Leadership Development: Action Learning, Austerity and Change in the Public Sector.

What have we learned?

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15th International Conference on HRD 4-6 June 2014

Submission: refereed paper

Key words: action-learning, austerity, evaluation.

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Abstract

In this paper we examine our findings from an evaluation of a leadership development programme for local government managers in a UK Children and Families department. The programme is conducted in the context of austerity measures in other words, budget cuts, service re-organisation and redundancies. (This study is sponsored by a UFHRD research grant). Central to the design of this programme is the inclusion of action learning. We begin by reflecting on relevant HRD literature to identify issues pertinent to the practice of action learning in leadership development in the public sector. Our evaluation explores three areas of questions: the interplay of the cuts with the programme, the experience of the participants of the programme, specifically action learning, and the impact – value added by the programme. We present and then discuss our findings and consider what they tell us about the value of this intervention. Our findings reveal that learning and development in the context of austerity in the public sector colour the learning experience and presents participants with significant personal and emotional demands that need to be supported and contained in the action learning process, by competent facilitation that will help them navigate the politics of organisational life. We discuss what is different about how we now think about action learning for leadership development as a result of doing this work. Finally, we consider what lessons we and others may learned for the facilitation of leadership development – action learning (HRD) practice from our study in this public service context.
Introduction

Over a two year period 60 managers from the Children and Families Service working for the local authority and its partners participated in a work based leadership development programme, leading to an academic qualification at post graduate level, enabling them to achieve a post graduate certificate in leadership and management. The programme was commissioned by the Workforce Development manager on behalf of the organisation, who believed that managers would benefit from a programme of leadership and management aimed at helping them develop leadership behaviours where performance and change in this context were increasingly of importance. With the recession came austerity, reducing public sector finances. The over arching them of this development intervention was to get ready for change, the ‘cuts were coming’, though that was not the language used by the organisation. They preferred a ‘softer’ discourse in the name of efficiency savings.

The programme design involved a series of study days-workshops which focussed on topics such as strategy, change, leadership and personal development, team building, managing performance and using your power and influence, as well as commissioning and partnership work. These study days were designed and delivered by an international consultancy organisation. They additionally, provided 360 degree feedback on individual leadership styles and administered an organisational climate tool. The University was commissioned to create a qualification framework and facilitate action learning sets, (a form of leadership development in small groups) that ran alongside the traditional study day provision. The learning sets provided two main functions, the first, to provide a container for participants to explore and navigate their leadership development challenges in the context of the changes taking place in the organisation, as well as, provide a container for guidance around the work based learning assignments of the programme.

Our evaluation study which we began a year after out first cohort graduated, used one to one interviews and focus groups with findings subject to thematic analysis. Additionally, we examined a sample of work produced by the participants to inform case scenarios of their individual leadership development journey and their projects. The Workforce Development manager had already undertaken a form of evaluation to get participant feedback about their experience of the programme and to identify any potential problems in the delivery of the programme as issues arose. The feedback we had received had been extremely positive. But we wanted to dig deeper and get a better understanding of the work we were engaged in and the learning that was taking place for them and for us.

We identified three areas of questions that framed our data gathering:

1. The interplay between the cuts and the programme
2. Their experience of the programme
3. The impact of the programme in terms of value added

These questions help shape the framework for this paper, which we hope will make a contribution to knowledge and add to the work of (Rigg and Richards, 2006) whose work on action learning, leadership and organisation development provides evidence and examples of extensive action learning activity within leadership development programmes in the public sector and which, invites new questions around process and facilitation in this work.
**Why is this paper important?**

This conference invites us to look back and to look forward, whilst the leadership development stream gives emphasis to the importance of clarity in what is expected of leaders and how we develop them today.

Our paper considers how we facilitate clarity across our leadership development programme. In particular, how we do this through our action learning work, addressing both the performance and task requirements of a project, as well as, creating space for the process of development for both individuals and the group, in a context of austerity and profound organisational change and where there is increasing complexity and contested purposes in public service.

We further consider how multiple discourses applied to leadership development activity in this case, has helped us see how the programme and the work of action learning in particular, responds to normative and functionalist demands of leadership development, contribute sense making, and more importantly, can support a critical contribution to leadership development (see Mabey, 2012).

