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Living Better: Making Management Research Relevant

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Refereed Paper

Introduction

There is continuing concern that management research and theory development favours rigour over relevance and therefore does not become 'practical' in the sense of influencing what practitioners do, think or say (Kieser et al. 2015). While many papers might cite relevance as a concern or purpose, the term lacks definition and can have different meanings in different contexts that are occasionally contradictory (Nicolai & Seidl, 2010). That prominence given to rigour is often seen in the priority given to research as an output that can meet the requirements of largely US-based journals.

In this paper, we seek to show how action learning can serve to bridge between the academic world and the world of practice; and how academic work, written up mainly for the purpose of providing a research output and proving value via rigour, can link with practice in a process that provides relevance through action and learning in an action learning set. A second purpose arises from the action learning process itself. Once participants begin working on their challenges and problems, asking questions and seeking ways forward, knowledge is likely to be created. Thus, in a potentially reverse movement on the bridge, knowledge generated in practice by learners can cross over to the academic world.

To show how this can be done, we will first consider recent criticisms of management and business research concerning its disconnection from practice, and consider a response to this problem in the form of a Knowledge Translation (KT) value-chain (Thorpe et al. 2011). We then employ this idea in reporting on work with a financial services organization. In the case, we began with a recently published academic paper involving one of the authors (Hines and Gold, 2015) that contained the key concepts that provided the impetus for action and learning. We conclude by suggesting that there is significant potential for working with action learning both as a vehicle for tackling intractable problems and knowledge translations.

The Problem of Management and Business Research

The UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has sought to promote research that has 'demonstrable' impact that goes beyond academic acceptance through papers, reports and conferences, to show evidence of use by policy-makers and practitioners. This reflects the definition of research by Research Councils UK (RCUK) as 'the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy'. RCUK also

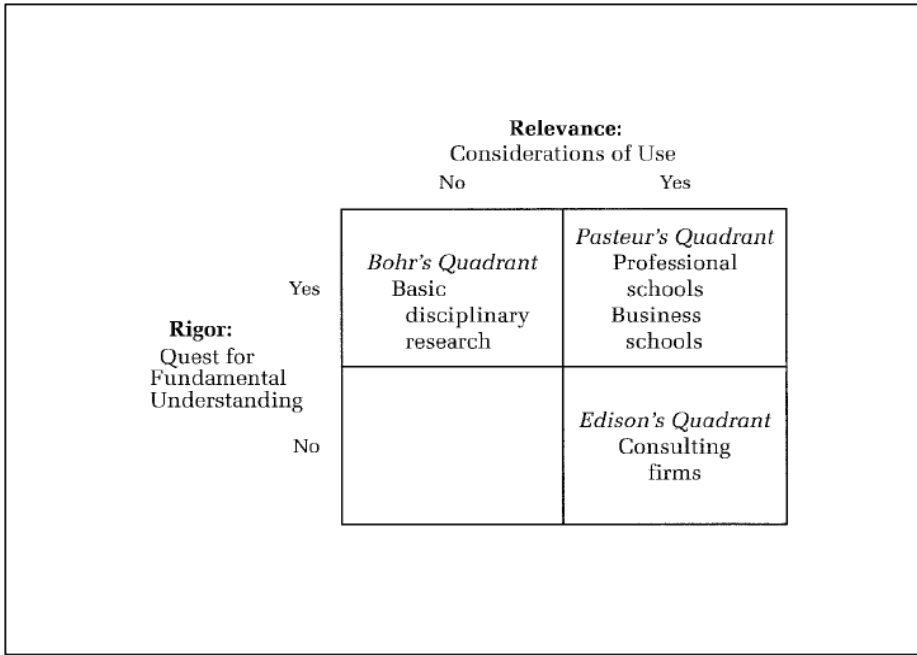
publishes an annual report on impact (RCUK 2014). However, elsewhere there have been concerns about the measurement of impact, including whether some consequences of research can be undesirable and have unintended consequences (Butler 2010).

