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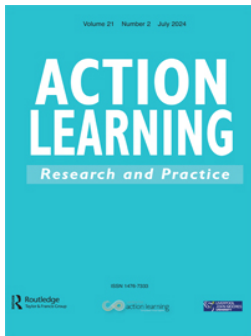
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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Developing leaders on-line using action learning: an account of practice

Katie Willocks and Julia Rouse

ABSTRACT

Amid the backdrop of the global pandemic and other complex societal and organizational challenges, the demand for proficient people management skills among managers and leaders has become increasingly urgent. The ensuing narrative offers an account of a leadership development initiative tailored for line managers and delivered amid the pandemic. This account focuses on a specific facet of the training - a series of online action learning sessions conducted between April 2021 and May 2022. The article commences by laying a contextual foundation for the project and profiling its participants. Subsequently, the paper delineates the precise action learning methodology adopted within the project, detailing its structuring and implementation. This is followed by the presentation of case studies featuring participants who engaged with the action learning process, delving into their training experiences and elucidating key outcomes pertaining to their learning, development and alterations in professional practice. Ultimately, the article culminates by reflecting on crucial findings and insights gleaned from the execution and assessment of the action learning initiative, thereby underscoring valuable recommendations for the future implementation of action learning in leadership development.

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Action learning; leadership development; flash peer learning; online learning

Introduction

Amidst the backdrop of the global pandemic and other complex societal and organizational challenges the demand for proficient people management skills among managers and leaders has become increasingly urgent (Edmonstone, Lawless, and Pedler 2019). Consequently, the significance of effective leadership and management development and education cannot be overstated. Nevertheless, research has unveiled an ongoing struggle for organizations, as many traditional leadership development initiatives fall short in terms of their efficacy. A notable critique of such programs lies in their tendency to provide factual information regarding the necessary skills and competencies for leadership, yet they often lack relevance to the practical challenges confronted by leaders. Compounding this, numerous leadership development programs fail to offer leaders the

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chance to apply new skills and knowledge within the context of their managerial or leadership responsibilities (Denyer and James 2016; Volz-Peacock, Carson, and Marquardt 2016). A recent contention has arisen, advocating for leadership interventions that acknowledge the value of guiding leaders and managers to learn collaboratively (Crevani, Lindgren, and Packendorff 2010). One such approach put forth is action learning, which is touted as a means to nurture collective learning, collaborative problem-solving, and shared reflective processes (Raelin et al, 2021).

The ensuing narrative offers an account of a leadership development initiative tailored for line managers and delivered amid the pandemic. This account focuses on a specific facet of the training – a series of online action learning sessions conducted between April 2021 and May 2022. The article commences by laying a contextual foundation for the project and profiling its participants. Subsequently, the paper delineates the precise action learning methodology adopted within the project, detailing its structuring and implementation. This is followed by the presentation of case studies featuring participants who engaged with the action learning process, delving into their training experiences and elucidating key outcomes pertaining to their learning, development, and alterations in professional practice. Ultimately, the article culminates by reflecting on crucial findings and insights gleaned from the execution and assessment of the action learning initiative, thereby underscoring valuable recommendations for the future implementation of action learning in leadership development.

The GELL project

The overall leadership development project was known as ‘GELL’ short for the Good Employment Learning Lab. The learning lab was established by researchers from a University in the North of England as part of a large ESRC grant to explore issues relating to ‘good employment practices’, specifically how best to train and develop line managers. The learning lab was a figurative space comprising of researchers, management development educators and partners from sectors (e.g. health and social care organizations, ACAS and trade unions). Managers and leaders seeking training, education and development were also invited to be part of the learning lab. The purpose of GELL was to set up a series of online training interventions to support managers to develop their leadership skills across a number of areas identified as critical. These areas or themes included managing an agile team, values based recruitment, enhancing team creativity, managing conflict and getting the best out of your team. These challenges were identified by engaging with partner organizations in the North of England to identify pressing leadership and management predicaments. This approach of consulting with partner organizations is aligned with a form of research known as engaged scholarship; an approach that argues that researchers need to develop research problems in conjunction with key stakeholders (Van de Ven 2007).

