The Importance of Sharing: An investigation into the efficacy of Action Learning Sets as a framework for leadership development

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Executive Summary

A group of 47 middle and senior managers, based in a large college of further education, engaged in non-facilitated Action Learning Sets to explore leadership and management challenges pertinent to their situation and to derive solutions and strategies drawing on the experience and expertise of their colleagues within the learning set.

The results suggest that Action Learning Sets are a useful tool in promoting reflective leadership in practice. Colleagues reported an increased sense of shared challenges, mutual support and a heightened understanding of a whole college picture. The approach led to improved relationships between multi-functional managers and in exposing a sense of isolation felt by some managers, also served to ease people out of their self-imposed silos.

Salient features of effective sets were the diversity of membership and the degree to which participants were familiar with Action Learning Set approaches. The outcomes suggest that the absence of facilitation was not a barrier for sets within which there was a core understanding of the purpose of Action Learning and its potential for collaborative problem solving. However, where this level of understanding was not present, the efficacy of the approach was slower to unfold.

Introduction

This project established non-facilitated Action Learning Sets within the middle and senior management team of a further education college. The purpose of the sets was to provide a formal setting for leaders and managers to work together on their chosen topics, listening and supporting their colleagues, and helping them to decide on courses of action. The groups comprised peers/colleagues, who determined their own agenda to share experiences and expertise to engage in collaborative problem solving. Through a process of reflecting on, and making sense of, past events and behaviours members of the sets have been able to identify action that can be taken, or new ways of behaving, at future events/activities.

This project aimed to address several of the LSIS research themes with a particular focus on the theme of “Leadership and Learning – the development of human resources”. Key questions underlying the project are:

- How do middle-ranking educational managers experience and enact leadership?
- How can their role be enhanced with benefits for curriculum development and delivery?

The project specifically explored the extent to which an Action Learning methodology can promote empowerment in education leadership.
The College is a large general FE college located in the South East of England. It employs 1400 staff and has an annual turnover of £40m. The College’s management structure comprises an Executive Team as shown in figure 1 below:

**Figure 1**

The Executive Team is supported by eight directors and senior managers, who in turn are supported by 34 middle managers. The project includes this entire group of 47 colleagues. Managers are a mix of specialist functional leads, for example Finance or Human Resources, or curriculum delivery managers. The College’s provision covers all Subject Sector Areas, from level one to Higher Education and includes community and offender learning work, so the range of disciplines is broad.

The College reviewed its mission, vision and values during 2008/09 and launched a new strategic framework in September 2009 (Attached at Appendix 1). As part of the process of engaging staff in a process of review and reflection in respect of the new framework, colleagues have been challenged to think about how the values translate into actions and behaviours relevant to their roles. A recommendation from the Professional Development Unit was that the College’s concept of leadership development should be expanded to recognise the rich opportunities that peer support and collaborative working can bring. It was felt that an Action Learning
approach would be congruent with the values espoused in the College’s new Strategic Framework, and would formally recognise the talents and abilities of the wider management team. This project reviews the effectiveness of Action Learning Sets within this management structure.

Action Learning is an approach to shared learning and development underpinned by the core principles of action and reflection. Action Learning Sets were established through the formal management team structure, with time and space for engaging as a set built in to the existing meeting structure. Sets were randomly selected and set their own agenda. Senior managers did not join the sets as College values include trust, respect and accountability: middle managers (including both delivery and support managers) were trusted to manage their own learning through this process and respected for the expertise they bring to the Sets. Senior Managers were active participants in their own Action Learning Set.

In carrying out this project it was anticipated that a structured review through the discipline of a research report would ensure that learning points were captured and used to inform future investment in leadership development. In addition it was anticipated that the results of the review would indicate the specific factors which contribute to the effectiveness of Action Learning Sets and those which inhibit their efficacy.

**Research Framework**

Action Learning is ubiquitous in education research. Developed in the 1940s through the work of Reginald Revans, in which managers within the Coal Board were encouraged to come together to share experiences and question each other. It was suggested that there was a significant increase in productivity as a result of these interventions. Revans (1978), along with many others who have used, researched and taught this approach, argued that Action Learning is ideal for finding solutions to problems that do not have a ‘right’ answer because the necessary questioning insight can be facilitated by people learning with and from each other in Action Learning Sets.

The Action Learning methodology aims to help colleagues to take an active stance towards life and work and to take responsibility for their own learning (McGill and Brockbank 2004). Pedler (1996) describes Action Learning thus: ‘working in small groups, people … tackle important organisation issues or problems and learn from [their] attempt to change things.’ It is a technique that promotes self reflection on actions taken and that challenges members to both reflect on their own actions and to enable other members to reflect on theirs.

