Improving Executive Group Decision Making With a Focus on Undiscussables

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

April 2014

Declaration

I certify that the work in this portfolio has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree.

I also certify that the portfolio has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the portfolio itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the portfolio.

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Paul Donovan

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my first supervisor Professor Alison Lee, who very sadly passed away two thirds through the journey of this doctorate. I miss you. I take your wise and compassionate voice in my heart and mind on my journey from here.

Thanks also to Tony Holland, whose pragmatic and no nonsense approach was a timely and welcome energy to help my over the line. Thanks Tony.

Thanks also to Mum and Dad. Your pride in me still deeply touches me. Your support of me over the weeks I took refuge in your home to write was indispensible.

To my three brothers and their families, for checking in on my progress and sending me on my way; thanks. To our friends, who have been listening to me talk about this arduous journey for so long, thanks for your continuous encouragement.

Thanks also to my family. Starting a doctorate in ones forties, while running a busy consultancy, has had enormous implications on you. Thank-you Georgia, Samuel, Elliot and Allegra for cheering me on at every bend.

To my wife Maggie; we should be on the stage together when I graduate. You have been my coach, my challenger and my inspiration. When I thought I couldn't finish this, you believed I could. You made the space for me to work by graciously managing all the complexities of our children, our home and our business. I'd still be on chapter 2 now without you. We have grown together.

Improving Executive Group Decision Making With a Focus on Undiscussables

Abstract for Whole Portfolio

The impact of the pervasive and persistent problem of undiscussables on executive group decision-making is as deep as it is far reaching. Executives struggling to discuss the most important issues facing their companies are required to negotiate a complex and undiscussed terrain of anxieties, threats and embarrassment in relation to various topics that appear, or might appear on the agenda of their meetings. My own long-term experience as a corporate facilitator supports these claims and has prompted this Action Research investigation into how to improve executive group decision-making, with an emphasis on undiscussables. Interestingly, our understanding of undiscussables had not significantly grown since Argyris first coined the term 30 years ago; of particular note is the absence of research addressing the relationship between undiscussables and power. This professional doctorate includes an analysis of data generated from the practice field of senior executive groups and literature within and beyond the broad field of Management Studies to provide new knowledge about the problem of undiscussables, and how to manage them, as they relate to executive groups and their decision-making. Transcripts over a six-month period of a senior executive group who became an Action Learning set were studied. Conversation patterns at precisely the time when organizationally important topics were being avoided were mapped and presented in a Company Report and subsequently in a published peer reviewed article. Via a second peer-reviewed article, the implications of undiscussables on organisational learning are explored, particularly in the context of our emerging understanding in relation to the collective nature of learning. A third peer reviewed article, utilizing data from multiple senior executive teams operating as Action Learning sets, proposed a new relationship between undiscussables, power and conflict. That article significantly widens the conversation about undiscussables, especially in relation to the role set leaders may play in

generating undiscussables as they exercise power afforded them by their rank. Also, recent discourse in managerial magazines in relation to the topic of senior executive decision-making is reviewed, including two articles published by the author that addressed that audience. All components of this portfolio add to knowledge in this important area, and work to significantly enhance the practice of those interested in strengthening the capacity of executives to make collective decisions on issues that matter.

Meta Statement

Improving Executive Group Decision Making

With a Focus on Undiscussables

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Chapter 1 – Research Problematic and Questions

1. The Research Problematic

The topic of this research concerns small group decision-making meetings for Australian senior executive groups. The problem posed is: how to make these meetings more effective for those participating, especially in light of the widespread problem of undiscussables. Undiscussables, explained more fully later, are defined as things that are felt or thought but not said because they are associated with an experience of threat, anxiety or embarrassment (Argyris 1986).

My personal interest in senior group decision-making and undiscussables stems from my practice as a professional consultant, specialising in senior group facilitation. At the commencement of this professional doctorate I had been operating as an independent consultant for about 7 years, during which time I facilitated many senior group collective decision-making processes. I realised that in discussions that I actively facilitated these senior groups engaged in very different conversations to those that predominated in regular, non-facilitated meetings. My fascination with the subtle obstacles that appeared to sabotage non-facilitated meetings, and even, at times, the meetings that I facilitated, grew. An early awareness of Argyris's work prompted my interest into the effect of things that are thought or felt, but not said, especially in relation to contested issues.

As a means of illustrating my own practice, and to further situate this research problematic, I describe below an executive meeting that I facilitated about the time I began to investigate doing this research. This description shows the current state of the practice of executive decision-making and provides an example of my own response as a facilitator to that practice.

I delivered a one-day workshop to a team of nine professionals responsible for delivering customer technical service and sales in a high technology company. The main objectives of the workshop were to increase their ability to communicate with each other in ways that delivered more effective and efficient work outcomes, and to provide a greater level of support to each other while delivering those outcomes. Such objectives are not unusual for workshops that target team development.

When collecting the personal objectives for the day from the participants, one participant said that she wanted the group to "be brave and say the unsaid". Consequently, and with their permission, I then asked them to reflect on a conversation they had with someone in the team where they had a "peak" of some kind of negative or uncomfortable emotion. I then asked the group to do the Argyris Left Hand Column (LHC) exercise (Senge et al. 1994). All the participants wrote the script of the conversation on the right hand side of an A4 page with a central line dividing a right hand column (RHC) from the LHC. The unsaid thoughts and feelings associated with the RHC conversation were written in the LHC. The group then began the process of sharing their written work.

One woman shared her LHC from an event that occurred in a team meeting two weeks earlier: the group manager "closed down" a discussion that was taking place between himself and another team member. She had felt angry and resentful at the way in which the manager had managed the discussion with the other team member. She had personally concluded that the manager was being overly controlling and acting out of fear that the conversation might become heated. This event was clearly a threatening topic to raise within the group. (In fact subsequent discussion showed that much of the team had been frustrated with the team manager in a similar way as the woman who had shared her LHC. I later discovered that it was a charged issue that until then had not been openly discussed in the group).

> The next step was to unpack the conversation a little further. It turned out that the manager had felt quite angry during the interaction in question. He felt that the team member was dominating the group discussion with an issue that was relevant only to herself, and was not relevant to the remaining team members. When the manager shared his LHC, the reasons for his closing down the discussion became evident and were seen as less sinister than originally assumed. The team manager expressed surprise and disappointment that he was being experienced in this way. He expressed his intention to behave in a way that caused the team to feel safe in their meetings. I felt relief as the group members began to see each other (and especially the team manager) in a different light.

The scenario (like that described above) where team members have strong and unspoken limiting assumptions about each other is both problematic for shared decision-making and, in my opinion, very common. Rarely does the quality or depth of conversation in meetings support team members to express and challenge such assumptions. Rather, meetings continue in a predictable way, while small but charged interactions result in an ever-increasing list of unsaid things in the group. These undiscussables, as Argyris identified them, appear to significantly hamper learning and collective decision-making.

Meanwhile, recent literature argues that one of the most pressing challenges for senior executive groups is to work more cohesively (Bradford & Cohen 1998; Runde & Flanagan 2008; Wageman et al. 2008; Zenger & Folkman 2009). Both Joiner and Josephs (2007) and Sinclair (2007) articulate this challenge, calling for our historical notion of leadership where a single heroic figure combats harsh odds to lead the way, to be replaced by the notion of a group of people who vulnerably reflect with each other, learn together, share leadership with each other, and together offer leadership to others. Consistent with this image is a group that makes decisions together, that is, 'in-public', (Vince 2002) as opposed to in private by one or two within the team. In addition, not only does Sawyer (2007) maintain that the fundamental

nature of creativity is in-fact collective, many organisational learning theorists now believe learning is fundamentally a social phenomenon (Fenwick 2010; Garavan & McCarthy 2008). It follows, that for senior groups to generate new directions, or make decisions that enjoy new insight, a collaborative approach characterised by open and frank sharing is necessary. Recent literature argues that senior executive groups need to have the capacity to meet together in ways that allow and support the sharing of views, assumptions, and concerns, and in this way, reason, learn and decide together.

Argyris (1986, 1990, 1993, 1995) argued that it was the existence of undiscussables, that is, things that are thought or felt on a threatening topic, but not said, and the defensive conversational patterns that accompanied them, that were in large part responsible for ineffective meetings and poor executive collective decision-making. Meetings that navigated around potentially threatening topics became flat, stilted, boring, and dangerously irrelevant. He described the "fancy footwork" that characterised these meetings as "anti-learning and overprotective" (Argyris 1978). Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2000) also found the 'unsaid' was responsible for unused employee resources and asymmetrical relations. Runde and Flanagan (2008) proposed that the ability to discuss contentious topics was a defining competence for effective teams, and the absence of such yielded short-term frustration and long term disappointment. Others have explored the effect of undiscussables and found similar results. (Avery & Steingard 2008; Baker 2004; Hammond, Annis & Mayfield 2011; Mclain Smith 2008; Morrison & Milliken 2000; Noonan 2007; Runde & Flanagan 2008). In short, the prevalence of undiscussables remains a central concern as they relate to the persistent problem of frustrating and ineffective executive meetings, obstructed learning, and poor collective decision-making.

Not only does is there general agreement on the main problems that plague these meetings, the literature describing senior executive experience appears to align with my own observations. Relevant texts

written for managers appear to be in unison about the level of frustration felt by managers regarding their meetings. Wilkinson (2005) charts ten separate negative characteristics of most meetings and even suggests that a meetings revolution is required. Timm (1997) maintains that 70% of senior executives consider many of the meetings they attend to be a waste of time. Schwarz (2002b, p. 3) speaking on behalf of managers says "Our experience of groups often leaves us feeling disappointed or frustrated". Petz (2011) reports that as recently as September 2010, USA Today reported that 49% of all office meetings were found to be a waste of time by the survey respondents.

But what kinds of decisions might be required of senior executive meetings? Schwarz (2002b) provides examples of problems being addressed by board members, senior management, and middle management self-directed teams. He nominates them as policy issues, organisational wide problems, and project related concerns, respectively. Straus nominates three different 'spaces' in which executive decisions are made. These are the "vision space" the "problem space" or the "solution space" (Straus 2002). In a comprehensive analysis of senior executive teams (Wageman et al. 2008), it was found that according to executive teams' lengthy list of criteria, they made decisions in areas that included: agreeing broad business priorities, identifying problems and required action, clarifying the behavioural norms of their team, and establishing meeting processes. Therefore, while reasonable clarity exists in relation to the kinds of decisions senior executive meetings are usefully making, the practice of participating in meetings that deliver collective decisions on these important topics, as evidenced above, remains a point of frustration and contention for those involved.

In addition, my early investigations into the research literature relating to senior executive decision-making meetings showed a less than ideal relationship with practice in this area. The vibrant and energetic exchange between researchers and practitioners, (including senior executives themselves), for which one might hope, seemed deficient. While the longstanding and groundbreaking published work of key

theorists who have investigated small group functioning was well established, the practice of senior group decision-making was undeveloped. For example, Argyris (1986, 1990, 1995), Schon (1983; 1995), Dick (1991, 1997), Lukes (2005), Mindell (1992, 1995, 2002), and the body of authors contributing to the Action Learning (Burgoyne 2011; Dotlich & Noel 1998; Marquardt & Waddill 2004; Pedler & Burgoyne 2008) and Critical Action Learning (Ram & Trehan 2009; Trehan 2011; Vince 2004) literature, (all described in detail later) have published far-reaching insights that might inform the running of senior executive meetings, however this particular world of practice has, according to my own long-term observations, continued largely untouched and unchanged by the literature. It would seem these two conversations, of the research and of practice, occur largely in parallel rather than in an exchange. This is in spite of the continuing discourse on the importance of Action Research (AR) and other participative research methods. These observations do not imply that either field is at fault, but rather that they could both be improved by a better relationship between them.

My experiences in professional practice, like the scenario described above, and a rudimentary understanding of the literature, prompted my personal investigation into completing a professional doctorate. I discovered that in pursuing a professional doctorate I would be supported to deepen my knowledge of the practice of senior executive team decision-making and my facilitation of this practice; reflect on, refine, and perhaps transform my own practice; develop new theory and tools for practice; and document my journey of growth and discovery for both academic and professional audiences (Jarvis 1999; Wasserman & Kram 2009). In other words, a professional doctorate promised a sustained focus on the problems of practice described above and on the practice of facilitation, with the possibility of improving my own practice and contributing to the field's general development.

