeemed (if this is an option to follow up on in the first place). Action learning case studies, almost without exception, only contain success stories. In the early days of action learning this was understandable, as the method had to be accepted (Revans 1976). Furthermore, organizational culture was generally such that methods like action learning were easily embraced and experimented with by firms (Donnenberg 2003b). By the 21st century however, the organizational climate has become markedly different from the way it was in the 1960s and 1970s, but this does not seem to have been reflected in many action learning discussions (De Loo 2003). Rijnsburger (2003) acknowledges this, and thinks that only in very specific types of organizations (which she, following Wanrooij 2002, calls 'proactive' and 'high-performing', based on the prevailing culture and top management attitude towards learning), action learning programs can lead to organizational growth. Personal growth may however be attained in any organization.

national culture) and inside (like organizational culture and past decisions) an organization. According to Burns and Scapens, there is a lot of literature studying how institutions affect human behaviour, while relatively little attention is paid to how individuals shape and change institutions. Furthermore, they assert that there is an ongoing interaction between individual behaviour and the formation and modification of institutions, which is also not often acknowledged in the literature.

We hypothesize that when an organization has been repeatedly involved in an action learning program over a period of time, its principles and outcomes can become institutionalized. According to Barley and Tolbert (1997), many operations involving institutions can be regarded as 'scripts'. Scripts are observable, recurrent activities and patterns of interaction characteristic of a particular setting (Gioia and Poole 1984). When someone is involved in infrequent but recurrent situations, script development is cued. Take for example the action learning program described by Mercer (1990). In this program, six consecutive phases could be distinguished that all action learning participants had to go through to reach a solution for the problems they had brought into the program. These phases were:

- Make a review of one's own problem situation;
- Present this review to the action learning group;
- Propose an outline of the way one thinks a problem should be tackled;
- Present this outline to the group;
- Discussion;
- Implement the resulting solution in one's own work setting.

Gioia and Poole (1984) make a distinction between cognitive and behavioural scripts. Whenever action learning participants decide, for whatever reason, to take action in a certain way, a behavioural script is performed. The scripts out of which participants choose a particular behavioural script are called cognitive scripts. In fact, behavioural scripts are observed cognitive scripts. We presume that the more an organization has been confronted with phases like the ones listed by Mercer (1990) in the context of an action learning program, the more they are likely to get institutionalized – not only within (future) action learning programs, but also throughout the organization, in its (daily) operations. This may be a valuable interpretation of the term 'organizational development', the more since we feel that organizational growth is about a lot of other things besides increased organizational performance, as Miller (2003), among others, seems to think.

According to Barley and Tolbert (1997), institutionalization takes place in several steps, namely:

- Encoding: this happens as an individual internalizes rules, for example when the six phases of Mercer's program, and the implementation hereof, become common practice. Thus, the phases turn into cognitive scripts. This conforms to Garvin's (1994) first stage of organizational development (through individual development), as well as a part of his second stage (as far as the process of internalization is concerned);
- Enacting: this occurs when a person, knowingly or not, decides to act upon the scripts he has encoded in the previous step. Thus, a behavioural script is put into practice. This is the remainder of Garvin's second stage of organizational development;
- Revision/replication: actual behaviour may modify the scripts that have been acted upon in the previous phase, because for example resistance was encountered, which one wishes to circumvent in the future. Both (the set of) cognitive and behavioural scripts alter. This is a stage that is not covered by Garvin, but one that is important nevertheless, as it highlights the cyclical nature of organizational development and the emergence of institutions;
- Objectification/externalization: in the final step of institutionalization, scripts and behavioural patterns are no longer tied to specific persons. They acquire a 'factual', normative quality. Gioia and Poole (1984) call such scripts 'protoscripts'. Protoscripts can be transferred to more situations than the one(s) in which they have originally been developed. This is stage three of Garvin's conception of organizational development.