Establishing Action Learning Sets within the College’s wider management team will provide the opportunity for managers who do not usually work together to come together to share problems or issues and to work together to find solutions, which can themselves be evaluated.

O’Neil and Dilworth (1999) pose six questions for those organising Action Learning Sets to consider:
Should the problems worked on be ones that are of a familiar or of an unfamiliar nature?
Should the initiative take place within an unfamiliar or familiar setting?
Should the problems be group or individual projects?
How will participants be chosen?
How much time will the participants and the organisation be willing to invest in the initiative?
Will the content be provided and if so what and how?

In formulating this project a steering group was established to propose a model for implementing the Action Learning Sets and in doing so they considered each of these questions. Revans states:

‘In Action Learning, you deal with real problems, not problems that have been prefabricated for instructional purposes. The best way to promote fresh questions and new thinking is by causing the problem, setting, and colleagues to be unfamiliar.’

(Revans, 1980)

And given that much literature supports this view that the unfamiliarity of the problem and the setting is important, the steering group proposed that the learning set should comprise a mixed group of managers who do not usually work together. They also proposed that convening the sets to take place within the formal management team meeting agenda would quantify the minimum amount of time to be invested in the initiative.

One of the aims of creating Action Learning Sets was to empower leaders and managers to recognise their own problems and to collectively propose solutions based on their own, individual experiences of other problems in other contexts. The steering group, therefore, proposed that the Action Learning Sets themselves should choose whether or not the set considered group or individual problems and that no agenda, or content, would be provided — on its formation the set would be able to determine its own agenda.

There is some debate as to whether or not sets are more effective when facilitated. Weinstein (1999) considered that is important for a new set to have a facilitator to ensure both action and learning. Holmes (2008) suggests that a highly skilled facilitator can enable an Action Learning Set to understand the principles and process of Action Learning by doing from the start; develop the groups’ skills of questioning and reflection; handle feelings of discomfort that often accompany learning about self and; create a positive learning environment. In contrast, whilst Revans (1978) suggested that a facilitator can be valuable at the start of the Action Learning process he argued that facilitation can lead to a form of hierarchy in which group members look to the facilitator for leadership, which limits the learning of set members. Dilworth, (1998) cautions that when dealing with mature learners, the role becomes more problematic after the initial stage. He comments that the facilitator is
not a member of the set, and the mere presence of a facilitator can influence (even damper) what occurs. The presence of a facilitator he suggests, even when they remain silent for the most part, can influence interaction within the set.

The size of the group may also have an impact on efficacy. Rickards (2008) commented that Action Learning practitioners seem to have settled for a standard size of learning set and that this should be challenged. He argues that ‘The mystical significance of the number six may be minimizing experience with other sizes of set’. He describes how quality circles typically comprise six members; that Belbin favours a group size of 6 and that researchers such as Alex Osborn argue that brainstorming productivity reduces with groups larger than six.

The Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme (http://www.learningplace.com.au/deliver/content.asp?pid=21059) advises that group size varies but smaller than 4 does not seem to provide a rich enough discussion and more than 4 complicates the alignment of diaries for meetings as well as making set meetings a long affair.

In this study non-facilitated groups of randomly selected managers, up to a maximum group size of six, engaged in unstructured Action Learning Sets. Each group set its own agenda, in the context of leadership and management challenges. In adopting an unstructured approach it is hoped to identify the characteristics of effective Action Learning Sets in respect of leadership development within the Further Education context.

Research Methods

Research questions can be conceptualised as falling into one of two approaches. One in which the focus is on idiosyncratic issues particular to the person or organisation under investigation and a second which focuses on broadly generalisable features meaningful to individuals across a range of settings. Morey and Luthens (1984) referred to this distinction as emic and etic. Etic approaches seek to investigate general constructs, often derived from theory, that are related to commonly understood organisational practices. Such an approach would not attempt to get at individual perceptions or feelings but would seek to generate or assess standardised categories. Methodologies typical of this approach would include quantitative assessment; an analysis of structured questionnaires for example. Emic approaches in contrast, seek to uncover an individual’s schema or mental model uninfluenced by the researcher’s pre-conceptions. Typically qualitative, ethnographic
approaches are used, perhaps focusing on a single organisation or an in-depth study of a few persons.

This study focuses on a few people within a single organisation and thus a qualitative approach is appropriate. Adopting a qualitative approach has many implications and one of these is the issue of limited generalisability.

