Procuring a Sustainable Future:
An Action Learning Approach to the Development and Modeling of Ethical and Sustainable Procurement Practices

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Abstract

This paper contributes to an understanding of the processes by which organisational actors learn how to affect positive and sustainable social change in their local region through ~~via~~ action learning, action research and appreciative inquiry. The paper is based on a critically-reflective account of key findings from an ongoing action research project, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The project is an attempt to alleviate poverty in the Leeds City Region through the identification and spread of 'good practice' in large local organisations. The paper is based on ~~key~~ insights into the tensions involved in accomplishing such modes of action research and action learning in this particular context, and how these findings can relate to similar research in other domains of inquiry, action and cross-organisational learning. Through this, the paper discusses the inherent challenges faced when attempting to use action research and action learning approaches to help large organisations to learn and develop as ethical and sustainable agents.

Keywords

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Introduction

In recent years the concepts of 'sustainable procurement', 'ethical supply chains' (New 2004) and 'sustainable supply chain management' (Walker and Jones 2012) have been understood as 'emerging issues' (Walker and Phillips 2009) that have received critical attention as prospective means by which organisations can avoid their possible negative impacts on both environmental and socio-economic factors. By understanding the supply chain 'beyond organisational boundaries' (Meehan and Bryde 2011), procurement practices have become understood as a central cause and prospective means of alleviating social and environmental issues. Such 'sustainable' orientations challenge the traditionally short-term and short-sighted (i.e., *un*sustainable) perspectives of the supply chain that traditional perspectives of procurement have been charged with failing to recognise. Through the practices and surrounding discourses of ethical and sustainable procurement, organisations have come to understand their 'purchasing power' as one that can equally cause social and environmental harm as much as it has the potential to 'redress imbalances in society' (Walker and Phillips 2009, 569–560), both on a local and global level.

This research forms part of a wider investigation, into the interrelationship between recruitment, employment and procurement practices and the potential of these to impact on poverty in the Leeds City Region (LCR). The wider investigation drew on notions of 'sustainable procurement' (Walker and Phillips 2009; Walker and Brammer 2007; Walker and Jones 2012) in order to explore the relationship between poverty reduction in the LCR and the procurement practices in large local 'Anchor' institutions. In this paper we focus on the processes for researching and developing these practices: those of action learning, action research and appreciative inquiry.

The wider research project was complex and has (to date) taken place over ~~15~~ 18 months. Funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, it involved researchers from Leeds Beckett University, York St John University, and senior managers and professionals from 12 large organisations in the LCR. The planned design was to use appreciative inquiry, action research and action learning to identify what large organisations in the LCR were doing in their current practices of procurement, recruitment and employment that ~~is~~ was helping to alleviate underlying poverty in the region, and to help these organisations to spread this good practice, so that they can do more to alleviate poverty.

Before going on to account for our findings to date, it is worth outlining the three central components of the project. These are: the issue (poverty), the region to which the project seeks to make its impact (the LCR), and the nature of the organisations with whom the action research was conducted ('Anchor institutions').

Poverty

Poverty is a 'wicked' social problem on account of it having many dimensions and numerous potential causes. As Waddock et al (2015, 996) observe, 'wicked problems' are defined as such because they are 'poorly formulated, boundary-spanning, ill-structured issues with

numerous stakeholders who bring different perspectives to the definitions and potential resolution of the issue or problem'. For the purposes of this project, poverty was defined as simply: 'a general lack of sufficient material resources'. To this extent it is understood in a general sense that is not the same as 'food poverty', 'water poverty', or 'fuel poverty', but rather an understanding of these being facets of the central 'wicked' problem (Goulden and D'Arcy 2014). Understood in this way, poverty can be experienced by the unemployed and by those in employment in low paid jobs, This allows organisations to understand their prospective reach in tackling this issue in the broadest sense possible.

The Leeds City Region

The Leeds City Region (LCR) is the largest of all core city regions outside London in terms of output and population (LCREP 2014). Economic output was £55bn in 2013, larger than nine EU countries (ibid). The project aimed to involve 12 'Anchor institutions' in collaborative research and action to explore how through the processes of procurement, recruitment and employment they could take steps towards alleviating poverty in the region.

