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ACCOUNTS OF PRACTICE



From nurturing the H in HR to developing the D in OD – systemic benefits where action learning and organisational development combine

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ABSTRACT

The authors review the Organisational Development and Design (OD&D) capability building programmes they have facilitated in the UK Civil Service and consider the learning and impact which they have had at an individual and organisational level. These programmes have been delivered to over 350 professional civil servants across a broad range of business functions, ministries, departments and agencies. This paper builds on the article published in this journal entitled 'Nurturing the H in HR' (Hale, R. and Saville, M. 2014. "Nurturing the H in HR: Using Action Learning to Build Organisation Development Capability in the UK Civil Service." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 11 (3): 333–351) which explained the early stages of programme roll out. Data to inform these findings has been drawn from a desk based review of the postgraduate level accredited papers written by participants as an integral requirement of the programme and an impact review exercise which used a storytelling approach in order to understand and interpret real accounts of practice. It can be seen how combining the Action Learning Question methodology with a humanistic approach to organisation development has made a significant cultural contribution beyond individual learning and this is impacting the wider system of a complex and dynamic government organisation that has faced, and most likely will continue to face, unprecedented and unpredictable political, social and economic change.

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Introduction

The Civil Service in the UK has experienced significant organisational challenges triggered by a confusing combination of political, global, economic and social factors and events over recent years. The traditional concept of a public service as a static organisation which maintains the bureaucratic *status quo* has little relevance in an increasingly unpredictable interconnected world. However, the demand for an effective public service delivered by committed professionals is as strong as ever and comes from diverse stakeholder groups including the public, local communities and the government of the day.

Our work has focused on enabling more effective organisations to be built within and between the ministries, departments and agencies of government. This means moving beyond the structural aspects of organisation design to the development a person culture that supports the people who have to work with uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity.

As a facilitation team representing the Civil Service and external learning and organisation development expert service providers we have worked collaboratively to deliver an extensive OD capacity building programme which has now reached over 350 professional civil servants. This paper represents a key stage in our learning journey as we reflect on how we are doing, what we are learning and consider the impact and benefits reported by participants and senior leaders in the business.

This paper draws on a review of experiences from three perspectives:

- A desk based review of written accounts of learning from graduates of the programme
- A series of face-to-face events where graduates told their stories some time later of the impact they have experienced as OD practitioners
- Our review of our experience and learning as facilitators of the programme.

At a basic level the programme has delivered skills training for practitioners in the methods of Organisation Development but at a deeper level we have seen many examples organisational learning and impact. We believe this is due to the programme design which connects real organisational business challenges with an accredited action learning methodology and instilling awareness of Organisation Development as a way of thinking, feeling and being beyond simply the techniques.

UK Civil Service – organisation development and design expert service

The UK Civil Service is a large (c. 450,000 staff), complex federated system of large and small government departments, agencies and arm's length bodies. The background to this work has been about establishing an appropriate level of Organisation Development and Design capability in this system, supported by a small team of deep specialists in OD&D that sits at the centre of government.

The Civil Service Organisation Development and Specialist Partnering team was formed in 2011 as a cross-government service initially supporting the Civil Service Reform Plan (2012) working with Civil Service departments facing large scale or complex change (Garrow 2013). Its intention was always to raise awareness of and capability in dealing with human aspects of change and the dynamic nature of change in a large and complex system such as the Civil Service. The OD&D team provides internal organisation development and design consultancy support to departments and cross-government functions in delivering change. Formed at a time of economic austerity, part of the initial focus for the team was supporting senior leaders to align their strategy, ways of working, people and culture.

More recently the decision to exit the EU, and in 2017 responses to multiple terror attacks and the Grenfell Tower tragedy have shifted some of the focus away from austerity-driven change to creating new departments, for instance the Department for International Trade, and helping established departments to review their purpose and ways

of delivering excellence. But what has remained consistent since 2011 has been the need for HR Business Partners and OD professionals to be equipped with capability to support large scale and complex change.

Over the same period, the UK Civil Service has focused on the professionalisation of its functions and the development of professions, such as HR, Commercial, Communication, by building career paths that recognise and reward deep expertise in such specialisms. This contrasts with past patterns and a longstanding culture of developing generalists who can move regularly and work across the whole system.