As part of the overall GELL project, three types of training were delivered, namely, masterclasses, skills coaching and action learning. 366 managers participated in GELL learning interventions overall and the training was free for all of the participants. Interestingly, over 75% of the participants were women, most of whom were aged between 30 and 60 but a small number were younger or older than this. The managers that participated had a range of different experiences; some had been managing for less than a year but the

majority had five years or more of line management experience. We selected managers and leaders who had line management responsibilities as prior research indicated that this group of individuals were often neglected in terms of leadership development opportunities (Dirani et al. 2020). This group was also identified as facing considerable pressure in their roles supporting the emotional and psychological health of the people that they lead and manage. Our prior research identified that there was a pressing need to understand the most effective way to develop and train line managers across a range of leadership topics and themes. In this paper, we draw upon some of the findings from the research into the participants who engaged with the action learning intervention that was part of the wider GELL project.

Action learning

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in utilizing action learning as a mechanism to bolster leadership development (Pedler 2011; Skipton Leonard and Lang 2010). Action learning, an approach initially developed by Revans in the 1940s, emphasizes the significance of managers engaging in discussions about ideas, facts, and opinions with peers. These conversations are then followed by practical application of newly acquired knowledge to real-world issues. Traditionally, action learning occurs within a group of 5–7 participants. Through a process of peer-led questioning, participants gain fresh insights and feedback that aid them in tackling challenges and adopting novel approaches. The learning experience transpires as participants reflect collectively, assimilate newfound insights into their current practices, and apply emerging knowledge (Marquardt 2000; Raelin 2021). Typically, a coach or facilitator provides support throughout the learning journey.

In our project, the action learning sessions were conducted in an online format. Initially intended for in-person delivery, the sessions had to be adapted due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions prevailing at the time of training. The design of the action learning encompassed several key principles rooted in management learning theory (e.g. Kolb 1984). The primary goal was for managers to acquire knowledge, introspect on their practices, contextualize their experiences, commit to experimenting with new approaches, and engage in collaborative learning with peers. Within our action learning sessions, a trained facilitator possessing expertise in HRD played an active role not only in structuring and guiding the sessions, but also in contributing relevant insights and knowledge when deemed beneficial. It is important to acknowledge here that having a facilitator play such a role in action learning is somewhat contentious, with some scholars seeing that facilitators take a more active role than others in listening, questioning and sharing experience (see for example, Marquardt 2004), whereas others highlighting the importance of the facilitator not offering their own opinions or advice (Revans 1998). At the commencement of each session, a participant was tasked with presenting a challenge or issue they were grappling with in their professional practice. The remaining members of the action learning group were then prompted to pose inquisitive and clarifying questions to gain a comprehensive understanding of the presented issue. The facilitator encouraged participants to employ active listening to delve deeply into the nuances of the challenge at hand. Following the presentation of their issue, the presenting leader (referred to in diagram 1 below as the 'focussed person'), moves away from the group by turning their camera

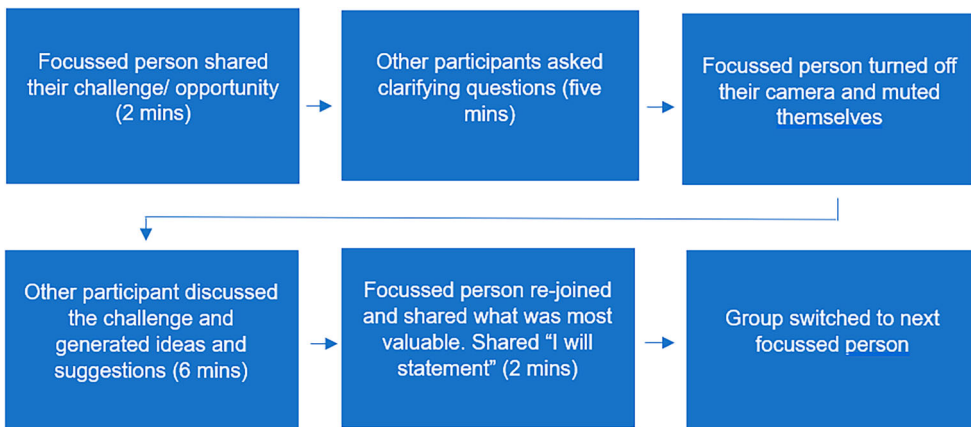


Figure 1. Process of GELL online action learning.

off and listens carefully to the other participants explore the issues and views that have arisen for them as they listened to the problem. This format of action learning, known as the ‘Gossip Method’ allegedly helps the presenting participant to listen more carefully to the perspectives of the others in the group (Abbott and Taylor 2013). After a short period of time (approx. 5–10 min), the presenting participant/ focussed person switches their camera back on and group members were encouraged to provide observations, perspectives, and input related to the challenge. Throughout, participants were prompted to engage in profound self-reflection while considering their peers’ viewpoints. The presenting participant was then guided to identify actionable steps and changes they could implement in their practice to address the presented challenge. This phase was referred to as ‘making a commitment to experiment’. The entire action learning process is depicted in Figure 1 below.