Anchor institutions

'Anchor institutions' are large institutions with the potential to contribute to the cultural, social and economic vitality of a local economy (Maurrasse 2007). They are 'anchored' in that they are very unlikely to move away from where they are located. Through their size and presence such institutions are likely to play a vital and impactful role in terms of employment, revenue generation and, especially relevant for this paper, their procurement, commissioning or spending patterns (ICIC 2002). Anchor institutions can include organisations such as universities, hospitals, local authorities and also larger private sector organisations. Twelve Anchor institutions took part in this project.

This paper will focus on the processes undertaken by the project, with a brief overview of the outcomes achieved to date. A more thorough review of outcomes will be the subject of further papers.

Three methodologies for learning and inquiry

As an approach for analysing and tackling practical issues and problems, action learning has a long and respected history, from its development by Revans in the 1950s to the present day. Although the most common use of action learning is that participants from a range of different organisations meet to help one another tackle their individual issues (Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook 2005) it is an approach that is also used to enable teams tackle problems and issues they have in common (Edmonstone and Flanagan 2007; Marsick and O'Neil 1999; Rigg 2008). In this project, it was planned to use action learning in two contexts. First, we sought to bring together representatives of the 12 Anchor institutions participating in this project into cross-organisational ~~two~~ action learning sets. Secondly, following this, we planned to help the representatives establish further action learning sets inside each Anchor institution in order to ensure that they progressed with the changes in a self-sustaining manner.

Action research has been undertaken in a number of different forms, but essentially it is a form of research that is used to address real world problems, with researchers acting as

change agents. To this end, action research involves a cycle of activities, of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Gray 2014).
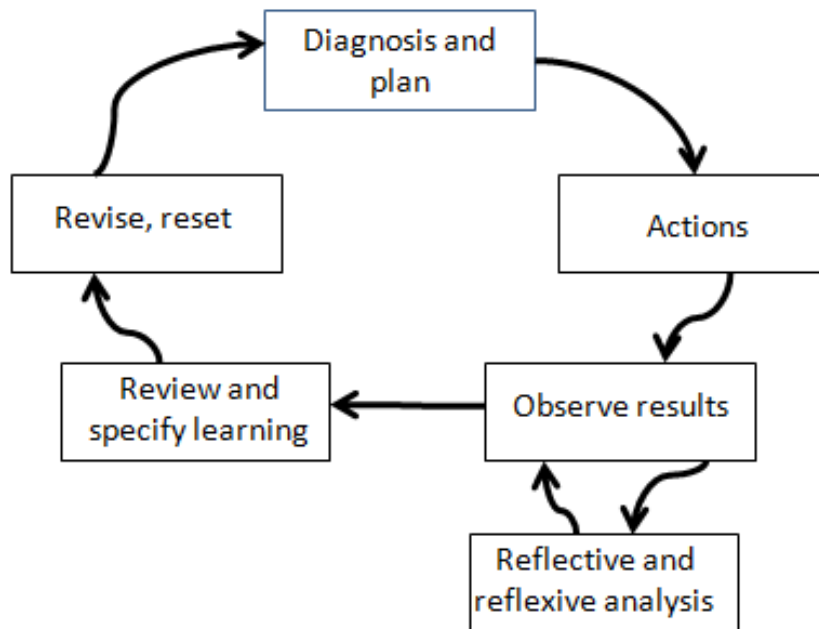

Fig. 1: Action research cycle

A typical action research cycle can be represented as in Fig. 1: it involves agreeing on a focus for the research – in this case practices in procurement, recruitment and employment that could potentially have a positive impact on poverty in the city region - gathering information about it to diagnose and better understand the issues, and plan some actions – for example, spreading good practices; undertaking these ~~some~~ actions; gathering and analysing information on the results of the actions; reviewing what has been learned; considering the focus of the next stage of action; then diagnosing and planning, and so forth. The purpose of action research is thus to change in some way the issue that is the focus of the research (Robson 2011) in a manner that, through the cyclic nature of the process, contains the potential for sustainability. Action research, in a social context, is often conceived of as being participative and democratic, involving researchers and those who are the subject of the research in collaborative action (Bryman 2012; Reason and Bradbury 2001). In this project, the collaborative work was undertaken by the academics from the two universities and ~~the~~ representatives from the 12 Anchor institutions.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry is an approach to research and change that was first developed by David Cooperrider in 1985. Appreciative inquiry (AI) typically focuses on social situations, or performance in organisations. Rather than investigating what is not effective in the situation – i.e. what might be failing and may need to be changed – AI focuses on what *is* effective, what is 'working well', and considers how the positive lessons of effectiveness might be spread. In short, AI:

