ABSTRACT
                The National Staff Development Committee of the Vocational
Education and Training Sector in Australia is promoting action learning as a
preferred professional development strategy to support the implementation of
key competencies. Action learning was piloted across five training areas
within the Department of Employment, Training, and Further Education, South
Australia. The project was evaluated through two semi-structured hour-long
interviews conducted with participating staff (one at the beginning, the
other at the end of the project) and the Stages of Concern Questionnaire and
the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The study found that the success of action
learning as a change strategy depends on a number of factors, including the
following: (1) preparation of staff to participate in the project; (2)
selection and preparation of facilitators; (3) management support, funding,
and feedback; (3) time constraints, workloads, and attendance; (4) needs and
concerns of all the participants in the project; (5) setting clear goals
around a common problem; (6) making team building and staff development a
priority; and (7) employing the thinking, doing, evaluating, and reflecting
cycle. (Contains 12 references.) (KC)

ACTION LEARNING: A STRATEGY FOR CHANGE

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Abstract

The National Staff Development Committee of the Vocational Education and Training Sector is promoting action learning as a preferred professional development strategy to support the implementation of key competencies. This paper reports on an investigation of action learning as trialed across five training areas within the Department of Employment, Training and Further Education in South Australia. Two semi-structured hour long interviews were conducted with participating staff, one at the beginning, the other at the end of the project, and two questionnaires were administered: the Stages of Concern Questionnaire and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. This paper focusses on the two interviews and these results are discussed in relation to the effectiveness of action learning as a change strategy that can move an organisation for learning toward becoming a learning organisation.

ACTION LEARNING: A STRATEGY FOR CHANGE[1]

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Bringing about change in any organisation is a complex matter. Organisational change in general and educational change in particular has never been a linear process (Fullan, 1993). Experienced managers of change are well aware that it is impossible to control the many factors operating during the change process. Selecting appropriate change strategies is an important step in achieving successive approximations toward desired outcomes. Can a strategy for change such as action learning help an organisation for learning become a learning organisation?

A learning organisation "is one that learns continuously and transforms itself. Learning takes place in individuals, teams, the organisation, and in the communities with which the organisation interacts. Learning is a ... strategically used process, integrated with, and running parallel to work ... . The learning organisation has embedded systems to capture and share learning" (Watkins & Marsick, 1993, p. 8-9).

Senge (1990) refers to such organisational change as a 'fundamental shift of mind'. Such a shift of mind requires all the individuals in the organisation to accept the necessity to integrate learning with everyday work. Such integration is more likely to occur when individuals are organised to work in teams. Team learning is more likely to be actioned and disseminated to other individuals or teams. Team work engages the individuals' commitment and capacity to learn at all levels of the organisation and propels the organisation toward becoming a learning organisation.

This concept of organisational learning suggests a dynamic approach to change that incorporates the concept of continuous improvement. It relies on the resources and experiences of its members and acknowledges the importance of structural, normative and cognitive factors in the process of organisational change.

An organisation moves towards becoming a learning organisation when it encourages its members to participate in organisational decisions, provides time for members to review and think about their work, provides professional development opportunities to expand knowledge and skills, removes the risks in being open and introduces structures and processes that make collaboration and team work irresistible.

Action Learning

The National Staff Development Committee (NSDC) has been promoting action learning as a staff development strategy to support the implementation of key competencies (Mayer, 1992) and bring about system change in the Vocational Education and Training Sector (VET). The implementation of a curriculum innovation such as the key competencies in the VET Sector is a major change initiative that requires people to change what they do and how they think about what they do.

The Department of Employment, Training and Further Education, South Australia (DETAFE) received funding from the NSDC to trial action learning as a support strategy for implementing the key competencies. An investigation of this trial was undertaken as one of seven research projects contributing to the larger project entitled *Teaching and Learning the Key Competencies in the Vocational Education and Training Sector: Research Support* (1996); a collaborative project between DETAFE(SA) and the Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching (FIST) funded by the Department for Employment, Education and Training (DEET, reconstituted now as DEETYA).

Action learning (Revans, 1991) is a team-based, workplace activity that brings together people with a common problem or project to work out solutions or achieve project outcomes. The action learning group or set provides support and encouragement to try out new ways of doing things and new ways of thinking about things. Developed by Reg Revans (1971) as a staff development activity for managers in industry, it attempts to overcome resistance to new learning and the tendency to stay with the familiar methods and avoid taking personal and professional risks. Action learning provides participants with opportunities to pool their knowledge and skills, share learning tasks, review and reflect on their learning, question each others' views and ideas and learn how to work productively in a team. The process of action learning helps participants learn how to learn by dealing with real problems in the workplace.

