

***IN SEARCH OF THE “STRUCTURE THAT REFLECTS”:
PROMOTING ORGANIZATIONAL REFLECTION IN A
UK HEALTH AUTHORITY***

Theme: Methodology

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Abstract

Reflection on action and in action constitutes a particularly important locus of learning in modern organisations and a critical location where learning at the individual, group and organizational level feed and sustain each other. The issue is then: how do you make this thing happen in practice? What strategy can be used to promote reflection at the organizational level? How do you bridge personal reflection, group support and organizational change? The paper discusses how the authors addressed these issues in the context of a far-reaching three-year initiative aimed to introducing reflection as a legitimated and stable practice among a group of middle managers of the British National Health Service (NHS). After summarizing the main phases of the project and describing the practical steps taken to promote reflection, the paper discusses the benefits and results of the project as well as some of the practical difficulties and vicissitudes encountered. The paper concludes with some considerations on the difficulties encountered in combining and putting to work together different intervention traditions.

Introduction

Reflection on action and in action constitutes a particularly important locus of learning in modern organisations and a critical location where learning at the individual, group and organizational level feed and sustain each other (Reynolds, 1998; Siebert and Daudelin, 1999; Moon, 2000; Raelin, 2001; 2002; Smith, 2001). Several of these authors take the view that the shift from reflection on action towards reflection in action, constitutes a particularly important locus of learning in modern organisations. They identify critical locations where learning at individual, group and organisational levels feed and sustain each other. They also note, however, that current reflections on ‘reflection’, at least in organisational and management studies, have two main limits. Firstly, they often elaborate on the theory and principles of organisational reflection without addressing how this notion can be put to work in practice. Secondly, even when they are practically oriented, these authors often describe experiences that focus on reflection at the individual level rather than at the organisational level. Reynolds (1998) notes that these two limitations tend to reinforce each other. The meaning of reflection is often restricted by an individualised perspective within individual problem-solving activity. However, the reality is that in most situations the individual alone cannot address or solve meta-organisational problems. Such a restricted view of reflection, however, neutralises its capacity to produce learning and change. Individualised, private reflection is incapable of reaching, exposing and affecting the institutionalised assumptions and logic that regulates organisational action, and it is also at risk of being a sterile effort, given that individuals alone are seldom in positions to make substantial organisational changes. (Raelin, 2001; Vince, 2002a). Reflection can become an opportunity for personal growth and organisational transformation only to the extent that it is public, sanctioned, participative and authorised. Effective reflection and questioning organisational assumptions works well when it is a legitimated organisational process and an ‘integral part to organising, rather than the province of individuals’ (Vince, 2002a, p.67). Certain organisational conditions have to be put in place for the sum of individual reflection practices to become a trigger for wider organisational change.

The issue is how to make this happen in practice. What strategy should be used to promote reflection at the organisational level? How are personal reflection, group support and organisational change to be bridged? Can reflection be part of a stable and self-sustaining feature of organising? How does a 'reflecting organisation' become established without attributing anthropomorphic features to it while bearing in mind that reflection is centred on people?

In this paper we shall discuss how we addressed these issues in the context of a far-reaching three-year project aimed at introducing reflection as a legitimated and stable practice among a group of middle managers of the British National Health Service (NHS). We shall start by reviewing the organisational conditions that triggered the initiative. We will then describe how a group of managers and consultants established a large organisational development-based change management initiative that led to the design of a programme that combined elements of the OD and Critical Action Learning traditions. We will describe the programme, entitled the 'Cross-Boundary Management Development Initiative' (CBMDI) in some detail, discussing the attempt to combine the creation of several Reflection Action Learning Sets [RALS] into a structure that would connect them into a larger and more powerful whole: the 'Structure that Reflects'. Finally, we will reflect on the outcome of the project, on its successes and difficulties, and on what it tells us about the use of reflection in organisations and on how to render such practice 'organisational'.

The difficult situation of middle managers in the NHS

Being a middle manager anywhere has always been difficult, but it was especially so in the British National Health Service (NHS) of the late 1990's. Since its foundation in 1948, the NHS has been beset by difficulties deriving from its considerable size and its inherent complex status. The organization has almost a million employees and has to align and reconcile the conflicting interests and expectations of a number of constituents such as patients, health professionals, government and taxpayers, who all hold different and often discrepant priorities.

These difficulties were further exacerbated during the 1990s when the nature, functioning and cost of the NHS became one of the most important issues in the UK political arena. During this decade, the health service experienced the highly controversial introduction and demise of a strict internal market regime that was replaced by the new Labour Government with a system based on a combination of local delivery management and commissioning organisations, regional co-ordination and centrally monitored performance standards and cost control. Operating under the double scrutiny of the Government and the press, towards the end of the 1990's, the NHS prepared for a major restructuring that would affect virtually each of its components except a few major specialised hospitals. The complete redesign was intended to create a network of medium-sized organisations, called primary care trusts, that were meant to be responsible for the delivery of all community health services at local level and were to be co-ordinated by Regional Health Authorities. The Government's intention was to create a system that would be more 'patient centred', that would increase integration between health and social care services, would reduce 'red tape', maximise the return of the extra funding provided and produce tangible service improvements for the public (Blackler and Kennedy, 2003).