- explores ideas about what people say is valuable in what they do
- builds on those ideas
- appreciates the positive rather than the problematic
- uses stories of the positive to persuade others to change

Since its first development, appreciative inquiry has been used as an approach to organisational development as well as to research (Reed 2007) and the methods used by Cooperrider and others have been expanded and refined (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2003; Watkins and Mohr 2001). As with action research, with which it is closely associated (e.g. Lundgren and Mohr 2016), appreciative inquiry follows a cycle of activities, sometimes described as in Fig 2. In the first stage (Discovery), information is gathered about positive performance and practices in the area of research. In the second stage (Dream), the researchers consider – on the basis of the positive activity they have discovered – what might be achieved in the future. The third stage (Design), proceeds into more focused planning about what might be achieved, and the final stage (Delivery), involves taking action to produce positive changes. At this point, the cycle may begin again, with analysis of achievements informing the next cycle and allowing further consolidation to be made on the positivity that has been identified, imagined, designed and delivered previously.

Discovery

Delivery   *Dreaming*

Designing
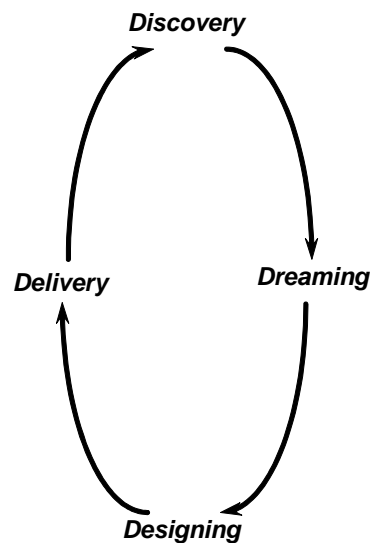
Fig. 2: The appreciative inquiry cycle, based on Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010)

Appreciative inquiry was used in this project as a form of action research. Each Anchor institution nominated a representative to attend cross-organisational meetings, which would form the basis of the action learning sets. These representatives were asked to gather information, using a data-collection sheet, which contained the vocabulary that appreciative inquiry mobilises to facilitate its process (Fig 3), from their own organisations and from their suppliers about positive performance in relation to procurement (the Discovery phase). The results were then shared and discussed in the core group. Representatives were then asked to develop draft action plans for their own organisation, based on what they had found, and to take steps to win backing for these action plans in their organisations.

Organisation:

What worked well?

What made it work well?

What can we learn?

How can we apply this?

Fig. 3: Appreciative inquiry data collection sheet

The research team gathered information on the outcomes and processes of the project by a number of methods:

- Meeting with the CEO and senior teams of each Anchor institution to recruit the organisation to the project
- Taking part in the meetings of the core group of representatives from the Anchor institutions and making notes of the meetings
- Gathering and collating information collected by the representatives
- Meeting with each representative and the senior team from their organisation to discuss how the project could be progressed within the organisation
- Gathering information from each representative at the end of the project about their evaluation of the project (this was done through interviews carried out by a consultant)

This resulted in a rich collection of information about practices in procurement, recruitment and employment that were having a positive impact on poverty, and which could be spread more widely to have an even greater impact. The details of this aspect of the project are beyond the scope and focus of this paper. This activity also generated rich information about the ways in which these three approaches - action learning, action research and appreciative inquiry - could be combined to bring about change. This information was gathered by the researchers over the course of the project, and analysed through regularly sharing perceptions and evaluations of the processes as the project proceeded.