The problem of research and impact has a long pedigree. Writing in 1929, the philosopher A.N. Whitehead argued that the rigour of scientific enquiry should include use value as part of the process so that it could contribute to a 'three-fold urge: (i) to live, (ii) to live well, (iii) to live better.' The fundamental point here is that the production of knowledge should not be disconnected from its use. However, for much of the 20th century, and in many areas of research, concerns of disconnection or worse have persisted. Disconnection problems can exist at local and even individual levels, at the levels of organizations, policy-makers and government or even at wider social or inter-national levels. This ought to be the position of research and, in some fields, this connection can be discerned. Commentators such as Nicholas Maxwell (2011) suggest that because academic inquiry has been driven by the primary purpose of knowledge-acquisition and technological know-how, it mostly stays on this path, creating more and more specialized disciplines and sub-disciplines, which celebrate their achievements in the form of publications and conferences only involving their specialized memberships. Maxwell refers to this as knowledge-inquiry and shows how the means become the ends as knowledge is produced but seldom put into practice, producing over time what we now call the research-practice gap. This gap stretches across many areas of research and is particularly evident in the social sciences such as management and business - the very areas of research that might be expected to deal with problems of significance to our lives. Maxwell points the finger at academic research caught in this knowledge-inquiry trap that succeeds in developing knowledge and even technological know-how but only in ways that disconnect it from problems of living and from what is needed to 'resolve' these challenges.

Other commentators argue further that the focus on the production of the theory can lead, not to good practice, but to ideologies that can have damaging effects. For example Ghoshal (2005) argued that the theories presented to students in business schools were 'amoral' but had the potential to promote 'bad' practices through the shaping of the 'normative order'. In recent times, academics have been blamed for their part in the Global Financial Crisis, where Krugman (2012) observed that 'economists have been part of the problem, not part of the solution'.

A key part of the problem pertinent to those working in the social sciences, have been the efforts to copy the natural sciences so as to demonstrate rigour, privileging scientific theorising and model building, which Bennis and O'Toole (2005) have dubbed 'physics envy'. In Economics, for example, the discipline has been largely concerned with models, mathematical proofs, market solutions and claims of value-freedom (Pfeffer 2005). Many other social sciences have also prioritised rigour at the expense of relevance in this way, socializing their doctoral students through teaching them to make their contributions through published outputs (Lariviere, 2012).

Stokes (1997) saw the tension between rigour and relevance as a set of choices which could find reconciliation as shown in Figure 1:



**Figure 1: The choices between rigour and relevance
Adapted from Stokes (1997).**

Thus research can be basic in order to improve understanding but without consideration of use. The danger here is that this understanding goes no further, and generates specialisations that distort the means to become ends in themselves. Where research is applied, as in consulting organisations, this can be highly relevant but lacking in rigour via the continuous and largely unquestioning pursuit of the next improvement. The third possibility is referred to as Pasteur’s quadrant because the research that led to the discipline of microbiology was rigorous but was also simultaneously applied, thus reconciling rigour with relevance and provoking new possibilities. Interestingly, in Stokes’ model, business schools appear in this quadrant, but perhaps this is a reflection of original intent that is now part of an illusion or delusion (Alvesson 2013)

The disconnection of business and management research in the UK is reinforced by the publication of a journal ranking list by the Association of Business Schools, which some have described as a ‘fetishism’ leading to a ‘perversion’ (Wilmott, 2011). Earlier Hambrick (1994) had referred to ‘closed’ incestuous loop’ among the writers of management research who were simultaneously both the producers and consumers of research outputs, with judgments of success based on the consumption by other writers who could cite a work in their next production rather than showing how it served the needs of managers and practitioners. Perhaps this dynamic was also working to counter the good intentions of the UK’s Advanced Institute of Management (AIM), set up in 2002 to improve the quality of research in business schools so that it played a part on contributing to the country’s economic competitiveness; in other words, management research needed to become more relevant and practical. However, as argued by Macdonald et al. (2015), it seems that those who were selected to participate in AIM were more oriented towards the requirements of publishing in highly ranked journals so as to fulfil requirements for the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), now the Research Excellence Framework (REF). We await the judgment of

the REF in terms of its assessment of impact of research.

Concern about the status of management research has a long history (Pearce and Huang 2012) with some journals such as the Academy of Management Journal seeking to encourage research that was more relevant to practice (Rynes, 2007). There have also been various efforts to frame research in relation to problems and issues in a context of application so that it is relevant to practice (Gibbons et al, 1994; Van de Ven 2007; Panza and Thorpe 2010)), although progress still needs to be made (Hodgkinson and Starkey 2011).