Set against all these changes, management at all levels, but especially middle managers, were anxious and exhausted. This was hardly surprising. The literature abounds with examples of middle management bearing the brunt of major organisational restructuring, and the conditions were particularly harsh for this group of managers (Dopson and Newman, 1998). For example, over a period of five years, the organisations involved in our project, that eventually became the Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire Strategic Health Authority, went through seven partial or total mergers. The extensive shake-up of organisational roles, jobs and responsibilities generated a situation of winners and losers. (Sher, Nicolini, Childerstone, 2003). Some managers were regarded as 'not up to the job' for the next reorganisation and were not offered new appointments. Others opted for early retirement. Overall, management felt unsupported in this process, 'dumped on from above and reviled from below', as one of the voices from the service put it (Wall, 1999). Research into middle management's perceptions, revealed that they felt they were 'not listened to, not recognised nor appreciated by colleagues, and especially not by superiors' (Pattison et al, 1999). For many, things were not making sense any more, morale was declining, and there was apprehension that the proposed changes would be cosmetic. New ways of working had to be found and new skills acquired, especially how to manage under conditions of rapid change and organisational turbulence.

Engaging with the organization: how to make a virtue of necessity

Against this background, in 1999, the Lead HR Director of the Hertfordshire Health Economy, approached the Tavistock Institute to obtain assistance in designing an initiative aimed at supporting middle managers to cope with the impending changes and turn the difficulties they were experiencing into opportunities for personal and organisational learning. The HR Director spoke on behalf of an already established 'grass roots' group of managers called the Organisational Development Forum (ODF). The ODF was composed of a number of managers who had set themselves the task of promoting a proactive approach to the management of ongoing changes and especially in the setting up of the new Primary Care Trusts. Prior to the Lead HR Director's contact with the Tavistock Institute, the ODF had carried out a needs analysis that revealed that local middle managers did not want traditional forms of training and needed instead new ways to make sense of their experiences to cope better with the ongoing changes. In short, they wanted to explore new ways of doing things, because 'the old ones were not working anymore'.

An interesting practical dilemma faced the consultation team and the HR Director at this point. The well-established OD path (e.g., Cummings and Wolrey, 1996) required to find a "leverage point" within the organization that could obtain the necessary endorsement and mandate from the higher echelons to co-ordinate local changes and support the process through the use of well-known tools of the 'planned change' tradition. However, several inconclusive attempts of the progressively shrinking ODF to obtain any form of substantial endorsement beyond vague and inconsequential general expressions of interest revealed that it was impossible to engage the chaotic organization in this way. What was to be done?

The consultation team was in fact aware of two opposite risks. First, there was a risk of colluding with the pressing urge for action which Pettigrew et al. (1992) has identifies as a major problem for the organization. According to the authors, the highly politicized context of the NHS generates a self-perpetuating process in which continuous crises and panics lead

to an endemic short-termism and over-reaction that generate yet more crises. In this context, responding to serious challenges through swift ‘resolutions’ and poorly planned actions becomes part of the problem instead of being part of the solution. There was however an opposing risk, that is, the endemic difficulty in the NHS of getting anything done which crosses any sort of boundary. Possibly, as a form of defense against the persisting chaotic conditions, managers at different levels and locales developed a tendency to wait for direction, maintaining a fantasy that people ‘at the top’ would somehow know what they were enduring and would come up with solutions.

Given that a traditional OD architecture could hardly be built on such shaky organisational ground, the team concluded that in order to move ahead on the design of the intervention, they needed an approach that would diverge from the traditional intervention model and aim instead to follow the contours of the fragmented organisation. The major pressing need of providing active and visible support to the middle managers had not been fulfilled. Given that a top-down approach was not viable, the group turned towards a model that was different to traditional organisation-wide consultancy, i.e. action learning and critical reflection.

According to Revans, in fact, Action Learning (AL), like the OD tradition, stems from Kurt Lewin’s emphasis on the importance of real life issues as a source of learning Revans (1980, 1997). Unlike the OD tradition, however, which is mainly focused on large scale and systemic changes, Action Learning often operates with a bias toward personal learning and tends to take small sets as the main locus of learning and development. Although it is difficult to refer to Action Learning as a unified corpus, given the broad variety of practices that are collected under this umbrella term (Marsick and O’Neill, 1999; Boshyk, 2002), it is possible to say that the Action Learning tradition is more focused on initiating change through personal development, but it makes large scale changes difficult to obtain. While OD is focused on modifying the power/knowledge dynamics that keep existing practices in place, Action Learning intervention has a more agile and plastic architecture. Action Learning is less threatening and more amenable to local adaptations that increases capacities to produce significant change effects. Given the aims of the interventions and the conditions under which we were operating, we were interested in the particular variety of Action Learning practice that has been defined as the ‘critical reflection school’ by Marsick and O’Neill (1999) and Cunliffe (2002). To the belief of the Action Learning movement that the starting point of all learning is action, the critical reflection school adds its insight that participants also need to establish a dialogue and reflect collectively on the assumptions, beliefs and emotions that shape practice.

We therefore developed a practical working hypothesis that an integrated Action Learning/critical reflection approach would deliver the two aims of the project, that is, to sustain middle managers in their efforts to cope with change and to produce significant results in cross-boundary methods of working in this part of the NHS. The proposal and an early short piloting initiative were favorably received by participants and were widely endorsed as viable ways to proceed. The participants said that in their particular environments organized and sanctioned reflection activity would have a powerful counter-cultural effect. ‘The best way you can support us’, they said, ‘is by developing a blame-free climate of listening where people can publicly discuss and review novel ways of working. We do not need solutions, we need space to think’ The piloting phase also emphasized the need to address the power conditions that would allow the result of reflection to be implemented to

produce organisational effects: the empowerment issue could not be put in the background and had to remain high on the agenda.

As a result of this early phase of our engagement three major themes emerged as topics for the subsequent part of the project:

- the roles that senior and middle managers would play in managing the changes demanded by the New NHS Plan
- the nature of the working relationships that would develop between the professions and disciplines to implement joined-up forms of management that had traditionally been competitive
- the challenge of improving inter-agency and inter-sector collaboration both within the NHS and between the NHS and social care systems.

