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Designing and Structuring Action Learning Researcher Networks

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The question driving learning in this paper is how to organise and structure a complex action learning research network of practitioners and researchers in a pan-European network of traditional food producers. The context is an EU's Seventh Framework Programme of a multidisciplinary, multi-sectoral collaborative project supporting a network of traditional food producers in dairy, meat and bakery sub-sectors. The project is aiming to establish a network for the effective transfer of innovative knowledge, processes and technologies with a view to improving traditional food production by providing training to stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship. While much of the literature on action learning focuses on systems developing their capacity to learn and change, this paper explores how the same principles can apply to action learning researchers working collaboratively.

Designing large-scale action learning

Zuber-Skerritt (2003) presented a generic model for the design and implementation of ALAR programmes. Her model outlined eight components of a structured action learning

programme that used collaborative action research as a methodology addressing a major organizational issue, concern or problem. These components were: problem definition and needs analysis, start-up workshop, project work, midway specialist workshop, project work continued, concluding workshop, preparing for presentations and publications, and presentation and celebration. Zuber-Skerritt encouraged others to create and develop their own models, representing their particular theoretical frameworks, concepts and systems of ALAR programmes. Building on an earlier design of a large scale action learning project (Coughlan, & Coughlan, 2004), Coughlan and Coughlan (2006) constructed four stages: project set-up, introduction and readiness assessment, action planning and action learning and evaluation and distillation of learning. The focus of these structures is the design and delivery of the respective project. What is generally not given much attention is the design of the collaborative research networks that create, design, implement and generate knowledge from and through these projects. This paper describes the design and structuring of a large complex action learning research project in the European local food producers sector. The paper is structured as follows:

Context:

The Food and Drink industry (F&D) is Europe's largest manufacturing sector, outranking all other manufacturing industries in the EU in terms of Turnover (€1017 billion), and employment (4.1 4.25 million) (FoodDrink Europe (2013). The sector is highly diversified with 274,000 companies producing a vast range of foods satisfying the wide range of evolving needs of consumers. The sector combines both SMEs and large Companies: 99.1% of companies are SMEs (284,535), 79% of which are Micro-SMEs, generating 49.3% of F&D annual turnover (€4472billion), 48.7% of value added (€ 99 billion) and accounting for 63.4% (2.9 million)of the people employed in the sector. The bakery, meat and dairy sub-

sectors are in the top five sub-sectors, which account for 76% of total turnover in the sector. The bakery and farinaceous products sub-sector ranks first in terms of employment and number of companies while the meat sector accounts for the most turnover (20% of total turnover).

Project Network

The project comprises nine regional networks (called hubs) across eight European countries. . The project's aim is to increase the competitiveness and inter-regional advantage of traditional food producers by means of a pan-European network that will build and encourage collaboration between stakeholders in the traditional food sector: the food producers themselves, food researchers, academic organisations, research institutes, technology providers, national food associations and business and entrepreneurial networks. The assumption is that successful collaboration brings with it the potential for collaborative advantage, the benefits of which cannot be gained from the producers working alone. Examples of these benefits can be: cost reductions, the potential to reach a wider customer base, improved access to resources, and the opportunity to learn from others. Within the project food producers are also being facilitated to input into decision-making at policy level.

Over the past 40 years, a practice-based understanding of networks and networking has emerged (Evans, 1965; Trist, 1983; Ring & Van de Ven, 1992). In the field of operations strategy, defined as reconciling the requirements of the market with the capabilities of operations resources (Slack & Lewis, 2008), there has been a shift from continuous and strategic improvement within the firm, to collaborative improvement and collaborative strategic improvement between firms (Cagliano, Caniato, Corso & Spina, 2002; Coughlan &

Coghlan, 2011). In the context of this article, our particular focus is on relationships among SMEs in European food producers that learning networks may develop and be sustained (Docherty, Huzzard, de Leede & Totterdill, 2003).