In 2014 (Hale and Saville 2014) we described in detail the Civil Service approach to developing OD capability with its partner, OD specialists Mayvin, and the action learning approach and its accreditation process developed by Dr Richard Hale. At this point, part of the operating model for the OD&D Expert Service was to upskill HR Business Partner capability in OD&D and support the development of an OD community of expertise across the Civil Service.

As the programmes have progressed over recent years we have noticed a more emergent approach has developed with the OD&D team responding to new patterns in the system. We noticed that practitioners graduating from the Core Practice programme sought to develop their practice further and we responded by setting up the Advancing Your Practice programme in 2015. This was related to a further significant trend we noticed which was departments setting up or growing their in-house organisation design and development capability as they began to understand how to use organisation development better, having experienced its impact. We have witnessed and been part of a mood change. For example we heard the story of a senior director, in the role of client, being gradually exposed to more OD&D concepts and methods. He did not at the outset know what OD&D was but now recognises its strategic value and the importance of establishing OD&D capability that complements HR business partnering capability. As the business demands more of this, we can see that OD&D professionals have earned a place as strategic contributors and thought partners with their senior level clients.

Organisation development meets action learning

In 2014 our work in developing the human side of human resource work in the UK Civil Service was reported in the article in this journal entitled 'Nurturing the H in HR' (Hale and Saville 2014). That paper explained the early stages of our experience and reflections on using a genuinely humanistic, people oriented approach to develop the capabilities of HR and Organisation Development professionals as they sought to tackle urgent, demanding organisational change agendas in a climate of economic austerity and rapid social and technological change.

We view this paper as one part of an ongoing rich experience of learning, not as a static account of something that 'was'. As the providers of these programmes we are part of the system we are helping to change. We are working as action learning facilitators in 'learning catalyst' mode (Hale 2012); we are learning personally and we are helping others to help others learn in service of their organisation's vision and purpose. We are a form of action learning set, learning with and from each other and, as we share our experience and findings here, we encourage ongoing discussion with other practitioners and academics who would like to engage with us further.

The range of issues tackled in this way varies considerably given the diversity of departments, professions and agencies represented on programmes. Some individual reports from participants of the outcomes of their work are shared in the section Impact Stories below. However to provide at this stage some appreciation of the sort of challenges which have been addressed some examples are listed here:

- The changing role of HR to become more OD oriented and the question of whether OD should be a specialism or generic requirement.
- External (to the Civil Service) challenges which were at the time driving a government response and which had triggered important challenges internally such as border controls, immigration, the West African Ebola epidemic 2013–16 and the Grenfell housing disaster in 2017.
- Helping senior managers to improve the effectiveness of their team (through culture, structure and leadership).
- Creating a more strategic approach to people planning within the context of a changing and uncertain environment at a site facing a major relocation programme.
- Introducing a change to the Human Resources (HR) service offering reflecting a move away from the existing traditional HR Business Partner (HRBP) operating model.
- Embedding flexible working, work patterns and types of employment contract.
- Developing managerial and leadership capability (in client businesses and amongst professions).
- Supporting the induction and integration of new senior managers to Director General level.
- Supporting the organisation to understand how the current levels of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) representation at senior levels impact business delivery.

Participants tackle these questions over a period of 6–9 months. The OD&D ethos means taking a humanistic approach, supporting senior clients in tackling their work-based business problems in an empathic way, treating people with respect, encouraging engagement through involvement, seeking organisational improvement and embracing diversity and differences of opinion. Certain OD&D tools are made available but not with any conditions about how and when they should be applied. This is something individuals decide through exploration with their action learning set members. For instance many have found benefits in considering their organisational challenge or problem against the categories defined in the Burke-Litwin causal model of organisational performance and change (Burke and Litwin 1992). Participants are encouraged to consider the way in which they use themselves as an instrument for the change, to see ‘self’ as a part of the system they are working on in an OD&D way, to reflect on how their ‘self’ is changing and evolving, to study and notice one’s emotions, feeling and behaviour by reflecting in action and on action (Cheung-Judge 2001).