The implementation of the eight key competencies (listed in Appendix 1) in the VET Sector has provided opportunities to trial action learning as a systems strategy that will: embed the key competencies in the curriculum; provide the staff development necessary to implement the curriculum; and, initiate the organisational change toward a work environment that enables the organisation to practise what it preaches.

This paper presents an investigation of action learning as a staff development activity supporting the implementation of the key competencies. The results and interpretations of this research reveal some of the existing complexities related to using the action learning process as an organisational change strategy.

Procedures of the Investigation

Five groups or sets with a total of 28 staff participated in trialing action learning at the Torrens Valley Institute, South Australia. These were:
>   Electronics and Information Technology
>   Veterinary and Applied Science
>   Horticulture
>   Community and Health Sciences
>   Para Dental

The facilitators/leaders from each set formed a sixth group for support to debrief, plan and exchange issues.

Information about action learning and the key competencies for the larger investigation was collected using a range of methods that included observation, interviews and questionnaires. The focus of this paper is confined to the results of two hour long semi-structured interviews (Appendix 2 and 3) conducted with each member of the five sets at the beginning of the project and towards the end.

First Interview: Early Experiences of Participants

Beginning Concerns about Action Learning (Question 1)

The beginning concerns about the action learning process were:
* time constraints, attendance at set meetings and workloads (51 per cent);
* inadequate understanding of what participation in the project required (20 per cent);
* inadequate induction into the action learning process (12 per cent).

Some other concerns expressed at this stage were:
* getting active involvement in the meetings;
* promoting open communications;
* choosing the problem;
* establishing clear goals;
* keeping team focused;
* recording and reporting;
* difficulty with reaching consensus;
* restraining dominant personalities; and,
* managing conflict.

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Understanding the Nature of Action Learning, its Strengths and Weaknesses (Question 2, 3 and 4)

Understanding the nature of action learning:
- mostly inadequate as expressed by, "opportunity to get together", a "discussion group" with a common aim, driven by a task "getting a job done" (39 per cent);
- deeper understanding of the staff development and team building purposes was demonstrated by explanations such as, a cycle of focusing on problems, working out solutions, questioning, reflecting, reviewing as a regular work pattern, "learning from each other" in a collaborative environment, "challenging viewpoints" and "going one step further than our normal interactions," (32 per cent). Two of the five sets had a majority of their responses in this category.
- no understanding or mistaken view demonstrated by, "like brainstorming", "like flexible delivery" (29 per cent).

The strengths of action learning that members of one set were experiencing related to the team building process: "expressing and resolving our feelings about the process"; learning to handle criticism; "being equal to one another and being valued for our input"; "getting feedback from others and bouncing ideas off people extends the learning and helps to make changes". Facilitation skills were recognised as a critical factor in promoting open communication and handling conflict.

A number of staff mentioned the time taken by action learning as a weakness of the process. One insightful comment from a member of a well-informed set was that "availability of time could be an issue to people who didn't understand what action learning is all about."

Self-Generated Action Learning Processes in Use (Question 5)

The processes most often identified across the sets were discussion, raising issues and ideas, challenging others, sharing tasks, and researching information on key competencies. One leader commented that what they did was not specific to action learning. Use of reflecting or reviewing was mentioned by 14 per cent of the total group.

Some individuals mentioned other relevant processes, expressing feelings, attentive listening, being inclusive, documentation and making information available through electronic mail, being experimental, using lateral thinking and reaching consensus rather than using majority decision.

Of the total group, 20 per cent, including two facilitators, suggested no processes and confessed they had no idea what they were.

What Helps and Hinders Your Contribution (Questions 6 and 7)

Members of sets seemed well aware of what helped and hindered their contributions at meetings. In any one set, nearly all of the following range of factors were recognised in both categories:

Helping	Hindering
understanding action learning and/or key competencies	lack of understanding of action learning and/or key competencies
having time to participate	time constraints and external demands
having common focus for meetings	having unclear or different goals
establishing a supportive climate	unresolved conflict
using interpersonal skills	lack of interpersonal skills
finding resources	not carrying out tasks

The importance of facilitation skills to the functioning of the set was mentioned. Willingness to change was offered by one perceptive individual. Diversity of work roles in the sets was identified as both a help and a hindrance.