In recent years, the notion of organizational learning has been extended to encompass the inter-organizational setting (Larsson, Bengtsson, Henriksson & Sparks, 1998; Lave, Stettner & Tushman, 2010) and learning in and by networks (Knight, 2002; Knight & Pye, 2004). Network learning involves exploration and exploitation of learning both within firms and between them as they participate in network meetings (Holmqvist, 2003; Coghlan and Coghlan, 2011). This dynamics may be framed in terms of *home* and *away* (Docherty Huzzard, de Leede and Totterdill, 2003). What is exploited at home then gets explored away, which then feeds back to what is exploited at home. Action learning research is well positioned to deliver network learning and actionable knowledge (Coghlan & Coghlan, 2011; Coghlan & Coghlan, forthcoming).

The project is divided into a number of work packages, each which of which delivers on a particular process to enable the food producers develop their business and to build the network. These workpackages are structured around delivering training in meeting such challenges as; knowledge transfer, food safety, food labelling, use of IT, supply chain management and distribution. Hub advisors act as action learning advisors by bringing the network together and facilitating the learning from the training in terms of applied action (Pedler & Abbott, 2013). Accordingly, action learning acts both as a coordinating and a learning mechanism:

- As a coordinating mechanism by integrating the action learning approach across the workpackages so that the participating food producers engage in action learning in as

seamless a way as possible across the workpages, rather than them being stand alone activities.

- As a learning mechanism in enabling participating food producers to engage in questioning and reflection in their networks as so develop skills in learning-in-action.

In this way we are ensuring that AL underpins all network activities and therefore that the network operates in a very particular way-which involves a lot more group and individual reflection than would have otherwise happened

The building and maintenance of the network will be supported in its initiation and development through an underpinning philosophy of network action learning realised through specific support actions which will encourage critical reflection on the part of network members, encouraging them to interpret and create new ways of working. Revans' learning equation, $L=P+Q$ pervades the work of the entire project (Revans, 2011). For Revans learning always begin with Q, where questioning engages the action learning and facilitators as to what is occurring throughout the project and extending P so that ultimately, the new P will be practical knowing by (in this case) the traditional food producers and defensibly so. Action learning provides the basis for critical inquiry as it generates insights into how learning is realized across the network. The paper describes and analyses the process by which action learning researchers transcend boundaries - including discipline and institutional boundaries, as well as those between academia and industry - to develop effective action learning networks. This approach has been shown to turn ineffective networks into effective ones by developing a richer collaborative relationship between partners and has been successfully utilised to support pan-European networks (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2011).

Action Learning Research

Action learning has traditionally been directed toward enabling professionals to learn and develop through engaging in reflecting on their experience in the company of peers as they seek to address real-life problems in their own organizational settings. What has received less attention is how action learning may constitute an approach to research. Coughlan (2011; Coughlan & Coughlan, 2011) argues that action learning research may be located in the family of action-oriented approaches to inquiry, such as action research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007) and collaborative management research (Shani, et al, 2008; Hoes et al., 2010) and consequently seeks to both enabling learning to take place in the food producer and researcher networks and the generation of actionable knowledge on building and sustaining such networks.

Action learning operates in the realm of practical knowing, where concern is for the practical and where situations are dynamic and are never identical or replicable. It focuses on what a particular organizational system needs in the present for the future. It works with the language, metaphors and constructions of participating members. Research through action learning may be positioned within contemporary expressions of alternatives to traditional research paradigms, particularly Mode 2 research, which, as articulated by Gibbons and his colleagues (1994), is a network activity different from a model embedded in the expertise of isolated individuals operating from a top-down expert model. Mode 2 research is characterised by: knowledge that is produced in the context of application, transdisciplinarity, heterogeneity and organizational diversity, social accountability and reflexivity. A number of the features attributed to Mode 2 are applied to such established action-oriented approaches as action learning and action research (MacLean, MacIntosh & Grant, 2002). The output for the project at the empirical centre of this paper is an action learning research-based understanding of how each traditional food producer, in its own local and market context,

learns how to improve its collaboration, innovation, entrepreneurship, knowledge and technology transfer and how a sustainable network may be constructed.

