

Using collaborative action learning projects to increase the impact of management development

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This article aims to contribute to the field of human resource development by exploring the conditions that influence the organizational impact of action learning projects. Many organizations use such projects as an integral part of their management development programs. Past research on action learning projects has shown how balancing action and learning improves the organizational impact of management development, but we argue that the concern with such a balance is not enough. We argue that certain organizational conditions are likely to mediate this balance. Based on empirical material from a case study of one off-site management development program, we identify three organizational conditions that seem to enhance organizational impact: clear reasons for enrolling managers on a development program, support from the manager's local superior throughout the process of the action learning project and local participation in the project work on the part of the manager's employer. These findings have practical implications for providers of management development programs as well as for organizations exploring ways of enhancing the impact of their investment in management learning and development. In terms of theory, the lack of organizational impact of action learning projects can be seen as part of the wider 'transfer problem' in training and development, and the results of the present study are consistent with the literature, which shows factors in the work environment to be important in facilitating or preventing transfer.

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Introduction

The study and its rationale

Action learning is one of the most widely used interventions for developing organizations and leadership (O'Neil & Marsick, 2007; Raelin, 2009). In the context of management training and development, action learning projects (ALPs) have become a popular part of program design. Real business challenges are used as the basis for learning by means of team reflection. If the action and learning is balanced, ALPs can have a positive impact upon the organization investing in the learning. However, the potential organizational impact of ALPs has not really been addressed from the perspective of those participating in management development programs. In this article, we discuss what conditions for organization-wide learning can be created to better reveal the potential of ALPs.

Revans (1982) argued that the greatest challenge in action learning is to balance action and learning to deliver organizational impact. Balanced action learning within the context of management development is argued to be a powerful engine for human resource development (HRD) (Reynolds & Vince, 2004; Vince, 2004; Willmott, 1994). Cho and Egan (2010) claimed that action without learning is unlikely to provide fruitful longer term results, and learning without action does not facilitate change in the organization. Although Revans' work on action learning emphasized the more social aspects of learning and action, the conceptual focus of later studies has been increasingly upon the individual and has not adequately explored how the socially situated nature of learning and action within the organization will affect its organizational impact.

In our study, we investigated a Norwegian management development program incorporating an ALP as an important part of the programmed activities. It was believed to add value to the participating organizations. The 22 participants in the particular cohort under study came from different companies and sectors and the study included regular interaction with program participants over a time period of 2.5 years. This yielded much empirical material. The analysis of the managers' experiences of the organizational impact of their ALPs led us to inquire more deeply into the ways the ALPs were implemented and with what effect.

The article begins with a review of key action learning perspectives and focuses particularly on the relationship between action and learning as a key factor in the organizational impact of ALPs. We identify what we see as open questions in the literature. After a brief overview of the research design, we offer two sets of descriptive analyses. The first group of managers reflects on what they perceive as a lack of organizational impact from ALPs. We then turn to empirical examples from managers who have completed what turned out to be projects that had greater impact. Based on managers' reflections on the conditions important for organizational impact, we extend the debate on balanced ALPs by incorporating practical concerns about ensuring that learning and action are collaborative endeavors within the manager's organization. Based on these findings, we point to the practical implications of our work.

Action learning framework

Although Revans has long been viewed as the most important contributor to action learning theory and practice, the research does not provide an agreed definition of action learning (Marsick & O'Neil, 1999). Despite this, however, there seems to be some agreement that the key ingredient is a focus on *real* work-based (or community-based) problems. Included here is learning from experience through team reflections to gain new insights and resolve perceived problems. Another area of agreement seems to be the need to balance action and learning, both conceptually and in practice, in order to unleash the potential for problem solving. Action without learning is unlikely to return long-term results, and learning without action does not facilitate real change (Cho & Egan, 2010).

Marsick and O'Neil (1999) claimed that all action learning is practiced collaboratively with others through some form of action research, and all approaches are philosophi-

cally rooted in theories of learning from experience. An underlying assumption is that human beings can shape their environment by learning from experience. Experience, on the other hand, needs to be understood as framed by social contexts. Action learning is rooted in the work of the progressive educationalist Dewey (1980) and the social psychologist Lewin (1951). Although some scholars draw eclectically on additional theories, action learning has come to be dominated by a pragmatic focus on learning for the sake of more instrumental problem solving (Marsick & O'Neil, 1999). The aim of action learning is to develop individuals' and organizations' capacity to learn, that is, to learn how to learn.