The three methodologies intertwined over the course of the project. They can be visualised (as in Fig. 4) as three strands of a plaited rope, which are to some extent separate and yet combine to work together.
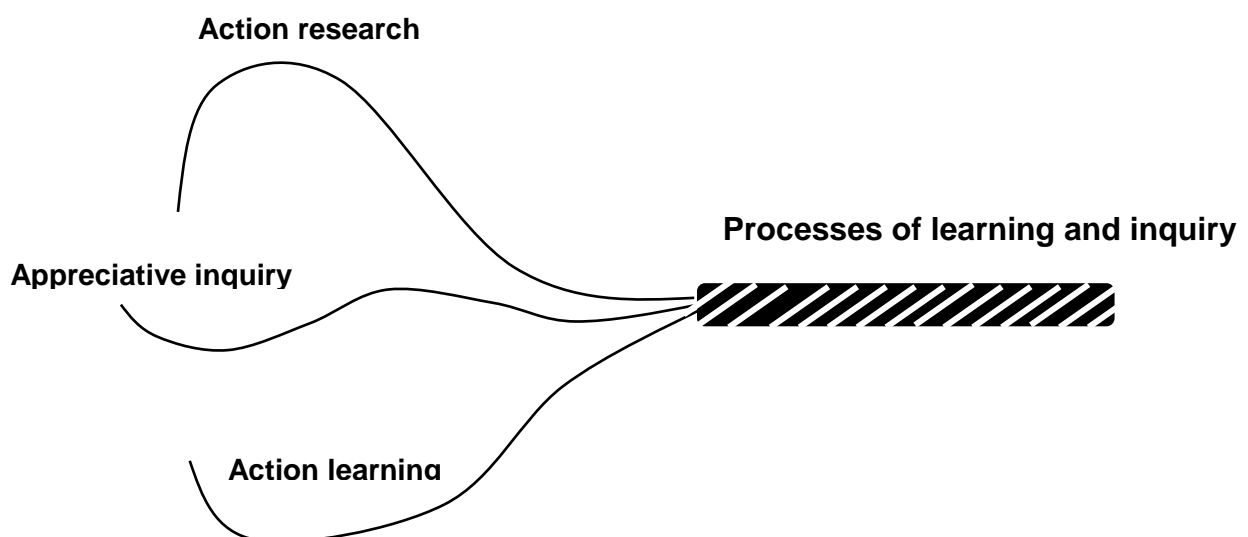
Fig: 4 Three methodologies for learning and inquiry

The project in action

To begin, Anchor institutions were identified and approaches were made to involve them in the project. To recruit Anchors to the project, the research team sought the approval of each organisation's CEO, and a statement of intent from a senior management team. Having indicated what the organisations wanted to achieve from the project via the statement of intent, each Anchor was asked to commit to sending one representative to ~~the~~ meetings of participants in the project, which would take place at six-week intervals, from January 2015 to the autumn of that year (this was later extended to January 2016).

Twelve Anchors were recruited:

Bradford College
City of York Council
First (transport group)
Kirklees Council
Leeds Beckett University
Leeds City College
Leeds City Council
North Leeds Clinical Commissioning Group
Voluntary Action Leeds
Wakefield District Council
Wakefield District Housing

All but one (First, the transport group) were public- or third-sector organisations. The research team did make efforts to recruit other private sector companies with headquarters in the region, but were ultimately unsuccessful.

The representatives from the Anchors were in senior positions in their organisations – such as assistant directors, heads of procurement, heads of human resources, chief service officers. In most cases they were either members of the senior leadership team, or reported to a member of that team.

It was originally planned to hold two separate sets of meetings, one in Leeds and the other in York, each to be for representatives from six Anchors. At the initial launch of the project, however, the representatives said they wished to continue to meet as one group. The core group meetings were a key part of the project. They brought together representatives of the participating Anchor institutions to agree plans, to discuss individual findings, to share ideas about good practice and about factors that actually or potentially could impact on poverty, following principles of collective action research.

At the first meeting, the core group members were briefed thoroughly on the project and its methodologies, and agreed to go back to their organisations and interview up to four people, using an appreciative inquiry frame of reference, about good practices. In the second meeting they shared these good practices and, by identifying common themes, suggested a model ~~framework~~ of activities that appeared to underpin good practice. Further interviews and sharing of findings took place until the fourth meeting, in June 2015, when the representatives were asked to draft an outline action plan for their organisation, and to share it in discussion with other ~~small~~ group members. Meetings between the senior management

team of each Anchor and the research team were then sought, to share the findings of the project to date, and to discuss how the action plans could be carried forward.