In Maxwell's (2011) wisdom-inquiry the 'problems of living rationally' should form the basis of research so that actions to tackle the problems are considered and imagined before the acquisition of knowledge. The starting point for research in universities should be to articulate the 'problems of living' at individual, social and global levels so that possible solutions and actions can be proposed and critically assessed. Knowledge would not be pursued or acquired for its own sake, nor become trapped in the academic *cul de sac* of papers and conferences that do not go further. Crucially, there is a cyclical aspect of pursuing knowledge that tackles problems that then provides feedback to begin the process again. The cyclical features of wisdom-inquiry opens the door to methodologies that allow a critical analysis of relevant issues to our lives and an orientation to taking action and learning from that action, such as action learning. In the next section, we consider how a theory of knowledge translation and propose that action learning can become the vehicle for a reverse translation by producing academic work that seeks to influence practice concerning issues of importance to our lives.

A Theory of Knowledge Translation

One solution to the problem of the prioritizing of rigour over relevance in the academy is the idea of the Knowledge Translation Value-Chain (KTV-C) (Thorpe et al. 2011) which considers the different kinds of impact that could widen the scope of research, depicted as a series of stages: (Figure 2).

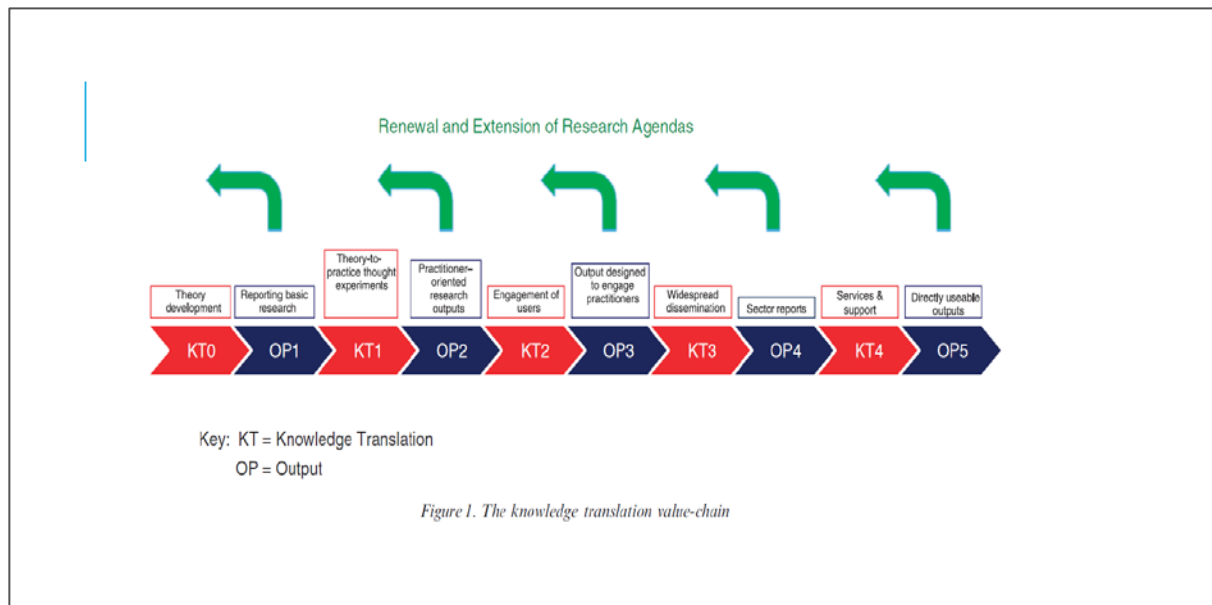


Figure 2: A Knowledge-Translation Value-Chain

Source: Thorpe et al. (2011)

This value-chain can be seen a bridge, at one end of which is knowledge created for academic purposes (OP1 & OP2), and at the other is applied within a practice environment. How does this knowledge move from one end of the bridge to other? And crucially, how can it move in the direction of the green arrows in Fig. 2, that is, from practice to theory?

However, in the model as proposed by Thorpe et al, the value chain moves basically from Left to Right; from academic research to practice. The green arrows are outputs from the former to the latter, but do they indicate a possible reverse flow of outputs from practice as informing academic research? There is no indication in Fig 2 of any opportunity for Maxwellian “wisdom inquiry” (2011) where the “problems of living rationally” should form the basis for academic research. We understand why this model was produced, the authors being academics engaged in and concerned about the effects of the Research Excellence Framework, and in particular its concern for “Impact” (Ref needed?) From a practice perspective, we propose a transformation of the linear KTV-C either by a second chain moving in the reverse direction, or by bending the chain, creating loop or circle, whereby findings from practice can influence the direction and purpose of academic research.