There are many examples of learning sets providing the basis for members to notice where parallel processes are occurring within the set, in relation to the issues out in the business which are being discussed. This three way learning relationship between *self*, the *set* and the *organisation* has been articulated as the ‘Focus and Locus of Action Learning’ by Hale (2014).

Over the four years of delivering this development work, we have been increasingly conscious of a more subtle, systemic and cultural shift. As well as tangible, measurable ‘deliverables’ as represented by the list above, we notice that a more intangible, and perhaps more significant, mood of change has accompanied this work. In this evaluation, we try to capture this mood, and consider how we have contributed to culture change in the most complex and dynamic of organisations.

Apart from generating data from our own discussions and meetings as facilitators, data which has informed this article has been generated from a desk based review of a sample of the postgraduate level (level 7 in the UK Higher Education Framework) accredited papers written by participants as an integral requirement of the programme. Sample size constituted 20% of the papers that were assessed as successful for the Core Practice programme and 53% of the Advancing Your Practice programme. These Organisation Development Question papers are based on the design principles of the Action Learning Question process (Hale 2004) which requires participants to work through cycles of learning, action and reflection. Guided by this desk research, we engaged former and current participants in an Impact Review exercise using a storytelling approach in order to understand and interpret real accounts of practice.

Impact evidenced from the review of organisation development question reports

To begin the evaluation, we conducted a thematic review of the OD Question (ODQ) papers across the 25 or so cohorts who had completed their Level 7 postgraduate assignment so far. Below is a summary of some of the key findings of this desk research.

Working across the structures

At a task level the impact of the projects conducted in external departments varies depending on the political dynamics at play and the level of acceptance of the host consultant and the timeliness of their assignment. However there is evidence of impact both from work conducted on the consultant placement and back in home departments. Several assignments involved playing a part in a review of HR services ranging across policy, talent development and structure. There is one example which resulted in recommendations for a new mission, strategy, culture review, structural changes, project plans, rewards system and people plan.

Adapting action learning

There are a lot of examples of participants experiencing significant personal challenges from their action learning sets and in a constructive way this has impacted the direction and nature of their OD work with clients.

Some participants showed a deep level of engagement with the concept of action learning and how it can be applied in the business, beyond the development programmes. One participant described how he has developed a conceptual framework for addressing ‘wicked problems’, and some graduates of the programmes committed to continuing to

meet with their action learning set in the future, 'to create a learning space where we can bring our challenges, our actions'.

Action learning sets

Many participants have described the impact of what might be categorised as psycho-social support provided through their participation in their ALS on the programme.

Examples include:

- Countering self-doubt when shaken by others.
- Realisation that others have difficulty in dealing with certain people and situations.
- Help in understanding the difficult behaviours of others within the business.
- There were several cases where the ALS members knew the client or individuals being discussed by others set members and the psychological safety and confidentiality of the ALS provided a forum for testing, challenging or verification of assumptions.
- Exploration and appreciation of cultural diversity and assimilation (national, international and organisational).
- Using the ALS to rehearse for real challenges/interventions.
- Support at a time of personal difficulty (e.g. bereavement, health issues, job insecurity, inter-personal clashes).

Knowledge mapping

A specific requirement built into the ODQ has been the Knowledge Mapping method (Hale 2014). This was designed to help embed the principle of working collaboratively to share 'knowledge about knowledge' in order to create a map of possible areas for research. Most participants have referred to the impact of using this tool, and several have mentioned how they are using it beyond the programme itself when working on complex organisational problems. Several have shown an appreciation of the value of considering 'Underground' factors such as culture, values and power dynamics. In terms of 'Sky' based research most have made use of, for instance, literature, articles, books and reports.

Considering these benefits which were evident from reviewing the written papers of participants we considered there could be value in reconnecting with graduates of the programme in order to explore their retrospective thoughts on their learning and to seek further examples of how the programme may have led to subsequent changes at a personal, team and organisational level. The impact stories that are now discussed below did indeed add some rich texture to the evolving picture of organisational impact.

Impact stories

In the original article relating to these programmes, Hale and Saville (2014) concluded:

The most important and most neglected mode of facilitation is that of Learning Catalyst – enabling the client to realise organisational learning and benefits and extending the reach of the learning organisationally and temporally.