Establishing a Structure to Reflect

To summarize, in order to fulfil the expressed aims of the project to support middle managers of the Health Authority to cope with the changes they had to face and to turn their change efforts into meaningful learning opportunities, we needed to devise a new approach. This approach would combine the practical advantages and contextual appropriateness of critical reflection and Action Learning with the wisdom of managing change that comes out of the OD tradition. Because the two traditions have both elements of learning and action, as well as some contra-indications for our particular situation, we felt the only way forward was to explore a hybrid model. However, examples of hybrids were difficult to find. In spite of their common roots and the recognised need for Action Learning to link with, and extend to, other forms of ‘search conferences’ and ‘whole system change’ methodologies, the two traditions rarely meet or are put together. (Morgan and Ramirez, 1983; McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993; Pedler, 1997b). We therefore designed our own ‘hybrid’, the ‘Cross-Boundary Management Development Initiative’ summarized in Figure 1 and described in detail below. The design of the programme was based on a simple principle: we would use the flexibility and simplicity of an Reflective Action Learning Set architecture and combine it with the OD prescription of the need to create the necessary leverage that would support participants in their change efforts. If legitimization and empowerment were impossible to obtain as a preliminary condition for the start up of the intervention, building such influence would become one of the aims and hopefully the outcome of the project itself. To achieve this effect, however, participants would need to make up more than a number of loosely coupled cohorts. They would have to form a network and the project as a whole would have to become an actor-network within the organisation. The design of the project therefore had to be developed on two separate but related levels. The first would be the level of the Reflective Action Learning Set in which the middle managers could reflect and learn how to cope with the ongoing changes in their organisations. The second level would involve the Sets establishing a dialogue among themselves and constitute a ‘structure that reflects’ that would create the necessary conditions for the changes they were planning to take root in their organisations.