Finally, we hope our evaluation case study, informed by theory of leadership development and action learning in public services, can provide new questions and insights about how we think and talk about leadership development in the public sphere and how we might better understand what is happening in this contested space and thus, be better informed and equipped to respond to this work. Potentially there are lessons here for us (Business School academics who work with organisations in the public sector and individual academic tutors and facilitators), the organisation (the workforce development manager, senior managers and members- local politicians), and the wider HRD community, who wish to develop their knowledge and skills in leadership development and action learning in this context.

**Literature review**

Leadership development and the use of action learning have become an increasingly familiar component of HRD activity for many organisations in recent times. Since the 1940's when Revans, the founding father of action learning first introduced this approach with coal pit managers, placing emphasis on the value of learning from experience over the classroom, trainers and educators alike have been challenged to think about how adults and moreover, managers learn best and take account of this in their learning designs. (Rigg and Richards, 2006) tell us of unprecedented investment in leadership development in the public sector, in response to delivering modernization and the improvement of public services. They claim that leadership development is mushrooming and within that activity, there is an increasing interest in action learning as a core theme of organizational capacity-building that simultaneously addresses individual and organizational development, where learning is embedded in participants real complex problems on the one hand, and on the other, where it serves a social purpose facilitating interaction of participants from diverse contexts.

Following Revans, the classical ingredients of action learning involves managers coming together in small groups known as ‘action learning sets’. The ‘action’ is the vehicle for learning with the opportunity for personal- management development arising from ‘reflection.
on action’. This is conducted as a peer group process, which Revans describes of one of ‘comrades in adversity’, providing support and challenge to one another, as they work through ‘problems’ (sponsored by the organisation). They do this by a process of questioning to facilitate insight. A process which takes primacy over the expert knowledge of traditional programmed-classroom learning.

In practice, many variations of action learning occur, often with quite distinct differences in intent, purpose and design. For example, business driven action learning often emphasizes the task, often in the form of a management ‘action project’. Criticisms of this approach are that often action activity dominates, with little or no attention paid to reflection on action. Also, this approach can fall short in attending to matters of personal growth and development. This approach emphasises the individual and his project. At the other end of the spectrum, ‘critical action learning’ may be claimed, with an emphasis on emancipation, revealing power relations and oppressive practices in organisational life. Here reflection tends to focus on the collective experience and not just on that at the individual experiential level.

Significantly, there is no one definition of action learning. Indeed, (Pedler et al., 2005) speak of action learning as an ‘ethos’, rather than a single definable method. Such is its increasing popularity, examples of action learning can be found in organisational leadership development activities and in academic leadership and professional development programmes, covering the span of activity from the business project to a transformational experience. The activity may also differ with on the one hand an emergent learning experience, and on the other, a planned, disciplined and rigorous approach to inquiry (more akin to a research project). Similarly, the activity may vary from emphasis on the individual learner and their action project, to the collective learning and organized reflection of the group-action learning set. The case studies in (Rigg and Richards, 2006), reflect this range of activity. Such emphasis, may well depend on what the intent is in the design for learning. But it may equally be the case that trainers and educators stumble into this work with a partial understanding of what they are doing and therefore are only vaguely aware of what the consequences of their design for learning and leadership development approach might be.

One further ingredient in action learning is the role of the facilitator in action learning. Unlike the expert educator, the facilitator in the ‘ideal’ Revans model of action learning would provide a light touch, helping hand in bringing the set together, and where necessary, gently steer them towards a questioning dynamic of peer led learning. But there are considerable differences here to in the practice of action learning and leadership development. For example, in an academic programme the facilitator may also perform the role of academic tutor, sharing their ‘expert knowledge’, it therefore begs the question: should academic tutors, offer ‘light touch facilitation’ or take a more directive approach when propositional forms of knowledge might prove helpful? We might also ask whether business school tutors should stick to the business of facilitating management action projects and the relative safety of that terrain, or should they engage in a more critical educative discourse and risk the exposure to the politics of organisational life?