Whilst the focus of the Civil Service Core Practice in OD programme is on individual action learning projects, the accumulated impact of process and increasingly the active emphasis of the programme has been on catalysing systemic benefits; in short creating a self-aware community of practice for OD in the Civil Service.

The way we approached this impact review in 2016/17, as well as the findings it revealed, have demonstrated the system-wide noise that this community has increasingly emitted. Whilst we still see the personal impact of the development work we have done as important, the systemic impacts are more vital in order to deliver the culture change that the Civil Service ultimately required. Of course we do not see these two dimensions, the personal and the system, as distinct; rather they go hand in hand.

Below we explain how we approached a review of the impact of the OD programmes, in an OD friendly way, and illustrate how this community has begun to express itself.

Storytelling circles

Our intent with the data collection around the impact of the development programmes was to offer people a valuable learning experience for themselves whilst we collected valuable data. We call this 'double duty'; that is doing useful OD&D work whilst measuring its impact. This amounts to an action research mind-set; doing the work of change whilst measuring how change happens. In itself it was a community development as much as an evaluation process.

We ran a series of three 3-hour workshops, with an invited group of participants, who were all former participants of the OD&D programmes. The groups of attendees numbered between six and 20 across the three sessions. The promise of the invitation was that they would gain more valuable insight into OD&D, meet again with a like-minded community of practice and help us measure what might have been most valuable in terms of the impact of the programme.

This method was not intended to develop statistically salient measures, but rather provides a cultural marker type of method, creating a guiding heuristic for the future strategic development of OD practice across the Civil Service. We offered the groups some information about the way we approach measuring OD and then a storytelling methodology that had three parts to it:

- Part One – in small groups of 4-6, each person had strictly 3 min to tell a story of a time when they felt they most made a difference as an OD practitioner
- Part Two – the group had a chance to inquire more deeply into each of the stories they have heard
- Part Three – the group worked together to extract common themes based on the stories they heard.

There are some challenges with this methodology. Because the aim is to create an environment when people can feel safe enough to be open about the stories they tell, it can be hard to gather required data in all its richness. Recording what people say is an option, but this can present problems. Firstly because people feel restricted in knowing they are being recorded talking about things that have a degree of sensitivity and secondly because the recordings don't always capture the richness of the stories

anyway, which is often most in evidence in the discussions between people that ensue as a result. We opted not to record the stories but to capture the key themes that emerged when the groups made sense of them.

This leads to the second problem, a more fundamental one in the context of OD and action learning. That is the intangible, cultural markers of change that are most likely to deliver the performance improvements and valuable change that organisations most crave are by their very nature hard to ‘capture’ in data terms. As researchers, we were left with a strong sense of the profound impact of the OD capability building, an abstraction of which is presented below, but also a frustration that we could never quite do justice to the richness of the experience. What we offer below represents a window into this rich picture, but one that at least demonstrates the important patterns that matter to the Civil Service in terms of what it is expecting this programme of work will achieve.

But the approach has many advantages if the aim is not to provide statistically salient data but rather offer an ‘elbow in the bath’ measure of the climate. When the client system is fast moving and busy, and there is not time, or indeed budget, to do more in depth research, this type of approach has the advantage of having a useful impact on the system whilst identifying broad trends that have qualitative value. It serves as a guide as to what has made a useful difference.

We make the distinction here between personal findings, that is what difference people said the programme made for them personally, and systemic findings, the second order impact that ultimately delivers the culture change the Civil Service was looking for. The second order impact evidence was developed using the themes the groups surfaced for themselves, and also a second round of sense making that the researchers conducted. Of course we see the two levels going hand in hand; both need to be emphasised as part of the delivery of change required. The quotations we have selected below represent a generic category of similar findings from across the cohort.

Personal findings

More hard-edged

An initial area of impact that emerged was that people’s experience on the programme had nudged them to become more hard-edged in their practice. They were prepared to move into challenging conversations and speak truth to power. These quotations exemplify many that we heard during the storytelling:

I believe that I have changed as a result of the OD programme. Feedback from my senior customer was, I am far more hard-edged. This reminded me of the extract from James Traeger – ‘there is too much niceness in OD – not enough edge’. She noticed that I challenge the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) far more than ever.