Satisfaction with Set Meetings (Question 8)

Very satisfied with the way the set meetings were going (25 per cent) with over half of these
responses coming from one set.
Reasonably satisfied with the meetings (32 per cent).
Uncertain (18 per cent).

Use of Recognised Processes in Set (Question 9)

Action Learning Processes	Not at all %	Some extent %	Reasonable extent %
clarifying goals and expectations	0	48	52
pooling of knowledge and skills	0	16	84
sharing learning tasks	4	40	56
review and reflect on my learning	8	44	48
questioning of old ideas and views	4	48	48
working as a team	0	28	72
trying out new ways of doing things	12	48	40
providing encouragement and support for change	12	32	56

The two processes recognised by most individuals (84 and 72 per cent) as occurring to a reasonable
extent were the "pooling of knowledge and skills" and "working as a team". "Trying out new ways of
doing things" and "providing encouragement and support for change" were the most variable, each
with 12 per cent of members indicating no occurrence.

Do Sets Help Implementation of the Key Competencies (Question 10)

Yes (68 per cent).
No (32 per cent).

*Ratings of Personal and Group Commitment to Implementing the Key Competencies (Questions 11,
12 and 13)*

Personal and group commitment was high for nearly half the group (48 per cent).
Discrepancies between personal and group ratings indicated lesser commitment (52 per cent) with the
majority of these responses coming from three sets. The highest differentials between the ratings were
due to strong dissatisfaction with members who were seen as using the process for staff development
rather than problem solving, frustration with lack of time, ineffective group process, unclear goals
and diversity of styles and roles of members. Only one person revealed a fundamental difference with
the implementation of the key competencies indicating that they should be addressed in secondary
education.

Action Learning Outcomes - Second Interview

Of the 28 staff commencing the project, 22 were available for a second interview. The contracts of
some of the staff involved had not been renewed in the second half of the project and two staff
withdrew from the activity after the first few meetings. One set (Horticulture) was completely
disbanded after their sixth meeting when most of the members' contracts were not renewed.

Resultant Changes to Curriculum in Relation to the Key Competencies (Question 1)

Three of the five original sets involved in this project had completed or were near completion of the
goals set in their action plans. A number of members commented that this project raised their
awareness and understanding of the key competencies and led them to consider ways of making them
more explicit in their delivery.

Current Concerns Related to the Implementation of the Key Competencies (Question 2)

The concerns raised by staff were:
- Finding the time and resources to implement the key competencies effectively
- Integrating the key competencies formally into all curriculum documents
- Changing actual teaching methods and delivery
- Conveying the value of the key competencies to task-oriented practical students
- Developing appropriate methods of assessment and graded assessment
- Collaboration with industry to get consensus on the importance of key competencies
- Need for extensive staff development within sector
- Re-education of those outside, schools, industry

These concerns indicated a significant shift from the staff concerns expressed in the first interview. The beginning concerns were predominantly related to time constraints, inadequate understanding of what was required, lack of information about the process and concerns about productivity and involvement at meetings. The second interview indicated that concerns had progressed to the management of change and the impact of the innovation. Concerns with the consequences of the key competencies on students were emerging with the focus on delivery, assessment and changing the attitudes and values of students.

Some staff were overwhelmed by the demands of this change on their time and their ability to deliver the outcomes required of them. They argued that teaching key competencies should not be the responsibility of the sector but be part of the prior learning in schools. Others coped by assuming that they would not need to change their practices because students would learn the key competencies 'naturally' anyway.

Reports on the Experience of Working in the Set (Question 3 and 4)

Nearly all of the participants made some positive comments about their experience of working in the sets. Members of three of the sets were uniformly positive about the action learning process and their learning about key competencies. All members of these sets made general comments that indicated they had established supportive climates which contributed to the development of their team. The non-teaching members of one set commented that they could contribute little to the mapping task carried out by a couple of members in their set, but their understanding of key competencies had dramatically increased and, as administrators, they had gained valuable insights into a central activity of their organisation ie. teaching. Two sets attributed their success to the facilitation skills of the leaders.

The heterogeneity and variable attendance in a fourth set produced the widest range of comments about their experience of working in the set. The leader of this set had significant difficulty in focusing members' efforts. Just over half of the members in this set appeared to find value in their set's activities, whether it was involvement in one area's mapping task, an improved understanding of the key competencies or an opportunity to interact across teaching areas. Some members attributed their dissatisfaction to the complexities of facilitating such a diverse set. Other members were very task oriented and believed this process was an inefficient use of time for the outcomes gained.