In figure 2.1, the various steps leading to the institutionalization of scripts are shown:

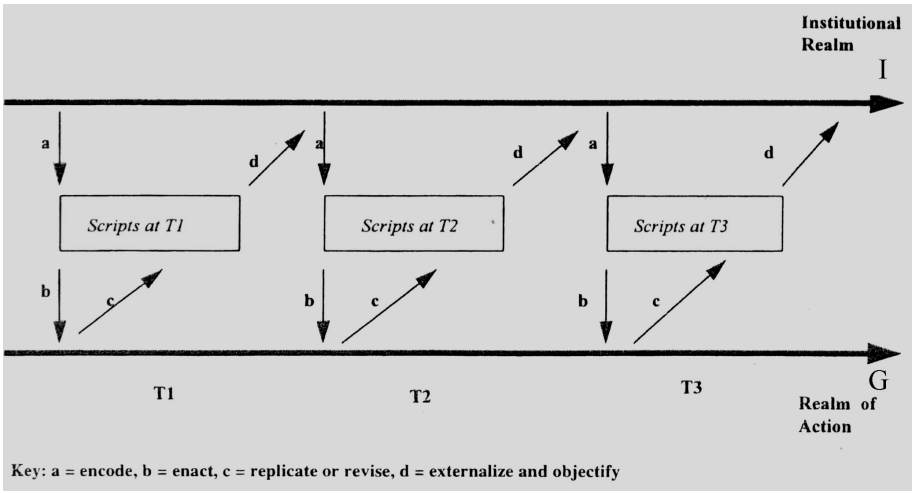

Figure 2.1 Stylized representation of the institutionalization of scripts (Barley and Tolbert 1997, p. 101).

Action learning, at first, takes place in the realm of action (G), when single set members 'learn to learn', leave their comfort zones, and possibly discover new problem solving strategies by engaging in concrete activities to solve their real-life problems. Mostly, the analysis and evaluation of action learning programs stops here, leaving aside thorough investigations such as Casey and Pearce (1977). However, as the quote from Miller (2003) in the first section already indicated, if organizational development is to be strengthened through action learning, a connection should be made between what has been learned by individual set members and the rest (or at least a larger part) of an organization. It is here that the institutional realm (I) comes into play. We conjecture that a person's attitudes, norms and behaviour connected with 'learning to learn' can be scripted, and that these scripts –either directly or over time– can become an institution, roughly following the steps described by Barley and Tolbert (1997). If 'learning to learn' becomes a protoscript and is thus transferable to more situations and is no longer tied to specific persons (the set members), we may say that organizational growth has been achieved and that action learning has fulfilled its potential[6]. When an organization is willing to accept action learning as the route to follow to solve its problems, and is willing to let action learning participants have a go at what they have learned in a program, it may well be that 'learning to learn' is institutionalized (Revans 1971). In such a case, encoding and enacting jointly determine personal growth, whereas objectification is a signal for organizational growth to occur. The revision/replication step is important to determine how far personal development will be transformed into organizational development, although the transformation is also affected by a person's willingness (or unwillingness) to put his new skills and attitude(s) to work.

2.2 Presencing

In what way does organizational development manifest itself? Some claim that is a latent ability of a firm to adapt to changing environmental conditions (Boulding 1978). However, this ability need not be latent at all and may be ingrained in all organizational members, as Scharmer (2001) notes. To illustrate this, he introduces the concept of 'self-transcending' knowledge. Self-transcending knowledge is defined as not-yet-embodied, future-oriented tacit knowledge that becomes embodied when organizational members share ideas, insights and reflections with one another and form a so-called 'shared will'. Shared will comes about:

> … in conversations in which participants form and articulate a common intention. (Scharmer, *ibid.*, p. 145)

Action learning basically involves a learning structure "(…) in which practitioners reflect and learn from their experience on a regular and repetitive basis" (Scharmer, *ibid.*), which may ultimately lead to

[6] Most of the definitions of a 'learning organization' mentioned by Garvin (1994) seem to affirm this interpretation of organizational growth, for it is stated that an organization develops when "the range of its potential behaviors is changed", by "encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behavior", which happens through "shared insights, knowledge and mental models" (p. 20). Interestingly, in none of these quotes reference is made to scripts, while we feel that they are at the heart of the discussion about organizational learning.

a ‘common intention’. The formation of a common intention is however not necessarily at the heart of action learning applications, for it involves institutionalization –since a common intention is not person-specific– and thus organizational growth, which, according to Pedler *et al.* (2003), is not often considered in action learning programs these days.