Marsick and O'Neil make a distinction between three schools of action learning: scientific, experiential and critical reflection. We find the experiential school useful for the present study because of its philosophical basis in action research and Kolb's (1984) learning theory. The purpose of experiential action learning is to understand and change oneself within a system through action and reflection on action. The depth of change is instrumental, intrapersonal and interpersonal and is based on raising awareness and developing the capacity to change tacit practice. The rationale of the approach is making meaning from experience through cycles of problem framing, action, reflection on action, concluding and reframing.

According to Marsick and O'Neil (1999), the organizational risk is the need for management support at various levels. For action learning programs, O'Neil (1997) identified tensions between the expectations of learning and the delivery of tangible results, between the time required for learning and the tasks to be undertaken and between team conflict and harmony. Marsick and O'Neil (1999) also claimed that participants might be disturbed by the discrepancy between what they are learning in action learning programs and the ways in which their organization functions. This indicates that the balance between learning and action is important when it comes to organizational impact.

In a review of action learning research, Cho and Egan (2010) pointed out that although action learning is frequently considered a strategy for organizational change, it appears most often in a manner directed towards individual learning and personal development. The balance between action and learning was addressed by categorizing the selected research as follows: action-oriented (three studies), learning-oriented (24), balanced (20) and other (three). The dominance of learning-oriented studies can be explained by the number of learning-oriented action learning programs carried out in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, where there is a strong tradition for action learning as an approach to personal development (Cho & Egan, 2010). This supports claims that action learning has become focused on personal development and rather than on organizational issues or organizational development. Research falling within the category balanced action learning tended to focus both on learning and the task at hand. This category of research also included projects focusing on reflective practices and organizational learning.

Depending on the nature of the intervention, the focus of the assessment can be change at an individual, a team or a system level. Many programs emphasize that the learning is more important than the actual results and that action learning provides a safe environment to learn from mistakes. Previous studies indicate that action learning is successful when assessed according to measures of individual learning and personal growth and directed less at organizational learning and development (Pedler *et al.*, 2005; Vince, 2004). A number of more general studies of training and development show a lack of impact on the organization from individual learning and several key factors to enhance transfer have been identified (Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Holton & Baldwin, 2003; Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992). This literature is often based on an assumption that organizational impact can in fact be achieved through individual learning, and although much of the evidence supports this (Nilsson, 2010), it is not always the case, not least because of the 'transfer problem' (Grossman & Salas, 2011). The literature is helpful in understanding the complexity of transfer, and our results emphasize the role of collaborative aspects of ALPs in achieving transfer.

Studies of management training and development emphasize the experience-based as well as the social and reflexive nature of managerial learning in management development programs (Blackler & Kennedy, 2004; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2006; Mintzberg, 2004a,b; Reynolds & Vince, 2007). Team reflection is also important for ALPs in management development. In studies of how to make training and development more successful, the organizational learning environment is one of the key factors (Belling *et al.*, 2004; Marsick & Watkins, 2003). When it comes to implementing action learning efforts to improve the organization, De Loo (2006) argued that HRD practitioners need knowledge about organizational-level development and change to enhance individual learning.

This review supports the claim that management development programs tend to be more oriented towards individual learning and much of the research is developed from a position where the focus is on linking individual learning to organizational impact. However, the rhetoric seems unwarranted in light of the results, and the narrow concern with translating individual learning into organizational impact might have blinded us to mediating conditions within the managers' own organization. Besides framing action learning as a question of finding the balance between action and learning at the individual level, there is a need to trace empirically how conditions within a manager's organization can explain the disparate impact of ALPs. Arguably, this could be seen as part of the wider 'transfer problem', which has generated a large literature within the training and development field: what factors allow the skills and knowledge flowing from an individual's training and development to be used in practice to benefit the organization (see Grossman & Salas, 2011).

Methodology and research setting

The discussion in this article draws on qualitative empirical material collected through a case study of one particular management development program provided by TrainingCorp. The context of the study is a highly industrialized region in Norway, with managers from different companies and sectors participating in the program. Over a period of about 2.5 years, we used ethnographic techniques (Van Maanen, 1988) to explore managerial learning in one cohort of 22 managers in this particular program. This gave us an opportunity to broaden our understanding of the possibilities of creating organizational impact from ALPs.

What was unusual about this research was the prolonged engagement of the researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with all program activities through participant observation, a research strategy rarely used to study managers' learning over a lengthy time period. This strategy gave an opportunity to gather rich qualitative material from the perspective of the participants (Antonacopoulou, 1999) through interviews. The benefit of participant observation of the activities in the program sessions was important to understand the social and reflexive nature of managers' learning throughout the program (Mintzberg, 2004a,b). In addition, we could explore the managers' group reflections of the progress of their ALPs during the program sessions and the presentation of their ALP reports at the last session of the 15-month program.