Ratings of Personal and Group Commitment to Implementing the Key Competencies (Question 5, 6 and 7)

Nearly 60 per cent of the remaining participants indicated an equally high degree (between 8-10) of commitment to the implementation of the key competencies for the group and themselves. The remaining 40 percent indicated a discrepancy between their own and their set's commitment, with the majority of these, and the lowest ratings, coming from one set.

Comparing the ratings in the first interview with the second, all but one of the increased ratings occurred in three sets. The members from the fourth set have indicated the highest variation in ratings and half of the total of decreased ratings are assigned by this set. The explanations offered for low ratings and the discrepancies were: wide variety of work teams within the set; irregular attendance; just beginning to come to grips with key competencies; agreed upon task not a priority for others; not

enough achieved in the time; due to administration not teaching responsibilities; too much is happening in DETAFE; and, key competencies should be developed mostly in schools.

Comments on Action Learning Processes and their Success (Question 8 and 9)

Choosing the set's focus for implementing the key competencies
Three of the four sets found this process straight forward on the whole. All except one member of the fourth set indicated that this was a long, drawn out process with no-one willing to take the initiative and marked by confusion and misunderstandings. In the end, the experience of one member's area was brought to bear on the early mapping activity of another.

Increasing understanding of the key competencies
There were members in each set (7 out of the total of 22) who stated they were already familiar with the key competencies and the activities of the set did not increase their knowledge significantly. The remaining individuals (15) indicated that they had all gained in understanding. It appears that for those staff who knew little about key competencies, the sets worked well to increase their understanding.

Raising awareness of the action learning processes
All members of one set asserted that their awareness of the action learning processes had been raised in the set. Ten members across three sets did not enhance their present understanding of action learning through the set activities. A frequent comment was that the set meetings were like their own experience of groups and therefore nothing new was offered under the name of action learning. The majority of these responses (7) came from the set in which the leader doubted that members had done anything more than come together to complete a task.

Maintaining commitment to the project throughout the set meetings
There was a strong and sustained sense of commitment in the responses of two sets. Set meeting times were adhered to and adjustments were made to agendas, or, in one set, meetings taped for the benefit of the member who could not attend. The remaining two sets recorded a great deal of variability in attendance and commitment. In one set the majority expressed difficulty with commitment due to pressures of work load and time constraints, lack of clarity and direction, frustration with process, and time wastage. Considerable commitment was required of hourly paid (PTI) staff who attended in their own time.

Level of support and resources from management
Nearly all participants perceived the support and resources provided by management as adequate to very good. Some members would have liked a more visible management presence in the project. Strong comments surfaced with regard to the use of funds provided for PTI backfill. Most participants in this project had difficulty taking full advantage of these resources. For some, the hassle of organising a PTI backfill in an already tight schedule, or the unavailability of suitable replacements prevented gaining time relief. Sessional replacement for some staff was not possible because of the nature of their program. Set meetings during teaching break were taken out of preparation time. Non-teaching staff and sessional staff were not aware that they could tap into these funds.

Training of members in the action learning processes
Most comments were negative regarding the preparation of participants. Some members did not, or could not, attend induction workshops. Some obtained a resource folder on action learning but did not have time to work through it. Those who attended generally found the induction inadequate and confusing with no skills training.

Training of facilitator
Members of sets recognised the importance of facilitator skills and the need for induction workshops for facilitators. One set rotated leadership because of the inexperience of the assigned facilitator who provided a supportive administrative role. Members of another set were sympathetic to the difficulties that a leader would experience in facilitating a large and diverse group with varying attendance and commitment. Sufficient training and time allocation to accommodate the training was recognised as critical. Only one of the facilitators attended the induction program, the others would have preferred to have been better prepared.

Time allocation for set meetings and preparation
Two of the sets had no major problems with maintaining regular attendance. One set found itself continually renegotiating times to accommodate its members. Another set fixed meeting times but attendance was an issue. All members of the sets found difficulty allocating time for preparation work for the set meetings.