In an action learning program, one mostly learns from events from the past, while Scharmer (2001) thinks one should also learn from the future. According to Scharmer, a focus on thought conditions that allow new processes of production or types of service to emerge will reveal an organization’s self-transcending knowledge and creates the ability to categorically make sense and use of emerging (business) opportunities. Thus, competitive advantages may be achieved. In Scharmer (2000) the processes involved with sensing and embracing emerging business opportunities are called ‘presencing’. Presencing flourishes when individuals perceive it as their personal mission[7]. The corresponding processes thus have to become institutionalized at the personal level, which can happen when one’s mindset changes. However, mindsets and the behavioural patterns (or scripts) connected therewith are difficult to change, for in the absence of contextual change it is likely that scripted behaviour is replicated (Burns and Scapens 2000). Action learning can bring about such a contextual change, for in a set one generally works on a problem in a completely different manner than usual. However, one tends to analyze only *one* specific problem at the very same moment that it occurs, and this makes that after a solution has been found and possibly implemented, there is no necessity to follow up on the change in mindset one may have witnessed by working through an action learning program. One may thus be inclined to fall back in routine behaviour (Cunningham 1993). That is why *one* action learning program, by itself, is not sufficient to produce an organizational climate in which presencing may foster (Rol 2003)[8]. Nevertheless, when action learning principles and outcomes are institutionalized in a firm, so that contextual change is brought about involuntarily, and action learning is no longer tied to specific problems or persons, we think that an environment is shaped in which presencing can streamline an organization’s business. According to figure 2.1, action learning principles and outcomes have to be scripted for institutionalization to occur. Thus, action learning programs have to be carried out repeatedly in an organization. In addition, the continuous interaction between the realm of action and the institutional realm implies, in the context of successive action learning programs, that an ongoing exchange of information and insights is required between the organization and its surroundings, stakeholders who are involved in a certain problem, upper- and lower-level managers, set members and other organizational members, etc. However, as Scharmer (2000) tells us, in case of a problem, specific types of interaction are necessary between organizational members (and other stakeholders) for organizational development to be realized. He calls these types of interaction ‘reflective dialogue’ and ‘generative dialogue’, as opposed to ‘talking nice’ and ‘talking tough’. In the latter forms of interaction, there is no reflective component: one simply wants to keep business going as usual and solve problems as they occur. Interactions are characterized by politeness and (superficial) debates. Learning is not considered essential to an organization’s survival. Anticipation and orientation towards future opportunities, which are important elements of presencing (as we have indicated above), can only be stimulated through reflective and generative dialogue. These types of dialogue evolve around thorough inquiries and a desire to change. In such circumstances, people may also ‘learn to learn’ outside the environment of an action learning set. However, in organizations where no reflective or generative dialogue is present, action learning principles will not become ingrained and the corresponding programs will, at most, result in personal development.

2.3 Lean thinking

In what way can reflective and generative dialogues be brought about in an organization? Donnenberg (2003b) believes that ‘lean thinking’ can help. The ‘lean’ concept originates from a benchmarking study conducted in the late 1980s, in which Toyota’s production system was -relatively speaking- typed as the most customer- and market-oriented under consideration, with a high level of sales and R&D-activities (Wallace, Jones and Roos 1990, Spear and Bowen 1999). An analysis of the production system showed, among others, that there was no production in batches, customer orders formed the heart of the system, *kaizen* (continuous improvement) was strived for, while organizational members tried to enhance their own work processes (Womack and Jones 2003). On the basis hereof, Womack and Jones developed their notion of ‘lean thinking’, which in Western contexts is often associated with lay-off decisions and reorganizations, as a rearrangement of work processes will mostly lead to some

[7] In fact, Scharmer distinguishes seven steps that lead to the materialization of presencing, which roughly correspond to the steps of institutionalization described by Barley and Tolbert (1997). See http://www.ottoscharmer.com/presencing2.htm for details.
[8] This is one of the consequences of action learning looking at events from the past. The action learning *concept* does not preclude learning from the future though, as we will see below.

people becoming superfluous in their previous function (Halper 1996). In Toyota however, these people would receive another job in the company based on their capacities and aspirations[9].

Although stemming from the automobile industry, lean thinking can be used in every type of organization, be it a manufacturing firm or a firm involved in service sector activities. According to Womack and Jones (2003), lean centers around the following elements:

- Creation of customer value;
- Rearrangement of the entire value chain (and the corresponding work processes);
- 'Flow' improvement. 'Flow' means that the goods moving through and the activities taking place in an organization should be coordinated such that as little interruption or delay as is virtually possible occurs;
- Customer demands;
- Continuous improvement.