Guba and Lincoln (1982) suggest that traditional conceptions of transferability should not restrict the utility of research. They argue that the concept of ‘fittingness’ should replace that of generalisability, where the degree to which the situation studied matches other situations is analysed. Beck (2003) developed this idea and proposed that credibility, auditability and fittingness are three main standards that are common to qualitative methodologies. Credibility is also described as trustworthiness and is said to be evidenced by an informed reader or a participant of the research recognising the researcher’s descriptions as his or her own. Auditability is the extent to which another researcher would be able to replicate the research and draw the same conclusions. This can be enhanced through creating an explicit audit trail that runs through each stage of the data collection and analysis. Fittingness refers to the transferability of the research findings and evaluates the extent to which the findings have meanings to other people in other contexts and situations. It is necessary therefore to be explicit in describing the sample and the setting to enable the reader to visualise the context and assess the extent to which it has relevance to a different context.

The interview as a technique for collecting qualitative data is widely used in education research. For example, Slocombe (1994) interviewed a range of interested parties when exploring redundancy at small schools. They included head teachers, deputy head teachers, governors and area office staff. One of the advantages of interviewing face to face is that the researcher can explore answers and probe for information and therefore flexibility is maintained. Research interviews can elicit the participants own definition of the situation of subject being explored, expose their private words and enable the researcher to understand how they structure and organise their experience.

One criticism of data collected through qualitative interview is the subjectivity it seeks to explore. Burns, Williams and Maxham (2000) investigated the potential for narrative bias within data collected using qualitative interviews to elicit critical incident data. They hypothesised that when self-disclosure is used:

1. That female informants will disclose more about themselves than male;
2. That informants will disclose more information to a person who is similar to themselves;
3. That informants will disclose more information to a person of the same sex;
4. That informants will disclose more about a high involvement topic than a low involvement topic.

The results of the study support three of the four hypotheses. Significant differences were found in the amount of data provided in all cases except that of disclosure to same or different sex. The study recommends specific actions for researchers to reduce the effects of these subtle biases.
1. To ensure a balance of male and female informants as a disproportionate number of males may decrease the richness of the text;
2. To maximise similarity with the informants;
3. To ensure the topic under investigation is one with which the informant has high involvement.

The critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) has been used to investigate a range of contexts since it came to prominence within the Aviation Psychological Programme carried out by United States Air Forces during World War II. Early applications of the technique explored effective leadership by asking respondents to describe an actual event that they perceived of as an example of strong/weak leadership and to identify behaviours that had helped or hindered the event. Analysing the data generated enabled researchers to identify the salient behaviours that contributed to effective leadership.

Cockburn (1984) considered the degree to which rhetoric obfuscates the researcher's ability to access accurate information, particularly when those being interviewed have a formal responsibility to protect the organisation or perceive that they have a responsibility to ensure that the organisation is shown in a favourable light. The danger of rhetoric is that it does not tell the researcher what is going on in the context being explored, but illuminates more about what or who the respondent thinks the researcher is and the message he or she thinks it is appropriate to convey to you. One method suggested to get past the rhetoric is to explore concrete cases and to encourage respondents to be as specific, concrete and graphic as possible, Cockburn (1984). Thus the use of the Critical Incident Technique should minimise the opportunity for rhetoric to blur individual perceptions.

From these research paradigms the implementation of the Action Learning Sets was undertaken as follows:

The project was introduced to the wider management team at its meeting on 22nd October 2009. The first activity, which was for all managers, including senior managers, on their own, to record on post it notes the leadership challenges they were facing over the coming 12 – 18 months. Individuals then put their post-its on the walls and collectively the group organised them into themes that were meaningful to them. This session was designed to create a mental set focussing on management challenges and to encourage participants to think about their own perspectives. In developing emerging themes, as a collective, it was felt that this was congruent with a message of autonomy and empowerment. The issues raised by the group of managers themselves were the important issues rather than any predetermined themes. It was also a safe, interactive activity which triggered discussion between informal, naturally occurring groups as individuals moved around the room reflecting on themes and creating groups.

The concept of Action Learning Sets was then introduced to the whole group. It was a methodology familiar to many of the participants, particularly those from a teaching or academic background. The project team had decided that for this project, groups would be drawn randomly with the only 'rule' being that no-one should be in a group with their line manager. Names were drawn from a hat (envelope) and the maximum
group size was set as six. This resulted in the formation of seven groups of between four and six members.

The groups were then given one hour to take any of the issues, or any other issue that was of relevance to them, and to agree together how they would take their issue and way of working forward. This phase was deliberately very loosely structured.

At the end of the hour all groups were actively engaged in discussion and whilst the meeting was formally closed, three of the groups stayed on. The next formal opportunity for the Action Learning Sets to reconvene was the January Management team meeting, but groups were encouraged to arrange to meet either actually or virtually between the formal opportunities afforded by management team meetings.