How the sets worked?

When evaluating the effectiveness of the training, our evaluation was focussed on exploring whether the managers had gained new knowledge as well as whether this had had a knock – on effect on their practice once back in the workplace (experimenting). In addition, we were also curious as to whether any reported changes had a wider effect on organizational practices or on the manager or leader’s staff or team. In total 17 action learning sets were run involving 69 participants. Early sessions that were delivered were 3 h in total. However, this was amended to 90 min per session following feedback from participants that 3 h sessions were too lengthy resulting in problems fully focussing and engaging. Each participant attended 3 sessions in total.

To effectively monitor the participants’ learning progress throughout the intervention, we employed various data collection methods. The foremost approach involved observations by facilitators and researchers. These observations encompassed comprehensive notes taken both during and after the action learning sessions. These meticulous notes documented the challenges participants presented during the sessions, the conversational dynamics during action learning, the generation of novel ideas,

and the innovative strategies and solutions deliberated upon by the leaders and managers. The second method of data collection consisted of distributing reflective portfolios to participants prior to the commencement of the action learning process. Participants were tasked with completing these portfolios and recording their learning experiences during the action learning journey. It's noteworthy that these portfolios served a dual purpose, acting as both reflective tools for participants and valuable research data for the project. A third data collection avenue implemented in the project involved conducting research interviews subsequent to the participants' completion of the action learning curriculum. These interviews were scheduled at least 8 weeks after the final action learning session, allowing ample time for participants to apply their training in practical settings. These interviews were conducted online using MS Teams and each session lasted approximately 35–40 min. All qualitative data acquired through the aforementioned methodologies underwent coding using NVIVO software. Upon concluding the data collection phase, we pursued in-depth case studies of several managers. These case studies were constructed by assimilating the entirety of the collected interview transcripts, portfolio entries, and researcher notes associated with specific participants.

Positive outcomes arising from action learning

The participants who attended the action learning sessions conveyed a highly positive assessment of their experience. Many attendees expressed that the sessions had provided them with newfound knowledge on a variety of topics and issues, while also aiding them in addressing the challenges they had been encountering. Additionally, numerous participants noted that the sessions equipped them with fresh tools and strategies to navigate the emotional dimensions inherent in their management and leadership roles. This newfound competence engendered heightened confidence and fortitude in grappling with their leadership quandaries.

Numerous individuals conveyed their enjoyment in acquiring insights from both their peers engaged in the action learning process and the skilled facilitators. A subset of participants openly expressed their relief at realizing that the skills pertaining to people management are acquirable and expandable through learning. Virtually all the leaders and managers who participated in the action learning initiative ventured into experimenting with novel practices and approaches. The changes enacted were far-reaching across diverse management challenges, encompassing modifications to recruitment protocols, enhancement of team engagement procedures, fostering improved communication channels with teams, and establishing more regular staff check-ins.

Intriguingly, certain managers and leaders extended their influence to broader organizational practices that extended beyond their immediate teams. Notably, a portion of the participants proceeded to institute action learning interventions within their own organizations, leveraging the GELL delivery model as their framework. Subsequently, we delve into three case studies involving managers who partook in the action learning initiative. We explore their motivations for engaging in the study, pinpoint the aspects they found most beneficial, and examine how their capacities for management and leadership evolved through their participation in the action learning program.

Participant stories

Case study 1: Yvonne

Yvonne possessed a decade's worth of experience as a social worker within a local authority, with an additional three years of supervisory and management roles. She also held the position of a practice educator, guiding students through their social work training. Yvonne's engagement with the GELL programme began during its third management challenge module titled 'Optimizing Team Performance'. Notably, her involvement coincided with a change in senior management within her organization, leading to the removal of her supervisory responsibilities. Although Yvonne had been offered alternative developmental opportunities, none came to fruition. This experience left her feeling 'disempowered', akin to encountering a 'glass ceiling'. Eager for guidance, Yvonne joined the action learning sessions in hopes of addressing this predicament. She was equally interested in gleaning insights from seasoned managers on team motivation, seeking to absorb both inspiration and practical wisdom from those well-versed in social care management.