It was clear that an element of this sharpness was related to a sense that this was more about their own personal qualities and commitment than any particular ‘tools and techniques’. The following is an example:

Further exposure to OD learning subsequent to this helped me to look more at an element that had not been a strong theme. This was about ‘personal influence’ and personal impact, not just in terms of working with my colleagues on options, but injecting a bit more of ‘me’ into this. This was a key element for me of understanding the impact of OD practice.

And

I observed the value of having a few tools in your 'toolkit' when working with clients. More importantly, it has given me confidence to use them and adapt them as needed rather than letting the tools determine what you do.

This is an important finding in terms of the approach of the programmes. From the start in 2013, we had emphasised the balance in OD practice and action learning between the need for 'a few good tools', and the emphasis on people's self-awareness, personal qualities and their own 'self as instrument'. (Cheung-Judge 2001).

It is interesting to note that when we started the project, in our familiarisation discussions, one of the commissioning Senior HR Directors said that they wanted the HR community to have more 'useful trouble makers' in it, people with slightly 'sharper elbows'. The reasoning for this was that an ambitious agenda for culture change needed facilitators or 'tempered radicals' who were prepared to challenge the cultural resistance to change. A persistent theme of the findings of this research has been people discussing how they have become more 'hard edged' in their approach.

Time to think

Another stand out finding based on the stories people told was people were developing spaces for reflection and criticality, both for themselves and for their clients across the service. The following quotations are typical responses:

One of the things which really struck me following the exchange was how effortless but impactful my intervention was. The difficult bit was making the time and creating the 'space' to reflect on the previous conversation and reconsider my approach.

I felt that the client's response of (suggesting) a workshop demonstrated that she just saw this as a performance issue, and I wanted her to consider the systemic approach to the problem.

The quality of my thinking I feel has evolved. I am thinking differently about how I question and acknowledge the ability to distance my personal views and judgements from those that are shared with me, remaining objective.

It is important that not only is the programme engendering time to reflect, which is often missing in busy organisations and therefore they can habitually miss out on the full cycle of learning, but that it is also linking that time to reflect to better quality thinking and decision-making. This could be because the programmes have postgraduate accreditation attached, the completion of which requires participants to exhibit the requisite level of critical thinking. At the outset of the programme it was recognised that the requirement for a form of accreditation was important, not only as a quality marker but also because for many delegates the programme would be the first time they have studied and conducted research at postgraduate level. It seems to be paying dividends in terms of supporting a culture of greater criticality across the service.

Systemic findings

As we interrogated these stories, we also found an increasingly strong signal, closely related to these personal findings, that suggested a more systemic set of impacts as a result of the accumulated development of individual practitioners. As is widely

understood, culture change is a process of incremental mindset and behaviour change, hard to pin down to one 'magic bullet' but visible in the gathering impetus of a range of interventions. So we do not claim a direct, simple causal relationship between these programmes and the systemic shifts we are observing, however as in the baking of a cake they are part of the leavening.

A more comprehensive, open approach to change

Part of the impetus for the early programmes was to 'change how we do change', that is create a comprehensive, systemic and culturally sensitive way of approaching change, one that would encourage creativity, cooperation and that side-stepped resistance and inertia. What we noticed in the stories that were told was that this seemed to be emerging. Programme graduates seemed to exhibit a more flexible, open way of working, where the language of change is more thoughtful and less programmatic.

I know it sounds silly but an example in our comprehensive approach went down to the furniture we insisted on in the office redesign. We had to make a strong business case for furniture that was on wheels, so that whole department could be more flexible; people could move about, talk and engage more freely with each other. At least that's what it symbolised. We had to stick with it, making sure the decision to support this went right down to the final decision-making.

And

The HR Director addressed her entire team on a recent dial-in, and referenced the impending recommendations and that she herself has listened to the data on apparent lack of strategy and her intention to take action in the coming months. One of her team has already taken some action in this case relating to one aspect of the Galbraith model, 'Rewards', and added it as a standing agenda item to his team meetings.