Initial feedback was sought from members of three groups.

The sets reconvened at the January meeting. At that time the College was going through a re-structure, with which many of the participants were directly involved. Those colleagues who had not been present at the October meeting were able to join any group with a membership fewer than six, again with the rule that no-one should be in the same group as their line manager.

Following this meeting the researcher emailed all participants to ask for volunteers to take part in a formal review of the process so far as part of the LSIS research project. Fourteen participants took part in face to face interviews and one colleague responded to the questions in writing. The transcripts from the fifteen respondents and the comments collated as initial feedback following the first meeting were analysed. The transcripts were read by the researcher a number of times before the analysis proper began. The nature of the analysis was exploratory rather than confirmatory and as such the process of reflection and iteration was important in allowing themes to emerge from the data.

There are four formal management team meetings each academic year and for the purposes of this research project, the first formal review was scheduled to take place after the second meeting. This provided a mid point evaluation to inform the on-going development of the initiative.

All participants were invited to take part in a confidential, semi-structured interview to share their experiences of the Action Learning Set process. The schedule of questions that formed the basis of the interviews is outlined in appendix 2. Interviews were recorded in writing contemporaneously by the researcher and transcribed subsequently for analysis.

Analysis was carried out using a grounded theorising approach in which themes emerged.

**Research Findings**

The leadership challenges identified by managers at the first management team meeting and their subsequent groupings are shown at Appendix 3. They were
organised, by the managers, into seven broad areas: managing change; managing within financial constraints; student success; team motivation and morale; managing self; keeping up to date; and partnership working. There were a handful of issues which were area specific.

Starting the interviews with two questions about the themes generated in the post-it note and subsequent grouping activity (part 1 of the interview - see Appendix 2) was useful in getting respondents to recreate their mental sets. One person commented that the issues generating stage had been a useful activity as on a day to basis managers have to deal with many events and crises and don’t often really think about what their core challenge is. Another commented that looking at the themes of everyone’s post-its was helpful because everyone had the same concerns.

The critical incident questions (part 2 of the interview – see Appendix 2) generated 44 incidents of where the process had worked better or less well than the respondent expected.

Analysis of these incidents revealed four components that contributed to the effectiveness of the learning sets: shared values, diverse perspectives, reflection, and shared challenges.

**Shared values**

Learning sets were more effective when members felt that core values were understood and shared by all other members. On respondent commented:

“The most memorable aspect for me was the fear around being put into groups – who will I be in with? The make up of the group is key – it needs trust to be successful – wouldn’t work if there was someone in the group who wasn’t on my wave length or I thought I couldn’t trust.”

(Respondent)

The concept of trust was mentioned in four other examples. Linked to trust was the concept of confidentiality, which a number of respondents mentioned specifically. In one instance a respondent articulated the tensions this had caused:

“There were things I learnt in the group that I could have intervened with in the real world – should I?”

(Respondent)

Other values which featured in respondent’s incidents were respect: both linked to respect for each others’ skills and abilities and also in terms of engaging in a process that demonstrated respect by not ‘talking over’ for example; and professional commitment, to the student and college, and to the process of engaging in the learning sets.
Respondents who were more experienced in the technique of learning sets were clear about what was expected of them and their colleagues. They took the rules of engagement for granted; this was even more evident when colleagues were familiar with each other.

‘We were all passionate, all on task and it was really useful.’

(Respondent)

A shared set of core values was important in creating a trusting environment within which confidential professional issues could be openly discussed and collective solutions explored.

**Diverse perspectives**

The membership of the group was an important factor in determining the likelihood of a successful learning set. A participant from a group which comprised a balance of curriculum and support managers with a range of experience and length of service at the College, reported that they found the time in discussions to be well spent and that they could see the benefit of combining experiences.

‘Different specialisms gave a different perspective and opened my mind a bit to the impact of my work on other people’s work.’

(Respondent)

Curriculum managers from mixed groups commented that they had a better appreciation of the generic management experiences support managers bring and support managers reported that they had gained a sense of the complexity of the management roll that curriculum managers face. One respondent acknowledged that:

‘It was helpful to work with people you would not choose to work with and you develop different skills and strategies working with people with different styles.’

(Respondent)
The diversity of the membership of the group was the most commonly reported feature. It was identified as an example of something that worked better than expected when the range of colleagues in a learning set was diverse, and as an aspect that was below expectation when the range of colleagues was limited.

‘...my group was me and two new managers. It was a nice opportunity to meet two new managers but we really just had a chat...’