Formulating an action plan and outcomes
The amount of difficulty experienced with formulating an action plan and outcomes varied across sets. Two sets achieved this relatively painlessly, although the level of detail and consensus were mentioned as issues. Members of another set acknowledged that their plan and outcomes were mainly the work of one member's efforts and some concern was expressed about the unequal load distribution. A fourth set found the process arduous and lacking in clarity and direction. Two members were allocated the task and completed the plan independently having failed to negotiate a mutual meeting time.

Implementation of the outcomes
Members of three of the sets were confident that implementation of their outcomes would follow; two of the sets were waiting for their proposals to be printed, another set would complete their goals within two weeks and have made a commitment to follow through on implementation with or without funding. Members of the fourth set provided mixed responses to implementation partly because most of the set are not in the area that will be implementing the outcomes. One member indicated that the documentation was still being prepared, the remainder of the set including the facilitator were uncertain about the progress of implementation at this stage.

How successful were set meetings in developing group cohesion, resolving conflicts and solving problems? (Question 10)

From members comments across the sets, three of the sets had been fairly successful in developing group cohesion. Only one set had difficulties in this area and members associated this with attendance problems, diverse work teams, changing group size and composition and personal styles.

Two sets acknowledged some interpersonal conflict which members and facilitators resolved as they occurred. All members of one set stated categorically that there were no interpersonal conflicts. Another set's members acknowledged disagreements, strong opinions, expressed frustrations but no conflict!

Members of three of the sets indicated problems were solved as they went along. The remaining set members gave a range of contrasting responses; problems were discussed but not necessarily solved, problems definitely resolved, problems not that well solved, problems explained and explored, problems solved via discussion, did not get to the stage of solving problems, fairly successfully solved because people wanted to and people gave ground.

How openly and honestly have you been able to express your views? (Question 11)

Only one member of the total group indicated that they were somewhat reserved because of lack of knowledge and experience.

Level of learning, perceived success and satisfaction (Question 12)

Only three of the participating staff indicated little learning in their set related to the action learning process. The rest of the group indicated moderate to high level of learning, with one member abstaining. The perceived success of the sets were generally rated successful to highly successful with only two members indicating a perceived lack of success. Most members indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied with their set, except for three members who indicated they were dissatisfied. The lower ratings in the three areas of learning, success and satisfaction were confined to one set. Members of this set gave group size, timing of project, lack of prior knowledge of key competencies and poor success of the action learning process as reasons for the lower ratings.

Response of other members and impact on other members of work team to set's activity (Question 13 and 14)

Two sets indicated that they took pains to keep other members of their work teams well informed. Nevertheless responses of work team members not involved in the set activities have varied from very interested to apathetic. Members of the other two sets have not reported to their own work teams yet and no formal process has been set up for disseminating information.

The impact of these activities on work teams outside the set was mostly in terms of awareness raising about the key competencies or no impact at all. Two specific examples of concrete impact was on the industry sectors. Two of the sets initiated consultation with sectors of the relevant industry with regard to the key competencies. One of these sets has transported the action learning process to the management of their work team.

Action learning as a staff development strategy (Question 15)

Members of two sets gave a resounding yes to the question of advocating action learning as a staff development strategy. Suggestions for improvement of the process were offered and these provide valuable guidelines to those managing the process.

Future implementation of action learning should consider:
- adhering more closely to the guidelines for initiating action learning, providing funds is not enough;
- careful selection and preparation of facilitators who are crucial to the success of the process;
- making clear to staff that being involved in action learning teams is a priority;
- allocating or funding time for the activity, builds commitment to the process and to the goals;
- recognising that not all staff are positively predisposed toward change and an action learning methodology;
- the effectiveness of an action learning set is influenced by the personalities of the members as well as the task;
- working on program issues in sets develops ownership of initiated changes;
- thoroughly informing participants of the process to obtain voluntary commitment.

Enthusiasm for action learning parallels members' perceived success of their set's activities. Members who experienced less satisfaction with their sets were more equivocal about action learning.

Some of the comments qualifying the use of action learning were, only if:
- management conducts thorough preparation, induction and sets clear expectations of what it hopes to achieve;
- members have some interpersonal skills with conflict resolution skills;
- the sets have strong facilitators and a purpose;
- participants' awareness is raised about what is involved in action learning before volunteering and beyond the provision of reading materials (which staff do not read);
- small groups are used and extended periods of confusion reduced;
- members of sets commit to the identified goals;
- management addresses the issue of funding staff development activities for temporary staff.