A more resilient community

This more creative and comprehensive approach to change required a lot of resilience on the part of the practitioners, and it was here that a well connected and mutually self-supporting OD community became helpful. This quotation was one of many such examples:

Our approach to OD was comprehensive. We had to work hard and be resilient to make a change. I couldn't have done this without the wider community supporting me.

Part of this cultural shift has also related to the attitude of leaders. Admittedly the evidence of this is patchy but there are some signs of a shift, particularly in some departments. This also shows itself as an increasing acceptance amongst leadership teams that the difficult questions OD practice sometimes poses are an inevitable, if uncomfortable, part of the change process. As such, leaders are becoming more OD curious, if not altogether OD friendly. Here is a typical example from one story:

They [a group of leaders] were talking about the leadership competencies that were needed [in the department]. And I asked them a question: 'how will you role model this?' There was what felt like at least ten seconds of silence. But they started to discuss this. I thought they would hound me out of the room, but it was as if they reluctantly accepted this was the type of question I should be asking. I am not sure if they took it on board, but it certainly made them reflect. It made it more personal.

And

Discussions have already been had within the HR Directors lead team about adding more of an OD element to the Senior HRBP roles in the future, which recognises the likely need and value of OD practice in what has been achieved so far.

A new mood?

Whilst it is clearly far too early to claim victory, what we were heartened by was a sense, in all the groups that we met in this research, of their enthusiasm for this type of practice, their commitment to action learning and OD, and their cautious optimism in a different 'mood' in the change process in many government departments:

I was working with a large group of [X department] staff, asking their views and giving them red and green cards to vote on particular issues. There was lots of energy and a buzz in the room. It was set up with a speaker in the middle, town hall style, like an arena, with no 'front' raised stage. This created a different power dynamic in the room. After a while of working in this way, some of the senior people left the room, because it was just too 'out there' for them. It was as if they supported it to be a bit 'out there', but they weren't ready yet to play themselves. We saw this as a cautious step forwards.

And

My manager commented after one of my team sessions that 'they seemed to have moved into a different space'; my subsequent project meeting with them was different, they were more prepared to do things differently.

Breaking down the boundaries

Finally, as we might have hoped, there does seem to be a persistent move towards cross departmental networking and collaboration, breaking down the siloes, not just within departments but between them, which whilst not fully supported by the structural barriers inherent in government, was clearly an always hoped-for benefit of this intervention.

The impact of the [cross department] project activity to date has installed a level of anticipation across many of the [cross department] stakeholders that have been spoken to, to see the conclusions within the final report. There have been requests for a further Open Space workshop to be held at the next [multi-department] HR Team away ... which has provided confidence across a number of departments that the process has been well received, engaged those present and given them a voice in the development of the next stages.

And

I developed an ODQ [OD question] around how I was able to help my HR Director and her Senior Management Team to fill 100 posts within the HR Directorate collectively by working across the department, taking a perspective of delivering the most effective service to the 45,000 people across the whole department. I worked on the OD programme with someone from another department who supported me, and together we offered the HRD the opportunity to use cross government OD capabilities in their department and offered to provide access and leadership.

Conclusions – what success can we claim?

When the three of us came together to consider the final draft of this article, we attempted to step back and notice this mood of change, and consider what part this work had played

in bringing it about. We recalled that when the Civil Service OD&D community came together in March 2017 for its annual gathering, this mood shift was evident in the stories presented to OD&D practitioners by senior leaders. The OD&D community, largely formed of programme alumni, heard one Permanent Secretary (a government department CEO) talking about bringing your ‘whole self’ to work and her experience of OD&D helping her and her team have the ‘right kind of conversations’ to enable change and delivery. They heard the Chief Executive for the Civil Service talk about helping people ‘go up and collaborate’ rather than working in protectionist, silo based ways as well as the Government Chief People Officer talk about how he expects them to continue to educate the client base to have more sophisticated conversations and celebrate the fact OD&D is ‘a huge agent of change across the Civil Service’.

For those present it wasn’t just what they heard that was significant in showing a shift in the impact of OD&D; it was what these leaders represented – influential leaders, supporting this community of practice and championing the strategic value of OD&D.

