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Men working differently: accessing their inner-feminine

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Abstract

Purpose – To present an account of changes in the behaviour of male bank managers who were engaged in action learning groups whose focus was on improving service quality and leadership development.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative study of the development of group process, and the changes in behaviours of the managers whose values and norms were dominated by discourses of traditional hegemonic masculinity. It is also an autobiographical account of the authors' experience of facilitating action learning groups.

Findings – Analysis of the groups' processes revealed a connection between the development of the groups in relation to authority and the changes in the managers' behaviour over a period of 12 months during which they began to behave in ways typically characterised as feminine.

Practical implications – Has implications for management development especially the development of male managers and their capacity to work in more feminine ways. Significant factors in developing men's management and leadership capabilities are peer learning, and engagement with authority in ways that are not dissimilar to the experiences of the adolescent and young adult in relation to peers and parents. There are also implications for facilitators and trainers engaged in management development processes.

Originality/value – Offers a theoretical contribution to the concept of the "Authority Cycle", and theories on masculinity. It is also useful for management development practitioners.

Keywords Action learning, Authority, Group dynamics, Masculinities, Gender

Paper type Case study

Introduction

This paper explores the development of groups engaged in an action learning project focussing on improving service quality and leadership development. The groups comprised male managers working in a large Australian bank. It explores the link between group development, authority relations and the development of more feminine ways of working. The paper emerged from issues that arose in my own practice as consultant and is autobiographical in nature since I wanted to better understand what was happening in the groups, for the facilitators of the groups and for myself as the project leader. The structure of the paper is unconventional in that the relevant literature is not presented until the second half of the paper. This is because I want the structure of the paper to mimic my own journey – the reflection and study of my own practice and the issues that arose in it, and then engagement with the literature to help me further make sense of what was happening in the groups. Firstly, I discuss the methodological approach and methods employed for the research used for this paper

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before continuing to explain the organization – “the Bank” from here on in – and the context in which the work took place. Secondly I describe how the work was undertaken and the issues that arose in the action learning groups – describing what occurred and making links to the literature on group development, authority relations and the development of more feminine ways of working. Lastly, the paper ends with some suggestions to others undertaking work in management development and in male dominated learning groups.

Methodology: action learning in “the Bank”

This work is both a qualitative case study of what occurred with the managers in the action learning groups, and an autobiographical study of my experience of facilitating some of these groups and managing the project team. Case study research is described by Wilson (1979, p. 448) as “... a process which tries to describe and analyse some entity in qualitative, complex and comprehensive terms, not infrequently as it unfolds over a period of time”. The case study is the examination of a specific “case” such as a program, organization, event, person or process (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991). Anchored in real-life situations, the case study is a rich and holistic account of experience (Merriam, 1988). In studying the action learning groups at “the Bank” I was interested in insight, discovery and interpretation rather. This work is also autobiographical, in that I explore my own experience of being involved in this project. As an insider researcher (Coghlan, 2001; Coghlan, 2003; Coghlan and Brannick, 2002; Coghlan and Casey, 2001) much of my learning came from examining my own practice in relation to that of the male managers and the other facilitators. For the purposes of this paper, autobiographical research is that which “... contains information about the self” (Brewer, 1986). Stone (1981, p. 80) describes autobiography as being “... simultaneously historical record and literary artefact, psychological case history and spiritual confession, didactic essay and ideological testament”. Autobiography is a way of representing the complexity of the experience of life in organizations, both those in them and of those researching them (Hannabus, 2000)[1].

Data that researchers collect about themselves can be used in two ways. Some studies are intensely personal and most of the data collected is about the researcher. Other studies involve the generation of a range of data that includes some data about the researcher. For example, the researcher may be a participant in the study, the researcher may keep a personal journal as part of the study, or the researcher may keep a record of their thoughts and feelings as part of the process of ensuring that the data generation and analysis is rigorous (Coffey, 1999). It was important to me that I was myself, a woman, in this work, and I brought all of who I was to it. As such this involved for me taking up authority in this way and being fully present as a female authority figure. It informed the reflection and the analysis of the data, and enabled me to feel the tensions and stories in my own project group that were reflected in the groups the facilitators were working with. Eventually, I found myself engaged in a parallel process in which the very dynamics that were occurring between the groups and their facilitators were also happening between the project group of facilitators and myself. The struggles that the facilitators and myself had as we worked on this project were important in how I worked with them, and then in how they worked with the managers. The processes of reflection and reflexivity through our conversations and sharing of narratives were ways in which we could become as

aware as is possible of our assumptions and biases and how they were being brought to the work.