The empirical material used for this article is based mainly on interviews conducted one year after the manager completed the program. They explored the managers' reflections on their individual learning and on the organizational impact of the program. The reflections included how they worked upon their ALP, whether and how their work had an impact on the organization and how they applied learning from the program sessions in their project. In addition, we use empirical material from interviews with the managers early in the program about their goals and expectations and observational field notes from the range of program activities where the managers discussed the progress of their ALP.

In using the data we had obtained, our first step was to make a descriptive analysis of the progress of the ALPs based on the managers' presentations at the final session and the post-program interviews. Second, we used this analysis to explore the managers' reflections of possibilities for organizational impact from the ALP. Third, we

identified three organizational conditions that seemed to characterize those ALPs that created an impact beyond individual learning. These conditions were conceptually analysed as balanced and unbalanced action learning based on the organizational impact or lack of it. The first condition related to the sponsoring organization's reason(s) for sending the manager to the management development program. The second condition related to the overall level of support in the ALP from the manager's superiors, whereas the third was connected to the level of organizational involvement in the manager's project.

Results

Empirical findings

In this section, we first address the question of lack of organizational impact from the ALPs before turning to examples of impact. The aim of the descriptive analysis is to identify organizational conditions that the managers considered to be important in their ALP creating an impact on the organization. We also examine organizational policy to determine whether the managers were able to articulate a clear reasoning on behalf of their employer for their participation in the management development program (MDP).

According to the program provider, the aim of the ALP was to use real business problems as content for learning and through this, to increase tangible outcomes from the program. The ALP was seen as an opportunity to take the formal knowledge and skills obtained from the six-week-long program sessions and apply it to a real business problem. An overview of the type of project with examples is presented in Table 1.

Session activities were designed to give managers the analytical tools to determine and understand the need and direction for organizational change, along with tools to make change happen through the ALP. Teamwork training activities were supposed to give managers guidance on how to organize a team to accomplish a project. The teams were also used for group reflections on the ALP. The managers' work with the ALPs initially followed the same basic pattern throughout the program sessions. Managers would first develop and present an overview of their intended initiative during sessions 1 and 2 before moving on to try to implement some sort of change. This was also discussed in a meeting with the provider, manager and local superior taking place at the manager's company site. Some time during each program seminar was used to discuss the progress of the ALPs. This was done in groups. The managers presented their projects in the plenary group during the last session of the program and we followed up on their progress one year after the program ended.

Although some projects moved beyond the planning stage, others never really took off. The failure to develop the project beyond the planning stage suggested the project would have little impact on organizational change and development. The managers in question had not used the ALP as a means for organizational development and change. Despite lack of action, the managers' reflections indicated learning from the project experience. Our informants frequently reported how and why implementing change was difficult, which led us to explore the conditions necessary if there was to be organizational impact.

Based on their reflections, we tried to isolate conditions that might account for why some projects led to organizational change and development, whereas others never really moved past the planning stage. Many of the managers experienced a lack of support and engagement from a local superior, which was needed to accomplish the ALP. Some, however, did experience support. The participants had their local superior (or person from a board of directors) appointed as a coach in the program. This person was supposed to support the managers in their project work and help anchor the project in the company. Many local superiors did not attend program sessions where they were invited as coaches; there were also examples of the local superior saying to the manager that accomplishing the project was not really important for the company. The managers were also encouraged to involve others in their company in the ALP but many of them found it difficult.

Table 1: Overview of managers' action learning projects

Type of project	Number of managers	Examples of projects
Corporate strategy	2	• Strategy development in a marketing company: description of the process • Development of an international marketing strategy for a company making boats
New business processes and innovation	3	• Plan for how to manage values in the department of e-trade of current in an electric utility • 'Modular-based design' in shipping: a concept for increased competitiveness. How to develop and use the concept
Retrospective analysis of past changes in own organization	3	• Description of a large organizational change process/project in a manufacturing company • Reflection of managerial challenges of an organizational change process in a ship design company during the program period. Use of theoretical models from the program
Planning for improvement to existing business processes	7	• To make the assembly/installation of transformer stations more effective • Revising the training guide and manual on how to build vacuum pipes and to do plumbing
Technology implementation	3	• Use of handheld terminals for information and communication technology (ICT) support in the whole value chain in an electric utility • 'From local to global', implementation of shared work processes in the ICT organization of a multinational manufacturing company
Human resource and knowledge management (KM)	4	• Knowledge/competence management in a shipping consultancy company. Development of KM strategy and find an ICT tool to support KM • Product development in a shipping factory. Building competence in the department, competence mapping and delegation of tasks
22 (cohort total)		

To illustrate the differences based on the managers' reflections, we first address characteristics of ALPs that did not result in organizational impact. We then examine the characteristics of ALPs that did have impact. In particular, we describe the managers' experience of support from their local superior and local participation in the ALP.