Each of these elements plays a role when a set advisor enters an organization to design an action learning program. After all, in such a case one will ask oneself questions like 'does a certain design create value for the user (the organization)?', 'what are the organization's goals with an action learning program?', 'are these in line with the long-term goals the organization tries to achieve?', 'what must happen for organizational growth to be realized?', 'how far do work processes have to be reshaped to achieve this?', 'how can this be done as simple as possible, with little interruption?', 'can it be achieved without pressurizing set members, sponsors, clients, top managers, etc.?', 'in what way will organizational members learn, both inside the action learning set and outside?', 'is action learning really the most preferable method in this context?'. If organizational growth is what an organization wants to achieve, either implicitly or explicitly, a sequence of action learning programs may be devised according to 'lean' principles that can help an organization 'learn to learn'.

Let an example illustrate the previous argument. Suppose there is an organization that wants to strengthen its development by increasing its learning potential. The layout presented in this section indicates that lean thinking may be used as a 'portal' for action learning to be introduced in the organization. Furthermore, if script development can be cued, which means that more than one action learning program has to be conducted, therein lies the basis for (certain) action learning principles and outcomes to become entrenched in the organization's institutional realm, thereby stimulating organizational learning. This can subsequently path the way for work processes that are directed towards presencing, which may bring about a competitive advantage. Action learning will thus fulfill a wider potential than the one evidenced by Pedler *et al.* (2003) in many a program, which was mainly about the attainment of personal growth.

The above, theoretically informed layout may nevertheless be hard to implement in practice. This is caused by the fact that the previous discussion focused on requisite organizations, as we gave a stylized representation of how organizational development can come about in a 'typical' organization. The relevant question is, if we want to move to extant organizations, how far the layout can be transferred to real-life organizations. This means that we have to look at concrete action learning applications.

3. Organizational development and action learning practice

In the preceding section we introduced concepts like scripts, lean thinking and presencing. An important question is what these concepts look like in the context of a(n) (series of) action learning program(s), as we wish to describe how action learning can play a structural role in achieving organizational development. We will therefore analyze all the aforementioned concepts, examining how far they were relevant in a number of action learning programs in which one of us was the set advisor.

3.1 Scripts: the planning and control cycle at Liftservice Nederland

Liftservice Nederland, a company located in the middle of the Netherlands, maintains and installs elevators in residential buildings. In the planning and control cycle of the company, action learning principles play an important role. Among others, planning and control are seen as learning paths, for

[9] In addition, it should be noted that lean thinking does not have to imply that a work force is as small as possible. For example, many luxurious hotels have redundant staff walking around, which adds to the sense of grandeur surrounding the hotel. This is something that the hotel guests, being customers, like to see. Lean thinking would in such a case prescribe redundant staff to be present.

the way they are shaped may change organically over time. The application of action learning in the planning phase of the planning and control cycle leads to a special form of strategy development, while through active knowledge management it is assured that all employees get to know what has been learned by others, which is a part of the control phase of the cycle.

The company director designed the planning and control cycle himself. His commitment ensured that action learning became an integral part of the organization's institutional realm. Managers (and subordinates) have experienced that the way of conduct proposed by the director is an essential prerequisite in keeping the company on track. This strengthens the view that top management participation is crucial to the success of an action learning initiative (Donnenberg 2003b, Rijnsburger 2003, Rol 2003).

Liftservice regularly organizes customer conferences in which representatives from housing corporations, architects, engineering consultants, construction companies and suppliers participate. At these conferences, a systematic exchange of experiences and (new) ideas takes place. Thus, Liftservice's managers may note what matters to their stakeholders, which can affect the company's strategy. This actually is the starting point of lean thinking.

Managers are periodically assigned a budget to carry out their tasks according to company plans, which are partially based on the results of the customer conferences. As soon as they see that a task, target or project contained in the plan does not properly satisfy what is needed or desired, they are entitled to apply for a so-called 'initiative'. This is a formal expression that implies that one seeks to find a better solution for a task or project using action learning principles. Managers, who are budget owners, can start a project and join other project leaders for a series of set meetings, in which they can ask for an expert-coach to work on a solution to change the task(s) under consideration. No more than four such projects may run simultaneously, so that regular work processes are not disrupted. The company director is the sponsor of the project leaders. They can ask -within prearranged limits- other people from both in- and outside of Liftservice to contribute to the set proceedings, for example in terms of feedback and know-how. What is learned by those involved in the 'initiatives' is regularly shared with other organizational members, and is thus absorbed in new routines, which replace previously developed rules in the organization. This is a prime example of script formation. By integrating 'initiatives', project leaders, sets of project leaders, and the facilitation of these sets into the planning and control cycle, Liftservice has created an environment in which script development is cued and organizational development can foster.