There are clues in the literature to these questions. We suggest a significant contribution to our understanding of the role of facilitation in action learning can be found in the work of (Vince and Martin, 1993) who offer a psychodynamic model of the facilitator holding a containing space in which the political and emotional dynamics of organisational life may be
explored. Their approach is particularly suited to the critical and developmental approaches to action learning, where the job of facilitation differs from the work of purely business action learning. Here, the role and skills of the facilitator requires serious attention. It begs the consideration of ethics in this learning activity because the interplay of politics and emotions in organisational life exposes the tensions between individual and organisations learning needs and their expected learning outcomes. It also draws attention to organisational climate and peels away the myth that the individual has the power to change all things, and the realisation that systemic forces are at play. (Rigg and Richards, 2006) are clearly aware of these tensions. They acknowledge the contested weight of expectations in the evaluation of action learning, especially, how in how it may be regarded, as either a performance activity or a development one.

The political pressures of the public service modernization agenda and the current austerity programme of public sector cuts draws our attention to the continuous and contested nature of public purposes and the complex and particular nature of the meaning of bureaucracy, as Weber, intended, (Hoggett, 2006). (Rigg and Richards, 2006) argue that facilitators of public service leadership development and action learning need to have or develop skills of what they call ‘bilingual ability’ with both public service issues as well as facilitation, to enable effective HRD interventions in this politicized and hierarchical environment.

The implications of this injunction for facilitation of leadership development and action learning in public services are that the affective (emotional) aspects of leadership development and action learning in this context require precisely the type of psychodynamic containment that Vince speaks about. This is because the development of leaders and managers in this context are increasingly drawing out tensions between the dual agendas of the so called, ‘third way’ in their work, highlighting the tensions they face between economic dynamism, talked about in the language of efficiency and effectiveness in public service and the agenda for social justice. If leaders and managers in public service are to be supported by leadership development and action learning, then it behoves facilitators to provide and hold a space for learning that helps leaders better understand and navigate these tensions. Furthermore, it requires a space in which ‘deep’ learning may be facilitated. (Bateson, 1972) refers to the feeling of perturbation that characterises deep learning, typical of the troubling or ‘wicked’ and intractable problems that public service leaders tend to face.

This presents a challenge for HRD, one that requires both participants and facilitators of leadership development and action learning in public service to have a genuine commitment to learning. (Marqardt, 2004) highlights the importance of the facilitator working as a coach, giving emphasis to the group’s (action learn sets) learning, over and above ‘the problem’ or action project task. He argues that by doing so, the group will become more quickly effective in both problem solving and group interaction. Similarly, (Reynolds and Vince, 2004), also draw our attention to this imperative, emphasizing the communitarian purpose of organizing reflection, that so often gets bypassed in action learning activities in favour of individual reflection on action projects. They remind us that when Plato invoked the infamous phrase ‘an unexamined life is not a life worth living’ that he meant it was necessary to include others in the examination of experience in our lives. We are after-all, all inextricably bound up with the good of the polis (public life). According to (Hoggett, 2006) this is definitely the case for leaders in public service, who take on this duty on our behalf.

Finally, it is worth noting that (Rigg and Richards, 2006) define organisations as relationships. (Clarkson, 1995) also makes this point telling us that “organisations are
relationships writ large”. This is important for HRD practitioners, as development of any kind is about developing people and organisations.

Method

We set out to interview 20 participants and conduct two focus groups from the first two cohorts (each comprising of 16 participants). It is also from these cohorts that we have sampled projects. We began this work in 2012, allowing a gap of year after graduation for these participants before we approached them to participate in interviews and focus groups, giving them time to work through and embed the practice implications of their work and give them time to digest their experience of the programme. We also wanted to put some distance between the academic relationship of student and tutor and our follow up as researchers. All interviews and the focus groups were taped and transcribed and subsequently coded and categorised before consideration of emerging themes. Access to individuals and arrangements for interviews and the focus groups was set up with the help of the Workforce Development Team. Meetings were arranged at the head office of the council where many of the participants were based. In the event, we managed to conduct only 17 of the planned interviews, as people cancelled or failed to reschedule due to work pressures. As for the two focus groups, one was a complete disaster, as it was scheduled when a second round of redundancy notices were handed out. This resulted in a very low turn out. (One participant who attended, came with her letter in hand, distressed and dismayed that the notice of redundancy that was issued to her. She said it had come as a complete and unexpected and unwelcome surprise). Given these set backs, we are pleased that the interviews conducted represent the experience of a range of participants who work for the organisation and its partners. We are also pleased that some participants came back to talk to us about their experience of the programme, even though they had been made redundant in the intervening period.