I collected the data by keeping a reflective personal learning journal. It included my personal reflections as a group facilitator, reflection on my role as project manager and reflections on the discussions that occurred during the facilitators meetings. Brookfield (1995, p. 189) writes that:

... learning journals are the private records of how learners feel about and make sense of their learning. They provide a direct and immediate recounting of the learner's experiences that are relatively undistorted by teacher or researcher interventions.

Learning journals have long been a source of data for those pursuing research. In a sense the learning journals provided me with a means of unobtrusive research, which allowed me both immediate and later access to information about events, my thoughts and my experiences (Kellehear, 1993). In these journals I also recorded some extracts from individual manager's speech which seemed to be important for the management development work I was doing and the text that resonated with me at the time. At the time of "data collection" and later as I analysed the data retrospectively the gendered nature and meaning of text struck me. These data are presented here in the form of direct quotes and are dispersed with my autobiographical accounts throughout this paper. As I had no preconceived notions of what I would find in the data, it was analysed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1979) to enable the theory to emerge from the analysis of the data. The concept of grounded analysis is that the theory is embedded within the data. Themes emerge from the analyses of the data's content, giving rise to a theory, which then can be explored.

The organization wanted to improve and standardise the quality and consistency of service being provided through the organization, and the national organization change and development department had developed a suite of changes that were to be implemented across the country. These would be implemented top-down in a prescribed manner. However, a lot of change over recent years had contributed to a culture of scepticism in relation to change that left people feeling disenfranchised, powerless and irrelevant, and staff increasingly argued that they wanted to be consulted – involved in making their own decisions and have input into the changes that affected them. In this light, a process for change needed to be created that would enable managers to be consulted and involved in the change. In the division in which I worked, it was decided that the approach to this change project would engage the managers, help them to take up their own authority, and bring their own issues to the dilemma of service quality. This process was action learning.

Action learning is a process of action, reflection and learning in a community with peers from the same or other organizations. Small groups of managers come together in what have traditionally been called action learning sets for purposes including exploring organizational problems, addressing change issues, management development and community development (Pedler, 1983). Initially, six groups of between 10 and 12 managers were formed to work together for at least 12 months. All of the group members were men. The groups met for one half day every fortnight with an appointed facilitator. Their task was to identify those issues related to service delivery and leadership they wanted to work on, and to also identify the ways that they wanted to respond to the bank-wide initiative. I was the project leader, responsible for

developing and managing the facilitators (male and female), working together with them as a project team, and overseeing and assessing the development of the action learning groups. I had strongly urged the management of our division to take this approach, as I believed it would make a significant difference to the outcomes they sought to achieve. I had seen so many of what I had come to call the "sheep dip" approaches to change and had been part of their short life. I believed that if the managers were involved in the change, the change was more likely to stick. I had worked for many years in this organization and was committed to trying to improve it. Broussine and Fox, 2003 would call this a "labor of love" referring to the notion that researchers are not separate from their work, but are people with values and beliefs that will impact on the research. I was passionate about helping these managers take a stronger, more empowered stance with the running of their branches. The action learning group facilitators were selected on the basis of their capacity to enable others' learning, and facilitate and support the process of reflection. We chose people who wanted to work differently, and who were not content experts. The gender mix of the facilitators was not a consideration.

After an initial one and a half day workshop, each action learning team met once a fortnight with their facilitators. The facilitators met together every week and engaged in a process of "interactive introspection" (Ronai, 1992) where we shared and reflected on the stories of our work in the groups. What began to emerge through this process was a narrative of what was happening in the groups, and we began to discover common themes and shared experiences.

We needed to be aware of the impact we were having on the groups and on each other as we worked together as a project team in this action learning process. My role was to help the facilitators consider and reflect on what was emerging both between them and their groups, but also within our group. This process of reflexivity (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991) was important in surfacing assumptions, and gaining an insight into both what was happening for the managers in the groups, as well as what was happening for us in our own group, and how one set of data might reflect and shed insight on the other.

Very early on issues around gender and authority emerged, and what became apparent was that the project team itself became a basis for exploring these dynamics given the mix of male and female facilitators and myself as a female authority figure. This enabled us to use the project team as its own action learning set where we could explore and reflect on the dynamics between men and women, as well as between men and women and a female authority figure.