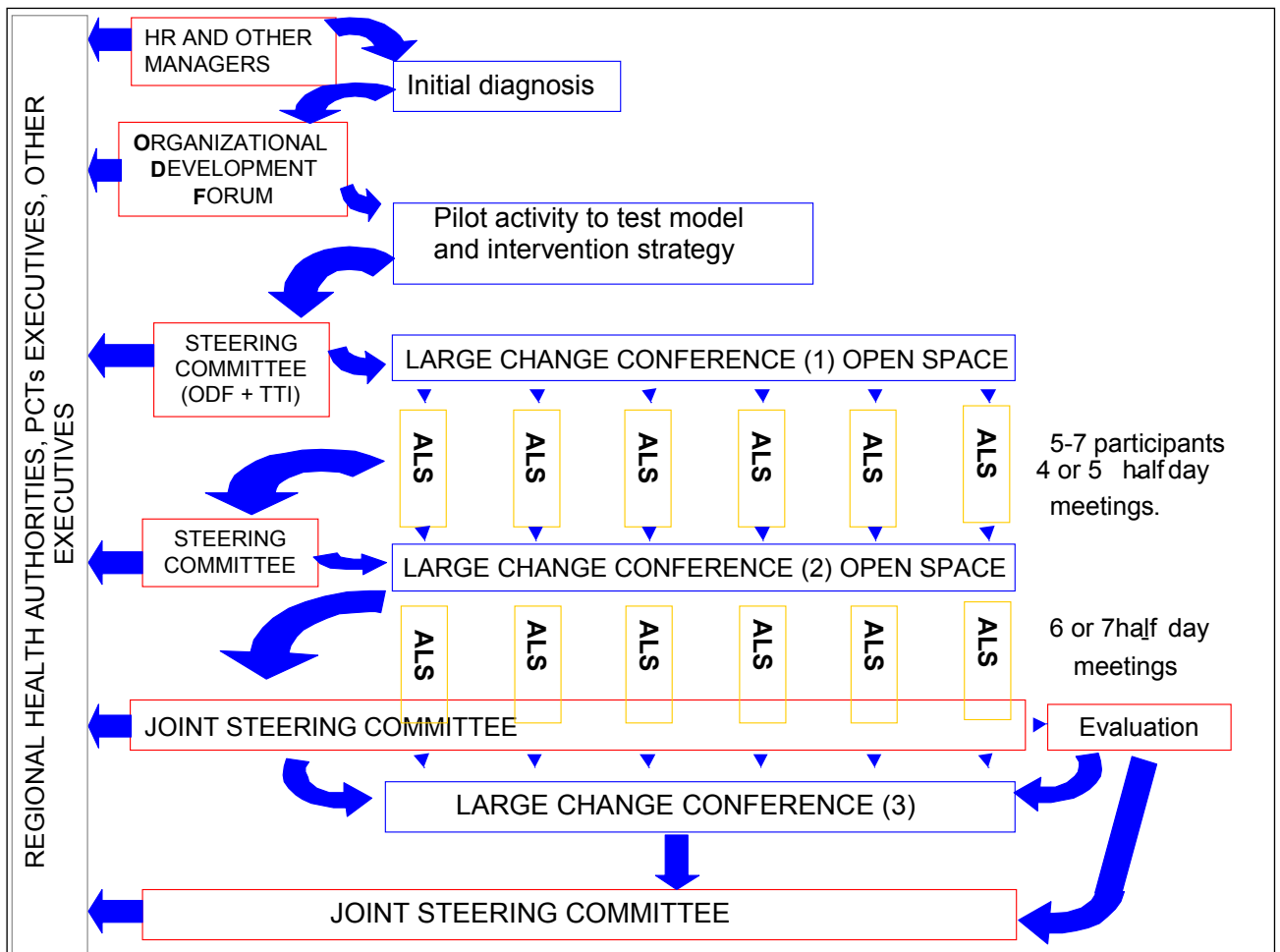


Figure 1

The Overall Design of the Programme

To achieve this goal, the ‘Cross-boundary Management Development Initiative’ was designed to have three large whole community change conferences (one at the beginning, one half-way and one at the end) interspersed in half-day monthly meetings of Reflection Action Learning Sets. The Sets, six in all, were facilitated by two Tavistock Consultants and met over a period of 12 months and lasted half a day at a time. The project was managed by a Steering Committee led by the HR Director and comprising three members of the original ODF and the Tavistock team. The Steering Committee met regularly during the programme and acted as internal client and referent for the programme. Members of the Committee collaborated to define the aims of the programme, to identify and convene participants, to design and review the first two whole community change conferences, to monitor progress and to design the outline of the evaluation process. They also assisted in the efforts of the programme participants to engage with the rest of the Health and Social Care Systems.

The First Conference

The CBMDI programme started with a whole-day conference held at a venue symbolically located at the centre of the catchment area of participant organisations. In order to establish in practice the principle of reflective conversation and action as a guiding principle of the whole initiative, the first conference was designed to be mostly self-organized by participants and to rely significantly on their willingness to accept responsibility for what does or does not happen. To this end, we ran three sessions of eight parallel self-organizing discussion groups. Participants were asked to clarify their chosen topic with a view to establishing a Reflective Action Learning Set, to start exploring what was potentially interesting and what could be done about it and/or learned from it. The results of each group discussion were summarized on one flipchart and posted on a board in the large room. Once all the sessions were finished and the flipcharts were posted on the board, the facilitators negotiated mergers between themes and groups. Participants were then asked to sign up to one of the resulting groups. In this way, participants formed 6 Reflective Action Learning Sets that met in the last session of the day to explore whether or not their topic was a viable theme for a long-term reflection activity. If they agreed the theme was viable for them, they planned the next steps, e.g., dates of future meetings and how to stay in touch with one another.

The design of the first conference gave a clear signal on how personal and organisational development was going to be approached. While many participants felt energized and empowered by the opportunity to take full control of their own development needs, others acted out the prevailing dependency culture, were disoriented by the low level of direction and structure or simply left the conference and the Programme. Overall, however, the conference successfully established from the outset the notion that whatever work would be conducted within the Reflective Action Learning Sets would be part of a larger structure managed by the Steering Committee. This awareness provided the necessary containment of anxiety raised by the work of the Reflective Action Learning Sets. In spite of this, there was still ample evidence of paranoid feelings towards the Steering Committee, but these were soon dealt with and the Reflective Action Learning Sets got on with their reflective activity.

Reflective activity in the Sets

Following the first conference, six Reflective Action Learning Sets were established around the following themes: (1) manner and style of communication with colleagues and staff, (2) managing the complexity of cross-boundary working in relationships with and between individuals, teams, professions, organisations and sectors; (3) moving towards a shared vision in a constantly changing complex organisational environment; (4) creating smooth transfer of patients across services; (5) increasing understanding of negotiating/managing change across professional boundaries; (6) power, empowerment and influence for doing things differently.

The number of participants in each Reflective Action Learning Set (RALS) at the initial meeting varied from a minimum of 6 to a maximum of 11. However, the numbers quickly settled to around 5-6 members per RALS, which is the normal recommended size. At the first meeting of the Reflective Action Learning Sets, after signing up to individual learning contracts, members of the RALSs proceeded to clarify their objectives, set the ground rules of their work, and agree ways of communicating with the Steering Committee and other Sets.

With these steps, the members gave practical meaning to the notion of 'critical reflection'. The Reflective Action Learning Sets interpreted this notion of critical reflection in four different ways and used the RALSs as:

- spaces to reflect
- resources for reflection
- spaces to act
- tools for action.

The RALSs used all these modes of interpreting critical reflection in practice and often shifted from one to the other during the programme and at times during the same session.

The RALS as a space to reflect

Members interpreted RALSs first and foremost as spaces to reflect on cross-boundary issues affecting their everyday working lives. One of them called these spaces 'a haven of sense-making, while everything else is crazy'. Reflection here meant a combination of containment and challenge that allowed participants to engage in personal and organisational development. Structurally, the meetings subdivided into 3 or 4 time slots and ran according to agendas agreed at the start of each meeting. The presence of facilitators combined to create 'safe environments' in which participants were able to report on their practical management and organisational issues and make sense of them by engaging in conversation with the other Set members. The activity therefore unfolded in terms of 'public reflexive dialogical processes' (Cunliffe, 2002), which is difficult and painful work. In this way, participants recognised how they had been affected by certain situations or events, worked out why this was so, and explored what this told them about their own practical ways of constructing their working reality and about their organisations. With the help of the facilitators and the active support of their groups, participants were then encouraged and often challenged to make connections between events, explanations and meaning. They also had opportunities to establish connections between their own experiences and those of others, a reassuring exercise for managers who frequently complained about their deep sense of isolation at work. The process led to establishing new connections and new possibilities of seeing, being and acting for the person raising the issues and the other RALS members.