Yvonne recounted engaging in impactful and extensive discussions during the action learning sessions. She expressed a preference for collaborative group conversations as her preferred learning style. Her action learning group comprised fellow managers operating within adult social care. Yvonne emphasized the value of sharing experiences and challenges with peers from her own sector, highlighting the profound connections she formed and the depth of exploration she engaged in. Yvonne noted the thought-provoking questions posed by her peers and the facilitator, which adeptly delved into the core of matters. She cited learning from her peers about conflict resolution methods and the implementation of a buddy system for underperforming colleagues within her team.

In addition to gaining insights into addressing ongoing team challenges, Yvonne's participation in action learning cultivated skills in introspection, attentive listening, and advisory skills. Delving into her personal career challenges during the sessions empowered her to envision the kind of work environment where she could thrive and recognize the adverse impact of the new senior management. This introspection led Yvonne to a pivotal realization: she needed to transition to a different organization. The safe and supportive atmosphere of the action learning sessions prompted Yvonne to re-evaluate her career direction, reaffirm her values, and identify areas where compromise was unacceptable. This introspective process was facilitated by the sessions' psychologically secure setting, fostering honest learning and non-judgmental support from peers. Beyond deciding to change organizations, Yvonne resolved to empower her team members and embrace collaborative decision-making.

An additional favourable outcome of Yvonne's participation was her contribution to her organization. She authored a concise paper proposing the implementation of the action learning model within small groups of social workers. This initiative aimed to aid them in resolving intricate cases. Overall, Yvonne characterized her experience with the GELL project's action learning as 'the most significant course I've undertaken in recent years', asserting that it had transformative effects on her life. She further expressed her surprise at the extent of learning achieved through the online medium, lauding the adept facilitation, amiable pacing, and respectful, encouraging atmosphere of the small group.

Case study 2: Fran

Fran, a dedicated social worker, held a leadership role in managing a team of frontline social workers focused on child protection. Describing her role as immensely challenging due to frequent conflicts, Fran faced additional trials during the pandemic. Managing her team became even tougher as they grappled with personal health issues amidst the pandemic's uncertainties.

A central concern Fran brought to the action learning platform was the management of new trainees within the shifting pandemic context, given the inability to supervise them in person. Specifically, she struggled with guiding underperforming and challenged trainees. The action learning process held promise for her, as it could potentially provide insights into addressing this predicament. Furthermore, Fran sought to learn effective methods for supporting her team holistically during the pandemic.

Initially sceptical about action learning due to the diverse backgrounds of fellow participants, Fran quickly recognized its value. Sessions brought together leaders from disparate contexts, validating her day-to-day struggles. This validation prompted Fran to deeply reflect on the intricacies her team faced. Fran found great worth in the group's collective wisdom, particularly appreciating perspectives from individuals in organizations different from her own. She remarked, 'Hearing about others' challenges and ideas was truly enlightening'.

Through action learning, Fran gleaned crucial insights on managing a particularly challenging team member struggling with performance. Collaborative discussions and reflections within the group enabled Fran to formulate a precise action plan, alleviating her burdens and providing a path forward. This newfound approach involved stepping back and empowering individuals to take charge of certain tasks, relieving Fran from perpetual involvement.

Intriguingly, Fran extended action learning to her own team after her involvement in the GELL project. Her intention was to facilitate coaching interactions between senior and junior team members. This transformative shift bolstered the confidence of senior team members within her organization. Overall, Fran found the action learning experience extremely beneficial. She emphasized that it allowed her to pause, introspect on her practices, and acknowledge her competence in leadership, surpassing her own expectations.