Lack of organizational impact from the ALPs

During the final project presentations, the majority of the managers had plans to implement their project in the following year. In general, their projects did not produce

any tangible outcomes of improvement or change in the company. The pattern was that projects were still at the planning stage one year later and the managers were still referring to their project as a future prospect. Some of the managers were close to not presenting anything at all as they had not really accomplished a project. Even in the post-program interviews one year after the program had been completed, many managers had made little progress and were still held up at the planning stage. We therefore characterize these projects as lacking organizational impact due to the lack of tangible company outcomes one year after the program had ended. However, their reflections on the attempt to implement the action plan flowing from their ALP, both during the presentation and in the post-program interview, indicate much learning from this experience.

In the following, we illustrate this with excerpts from the responses of the managers. The first manager stated that he had not really accomplished any project at all; instead, he discussed what he planned to do, his attempts at doing it and why implementation was difficult.

Because of internal purchase, four departments get profits on the same package. All have focus on profits in their own department. I want to get through to the company's real earnings. The ways we are organized with common customer contact are a challenge when it comes to accounting. I have [at least] created a common system in the production units; have managed to get a focus in my department on total profitability. Have not reached as far as I wanted, but it is taken in the right direction. Changed objective on the way ... I have understood more of the preconditions ... I cannot focus on all the other units, and think about all ...

The learning [through this project] is that I would have needed more time to clearly go through the goals and resources, and who to involve at the start ... about one self and my position regarding accomplishment of a project ... [This project] should have been initiated one level above [me], it is difficult to initiate something towards departments on the side [same level]. It is dependent on much stronger anchoring /foundation with the top management. If the project should move on, the ball must be taken up further up in the system. I was thinking about creating a project group too late ... to do this project I would have needed commitment from above.

This indicates that the attempt to accomplish the project contributed to both better insight of his role in relation to his own organization and towards the preconditions for a change in work processes. His reflections on the unsuccessful completion of the project showed learning about the importance of involving others in the company and using teams to implement new work processes through the project. The manager's presentation of his attempts and failures to accomplish his idea of improvement through the project showed new understandings of his managerial role in the organization. This is thus an example of a strong learning experience based on failing.

The next manager also perceived the project as a part of his job and attempted to try out a new practice in the projects of shipbuilding. The following is, first, his words about the idea of his ALP early in the program and second, his reflections about why implementation of a new routine in all the projects at work became problematic.

[I am a] project manager in shipbuilding. The company's need is to rationalize production methods both when it comes to products and the organization. To move the pressure earlier in the process, to create zones, block production or work packages. To make the whole boat the building process is maybe too big ... the idea is to focus on teams ... a potential we have most to win. To make people cooperate. It is complicated because we have no strategy or competence plans, ... a messy and unorganized company that lacks important things, like job descriptions – so I can instruct people to do things instead of me as a project manager. I planned to use ideas of teamwork thinking.

The project was relevant, it is a job, I did that ... to facilitate what is needed when it comes to documentation. It was not challenging to do this (project) ... it was just purely routine [to create the documentation]. I am not finished, so I did not present anything. I use this in my projects ... we have in a way had this documentation, but it is not collected ... the thought was that this should be the same (routine/practice) in all projects. I do not think they use it in my department now ... I doubt that no one else cares ...

This shows that his documentation of project routines to create a new practice for all company projects was difficult because others in the company were not really involved.

The way he reflected on organization within his company also indicates that the program contributed to learning through reflection on his role in relation to the organization.

In the following section, we present a selection of responses from managers regarding lack of support and engagement from the local superior.

My boss is eager to try out new things, the new management has an intense focus to change things . . . constantly change, introduce new things. Concretized in our strategy plan – management training . . . , in the beginning it worked out pretty well . . . but as the program went on . . . then the dialogue about the program was not very strong. He followed up the real life project . . . progress on that . . . but I felt too little engagement in relation to . . . sparring partner.