In each of the first four core group meetings, leading up to the drafting of individual action plans by participants, some time was devoted to presentations by the research team and to plenary discussions, and some time to discussions in smaller groups (of 4-5 people) where progress was reported and plans discussed. In these early meetings, the small group discussions were recognisable as action learning set interactions in their dynamics of mutual inquiry and support. Each meeting lasted half a day, giving sufficient time for these activities.

The appreciative inquiry interviews had revealed many examples of existing good practice (see Box 1 for examples), where procurement and employment processes were impacting on poverty in the region. In most cases, however, it was difficult to provide hard measures of the extent of the impact on underlying poverty – for example in terms of the effect of providing paid work experience, or the effect of including social value statements in the procurement process. One action point for many of the core group members in the fourth meeting was for their organisation to develop better methods of mapping procurement expenditure against local social factors.

Box 1 Examples of good practice

Using Equality and Diversity (E&D) criteria to evaluate Tenders where E&D is considered 'highly significant' E&D criteria make up 10% of the overall score. We offer free E&D training to suppliers.

Building social responsibility into the procurement process. For example, the Living Wage question is now a pass/fail question in the procurement process. Contractually bound – so if [the supplier] stops paying the living wage, the contract is breached.

A programme to provide paid work experience to unemployed people who only lack recent work experience on their cv, but who otherwise are close to the jobs market.

Proposal to be accredited Living Wage Employer, guarantee that all staff and contractors are on Living Wage. Likely to be phased to come into place as contracts are renewed.

Added 400 new SMEs to suppliers last year. Increasing local provision and local spend.

At the request of the project sponsor, the research team steered the core group discussions towards procurement practices in particular in the first months of the project, and an additional piece of research at this time was for core group members to gather information about the procurement expenditure of their organisation. Only nine core group members were successful in gathering this information. From this it was found that these nine Anchors were collectively spending about £1.4bn each year, with at least £720m being spent in the region. With multiplier effects, this local expenditure was calculated as being worth between £786m and £1.1bn to the region. Part of the July core group meeting was devoted to sharing and discussing these figures and considering the potential impact of spending an extra 5% - a relatively small increment – within the region.

Core group members were interested in research and developments elsewhere, and the research team sought out and provided accounts of other initiatives, primarily in the UK and the US. In the meetings in the autumn of 2015, speakers with experience of working with organisations to achieve sustainable social actions were invited to make presentations to the core group meetings.

By the early autumn of 2015, the project had recorded some key achievements:

- It had found (and shared) a range of practices within individual organisations, particularly related to procurement, that appeared to have a positive impact on poverty

- Through identifying common themes in these examples, it had developed a model of factors that could act together to produce this positive impact

- It had identified patterns of expenditure on procurement from nine of the Anchor institutions

- It had led to improved communication and networking between core group members that had led to ~~some~~ collaborative work with positive social outcomes between some of the Anchors

However, the planned move to agreeing action plans within individual organisations was taking longer than expected. There were delays in arranging meetings with some of the senior management teams. There were difficulties in setting up action learning sets inside the different organisations, in order to get to the next stage of the action research – taking further action.

In September, October and November 2015 the focus of the core group activity moved towards employment practices, and core group members were asked to seek out examples of good employment practices in their organisations. In the October meeting, examples were structured, using the framework for 'good work' proposed by Sweeney (2014).

Following the final scheduled meeting of the core group, in January 2016, evaluation interviews were carried out with each core group member by a consultant associated with the research team. A sub-group of members agreed to meet again to discuss progressing changes to procurement practices. This resulted in a further action learning set composed of procurement managers.

At the time of writing, dissemination conferences are planned, and there are plans for further papers analysing matters specific to procurement practices in this social context. Funding is being sought from sponsors to continue with work arising from the project.