3.2 Lean thinking and continuous improvement: a hospital laboratory in the northeastern part of the Netherlands

The merger of two Dutch hospitals triggered a variety of initiatives to enhance the efficiency of the work processes in the resulting, joint medical laboratory. Plans for the construction of a new laboratory increased the number of initiatives. Since one of the managers (a lab professional) had already had previous experiences with lean thinking (as he had attended a workshop in which the approach was illustrated in a business game), the laboratory decided to give it a try. As an example to see what may be improved when lean principles are followed, and what the improvements would look like, the steps and work processes involved in a frequently executed blood test were analyzed. One of the lean consultants helped the laboratory's middle management, together with the lab assistants who participated in the test, to map the current state of how the blood test was run and how the test results were delivered to the doctor(s) who had asked for the test to be conducted. The mapping of the corresponding work processes, which had hitherto been given no consideration by laboratory personnel, was realized through action learning principles. The laboratory managers acted as sponsors of this action learning exercise, for which lean thinking functioned as a 'portal'.

At first, the sponsors tended to dictate the solutions chosen to structure the future state of the work process, as they tried to impose their own solutions on the medical personnel. However, they soon learned that they were losing the latter's commitment and support. They also became aware of the fact that they had had an inclination to proceed too quickly, without reviewing and reflecting on the steps they had undertaken or were about to undertake with other stakeholders, most particularly their co-workers and clients. Therefore, they started to embrace lean thinking, the more since it appealed to their scientific mindset - for there are clear links between lean and the scientific method (Spear and Bowen 1999). The resulting solution helped to reduce the number of steps in the analysis and reporting stages of the blood test, and cut out the batching, queuing and overproduction of test results, thereby

saving a lot of physical space in the lab. Almost all middle managers and lab assistants embodied the solution, and they now regard lean thinking as a fruitful way to reshape more work processes.

3.3 Presencing and business development: a lab assistant finds her personal mission through a project in an Austrian hospital

A hospital in Austria with about 1000 beds had recently overcome a difficult situation, as the previous management had been sacked for corruption. The newly appointed management wanted to improve moral, trust and ambition among all employees. They commissioned a survey on the state of communication and cooperation in the hospital. Among others, it was found that there were numerous initiatives developed by hospital personnel, but these were not picked up or flatly rejected by the hospital's middle management. Thus it was decided to run a management development (MD) program in action learning style, in an attempt to stimulate more initiatives and to change middle management attitudes. Although the principles of action learning were rigorously applied in the MD-program, the term 'action learning' was never used, for it might have been regarded as a fad stemming from the new management. Only those were allowed to participate in the MD-program who had taken up a problem that urgently needed to be solved. This was for example assessed by the number of complaints received by patients. Each participant was responsible for his own project and was allotted a certain amount of time to solve it.

One of the participants in (the second run of) the MD-program was a lab assistant from the pathology lab. She had initiated a project to improve the validity and safety of a gynecological test. The outcome of her project led to such an enormous improvement of the test that she was subsequently asked to join the World Health Organization to apply the method she had developed on a larger scale. What had started as a simple observation of her daily work had become a successful formula that was adopted by many pathologists on an international level. This we find a (large-scale) example of presencing.

The lab assistant's example encouraged colleagues to come out with their own ideas for improvement. Her success also changed the mindsets of some of the department heads who had previously opposed the MD-program. A series of very productive projects followed. The MD-program became an annual routine and thus got institutionalized in the hospital. A growing number of department heads learned how to be a commissioner of a project or became personal sponsors of project leaders. The projects brought about a series of changes in organizational structure, procedures and tools, a more efficient distribution of work (in a couple of departments), better planning procedures, more easily readable information for patients, etc. Above all, a new spirit grew among a substantial number of hospital employees - a spirit of pro-activeness in taking innovative initiatives. Again, this is a prime example of presencing.

This particular MD-program was organized for seven years without a break, until there were no candidates left to participate. Thereafter, the hospital management established result centers, which combined the outcomes of the projects and set up new hospital practices. This has caused protoscripts to emerge that had previously not been present (Donnenberg 1999).