During the first year after choosing to pursue a professional doctorate, I realised that a 'portfolio' approach could serve my purposes well. With

the portfolio approach I could include in the doctorate a range of documents (or 'artifacts') that were intended for a range of audiences. For example, I could include documents intended for a managerial audience, while my critical reflections on those documents in the light of the literature would be written for an academic audience. In addition, I could include the data-based theory generating documents intended for an academic audience. With this approach the doctorate itself could serve as a means of supporting a direct dialogue with both academics and practitioners. I would be supported to deepen the rigor, impact and relevance of my communication with a managerial audience, while at the same time allow that exchange to deepen and enrich my ability to conduct and publish research on the boundaries of our knowledge. Consequently, the portfolio approach allowed me to focus directly on publishing academic and managerial articles (and other publications) as part of the submitted manuscript, rather than waiting till the manuscript was complete, or publishing articles simultaneous to preparing the manuscript. This approach also presented me with a personal advantage, since I anticipated that it would benefit my professional standing and ultimately my business. In summary, the portfolio approach facilitated an even tighter fit between the requirements of the doctorate and my intention to strengthen my personal practice as a consultant, extend the boundaries of practice more broadly, and build a better personal consultancy.

In summary, the need for senior executive groups to engage one another in searching, vulnerable, and robust conversations as they endeavor to make collective decisions is clear. Generally, however, executive meetings do not engage in these conversations; the prevalent problem of undiscussables seems to be a primary cause. While research in this area has yielded much insight into improving the practice of senior executive meetings, the practice itself appears generally unmoved. This may be in part be because of a less than ideal relationship between research and practice, where a rich and ongoing exchange is required for sustained change in practice. This professional doctorate is a research initiative to be both informed by and contribute

to improving the practice of senior executive group decision-making, especially in relation to the effect of undiscussables.

2. Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this doctoral research was straightforward: to provide a contribution that was both informed by and improved the practice of senior executive collective decision-making, through an investigation of undiscussables. To do so, I intended to deeply inquire into this practice and to consequently generate and publish new theory and tools to assist in improving my own practice and that of others in the task of supporting senior executive teams to better manage the problem of undiscussables, and thereby engage in better collective decision-making.

Therefore, the research asks the following primary question:

> How might the practice of senior executive group decision-making be improved through a focus on the problem of undiscussables?

The following subsidiary questions were asked in the service of the primary research question:

- What patterns of exchange characterise senior executive groups at the time when they are avoiding topics, that is, navigating around undiscussables?

- How might the exercise of power be related to the generation and sustaining of undiscussables?

- How might undiscussables affect organisational learning, and how is that important?

- How might a researching practitioner usefully contribute to current human resources (HR) professional discourse with the intention of widening awareness of the problem of undiscussables as they relate to collective decision-making?

The primary research in this portfolio was an Action Research (AR) project with a group of senior executives who were responsible for a medium size biotechnology company, in Sydney, Australia. In the first instance, I had a relationship with the group by virtue of my consulting practice. Approximately 12 months following the consulting engagement, I approached the Managing Director (MD) of the group to test his interest in working together with me to improve the collective decision-making of his group, in this case not as a client, but as a partner in a collaborative styled research. He agreed in principle, and gave me permission to similarly approach his team, who also agreed. The senior group and I then planned a series of meetings over a six month period, including the observation and facilitated debrief of four of their monthly half day planning meetings, and one-on-one interviews in between. A significant amount of data was generated as each meeting and intervening interview was recorded and transcribed. It was the analysis of the data generated as this team strove to increase their ability to engage one another in ways that supported collective decision-making that comprised the primary research of this doctorate.

This meta statement is intended to tell the story of my doctoral research. Following a brief statement of the research purpose and questions (shown above), this meta statement includes: the research problematic; a description of the components of the portfolio; the conceptual context of the research; methodology employed; in-depth discussion of each component of the portfolio and their relationship to the research questions; a reflection on personal, professional and academic development this doctorate has afforded me; and a conclusion.

Chapter 2 – Composition of the Portfolio and Purpose of the Components

This doctoral portfolio consists of six artifacts. These artifacts (discussed in this meta statement) are: three peer-reviewed journal articles (two published and one scheduled for publication July 2014), one company report and two managerial articles. The following description is in two parts. First, each of these artifacts is briefly described and the broad intention associated with each identified. Second, the relationship of each artifact to the research questions identified above is articulated.

1. Portfolio Components

The following description of each of the meta statement components is summarised in Table 1, found at the conclusion of this section.

The Meta Statement

The meta statement, considered a portfolio component to examine the artifacts, was intended to link the artifacts, provide an overview of the research agenda, and provide context for the artifacts with a literature review and methodology. It also provides a vehicle to deeply reflect on the theoretical and practical concerns raised in the artifacts and the relative effectiveness of each artifact in achieving its purpose and addressing the relevant research question.

The meta statement includes the following parts: 1) Articulation of the research problematic and questions (above); 2) Description of each artifact and how it elates to the research questions; 3) Conceptual context of the research; 4) Methodology employed in the research; 5) Reflection on, and further analysis of the three peer-reviewed journal articles, one company report, and two managerial articles, including personal reflections on the impact of completing each artifact on my scholarly, professional and personal development; 6) A reflection on my changing relationship to power and conflict throughout the doctorate; and 7) Final conclusions, which includes the main arguments of the meta statement and proposed directions for future research.

The intended audience for the meta statement is those marking this portfolio. Parts of the meta statement might also be subsequently reproduced in the preparation of other written pieces for either the academic or practitioner communities, or both.

The meta statement was designed to play the role of 'grand conductor'. It presented the overall research aims and problematic, discussed how each portfolio artifact addressed both overall and subsidiary research questions, and brought deeper analysis and reflection to each of the artifacts.

The Journal Articles

The portfolio includes three peer-reviewed academic articles. The first article appeared in the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal (Donovan 2011), the second in the proceedings of the 6th International Colloquium on Business and Management (Donovan 2013), and the third in the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal (forthcoming, July 2014.

The purpose of the articles was to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the current academic discourse in relation to executive exchanges and collective decision-making, effectively present my own research, show its significance to practice, and in doing so contribute usefully to practice based knowledge. My aim was to successfully bridge between the academic and practice worlds by bringing a rigorous review of my practice and the practice of senior executives as they engage one another, to the academic world. This initiative was intended to contribute to a lively and energetic exchange between these two worlds, and through that exchange, enrich both.

The intended audience was academic. Readers of both journals are primarily scholars in the field of Organisational Development (OD). These scholars conduct their own research, teach graduate and post graduate students in this field, and in some cases also run their own

practice with private clients. As a community, these scholars are prime movers in shaping the conceptual boundaries of OD, and its future practice. In addition, a small portion of the community of practitioners might review these academic journals.

The articles were to play the role of 'brave explorer': taking my research of practice into (what is for me) the unfamiliar territory of the academic world, for criticism. I locate the research in relation to other academic literature and further the process of becoming part of the academic community.

Company Report: Biotechnology Company

As described above, I worked with a senior management group in the capacity of an action researcher, for a period of six months. Following that period, I compiled and delivered a Company Report to the company. The purpose of the Report was to provide the organisation with documentation of their learning and to support the group's ongoing reflection and learning.

This Company Report was organised into the following broad areas: 1) Agreed purpose of the research; 2) Description of context and methodology; 3) The project vision; 4) Discussion of the themes that emerged from an analysis of the data; 5) Recommendations for the ongoing practice of the executive group; and 6) Final comments by the researcher.

The intended audience for the Report was the organisation itself and, with appropriate permission, the portfolio markers. Otherwise, and importantly, the Report is confidential. It includes a detailed account of conversations held by the senior team, and the names of those speaking are clearly indicated. The central concern of the Report's confidentiality featured strongly in the ethics submission for this research. The submission was granted on the basis of a clear understanding of the sensitivity of the Report, and commitments that ensured restricted distribution beyond the company itself and the portfolio markers.

The Company Report was intended to play the role of being a 'faithful mirror' by reflecting back to those in the company the journey of our research. It also provided me with an opportunity to reflect further on that journey and include those reflections. As mentioned above, this presented a sensitive issue concerning which parts of our journey to include in the Report, and which not. For instance, the final debrief meeting, by which time the MD had left the company, included a very frank appraisal of the MD's performance by the remaining team. To include such a discussion may have been risky for the remaining team members, should the Report find itself distributed more widely within the company. These issues, and others like it, are discussed in more detail in the chapter of the meta statement that discusses the Company Report.

Managerial Articles

Two articles published in a managerial HR journal that address practice issues concerning improving the quality of senior executive dialogue especially in relation to undiscussables and collective decision-making, are also included in the portfolio.

The purpose of these articles was to translate as faithfully as possible relevant concepts and tools both from my experience and from the academic literature for a managerial (non-academic) audience and in doing so provide practical assistance to those involved in improving the performance of senior executive groups in their collective decision-making.

The intended audience was managers and HR professionals and the role of these articles within these communities was of the 'integrous engager'. Here, I attempted to engage the non-academic world in a dialogue about important aspects of practice. To this dialogue I brought the dual intentions of communicating academic research with integrity and accessibility while prompting a new, fresh and relevant discourse with practitioners. As with the peer-reviewed articles, the managerial

articles represented an attempt to bridge the academic and practice worlds, and thereby enrich both.

Company Report (8,5000 words)	
Description	Purpose and Audience
The Company Report reflects this research's Action Research approach. It is organised into the following broad areas: 1) The agreed purpose of the research; 2) Description of context and methodology; 3) The project vision; 4) Discussion of the themes that emerged from an analysis of the data; 5) Recommendations for the ongoing practice of the executive group; and 6) Final comments by the researcher.	The audience is the organisation itself and, with appropriate permission, the portfolio markers. Otherwise, the report is confidential. The purpose is to provide the organisation with documentation of their learning and to support ongoing reflection and learning by the group.
Two Managerial Articles (3000 words each)	
Description	Purpose and Audience
Two articles published in a managerial or HR journal that address the practice issues relating to improving the quality of senior executive dialogue and collective decision-making.	The audience is managers and HR professionals. The purpose is to provide practical assistance to those interested in improving the performance of senior executive groups in meetings and collective decision-making.
Three scholarly articles (approximately 6000 words each)	
Description	Purpose and Audience
Academic articles that include a review of relevant literature, present my own research in relation to the issues of senior executive exchanges and collective decision-making, and position these elements in the context of the Action Research approach.	The audience is academic (acknowledging that many academics also engage in a professional business practice), and with the possible inclusion of some professionals. The purpose of the articles is to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the current academic discourse concerning executive exchanges and collective decision-making and to show its significance to practice. The articles also integrate my own research in the discussion.
Meta Statement (55,000 words)	
Description	Purpose and Audience
The meta statement is organised into the following areas: 1) Statement of the research purpose, problematic and research questions; 2) Broad description of the elements of the portfolio and their relationship to each other and the research questions; 3) Literature search; 4) Methodology; 5) A reflection on the effectiveness of each element in achieving its purpose in addressing the research questions, and	The audience is the markers and any subsequent readers of the portfolio. The purpose is to link the elements of the portfolio and provide an overview of the research agenda. The meta statement also provides a vehicle to deeply reflect on the portfolio elements and their relative effectiveness in achieving their various purposes.

evidence of each elements impact on practice; 6) My personal reflections on the research process and its impact on my own scholarly, professional and personal development; and 7) Conclusions and further research.	

Table 1 – Summary of Portfolio Components

Finally, a brief word about the order in which the various components of the portfolio were written, shown in Figure 1 below, and the order in which they are discussed in this meta statement. You will notice that the peer-reviewed articles were completed after the other components. This meta statement, however, presents the three peer-reviewed articles first. There are several reasons for this reversal in order. The peer-reviewed articles constituted the most strenuous conceptual work of the doctorate and the primary place of residence for new contributions to theory and practice (this is especially pertinent to the second article). So, presenting the peer-reviewed articles prior to the other components was intended to effectively engage the reader early in the meta statement. This was intended, as in the preparation of an effective peer-reviewed article, to provide the punch line early on leaving the reader in no doubt as to the key messages of the doctorate which are included in the three peer-reviewed articles. The reader is then able to read the remainder of the portfolio in the context of the key messages. The remainder is then both an artifact of the other research activities and a documentation of the journey toward realising the primary research outcomes.

