**Action Learning – Making a ‘Research Turn’**

When does action learning become research and when might action learners get confronted with some of the ethical and methodological challenges that confront those who are researching and writing about organisational issues from other traditions? To provoke discussion we have included in this edition an interesting reflective piece by James Traeger writing from his experience of doing action research.

The similarities and differences between action learning (AL) and action research (AR) are much discussed (Raelin, 2009; Coghlan 2010). Each have differing origins and forebears (Revans for AL; Lewin for AR). Yet ironically and confusingly for those coming new to the field, the literatures are fairly siloed, with Raelin and Coghlan being relatively rare in straddling and contributing to both. Some see the distinctions between AR and AL as so scant as to be splitting hairs. Some have asked what is the difference between Revan’s philosophy of learning as captured in his System Alpha, Beta and Gamma (where *System alpha* is investigation of the organisational issue in its context; *System beta* is inquiry into resolution, through cycles of trial and error, action and reflection; and *System gamma* is the learning, framing and self-awareness of the participants) and the First, Second and Third person Enquiry of AR (Reason & Torbert, 2007) (first person - enquiring into my own practice; second – investigating with others; third – engaging with or contribution to a wider audience such as policy and debates in the world at large). Typically the key difference highlighted between AR and AL is to say that whilst both are grounded in tackling real organisational or societal issues, AL is principally committed beyond this to learning for those directly involved and is not particularly interested in whether such learning goes beyond the specific group or organisation, whereas, AR is concerned that wider knowledge be distilled from the specific issue, to be shared with a wider (third person) audience.

Yet even while we debate the similarities and distinctions there are times when the worlds of action learning and action research overlap. In other words, when does action learning make a ‘research turn’? In this journal, as action learners write up their experiences or systematically evaluate and theorise from their practice, isn’t that now a sharing to a third person audience and a concern to generate wider, useable knowledge for others? Arguably the research turn of action learning is captured by the hybrid term ‘action learning research’ (Coghlan and Coughlan, 2010) introduced to describe activity that has a threefold commitment to learning, to action and to the generation of ‘actionable knowledge’ (Argyris, 2003), what Coghlan and Coughlan refer to as the ‘action turn’ of research. The notion of action learning research has been debated previously in this journal and no doubt will be revisited at the 2016 biannual Action Learning: Research and Practice conference (see details below). But for now what I want to highlight is the significance of James Traeger’s ideas on the ethical and methodological dilemmas of action researchers for the field of action learning. He highlights a paradox whereby requirements for demonstrating compliance to academic research conventions can inadvertently be at odds with enabling the voices of organisation members to be heard. This seems valuable food for thought for those action learners who are taking a research turn and converting their work into actionable knowledge for a wider audience.

**References**

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