Discussion

The project has to date made some progress with action research, action learning and appreciative inquiry into the use of procurement processes for alleviating poverty in the LCR – and to a lesser extent with research into the use of certain employment practices. Certain

good practices have been identified in the Anchor institutions taking part in this project, and by their suppliers, as well as in other initiatives in the UK and the US. Based on the inquiries carried out by core group members, a model for achieving good practice has been developed that highlights the need for:

- leadership at all levels within Anchors
- collaboration within and across organisations
- a focus on social value
- experimentation, learning and adjustment of initiatives

The research has shown that there are certain strategies used by Anchors to increase the social value of procurement processes – including, for example, ways of establishing good communication with small and medium-sized businesses within the region that might supply goods or services, and ways of providing training for them in the procedures for tendering contracts. Some procurement initiatives that create added social value appear not to generate extra costs for the purchasing organisation. However, this is not always the case, and there are some issues and dilemmas, such as establishing who within the organisation ~~that~~ will bear any extra costs associated with a focus on social values, and who will shoulder any extra responsibilities to which additional actions give rise - such as monitoring suppliers' actions in relation to social value elements of a contract, for example offering and maintaining good quality apprenticeships.

The project has also revealed some tensions regarding the use of these learning and research methodologies in this context.

The collaborative nature of the learning and research appeared to be one of the barriers to recruiting more private sector organisations. At one stage, the researchers were in preliminary discussions with two large organisations from the same sector – but each was reluctant to become involved in a project that might involve revealing information about their practices to a competitor.

For those representatives of Anchor institutions who enrolled on the project, the first stages of action research - exploring the current situation – worked well. There was enthusiastic and productive inquiry, collaboration and sharing. The appreciative inquiry approach to research produced valuable results, generating a number of case studies of good practice. The collaborative research approach, with academics and practitioners working together, discovered much more about practices within the Anchors than could have been discovered by other means. However, the transition into delivery and action did not occur as quickly as planned. This was partly due to the uncertainty over budgets in local authority and health organisations. This may be a result of the relatively short timescale of the project. As part of the research into initiatives elsewhere, the core group heard from the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), who have been working for five years with one large local authority in England, and for two years with another smaller local authority on projects to alleviate poverty through procurement practices. Delay in moving into new action may also be a function of the size of the Anchor institutions. Large organisations, by their nature, are faced by numerous demands for new initiatives, and a project such as this one is unlikely to become a top priority for a senior management team. In the timescale of the project, the Anchors were faced by a number of challenges, including policy changes from a new national government, various austerity measures, the proposed reorganisation of regional government, and a change in political control.

However, whilst the planned transition into action did not occur in more Anchors as quickly or as smoothly as planned, there has been transition into the action stages of action research and appreciative inquiry. At the time of writing, progress is being made with projects within five Anchors, and in the January 2016 review of the project, three Anchors reported planned changes in procurement practices to achieve greater social value, such as mapping expenditure to identify the potential for targeting more spending within the region, and greater use of procurement contracts to create access to jobs for local people who are out of work and living in deprived communities. More generally, representatives reported raised aspirations in their organisations to engage with social value concepts and to use them to promote better work in the LCR, and some representatives reported an increased awareness of the potential for changing certain employment strategies to benefit workers in low paid, entry-level jobs, such as targeted training and development, making more progression opportunities available, and providing more fringe benefits that directly save employees money, or stretch take-home pay (e.g. child care or healthcare provision).

During the project, three Anchors co-operated in a *Help the Aged* campaign in West Yorkshire to support an initiative centred on reducing loneliness of vulnerable older people, and two Anchors collaborated to set up an in-project secondment to drive forward elements of the West Yorkshire Low Pay Charter. As a direct result of the project, one of the Anchors organised a cross-city conference to stimulate opportunities for other stakeholders to recognise the potential to use procurement to encourage better jobs in the LCR.

Six Anchors continue to collaborate through a procurement sub-group, convened towards the end of the project, which plans to meet on a regular basis to review practice and report on trials under way in their organisations.

It was intended that action learning would play a key part in the project. The research team planned that the core group would act as an action learning set. It was also part of the plan that the project groups subsequently established within each Anchor institution would function as action learning sets. We noted above the potential for action learning sets to address issues they have in common, as discussed by Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook (2005), Edmonstone and Flanagan (2007) and Rigg (2008).

Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook (2005) argued that a 'classical principle' of action learning was that it focused on organisational problems, rather than on personal development, although they observed a drift towards a personal development focus in more recent times. However, 'business-driven' action learning could focus on tackling organisational issues. Edmonstone and Flanagan (2007) evaluated a programme that included business-driven action learning sets comprising Area Improvement Teams working on community projects. Rigg (2008) cited a number of examples of action learning designed to support capacity development and performance within an organisation, and provided one example of cross-organisational partnership working based on action learning.

In this project, the issue being addressed was the social problems of poverty, and whilst all the Anchor institutions had drafted statements of intent to support the project, the core group of representatives were not mandated to achieve joint outcomes (as in Edmonstone and Flanagan 2007). The research team planned for the core group primarily to be a forum for sharing information and for supporting individual members as they explored practice within

their own organisations, and then set about bringing about change. Action learning processes were used within the core group meetings.

The tensions encountered when using action learning processes in this situation included issues related to the stability of membership of the action learning set(s), and the ownership of the problem(s) investigated.

Group stability was affected by changes in the representatives attending the core group meetings from Anchors, and by changing patterns of small group formation within the overall group of 12. Both of these factors weakened the potential for ongoing development of trusting personal relationships, and continuity of conversations about plans and progress that can arise when the same people meet regularly as part of an action learning set. As Edmonstone and Flanagan (2007) found in the project they studied, the arrival of new group members who need bringing up to speed can be distracting.

The ownership of the problem(s) investigated was challenged to some extent by steering from the project sponsor, and by a desire on the part of the research team to shape the project by achieving action points in common across all group members. These may be features of all action learning sets that aim to work together on joint problems. In this case, the specific shaping from outside the group included: the guidance that the core group would focus for the first six months on procurement issues (rather than employment issues, or on *either* procurement or employment). A second significant shaping request was for all group members to devise an action plan at a certain time.

These tensions between focusing on common areas for action and the potential for individual members to explore different needs and interests, and between achieving common outcomes (in this case action plans) and the potential for members to pursue different individual aims or follow different timescales, may be a feature of all action learning projects that aspire to collective goals.

The organisational focus of the core group discussions was also evident in a limited explicit focus on introspection about personal learning that is often a characteristic feature of action learning sets in more recent times (Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook 2005; Rigg 2008). However, personal development outcomes were reported by nearly a half of core group members in interviews at the end of the project. These outcomes centred on greater confidence from a wider understanding of the issues, and better practice, and from making contributions to knowledge-exchange. Some felt their confidence had increased through improving their knowledge and skills around procurement, in areas where, as non-specialists, they had felt relatively ignorant. Confidence gains also related to having widened their experience in multi-partner projects.

Conclusions

In this project, action learning, action research and appreciative inquiry all played an important part in collective action towards identifying procurement practices that can to some degree alleviate poverty in a city region. Poverty is a major 'wicked' social problem, with many dimensions, and with no quick, easy or singular solution. The project, employing these methodologies, and bringing together academics and practitioners in collaborative action, has made progress in indicating some ways in which aspects of the problem can be addressed.

Representatives of large organisations that were 'anchored' in the Leeds City Region worked together over the course of a year on the project. Public-, third-sector, and one private sector organisation contributed to the project. Their collective work identified a number of examples where procurement and employment practices can add social value, and contribute to relieving poverty within the region.

Action learning was a key process at the heart of the meetings of the representatives of the participating organisations. These senior managers shared what they had found about good practices within their organisations, identified common patterns across organisations, and helped one another develop and progress action plans. Although the focus of the action learning was on organisational improvement, participants reported some personal development achievements at the end of the project. The project experienced issues concerning the stability of membership of the action learning sets: changes to the membership of the core group of representatives reduced the potential for the development of the continuing trusting relationships that can strengthen action learning processes. There were also tensions within the project between establishing a strategy in common across the participating organisations and the classic action learning approach of enabling individual members of the group to decide on the focus and timescales of what they wanted to achieve.

The initial phases of gathering and analysing information were undertaken enthusiastically and produced results that interested all the participants, but the move into the action phases of action research and appreciative inquiry did not happen as quickly or as smoothly as planned. However, the participants in the project reported some changes in practices within individual organisations, and some cross-organisational collaboration. A longer time period than the planned 12 months is evidently necessary in order to achieve more lasting progress.

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