Chronological Order of Completion and Intended Audience of Portfolio Components
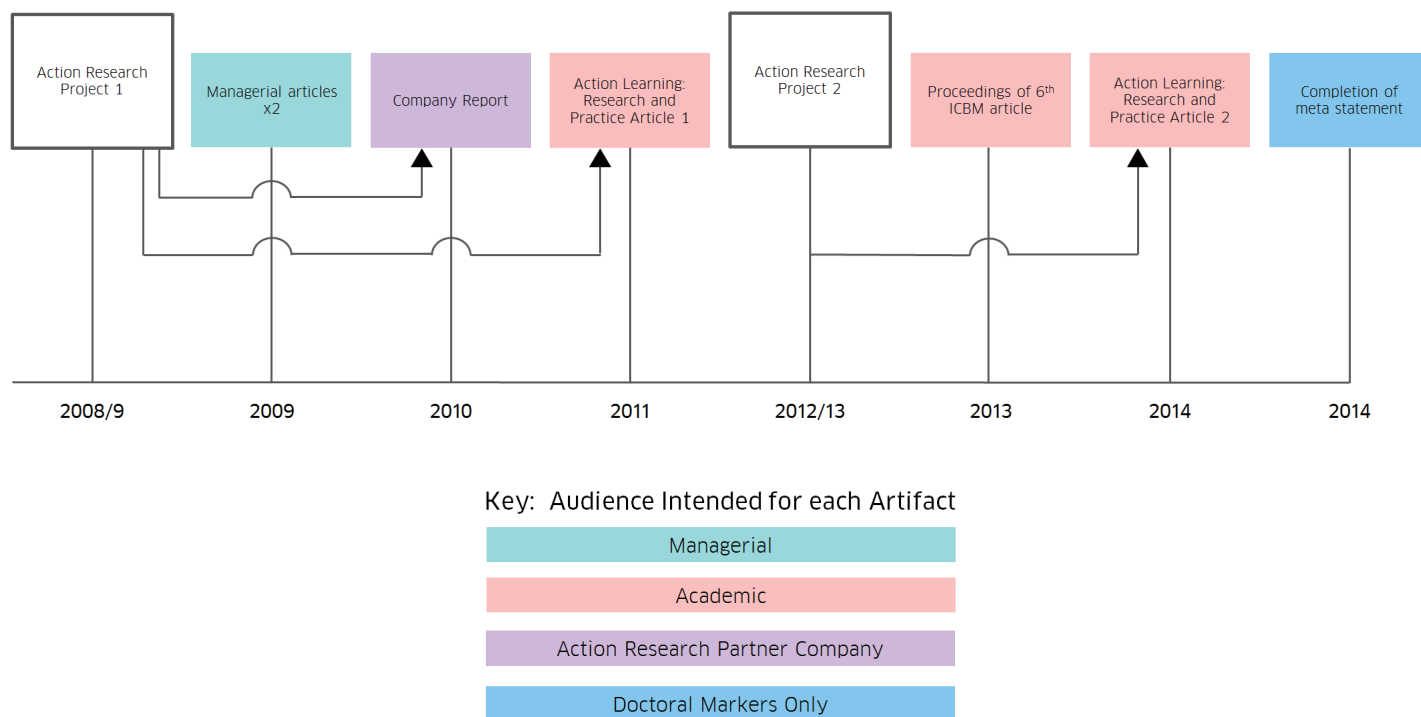
Figure 1 – Chronological Order of Completion and Intended Audience of Portfolio Components

2. The Artifacts and their Relationship to the Research Questions

The various components of the portfolio each addressed the broad research question and one particular subsidiary research question listed in chapter 1 of this meta statement. Described below is the relationship between each component of the portfolio and the primary and subsidiary research questions.

The Company Report for the biotechnology company and the first peer-reviewed article (Donovan 2011) both examined the nature of senior group conversations precisely at the time when important topics were avoided. In doing so, these two artifacts explored the nature of conversational patterns that seemed to support the group to avoid

important but undiscussable topics. Knowledge of these patterns was intended to further researcher and practitioner understanding of the often-subtle signs that appear when senior executive groups are avoiding important topics, that is, suffering from undiscussables. This knowledge was intended to increase the capacity of senior groups to bypass those patterns, directly address potentially threatening topics, and thereby improve collective decision-making. In this way, these two artifacts addressed the primary research question:

> How might the practice of senior executive group decision-making being improved through a focus on the problem of undiscussables?

As indicated in the description above, these two artifacts addressed the following subsidiary question in the service of addressing the primary research question:

> What patterns of exchange characterise senior executive groups at the time when they are avoiding topics, that is, navigating undiscussables?

The second peer-reviewed article (due to be published in the Action Research: Research and Practice journal) addressed the primary research question by directly exploring the nature of undiscussables themselves. The subsidiary question addressed in this artifact was:

> How might the exercise of power be related to the generation and sustaining of undiscussables?

This article brought together data from a second AR project with relevant literature to propose a novel model of how power and conflict work to generate and sustain undiscussables. Bringing various conceptualisations of power to the topic of undiscussables was a relatively novel approach, and doing so yielded new insights into which senior executive behaviours appear to create undiscussables. Senior groups wishing to understand how they may, often unintentionally, be

creating undiscussables and thereby limiting collective decision-making can directly utilise this knowledge.

The third peer-reviewed article (Donovan 2013) explored the relationship between undiscussables and organisational learning and, in the context of recent theory, argued that undiscussables are a critical obstacle to organisational learning. Consequently, while this article does not directly explore undiscussables and collective decision-making, it investigates the closely related area of organisational learning. In-fact, the discussion in chapter 7 of this meta statement argues that collective decision-making can be identified as a subset of organisational learning. Therefore, while the third peer-reviewed article does not directly address the primary research question as described above, it directly addresses the subsidiary research question:

> How might undiscussables affect organisational learning, and how is that important?

The managerial articles are a lighter discussion of the problem of collective decision-making in senior teams and the impact of undiscussables. They provide practical assistance to HR professionals in assisting senior teams to improve in this area. These two brief articles, and the discussion of them included in this meta statement, address the subsidiary research question:

> How might a researching practitioner usefully contribute to current HR professional discourse with the intention of widening awareness of the problem of undiscussables as they relate to collective decision-making?

Chapter 3 – Conceptual Framework

The chapter begins with an exploration of the main themes that relate to the phenomenon of undiscussables. Three main themes have been identified; each theme is linked to a key theorist. The first theme explores the foundational knowledge upon which our understanding of undiscussables is largely based. This knowledge is primarily provided by Argyris who first coined the term 'non-discussables'. It includes the identification of the divergence of the 'theory in use' and the 'espoused theory' at the time when undiscussables are present (Argyris 1991). The second theme concerns power and its relationship to undiscussables. The key theorist here is Lukes (2005) who developed a robust and durable model of the exercise of power, especially where one person is dominating another. This model offers important insight into how such domination might relate to the generation and sustaining of undiscussables. Finally, notions emerging from the new sciences, including that of the 'field' and its relationship to power, further develop the theme of power and constitute the third theme. Here Mindell (2000) is the key theorist under consideration.

Following a review of the three main themes and three key theorists, the chapter then explores the relationship between the key theorists' work. Here Bourdieu is also introduced and compared to Mindell's, and Lukes's conceptions of power. Bourdieu's considerable body of work on issues of power and status constitute a suitable point of comparison to enrich the discussion on power, and its possible connections to the generation of undiscussables. This section comprises work that goes beyond setting the conceptual context. It introduces the new conceptual work achieved in this doctorate, done primarily while preparing the third peer-reviewed article (scheduled to be published in the Action Research: Research and Action journal). In particular, Lukes's and Mindell's alternate models of power are combined in a novel way and related directly to the generation of undiscussables. Argyris's and Mindell's tools

to manage undiscussables are also compared and contrasted, especially in the light of their differing conceptual models.

The next section includes a review of Clegg's work. Clegg (1989) is an important theorist on issues relating to power. His inclusion here serves to broaden the discussion of power from small group interactions to whole systems analysis. This whole system thinking provides a useful counterpoint to the previous discussion, and offers a more comprehensive picture of the issues of power as they relate to the corporate context.

Finally, the relationship between undiscussables and organisational learning is explored. This section is an abbreviated version of the content included in the third peer-reviewed article (published in the proceedings of the 6th International Colloquium on Business and Management). It argues that in our emerging understanding of organisational learning, undiscussables take center stage as a powerful resistor to it.

1. The Foundations of Undiscussables: Argyris

It was Argyris who first coined the term "non-discussables", which later became known as "undiscussables". His writing was primarily located in the field of Management Studies, with an emphasis on organisational learning. The following section defines the key terms Argyris used to introduce these ideas, including the mental programs he maintains are underlying the phenomena of undiscussables. Following is a brief discussion of one of the main tools he used with groups, and a summary of the main criticisms made of his work.

Argyris contended that an organization's inability to address issues that might create threat or embarrassment creates non-discussables and that they, in turn, lead to managerial mediocrity, poor market performance and malaise (Argyris 1995). In other words, non-discussables prevent learning, and result in poorly conceived decisions. Conversely, as its leaders learn to engage in conversations that address these "non-

discussables", they increase their ability to create robust conversations, thoroughly interrogate various strategies, create organisational learning, and ultimately make effective decisions. Argyris also maintained that the ability to do this is especially necessary in a world becomingly increasingly complex (2004).

With the intention to shed light on how organisational defensiveness works, Argyris (1986, 1990) explained that when issues emerge that prompt feelings of being threatened or embarrassed, groups tend to navigate around the issue or "cover up". In addition, they do not discuss that they are avoiding the issue and thereby cover up the "cover up". This strategy has the effect of sealing the original contentious issue off from the group's interactions; therefore ensuring that problematic decisions required by the group are not dealt with directly. Argyris further contends that the group's behaviour in navigating around a contentious issue is in fact "skillful" since it is produced in milliseconds, is spontaneous, automatic and unrehearsed. For this reason, he calls it "skilled incompetence" because it produces an unintended result (mediocre managerial stewardship) that groups produce repeatedly and voluntarily (1986). Argyris explains that this "fancy footwork" which enables the group to avoid contentious issues leads to malaise within the organisation as employees increasingly do not question or challenge the behaviour of the organisational group (1990).

Underlying the above observations is Argyris's theory regarding two mental programs human beings employ to maintain control, especially when faced with embarrassment or threat (1990, 2004). He asserts that one program contains a set of beliefs and values regarding the optimal way for that individual to maintain their lives. The other contains the actual rules the individual uses to manage those beliefs and their actual behaviour in the world. The first is espoused theories of action; the second is theories-in-use.

Because the behaviours demonstrating theory-in-use are observable, Argyris was able to discover that while the behaviours varied from

person to person, the actual theory-in-use did not. He called this theory Model 1. Model 1 theory-in-use prompts individuals to seek to be in unilateral control, to win, and to not upset people. It therefore informs action strategies that are primarily selling and persuading, and when necessary, strategies to save one's own and other's face (Argyris & Schon 1974).

Model 1 theory-in-use, however, presents various problems. Model 1 presents a dilemma because of its authoritarian features. For its use to be effective the recipient must become submissive, passive and dependent, which completely contradicts Model 1. Therefore, if Model 1 is defined as the effective theory-in-use, its implementation requires others to be ineffective by the very terms of Model 1. For this reason, where Model 1 is applied, undiscussables tend to be generated. The intention to win, and to win over by persuasion while keeping all parties on an emotional equilibrium and remaining in control, ensures issues or topics that might threaten a convincing argument, prompt upset, or embarrass are avoided.

Argyris and Schon (1974) offered an alternative model, which they called Model 2. The governing values of this alternative model are valid information, informed choice, and responsibility to monitor how well the choice is implemented. They explain that Model 2 is characterised by behaviours where individuals advocate for their position while encouraging enquiry of the reasoning behind the position being advocated. Therefore, face saving is minimised. To this end, they developed the concept of the Ladder of Inference to assist groups to engage one another in ways consistent with Model 2.

While Argyris shows in his transcripts that assisting groups to migrate from Model 1 behaviours to Model 2 behaviours is certainly a possibility (Argyris 2004), one is left with the impression that Argyris's exceptional skill combined with his research based knowledge might be required to facilitate such a migration. Such an impression is consistent with my own observation as a management consultant working with varied

clients over the last 15 years: that Argyris's concepts and tools are not widely used or understood.

While there is no doubt that Argyris was a pioneer, it could also be argued that some of his tools were simplistic in their approach to assisting groups to discuss 'non-discussables'. In particular, his Left Hand Column (LHC) exercise invites participants to write down what they were thinking or feeling but not saying in a particular conversation. Based in part on my own experience as a corporate facilitator, I would suggest that in cases where non-discussables are especially sensitive, or participants have come to the conclusion that withholding strong emotions is more appropriate or 'professional', such an exercise is unlikely to surface previously undisclosed contributions. Therefore, applying new, more sophisticated approaches to bringing non-discussables into the conversation would seem a welcome extension to Argyris's work.

In addition, Argyris attracted sharp criticism from some critical theorists, because of his failure to explicitly address existing power structures both within and outside organizations. Welton (2005) says:

> "Organization learning paradigm, as proposed by Argyris….lacks the conceptual power to penetrate into the actual learning/action dynamics of corporate capitalism" (p. 95).