"The Bank": group dynamics and gender

What follows is a description of the journey the managers and facilitators (including myself) took in this change project over a period of approximately 12 months. The description is interspersed with references of theoretical constructs that have helped me understand what occurred. The patterns and dynamics that I describe are those that occurred at the group rather than the individual level. Groups will exhibit certain characteristics and behaviours that can be examined by conceptualising and analysing what is going on at the level of the "group as a whole" rather than as an outcome of the amalgam of behaviours of a number of individuals (Bion, 1959; Wells, 1980). Further, groups develop in relation to authority in a way analogous to the

developing person in relation to the authority of the parent. There are identifiable stages of development that groups go through in relation to the authority of the leader that are distinguishable, and provide insight into the dynamics occurring within the group and between the group and the authority figure (Reid, 1965).

The beginning of the groups

The beginning of the life of the groups, which began with a one and a half day program to develop the project framework and purpose, was characterised by conflicting and paradoxical emotions. There was excitement, scepticism, confusion, denial, blame and suspicion. Initially, the managers were excited about a new change, and about being involved in what would happen to them. They had a lot to say about what should be done. At the same time there was frustration with yet another change and scepticism about its potential for success based on their previous experiences of change. This was reflected in comments like: "What's really going to be different this time?"; "It'll last five minutes before it all goes back the way it was?" and "We'll just do what we need to do to keep 'em happy".

The level of anxiety in the groups rose as the managers tried to get a sense of the function and purpose of them, their relationship to their facilitators, and what was expected of them around the change itself. This propelled them into a search to find quick answers and quick solutions for what they agreed were tough problems. At the same time, here was strong denial of their own responsibility for the problems of service and leadership, and many accusations of how it was "senior management's fault and they should fix it!" This was accompanied by great lists of what senior management should do, and quickly followed by direct requests of the facilitators for direction and answers.

The facilitators experienced constant requests for "agendas", and groups demanded to be told what to do. The action learning methodology meant that the facilitators responded by encouraging the managers to discuss their organizational concerns and problems, and helping them to decide what they wanted to do. This resulted in the managers becoming increasingly angry and suspicious. Facilitators were accused of "knowing the answers" and deliberately withholding them. This lack of traditional structure and boundaries created a sense of chaos and ambiguity and facilitators were met with accusations that the program was "bullshit", "a waste of everyone's time", and were increasingly asked: "When is the real work going to start?" Additionally, in the absence of the guidance and direction they sought the managers demanded to know what the facilitator would be doing, why they were there, and question the need for the facilitator to be there at all. The facilitators were accused of being "soft" or "touchy-feely" or generally useless.

There was little work done, certainly no problem sharing and no substantial dialogue between the managers. The interaction was between the managers and the facilitators. By the end of the one and a half days the managers left with feelings of unease and uncertainty that were alleviated by the group allowing one or two of its members to arbitrarily set an agenda for their next meeting.

Dependency, authority relations and gender relations. The sense that the project was a waste of time, and the feelings of chaos are typical of dependency in relation to authority. The groups were dependent on their facilitator to tell them what to do. Having been given some autonomy for the first time, their sense of not knowing what

to do was unbearable, and their reaction was to initially seek guidance and permission. It was as though the managers had no capacity to act on their own, and they seemed to be powerless to do anything for themselves. The constant looking to the facilitators to provide the direction, structure and answers typifies a dependent relation to authority, as the group "looks to the designated leader to initiate activity" (Reid, 1965).

Hierarchy defines identity, through knowing and expertise, and once this is known it creates a sense of comfort that is hard to move out of. Hierarchy arises out of notions of expertise and the "rational manager", and as such, being in control is "masculine knowledge", and is privileged above other forms of knowledge (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998). In this context, questioning and reflection were experienced as invalid and illogical – "a waste of time". At times they were experienced as dangerous. The need for control and rules and order was so strong that the managers only knew how to do what they were told, and the absence of them created havoc and anxiety. The managers at times appeared literally unable to think, and in the space the facilitators created, the anxiety that emerged was intolerable. As a result the managers became hostile and suspicious.

Hostility is a characteristic of a "counter-independent" relation to authority that occurs when groups are given some freedom but do not want it. An analogy is the reaction of people held captive who shy away from freedom when initially offered it, having been imprisoned for so long they do not know what to do or where to go. To outsiders it seems strange, but they can feel angry at suddenly being thrust into an unknown world. The managers reacted strongly against the freedom and choices being offered to them.