3.4 Summary

The previous examples all show that as soon as action learning programs are carried out repeatedly in an organization, either implicitly or explicitly, and in combination with lean thinking, MD-programs or without, its principles and outcomes can become ingrained in an organization's institutional realm. Thus, organizational development is strengthened and (in some cases) presencing realized. Therefore, we feel that the theoretical set-up presented in section 2 definitely has a lot of practical appeal for extant organizations. But what do our results imply for action learning practitioners?

4. Implications for action learning practitioners

4.1 Check your mindset

O'Hara *et al.* (1997), analyzing for whom action learning may work, state that:

> Action learning is appropriate for people and organizations where change is sought. Action learning seems most appropriate in circumstances and contexts of unclear futures and choices of action. Where the path ahead is preordained or obvious or clear, there is little room in the

process for action learning. Where times or individuals are undergoing change and uncertainty then action learning can be a powerful tool. (p. 95)

But how is action learning to be applied in such settings? Donnenberg (2003b) states that in order for action learning programs to become a success, one should carefully map the extant organization with which one gets in touch. Learning with a customer instead of merely applying some form of action learning with which one has grown comfortable through previous experiences may lead to a series of programs of which the underlying principles may be entrenched in an organization's institutional realm. This means, firstly, that action learning practitioners should check their mindset, as this can tell how one is inclined to set up an action learning program. Given customer demands, one's mindset may have to be changed. We question however, following O'Neil (1996), if practitioners often perform such a check. Nevertheless, if one does, the classification of mindsets adopted by De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003) may be useful. De Caluwé and Vermaak believe that those involved in organizational development think that it can come about through one of the following approaches:

- Blue print: rationally analyze and reconstruct organizational structures;
- Red print: promote people because they rule on organization;
- Yellow print: endorse political campaigns to shift power structures;
- Green print: facilitate 'learning to learn' so that breakthroughs may be achieved;
- White print: emphasize or reduce processes of change that happen anyway.

We allege that action learning programs are nowadays mostly set up according to the red print mindset. If so, it is no surprise that Pedler *et al.* (2003) found that that personal development is at the heart of many a program, as this mindset primarily focuses on human resource development. Personally we feel that, certainly in the global economy we are facing today, action learning programs should be shaped on the basis of the green print mindset – which is actually what Revans (1971) has described in his systems approach of system alpha, beta and gamma.

4.2 Work on script development

Given that according to us, 'learning to learn' is to be facilitated in an organization, practitioners should work on script development. After all, we have argued that if the prevailing protoscripts in an organization can be isolated, one can judge if and how action learning may be applied successfully in an organization (if organizational development is to be realized). Admittedly, it is difficult to pinpoint the protoscripts ruling an organization, although it is argued in the literature that research techniques such as participant observation and direct questioning (via individual or group interviews) may prove fruitful (Burns and Scapens 2000, Gioia and Poole 1984).

What does an action learning protoscript look like? It is our contention that the outcome of an action learning program can never be contained in a protoscript of the method in any way, for otherwise a program that does not achieve the desired results would simply not be called action learning. Programs would thus always be successful, which is hard to imagine when reading for example Bourner and Weinstein (1996) or Harrison (1996). Nevertheless, if one wants to get action learning principles or outcomes institutionalized in a firm, we deem it necessary that the following requirements are met, which jointly determine an action learning protoscript[10]:

- Problem sharing in a group of 5-8 people;
- Learning with other stakeholders involved in a problem;
- Active, controlled experimentation over a longer period of time (mostly a couple of weeks);
- Critical evaluation of, and reflection on, the progress made and the results achieved (both individually and by the group as a whole). This is done through 'fresh' questioning and personal feedback;
- Set members and an organization's top management allow their mindsets to change (if necessary to solve a problem);
- Acceptance of views that are contrary to one's current beliefs and habits;
- Attempts to bring about change in an organization (which can succeed or fail[11]);
- Anticipation and orientation towards future (business) opportunities, most notably through reflective and generative dialogue.

Several conditions have to be fulfilled for this protoscript to be put to work. These are about:

[10] Although we do not wish to disqualify the definitions of action learning others, im- or explicitly, use.
[11] As argued above, success or failure itself cannot be contained in the protoscript.