Findings

Question 1) Exploring the interplay between the cuts and the programme our findings reveal how redundancy and reorganisation has shaped the context for learning and leadership development:

- Risk of redundancy & how it feels
- How differently people reacted
- The relationship between uncertainty and anxiety
- Change, loss and consequences

The Risk of Redundancy and how it feels

The risk of redundancy and cuts affected staff both in the local authority and in partner agencies. Particularly affected were youth services and non statutory children’s services, including play groups and children’s centres, that received funding through local government grants. The first round of redundancies began with ‘at risk’ letters being sent to all staff in the autumn of 2010. This coincided with the early part of the programme for cohort one, creating a period of uncertainty before decisions were finally made about how the service would be reorganised, which jobs would be lost and what and who would be left on the 31 March 2011.

There were two ‘stories’ that emerged one of hopefulness and the other of dislocation.
Shaping the service was the vision of ‘early intervention’, a strategy for working with ‘troubled families’. Early intervention is seen to be a cost effective way of saving monies in the long term by intervening with families early on to facilitate good parenting and prevent worst case scenarios.

“So, over the period of the first six to nine months of the course, although it was uncertain for my team, the situation was never as black as it was for others because it was very high on the agenda for the director that putting in place a team of people, practitioners working with families, was his vision for the future”.

“All of my team and my-self were at risk of redundancy from early December...the early intervention grant was coming to an end and we didn’t know the allocation. I was relatively hopeful about my staff and their posts because I knew the agenda had quite a high profile politically and locally. But there were no givens”.

By contrast, another manager describes the experience between the moment of getting the ‘at risk’ letters and the point at which notification was given of having lost your job, as being one of “dislocation”.

“It felt as if we were on the edge of a precipice, just waiting to see what would happen. People’s lives were pulled apart. How would they afford the mortgage? Would they get other jobs? How would they educate their children? As well as looking for other jobs. They had to re-apply for their own jobs and to fill in a million forms. It felt demeaning”.

She described the atmosphere as: “numb, desperate and grey”.

**How people reacted to the cuts**

For some it was ‘business as usual’.

“For me and my team it was business as usual, mainly, the usual turbulence, a few posts that are hard to fill where you might have locums, and they change, but I had a full team.

The contrasting story was ‘concern for survival’.

“It has been a nightmare year and the whole time you are thinking ‘will I have a job’? I had to stop thinking about how this is going to affect me and look at how it is going to affect the service and what does that mean for the service and how are we going to fight to keep the services, regardless of whether I am here or not, what is in the best interests of the service. It has been so hard because you come back to yourself. Well you do, obviously, because you think, ‘I’ve got a mortgage to pay, I’ve got bills. What can I do to save my own job? So it has been a bit of a battle, in-between what I can do for me and how I can protect the service”.

**The relationship between uncertainty and anxiety**

Not everyone was affected in the same way. But for some participants the uncertainty and anxiety affected them deeply. This is how one participant gave voice to her experience.
“I am not doing very well. My team isn’t doing well, because where I thought I was spending time with them, I am not spending time worrying about the impact that this has had on me. Then of course worrying, ‘well, actually, if I am doing a really rubbish job does that mean I am going to be cut next’? ”.

A vacuum in communication left people unsure of where they stood. This manager goes on to say:

“I am not entirely sure that I was that sane during that period. I think you get caught up, unless you are very careful, in the collective consciousness, the anxiety”.

**Change, loss and consequences**

Redundancy, restructuring, were no surprise. But findings show that even where people were safe there were consequences, including, stress and increased workloads. The loss of professional relationships was also identified as significant by a number of participants in the research.

“So, we did have to make a lot of people redundant. All of us went through a restructure and we all had to reapply for our jobs”.

“I wasn’t affected by the redundancies or the cuts. It seemed to have bypassed my team. We work in Safeguarding, so I guess that is deemed a high priority area and the cuts didn’t touch it at all.....In terms of what was going on for me and my team at that time, I remember it being quite a hectic period. I think we were going through a period of change. Some people were leaving and so that made things more pressurised in terms of workloads”.

“The whole team just went. The youth workers were decimated. The key people are there. I have good relationships with them and have had over many years, but there is this undercurrent of loss. I am saddened that I have lost relationships I built up”.