Likewise, Brookfield (2005) in making reference to the work of Argyris says:

> "Inferential ladders are scrutinized for false rungs that lead business teams into, for example, a disastrous choice regarding the way in which a brand image upsets a certain group of potential customers. The consequence of this exercise in critical thought is an increase in profits and profitability, and a decrease in industrial sabotage and worker absenteeism. Capitalism is left unchallenged as more creative and humanistic ways are found to organize production or sell services" (p. 11).

Both these authors noted that Argyris's lack of attention to systemic power imbalances resulted in him failing to address the institutional power structures implicit in unchallenged capitalism. However, vigorous defense of Argyris as a critical thinker has been made by Bokeno (2003). He maintains that Argyris's work is a rare and excellent example of a critical approach applied to practical action. Bokeno points out that while Argyris's work does not include the words "ideology", "discourse" or "emancipation":

> "His is a discourse that legitimates action as an inseparable if not central aspect of critique, and one that enables transformative practice as a function of "critical" theory" (p 634).

Bokeno goes further to offer a rebuttal to critical theorists in general. He points to a lack of evidence that their thinking and writing has led to anybody's emancipation. As he writes (2003):

> "….it remains unclear to almost everyone whether COS's (Critical Organisational Study's) cerebral explications of organisational constraint on human freedom have ever liberated anyone from anything" (p. 634).

It is nevertheless true that Argyris left relatively unexplored the connection between undiscussables and modern conceptualisations of power. The closest he comes to investigating this area is to suggest that widespread cultural indoctrination conditions us to behave defensively if caught in potentially threatening situations, and to withhold certain information. Likewise, the related fields of study of Action Learning, Organisation Learning and Human Resource Management have also been criticised for their failure to explicitly address issues of power and justice, especially those supported by an unchallenged capitalism (Fenwick 2003). Again, Welton (2005) says:

> "Organizational learning theorists, or consultants, have not raised any fundamental questions about…globalized corporate capitalism itself" (p. 95).

In summary, Argyris, in his pioneering work, set a firm foundation for our thinking about undiscussables. Not only did he first coin the term, he also provided useful theory concerning our tendency to behave in ways that are different to what we profess and, when doing so, to generate and sustain undiscussables. He did not however explicitly address issues of power in relation to undiscussables, and some authors criticised Argyris for this omission.

2. The Missing Link of Power: Lukes

In investigating issues of power, especially as they relate to the subtle issue of undiscussables, theorists who have focused on not only the societal-wide implications of power but also on individual personal effects of power are of central concern. A key theorist in that context is Lukes (2005). The following section reviews his model of power especially as it relates to achieving the willing compliance of others even if this compliance does not appear to be in their interest. His three dimensional view of power will first be presented, then criticised, then briefly explored in relation to the phenomenon of undiscussables in the corporate context. The following review of Lukes offers a useful forum to discuss issues of power as they relate to interactions where suppression of some kind may be at work.

In 1974 Lukes published his famous text: Power: A Radical View, which is now widely referenced and which drew significant comment and criticism from both academic and political corners. The text is loosely located across two fields: the primary field being Political Studies, and the second field Management Studies. More recently, Lukes (2005), published a second edition of the text. In it is included the original work, plus a chapter that locates the original in a wider conceptual frame, and a chapter that critically reflects on Foucault's work.

In both editions of his text, Lukes clearly states that his focus is on power and domination, or 'power over'. (Although in the second edition he offers a widened definition of power as a capacity that can be utilised to both suppress and advance the interests of others.) The overarching question accompanying his work is "How do the powerful secure the willing compliance of those they dominate?" In answering this question, he offers his now famous three dimensions of power as well as some useful theorisation relevant to undiscussables. The exploration of the relationship between dominating power and undiscussables in a business context represents one key way in which his work is relevant to the field of Management Studies. Lukes's three dimensions of power are described below.

Lukes described three dimensions of power; each dimension is subtler and potentially more pervasive than the last. One-dimensional power aligns with the traditional understanding of power as limited to discrete situations where person A has power over person B and can compel them to do something they do not want to do. This early conceptualisation was first made by Dahl (1957). It was founded on a mechanistic paradigm based on classical mechanics and is arguably the most pervasive present-day view of power. As Clegg (1989) describes, Dahls's view of persons A and B parallels the properties of object A and B interacting and exerting power on one another. These objects can be considered like two billiard balls on an even surface, where no other forces are acting at a distance and the autonomy of the objects is sovereign.

One-dimensional power is considered relevant to situations that involve unambiguous decision-making with a clear contest between two distinct views or parties. Gaventa and Cornwall (2008) suggest that in single-dimensional power, knowledge is conceived as a resource to be mobilised. The more objective, rational and credible knowledge has greater influence and thus wins out over the opposing view. Clegg (1989) also clarified that one-dimensional power is associated with overt conflict or resistance, and therefore is relatively easy to detect. Finally,

in one-dimensional power, little attention is given to whose voice or whose knowledge is represented or how certain kinds of knowledge can affect how the problem is framed (Digeser 1992).

Bachrach and Baratz's (1962, 1970) criticism of Dahl's contribution, like others who made similar criticism (Wrong 1979), pointed out the limits of the mechanical metaphors underlying Dahl's work. They explicated this limit by identifying that power acts to prevent certain issues from inclusion in the agenda in the first place. In the context of the billiard ball metaphor, this is equivalent to someone tilting the table, or simply taking a ball off the table. So, two-dimensional power was proposed as the hidden face of power. This dimension is less concerned with who wins or loses, but rather with which issues and/or actors were prevented from coming to the table in the first place. In other words, a 'mobilisation of bias' may be at work suppressing certain kinds of conflict. Lukes (2005, p. 22), quoting Bachrach and Baratz, says:

> "…power may be, and often is, exercised by confining the scope
> of decision-making to relatively "safe" issues."

In this context, power is not just about challenging expertise with expertise (as in one-dimensional power), but also concerns who participates in the conversation, and what is discussed in that conversation. When applied to participative research (Gaventa & Cornwall 2008), this conceptualisation of power underlines the importance of including new voices and new perspectives in the research, especially of those considered less 'powerful'. This notion of two-dimensional power maintains the idea that conflict occurs over clearly recognised differences. It is less about participants willingly complying by not raising issues, but rather emphasises participants being prevented from raising issues because they are deprived of a forum. Conflict exists, but covertly, as it does not find voice, at least not at the decision-making table. Clegg (1989) observed that the covert quality of conflict associated with two-dimensional power makes identification difficult.

Lukes proposed the concept of three-dimensional power partly because he claimed that (2005):

> "…the two dimensional view of power is inadequate in its association of power with actual observable conflict" (p. 26).

In addition, Digeser (1992) in his review of the three dimensions of power, says of the first two dimensions of power:

> "… (they are) characterized by overtly or covertly conflictual relationship between agents coercively advancing well-understood, self-defined interests against the interests of other agents" (p979).

Lukes (2005), in discussing alternate forms of power to the first two dimensions, suggested that:

> "…the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place" (p. 27).

Lukes claimed that the powerful may do this by influencing consciousness; this is achieved through the control of information, the mass media and the process of socialisation. He termed such power three-dimensional. If three-dimensional power is present, B willingly does what A wants them to do, even though it is contrary to their objective, real interests. Therefore, this conceptualisation of power internally influences others, both as individuals and as a collective, actually affecting how they perceive the problem in the first place. Individuals may de-prioritise the importance of the problem, or simply not see a problem at all. Clegg (1989) describes the conflict associated with the exercise of three-dimensional power as latent. That is, present but somehow un-experienced or unacknowledged. In addition, Gaventa and Cornwall (2008) note that in this dimension of power, power is exercised by controlling knowledge to influence consciousness. They argued that countering this expression of power involves using and

producing knowledge to affect popular awareness and to overcome internalised oppressions concerning issues that affect the lives of the powerless.

Central to Lukes's third dimension concept is the notion of 'real interests', which is presented as this dimension's primary innovation. Lukes presents the first two dimensions as arenas where interests are subjective, but in the third dimension interests are 'real and objective'. Clegg (1989) condemned Lukes's self confessed moral relativism, and raised the profound concern of the difficulty of defining someone's 'real interests'. Clegg contends that no position of cognitive superiority exists whereby some one's real interests can be objectively determined. Clegg was not alone. Bradshaw (1976) and Benton (1981) express similar concerns. They find in Lukes the kernel of social tragedy, where some parties consider themselves privileged to determine the real interests of others, even when those others may not be privy to that insight.

Clegg also argues that Lukes's third dimension does not allow for the two primary means of exercising power, agency and structure, to be dialectically synthesised, that is, for their natural polarity to be acknowledged and integrated into Lukes's conceptualisation of power. Rather, via the centrality of the notion of one party acting to dominate another party's interests, Clegg finds that Lukes emphasises agency while structure is marginalised.

Running contrary to this criticism of Lukes's work is Gaventa (1980). He documents an historical account of power and powerlessness and draws on Lukes's three dimensions of power to analyse it. Gaventa's account has been widely referenced, and represents a useful application of Lukes's model to the real exercise of power over a period of time. Even Clegg (1989), who is critical of Lukes's conceptualisations, considers Gaventa's work a valuable illustration of the processes through which three-dimensional power might operate. Clegg suggests that Gaventa achieved this by largely bypassing the issue of 'real interests' and making no direct reference to them. Interestingly, Gaventa and Cornwall

(2008) also provided a useful analysis of the relationship between power and knowledge, and utilised Lukes's three dimensions to bring helpful distinctions to that relationship.

The distinctions Gaventa (1980) brought to the exercise of three-dimensional power via his historical account deserve a more specific mention here. He found three indirect mechanisms through which three-dimensional power operates. First, the less powerful who continually experience failure in both material and psychological arenas can ultimately become apathetic and fatalistic. As these traits develop into norms, the less powerful become accepting of and resigned to the more powerful. Second, consciousness of one's situation can be affected by one's personal level of participation in current events. Drawing on political theory to understand the events he was analysing, Gaventa proposed that where participation is less, awareness of ones situation is likewise lessened. Third, where the less powerful are not organised, and chronically so, they remain powerless and provide little or no resistance to the more powerful.

A brief reflection on the exercise of three-dimensional power within the corporate environment is appropriate here. It could be argued that a mobilisation of bias currently supports executives to avoid strong expressions of emotion or engage in obvious confrontation. Certainly Argyris made repeated claims that such bias existed and described it as partly constituting the 'values in action' of most or all senior management teams (Argyris 1978). Consequently, executive team members may not raise potentially contested issues in meetings that could evoke strong feelings in themselves or others. This may occur even when they appear to have a forum to raise such issues. It could be argued that the practice of overlooking strong feelings is so embedded and normalised that many executives see this practice as appropriate, and even helpful. Consequently, it is my contention that many executives are unaware of strong feelings, especially negative feelings like frustration, embarrassment, anxiety and so on. I propose that three-dimensional power has been exercised to achieve this embedded norm.

Executives have become resigned, accepting this norm as an appropriate way to do business.

Lukes's three-dimensional model of power offers a unique conceptualisation and tool for the analysis of power. His work allowed for the separation of at least three different kinds of power and, in doing so, widened the conversation about how power is exercised, and how it might be exercised with increased awareness. Drawing on his rich personal history as an academic, Lukes locates his model in relation to other power theorists. Indeed, the first two dimensions had already been articulated, therefore, in providing the third Lukes offers a wider, unifying context to the important work of others before him. It is for these reasons that Lukes's work was identified as one filter through which to analyse the transcript of the final debrief meeting in the ALAR project reported in this doctorate and included in the second peer-reviewed journal submission.

Interestingly, Lukes's notions of power have not previously been applied to the practice of collective decision-making. This is both surprising and exciting. Surprising because his work is longstanding and its relevance to understanding the subtle power dynamics that attend such a practice would seem obvious. Exciting because making this connection may initiate a better exchange between Lukes's theory and the immediate problems of practice. Such an exchange may enable both the theory to be usefully refined and the practice of executive collective decision-making to be refreshed, and exercised with more awareness and precision.

3. Bringing the New Sciences to Power and Undiscussables: Mindell

More recently than Lukes's original work, concepts drawn from the new sciences have provided new insight into how power operates, and how to make power relations visible. While Mindell's work has been selected as a key focus in this area, others (Davis & Sumara 2006; Stacey 2005) should be acknowledged as important contributors. Although Mindell has 20 published texts, and others have published texts examining his work

and their application of it (Diamond & Spark Jones 2004; Goodbread 1997, 2009), it should be acknowledged his work is largely directed toward practitioners rather than the academic community. A small but growing body of research literature (Audergon & Arye 2005; Collett 2007; Morin 2006) is, however, bringing his conceptualisations under the important critical review the academic community provides. Perhaps it is Mindell's significant presence in the life of practitioners, and his pragmatic approach to meet their needs, that best defends his inclusion here. In 1991 he founded the Process Work Institute; similar institutes are now located on every continent. Thousands of students attend training workshops and seminars facilitated by a highly qualified faculty every year, and today about 120 students have graduated with Masters degrees through the Process Work Institute.