I have not discussed the program with anyone, except one colleague who came here the year before me. It is expected that they should get something in return . . . even if it is not measurable. There should have been some kind of follow up on that, internally, to see that one get something in return. The effect has to do with how receptive one is . . . The conversation with advisor or coach . . . that did not work out at all . . . But why, I do not know . . . I do not remember who I had [laughing] as a coach. I did not actually have an advisor . . . no commitment from my own manager. I discussed the real life project a bit with another one . . . it was in the air . . . [And his manager had said] it is not so many [in this company] that have done that real life project, not completely.

It is difficult to undertake a project when you do not have the control regarding decisions. It was very hard to do the ALP because I got little support here [in the company].

. . . because the company is not with you, first you are away from work six weeks . . . then you should spend time on a development project and have homework . . . some have done this [project] as a part of their job, but there are not all that have had this possibility. I have not had understanding and support in the company.

The lack of local support can be explained by looking at individual company's histories and beliefs about using the management program. Some local superiors had participated in earlier cohorts. If they had not experienced any value in designing and implementing their own ALP, they were reluctant to support their manager in the cohort within the present study. Thus, some managers learned that their local superiors' perspective was against using ALPs in management programs as a means of organizational change despite this being part of company policy for management development and training.

Some reported that the nature of the ALP was something simulated and not real; if the project was not a part of the manager's daily work, the local superior did not consider the project as important. One manager expressed the following about the nature of the project: 'I do not think people like to have a project like this; it is a bit "school-like" '.

This shows that the manager did not have a commitment to accomplish a project because he considered it a program assignment and not something to benefit the company. There is a contradiction here between the program goal of organizational development and the lack of support from the local superior. We illustrate this contradiction by one manager's reaction towards his company.

We have worked more in teams on this boat than usual, but it is complicated when cooperating with other countries. No strategy or competence plans, it is a messy and unorganized company that lacks important things, like job descriptions so I can instruct people to do things instead of me as a project manager.

I was then just throwing it away . . . it is very bad . . . but I did not bother, when no one bothers what I really do, then I do not want to invest time in it. Did not get any support, it was just about getting it over with . . . to take the course for my own sake. What was not done was not something to care about. One starts with ambitions, and then it collapses . . . no one cares about what I write . . . they were unconcerned, [I felt] I wasted the company's time when they [did not care]. So then I did not do it.

This shows that the attempt to accomplish a project produced learning from the experience. It is also a reflection about the mismatch between his ambition and the perception of the reality in the company. He made sense of the organization by believing it to have no strategy or competence plans, to lack job descriptions and to be messy and unorganized. This showed a strong reaction of disappointment towards the local supe-

rior based on the absence of support and engagement from the company for the project or program participation. Such opposition after participation in a management development program can result in lack of commitment to the company. Another tension is illustrated by the following manager.

My English boss wants me in British management training; she thinks this [program] is just piss. My Norwegian boss will probably say this program is fundamental for how to do training in Norway.

The projects earlier can be characterized as lacking organizational impact and the managers reflected on the lack of support from their local superior. Also, for these managers, the ALP was an individual endeavor as they did not involve others locally in the project. Based on the managers' reflections in the first round of interviews in the program, the companies' goals with regard to their participation seem more or less concrete and conscious.

To explore this further, we used the interviews with the managers early in the program about expectations to their participation. This category of ALPs lacking organizational impact were also characterized by unarticulated goals, and as one manager expressed:

My boss wanted me to join the program, it was almost an order . . . and he said it was a good course. I did not dare to ask what the company hoped to gain from my participation. Nothing was articulated. He expects me to develop and become better as a result of the program and I have got positive signals from him.

He was only the second manager from this company to participate in this particular program. Two managers from different departments of a large company stated that the following:

I do not know what plans the company has for me and I do not know if there is something behind my participation. We are expanding so we need to educate and develop managers. I do not know why my company uses this program; it is the human resource department that decides. . . .

The company enrolls the managers; they have participants in every cohort . . . Guess the company has seen the value of educating their managers, but I have not heard a good explanation of why or an explicit expectation. But I believe that it has to do with networking and 'knowledge fill' and to see the things you face every day in a new way. To get more people through the program, . . . to create a community [in the company].

The last manager indicated an assumption about the company's goal in enrolling him on the program but it is clear that it was not articulated to him by the human resources staff or his local superior.

The ALPs that did not impact the organization are characterized as learning-oriented as there was not much action involved. In general, the managers did not experience support from the local superior and did not involve others from their organization in the project. The managers were not able to provide a clear reasoning for their participation in the program.