Case study 3: Millie

Millie also had a role in Adult Social Care where she led a team of 40 social workers. She decided to join the action learning initiative due to challenges with retaining staff in her team. She explained that there had been instances of bullying within the team, leading to high turnover rates with staff leaving within a year of joining. Millie was particularly intrigued by the concept of 'values-based' recruitment, which was the focal point of Management Challenge 1 (the full list of the management challenges is listed in the section titled the 'GELL project'). Having previously attended a masterclass on this topic, she recognized the need to further expand her knowledge through interactions with other leaders and to reflect on her learning. She was drawn to the action learning opportunity as it provided a supportive environment for her to begin experimenting with changes in the recruitment process within her organization. Millie expressed her hope that this experience would

equip her with the confidence to implement new ideas and practices. Despite viewing herself as a confident and seasoned manager, she sought the reinforcement of action learning to apply values-based recruitment more assuredly. Additionally, Millie displayed an interest in understanding how to implement action learning as an intervention in her own team.

Participating in the action learning sessions exposed Millie to various challenges and approaches to values-based recruitment, shared by both facilitators and fellow leaders. This served to reinforce and build upon her prior knowledge gained from the masterclass. She felt motivated to collaborate with other members of the action learning group in exploring how to strike a balance between values-based recruitment questions and other inquiries during interviews. She was also enthusiastic about finding solutions to specific recruitment dilemmas in her team, such as ensuring a diverse mix of individuals with varied skills when hiring new team members.

Millie found the learning process during the action learning sessions to be fulfilling. She described the group as 'small', 'well-facilitated', and 'trustworthy'. During an interview, she highlighted the value of hearing about and reflecting upon the experiences of other managers within the action learning context. Insights from fellow managers led her to realize that, in order to effectively utilize a values-based approach during interviews, she needed to rephrase questions and adapt in real-time to draw out more meaningful responses from candidates unaccustomed to discussing their values. Millie stressed that the action learning experience empowered her to overcome challenges and generate innovative ideas for her experimental endeavours. She also acknowledged the enhancement of her listening and questioning skills as a result of participating in the action learning sessions.

Following her engagement in the action learning initiative, Millie introduced several changes to her practices. Primarily, she crafted a fresh set of recruitment questions and began testing them in her recruitment processes. Furthermore, she expanded her recruitment techniques beyond interviews to incorporate role-playing scenarios. These adaptations emerged from discussions with fellow leaders in the action learning sessions. As a direct outcome, Millie felt that she gained deeper insights into potential candidates during the recruitment process, leading to the hiring of exceptional new team members. Subsequent to the action learning experience, Millie went on to develop a comprehensive recruitment toolkit for her team. Interestingly, she also shared that the action learning had provided her with valuable insights into running action learning within her own team to address issues and challenges. These changes ultimately contributed to an enhanced sense of identity, engagement, and resilience within her team. Overall, Millie regarded the action learning initiative as an immensely valuable learning opportunity, noting its ability to foster stimulating conversations and facilitate a deeper understanding of colleagues and potential collaborators. She commended the facilitators for their expertise and acknowledged that the action learning experience bolstered her confidence in innovating recruitment practices and exploring new methodologies.

Overall findings, reflections, and implications

The participants in the action learning programme brought forth an array of leadership issues and challenges to the sessions, spanning from recruitment matters to dealing

with underperforming team members and effectively managing conflicts within their teams. Our findings revealed that the participating managers, as part of the study, found immense value in the action learning approach. It provided them with the opportunity to reflect on their current challenges and acquire new insights from both their peers and facilitators. This, in turn, equipped them to confront some of their complex organizational dilemmas. A substantial number of the managers who engaged in action learning demonstrated a commitment to experimenting with novel techniques and approaches. Many of them translated these experiments into tangible practices upon returning to their respective organizations.

The action learning intervention was introduced during a period when various socio-cultural and environmental factors were at play. Numerous managers and leaders were grappling with heightened pressure in their roles, largely stemming from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Our study highlighted that managers reported overwhelming workloads and staffing challenges across their organizations, placing them under significant strain. The emergence of remote work posed logistical hurdles, forcing teams to adapt to unfamiliar modes of operation. This shift led to managers feeling inundated and often unsure about how to navigate the mounting challenges arising from rapid and forced changes. Despite their considerable experience and tenure in leadership positions, many managers found themselves overwhelmed, isolated, and lacking avenues for addressing these challenges. Remote work further exacerbated this sense of isolation, with several managers expressing a lack of peer or managerial support for discussing the difficulties they were encountering.