Action learning research provides a basis for critical inquiry as it generates insights into tensions, contradictions, emotions and power dynamics in and between organizations (Rigg & Trehan, 2004; Vince 2004; Coughlan & Coughlan, 2011). The actionable knowledge generated needs to meet the criteria of good research, namely is rigorous, reflective and relevant (Pasmore, Woodman & Simmons, 2008). Quality in action learning research requires that the collaborative engagement with real-life issues towards workable outcomes has a reflective character while being rigorously objective with reference to a wide set of criteria about the facts of the problem and its context.

The project is based on and enacts Revans' theory of action, his praxeology of cyclical systems - alpha, beta and gamma. In the project, *System alpha* focuses on the identification and analysis of real organizational problems or opportunities facing the traditional food producers.

- *The external environment.* The traditional food producers are enabled to assess the business environment in which each one competes and to identify challenges from an environment, and the problem or opportunity is embedded in that environment. From the research perspective, this analysis of barriers and opportunities needs to go beyond the descriptive and the theoretical positioning of the problem should entail a critical literature review and analysis.
- *The current organizational performance and its origins.* This analysis looks at the internal situation in the traditional food producers and how they currently

respond to the challenges from the external environment. In addition to description, this investigation should draw again on theoretical frameworks to enable critique of organizational performance. This analysis needs to be seen as an engagement in a process of research into the origins of the problem under consideration including its history, its manifestation, what has prevented the problem from being resolved and what has previously been attempted. It takes that analysis into the present and considers what is happening currently and in prospect.

- *Management values.* Here, the focus is on what the owner-managers of the traditional food producers want to achieve. Further, this analysis considers what ought to be happening and what the managers think ought to be happening and what they might need to do in order to make it happen.

System beta involves the rigorous exploration of the exploitation of opportunities or resolution of problems through cycles of action and reflection in the hub action learning sets. Essentially this involves participants participating in training workshops, engaging in action and reflection from the workshops and by being exposed to the process of the action learning facilitator acting as a critical friend. Building on the initial framing of the project or opportunity in system alpha, a rich description is developed including how the problem was framed initially, what initial actions were planned, how they were implemented, how understanding of the problem evolved and how cycles of action and reflection were undertaken through multiple iterations.

A parallel *system beta* process is the action learning research team's engagement across the hubs and the project board, captured by the two diagrams below. Here the unit of analysis or focus is the project.

Action learning incorporates not just the understanding and solving of the problem but also the development of learning by the participating food producers. The learning is the particular focus of *system gamma*. The interest is in the thought processes of the food producers, in their facilitation by the hub learning advisers and, in particular, how these processes and research-based interactions adapt to and evolve with the actions directed towards building a sustainable network.

Within this conceptualisation of the action learning research method, Revans' concept of the scientific method of action learning finds application.

- Observation/survey involves collecting and classifying what seems to go on in the workshops and action learning meetings. Minutes and reflective notes from these meetings are central.
- Theory/hypothesis generation involves suggesting causal relationships between those happenings. These may be explored through the contact and meetings of the project board and facilitator meetings.
- Test/experiment involves taking action on the basis of those causal relationships.
- Audit/review involves asking if that action has gone as expected. This happens at subsequent contact and meetings the project board and facilitator meetings.

- Review/control involves rejecting, changing or accepting the emergent causal relationships. This happens at subsequent contact and meetings of the project board and facilitator meetings.