Organizational impact from the ALPs

Although a good number of the projects were still in the planning stage, there were some exceptions. These projects are characterized as being in progress as they continued after the last program session and appeared to produce more tangible outcomes in terms of change and development. The most important difference from the examples of ALPs lacking impact is that these managers, to a greater extent, involved others in their accomplishment of the project. Involving others either included a discussion partner or collaborative project partners. The discussion partner was either a co-participant in the program or their local superior (a line manager or member of the company's board of directors). One example was where a manager was hiring a consultant from the program session to help him run a strategy process in the company. This indicates that completing a project that creates change and improvement needs to be a collective activity and that a change process needs more than one person.

During the project presentations in the final session, this manager described a strategy process that he as a general manager initiated in his company. This manager hired the consultant facilitating the strategy workshop during the first program session to help conduct an overall strategy process in his company. The manager stated that this consultant opened his eyes about the importance of broad participation of the employees in his company in strategy development. These are his beliefs about the project one year after the final program session.

The project was a description of this strategy process more or less until the time we were supposed to hand in the project. It described the direction and what was defined until that point . . . about until the implementation . . . it is a process we work with now, and we have in large used the strategy model. We now have a revision of the business plan . . . and the strategic goals every year. That is a process we are in now. The business and the strategic goals are actually . . . developed and results of that process. What we had earlier is not thrown away, but it is a building block we have used in that process to develop this further. We have more focus on fundamentals and a development . . . and involved all the employees, we got more nuances in the process, and some elements are maybe clearer also for the board of directors.

This manager referred to the strategy work as an ongoing process in the company and he emphasized that all company employees participated in the strategy development. His participation in the management program jump-started a new way of thinking about and organizing strategy work, which was a tangible company outcome based on his learning from the strategy workshop.

Another participant in a middle manager position reported that his project of introducing appraisal meetings contributed to improvements within his department.

I implemented appraisal meetings and evaluated the process, keep on doing this, it was a commitment . . . but if I got so far as I wanted during the course, that is another thing . . . to get hold of the workers ideas and in a way to communicate these thoughts, but no ripple effects. [It was] an activity and process more than a project, a part of the job. Planning and implementation of appraisal meetings in my department and to make a system for this. How to handle competence, permanent employees and contract workers. Who to involve in the projects, to find a balance between quality and productivity. To create expectations through the meetings, and make sure to follow up.

I have a strategic anchoring of this in my company, each employer is supposed to be involved in their own development and work situation. To have a conscious relation to what you are a part of, and feel that you contribute. Not a big project, but a small step forward after all.

Regarding appraisal meetings, . . . more aware of the mechanisms and how people talk together, from body language . . . you can be all sorts of things in a way . . . to get the truth out. Knowledge about human relations and interpersonal skills.

This manager defined the project as a part of his job as a general manager and showed a commitment to his local superior who supported him in this work. The commitment to accomplish a project during the program was also discussed during the program provider's meeting with this manager and his local superior between sessions 1 and 2. Although he stated that the project had no ripple effects, he began the routine of appraisal meetings as his project and talked about it in terms of an activity or process.

In the following, we provide some examples of how the managers experienced and expressed support from local superior.

We talked about this before the program, so we had the strategy [of the project], and this is the direction of how we wish to develop.

This manager's local superior also attended the final session where the manager presented his project. The next manager's local superior was also very engaged and participated in the meeting where the ALP was discussed by the program provider, manager and local superior.

The company's overall strategy supports the idea that each employee is supposed to be involved in their own development and work situation, so the implementation of appraisal meetings in the department is in line with this. To have a conscious relationship with the organization you are a part of, and feel you contribute. He supports the work with the project.

This perception of support was confirmed in a meeting the program provider had with him and his local superior. Another manager talked about support from his local superior.

The chairman is my coach in this and he is setting high demands and said I should join this program . . . a positive approach to the participation in [the program] in the company. The company has a focus on competence development. Recommended to have the superior as a coach, we collaborate really well . . . have had my own 'basic group' with my manager.

This general manager collaborated well with his coach who is on the board of directors and he also participated in sessions where the local superiors were invited.

The following example shows engagement from two local superiors with their two respective managers' participation in the program.

The HR manager and director [our coaches] are very engaged and motivated in the project; they have the same needs for an improved process. To improve the process in areas that have been suffering [technically] is a local effect. And if my co-manager and I develop positively, and since we manage pretty large values and millions, if we get inspiration to manage things smarter and do things with our groups, this can give us payback.

Through talking about 'we' and 'us', management in the company of these two participants seems similar to a collective effort of continuous change and development. This shows that support from the local superior is important if the project is to have results beyond individual learning.