We also propose that action learning is a proper vehicle for making this reverse crossing or completing the circle, along with action research and the other “action modalities (Raelin 1999), where ‘knowledge is produced in the service of, an in the midst of, action’ (Raelin 1999, p.117). As traditionally formulated, based on the work and practice of Revans (1983), the primary concern of action learning, its ‘first principle’, is the relationship between learning and problems where the problem is ‘real’. That is, the problem is not just an exercise in thinking or learning a theory; if the problem has salience for the learner, it can provide for action. Central to the consideration is that through questioning insight or Q new possibilities for action can be formulated. Revans gave particular emphasis to this process and contrasted it with a reliance on P, or programmed knowledge, arguing that in situations where learners are faced with a problem ‘they do not know how to address’, it is through Q

that opens new possibilities. He and others have even denounced the tendency to give prominence to P (cf. Mumford 1995) and this might include the efforts and outputs of academics and business schools.

Revans' seminal works date mainly from the 1960s, 70s and 80s, and largely before the advent of the digital age. Castells (1996) highlights the subsequent explosion of available information, or P, and new areas of expertise or generations of 'knowledge workers', resulting from the accumulative and generative power of ICT. Leaving aside the important debates concerning the movement from data to information to knowledge, it should be evident that we live in a world in which digital technologies fuse with physical and biological advances to produce a P-rich world (Schwab 2016). Academic work in business and management is part of this accumulation although, as we argue above, too much of it remains as data to information which does not then become accessed by individuals as knowledge for their use. Crucially, if we take Polanyi's (1975) views on the personal character of knowledge based on 'participation through indwelling' (p.44), we argue that action learning can provide a path to correction.

Case Study: Future & Foresight in a Financial Services Organisation

Hines and Gold (2015) considers a long-running issue of how futures thinking can be integrated into organizations, and highlights some of the reasons for the rare use of futures and foresight methods and ideas. These include a lack of clarity of the meanings of terms, the episodic use and confusion with strategic planning, and non-receptive climates in organizations where managers are too busy and focussed on the short term and everyday. Hines and Gold suggest the need for internal champions to broker and facilitate the integration of futures and foresight processes. A social constructionist approach (Cunliffe 2011) requires internal connections, dialogue and meaning-making by organizational participants to construct a reality recognised as futures and foresight. The work described by Gold & Hines was done via an action learning set established in a medium-sized financial services organization in Yorkshire (FSO).

Hines and Gold (2015) was used as the starting vehicle to help the set to cross the bridge was KT1 moving to OP2 in Figure 2. The intended destination was firstly KT2 to OP3 and then potentially a jump to KT4 and OP5. However, we also recognized that a reverse flow was quite possible, through the questions posed and knowledge generated.

In an attempt to engage with the users in the FSO, Futures and Foresight (F+F) was suggested to one manager who had recently completed a leadership programme. This manager was concerned with the strategic development of the organisation and was aware of the limitations on thinking of the previous 10 years, during which the organisation, and the sector as a whole, had come close to disaster. F+F seemed an attractive new direction to explore. On the basis that once an insider became interested, others could be attracted through conversation, this led to five other managers attending the first meeting of what was to become the action learning set. To quickly provoke interest, the group were asked to respond to three question about the proposed work

1. What is the time horizon for this work?

2. What is the focus for this group?
3. What is the outcome envisaged?

A time horizon of 2025 was quickly agreed but it took longer to find the focus. As newcomers to F+F, the group members found future talk more difficult, and prompts were needed to shift their reliance on past talk feeding present talk. As Aaltonen and Barth (2015) argue, although looking back or hindsight plays a part in F+F thinking, this is mainly concerned with the ability to imagine, create and use futures knowledge.. However, as philosophers such as Gadamer (1999) have often argued, language itself is historically formed and this can tilt conversations in the present in the direction of the past. Further prompting to push the talk towards the future finally produced a focus of: "The Future of FSO Services" and an outcome of: "Sustain why the FSO community is here: Understand how we deliver to ensure we do".