The following section highlights Mindell's application of quantum physics concepts to group facilitation, his novel conceptualisations of power, and his methods of assisting groups to say the unsaid. Mindell's work is broadly located across two fields. First, and primarily, Psychological Studies, secondly Management Studies. This investigation begins with Mindell's early concept of three levels of reality, since this sets a context for his later work.

Foundational to Mindell's approach to working with groups and individuals is the acknowledgment that awareness can operate at three levels, and that the failure to sustain this multileveled awareness by the facilitator, coach or therapist will have deleterious effects (Diamond & Spark Jones 2004; Mindell 1992, 2000). He calls the first level of awareness Consensus Reality (CR). This level consists of things that are measurable and objective; a consensus can be achieved in relation to their existence. In the context of a company, CR elements include bottom line results like revenue, profit and market share and measurable factors like organisational structure and employee remuneration. CR factors in a meeting would include items listed on the agenda, how many minutes a discussion has lasted or who has verbally contributed to the discussion. The second level is the subjective, or

'dreaming' level, which consists of feelings, hunches, power struggles, intuitions and so forth. In this level, it is not possible to gain consensus, but rather it is expected that diverse, even polarised views may exist. Schupbach (Schupbach 2004a, 2004b, 2010b) describes this level as the imaginary level, consisting of potentials and pictures that have not yet manifested in the CR level. The third level is the sentient, or essence level where expression is limited and the often-disturbing polarities present on the subjective level no longer exist. It is also described as the 'unbroken' or 'whole' level where no conflict or relationship exists, but rather a sense of connectedness is present, and all is one.

Schupbach (2010a), uses the example of time to describe the three levels of awareness. The CR level includes the measurement of time in minutes and hours. The subjective level includes our subjective experience of time, for example we may experience it as dragging on, or as flying past quickly. A sentient level experience of time might be at the moment when we glimpse the first rays of a sunrise and lose all sense of time and experience something of the perfection and timelessness of creation.

It is Mindell's conceptualisations of the subjective level of awareness that is of particular interest to this project (Mindell 2000), as well as his application of post Newtonian physics to those conceptualisations. His notions of field, roles, ghost roles, time spirits, edges and hot spots are discussed below.

Mindell conceptualises that groups generate a 'field', a notion primarily drawn from modern theoretical physics (quantum mechanics). He describes the field as both shaping and being shaped by the interactions within it; both aspects need to be focused on for a balanced approach. He further proposes that the field is constituted not only by the given set of interactions within it, but also by the wider societal or global context. The self-organising property of the field generates various roles. The roles generated by the field are balanced, that is, polarities of each role exist in the field. For example, where one particular view on a

topic exists within the group, it can be assumed that an opposing view will also exist in the group even if it is unexpressed. He also describes ghost roles whose voice, or view, may be counter to the mainstream within the group and whose expression may therefore become marginalised by the group. So, the ghost role may not be directly expressed by the group, but is signaled by information in the group that is not identified with by participants. This may include body movements not apparently consistent with verbal message, or voice tonality similarly at odds with parallel communication. A ghost role may also be signified by a person or group outside those present in the meeting, who is repeatedly referred to, and whose voice or role is not being directly expressed. Ghost roles affect the expression of other roles in the group, but are not directly expressed themselves. Through the above-mentioned conceptualisations, Mindell achieves a depersonalisation of the roles expressed within a group, suggesting that these roles are not so much the result of a particular participant, but rather an expression of the field created by the collective.

The influence of quantum physics on Mindell's work is further evidenced by his conceptualisation of 'non-local' effects on the roles appearing in the field. Mindell draws on scientific findings that changes in one entity can affect another entity that is in a remote location to the first. He applies this scientific principle to the concept of the field, suggesting that the wider society's conflicts and tensions can shape and inform the appearance and disappearance of roles within a particular field. He calls these remote influences 'time spirits'. Therefore the roles identified within the field may be informed by collective elements within the group, outside the group, or a combination of both.

An 'edge' is where the group expresses something that is inconsistent with their current identity and is therefore accompanied by a sense of vulnerability or risk. When a group experiences an 'edge' and explores the expression of the previously forbidden, they co-create a new reality and produce new information that can reframe existing problems. Mindell names the heated exchange of two polarised roles a 'hot spot',

in reference to seismic infra-red photos that show where the earth's energy is near eruption, usually near the edges of tectonic plates in the earth's crust. Consistent with this analogy, 'hot spots' often occur when groups near an 'edge' and heated exchange between two polarised views is happening.

Mindell discussed power using the associated ideas of rank and privilege (1992, 2000). He describes rank as a potential energy, which may or may not be used within the field in which it exists. He also proposed that rank existed on all three levels of reality. The first is social rank, existing in CR where objective data is observed. Mindell proposed that for any human group our gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and age give us more or less social rank than others. Another manifestation of social rank is the rank provided by organisational positions. Mindell also described psychological rank, which exists on the subjective level of reality. Finally, he describes spiritual rank, existing on the sentient level of reality.

Each rank has certain privilege associated with it, and enables us to exercise more or less power. Interestingly, Mindell maintains that, usually, the more rank we possess the less aware we are of the associated privilege. He finds this lack of awareness to be a primary cause of conflict. For example, he explains that in most countries men are paid more than women and are found more frequently in leadership positions. He sees this as evidence of women having less social rank. Some men however, protest that they do not possess rank in relation to woman; this typically creates conflict. Mindell suggests that, alternatively, men can say that they are not using their rank, or not currently able to use it, or that they have less rank in other areas. These statements may allow men to express their view of a present situation, without denying the wider reality of lesser social rank that women live with as an everyday experience.

Mindell's approach is a valuable alternative in the field of undiscussables, for several reasons. First, Mindell, through his application of physics to

group work, provides new language to describe the subtle experience of undiscussables in a group. Terms including; "field", "roles", "ghost roles", "hot spots" and "edges" give groups new and helpful language to describe their felt experience, and provide practitioners with conceptualisations to aid groups in voicing previously unspoken concerns. Second, the numerous case studies published by Schupbach (2004b), Diamond and Jones (2004), Goodbread (1997) and Mindell (1992, 2000) demonstrate that additional information provided by the facilitation of a full exchange between the various polarised roles within a group enabled the group to address topics and issues that were previously withheld and beyond reach. That is, undiscussable. The critical distinction that polarised roles exist within the field, and are created both by those in the immediate field and by others outside the immediate field, appears to strengthen the group's willingness to identify and articulate things that are contrary to the mainstream of the group, and consequently more risky. Having observed in person Mindell and Schupbach facilitate extremely sensitive issues in large groups, it is hard not to be impressed by the power of this approach in enabling groups to work at 'edges' that at first seem too risky. In summary, Mindell's approach to working with undiscussables represents a significant departure from those who have more directly built on Argyris's foundational work (Mclain Smith 2008; Noonan 2007; Simmons 1999).

While the potential power of bringing Mindell's work to the practice of executive decision-making seems obvious, application to date seems to be at the margins, at best. Mindell's novel language and conceptualisations, although longstanding, are yet to be widely understood or used within mainstream corporate facilitation texts or training programs. Yet, the practice of engaging in collective decision-making, especially in the complex world of senior executives, would seem ripe for such application.

Perhaps adding to the marginalisation of Mindell's work in management texts or corporate training is the observation that he occupies a very small space in mainstream academic literature. For instance, in the

literature making direct reference to undiscussables, he is mentioned only once, by Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2008). It should be acknowledged however, that there exists a small but growing body of literature that has examined his conceptualizations of rank and power (Audergon 2004; Audergon & Arye 2005; Collett 2007; Morin 2006). Mindell's general lack of representation in academic literature can be attributed to two main reasons. First, Mindell has generally not participated directly in academic discourse. Rather than publish papers, he has published books. Secondly, perhaps because of his deep interest and respect for Indigenous spirituality, he often uses language that seems alternative. He refers to 'dreaming' and 'time spirits', indeed the comprehensive catalogue of process work tools by Goodbread (Goodbread 1997) is even titled the 'Dream Body Toolkit'. This language may appear inaccessible to the usual academic researcher, even to critical sociologists.

In summary, it is timely to bring together Mindell's work and immediate problems in the practice of collective decision-making, in the context of published academic research. Adding to this the exploration of the work of both Argyris and Lukes, not previously combined in the literature, is particularly useful and interesting. An inclusive exchange between these parts might refine and improve theory, and assist in transforming widespread unconstructive practices in executive collective decision-making that have far reaching consequences. To this end, the following sections explore the relationship between the work of these three authors, and two other significant power theorists: Bourdieu and Clegg.

4. Bourdieu, and his Relationship to Mindell

Bourdieu was a highly acclaimed French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher who authored several books and vigorously engaged in academic discourse and later in his life, public discourse. A brief review of a few of his most relevant conceptualisations are included here because they relate to issues of power, rank and 'capital'.

Bourdieu himself (1987) and Brubaker (1985) who discussed Bourdieu's work in depth, both described the underlying intention present in

Bourdieu's work of enabling social analysis to better comprehend and reconcile the objective or material and the subjective aspects of social reality. As a means of achieving this and avoiding the privileging of either, Bourdieu described various kinds of capital that he contended could be utilised, or exercised as power. He identified four different kinds of capital, each of which can be utilised by an agent in a social setting. They are economic, cultural (primarily related to knowledge and information), social (primarily related to connections and group membership), and symbolic capital, which all the others transmute to when they are perceived as legitimate. While the first of these 'capitals' is objective, the others are subjective, and in Bourdieu's view at least as important in providing means of exercising social power and defining class. Each of the varying kinds of capital brings rank and privilege to the social agent who possesses them.

While various kinds of capital were identified, Brubaker (1985) described Bourdieu as identifying only two kinds of power: material or economic, and symbolic (relating to the subjective forms of capital), with the understanding that even economic power has a crucial symbolic dimension. Those who have sufficient capital, as described above, can exercise these powers. He describes these forms of power as interconvertable, meaning that they may transmute into each other or exist in the absence of the other.

Perhaps his most famous conception is that of 'habitus'. He described habitus as systems of internal dispositions that are both shaped by social structures and regulate our practical activity. Rigg and Tehran (1999) share their understanding of Bourdieu's concept, saying:

> "Our habitus is the way we have developed and internalised ways of approaching, thinking about and acting upon our social world" (p. 277).

In conceiving of the habitus, Bourdieu argued against the reification of structures as having power or agency. He argued rather that structures

becoming internalised by us as a system of dispositions, which in turn shapes the way we act in our environment. In this way, we efficiently shape, but mostly reproduce, the social structures in our world. Bourdieu developed the notion of habitus as a means of usefully linking and mediating between social structure, our internal dispositions, and our social practice.

Of particular importance to this review is Bourdieu's view on the effectiveness of symbolic power. Brubaker (1985), describing Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power, says:

> "It is not perceived as power, but a source of legitimate demands on the services of others, whether material….or symbolic, such as the expression of deference; and it is precisely this perception or misrecognition that makes it effective as a form of power" (p. 756).

It is here that Bourdieu's theorising may be most helpful to this review. When agents exercise symbolic power, those over whom the power is exercised may not identify that power has been exercised at all. This kind of power is typically exercised in scenarios embedded within cultural norms (such as the three scenarios presented in the second peer-reviewed article published in the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal). Consequently, the legitimacy of the demands of the person exercising symbolic power seems self-evident, is not tested, and is not even "perceived as power". In addition, those who exercise symbolic power typically have little or no awareness that they are in-fact exercising power, primarily because of the same accepted norms and tacit assumptions about the expected nature of their practices.

Comparing Mindell's work to Bourdieu's is appropriate here. First, it should be acknowledged that both Bourdieu and Mindell focus strongly on acknowledging the objective and subjective levels of social reality. Bourdieu described the broad base of methodologies that privilege each in turn, but declares the usual opposition between them to be false.

Mindell described three levels of reality (as mentioned above), the first two, the consensus reality level and dreaming level, correspond loosely to the objective and subjective levels respectively. Mindell added a third level: the 'sentient' level. Mindell maintains, in the context of a practitioner working with individuals and groups, that privileging one level of reality over another marginalises some important aspects of reality.