The first six months

Following the workshop, the meetings began each fortnight and the managers all but ignored the facilitators. In the first few meetings the managers attempted to take action, set objectives, define outcomes, order their meetings, identify problems/concerns, and agree what they would tell their staff to do. There was constant action, each manager independently deciding what they would do and announcing it to each other. There was no active support or sharing but rather a lot of announcing and telling. There was little connection between the managers and no intimacy. It was "every man for himself" as competition for leadership and the best actions grew and energy increased. There was no reflection, and questioning took the form of competition rather than enquiry.

During these early meetings groups generally avoided the issue of leadership, preferring to focus on more tangible problems that had concerned them for some time that were related to service, like errors in customer deposits or withdrawals, lending discretionary limits, or mistakes made at the back office processing centres. This became more frenzied as older members of the group would compete for leadership on different issues, and that enabled them to focus on specifics and provided a sense of purposeful action. They were also issues that could be addressed from a systemic perspective, and generally involved needing someone from outside of the group to take action. The managers colluded to actively avoid reflection on the part of the problem that might involve them. The reluctance to share and work together was evidenced by statements like: "Why should I help you young managers? You should work to find out and get there just like I did".

Also, leadership struggles emerged between the older and the younger managers when occasionally a younger manager would quietly make suggestions, or try to open discussion and reflection. This was met with the silent and stoic faces of their peers, or they were teased, for example: "Are you the facilitator now are you?" a response that was followed by comments like "just stirring you up mate!"

The managers were unable and unwilling to focus on themselves. They stated repeatedly that the service being delivered from their branch was fine, and rejected reflection or considerations of this on the basis that their customers would tell them if there was a problem and since they were not, there was no value in thinking about it further. In regards to leadership, while they were quick to make complex judgements about their managers, they felt the leadership they were providing was fine, because, "of course if it weren't, their staff would tell them!"

The facilitators became all but invisible, any comments or interventions offered by them were generally ignored, and any that were not ignored came under scrutiny or attack. Their efforts to create the space for questioning and reflection, and to encourage the managers to collaborate were constantly rejected and met with increasing levels of anxiety. There was a vigorous and ferocious rejection of all things foreign to their way of working, with statements like:

You don't know what you are doing, if you did you would tell us what to do?

You don't know what it is like for us so where do you get off making comments?

You have no idea about the real world.

Eventually the groups began to fantasise about what it would be like if the facilitators did not come, or if they arranged to meet without them. The level of hostility also included sexualised comments like: "This stuff is touchy-feely wank!" and culminated in an awful attack on myself and another female facilitator when a member arrived late, and looking around the room he saw that there was a seat between us and commented:

I'll be the prick between two cunts!

Counter-dependency and authority relations. The groups exemplified a counter-dependant relationship to authority. The attitude to the appointed authority was that they could well do without them, and they would show them how. This is an acceptance of some freedom, but also a reaction to the "leader who will not lead" (Reid, 1965). The leadership struggles within the groups, and establishing patterns of work are also characteristic of this stage, as is alternating between expressions of hostility toward the facilitators and ignoring them.

Groups in counter-dependency are not able to engage with the leader, they are too angry with them for not doing what they expect them to do, and with that the group can find strength in a collective enemy. The energy with which the managers moved away may well have been an expression of their hostility to the authority of the wider organization with whom they were constantly dissatisfied. Much like the teenager who engages in a constant criticism of the parents, these managers were endlessly dissatisfied, and, just like the teenager, they would test the authority to see just how much freedom they really had.

The hostility, however, had the effect of galvanising action, and paradoxically, in this way the groups began to work. The work, however, was not very creative, and it was still work they were deciding others should do. The managers were not behaving in anyway differently from the organizational leaders they sought to criticise, and this was played out in the way they began to construct lists of actions they would dictate to their staff.

Counter-dependency and gender relations. Masculinity involves a compulsive desire to be in control (Kerfoot and Knights, 1996, p. 85).