**Question 2):** How participants talked about and reflected on their experience of the programme in relation to their leadership skills and effectiveness revealed the following:

- The 360 feedback on leadership styles along with the three core development days on strategy and change had the greatest impact in participants learning about leadership and their own leadership styles
- The role of the action learning sets provided a safe space for reflection and the containment of anxieties in the midst of turbulence and change
- The assignments provided an opportunity to embed the learning in the work.

**360 Degree Feedback**

Feedback from managers about the usefulness of the 360 feedback has been extremely positive, giving them the opportunity to learn about themselves.

“The feedback from the staff was really helpful and very challenging to start with. I thought that was spot on. But I would never had said that about myself”
“I had this idea that I was a really directive, stroppy old boss who set really strong targets, and actually, I think my team think I’m a pussy cat........that made me relax a little, and realise, maybe I could ask them to do more”

“It opened my eyes. It was like a descriptive noise that helped me to think”.

The Role of the action learning sets

In the action learning sets we were working with task and process, the tasks being work based assignments. Talking, emotional support and providing a space to think were typical of what people said was good about the process. Indeed, during the interviews we were asked almost continuously, ‘can we have more’? We sometimes wondered if this is what motivated some people to come forward. In one of the quotations there is an implication that we needed to spend more time on process issues and another suggesting that we needed to spend more time on the task (project). Additionally, we had the experience of one action learning set appearing to avoid engagement in the process, by turning up to set meetings late, or just not turning up at all. As there were only three action learning set meetings scheduled during the programme for each cohort, we had limited opportunity to address the underlying issues behind this. However, for the most part the action learning experience seemed to be welcomed.

“I’ve never experienced anything like that before and I thought initially they were a bit weird. If I can be perfectly honest, I have never had the opportunity to speak so frankly and openly. I found it a bit uncomfortable initially but that is because I wasn’t used to talking in that way............and then by the end, I found them really, really, useful”.

“I think the learning sets were fantastic. It was a really useful way of internalising and thinking about it (the cuts and changes) and how it was impacting on us. It was a hugely emotional experience in many ways, but so valuable”

“I think actually having that experience really helped me to deal with it (cuts) because at the time, I was quite thrown and upset about it........I can see that later on I actually got all the changes I asked for........When I sat down with people in my learning set they all had quite similar experiences and I think it was just hearing it and getting reassurance ... it was part of the process and it was learning from that and standing back and thinking about some of the forces that were at play”

“Even though it is an informal space, it was actually structured, in that you are coming here and in this time we will explore what has been happening...that little space to think and focus your mind, and then having other people there that help you reflect”.

“I was looking at workloads for my team... What I came up with in the end was, I couldn’t really change much. But I realised I probably needed to move on”.

“Just having the delight of not to put a pretence on about the quagmire I think that we all found ourselves in and the learning that went with it”.

“I would have liked more. It was good when we talked about our feelings and about what was changing. The action learning sets were not exactly what I expected. I think we should have talked more about our feelings and how things were affecting us”.

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“At times, there was just too much talk about the cuts and change and not enough on the projects”.

**The assignments provided an opportunity to embed the learning in the work**

The programme required participants to undertake three work based assignments. The first involved a review of learning, the second a stakeholder analysis and the third a work based project. A common example of how some manager used and applied their learning from the programme workshops was to take ideas back to their teams and incorporate them into team building and development days, as indicated in the quotation that follows.

“I did a team day, where I included one of the workshops within the day and got them to explore their team roles, which was brilliant, because I could then understand them and their thinking better”.

**Question 3) How they judged the impact of the programme and its capacity to add value to the organisation and their leadership identified the following:**

- A number of the work based projects revealed evidence of immediate benefits and value to the teams led by participants on the programme
- Managers who participated in the programme reported an increased confidence in their ability to lead and manage and moreover, less fearful of doing so as a result of the programme
- Linked to the above managers reported a greater ability to let go and delegate, and in so doing, improve their work loads and work life balance.