What issues did facilitators experience? (Question 16)

Facilitators experienced the following problems:
- members not well informed about the demands of being involved in this project;
- inadequate induction;
- not enough lead time for people to commit to this staff development process and cover other work responsibilities;
- end of the year inappropriate timing for project;
- not to have too large a group;
- maintaining attendance;
- keeping people on task yet not directing them;
- keeping a balance between task and group processes;

- time for recording and documenting process; and,
- the constraints of time and work load demands interfering with the process.

Action Learning as a Staff Development Activity

The effectiveness of action learning as a change strategy is dependent on its effectiveness as a staff development activity.

Effective approaches to staff development recognise that:
- change is a process and that bringing about behavioural and attitudinal change takes time and effort;
- successful staff development programs respond to the assessed needs of the participants and match the content and activities to their developmental level;
- applying the principle of self-management fosters an involvement in the learning and a commitment to change;
- participants need to be involved in decisions about program content and activities and the processes for achieving the objectives;
- effective staff development acknowledges and capitalises on the experience and existing expertise of the participants;
- it is important to take account of participants' changing concerns at different stages in the process;
- the purpose of innovations should be made clear and related to the achievement of the overall organisational goals and objectives;
- those managing the process must provide opportunities to implement new learnings and provide ongoing support and feedback on progress.

Effectiveness of staff development programs will be reduced when:
- activities are imposed and piecemeal;
- activities are not work-based and there are few opportunities to practise and implement new learnings;
- managers do not demonstrate commitment nor provide tangible support; and,
- the culture of the workplace fails to support program goals.

Most of the participants in this project indicated that they were not well enough informed about what was involved to have made a voluntary commitment to the project. Some felt that they had been misled about the extent of the demands of the project. For those that attended, preparatory workshops were confusing and presented an oversimplified picture of what was required.

Action learning is supposed to draw people together with a common work problem to find a solution or complete a task. The individuals in this study did not initiate the process. The availability of funds was the catalyst for their formation. The sets were brought together to trial action learning by addressing the issues around the implementation of key competencies. The dual nature of the sets' activities was confusing and resulted in negativity toward the action learning process which was not well understood.

Some sets had difficulty in identifying clear goals and achievable outcomes because of the diversity of roles and interests in their set. The leader support meetings indicated that goals were not always reached by consensus and one or two members of one set were left to achieve an outcome because the goals were not necessarily of relevance to all members.

Action learning provided opportunities for staff to learn from each other and share resources. Those who took the opportunity reported an enhanced awareness and understanding of both the key competencies and action learning. Pooling of knowledge and skills was seen as a process being used by most of the individuals.

To some extent, participants experienced support and encouragement to try new things through the set meetings. However, members in some sets indicated it was not occurring at all. Some participants indicated that as a result of the action learning activity they were planning to introduce new methods of delivery and new systems to their teaching. However, these examples were the exception rather

than the rule. Learning new skills requires experimentation and practice. Implementing the key competencies seemed premature for most members.

The evidence from the sets suggests that at least in two of the sets the skills of working in teams were being established. Team building requires an appreciation of people's differences and strengths. Set members found difficulty with working in diverse groups. Some individuals reported diversity as a help to the set and others a hindrance. The sets that appeared more effective were generally homogeneous. The tendency was to emphasise the task in some sets so that interacting with a diverse group became a hindrance if interpersonal learnings were not valued.

A number of members from two sets reported no conflict despite the evidence from interviews and leader meetings to the contrary. Conflicts are an inevitable product of engagement. Avoiding conflicts retards the individual's and group's development. Effective facilitation skills are required to ensure that conflicts are resolved and that the process remains constructive.

Participants in this project were satisfied with the funding support provided for this project in principle. In fact, however, most found it difficult to draw on this support for a variety of valid reasons. Regular meetings of set leaders with the project manager provided some feedback and support. Leaders had the opportunity to learn from each other how to conduct set meetings and facilitate the process.

Lewin (1951) maintained that learning is facilitated in an organisation by establishing an environment of tension between concrete experience and analytic detachment (Rait, 1995). When individuals in an organisation examine their own practices using data from actual workplace events and test new organisational actions, shifts in practice are more likely to occur. Bringing about change in the workplace involves each of the steps of the experiential cycle - thinking, doing, evaluating and reflecting (Kolb, 1984). To promote staff development and change, facilitators need to help individuals and teams move through this cycle. Multiple cycles of action and reflection result in collaborative inquiry (Dewey, 1938).