It was terribly difficult for these managers to be confronted with problems; to be encouraged to find problems and not to have the reaction that they had to do something about it, and they were angry at not being in control. Further, the extent of the hostility was also a rejection not just of feelings of dependence on authority, but of feelings of dependence on a feminine authority, not unlike the abrupt and sometimes violent way in which boys reject all things female. At times the hostility in the groups felt violent, and the attacks on the facilitators were attacks on the feminine (Fondas, 1997; Harragan, 1977; Lindsay, 1993; Metcalfe and Linstead, 2003). The gender of the facilitator was not significant – both the male and female facilitators came under criticism. The nature of the name-calling was a rejection of the way in which the facilitator was working. The values being modelled were not understood and in that way were not recognised as being useful to the group's purpose. The use of the terms "wank", and "touchy feely" were derogatory terms that Greer (1999) would call one of the many names in men's "vast vocabulary of insults" for women. It felt at this time that rejection of the facilitators and their "touchy-feely" process, and the subsequent assertion of the rightful place of the "customary" ways of doing things seemed certain! Chodorow (1994, p. 45) argues that "boys and men come to deny the feminine identification in themselves and those feelings they experience as feminine: feelings of dependence, relational needs, emotions generally".

Masculinity embraces individual competitiveness in a way that determines that the way men become "real" managers is by proving themselves without the help of others. Mates learn through innuendo, they do not have "heart to hearts", are unforthcoming, and see a real danger in affiliation, and so resist possibilities for closer intimacy (Formaini, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Kerfoot and Knights, 1998). There was certainly great reluctance to share, let alone discuss problems or concerns that might leave them feeling vulnerable. The teasing and "stirring" of the managers who advocated for more sharing and reflection was a way of keeping them "in the mould", ensuring that the prevailing masculinity would be continued, as "rarely does masculinity embrace the world or even itself with a sense of wonderment, pleasure or engagement" (Kerfoot and Knights, 1996, p. 82). The teasing was a clear reminder not to break ranks, and stems from what Kindlon and Thompson (1999) call the "culture of cruelty" in which boys experience domination, humiliation, fear and betrayal for failures to conform to the norms of behaviour in their early school years. These experiences stay with men long into their adult lives and are rarely shared, but become powerful reminders of the consequences of behaving in any way that might be perceived as somehow not masculine or different.

Six to nine months

After a about six months of meeting, there was a sense of celebration and self congratulation as the managers began to see that some of their actions had worked, for

example the regional office had allocated resources to investigating errors. The managers started to feel good about their work, which created an atmosphere of some power, control and influence, and so the idea of exploring problems and reflection were even more strongly rejected as their own successes confirmed that they were an unnecessary waste of time.

There was increasing levels of avoidance of the original task as the managers started questioning what they were there for, since having achieved some results there did not appear to be any reason left to stay together. The managers became confused about their purpose and started complaining about not meeting for the sake of it, wasting time on reflection. A frequently made comment was that they were not a "mothers group".

Independence and authority relations and gender relations. The groups continued to largely ignore the facilitator and ignore the task. They did what ever they wanted – because they could. This is typical of an independent relation to authority where the experience of freedom can feel heady, and the groups "resist serious business which might disturb the pleasurable flight from reality in which the group is engaged" (Reid, 1965).

The managers behaved in typical masculine fashion, asserting their individuality, and also behaving in the ways they always had. Now, having rejected their leader they no longer had alternative role models and had to rely on traditional stereotypes in order to know how to behave.

The last three months – a year of meetings

Towards the end of the previous period, however, what slowly started to emerge was an informal network of communication between the managers, and they started to call each other between meetings and begin to share their workplace stories. When asked to say more about these conversations, they reported saying they called to "run something by him" or to "check out" if the same problem was happening somewhere else. These informal conversations were the first sign of the emergence of dialogue and relating to each other, and the experience of contacting each other and sharing feelings and concerns, and, after about nine months started becoming commonplace.

The act of sharing and supporting each other was happening with increasing frequency and by choice. They started to reflect on their experiences with each other and for themselves. What also happened is that the managers started to encourage reflection, and began challenging each other and asking questions in the way the facilitator had. They also began to actively support and help each other. The managers had an increased knowledge about each other, and would let others know if one member was away or ill.

There was a shift in the relationship with their facilitator with whom they started reporting in, tell them what they were doing and modelling their behaviour on them. There was a softening; a gentler energy and accusations fell away, although there were still criticisms that the facilitators "didn't understand them".