Both Mindell and Bourdieu liken power to a kind of energy: Mindell describes power as potential energy that may or may not be used by the agent; Bourdieu utilised the metaphor of power as energy primarily to express how power can transpose itself into different manifestations of material power and symbolic power. In all cases, as both Mindell and Bourdieu maintain, the ultimate exercise of power resides in the practices of people. Bourdieu's multileveled notions of capital, which can be exercised as power align broadly with Mindell's notion of rank, a term which Bourdieu himself used. Mindell acknowledges various kinds of rank including social, psychological and spiritual. Both authors used the word 'field' to discuss a social space that is characterised by a certain set of rules, and legitimate opinions. Bourdieu used the term primarily in relation to class analysis, whereas Mindell makes explicit the connection of the term to the new sciences, and uses it chiefly in relation to groups and resolving group conflict.

5. Relationship Between Lukes's and Mindell's Work

Combining the work of Lukes and Mindell, in connection to the data collected and analysed, represents one of this doctorate's primary contributions to research and practice. Exploring this relationship may bring more distinctions to our understanding of power, especially as it relates to undiscussables. The following comparison is made between Lukes's third-dimensional power and Mindell's conceptualisations.

Both authors acknowledge that factors remote to the less powerful may have a profound impact on them. Lukes conceives third-dimensional power to be exerted by person A on person B (the less powerful)

without person B's knowledge. In this way person A may influence person B's willingness and ability to present resistance to A's power. Mindell goes further to say that both person A and B may be being shaped by powers remote to them, that is, the field in which they reside, and that it is possible that neither A or B is aware of that shaping power. In this way, he acknowledges that the field, made visible by the beliefs and practices of those within it, may operate in invisible ways on both parties. Therefore, it is not a remote person 'C' who is affecting parties A and B, but rather a more general pull exerted on them via the beliefs and practices of those who provide context to A and B. Interestingly, Hayward (1998), in exploring the application of Foucault's work, described a similar possibility when she 'defaced' power and nominates the 'network' beyond A and B to be exerting power on them.

By acknowledging this dynamic, Mindell makes clear the possibility that power may be exercised without the explicit intention of another individual or group. Therefore, a group or individual that may in part comprise the field within which A and B are found, could be unknowingly informing A and B's interactions. This has specific application in an analysis of undiscussables - who is responsible for them, and how best to allow them to surface. Specifically, any analysis of undiscussables conducted by B may need to include factors well beyond their relationship to A. In this way, Mindell offered an extension to Lukes by widening the possibilities of how power might be exercised on not just B, but on both A and B.

In the second article submitted to the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal, it was acknowledged that both person A (the party with rank) and person B (the party with less rank) may have withheld in relation to uncomfortable topics, and that factors beyond both may have been significant to that withholding. Therefore, the article's analysis included a review of factors outside the team, specifically factors beyond the team's immediate relationships. These factors included the potential indirect effect of global senior management situated remote to the AL set, and could more generally include any remote decision-making

senior executive team. It was proposed that offshore senior management who are detached, remote and unresponsive, may shape and inform the pattern of withholding in relation to uncomfortable topics or challenging opinions within the AL set.

6. Lukes, Mindell, Bourdieu, and Power, Conflict and Undiscussables

What is the place of conflict in the power exercised between the powerful and the less so and their wider context? And how might conflict relate to undiscussables experienced between these parties? Clearly, not all power, when exercised, creates conflict or undiscussables. Bourdieu's and Mindell's notes on conflict and rank may be helpful here. Bourdieu, as mentioned above, identified symbolic power as especially effective, partly because its use is often unrecognised, and subsequently unchallenged. Symbolic power draws on embedded social structures and works to reproduce them in action and relationship. In this case, it's likely that both those exercising power and those complying are doing so with little awareness. Interestingly, Mindell (1992, 1995, 2002) noted that while individuals may be initially compliant to the demands of the powerful, the relationship would ultimately be characterised by conflict. The conflict may not, however, find direct expression with the powerful and, if not, remains covert. In the second peer-reviewed article, to be published in the Action Research: Research and Practice journal, I identify three distinct ways in which the more powerful in AL set meetings may exercise power without awareness. First, the more powerful may unwittingly utilise their rank to silence another's voice as unimportant. Second, they may exercise freedom of expression, especially anger and frustration, unaware or indifferent to the fact that those with less rank do not enjoy such freedom. Third, and perhaps most subtle, those with rank may utilise it to detach themselves and become remote to the challenges and conditions experienced by those with less rank and privilege. A lack of awareness that the power to become remote to the hardship of others is a privilege that those with less rank do not have, may trigger conflict. Each of these three means of exercising power via accessing privilege associated with rank is shown in Figure 2.

Clegg's (1989) analysis of Lukes's three-dimensional framework distinguishes between three different kinds of conflict, each belonging to one of Lukes's three dimensions. As described earlier in this meta statement, they are overt, covert and latent conflict, belonging to one-dimensional, two-dimensional, and three-dimensional power respectively. The second peer-reviewed article connects Lukes's and Mindell's frameworks by suggesting that the person with less rank may respond to the exercising of power by those with more rank, with either overt, covert or latent resistance and conflict. According to Clegg (1989), the type of conflict in each case serves as an indicator of the dimension in which power has been exercised. Implied in this is the notion that it is the way the person with less rank responds, at least in part, which determines what dimension of power is being exercised. But what determines how the person with less rank responds to the exercise of power by the other? Here Mindell's notion of psychological rank can be of assistance. Mindell (2002) suggests that while person B may lack social rank (at the consensus level of reality) they may possess high psychological rank, which may impact how they respond to person A. For example, where person B enjoys such rank, they might have higher capacity to find expression for their concerns and in doing so offer visible resistance, or participate in overt conflict. Where such rank is not enjoyed, the ability to assertively seek out, or create forums for expression, and when in that forum to give clear, coherent resistance may be less.

Figure 2 also includes reference to the impact of the exercise of power in relation to undiscussables. Where overt resistance is demonstrated by the person with less rank, indicative of one-dimensional power, widespread undiscussables may not be generated. Concerns find expression and withholding is minimised. Where there is second-dimensional power however, undiscussables will most definitely be generated. In that case, those with less rank, with their stifled grievance, are unable to find expression for their concerns in a valued forum with those with more rank, and undiscussables obviously result.

The deprivation of that forum, with the accompanying underground expression of frustration, is the critical indicator of two-dimensional power being exercised. In the case of three-dimensional power, the question of undiscussables is more delicate. The indicative resignation, acceptance and hopelessness and its associated latent conflict implies that those with less rank have become relatively unaware of their concerns and unable to identify undiscussables. Their awareness of what they are withholding may be very low. It could be suggested that, in this case, those with less rank could be served by being 'awakened' to their conditions and concerns.

It should be remembered here, that while it might be simpler in the context of this discussion to consider the exercise of power to be between a person who is more powerful (person A) and someone who is less so (person B), Mindell would suggest, as discussed earlier, that such power might be exercised in relation to both persons A and B by other forces in the 'field' which give context to both. Included in that field may be the beliefs and practices of individuals or groups remote to both A and B.

Finally, Gaventa (1980) implies that in some cases there may be a transitional effect between one, two and three-dimensional power (as shown in Figure 2). Where there is an overt response to the exercise of power, and that power is continually exercised irrespective of the response, the overt response may be replaced with a covert one. The grievance may go underground; those with less rank may no longer feel they can usefully find their voice in a forum with those of higher rank. In that case, one-dimensional power has transformed into two-dimensional. Likewise, where the exercise of two-dimensional power continues unabated, a sense of resignation, hopelessness and acceptance may appear and the latent conflict associated with three-dimensional power could emerge.

Power, Conflict and Undiscussables

Person A; more rank

Exercise power by appropriating privilege provided by rank, without acknowledging they are doing so

Dismissing topics or agenda items in meetings with others

Liberal expressions of anger and frustration with others

Becoming detached, remote and unresponsive to needs of others

Person B; with less rank Responds

Overt Conflict; one-dimensional Power
Person **B** openly expresses their resistance to Person **A**

Covert Conflict; two-dimensional Power
Person **B** is somehow prohibited from expressing their resistance in a useful forum with Person **A**

Latent Conflict; three-dimensional Power
Person **B** is relatively unaware (not cognisant) of Person **A** exercising power

Few undiscussables

Prevalent undiscussables. Resistance can not find expression in useful forum

Prevalent undiscussables but Person **B** may be unaware of them. Person B has become resigned, accepting, and/or hopeless.

May become covert if domination is sustained; i.e., underground grievances

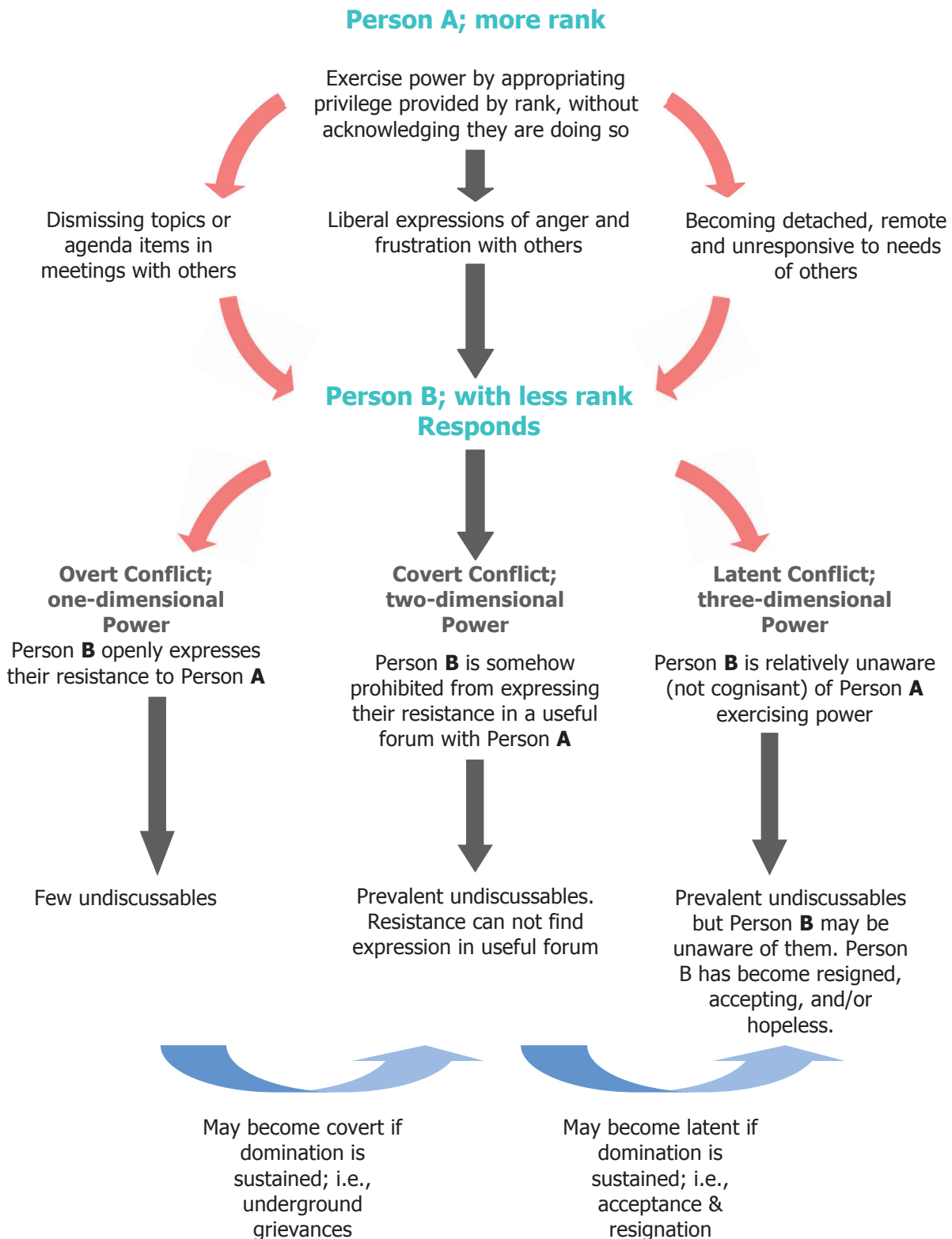May become latent if domination is sustained; i.e., acceptance & resignation

Figure 2 – Power, Conflict and Undiscussables

As a final brief comment in this section, Gaventa (1980), in proposing three different means through which three-dimensional power might be mediated, provides an indication of how the less powerful, in the context of three-dimensional power, could be awakened. This might include the less powerful considering conditions that they have become accepting of or resigned to, where their level of participation is less, and therefore where their awareness is lessened, and how they have become disconnected from others and therefore lack the awareness that organisation and solidarity may bring. These points of consideration may be helpful in the context of working with people who desire to become more aware of the various roles that they occupy, some of which are less powerful and some more so.