**The value of work based projects**

We have reviewed a sample of the projects and written them up some as illustrative case studies. The sample includes projects undertaken by council employees as well as partners. They include staff who remain in post and staff who were made redundant. These will be available in the final report of the study. From a learning perspective we employed the project as a vehicle for development, taking the participants on ‘a journey in discovery and development’ (Weinstein, 1995), through the programme. Initially there was talk that the senior managers in the organisation would identify projects for people to work on. In the event that did not happen and individuals identified projects they considered immediately relevant to their work and or their own development as leaders and managers. Looking at the project titles, there is a range that would fit all four discourses of leadership development as described by (Mabey, 2012). But the interesting thing here is that very few of them are purely functional or performance orientated in nature.

Some of the interview data suggests that the academic work helped reinforce their learning and some participants commented on how much they enjoyed returning to study (a number being qualified professionals in social work and teaching, with first degrees).

**Increased confidence in leading and managing people**

“I think it is about confidence and self belief. I think that underlines it all for me. I know I can do it now, and I know how to do it, and probably, two years ago I would not have said that, not at all. So, thank you”.
“It is about giving you that confidence that you are doing the right thing and you are doing it in the best way. Like most managers I’ve just got on and I’ve managed for years and nobody has told me how to, I’ve just done it. It’s quite nice to know that some of the things I was doing were OK but I now have a few extra ways of doing the things now. I now have the confidence that I can have those ‘difficult conversations’. I still don’t like them but I don’t lose a week’s sleep over them anymore. I’ve learned to be very clear with people. I’ve learned that actually pussyfooting around and not saying it, actually, doesn’t help at all”.

The legacy is I’m a bit more confident now... you can’t buy that”.

**Letting go and delegating**

A common problem that some managers had addressed in the programme was around delegation and a fear of letting go of the work, which had caused a number of problems including work overload and inadequate use of otherwise competent staff.

“I am very aware of not trying to do it all myself. I’ve learned to be able to delegate and to advise and support as opposed to thinking: ‘I will do it myself, or if you want a good job doing, you’d better do it yourself’ so, it looking at what this person can do not doing just how I want it done, which has created some magic, because when someone knows that you are supporting them they feel encouraged and they will blossom”

“I think generally it has made me more relaxed....I don’t need to be in control of everything. Management isn’t something that everybody instinctively knows how to do. I have had some really awful managers in my time and I know how awful it is to be managed by somebody who is very controlling, who micro manages and doesn’t get the best out of their staff”.

“It has added value to the organisation because I could then spend my time on other things, which helps my manager, so that she’s got more time. I am now doing practice assessing, which I have never done before, because I felt I had the time to do something else now, other than just the work”.

**Discussion**

As HR has become more strategic in its service to business the role of evaluation has increasingly come to view the importance of ‘value added’, with return on investment, taking centre stage. In simple terms, evaluation asks the question whether or not an activity or investment was worthwhile. Added value traditionally was recognised as being achieved in learning and development through adding mainly soft gains, not so much, hard gains, such as, a return on investment. Surprisingly, the local authority has not pressed for a specified (ROI) return on investment from this leadership development programme, though, they have expressed an interest in evidencing ‘impact’ and value added from the programme through the evaluation study. However, there does appear to be a growing demand on public service practitioners to show a return on investment in their work.

Training (learning) evaluation typically looks at levels of learning: reaction, learning, job behaviour, and results as in (Hamblin, 1974). The assumption is that the training will plug the learning gap (or need). This model later evolved to include the organisation. See (Tamkin et al., 2002), for how Kirkpatrick model evolved. Training evaluation generally
equates to determining the effectiveness of the training event. Early models of evaluation were essentially a product of a cause and effect paradigm. Evaluation also addresses the desire to prove that the training (learning) intervention has met the objectives, improve it and learn from it, as with (Easterby-Smith, 1994). The integrated nature of the leadership development programme, with the workshops feeding into the developmental experience and the academic work based projects providing a vehicle for this learning, avoids the messy problem of transfer of learning to the workplace that is typically the Achilles heel of traditional leadership training programmes. Rather, this leadership development programme has engaged purposefully in ‘learning from the real’: “We linked the modules ‘Review of learning, project planning and project to the action learning sets, and linked the learning and assessment to the goals of the programme, which was to develop effective leaders and improve leadership performance... Moreover, the learning is both holistic and ‘critical’, by identifying and valuing the emotional and political domains of learning that impact their development as leaders”. (Hartog et al., 2013). This evaluation takes place however in a particular context of austerity in public service and for that reason we have in our research looked at the context of the cuts and its effect on the programme.

