

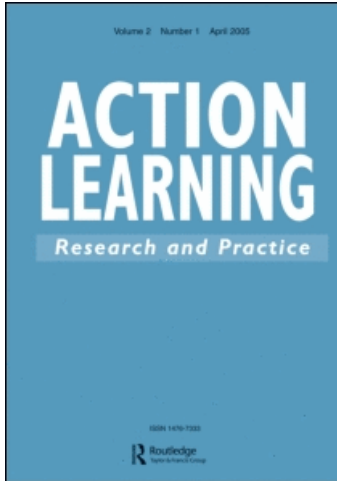
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ACCOUNT OF PRACTICE

Leadership and learning in the arts

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This account of practice outlines a national programme for current and aspiring leaders in the arts and cultural sector. One of the main constituents of this leadership offer was an intensive six-day action learning facilitator training programme. This account reviews this programme with the help of reflections from two participants, each of whom leads an SME in the East of England. These reflections include their initial perceptions on the impact of action learning ideas on their leadership, considerations of how they might continue to develop as leaders and how they might use action learning in the future development of their companies.

Keywords: facilitator training; leadership; arts; cultural sector

Introduction

The Cultural Leadership Programme¹ (CLP) is a government funded programme that does what it says on the tin: offers leadership development to current and aspiring leaders in the creative and cultural sectors. In late 2007 the programme director invited bids for the provision of training in high-level facilitation skills. The 2008/2009 training programme was targeted at around 50 people already leading small organisations or businesses and mid-career people in larger organisations who may be future directors.

Action Learning Associates² (ALA), itself an SME with two directors, four freelance virtual administrators and 20 associates, made the successful bid. Following independent evaluation of the first programme, ALA were successful in winning the contract for a second programme running in 2009/2010.

With the exception of the nationally known, publically funded, big outfits, most people in the cultural and creative sector work in small companies, which require a wide range of skills and behaviours from their leaders. It may or may not be true that few creative people are good at, or inclined to, self-promotion. It is the case that the Government has increasingly recognised their actual and potential contribution to the economy. This is apparent in the Government's invitation to a wide range of artists, dancers, musicians, film-makers to make a contribution to education at all levels – perhaps recognising that the standardisation of the National Curriculum, and its accompanying tests and targets, has left little space for the development of skill sets such as flexibility, handling ambiguity, responding swiftly to rapidly changing circumstances and getting the best out of a diverse workforce. Enter the artists . . . but only rarely by themselves.

Nationally, a network of arts organisations called Creative Partnerships was established: eventually to make the connections between schools and artists – and other people broadly

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designated as creative or cultural producers. Some Creative Partnerships flourished, others didn't; many are thriving and evolving to supply changing requirements.

Dotted here and there, talented individuals and groups of artists spotted the same need – and a different opportunity. Two leaders of these, Ruth Sapsed of Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination (CCI) and Clare Chacksfield of Suffolk-based Eastfeast applied for the CLP Leadership Facilitation Skills course and took part in the six-day, practice-based programme.

Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination and Eastfeast both work in a twenty-first century environment that requires influence, persuasion, quick adjustment, client centred responses and the bringing together of very different people from the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. This is an environment that requires that successful people will not be those who say, however they say it, 'follow me', but who enable a very wide range of stakeholders to take risks, invest in little-known people, work with people with different aspirations and values and not know from the beginning how things will turn out.

The programme commissioner selected ALA because they were convinced that the core skills of action learning could be used in sector action learning sets and would also transfer to running complex partnerships. For three consecutive days delegates first observed the trainer, each of whom was a very experienced action learning facilitator, then each delegate ran a set and received feedback on their performance from the trainer and the other delegates, against the initial introduction to the skills, conventions and best practice offered as chalk-and-talk input on the first day.

The programme took place over six days, the first three of which were sequential. This year we have limited each cohort to eight delegates, offering a five-day programme of three and then two consecutive days. The CLP programme aims remain the same:

- to improve leadership in the cultural and creative industries through investing in leadership facilitation skills;
- to improve facilitation skills in leaders; and
- to extend the number and range of leaders who can facilitate using an action learning approach.

Action Learning Associates' aims are:

- thorough immersion in action learning;
- confidence in the process;
- opportunity to practice facilitation, observe peers and get feedback on your style;
- opportunity to consider ways you might use action learning; and
- a sound basis to further develop your facilitation skills.