But the new ways of behaving were hard to hang onto, and there was movement and oscillation back and forward between old ways and these new ways of working. One little set back would mean that the new skills could be quickly forgotten. So when the managers started to discover that the actions from the first meetings did not have a long-term effect, they regressed. They were identifying the wider systemic blockages

to their problems, and at the same time were finding that at their own branches the problems they experienced were not as straightforward as they had originally thought. They were also beginning to see their part in the problems, and this was painful. They began to get a sense of the change needed within them and how hard it was. As one manager said:

I got to my position by winning and beating the rest, and by using my power and authority. Now I'm being asked to encourage and support and work with you. If you think it's hard for you, I've got 43 years of habit to change!

For example, the error investigation had identified key issues of absenteeism, morale and staffing levels as part of the problem, and they were beginning to realise that their problems were more complex than they had originally felt. But in their exasperation and anxiety they returned to old habits. The ways that had started to work were forgotten – sharing, supporting and reflecting were seen as useless unless the organization did something. The groups returned to wanting to put proposals before the executive, feeling that anything they do would be a waste of time until “the Bank” addresses other, systemic issues.

Yet, the managers were somehow able to cope in a very different way – something had changed. While they would engage in flights of fantasy about “the Bank getting their act together”, this time the managers began to engage with the complexity of the problems through conversation and dialogue with each other.

The facilitators continued to encourage the managers to engage with their problems and in doing so, started to be seen as affirming rather than punishing figures, as people that would hang in there, and continue to encourage and support them. Comments like “It's strange getting support for stuffing up!” were common at this stage. A connectedness emerged between the managers, and they began to talk about feeling less isolated, and less alone in doing their work. There was a shift in the nature of engagement, from engaging in activity to engaging in conversation leading to more considered action.

The managers began to recognise at this point that talking to their staff and spending some time understanding and reflecting on their problems would be a worthwhile activity. They also announced that this would be “really hard”. One manager described his ambivalence to working this way in a reaction he had to a staff members' error by saying:

Once I would have ripped his guts out, but instead I have met with him twice and tried to understand his problem and work with him to find solutions. I still might rip his guts out, but I've tried to empathise first.

They felt anxious about how they would work with values and attitudes in their staff, but a small number of managers decided to bring their teams together to do this work. The managers spent time discussing activities such as having team meetings with staff with open agendas, being more visible and involved with the staff, and encouraging their staff to talk to them and each other about how they were doing. They began to discover they could work differently, take some risks, and start to empower staff by using their power to foster the growth of others – just as they had experienced in their own groups. It was, finally, some 12 months or so later that the groups were starting to work with two of the fundamental aspects of service and leadership individual values and attitudes.

One of the most striking features of this last stage of the work in these groups was that some managers started talking about their personal problems and lives to each other in the group meetings. This represented a real acknowledgement of the connection between the personal and professional and feelings of connection and trust between the men with their own difficulties and struggles. The managers became more confident in these new ways of working which included values of connectedness, co-operation, relatedness, nurturing and support. Finally, the groups began to recognise how the facilitators might be of some use to them, and the facilitators found that they were being consulted, asked to help the managers with other kinds of work and even thanked for all the efforts they had put in. The managers began to recognise the enormity of the journey they had all been on, and the role and value of their facilitator in taking up and offering them an alternative way of working.

Interdependence, authority relations and gender relations. In relation to authority, groups do not move in a linear fashion and so there was movement backwards and forwards in relation to authority. A difficult experience, or an unfavourable response would set them back. So once they realised that the kinds of actions they had been taking were not fixing the problems, there was a period of giving up, where the groups regressed to earlier stages. However, although they wanted to get someone else to "fix it" again, the managers were not filled with the same kind of energy of earlier months. Instead they seemed flattened, bottomed out and tired. It was like the weight of the world had descended upon them, and there was a sense of heaviness, and rather than the indignant rage and blaming of earlier meetings, there was a more realistic sense of the world. This taking the world seriously, and engaging with reality is characteristic of interdependence.

An interdependent relationship with authority in groups is characterised by recognition of the leader, and of the mutual dependency between the leader and the group. There was a more subdued tone; more considered exploration of ideas, and sharing and creativity. Finally, what also emerged in this stage was some intimacy between the managers, and the setting of a new level of personal communication.

The managers were beginning to find within themselves their own authority and bring more of who they were discovering themselves to be, into their work. They were beginning to foster and encourage these new ways of behaving and were becoming more centred and generative toward themselves and others. As they became more able to engage with and recognise the mutual dependency of their relationship with the facilitators they also became more able to express themselves more fully, and this included behaviours such as empathy, caring, nurturing, attentiveness to others, and co-operation. The managers had begun to reconfigure themselves emotionally (Connell, 1995), and this was new learning and a new way of working for these men who had long ago learned that the hallmarks of success in a masculine world were action, control, individuality, achievement and competition.