7. Comparing Argyris's and Mindell's Tools to Manage Undiscussables

Argyris, who first coined the term 'undiscussables', provided straightforward means to assist in surfacing them (Senge et al. 1994). He formulated the LHC exercise: participants are invited to write down the spoken dialogue on the right hand side of the page, and their related withheld thoughts and feelings on the left hand side of the page. In my own professional experience, however, this approach has mixed success. The example of using this approach I provide in the opening pages of this meta statement evidence the use of this tool to good effect. In some cases, however, participants may not feel a sufficient sense of safety, or permission to speak, despite the invitation of the LHC exercise. Likewise, they may remain unconvinced that if they do speak, they will be heard. In addition, where three-dimensional power has been exercised, participants may have too little awareness of the concerns they are withholding to write them down.

In these difficult cases, Mindell's approach provides a useful alternative. He has drawn on his experience as a Jungian therapist and theoretical physicist, and as a long-term group facilitator to provide additional means to address such situations (Mindell 1992, 2000). By offering his conceptualisation of the field, roles, edges and ghost roles (previously

defined in this meta statement) he provides participants with safe avenues to express the previously unspoken. Participants are, through the application of these concepts, invited to occupy a role and speak without implying that they are defined or contained by that role. Indeed participants are encouraged to occupy several roles. This significantly increases the sense of permission to express a role that might enjoy less rank, and which may have been previously marginalised. Therefore, participants can, at least temporarily, bypass the usual constraints experienced by those with less rank and articulate things usually not permissible. So, these concepts may enable those who experience the stifled restraint consistent with two-dimensional power to speak the unspoken, where the more traditional method of LHC exercise did not.

Mindell's approach therefore provides means whereby groups can identify the forces compelling them to withhold, without necessarily causally relating those forces to a particular person or group. He shows that by crafting those forces into a role and exploring how that role might interact with other roles in the field, groups may be more able to identify and disable the forces working to support withholding in relation to uncomfortable topics or marginalized points of view.

It is helpful here to explain in more depth the application of Mindell's notion of the ghost to assisting a group to express the previously undiscussable. The following example is one way, of many possible applications. If a group is exhibiting shyness to respond to questions about suggestions that could help their company, the visible collective role might be described as a quiet, shy contributor. The ghost role may be a role that somehow creates or facilitates the shy one, but is not visible. In this case, it could be a role, or 'voice', that is critical of the group's legitimacy to make suggestions. Or alternatively, a role that is cynical about the motive for asking for ideas in the first place. In either case, the invisible ghost role is shaping, or producing, the visible shyness. As long as the ghost role remains invisible and unaddressed, it will likely continue to generate the pattern of withholding. Applying Mindell's conceptualisations, the facilitator may need to use what Mindell

calls 'meta skills' to intuit the nature of the ghost role. In that case, the facilitator may work to engage the ghost role directly. The facilitator might explain to the group that she is going to temporarily inhabit a particular role (in fact the role she imagines to be the ghost role) and precipitate a direct response to the role. For instance, while inhabiting the role, she might say to the group 'what grounds do you have to be making suggestions anyway? Your expertise is not sufficient, others probably know better, it's best that you don't say anything about making things better around here'. She would then invite the group to respond to that role, allowing her expression of the ghost role to precipitate its polarity, that is, the role that expresses a polarised viewpoint to the one she has expressed. The strength of their response signals to her if the imagined ghost role was actually present, or not. She may then facilitate a further exchange between the ghost role and its polarity, if there is will to do so in the room.

The intention behind this exercise is to build collective awareness about how power has been exercised to create the initial shyness. With this awareness the group is in a better position to respond to the imbalance, and to take a role other than the shy contributor that was initially presented. It may only be after this has taken place that the group will be in a position to answer the original question about suggestions for the business.

It is my experience that groups who engage in such forums experience an increased ability to talk about various issues that concern them, especially concerns that they had previously lost awareness of or given up hope about. In this way, those who are experiencing the resignation or hopelessness consistent with three-dimensional power may find a new voice to express their previously latent concerns. In other words, a facilitator skillfully applying the tools described above may assist the group to effect a transition of the power exercised from three-dimensional to two-dimensional.

8. Widening the Conversation on Power to Include the Systemic: Clegg

The primary focus of most of the previous discussions of power included in this meta statement, and indeed those included in the manuscript submitted to Action Learning: Research and Practice, have focused on interactions between players and how these interactions have exercised power. While such a discussion is both helpful and valid, it does not address other important aspects of power, in particular a more systemic analysis of its mechanisms within an organisational context. Clegg's 'circuits of power' (1989) model provides a useful focus to broaden the discussion of power in this way. In proposing this model Clegg intended to remedy the over emphasis on personal agency he felt characterised Lukes's model and propose a larger presence for the role of structure as an avenue for the exercising of power. The extension Clegg offered to Lukes's model by developing his circuits of power is similar to the extension to this discussion that I provide by its inclusion here.

Before looking more closely at Clegg's model, a brief word on how the word 'structure' is used in this context. Here, structures can be understood to mean fixed understandings within a particular organisational context, which assign to a privileged few certain authority to act and to precipitate certain obligations upon others to act. In other words, it is these fixed understandings within the organisation that shape the organization's processes for action, and the systems of authority that inform the distribution of resources. Clegg describes structures themselves to be saturated and imbued with power (1989).

Clegg's model shows power to be exercised through three main circuits. The first circuit is primarily concerned with agency, the remaining two with various kinds of structure: the circuit of social integration and the circuit of system integration. The latter two circuits set the context for the agency circuit, setting the boundaries for agency experienced by the players. Clegg used the term circuits because he did not want to imply they are the source of power, but rather that power might flow through them as in circuits. His three circuits of power are summarised below.

Clegg's Circuits of Power

	Circuit of Agency	Circuit of Social Integration	Circuit of System Integration
Type of power	Causal/episodic	Dispositional	Facilitative
General Description of circuit	This circuit of power includes episodic instances of agency, which are the most apparent, the most easily accessible and the most visible circuit of power. This is one-dimensional power but not the foundational or freestanding circuit that Dahl advanced. Episodic power is seen to derive from the capacities of agents grounded in resource control. This kind of power is interested in events. In-fact, Clegg says that the two defining elements of any power system are agencies, and events of interest to these agencies. In episodic power, agencies gain control of events of interest, subject to the resources over which that agent has control. This circuit of power secures outcomes.	This circuit of power works to secure the relational field in which A and B act. It constitutes them, and/or is being constituted by them. Dispositional power is at work to fix and re-fix relations of meaning and of membership, with the associated empowerment or disempowerment of agents' capacities. This circuit concerns the securing or reproducing of the relational context within which the strategies espoused in the circuit of episodic power make good contextual sense. Therefore, power is exercised in this circuit to contextualise strategies of episodic power, and undercut strategic opposition. This relational context can be immediate or a long-term concern. These social relations also constitute the identities of agencies (whether they be individuals or collectives). The 'standing conditions' under which agencies act is determined by the rules of the social circuit. Domination is institutionalised through this circuit.	This circuit relates to the setting and re-setting of techniques of production and modes of discipline. These can be altered to transform the rules of practice set up by the social integration circuit. The exercise of facilitative power through this circuit cannot escape relations of meaning and membership, and in order to be effective must work through these. The circuit of system integration is more dynamic and unstable than the other two circuits. Environmental characteristics, via this circuit, introduce a potent source of innovation which will favour certain forms of technique of production and discipline.
Resistance	Episodic power will usually call forth resistance. Here the reciprocal nature of the relationship between power and resistance is	Where dispositional power is effective, there is a relational subordination of B to A and little or no resistance when episodic power is	This circuit acts to resist stabilisations of existing memberships and meanings by generating new techniques of production and new

	evident.	exercised. That is, there is no antagonistic agency to the exercising of power. This denotes either a genuine consensus of wills or capitulation on the side of B.	modes of discipline. Therefore, exercising power in this circuit may work to disrupt existing relational norms.

Table 2 – Clegg's Circuits of Power (1989)

Changes to social and system integration may be endogenous or exogenous. If endogenous, episodic power results in either transformation in the rules that fix relations of meaning and membership, or enhancement in the innovation of techniques of production and discipline. Exogenous change occurs as a result of environmental contingencies that interrupt and disturb fixed fields of force in either the social or system integrating circuits.

It is helpful to discuss how these three circuits play out in daily organisational life. To assist in that discussion a scenario is explored below involving the delivery of a training program in facilitation skills. The scenario is played out with reference to the three levels.

The training program itself aimed to provide players with new language and behavioural maneuvers to exercise episodic power in the agency circuit. For example, teaching participants to capture the main points of a discussion on a flip chart is an attempt to provide them with an additional behavioural option through which they can exercise causal/episodic power. The making visible, on the public canvas of the flip chart, of the various players' contributions, can shape an ensuing discussion in significant ways. This in turn can profoundly effect the decisions made in that discussion and subsequent discussions, and serves as an objective record of the interactions. (This may be why I have observed strong feelings and irritation in participants when they believe the scribing does not accurately reflect the discussion.)

My experience in teaching these particular maneuvers is that while participants may be able to demonstrate a particular behavioural skill in the training room, many do not proceed to exhibit the same skill in their offices. Perhaps the relational context within the organization, to which they return, makes the explicit exercise of causal power represented by scribing, rather more difficult. What made 'good sense' in the training room seems now to transgress the rules of conduct within the organisation. Participants, when interviewed, have described their shyness or embarrassment in fulfilling the role of scribe as practiced in the training program. To do so feels for many exposing, since it requires that they stand in front of the group and perhaps appear as if they are trying to control the meeting or appear more in control than the other participants. Such an appearance can threaten their 'membership' within the social context of their team or organisation; this lessens motivation to exercise the agency practiced in the training room. Participants have described this experience whether they were assuming the role of facilitator within the meeting, or if they were simply a participant who was attempting to assist in the meeting by scribing on a flipchart. In summary, this scenario shows how dispositional power had been exercised to shape and inform how players exercise causal power with each other.

Clegg also includes the possibility that the exercise of causal power may work to constitute and re-constitute the relational field. Consistent with this assertion is the observation that in some cases the practice of scribing has been used in the meeting room following training, and re-shaped certain relational norms. For example, after a series of meetings that involved scribing, if the 'public' display of decisions via scribing was not executed, participants who had received the training came to question the competence of those facilitating the meeting, and/or the effectiveness of the meeting itself. An expectation had developed that the practice of scribing would be evident, and that visibility of participants' contributions and ultimately decisions would be provided. These re-shaped norms became the relational context that new players hoping to exercise agency would need to contend.

The circuit of systems integration also deserves discussion in relation to this scenario. For example, the performance management system of the organisation might be altered so that the measurement of members' effectiveness includes a measurement of effective meeting facilitation, and in particular, the evidence of faithful scribing. Such an exercise of 'facilitative' power may or may not be successful in shaping actual acts of agency. Where there was a relational field being formed that was consistent with such an effectiveness measurement, this technique of discipline may support the ongoing fixing of the relevant social norms and behavioural agency. Where this was not the case, resistance to the practice of scribing may become visible in the inner most circle. Clegg (1989) mentions this phenomenon specifically when he states that for the exercise of facilitative power through the system integration circuit to be effective, it must work through the circuit of social integration.