The first half-day introduced Reg Revans (1982, 1998), Schön (1995) and the learning theories of Kolb (1984) and Weinstein (2008), explored Senge's (1994, 2006) ladder of inference and paid brief attention to learning styles (Macey 2009; Mumford 2000). We ran through the core techniques and conventions of action learning, what happens in a set and how to contract. The facilitator then ran a set, which enabled delegates to begin to link theory to practice. The programme requires each delegate to facilitate a set, immediately receiving written feedback (what you did well, what you might have done differently) from the set members, the programme facilitator and the presenter. The set facilitator also records his/her own reflections and all are shared in the group, often triggering further questions and enabling the programme facilitator to feed-in additional techniques or tips.

In 2008 each programme facilitator recommended and/or referred to a range of writers on and models of leadership. One programme facilitator ran an exercise that asked half the delegates to investigate what, in their experience, good leaders do and the other half were

asked what good facilitators do. Both groups found there was significant overlap and that the labels leader and facilitator could be switched. In 2009 all delegates will take part in this exercise.

Essentially then, the delegates worked pretty intensively as an action learning set over six days, moving between being trainee facilitators (theory, reflection, analysis, doing it) and set members. We signalled this change explicitly: if space allowed, sets would take place in one room, 'training' in another. More often it was the ceremonial laying down of workbooks, notebooks and pens as the set started and their retrieval to record reflections on the facilitator's practice. All the facilitators focused hard on the basic ALA model, introducing variations as possibilities, in order to achieve the depth of experience of trust in the process (programme aims, above). Truncated, it looks something like this:

- Bidding round 10 minutes
- Presentation 5–20 minutes
- Clarifying questions 5 minutes
- Group exploration open questions 35–55 minutes
- Move to action
- Group feedback to presenter 10–15 minutes
- Presenter summary 5–10 minutes

As readers of this journal would expect, people's responses depended on their own learning styles, their preferred mental functions, their acquaintance with action learning (all cohorts included the range from lots to zero) and their experience/seniority as leaders/facilitators. The author's own practice when training is to facilitate slightly harder than in an ALS contracted to meet for five or six sessions. By challenging closed questions, competitive questioning or the presenter using second and third person language or the passive voice when speaking of themselves this meets the dual purpose of solving real time dilemmas in the set *and* rapidly encounter the delights, risks and traps of facilitating.

What follows are the reflections of two participants on the impact of the programme on them as leaders of small companies in the sector.

Ruth Sapsed and Clare Chacksfield

We knew each other very peripherally and knew enough of each other's organisations to think there were some shared values and challenges.

Undertaking the programme together has offered a unique opportunity to recognise a valuable and significant colleague and future partner as we grow our organisations in the East of England.

In terms of impact, perhaps the most significant is our understanding of our own leadership roles. At the outset we were both aware that we sought time with like-minded colleagues and that we needed to develop a clearer network of support for ourselves. We also each needed time to address some core questions.

Clare describes how she was seeking to find a balance between her role as leader and her own creative practice:

I felt I knew I wanted to establish a learning culture in my organisation but would often struggle with sculpting time to enable this to take place for myself as a leader. I knew creativity was core to my practice as a leader but had not fully embraced this aspect of my work as practically until I had completed the action learning set.

I need to do more to find out about what kind of leader I am.

For Ruth, the issues were around time to look at organisational structures:

I had become the 'leader' of a group that was committed to remaining 'artist led' in principles and practice, with less attention to what the implications for this were organisationally. I needed to explore during the programme how to continue to balance and perhaps shape and develop this often uncomfortable and rather isolated role that had formed around me. I was aware that I needed to understand and explore the role more fully and recognised the importance of colleagues for this. Creating opportunities for educators and artists to share practice and learn from each other are 'bread and butter' within CCI and I was eager to offer some of this time and space to myself as I struggled to take on this role. I wanted an opportunity to explore my role and to be more thoughtful of the style of leadership I wanted to inhabit.

The programme offered them invaluable time in which to address these. Clare's reflections offer powerful comment on how she has re-evaluated her approach to leading Eastfeast:

The most powerful aspect of my learning on the programme was embracing my own creative practice as a director. When I joined the action learning set in September 2008, I was torn between the range of responsibilities and accountabilities that seemed to weigh me down. Although creativity was a core value of our organisation, I somehow felt guilty giving my time to work as an artist or creative practitioner myself. It always seemed more important to facilitate creativity in others. My reflection at the end of the set revealed that action learning had helped me to realise that nurturing my own creative practice was core to my role as director. This principle has provided valuable understanding of all layers of my organisation.

Embracing this creative practice has enriched my role and given me increased confidence as a leader. I don't think I would have shifted my role in this way unless I had gained the insights I had from being involved in my action learning set. I realised that these creative qualities to my personality could be harnessed for the good of the organisation as a growing small enterprise rather than being something that I had to suppress or even devalue. It remains a difficult balance to strike to retain this creativity and entrepreneurial spirit in a climate of high accountability and layered administration, however, action learning has reiterated that this is a core part of my identity as a leader in the cultural sector.