Discussion

This paper has discussed the stages of group development in relation to a characteristically feminine authority figure, and the resultant changes in behaviour of the male managers. Whilst there is a plethora of literature that explores psychodynamic theories of the stages of group development and leadership of groups, there is very little literature that explores the psychodynamics of group

development in relation to authority as defined in Clyde Reid's work on the "Authority Cycle" (1965) with the exception of Hirschhorn and Krantz (1982), Lundgren (1979), Taylor *et al.* (1979). However, none of these aforementioned authors develop Reid's work further, and none of them explore the notion of a groups' development in relation to gendered authority. Action learning privileges creativity, risk, intuition and experimentation. Working and learning together, holding each other to account, reflection, identifying parallels between behaviour within and outside of the groups were all ways of engaging and relating markedly different from the usual approaches to change which would prescribe behaviour and proceed in a very ordered, logical way with rules and controls throughout the process. In this way the action learning groups and the nature of the authority taken up by the facilitators was gendered, encouraging and modelling for the managers behaviour that was characteristically feminine, and in striking contrast to the dominant masculine culture of the organization.

A significant factor in this work was the engagement with authority. Authority was held by the facilitators, but not wielded; it created a space for the work but was not dictatorial. Neither was authority abdicated, or simply handed over to the groups. Each fortnight the facilitators would be at the action learning sets, helping the managers reflect, consider and focus on their actions in ways that held the managers' accountable and responsible for their work. This role is reminiscent of the family parent, who helps the young adult navigate their way, holding them responsible for their actions, but not dominating or abandoning them. The action learning sets provided the space for the managers to bring more of self into work, it was difficult for them to know what to bring, what to say, what to do, and this struggle was an enduring theme in the groups, manifesting in hostility and anxiety. It also gave rise to in an inner turmoil in which managers struggled to know what the codes of behaviour and ways of thinking were supposed to be. This freedom eventually enabled the exploration of other ways of behaving and being, and for previously out of awareness aspects of self to emerge. This paralleled the way adolescents develop, in groups, together challenging authority and the status quo. In this way the managers "grew up" again, were parented again, and this led to growth and change. The managers got "bigger"; they had an increased capacity for action, more choices about how they managed and led, and more insight into their own values and behaviours.

The movement in stages of group development came from the facilitators creating a space in which the group members were able to experience themselves more fully, and allowing them freedom to make their own decisions, and determine their own tasks. This is much like mothers do with their children. These managers worked together and changed together with their peers. In this way were able to collectively shake off the shackles of the dominant masculinity.

Implications for management development

Given that currently desirable conceptions of leadership and management are more consistent with feminine values (Billing and Alvesson, 2000; Rosener, 1990; Schor *et al.*, 1994, 1995; Sloan and Krone, 2000), this research has implications for management development especially the development of male managers and their capacity to work in more feminine ways. Much literature has focussed on finding ways for women to take up more senior roles, and the role of men in this has been largely in making way for women through policy change and active support. Research on gendered

organizational change has focussed on understanding how men and women approach change and learn differently and the gendering of workplaces (Abrahamsson, 2001; Paton and Dempster, 2002). While there is literature that examines the ways women adopt masculine characteristics (while maintaining feminine ones (Fagenson, 1990; Sinclair, 1998)), there is little if anything in the literature that examines how men might develop a wider repertoire of behaviour to include the kinds of feminine characteristics becoming so important to management.

The difficulties managers face in response to pressures in having to manage social relationships means that managers need to become more comfortable with who they are before they can come into relationship with those they manage. These difficult changes need to be undertaken by adopting approaches to change from outside the dominant organizational discourse, and give consideration to creating supported spaces in which managers can first come to know more about how they currently behave, and be supported to discover other ways of behaving.

Finally, management development processes need to incorporate, in real ways, recognition of issues of resistance to change, create opportunities for self-discovery, peer support, and applied learning and reflection. More importantly, men need to have opportunities to learn together, and be allowed to challenge and engage authority without punishment while at the same time be held accountable for their management practice and development.

Note

1. The debate about the extent to which autobiographical data is "true" is beyond the scope of this paper.

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