(Respondent)

Whilst it was clear that mixed groups in terms of management roles were more effective than sets within which there was little variation, this did not extend to increasing the diversity through including line-managers. One group included two participants who were line managers of the rest of the group. This was out of kilter with the project approach, but in the spirit of groups determining their own way of working it was agreed to work in this way.

Whilst one line manager within the group reported that they had found it useful to receive feedback as they did not routinely explore such issues with team members, and that they reported that action has been taken as a consequence of the discussions, it was clear that the inclusion of line managers had a disempowering effect in terms of agreeing action. Whilst participants reported that it was useful to have a forum in which to raise issues and concerns, the reportees looked to their line managers for solutions.

Whilst most respondents suggested that they would not have minded having their line managers in the same group they could see that for some colleagues it enabled them to talk openly about what they were doing and to speak for themselves.

‘Having no line manager was good, people were open, we didn't have to worry about not being seen to be positive about everything – it was alright to have a bit of a moan and then move on.’

(Respondent)

This view was endorsed by one participant who disclosed:

‘...it was good not to have the line manager there – feels confidential, which was good.’

(Respondent)

Participants valued the opportunity to share practice and experience with colleagues. One commented that they hadn’t expected that the ideas of others would make them
think so much about their own behaviour and actions ‘it made me think: Am I right? Should I do what X does?’

A critical factor in the success of the sets was that there was a balance of delivery (curriculum) and support managers. They were able to share incidents and to draw out similarities and differences between different colleagues’ experiences. This helped participants make sense of their own perspectives and challenged them to think differently.

An added benefit reported by a number of respondents was that engaging in the learning sets had improved their relationships with other managers. One respondent reported:

'It has improved my relationships with other managers. Barriers have been broken down, we are more open and there are lines of communication.'

(Respondent)

Reflection

Respondents were positive about giving time to discuss leadership challenges. A number commented that unless something formal was created, such as this activity in a formal Management Team meeting, then people wouldn’t get to it in their normal working days. One group tried to meet between management teams, but diary clashes meant that it just didn’t happen. It was recognised that by having a separate item on the agenda, legitimacy was given to the act of peers listening to each other and thinking about issues:

‘Very refreshing to take time out and it’s good to give this approach legitimacy – it’s OK to invest in thinking time – this is really positive.’

(Respondent)

Respondents were able to reflect on the impact of engaging in the learning sets. One commented that it had got them thinking about strategies for working with their team. Another likened it to undertaking teaching and learning observations:

‘I am more aware about how other people handle situations, it’s turned theory into practice – I think, I could try that style, like observing a lesson, you always come away with new approaches.’

(Respondent)

Participants valued the time and enjoyed the process of reflecting on their and others’ experiences, at least in the cases of the effective learning sets. For others there was a sense of frustration:
Those who were more familiar with the approach were more comfortable with investing time in reflecting and thinking. Where this was embraced, learning sets were more effective. Overall, participants felt that it was good to give time formally to exchange views and to work with people they didn’t normally work with.

**Shared challenges**

Sharing and shared experiences were commonly reported items. In all instances it was seen as a positive outcome of engagement with learning sets. One respondent discussed how, in discussing challenges faced by the members of their learning set in the context of the College’s restructuring programme, a sense of **shared challenge** emerged as colleagues recognised that they were all in it together and that through sharing their anxieties and their coping strategies they developed a sense of moving forward as a group. In terms of this individual’s leadership development, they commented:

‘*It reinforced the importance of being strong as leaders and the impact we have on those affected by the restructure if we aren’t.*’  
(Respondent)

The benefits of the diverse experience and roles of group members was only realised if group members were willing to share issues, approaches and experiences. It was clear that some participants found this empowering:

‘*Members shared issues, but there were different approaches. I know this is MY problem but this has shown me the importance of sharing.*’  
(Respondent)

Respondents talked about looking for ways in which they could share, support and interact with management colleagues more routinely. Two respondents commented that they now felt differently about sharing their work room with fellow managers rather than their team. They recognised that sharing with peers brought synergies and opportunities to share good practice and also provided support and allowed people to appreciate other perspectives.

In the less effective sets, the sharing became what one respondent described as ‘*unfettered whinging*’ and there was clearly a balance between the opportunity to share concerns and issues and giving the space to move forward with suggested
strategies and solutions. Other respondents commented that having no agenda meant that people were able to have a useful ‘off-load’ of concerns and that it was good just to be able to share.

It was acknowledged in some groups that whilst everyone was happy to talk, some people were more at ease talking than others and in the groups of six; some people were described as having chosen to keep quiet. One respondent suggested that even within an unstructured setting roles developed and was concerned that some people could lose out if roles became stuck or if individuals dominated.