While not especially challenging or insightful, this process provided an entry point for F+F thinking and a step into action learning. F+F is concerned with a time that has not yet happened and where predictability falls and uncertainty rises. We suggested that this started when considering time periods beyond the next 3 to 4 years which means working with what is probable in terms of the continuation of events and activities, but increasingly is concerned with what is possible, plausible, preferable and undesirable or surprising (Micic 2010). Because the FSO had endured a very threatening and difficult period until 2010, and had been recovering since, it was possible to give more prominence to the way F+F could work and the group were happy to move to the next phase of 'doing the work' and begin the action learning process

A future concerning uncertain events fits with what Revans (1983) considered as an intractable problem resisting easy solution. To respond to such uncertainty, questions can be posed where answers are not yet formulated. They can direct attention towards finding knowledge that can reveal the key factors in terms of trends, issues and technologies about future development of the environment that will inform decision-making. For the FSO, such knowledge could concern market conditions, the behaviour of consumers and customers, technology, regulation and the law and general socio-economic-political conditions. Each set member chose their own question to contribute to the overall focus and outcome:

1. Where will the emphasis be on regulation and what do we need to put in place?
2. How will people's attitudes and emotions towards financial needs change across generations? What is the changing landscape of different generations' expectations?
3. How will self-ownership and self-knowledge of services evolve?
4. Will people be able to afford to save and want to save for tomorrow?
5. How will we innovate for success? Are we fit for purpose?
6. How will different generations, especially 20-40 age group, interact with FSO?

These questions led to actions in terms of seeking knowledge from company and sector reports, various experts and also academic and other papers. The data collected formed the basis for a first review of action 8 weeks later. Set members were able accumulate significant bundles of information including freely available documents such as PWC (2014) and more academic papers such as Nienaber et al. (2014). To help sense-making and

articulate learning each member prepared a presentation under two sub-headings – Overview and Actions for the Present. The intention was to link a consideration of the future with possibilities in the present. Figure 2 is an example of these presentations:

**How will people's attitudes and emotions financial needs change across generations?
What is the changing landscape of different generations' expectations?**

- **Overview**
 - Logistics; physical and virtual.
 - Time; rich or poor
 - Usability; Advanced or simplicity
 - Customer experience; 'look and feel'
 - Financial situation; scale of affluence
 - Ease of transaction
 - Connectivity – 'peer to peer'

- Actions for the present**
 - Current customer segment and feeder group. Establish these further to overlay attitudes and emotions of both groups .
 - Personas
 - Insight
 - Review of channels and usability to accommodate segments across generations

Figure 2

This presentation, along with others, was based on multiple sources of information synthesised by two of the group working together. As a first effort to work with F+F, there was a need for the facilitators to guide and direct the set to some extent. By encouraging the group to make the presentations and articulate actions in their own words, they were using language that would be more acceptable to others in the FSO, a process Hines (2000) refers to as the stealth positioning of F+F. A review of learning so far had revealed that F+F had:

'Allowed the time and space to start the development of an internal capability that is aligned to supporting our long term growth aspirations'

'Established a group of key leaders within the FSO to influence decision making, using well-grounded insight to make projections.'

As insiders, they could see how F+F was 'now starting to ground our work in actionable outcomes' furthering the progress of F+F towards acceptance by others, which Hines and Gold (2015) see as a key stage in the recognition of the value of the discipline. One way of doing this was to develop mini-scenarios. Scenarios are probably the most well-known F+F

methods (Wack 1985; Ringland 2010). However, there are doubts about their value (Molitor 2009) and the strong likelihood that as possible futures, they become confused with forecasting and give the impression of controlling uncertainty and lack of predictability. Our approach was to use a simple method to develop mini-scenarios on the basis of the work already completed, not to provide predictions but to consider projections, with an emphasis on possible suggested futures. To encourage joint work and creative talk, we combined two projections to form single mini-scenarios. For example, the following projections were used in the mini-scenario below:

1. FSO uses its influence with the sector to collaborate and inform our regulators
2. FSO supports development and research innovative solutions which provide choice, security and trust

Friday 30 January, 2025

FSO LAUNCHES NEW CUSTOMER PORTFOLIO SITE

FSO together with Partners in the Financial Services Industry has today launched a new service which will give customers the opportunity to see their own personal investment portfolio.