This way of approaching critical reflection was both powerful and problematic. It was powerful because, as participants clearly stated, this way of learning was perceived as 'a form of conversation in practice as opposed to a conversation about practice (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). Themes and issues emerged directly from actual working life, feedback was frank and at times merciless, but always delivered by peers who had a deep understanding of both the organisational and emotional conditions of the presenter. This led to the collective production of non-judgmental, non-competitive arenas that allowed participants to explore new ways of being that, where appropriate, would generate different ways of acting. Consequently, the process of learning was profound and meaningful for participants because the situations they were describing were messy, deeply emotional, unstructured, unplanned and had a driven quality about them. These situations were however problematic and a cause of anxiety for both participants and facilitators. Theories that equate learning with clear-cut and ordered processes whose outputs can be measured for efficiency and added value, i.e., where learning has been equated with production, have been deeply introjected by staff of the

NHS, as indeed most organisations in the Western world. To the extent that learning and training are framed in terms of the prevailing logic of production, they are perceived as legitimate realities. On the other hand, the form of developmental activity carried out within the RALSs has peculiarly been oriented towards the production of a 'no-thing'. Although this form of training and its value was never discussed, this element of producing a 'no-thing' rendered attendance at the RALSs a source of guilt. But in fact some members preferred it to other structured forms of training. This created a problem for the facilitators, who felt caught between the dilemma, on the one hand, of responding to the needs of participants and following reflection processes wherever they would lead and, on the other, of producing a form of activity that would be properly reportable and accountable.

The RALS as a resource for reflection.

The RALSs were used as resources for reflection and opportunities for learning. Members of the Sets would enact processes and practices that reflected the value, expectations and assumptions of their organisations. These enactments presented opportunities to explore tacit assumptions and their consequences. For example, at the start of the programme, one of the RALSs was visited by the person responsible for designing the evaluation of the programme. Due to a miscommunication, the person came into the group at the wrong time, i.e. crossed a boundary without being invited, announced or authorized. This triggered a range of reactions which became the object of reflection in the following session and helped the participants to see connections with a number of broader organisational assumptions and (mal)practices in relation to crossing professional and team boundaries. The incident turned into an opportunity for reflecting on the nature of boundaries, their functions and their effects on the people crossing the boundary and the group that has its boundaries transgressed.

The RALSs also planned and implemented a number of activities to support the reflection process on cross-boundary issues. For example, some of the Sets invited members of different organisations to attend Set meetings to explore together the nature of the boundary between their organisations and their perception of boundaries as dividers instead of connectors. The ensuing discussions ranged from a mutual understanding of similarities and differences, to the identification of ways of bringing down barriers between them. In some cases, a more pro-active approach was adopted. A manager in an organisation would be identified and an RALS member would arrange to 'shadow' that manager and spend a day with their 'alter-ego across the boundary'. The results of the shadowing were then fed back to the RALS and discussed at length.

Finally, RALSs operated as reflectors for participants and helped them explore in depth their assumption and feelings about the issues under discussion. The facilitators encouraged reflection of assumptions and feelings as part of the main task of the programme and then modeled 'appropriate supportive critical behavior' (O'Neill, 1997). Halfway through the programme, the facilitators made their approach 'explicit' through a short presentation on the reflection process. This was designed to enhance the critical capacities of the RALS members and to emphasize that the acquisition of reflective competencies was, in fact, one of the desired outcomes of the programme.

The RALS as a space to act.

Although we were wary of the potential contradiction of pressing participants to enter a 'production-oriented' style of reflections, from the beginning it was accepted that participants would be involved in personal or organisational change initiatives that would constitute a significant source for reflecting. Sets were therefore used to support, devise, monitor and review personal action plans and discuss anticipated relevant cross-boundary events in their organisations. Several participants identified personal or organisational change objectives and used the RALSs to elaborate plans, to discuss progress and to reflect on successes and failures. This activity was sometimes interpolated with broader reflections on power and change. Some of the Sets chose to deepen the understanding of this topic by establishing joint study sessions or by accessing short training sessions that had been offered as a resource to all RALSs at the beginning of the project. By studying 'power' dynamics as they emerged and manifested in the participants' change efforts, they were able to understand both the nature of power and how power operated within their organisations. This, in turn, empowered them to 'work the system better', i.e., to make progress in their change programmes.

Other RALS participants used the meetings as opportunities to obtain support to steer changes that were already happening in their organisations. Topics ranged from interventions to address difficulties individuals were encountering; difficulties with collaborators or superiors, ranging to more complex situations, such as managing the closure of services and organisations and team mergers. In these cases, RALSs were used for support, enrichment and a critical voice during planning and reviewing stages. When RALS members were involved in organisational planning, they used the RALSs to explore scenarios, understand power dynamics and engineer participation and consensus-building. They tapped into their previous experiences, reported to the RALSs, allowing their colleagues to learn collectively from their experiences and make connections with their own situations. RALS activity involved the copious use of flipcharts that were summarized and circulated among members of the RALSs and retained as a collective memory aid.

The RALS as tools for action.

The Sets were used as tools for intervention. In some cases, two participants of the same Set identified common issues, such as a common boundary that they believed needed to be made more permeable. This challenge was then addressed with the support of the rest of the Set. In another case, a whole Set worked together to intervene on a complex organisational change initiative. In this case the RALS took on the character of a de facto local OD initiative, as illustrated by the following example.

During the Open Space session at the beginning of the project, a group of four people from the same organisation decided to work together on their cross-boundary issues involving the smooth transfer of patients across services. These people formed a Set and proceeded to investigate and map existing transfer processes and their obstacles, alternating this with reflections on the nature of the barriers they were encountering. Once a draft was completed, they contacted all the actors identified in the transfer process map and explored with them the reasons why patient transfer was not smooth. Positions on the map where forces and interests had been identified and intersected and which prevented a smooth transfer of patients, were

marked with ‘cockroaches’, a very powerful image that helped to capture the imagination of everyone involved. Discussions were henceforth framed as attempts at eliminating the ‘cockroaches’, i.e. to identify practical ways to remove obstacles to smooth patient transfer. By mapping the territory, the RALS had, in fact, changed it. The reflective exploration activity allowed the Set to build the necessary relationships and support and what followed was a change process and new procedures for patient transfer. Most importantly, once news of the Set’s activity started circulating through the organisations, the Set members were contacted by local directors who invited them to present their work at higher level meetings. This constituted both an acknowledgement and an endorsement of their work and their bottom-up empowerment strategy, as well as a further source of influence for the Set in support of their activity.