Providing the opportunity to share incidents and for the participants to draw out the similarities in their different challenges was valued. In the more effective groups these discussions led to reflections which empowered managers to try different approaches. One respondent commented that after the second learning set in which one of their challenges had been discussed they left thinking:

‘I can do this and I know where there’s help.’

(Respondent)

One respondent described how engaging in the learning sets had made them realise how isolated they had become. Their role was very different and they had little formal opportunity to engage with colleagues. Through the learning sets they acknowledged that they had developed a wider focus of the whole College and they felt part of a larger, more complex, yet more coherent organisation.

There were conflicting views as to whether or not the unstructured approach assisted or hindered the effectiveness of the learning sets. The dominant factor was the mix of managers within each group. Where participants were familiar with the approach, the lack of formal structure was seen as a particularly positive feature. One respondent commented:

‘Not having an agenda was unusual and positive. …There was no interference, no hidden agenda, no need to get to a conclusion. It was refreshing.’

(Respondent)

In contrast, in a less effective learning set a respondent commented:

‘This is not the way – too purposeless, too loose.’

(Respondent)

Whilst for some individuals and learning sets, particularly those with no experience of an Action Learning Set methodology, the absence of a defined task, or at least an activity that they could perceive as a task, meant that their engagement in the
learning set had little value. On balance, more respondents felt that the fact there was no specific task meant people shared.

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that there are four components which contribute to effective Action Learning Sets: a shared set of core values; the diversity of the group; reflective practice and shared challenges. When these four features are present, an Action Learning Set approach can be effective in empowering leadership and management development.

The initial formation of Action Learning Sets was well received by participants. They valued the opportunity to share with their peers and to take ownership of problem solving.

A shared set of core values was important in creating a trusting environment within which confidential professional issues could be openly discussed and collective solutions explored.

Where there was a balance of delivery (curriculum) and support managers. They were able to share incidents and to draw out similarities and differences between different colleagues’ experiences. This helped participants make sense of their own perspectives and challenged them to think differently. The absence of line managers was important in creating an open atmosphere and in avoiding deferential problem solving. Mixing the membership of groups also increased the opportunity for sharing unfamiliar problems or familiar problems in unfamiliar settings. Finally, those managers who work in isolation benefited from meeting and sharing with a diverse range of managers within a group. The engagement enabled them to see their own role in the context of a wider organisation.

Those who were more familiar with the approach were more comfortable with investing time in reflecting and thinking. Where this was embraced, learning sets were more effective. Overall, participants felt that it was good to give time formally to exchange views and to work with people they didn’t normally work with. Whilst some participants were able to articulate what impact engaging in the Action Learning Sets had on their leadership and management practice, at this stage of the project there has been little focus on recognising learning, which is an essential aspect of the Action Learning methodology. The primary value of Action Learning Sets is the learning that individuals recognise rather than the generation of solutions in their own right and this will be a feature of the next phase of the project. Those participants who took part in the research interviews had a more formal opportunity to reflect on their learning and this added value to their experience.

The deliberate lack of structure or facilitation of the groups seems to have worked more effectively in those groups where participants already have a degree of empowerment and autonomy and less effectively with those managers who tend to rely on more support. Those groups which included participants with some experience of the Action Learning methodology were able to get straight on with the
activity whereas those who were less familiar or not familiar at all were less likely to have had useful interactions in the first meeting.

Group size seemed to be significant. Respondents in groups with six participants reported that some group members were able to take a less active role, or were unable to take a more active role. Groups with fewer than four members were less effective.

The results suggest that Action Learning Sets are a useful tool in promoting reflective leadership in practice. Colleagues reported an increased sense of shared challenges, mutual support and a heightened understanding of a whole college picture. The approach led to improved relationships between multi-functional managers and in exposing a sense of isolation felt by some managers, also served to ease people out of their self-imposed silos.

Salient features of effective sets were the diversity of membership and the degree to which participants were familiar with Action Learning Set approaches. The outcomes suggest that the absence of facilitation was not a barrier for sets within which there was a core understanding of the purpose of Action Learning and its potential for collaborative problem solving. However, where this level of understanding was not present, the efficacy of the approach was slower to unfold.

**Recommendations**

The results have identified some simple areas for improving the Action Learning methodology as implemented in this project.

The level of experience of the methodology influenced the extent to which participants could embrace the activity at an early stage. A more thorough introduction to Action Learning and the concepts of reflective practice may have alleviated this for some participants.