For Ruth, too, there have been significant shifts in both her thinking and self-confidence:

I now recognise the need to inhabit better the role of leader and have gained confidence in my own ability to do so. I did this as a presenter, but also through reflecting on presentations made by others that addressed the function of leadership and the impact it can have on an organisation. By listening to the frustrations of colleagues in their struggles with management and by exploring my own rather unclear role, I was able to define more clearly the importance of clarifying my own role and responsibilities.

I have an increased awareness of which environments enable learning, which promote listening, reflection and sharing.

These opportunities to explore learning environments that empower individuals were invaluable. There were occasions for this particular set when the crucial elements of mutual respect and trust faltered and this resulted in critical moments of questioning and debate about action learning. For us it seemed to just sustain 'the feeling of learning about learning'. We found ourselves asking how we can extend the empathy that is so critical within a set to other environments, how we can develop our own ability to be less judgemental and how can we use the robust and insightful approach to open questions modelled by the facilitator in our own organisations?

This action learning programme has offered many meaningful insights and support for our roles. There is a sense that we both feel less isolated and plan to seek ways to maintain this crucial support for ourselves. We have found colleagues and a framework for supporting ourselves in our challenging roles and environments. Through participating in this experiential process coupled with exploring various theoretical frameworks, we have both had important learning experiences,

which have had an impact on a personal and organisational level. Through the feedback from colleagues within the set we gained greater knowledge of ourselves and how we appear to others.

Had we known that we were embarking on a programme in which we would be balancing learning how to be in an action learning set (a new experience for both) with how to facilitate a set and with extensive time to reflect on our role as leaders? Probably not and we both would say that we were, at times, overwhelmed and exhausted with the demands. Yet for both it has been an exciting and powerful experience, with a sense of a journey only just begun. The experience has instilled a confidence to experiment with the process in different contexts and an awareness that we can call on each other's continuing collaboration and support as we develop.

The course handbook referred to the irreducible core of action learning as one that enables people to:

- hear their own story differently;
- understand and create different responses to a range of experience; and
- become more self-aware and open to different possibilities in themselves and others.

What has ALA learned about training in action learning facilitation to develop leadership in SMEs?

Participants varied in their focus on action learning facilitation and/or leadership according to their interests. Those already leading SMEs were more interested in both aspects – practical and theoretical – than those for whom this was a likely next step or more distant possibility. Following a report from an independent evaluator, the 2009 programme has been developed to offer more on the leadership practices that will best deliver the aims of the delegates' organisations and on what they can do to develop best practice in the sector. The overall shape of the programme remains the same.

If the programme continues for the anticipated third and fourth years the creative and cultural sector in the UK will include leaders who understand what is required of them in a complex modern environment and who exercise the skills and behaviours of good facilitative and collaborative leadership.

Notes

1. The CLP is a Government funded investment in excellence in leadership across the creative and cultural industries. By supporting an ambitious range of activities and opportunities, the programme aims to nurture and develop world class, dynamic and diverse leaders for the twenty-first century (www.culturalleadership.org.uk).
2. Action Learning Associates (ALA) was founded in 1998 to promote and develop action learning and has grown to be the UK's leading provider of action learning and training for action learning facilitators within the arts and cultural sector. Working extensively in the voluntary and public sectors, ALA also delivers an Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM) accredited Professional Development Programme in Action Learning Facilitation. The company has 22 Associates based across the UK and in Europe who offer a broad range of action learning and management development expertise (www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk).

Notes on contributors

Di Bligh is a senior associate with Action Learning Associates. She brings 20 years of experience in local government, including at CEO level, to her work as an independent consultant specialising in action learning facilitation and training as well as mentoring and coaching.

Clare Chacksfield is the director of Eastfeast (www.eastfeast.co.uk). Eastfeast is a team of professional gardeners, artists and teachers that help schools deliver more effective learning based on working a school allotment through the seasons, culminating in a community feast. We work with students and teachers to develop the outdoor classroom, cultivating shared learning about the world in which we live through food and art. Eastfeast became a registered charity in March 2009 having been originated as a pilot project in 2005.

Ruth Sapsed is chief executive of Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination (www.cambridgecandi.org.uk), a collective of contemporary artists and other creative practitioners who design and deliver a range of cultural, social and education projects. These include workshops, training days, courses and consultation. It became a company limited by guarantee in 2007 with charitable status granted in 2008. There is a board of 10 directors, drawn from a wide spectrum of disciplines, including education, arts and health management and contemporary arts practice.

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