The Second Large Change Conference

The second conference took place during the fifth month of the initiative about half-way through the project. The conference aimed at establishing connections between the RALSs and engaging with wider organisational contexts by communicating provisional results of the programme to a group of ‘key decision makers’, whom it was hoped would champion some of the initiatives pursued by the Sets. The design of the second conference included a sharing activity between the Sets, a consensus-building activity on how to turn the collection of six Sets into collective change agents (How can we work together? What can be done to make our learning experience more relevant and make a difference in our Health and Social Care Systems?), and finding a space for suitable forms of engagement with key decision makers. In the view of the Steering Committee this conference was designed to mark the beginning of creating the ‘structure that connects’. Things, however, went very differently from what had been expected.

The key decision makers simply did not turn up and the few who did, turned up without being able to make any commitment beyond a personal one. In many respects, this was a manifestation of the same conditions that fostered the programme and shaped the CBMDI initiative, i.e. the fragmentation of responsibilities and accountability. The same processes that made it impossible to establish clearly identifiable authorizing points in the organisation to support the use of a system-wide OD approach and the absence of a culture of reflection, made these managers ignorant of the relevance of their presence for CBMDI participants. This signaled that the programme as a whole had been less successful in self-empowerment than had been the case for the individual Sets. Finally, the lesson for the Steering Committee was that ‘engaging’ with a whole system like the NHS meant acquiring different models to those mutated from companies in the private domain. We shall return to this point below. Overall, failure of key decision makers to show up was a powerful demotivator. The signal they sent was a painful reminder of the difficulties and high levels of resources necessary to accomplish anything in the organisation. The lesson of the key decision makers’ non-attendance was a very harsh reality check.

Following the second conference, the Steering Committee, by now constituting its own reflective space, concluded that the attempt to create stable connections by making people meet to discuss and identify a common aim and action plans, had been probably too ambitious. Nevertheless, feedback from the RALSs revealed that participants viewed their reflections as part of a larger programme. They felt that synergy between the groups was

important to support the legitimization of their reflection activity and to create the conditions to implement the change agreed at Set level. The Steering Committee decided to explore in practice another way of creating connections among RALSs, i.e. by a method of representation, which was a more time-consuming, but more reliable way than the model used at the second large conference. Accordingly, Sets were asked to nominate representatives to join an expanded Steering Committee whose aim would be to collate the learning and recommendations arising from the RALSs and present them to the organisations that were part of the CBMDI.

The now enlarged Joint Steering Committee met twice in the last third of the programme. In the first meeting, representatives briefly shared the recent learning from the RALSs and reflected on the causes of the low level of satisfaction with the outcome of the first large community change conference. They noted that what had happened in the conference was an accurate mirroring of their everyday experience of organisations in states of unraveling and where 'engaging' meant tiresome and painstaking work. They agreed that the programme would have to build its own legitimacy by establishing relationships with other initiatives and agencies, especially across the health/social care services boundary, by disseminating the results of the Sets' work. The Joint Steering Committee also agreed to take responsibility for contributing to the design of the evaluation process and of the third, final large community change conference, a task that was carried out at a second meeting. During the meeting, representatives of the Sets discussed and approved the idea of working together to invite managers 'one level up' in their organisations to the third large change conference.

The Third Large Change Conference

The third large change conference took place one year after the start of the project. Because of the reluctance of external managers to confirm their attendance, this time the Steering Committee decided to prevent another failure and, based on their learning from the second large change conference, opted for a reduced agenda. The third large change conference was aimed at sharing the learning between Sets, agreeing how to connect with other initiatives, and discussing what to do in the future. Sets were given one hour before the meeting of the first session to summarize what they had learned. Groups used a range of methods to communicate their experiences, from slides to artifacts, from flipcharts to anecdotes. The second session was used to reveal the early outcomes of the evaluation process. Finally, the Sets met to explore hopes and desires for the future, both for each of the Sets and for the programme as a whole. The results of this latter session were taken up by the Joint Steering Committee that met in the afternoon. The Joint Steering Committee decided to remain in place after the conclusion of the CBMDI and to own and disseminate the results of the evaluation process and to support the promotion of new initiatives. These included the possible establishment of a programme of RALS-facilitated training that would allow members of the CBMDI to extend their experiences to others in the organisations. At the same time, some of the RALS decided to remain in place and pursue their activity on a self-organizing basis. Six months after the conclusion of the initiatives at least two of them were still meeting on a regular basis.

Discussion

Reynolds (1998, 1999) suggests that critical reflection is characterized by a number of specific features that set it apart from individual-centered methods of understanding reflective activities in organisations. Critical reflection is about questioning organisational assumptions. It pays attention to power relations in all its forms; it is democratic and forward-looking, i.e. it focuses on expanding the ways of making sense of work in all its aspects and of the ways of talking and acting in the organisations. (Reynolds, 1998, 1999; Vince, 2002; Blackler and Kennedy, 2003). By addressing and monitoring these aspects in all phases of our project, it was possible to prevent some of the known shortcomings of the more individualized approaches to learning. These shortcomings include tendencies to operate within existing managerial agendas and assumptions; to frame change in individualistic and heroic ways; to become 'isn't it all awful' forums that provide psychological support to participants, but do little to address the root causes of organisational problems (Vince and Martin, 1993; Pedler, 1997b).