There is no doubt from the selection of quotations provided that this effect has been significant and we can see further evidence of this in the project cases we have reviewed. The cuts resulted in considerable change which affected people in different ways. Inevitably in redundancy situations people lose their jobs. In this case, it was not solely that individuals were leaving, sometimes, entire teams and parts of the service went. Loss was systemic. It coloured the learning for participants.

The participants’ experience of the programme reveals the value of the action learning process and confirms that the space for learning offered both safety and an important container for emotional labour. There is also evidence to suggest that the action learning process has helped participants think about the cuts and how they were affecting them.

Moreover, we would suggest it supported participants in better navigating this complex political terrain. (Hoggett, 2006) begs the question whether the economic concerns of modernization in public service have ‘thrown the baby out with the bath water’, in that we are destined to know the cost of everything and the value of nothing? This is almost certainly worth considering in view of the examples in the sample of project cases. What is striking about all of them are the power relations that the participants come up against.

The Impact of the Programme and value added as (Rigg and Richards, 2006) suggest, may well be contested. There is evidence however of both individual benefit and benefit to the organisation. For individuals increased self confidence to practice as managers is evident as well as increased confidence in managing people. Letting go and delegating offer both important outcomes for individuals but also their teams, enabling work to be more effectively shared and staff given opportunities for development. At the organisational level there is evidence of change as participants adjust their ways of working to accommodate efficiency savings and structural change. In some cases, there is as suggested by (Rigg and Richardson, 2006), evidence of considerable tension in the work carried out by mangers and leaders as they grapple with the competing demands of economic austerity and social justice. But there are also hidden benefits to some of this work, including in areas where the ‘project’ was to close the service. The quality of care evidenced in some of these projects speaks volumes about the professionalism of staff and their capacity to lead in the most challenging circumstances. There efforts to save service areas, consultation
activities, involvement and participation of their teams and their client groups all leave a positive legacy (reputation) for the organisation in the wider public sphere.

**Conclusions and Lessons for HRD**

Critically, this evaluation has helped us reflect on how we think about and now talk about leadership development today. With the benefit of hindsight, we can now explain our approach, learning design and intent in this leadership development intervention. With the help of discourse theory (applied to understanding leadership development interventions and practice) (Mabey, 2012), we can articulate what we are doing differently in our leadership development work in 2014, compared with what we may have done or thought we were doing in the past. By drawing on multiple discourses and applying them to the design of the leadership development programme (as employed with this local authority group of participants), we are now better able to illustrate what the different elements of the programme have contributed and offer richer insight into our evaluation findings.

For example, the performance focus is present in the content of the workshops, and in the traditional business action project. However, the action learning process has also played an important role for participants in making sense of their experience, especially helping them explore what the cuts mean for them, their teams and client groups. Some participants have embarked on a personal journey of learning and discovery in an effort to know themselves as leaders and managers. But perhaps most significantly there is much evidence of a learning space in which emotional containment and emotional labouring in action learning sets have revealed power relations. In doing so, this has made for a critical contribution to the process of action learning and leadership development for those involved.

Some of the projects we have reviewed we believe adds value. But they may require a different way of appreciating what added value means, in this particular context of cuts in the public sphere. Theoretically here, we are guided by an appreciation of the perspectives offered by (Belenky et al., 1986) in ‘Women’s Way’s of Knowing’ and the importance of an ‘ethic of care’ and connected-relational knowing, as expressed, in the leadership work present in these projects. Moreover, this perspective helps us see that conventional and heroic notions of what is commonly understood to be leadership have limitations and may not be appropriate in this particular complex organisational context of austerity.

Finally, last but not least, we must mention the role of the action learning set facilitators. Their capacity to offer the support both on task and process, suggests that if they did not already have the skills of bilingual ability that (Rigg and Richards, 2006) refer to, they most certainly have developed them in the course of this assignment. (Mead, 2006) in his account of his work with leaders in the police service talks about a ‘meta set’, where he and his co-facilitators reflected on the process. Indeed, this rings a bell for us as we followed a similar path, employing a coach to work with us to help us reflect on, learn about and manage the emotional work that this programme challenged us with.
References