To conduct an ALP as a means for organizational change, local participation and the involvement of others were found to be important. The following is one manager's words about local participation in the project.

I started to think about the real life project early in the program. I have been leading a project group, and described the process. We involved others consciously; we created a project group in this company with people on different levels. I let others do much of what was going to be done . . . I used the organization. It might have been done in the same way without the program, I do not know.

This manager organized a local project group around the ALP. He was not certain if he conducted this process in a different way due to program participation but believed the process became more structured because of the possibilities for group reflections in the program sessions. The manager emphasized that through the program, he received input about the importance of local participation in change processes, such as involving the entire organization – including the trade union – at the outset of a project.

The next two managers also discussed the importance of local participation and emphasized that this built upon an established and fundamental way of thinking in each of their companies.

The process so far has been a strategic process, competence and ICT, to build a culture of performance. The values are defined by the employees [involvement], and one has been through all the phases [refers to a model from the program] within two years. Continuous changes happen, and in the future the time used on reorganization needs to be shorter. It has been useful to run this change process in parallel with the program. It is a common use of language. Participation, delegation, regional thinking on organizational development – this builds on our values and culture.

[There is] an 'involvement thinking' in the company, [we are] two managers from the same company . . . we know each other a little, we both aspire to new possibilities, so that is a bit exciting. He talks about 'we' all the time, make a new self-directed team based on broad participation from the value chain for developing . . . use of a consultant to 'play ball' with.

This indicates that in this company, involvement is a basic value that probably made it easier to involve the local community in the project.

When analysing the first round of interviews, the managers in this category were also more able to articulate the company's reasons for sending them on the program. This is exemplified by the following middle manager.

The company wants us to become better managers, to develop. Be more capable to handle daily situations in the company. Let go of technical issues and become more a manager and less a practical

problem solver. To get more of the overall perspective and let go of the details requires methods and training in skills other than those of an engineer.

This was also confirmed in a meeting with the manager, his local superior and the program provider when discussing the goals of the program and project. Another example of conscious company goals expressed by a manager is as follows.

... the usefulness of getting a better manager with increased competence, and thus get increased value creation in the company through results and development. My participation can make the company a more innovative actor, ... turn around fixed systems in the company and go through a change process.

The company is in 100 percent change ... Give me support in the work so I get a broad understanding of management and leadership. I think my chairman hopes this will give me support in how to work with commercial aspects in the job, ... [but] I am not sure that the course will deal with this.

These two managers focused on handling and leading change processes as the companies' goals of investing in the management development program. This indicates that the managers' awareness of company goals is important for the progress of the project.

Compared with the first category of ALPs lacking organizational impact, the managers in this category experienced support from their local superior. They were also involving others in their company to a larger extent and were able to provide more clear reasoning for their participation in the program.

Discussion: balancing individual action and learning and mediating company conditions

To discuss these findings, we contrast the managers' reflections of the lack of organizational impact from the ALPs to the few examples where ALPs were perceived to have an impact on the organization. The distinction between balanced and unbalanced action learning (Cho & Egan, 2010) is used to conceptually frame the discussion of organizational conditions that will mediate ALPs that are more balanced and thus, more likely to have an organizational impact. The aim is to address conditions that can close the gap between what managers are learning through the ALP and the way in which their organizations operate. Table 2 is a summary of aspects of the two types of projects: balanced and unbalanced. We use these aspects to conceptualize mediating company conditions. The findings show the importance of having a company orientation towards the ALP as a means of organizational change as well as experiencing support from the local superior and local participation in the project. The mediating company conditions are shown in the Table 2.

The number of projects without impact shows that many of the managers were not able to identify significant organizational change in the companies. Generally speaking, the managers did not receive hands-on experience with managing people through a change initiative during their project work. Even so, they believed they had received analytical tools improving their understanding of organizational change. These managers did not involve others from their company nor create a group to implement the project. However, managers' learning from attempting a project showed reflections on the importance of involving other people in their company to actually make change happen. Managers also experienced little support or engagement from their local superior (who was supposed to be their coach) in this work. There was a lack of shared goals for the project with others in their local organization as a means of change in the company.