Working in teams can lead to reflection and questioning of old ways of doing things. Exchanges about work practices in a supportive group raises awareness of what we do and why we do it. Some examination of work practices occurred in the sets, but deeper inquiry about work practices was uncommon. The evidence suggests that members from two sets were consciously moving through this cycle in order to maximise learning.

Change in staff's attitudes and beliefs can occur as a consequence of a change in behaviour. Interacting with others can highlight contradictions that may exist between practice and underlying beliefs. Participants did indicate that their attitude towards action learning changed at the end of the project and became more positive.

Action Learning as a Strategy for Change

Action learning is hard work, often frustrating and sometimes threatening because individuals are expected to practice more open communication than their every day activities require. They have to become interdependent learners when they have habituated to independent learning. The ultimate aim of team work of this kind is organisational and social change. System change requires behaviour and attitude change which individuals may resist (NSDC Commissioned Project, 1993). Action learning requires considerable investment of energy and time to be a successful strategy for bringing about change.

Implementation of the key competencies into the VET Sector is a significant change initiative. It requires substantial professional development support to ensure a shared understanding of what key competencies mean across the sector, develop staff expertise in the eight key competency areas, provide the opportunity, knowledge and skills required to incorporate the key competencies into courses, and, ensure the key competencies are appropriately embedded into the industry competencies.

A significant factor is that the key competencies that action learning methodology is being used to advance in the VET sector, are the competencies that are required to be put into practice in action learning. Both action learning and the expectation that VET Sector staff will teach the key competencies successfully, presuppose a high level of attainment of the key competencies by the staff involved.

In this study, staff had very high levels of personal concerns around participating in the action learning project. Elevated personal concerns occur when individuals face the uncertainty and ambiguity that is associated with change. Such personal concerns create significant resistance and reluctance toward implementing change and need to be reduced. Individuals who are used to working independently find team work personally threatening, time consuming and frustrating. Team work develops a learning orientation, flexibility and openness to new ideas and new ways of doing things that remain undeveloped when working in isolation.

If collaborative teams become the basic unit of work preparation and performance management, then they can provide:
• an ongoing context and support for action learning processes;
• a way of managing the linking of curriculum design, delivery and
  assessment;
• a focus for continuous, work-based staff development; and,
• opportunities for the implementation of innovations such as key
  competencies.

The increasingly part-time nature of DETAFE staff inhibits this kind of team work even though it facilitates the management of outcomes and quality control. If team work is seen as work-integrated staff development, then its importance needs to be recognised as a required part of teaching preparation for performance enhancement and as a quality assurance activity.

Most of the individuals in this study understood action learning to be nothing more than working together in a group to solve problems. The implicit belief of these individuals was that team work was not the most effective or efficient way "to do things around here", particularly under the present work demands and time constraints. Some individuals expressed a belief in the value of team work that was not reflected in their preferred practice.

This study demonstrates that the success of action learning as a change strategy depends on a number of factors. These are:
• preparation of the staff to participate in the project;
• selection and preparation of the facilitators;
• management support, funding and feedback;
• time constraints, workloads and attendance;
• needs and concerns of all the participants in the project;
• setting clear goals around a common problem;
• making team building and staff development a priority; and
• employing the thinking, doing, evaluating, and reflecting cycle.

Conclusion

As a change and staff development strategy, action learning requires an organisational culture of collegiality and cooperation. DETAFE will need to enunciate these principles in their organisational objectives, model the processes in their own work practices and provide resources in the form of release time and support. Nothing short of a cultural transformation is required in DETAFE to meet the challenge of becoming a learning organisation and improve performance in the face of present economic constraints.

Action learning is a process that requires members of an organisation to work together to solve problems through action and reflection. It has the potential to become a multi-purpose organisational activity depending on the extent to which it is integrated into the organisation's systems and made central to the organisational culture. Action learning processes promote reflection, mentoring and

collaboration and cast employers into the role of continuous learners who are capable of both investigating and improving work practices.

Action learning cuts across the prevailing trend within education and training institutions to work in isolation. The group work promotes problem solving and team building as well as provides a vehicle for work-place linked ongoing professional development. Ultimately, action learning aims to change behaviours, instil new skills and revise attitudes and beliefs underlying work practices. Collaborative work-based teams of this kind have the potential to transform an organisation for learning into a learning organisation.

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Appendix 1

KEY COMPETENCIES

1 Communicating Ideas and Information
The capacity to communicate effectively, with others using the range of spoken, written, graphic and other non-verbal means of expression.