Given this context, the managers and leaders who participated in our study recognized that action learning training provided a secure and supportive environment. Within this space, they could be candid, open, and vulnerable while engaging with their fellow managers and leaders. This supportive atmosphere addressed a gap they perceived in their current professional roles, which had been further intensified by the isolating effects of the pandemic. Throughout the action learning sessions, we observed rapid establishment of trust among group members, leading to robust conversations, candid sharing of perspectives, and the emergence of new insights and understanding. As researchers, we were pleasantly surprised at how swiftly psychological safety and trust were established in the online format. This may partially owe to the pandemic fostering a greater comfort with online interactions. Moreover, the facilitators' credible and non-judgmental approach likely contributed to creating an environment of trust and safety. In light of these findings, we propose that during times of organizational change and uncertainty, online action learning can serve as a highly effective learning platform to support overwhelmed and isolated managers and leaders, who often lack adequate support within their own organizations. Consequently, we learned that action learning can foster confidence and alleviate isolation for many managers and leaders.

Beyond mitigating feelings of isolation and overwhelm, the action learning sessions facilitated managers' rapid sense-making of their challenges, enabling them to devise new solutions and strategies for addressing them. Participants frequently underscored the value of collective learning within the action learning context, where diverse perspectives and experiences among their peers enriched their insights. The recognition that others had faced or were facing similar challenges reassured them, and tapping into this collective wisdom aided their understanding of their own issues. Furthermore, our

research revealed that participation in action learning bolstered participants' confidence in dealing with workplace issues. Evidently, the sessions reduced feelings of isolation and normalized their management struggles. Interacting with peers also emboldened them to address intricate challenges in practice, often by providing a clear action plan.

Regarding the various elements of action learning, participants particularly appreciated the segment where group members discussed a leader's issue without their direct input (refer to [Figure 1](#): 'Main Participant Switches Camera Off'). This practice facilitated managers in stepping back from their own situations, allowing them to listen to insights regarding the potential sources of their challenges. Additionally, many managers highlighted the discussion phase of action learning and the opportunity for collective reflection as offering deeper insights into their practices than they could attain in isolation. An illuminating example involves a manager who recognized, through action learning discussions, a disparity between their emotional nature outside of work and their more conservative demeanour at work. This realization prompted them to explore the emotional impact on their team in certain situations. Collaborative reflection led them to commit to considering emotional aspects more comprehensively. Thus, we recommend integrating both processes – stepping back to listen to others and actively engaging in discussions – into future action learning initiatives for leadership development. Interviews with our research participants also unveiled that spacing peer learning sessions (approximately every two weeks) and conducting multiple sessions over a duration allowed managers to reflect between sessions and implement actions based on these reflections.

Many leaders also emphasized how action learning held them accountable for changes they intended to make in their practices. Accountability, in this context, involves holding learners responsible for commitments they made. Facilitators informed the leaders and managers that they would be expected to commit to changing their practices and provide feedback on their progress during subsequent sessions. This aspect of the action learning process emerged as a pivotal factor that facilitated both change and learning among participants. However, we caution that this accountability approach should be employed judiciously to avoid instilling fear or shame if applied inappropriately.

Conclusion

This account of practice presents findings from a leadership development initiative called 'GELL' (Good Employment Learning Lab), focusing on online action learning sessions designed to enhance leadership skills and address critical challenges faced by managers. The participants' stories emphasize the value of collaboration, peer learning, and introspection within the action learning environment. Key findings include participants' improved confidence in dealing with challenges, enhanced problem-solving skills, and a greater sense of accountability for implementing new approaches in their roles. The article suggests that the action learning approach, particularly in an online format, is effective for overwhelmed and isolated managers seeking support and innovative solutions during times of uncertainty. The integration of diverse perspectives, accountability mechanisms, and regular intervals between sessions were identified as key elements contributing to the success of action learning in leadership development. Ultimately, the study highlights the transformative potential of action learning in fostering collaborative learning, empowering managers, and promoting adaptive leadership practices.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Katie Willocks is a lecturer in leadership and leadership development at Manchester Metropolitan University. She is interested in how managers and leaders learn and develop. Her work has been particularly focused in health and social care settings. She is interested in practice-based perspectives such as activity theory and leadership as practice as a way of understanding collaborative learning processes.

Julia Rouse holds a Chair in Decent Work and Productivity at Manchester Metropolitan University. She practices as an Engaged-Activist Scholar and works with organizations and wider ecosystems to learn how to develop people management that is effective, just and sustainable.

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