The CBMDI project was a practical test of the working hypothesis that tools, designs and techniques of the two related traditions of action learning and organisational development can be combined in order to promote organisational reflection and individual and organisational change. (Morgan and Ramirez, 1983; Pedler, 1997a; 1999). The effectiveness of this approach was encouraging, although certain aspects require further development.

The evaluation process of the CBMDI, based on a number of focus group interviews with project participants, their managers and colleagues, revealed positive, deep, and long-lasting effects. Most participants reported that the programme had given them new tools to manage themselves more effectively in their roles, such as improved practical understanding of partnership working, cross-boundary management, working with the power dynamics of the organisation, enhanced delegation skills and applying reflection techniques as everyday managerial tools. As one participant put it 'the RALS changed my way of managing'. Some organisational results were short term and tangible, such as new cross-boundary innovations; others were long term and intangible. Two participants said that the programme helped them stay in the NHS. A rough calculation revealed that costs to the organisation in recruitment and training new managers at their level of seniority was equal to cost of the CBMDI itself.

We believe that the most relevant aspects of learning lay in the province of tacit and aesthetic managerial and organisational 'knowing' (Nicolini et al., 2003). Statements such as 'the most important thing about this programme for me was that I could finally say aloud: 'Folks, I made a mess!'' were heard in different forms and on different occasions. We believe this pointed to the success of the programme in establishing a 'structure that reflects', i.e. a cognitively and emotionally protected space that allowed participants to experiment with new ways of being at work. Additionally, the programme contributed to the development of a culture of organisational reflection and individual development within it. The evaluation process confirmed that the programme, through its design and facilitation practices, created a 'social space' that functioned as a 'zone of proximal development' (Engeström 1996; 1999) and a 'holding environment' (Winnicott, 1965), that allowed for organisational and individual development to occur. Critical to this was the recognition of the power of emotion and the search for a balance between support and questioning. The overall design of the CBMDI and the facilitation practices established a setting that was both a source of anxiety through its questioning and reflecting practices and a container of anxiety. Emotional support was a key

element in the life of the Sets, and it was successfully channeled outwards, thus preventing the groups from becoming self-pitying groups. Because of the inevitable anxiety that learning and change arouses, critical reflection needs to be sustained by practices that guarantee emotional containment (Bion, 1985; Vince, 2002). Emotional containment is indispensable to making 'standing back from daily pressure' possible, allowing new meanings to emerge in conversation, and allowing for experimenting with new ways of managing in the organisation.

The CBMDI also showed how reflective activity deeply questions existing organisational assumptions. This was achieved by promoting a critical stance through the use of questioning practices and providing alternative theoretical tools for thinking. The critical dimension of the reflection activity was rooted in the sustained attention to issues of power within the RALSs and in exposing the unsaid and unsayable assumptions of NHS organizing processes.

A key ingredient of the programme and its success was the recognition of the centrality of the distribution of power as a critical aspect of all organizing processes and especially those concerned with development and change. By attending to questions of the distribution of power in all the forums of the programme, participants were able to deepen their understanding of its nature, manifestations and ways of operating. This provided them with a new awareness of their own capacities to influence power and gave them a set of practical tools to 'work the system better', thereby enhancing their capacity to intervene in producing and steering change. As the evaluation revealed, several participants said that the project had enabled them to see their organisations as systems they could influence.

This bottom-up empowering strategy was successful, but had its limits. As the previous sections illustrate, the empowering process worked well at individual and Set levels, but was less successful at the organisational level. While we successfully managed to create structures and places to reflect, the effort to create the structure that reflects, i.e. to sow seeds of a reflecting organisation, proved far more challenging. It is true that one of the outcomes of the project was the establishment of a Joint Steering Committee that constituted a potential future source of influence in the organisation. However the Joint Steering Committee collectively found it difficult to increase top managers' sensitivity to cross-boundary issues and to cascade the reflection and learning to other parts of the organisation.

The project was fraught with difficulties, but there were lessons to be learned.

First, our original idea to put in place a collective actor, the 'structure that reflects' that would constitute a pressure group within the organisation, was maybe too ambitious. We believe this was due in part to our over optimistic time frame; one year was too short to trigger broader organisational effects.

Second, difficulties stemmed from the particular characteristics of the multi-Set arrangements. In the CBMDI multi-set project environment, energy tended to be generated within Sets. Normally, establishing boundaries around Sets is critical to the generation of energy, but nevertheless, it is still possible to channel this energy outwardly by having Set members using the group as a base for launching new ways of being and doing. However, the Set remained the reference group and source of identity for participants. We observed many times that the Sets, and not the project as a whole, was the more important source of