For many delegates at that event undertaking the accredited programmes was the main ticket of entry into this increasingly valued community. What showed up at this was a passion for OD and for leaders to develop their organisations for the better. As one external consultant who was present said, in a tweet, at the event:

Such a lot of change and OD happening across government, got to admire the passion in the #CSOD network for helping leaders to change orgs for better.

It felt to us that we had, through the structure of the OD&D programmes, and the community they helped to facilitate, amongst many other interventions of course, enabled some continuity in an unstable landscape. We had experienced austerity, two general elections, the Brexit vote and the creation of new government departments as a result, not to mention many other significant changes. The OD&D specialist partnering team has similarly gone through many changes of position and personnel. However, through all this an ethos of reflexivity in practice has been developed and persisted. This has been exhibited on behalf of whatever team or arrangement we find ourselves in. The attention to maintain an ethos despite the vehicle for change is something that we have emphasised with participants. This is about a mindset, one that is less about imposing a programme of change, and more about flexing practice to adapt to the realities on the ground. What is also showing up is a commitment to both the plans of change (a conventional approach) wrapped by a commitment to relationships (a post conventional approach). One of us summed this up as about ‘plans and passions’.

Tosey and Marshall (2017) opine the demise of inquiry-based HRD programmes in the UK, noting that universities have become increasingly hostile places for reflexive practice-led education. This paints a rather pessimistic picture noting the pressure for student numbers, an epistemological shift towards scalable taught programmes, limited resources and the constraints of the Research Excellence Framework. We believe that the UK Civil Service programme reviewed in this paper, however, demonstrates that it is possible to develop human resource and organisation development professionals through an inquiry based, business focused process which draws on essential principles of action learning, organisation development and to some extent action research. A key requirement in order to achieve such success is creating a collaborative partnership with an accrediting higher education institution, university or business school

(Collingham et al. 2007). The University of Chichester have added value to this partnership by not simply providing access to postgraduate accreditation, but through demonstration of a real interest in supporting work based learning and through recognition of the Action Learning Question methodology.

Looking to the future

Several features show up on the horizon. For example, across many government departments, OD&D teams have been set up mirroring the role of the central one and some graduates of the programme have progressed into senior departmental OD&D roles. This impacts on the accepted currency of OD&D across the system. This shift in tone is reflected in how some Permanent Secretaries now expect an OD&D input to be there when there is any significant change agenda. All of these are indicators of how OD&D continues to earn a place in the system and at the strategic table. There is more to do but the differences we are seeing offers confidence that OD&D is making an impact and is becoming part of the fabric of the UK Civil Service.

Government now faces greater ambiguity than ever. Momentous and sometimes catastrophic events are frequent. 2017 saw a snap election, and the tragedies of multiple terror attacks and the Grenfell Tower fire. These events are unique and we cannot teach anyone how to deal with them; through this work we can support the mobilisation of a mind-set, attentive to relationships and plans on the ground, that is reflexive, responsive and systemic. OD and action learning help facilitate this mind-set, because we know that things are never complete; we always have to start again and expect the unexpected.

When we started in 2013, we had the green light for six programme cohorts. We are now approaching 30. In OD&D work, it is notoriously hard to relate interventions to their impact. Some would argue that the causal chains are too complex to untangle, whilst others would say the wider conditions and external factors as more significant. We have explored this challenge elsewhere (Traeger 2014). We would argue, notwithstanding our partiality, that as we have been part of the system for nearly five years, the very fact that we are still here, doing this work, in a dynamic and highly cost sensitive environment, this is in itself a demonstration of value.

A final comment should be made regarding our learning as the facilitators of this programme. In action learning facilitation terms we have worked in the modes of ‘mobiliser’ – internal and external contributors to the momentum to enable the programmes to happen with the political support of relevant stakeholders at various levels. Additionally we have worked at ‘learning catalysts’ drawing out the organisational learning at individual and organisational levels. As indicated by Hale (2012) these are the more challenging, less obvious but arguably more impactful aspects of the action learning facilitator role. We have also worked in the more obvious mode of action learning ‘set adviser’ but a key point of our own learning has been to give serious attention to the organisational context, politics, social and power dynamics which envelopes any specific programme of action learning.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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