- The type of problem under consideration. Apart from being real-life, complex and urgently calling for a solution (O'Hara *et al.* 1997), problems also have to have a clear strategic dimension (Donnenberg 2003b, De Loo 2003, Rijnsburger 2003, Rol 2003). Note that the problems themselves do not necessarily have to be strategic in nature[12]. However, they must be in line with organizational goals for their solution may otherwise not be regarded to be crucially important for an organization's development;
- The functioning of the action learning set. In some sets, there appears to be a tendency to conform to group norms instead of ventilating critical views when the group, seemingly, has reached a consensus (Donnenberg 2003b). This is an occurrence known as 'groupthink' (Janis 1972), which can seriously damage the outcome of an action learning program (De Loo and Verstegen 2001). By a careful selection of set members on the basis of their inclination to take risks, groupthink may be redeemed (Siegel and Ramanauskas-Marconi 1989). Herein lies an important role for the set advisor – a role which has as of yet not often been acknowledged in the action learning literature (Bourner and Weinstein 1996, Donnenberg 2003a, Donnenberg and Lazeron 1999);
- Active participation of an organization's top management in an action learning program (to stimulate institutional change and highlight that the problems under consideration are deemed relevant and their solution is eminent);
- The presence of identifiable clients and sponsors (to embed the program further in an organization and to ensure that the selected problems are taken seriously by those concerned);
- A manageable and controllable period of time within which an action learning program is to be carried out (so that balance is achieved between a set member's regular workload and the activities required in the set). From experience, Donnenberg (2003b) finds a period between six and nine months reasonable. This view is reinforced in several action learning studies (Weinstein 1999).

A setting in which all the aforementioned requirements and conditions are met may be considered 'optimal'. In such a case, a natural search for future business opportunities ('looking forward', 'learning from the future') and a continuous flow improvement may well be realized – perhaps even without an organization realizing that business is conducted following action learning principles (Donnenberg 2003b).

4.3 Discover the 'best' portal

In addition, one should find out which 'portal' (if necessary) suits organizational development best. Action learning may sometimes be seen as a management fad, which will create barriers for a successful implementation of an action learning program. In such cases, it is advisable not to use action learning explicitly, but to introduce it via a more easily acceptable 'portal'. Donnenberg (2003b) clearly prefers lean as a 'portal', but this preference may differ given customer needs and personal mindsets. For example, Rijnsburger (2003) conceptualizes personal dilemmas of managers to attain, through various steps, personal change. This may at some point lead to organizational change as well. Of course, other choices are possible, as the set of 'portals' that may be used for action learning is not limited.

4.4 Use constellation work

Finally, in order to visualize how organizational development comes about, one may resort to constellation work[13]. Through this holistic approach, which originates from the analysis of the functioning of families in psychiatry, it is possible to create images of the system dynamics of an extant organization. By studying these images, which can be both diagnostic and solution-based in nature, one may determine if and how far organizational development is to be strengthened, and how (proto)scripts play a role herein. Thereafter, given organizational and practitioners' mindsets, it can be decided if action learning may be a fruitful approach and if so, if it can be used with or without a 'portal'.

[12] For example, examining how an order tracking system must operate is in principle not a strategic problem, but the examination may be motivated by an organization's strategic goals nevertheless (as the tracking system may be crucial to achieve or maintain a competitive advantage).

[13] Refer to http://www.donnenberg.nl/files/content.asp?catid=7 for details. Information on constellation work in family therapy can be found at http://www.systemicfamilysolutions.com/articles_historical.html.

5. Conclusions

Conger and Toegel (2003) present a critical analysis of action learning in the context of leadership development and state, among others, that a fatal design flaw in action learning is that it is built around singular learning experiences (which, according to the authors, by themselves are not sufficient to get to terms with complex subject matters such as leading change and formulating a strategic vision) and that it is characterized by a relatively poor follow-up on project outcomes. As far as the latter aspect is concerned, they say:

> … often when action-learning projects end, they quite *literally* end. There is an assumption that sufficient learning has taken place during the programme itself and that it will be self-sustaining. Nothing could be further from the truth. Like any form of training, action-learning programmes need mechanisms to ensure the transfer of learning back to the workplace. (p. 338)

We firmly believe that studying action learning scripts offers valuable insights into the "mechanisms to ensure the transfer of learning back into the workplace". When these are known, and their relevance is assessed via for example constellation work, it may be possible to devise action learning programs that do strengthen leadership development, and that lead to organizational development from the outset – certainly when practitioners' mindsets are targeted towards 'learning to learn'. Lean thinking may be useful as a 'portal' in developing such programs.

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