Similarly, the benefit of reflection needs to be better explored and understood by participants in order to gain the maximum learning from the interaction. Each participant needs to understand better their own learning and this needs to be formally recognised. To help this process it would be of value to introduce some theory for the participants and to make some room for this in the programme. The next learning set event will include some input and activity based on the theoretical aspects of reflective and leaderful practice.

The mix of managers within the groups was a significant factor and the random approach used to allocate participants to groups meant that some sets were insufficiently diverse. The efficacy of such sets was exacerbated further if the participants had little experience of the Action Learning methodology. A more planned approach to membership could have improved the diversity within each group and thus created a better chance of a successful series of discussions.

The randomisation of allocating participants to sets also resulted in a range of group sizes. The results of this interim research suggest that groups with over five
members become less effective as it was easier for individual members to take less active roles. Thus set size should be capped at five.

The absence of facilitation was not a barrier for sets within which there was a core understanding of the purpose of Action Learning and its potential for collaborative problem solving. However, where this level of understanding was not present, the efficacy of the approach was slower to unfold.

This issue of differential levels of experience and the impact of how quickly sets were able to move into useful discussions could be addressed through a scaffolded approach to providing the content for each set. Specific topics or problems can be presented to the sets, which they can consider as to whether or not they will focus their questioning and explorations on these, or on issues more salient to them. For the least confident sets, the problems presented could be linked to an associated outcome. This methodology will be trialled at the next learning set event.
References


Holmes, M. 2008. ‘What do facilitators bring to the party? (and do we need them?), Action Learning: Research and Practice, 5:3, 249 – 253


O’Neil, J. and Dilworth, R. I., 1999.'Issues in the design and implementation of an Action Learning initiative’ Advances in Developing Human Resources 1999; 1; 19


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**Articles reviewed**


Appendix 1: Strategic Framework

**Mission**

An outstanding College at the heart of our city: nurturing ambition and delivering success.

**Vision**

Milton Keynes College will be at the heart of a connected and inclusive learning community.

We will drive new models and partnerships to create an education landscape where there are no boundaries to limit access, progress and success.

We will be a catalyst for economic prosperity and wellbeing.

**Values**

- Excellence
- Creative
- Being Bold
- Challenge
- Inspire
- Ownership
- Deliver
- Innovation

- Trust
- Openness
- Integrity
- Respect
- Nurture
- Accessible
- Value Diversity
## Core Strategic Objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Success</th>
<th>Financial Health</th>
<th>Future Fit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outstanding student success</td>
<td>A sound financial platform</td>
<td>Responsive and sustainable business models</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Strategic Focus 2009-2012

- Play a key role in 14-19 reform and Local Authority improvement agenda
- Build higher education sustainability
- Develop new solutions to meet accommodation needs
- Develop new curriculum business models to ensure financial health

### Key Performance Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Success</th>
<th>Financial Health</th>
<th>Future Fit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall student success rate of 85%</td>
<td>Student numbers</td>
<td>Curriculum innovation and planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>Surplus/deficit</td>
<td>Physical resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention</td>
<td>Performance against budget</td>
<td>Student voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>Solvency ratios</td>
<td>Student progression and destination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length and level success rates by age</td>
<td>Financial health assessment of satisfactory</td>
<td>External judgements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value added</td>
<td>Achievement of income by strand</td>
<td>Human Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average points score</td>
<td>Income diversification</td>
<td>3 year financial plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade profile for teaching and learning observations</td>
<td>Achieve very good value for money</td>
<td>Diversity indicators</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diversity indicators</td>
<td>Diversity indicators</td>
<td>Partnership arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership arrangements</td>
<td>Partnership arrangements</td>
<td>Economic benefit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safeguarding</td>
<td></td>
<td>Funding sources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: Interview Questions

The researcher introduced the meeting by reminding participants of the LSIS Research Project, assuring confidentiality of responses and confirming that the participant was happy to continue.

**Part 1:** These questions were aimed to create a mental set – to get the participant thinking about the issues that were in their mind at the time. The researcher had the list of themes identified and the lists of groups and their membership to use as prompts.

1. You were asked to think about your biggest leadership challenges over the forthcoming 12 – 18 months & to record these on post-its, how useful was this task?

2. You then worked collectively to look at themes and to group the post-its. How did you find this activity?

**Part 2:** The Critical Incident Technique was used to encourage respondents to think of concrete examples of effective and less effective practice.

3. Groups were randomised. What was good about this/what was less good about this?

4. Can you tell me one way in which the group worked better that you expected? One way in which they worked less well than you expected?

5. Can you think of an example where the formation of the groups has supported you as a leader or your leadership development?

6. Can you think of a way in which being part of this group has enabled you to support the leadership or leadership development of others?