The Challenges of Design: Structuring and Intervening

Our role, as leaders of the action learning and action learning research processes is to act as members and learning advisers for project management board, and the hub advisers as well as to contribute on-going support for network development for network sustainability. This involves developing the capacity of the hub action learning advisers to facilitate action learning activities for the food producers through provision of facilitator training and to develop a ‘Tools for Collaboration’ information pack for all project partners. In terms of action learning research we act as organisers and conduits for the capture and dissemination of the learning gained in the action learning sets in the hubs. Due to the complexity of the project this latter task has its challenges: a possible lack of engagement of food producers with the project, possible insufficient regional impact from the hubs, possible lack of clarity on on-going engagement and activities associated with action learning and possible lack of communication and co-ordination between hubs.

Figure 1 outlines the multiple roles of action learning research coordinators. At the regional hub level there is meeting preparation and the availability of tools. We have provided the hub action learning advisers with questions to enable them to engage with the food producers in their sets and tools to act as advisers in their sets. We then expect to receive report of the set meetings and the reflections on how they went and how the producers learned. These reflections in turn will become working papers and eventually research papers.

Hub Level

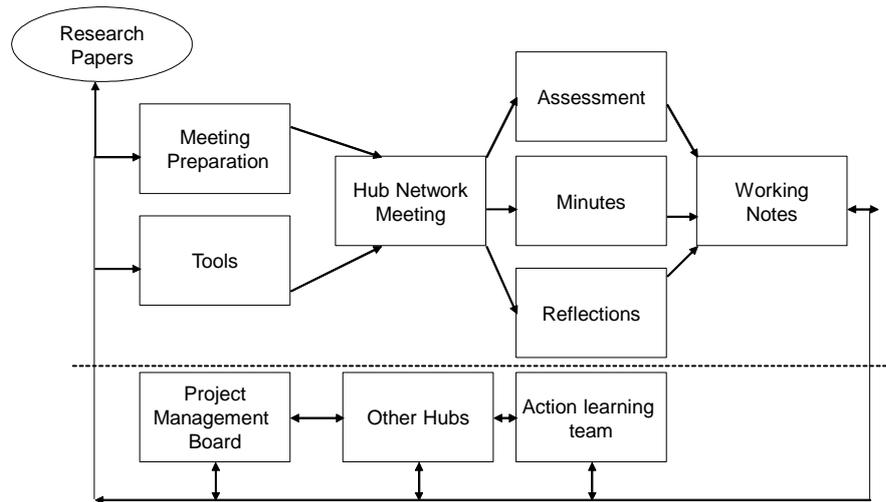


Figure 1

Structuring and Directing the Action Learning

In terms of the overall research project, there is a need for consistency across the nine hubs – that each follows a recognisable action learning process in engaging with the training and in reflecting in action. Similarly, there is a need for each hub learning to follow a recognisable action learning research process and to gather data and take action in a consistent manner. At the same time, each hub is different and will follow a path which fits its local context and situation. The challenge facing the action learning research coordinators is to establish and maintain a balance between structuring and directing the action learning (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2011). A complex project such as this one requires some structuring to maintain consistency and to build quality of reflexivity while, at the same time, flexibility in allowing for local conditions and self-directiveness in the hub action learning sets is paramount.

As the action learning research team, we write reflection papers for one another which air assumptions and inferences and which we try to test. As such, there is continuous exposure of

the events across the project and their interpretation and analysis to public reflection which then lead to further action. Managing and coordinating across borders and boundaries, by means of a range of structuring and directive/nondirective procedures is a constant challenge in order to ensure consistency of the frequency, form and process of reports, reflection papers and researcher meetings (Coghlan, Coughlan and Brennan, 2004). The recording of events, the articulation and discussion of interpretations and assumptions, the enactment of cycles of action and reflection and the testing of reflections in subsequent action are aimed to ensure methodological rigour.

Conclusions

This paper is introducing the design challenges of a complex action learning research project where action learning occurs at two levels, at the programme manager level and at regional hub level. The design challenge is to integrate action learning in as seamless a way as possible into project activities developed by delivered by other project partners, rather than them being stand alone activities. In this way we seek to ensure that action learning underpins all network activities and therefore that the network operates in a very particular way-which involves a lot more group and individual reflection than would have otherwise happened.

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