These findings indicate that ALPs can be characterized as balancing action and learning if the managers experienced support from a local superior and involved others from the company. In general, these managers did not experience company opposition during their attempts to conduct the project. On the other hand, managers with projects characterized as balanced action learning did not necessarily learn more than managers with unbalanced ALPs. For several managers, trying to carry out an ALP and failing

Table 2: Mediating company conditions for organizational impact

Unbalanced action learning projects (ALPs)		Mediating company conditions		Balanced ALPs
The managers cannot articulate the company's reasoning behind sending the manager to the program		Clear reasoning behind sending managers to the program		The managers can articulate the company's reasoning behind sending the manager to the program
The managers do not experience support from local superior in the project work		Support from local superior in the project		The managers experience support from local superior in the project work
The project is an individual endeavor and does not include local participation		Participation in the project of others in the organization		The project is an individual or collective endeavor and/or includes local participation

seemed to trigger learning about themselves in relation to their organization. However, managers with ALPs characterized as unbalanced action learning were more likely to experience opposition and expressed a mismatch between ambition and reality. Managers' expressions of lack of organizational impact is supported by what Hay (2006) called 'seeing differently'. We argue that learning without action is not always favorable for the sponsoring company and more focus needs to be on creating conditions for organization-wide learning to better reveal the potential of ALPs.

Although an ALP can be a strong learning experience for the manager, particularly about how he or she himself relates to the organization, the findings show that an imbalance between action and learning can cause tensions. We argue that this learning is not necessarily in the best interest for the company sponsoring a management development program. Considering the perspective of the company, we claim that support and engagement from the local superior through the manager's participation in a program is important in order to avoid the discrepancy between what the managers are learning through an ALP and the way in which their organization functions. This is also of importance for the manager's commitment to the company in the long-term. These findings are supported by Marsick and O'Neil (1999), who found that the greatest organizational risk in action learning is not being able to ensure management support at various levels. The unbalanced ALPs show examples of tensions identified by O'Neil (1997) between expectations of learning and delivering tangible results, between time required for learning and tasks and between team conflict and harmony.

The majority of the reflections show a strong individual orientation to participation in the management development program. We therefore argue that there is a mismatch between the individual orientation and the program value propositions of organizational change. The findings show that managers perceived that the companies generally did not view an ALP as a collaborative endeavor or a means of change or organizational development. Most companies basically used the management program as a tool for individual learning and development. This supports our assumption that an ALP is

more a possibility for managers' learning than a means of organizational change. We argue that organizational policy can influence the possibility of balancing action and learning.

In a meta-review of management development literature, Cullen and Turnbull (2005) pointed out that there exists a specter of rationales for investing in programs. The importance of the company's orientation or policy about using management development as a means of change is also supported by Antonacopoulou (1999), who argued that a manager's perspective to management development and training is influenced by the company's policy. Based on this, we anticipate that organizational impact from a manager's attempt at an ALP requires a collaborative orientation to using the management development program beyond individual development.

Conclusion and implications

In this article, we argue that ALPs in management development programs are more likely to have organizational impact if action and learning are balanced and if the ALP is a collaborative endeavor. In order to achieve these things in practice, our research suggests that organizations need to:

- have clear reasons for enrolling managers on management development programs;
- ensure managers have support from their immediate superior; and
- facilitate 'local participation', that is, the involvement in the ALP of others within the manager's organization.

These have implications for the conceptual and practical understanding of action learning in HRD interventions such as management development and training. We argue that these three organizational conditions need to be met in order to deliver impact from management development programs beyond that of individual learning, that is, organizational impact.

We do, however, point out limitations in our research. First of all, this is a relatively small case study from which generalization is difficult. Second, we have defined lack of organizational impact in terms of its absence one year after the program. We feel that after such a delay, the likelihood of impact is small. However, we do recognize that changes in large, complex organizations can take a long time to be sanctioned and that some ALPs might have resulted in changes after the one-year cutoff point.

Future research, therefore, might usefully explore the applicability of our findings on a larger scale and also examine organizational change resulting from ALPs, and perhaps other HRD interventions, in terms of process and timescale.

In terms of theory, we have noted that one way of conceptualizing the lack of organizational impact of ALPs in management development is to regard it as part of the wider 'transfer problem' in the training and development field more generally. The results here are consistent with the existing transfer literature, which shows that the work environment is important in transfer (Grossman & Salas, 2011). This broad category includes 'transfer climate' and support, which, together, embrace the conditions found to be important in the present study.

A better understanding of balanced action learning also has important practical implications for program providers and companies using management development programs. It makes it clear that although program providers can go some way towards striking a healthy balance between learning and action, the ultimate organizational impact is contingent on company conditions beyond the providers' control. Providers can help define realistic projects and guide organizations in their efforts but organizations themselves need to assume a greater responsibility for bringing about favorable internal conditions to allow the potential of ALPs to develop and the benefits of their investment in management development to accrue.

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