identification, the focus of participants' care. As one said: 'in the RALSs there is a high level of energy. When we attempt to connect with the chaotic system outside, this energy gets drained, sapped. We return to the RALSs to recharge'. Put in other terms, a certain level of 'insularity' is necessary and inevitable for this model to work, although efforts can be made to prevent this insularity from becoming counterproductive. In order to develop a common aim and goal and turn the collection of Sets into a 'collective actor', one has first to overcome this centrifugal force. The fact is that the more each Set develops its own history, language, and priorities, the more Sets become effective at empowering and energizing their members, the more work is required to identify the broad aims of the project to work collectively at organisational levels. On the other hand, disregarding the centrifugal forces of Sets and trying to appeal to individuals does not work, as we found in our second large change conference. In short, a multi-Set project is much more difficult to mobilize than a single aim change-oriented coalition. For the same reason, the shift between contributing to the Set and to the 'structure that reflects' may not be perceived by participants as having consequences, insofar as sources of energy and motivation in the two are profoundly different. Pedler (1996b, 1997c) suggests that in order to increase the power of RALSs 'the Set may have to be larger than usual' (1997c, p.261). It is clear that a 'set of Sets' cannot reproduce the same mechanisms that glue small Sets together because large groups behave and perform in very different ways. They are much less efficient as 'holding environments' (Winnicott, 1965) and are, in fact, anxiety-producing situations. Participants will have to be convinced to turn their primary attention, responsibility and caring concerns away from their initial focus, themselves and their 'comrades in adversity' in the Sets, and redirect them outwards to their organisations. In short, RALSs are powerful ways to begin the process of critical reflection and change, to 'unfreeze the organisation', but they may not be the best way to bring the change to fruition, unless the Sets are recast as small 'action research teams'.

Our third source of difficulty is related to our attempts to 'engage with a system' like the NHS. Some of our difficulties were due to the particular local circumstances such as turmoil in the organisational environment and top management 'merry go round' created by the various mergers. Our experience in this project, however, suggests that some of the difficulties may have been the result of a misleading notion of 'engagement', based partly on a fantasy of 'wholeness' and 'imagined stability' that may have hampered out action instead of helping it. The notion of 'engagement' provides a powerful language for addressing the necessary relational and political activities for a programme like the CBMDI to connect with the rest of the organisation, but it also fosters the image of the organisation as an integrated whole that speaks with one voice and with which it is possible to negotiate, i.e. to 'engage'. Vince (2002) notes that 'imagined stability' and unity is at times endorsed and supported by corporate rhetoric within a political process aimed at steering actions and change in a particular direction. By colluding with the fears and anxieties generated by a change perspective, by sustaining the fantasy of the existence of a unitary organisation capable of supporting projections and solving all problems, ('the organisation could, if only it wished'), sources of resistance to change are powerfully increased. As Vince puts it 'the avoidance of the power relations that inform attempts to manage change, limits managers' abilities to find ways of enacting their authority that are inclusive and open to view' (Vince, 2002b, p.1206).

In highly politicized organisations like the NHS, the notion of a unitary, stable, and coherent organisation is only a fantasy, albeit a useful fantasy that helps contain anxieties. This fantasy is somewhat nurtured by the UK government which for generations have tried to 'put the system under control' using planned, rational approaches that assume the existence of a

ordered, unitary organisation. Members of NHS organisations, in fact, deal with totally different daily experiences of loosely coupled organisations in which the existence of multiple perspectives, interests, and ways of representing the world, creates inevitable linguistic and practical contradictions, inconsistencies and paradoxes (Law and Singleton, 2003). In this context, ‘engaging with the system’ can only mean establishing partial connections, transient ties and negotiated alliances with one or another of the existing and emerging constituencies. It follows that establishing temporary connections, learning and becoming skilled in knowing when, with whom and how to connect, and when such connections become an unnecessary burden and should be dropped, is not only legitimate, but is also a sign of managerial strength and wisdom. Many participants of the CBMDI learned that their job was not so much to get rid of dilemmas, ambiguities and problems, but to accept that these are integral to their managerial work. Consequently, the results of the project suggest that in order to promote empowerment from the bottom up, innovative and flexible strategies will need to be adopted and innovative and flexible ideals and expectations regarding the meaning of ‘engagement’ need to be embraced.

Final remarks

In this paper we have described the role of public reflection as a basis for learning and change at individual, group and organisational levels. Most reflective activities focus on individual and not on organisational development. Our experience of the CBMDI suggests that reflection works at individual and organisational levels if it is public, participative and authorized. Working with a large group of middle managers in the UK National Health Systems we developed a large organisational development-based change management initiative that combined elements of traditional OD and critical Action Learning traditions.

Despite the size of the NHS and the conflicting interests that are its main characteristic features and the massive changes in the shift to Primary Care Trusts, the programme provided the managers with new skills and tools for working with the realities of a fragmented and politicized organisation. This was achieved by devising a model of reflection that emphasized the importance of learning from real life issues. These were embedded in the four phases of work: Consultation Syndicates, large change conferences, Reflective Action Learning Sets and an extended participatory evaluation process. Working together with a steering committee that formed an internal referent group, these elements represent a unique combination of critical reflection and Action Learning models of the organisational development tradition that created the necessary leverage to support organisational change efforts across a wide spectrum.

The CBMDI programme demonstrated that it is possible to create a hybrid model combining critical organisational reflection that questioned organisational assumptions and individually-focussed learning activities of Reflective Action Learning Sets. At the same time, the programme also highlighted a number of issues that emerge from such a hybridization and that will need further consideration.

The programme was evaluated for effectiveness and evidence of change in cross-boundary partnership arrangements. Everything pointed to critical requirement for learning being an awareness of the power of emotion in the search for a balance between support and

questioning. Winnicott's idea of the 'holding environment' and holding to democratic principles and ideas about the distribution of power were especially relevant.

The programme had its limits from which much was learned. These include resisting having an over-optimistic timeframe; Recognising that RALSs would generate insulating forces that would be counterproductive in addressing organisation-wide issues; and the mythical sway of ideas of engaging with a system, the NHS, that is presented as a stable integrated organisation only through corporate rhetoric to achieve political ends. Coming to terms with this fantasy, enabled participants in the CBMDI to become skilled in knowing when, with whom and how to connect and when such connections become burdens and needed to be dropped. The CBMDI helped reformulate the meaning of engagement in ways that promoted managerial effectiveness.

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