Having the ability to view all their savings and investment, mortgage and pension information from any Financial Services providers in the same place will give customers choice and opportunity.

Once a customer has built their own portfolio of accounts, they will see up to date information on balances, interest rates, risk factors and a forecast of a return on those investments

Working with the regulators, FSO and its Partners, including banks and pension companies, have designed a safe and secure system which puts the customer in control.

Gone are the days of inertia and apathy, the customer will have the opportunity to set goals and pathways to help them obtain the right outcome – be that saving for the holiday of a life-time, or planning for retirement.

Once signed up, all their accounts are linked together and they will be able to move their money between providers.

The making of mini-scenarios stimulated a growing interest and appreciation of the value of F+F and completed the first phase of learning for the group.. As internal advocates for F+F, the set could now work with the mini-scenarios to persuade as part of the key task of integrating F&F into organizational life (Hine & Gold 2015). They provide an image of a possible future that others can engage with, by agreeing or disagreeing, ignoring, judging or asking for further explanations, thus becoming part of a negotiation within a context of argumentation (Shotter 1993).

An opportunity to widen their availability was provided by the FSO's annual leadership event, attended by 500 managers, where the group were able to offer a 30-minute experience which was delivered eight times to groups of 30 managers.

The workshops were highly interactive and introduced attendees to some of techniques such as projects and questions for the future. The exposure to future talk engendered an appreciation of F+F and the scenarios, and also raised questions revealing concerns about the future. including changes to roles and the position of the branch network. It was also a useful feature of the event that both the CEO and Chairman of the Board attended, and participated.

As a result of the interest shown in the mini-scenarios and the experiences of using the F+F tools of F+F, a case was being made that added to the discourse around wider use of F+F in the FSO. The presence of both the CEO and the supported a narrative of the validity of the

process and persuaded others to join in and strengthen the claim (Watson, 1995). This has provided the basis for F+F to be now established or institutionalised in the FSO via:

1. The continuation of F+F action learning group
2. The outcomes from the action learning being are considered in the FSO's strategy
3. F+F becoming a feature of leadership development

Summary

This paper provides a different view to the widely-held opinion that too much business and management research does not move beyond academic publication. Hines and Gold (2015) was published in a refereed journal that takes impact seriously. Nevertheless, the paper seeks to present a way by which F+F as a particular field of understanding could be integrated into an organisation and valued for the contribution it makes to organizational life. The paper advocates the role of internal champions to broker a conversational process and seek to persuade others to join the progressive construction of an F+F text for the organisation. As has been shown elsewhere (e.g. Dovey and Rembach 2015), action research or action learning can be a useful vehicle for supporting such internal champions. Returning to the critique of Maxwell (2011), who argues that the knowledge-inquiry trap disconnects researchers from the problems of living, such as global warming, pollution, poverty, obesity, housing and so on. To respond to such problems, Maxwell advocates a shift to what he calls wisdom-inquiry as concerned with the problems of living, and with realizing justice and value in life. This paper has shown how action learning, can help with the connections between the many reports and inquiries that relate to such issues, but with the impetus of bringing about change and learning in the situation. In another example, Watt et al. (2016) show how action learning sets in different organisations sought to tackle poverty in the Leeds City Region.

A second issue concerns the direction of travel on Thorpe et al's (2011) KTV-C bridge. Starting from KT1 with OP2, the process initially gave prominence to the published paper, or what Revans would have seen as P or programme instruction. Indeed, despite the reverse arrows, the main thrust of KTV-C is in a linear direction, from left to right, and from theory to practice.. We suggest that, given the P-rich world that we now inhabit, it is important to recognize the value of creating the translations based on outputs. In saying this we also want to recognize the cyclical and iterative nature of journeys along the bridge; as is evident in the various texts produced in the FSO case, not only did they provide the impetus to bring about new practices, they also represent a codification of the meanings generated by the members of the action learning group. Revans would have recognized such 'symbiosis' as 'System Gamma' (1982:347) and the data gathered in response to questions posed and the learning that then surfaces provides a rich source of further research for translation and formulation into outcomes in a process that we can call Action Learning Research (Coughlan, 2013; Ogun et al. 2015). In any future consideration of the KTV-C, we suggest that action modes of research, including action learning, be included to accommodate the cycles and iterations that lie at the heart of knowledge generation and creation.

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