2 Using Mathematical Ideas and Techniques
The capacity to use mathematical ideas, such as number and space, and techniques, such as estimation and approximation, for practical purposes.

3 Using Technology
The capacity to apply technology, combining the physical and sensory skills needed to operate equipment with the understanding of scientific and technological principles needed to explore and adapt systems.

4 Solving Problems
The capacity to apply problem-solving strategies in purposeful ways, both in situations where the problem and the desired solution are clearly evident and in situations requiring critical thinking and a creative approach to achieve and outcome.

5 Working with Others and in Teams
The capacity to interact effectively with other people both on a one-to-one basis and in groups, including understanding and responding to the needs of a client and working effectively as a member of a team to achieve a shared goal.

6 Collecting, Analysing and Ordering Information
The capacity to locate information, sift and sort information in order to select what is required and present it in a useful way, and evaluate both the information itself and the sources and methods used to obtain it.

7 Planning and Organising Activities
The capacity to plan and organise one's own work activities, including making good use of time and resources, sorting out priorities and monitoring one's own performance. (Mayer Report, 1993, p. 3)

8 Developing Cultural Understanding
The capacity to apply an understanding of cultures when carrying out workplace tasks, including commitment to organisational goals such as quality, safety, efficiency, teamwork, security, environmental protection, customer service and personal development, and interacting with people from widely different backgrounds and cultures in the achievement of these common work goals. It involves respect for rights and responsibilities, tolerance and sensitivity and an appreciation of the wide diversity of backgrounds, languages, beliefs, customs and traditions that are spread across Australian society and its labour force.

Appendix 2

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Action Learning concerns response (attached)
2. Describe what you understand by Action Learning
3. What do you see as the strengths of Action Learning? (or what do you like about it?)
4. What do you see as the weaknesses (dislikes) of Action Learning?
5. What Action Learning processes do you use?
6. What helps you to contribute at the set meetings?
7. What hinders your contribution at the set meetings?
8. How satisfied are you with the set meetings at this stage?
9. Action Learning is said to provide opportunities for:

	Not at all	Some extent	Reasonable extent
clarifying goals and expectations			
pooling of knowledge and skills			
sharing learning tasks			
review and reflect on my learning			
questioning of old ideas and views			
working as a team			
trying out new ways of doing things			
providing encouragement and support for change			

10. How helpful are the set meetings in your implementation of the Key Competencies?
11. How would you rate your commitment to implementing the KC's on this scale? Use "A" on the scale below.
12. How would you rate the group's commitment? Use 'B" on the scale below.

<u>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</u>

13. If gap exists, explain.

Appendix 3

Second Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What changes, if any, have you made to your curriculum in relation to KCs?
   Give examples.
2. What are your current concerns regarding the implementation of KCs?
3. Can you make some general comments regarding your experience of working in the set?
4. How helpful were/are the set meetings in your implementation of the KCs?
5. How would you rate your commitment to implementing the KCs on this scale? Use "A" on the scale below.
6. How would you rate the group's commitment? Use "B" on the scale below.

   <u>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</u>

7. If gap exists, explain.
8. Here is a list of some of the processes that you've been involved in. Make some comments about any of the processes on this list.

> 1. Choosing the set's focus for implementing KCs
> 2. Increasing your understanding of the KCs through the set
> 3. Raising your awareness of the action learning processes
> 4. Maintaining your commitment to the project throughout the set meetings
> 5. Level of support from management and resources
> 6. Your training in the action learning processes
> 7. The training of the facilitator
> 8. Your time allocation for set meetings and preparation
> 9. Formulating your set's action plan and outcomes
> 10. Your implementation of the outcomes
> 11. The attendance and participation at set meetings

9. How successful have each of these processes been?
10. How successful were/are the meetings of the set in:
    developing group cohesion
    resolving interpersonal conflicts
    solving problems
11. How open and honest have you been able to be in expressing your views to the set?
12. Circle your own level of:

learning in the set	<u>0 1 2 3 4 5</u>
perceived success of the set	<u>0 1 2 3 4 5</u>
satisfaction with the set	<u>0 1 2 3 4 5</u>

13. How have other members of your work team responded to this set's activity?
14. Have any of the set's ideas impacted on the work team outside of the set?
15. Would you advocate action learning as a staff development strategy?
16. In your role as a facilitator what issues/problems did you experience?

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