**Part 3:** This was used to explore general comments about the approach and to elicit ideas for improvement.

7. What do you think about the lack of structure provided for the first meeting?

8. Any suggestions/comments for this approach as one which supports your leadership development.
Appendix 3: Leadership Challenges: take from post-it notes

Managing change
- We are one college and need to all work to support each other to manage initiatives and changes and targets
- Supporting staff to make provision seems seamless despite numerous funding streams
- Project delivery targets need to be met in a quality manner
- Changing my longstanding team processes Multi skilling. Flexible working cover for others
- Developing the skills of our team managers
- Implementing a service culture within the team
- Guiding others through periods of change
- Guiding others through periods of change
- Change in team focus – proactive approach
- Inflexible staff – challenge to making a more effective team
- Changes in curriculum and planning with staff
- Manage change, funding and so on
- Keeping communications going (upwards, downwards and sideways)

Managing within financial constraints
- Continuing the IT modernisation agenda against back drop of finance agenda
- Developing quality in a changing world
- Balancing needs for resources against financial pressures
- Supporting team members adjust to new ways of working
- Driving through changes related to business process Improve/maintain success with diminished resource To manage the delivery of a quality curriculum against the college budgets
- Not being able to meet student’s additional needs fully
- Ensure quality of teaching and learning given financial constraints
- Ensuring best return (student success and financial) from investment
- Doing more with less
- Ensuring we are financially viable
- Setting up community projects team in a sustainable way and maximising short/medium term funding
- Writing bids and contracts
- Containing costs and continuing to improve service
- Strategies to think about p/t funding and full cost recovery
- Sharing more resources to improve success
- Raising standards in spite of increasing pressures
- Being prepared to do things differently and sometimes not as well

Student success
- Achieving success figures and being consistent
- Achieving targets for apprenticeships 16-18 age group
- Continue to drive up success
- Improve retention on 2 year programmes
- Maintaining success
- Improve retention rates
• Improving student retention and success via teams taking more responsibility
• Maintain quality
• Success rates
• Managing priorities
• Having started a number of initiatives, making sure I deliver on the expectations
• Giving same level of support to students with less money and less staff
• Achieving targets
• Key skills Encouraging raising of standard with team within financial constraints

Team motivation and morale
• Finding time for my team Encouraging more innovation
• Keeping staff motivated in a time of great change and uncertainty
• Inspiring and motivating staff during challenging times
• Maintaining staff positivity and not losing good staff during ‘difficult times’
• To support mangers to support teams in environments they may not have experienced in the past
• Team morale
• Staff motivation
• Inspiring others through challenging periods
• Maintain a positive college environment
• Morale
• Ensuring team managers keep the team positive and focussed when they are feeling the pressures of challenges
• Ensuring all staff give 100%
• Ensuring team managers keep the team positive and focussed when they are feeling the pressures of challenges
• Continue to motivate team who have reduced staffing
• Ensuring all staff give 100%
• Maintaining morale
• Maintain morale in challenging climate
• Getting my staff to go the extra mile knowing that if they don’t, we’re …..!
• Motivation and good will
• Taking staff with you – motivated, interested
• Creating a cohesive team of staff
• Push staff to their potential
• Obtaining ‘buy in’ to new business environment
• Creating a whole team (integrating new staff)
• Keep motivation high amongst staff with heavy timetables
• Keep/increase openness and honesty
• Imagining the future and communication this to the others
• Communicating difficult news to individuals/teams
• Positive communications
• Handling staff absence and motivation in shorter term projects
• Staff turnover
• Building team synergies, relations/remove silos

Managing self
• Managing me
• Not trying to be all things to all people
- Integrating myself into the teaching side of the college
- Development of right brain thinking – creativity and ideas
- Staying motivated
- Developing myself to be able to achieve at the highest level

**Keeping up to date**
- Ensuring up to date information is available
- Keeping up with changing rules and regulations
- Keeping up to date with developments, e.g. Safeguarding

**Working in partnership**
- Getting people into work and establishing links with Business Developments Departments’ employers – not overloading employers
- Engaging more employers
- Liaising/working with external agencies
- Making student experience more relevant to workplace
- Competing with different areas, e.g. FE, Apprenticeships, T2G
- Working with curriculum areas under FLT models – staff working across areas with different ideas/cultures/rules
- New partnerships with SERCO, JCP ‘account management skills’

**Area specific**
- Increase number of outstanding observed sessions through staff training/mentoring/support
- Performing Arts
- Maintaining quality of the provision with staff working in different campuses
don a new area
- Project management tools and techniques ie Prince 2/handing data in a quality framework
- T2G compliance and maximum funding
- Reporting across college systems