Having explored how Clegg's circuits of power might operate in relation to a simple corporate scenario, it is appropriate to discuss how his model might be communicated within an organisational setting. In the diagram below, I have made a number of adaptions of Clegg's model. Here I face the challenge of communicating the essence of the model without oversimplifying it and losing its integrity. This is a pertinent challenge for those interested in translating academic literature for managerial communities, to support a better relationship between research and practice. First, because of the contextual property that the circuits provide for each other, I have displayed the three circuits as three nested circles. Second, I have reworded each of the circuits, and assigned to them the kind of power that is exercised in them. Therefore, the circuit of agency is called Action Power Domain, the circuit of social integration is called Relational Power Domain and the circuit of systems integration is called Systems Power Domain. This is language that I imagine might fit more easily with the audience intended. Importantly, I have collapsed the distinction between naming the 'circuit' and naming the kind of power that Clegg nominated for each circuit. This is potentially dangerous; Clegg made it clear that the circuit was not the

source of power, but rather the vehicle through which it might flow. Nevertheless, by the inclusion of the word Domain, I hope to communicate that the particular power works to achieve the various things included in the circle or domain shown. Third, I have included the notion that change to these domains can be initiated from outside, or inside.
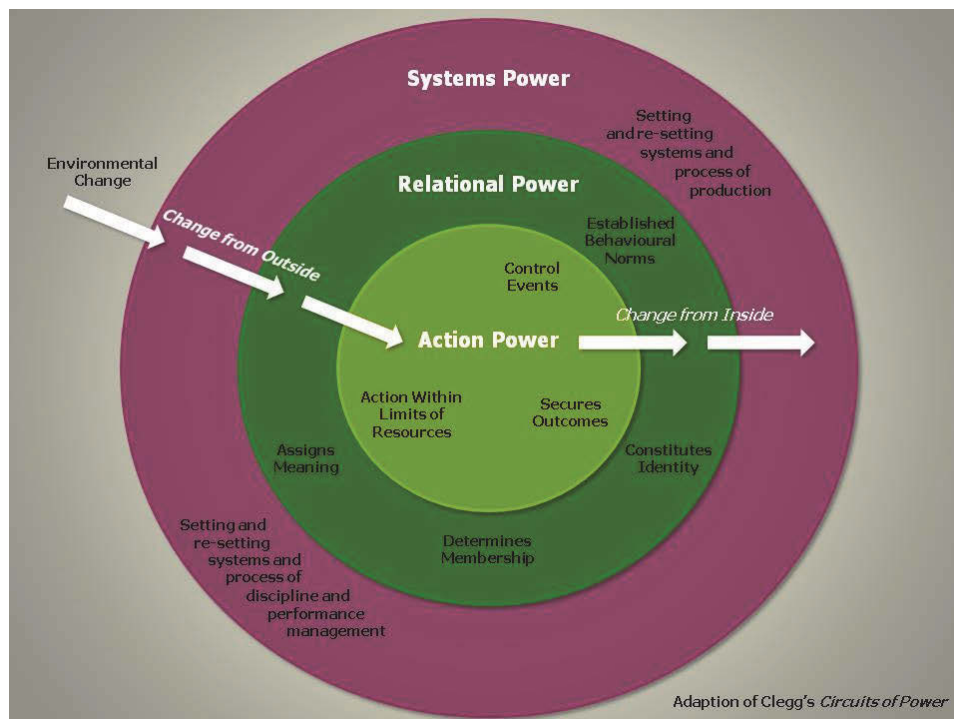

Figure 3 – Adaption of Clegg's Circuits of Power

In teaching this model to a managerial audience, my intention might be as follows. First, to build awareness of the context setting power of the Relational Power domain and to assist managers to understand how that domain gives sense, or not, to the actions they take every day. This may support the generation of curiosity about how various actions are accepted as appropriate, while others are not. Second, to cultivate understanding that the Systems Power Domain may not in fact shape organisational players' agency, if the Relational Power Domain is not

aligned with it. In other words, mandating change by altering systems or processes of work may not change everyday practice. Thirdly, to encourage attention to instances where Action Power, that every employee exercises to do their job, may be working to bring about a change in the Relational Power Domain and the System Power Domain. Sometimes the most important changes required by an organisation are already quietly at work when the employees, by taking some local action, influence change in other Domains.

Finally, a brief comment on communicating this adaption of Clegg's model seems appropriate. It may be unfair to expect to trigger these particular insights in managers, simply by communication of the model. To do so may appear as theory attempting to impose itself on practice. However, if managers were supported to reflect on how this theory might intersect with their own practice dilemmas, and if Clegg's theory has practical validity, further insight may result.

9. Undiscussables and Organisational Learning

While preparing the second article submitted to the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal, I initially included a few paragraphs discussing the relationship between undiscussables and organisational learning. These paragraphs were ultimately removed from the paper, however their preparation required an exploration into the field of organisational learning, and the application of undiscussables to that field. The following section presents that exploration. An extended version of this section was submitted and published in the proceedings of the 6th International Colloquium on Business and Management (Donovan 2013). This section contains the following parts. Firstly a brief review of organisational learning literature is presented. Second, in the context of that review, undiscussables are discussed as an obstacle to organisational learning.

There seems little doubt that for organisations to succeed, and for them to play a role in creating a more just and sustainable world, they must learn. Yet, the literature relating to organisational learning is complex,

contradictory and contested. Indeed, one of the main points of agreement is that the field lacks cohesive, unitary definitions to bind it (Crossan, Lane & White 1999; Easterby-Smith & Araujo 1999; Stewart 2001; Tsang 1997) Interestingly, it is not even agreed that these contradictions are a bad thing. Clegg et al. (2005) call for an acceptance of the divergence and inconsistencies within the field, suggesting they are an important part of the field continuing to learn.

In the 1990's, two broad streams of writing within this field operated side by side, and largely independently (Garavan & McCarthy 2008; Rebelo & Gomes 2008; Tsang 1997). One stream related to the learning organisation, and was largely prescriptive, normative and intended for business people and HR professionals. This stream aimed to provide practitioners with clarity about the vision of the learning organisation, and practical tools to achieve it. The second stream discussed organisational learning, and was focused on how learning actually happens in organisations. Primarily academics and researchers participated in the second stream (Garavan & McCarthy 2008: Rebelo & Gomes 2008).

By the end of the 1990's the flow of these streams started to wane, especially the one relating to the learning organisation. This coincided with an increasing number of critical reviews and reflections on the concept of learning organisation (Belasco 1998; Clegg, Kornberger & Rhodes 2005; Fenwick 2001; Stacey 2003). Several authors advocated that to use 'the learning organisation' language was to anthropomorphise something highly elusive and inanimate. For example, Fenwick (2001) says of the literature that upholds the learning organisation ideal:

> "The organisation is thus construed as a unitary, definable, intelligent entity. It is not, nor is it stable and bounded….how can this fluctuating combination of sub-groups be totalized as a single, monolithic organism that somehow 'learns' and has memory?" (p. 78).

Consistent with the character of this field, Ortenblad (2005) gave a lively defense of the notion of the learning organisation in his article "Of course organisations can learn!". He advocated that analysis at the individual level should not be done in exclusion to analysis at the organisational level.

While controversy regarding the learning organisation concept emerged, the concept of collective learning as part of organisational learning has steadily gained legitimacy over the last few decades. Even those who expressed doubt (sometimes cynicism) about the concept of the learning organisation seem convinced that individuals do not learn in isolation. While the original theories of organisational learning centralised the notion of individual learning (Elkjaer 1999), recent literature has framed individual learning as an insufficient means to create organisational learning and change (Aslam et al. 2011; Garavan & McCarthy 2008; Sessa & London 2006; Shani & Dochery 2003). Similarly, Marquardt and Waddill (2004) in their analysis of the five main schools of adult learning and their relationship to Action Learning say:

> "All of the five schools of adult learning recognize the importance of the group and its members in the learning process" (p. 191).

Within organisational learning literature the individual, group and organisational learning are generally shown or implied to be nested circles, indicating systems within systems, each at different levels. Sessa and London (2006) said:

> "Organisational learning builds upon group learning, which is dependent on individual learning. Yet group learning is more than the learning of individuals in the group, and organizational learning is more than the patterns of behaviour established by groups in the organization" (p. 6).

Stacey (2003), who supported the fundamental notion of learning being social, contributed a more nuanced understanding of the relationship

between individual and group learning than the nested circles concept. Rather than place the collectives at a higher level than the individual, he maintains the individual and group arise together, and at the same time. Individuals form the social, while being formed by it. He maintained that the individual and the group are constitutive of each other; interdependent individuals learn in the context of their exchanges with each other, that is, the collective. Consequently, he advocated that while learning was indeed social, the collective did not represent a higher system to the individual.

In the field of organisational learning, the notion that learning is a social affair embedded in practice as we work together, has taken root (Billett 2010; Elkjaer 1999; Fenwick 2010; Garavan & McCarthy 2008; Iverson 2011). This understanding stands contrary to Human Resource Development literature that continues to feature the traditional concepts of learning as individual acquisition (Fenwick 2010). With a more collective understanding of learning comes the acknowledgement that it is deeply vested in the political forces that shape the social space. Power relations that shape and reshape the exchanges between workers equally inform the learning and action between them. These power relations are subtle, complex and changing, and reflect not only the immediate members of the collective in question, but also those who exercise power outside the group.

While locating learning in the collective obviously increases the complexity of the undertaking, Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes (2005) moved to deepen that complexity by arguing that learning in organisations resides in places of ambiguity, uncertainty and the vulnerability of unknowingness. They also described the learning journey as straddling method and planned structure on one side and haphazard meandering without clear direction on the other. Consequently, to facilitate learning it is required that:

> "learning becomes the task of providing room for multiple voices
> and creating openings for those voices…organisational learning

can evolve through decentralised power…where there is no decentralised power, there is no organisational learning" (p. 149).

Undiscussables may be the most obvious symptom of a power imbalance in a collective. Indeed, they give immediate evidence that the "multiple voices and openings for those voices" referred to above, that are required for learning, are not being facilitated. In such a context, one or more in a group may not experience the freedom and agency to express their concerns or reflections on a particular topic, but instead avoid the topic in question and withhold their thoughts and feelings. The multiplicity of voices is reduced, undiscussables are generated and learning is limited.

An important, and perhaps not surprising finding published in the first peer-reviewed article (in the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal) was that undiscussable topics in the senior executive group studied overlapped with some of the organisation's most pressing strategic concerns. Placing these topics beyond the reach of the collective shielded the topics from collective interrogation and from the critical reflection and planning that might be expected of the senior team on matters of import. Consequently, without the power balancing effect of open exchanges on the topic, existing imbalanced power relations became entrenched. Practically speaking, this was evidenced by the practice of one or two senior team members making important organisational decisions outside the meeting. The group's capacity to learn by evaluating the effect of action previously taken, to consider assumptions that they may bring to this evaluation, and to plan subsequent action, was constrained. Learning in these important areas was disabled.

Interestingly, Fenwick (2001) said one of the topics that may suffer from the 'cover up' of undiscussables is the topic of organisational learning itself. She contended that questions including: What does organisational learning value? What kind of learning is invisible to the organisation and therefore deprioritised? How has learning become seconded by the

priority of profits? and How is learning being used to support existing imbalanced power relations? are usually overlooked or avoided by managers and educators.

In summary, organisational learning has recently been conceived to be at least as collective as it is individual, and consequently deeply informed by the dynamic of the collective. Undiscussables are both an unambiguous reflection of the power relations that shape the dynamic between individual and collective learning, and a muscular resistor to the power relations required for collective learning. Therefore, it is clear that groups who wish to create learning in their meetings should raise awareness of undiscussables as a matter of priority.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

The following chapter considers the methodological approaches utilised in the research presented in both articles published in the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal. The article published in the conference proceedings of the ICBM (Donovan 2013) did not involve the collection and analysis of data and consequently its methodology is not discussed in detail in this chapter.

This chapter consists of two main parts. First, a description of the main theoretical and practical concerns of the relevant research methodologies employed is provided. The related methodologies of Action Research (AR), Action Learning (AL), and Action Learning Action Research (ALAR), are reviewed, and the reasoning for the selection of those used in this research project is explained. Second, a description of the two AR projects that were carried out is provided. This includes the step-by-step processes of data collection and analysis and an explanation of how the findings were generated. It should be included here that ethics approval from the Ethics committee of UTS was granted for these projects. The approval number was UTS HREC 2007000215.

1. Background to the Methodological Approach

Before any methodological approach was decided upon for this research, a strong intention to directly improve practice, by researching practice with the help of those in practice, was acknowledged. Consequently, it became clear early in the research initiative that the methodological approach taken would need to meet two criteria. First, it would need to be a participative, inclusive approach where the 'subjects' were fully enrolled, informed and motivated to take part in the research. Second, the subjects would need to support an open intention to improve practice.

With these criteria in mind, and in the context of the summary below, it became obvious that AR was the most appropriate methodology. Included below is a brief summary of the AR, AL and ALAR research

approaches. These three approaches are highly connected, as described below, and are all part of the broad AR family. Nevertheless, each of the approaches is compared and contrasted. My reasoning, and the associated journey to select the optimum approach from these three, is also reported.

AR is a methodological approach to social research that generally includes the following characteristics ('The First World Congress on Action Research and Process Management' 1991; Burgoyne 2011; Carr & Kemmis 1986; Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000; Hart & Bond 1995; Khan, Bawani & Azis 2013; Kumar 2013; Reason & Bradbury 2008; Sarantakos 1993; Zuber-Skerritt 1996):

- Works with communities or groups that are committed to take action on a situation, or improve a practice, and to be enlightened about the consequences of their own actions, in their own contexts.

- Brings together researcher and group to conduct research that aims to emancipate participants from institutional and personal constraints.

- Encourages the formation of a self-critical community that cycles through the broad steps of planning, action, observation and reflection. This community may be known as a 'set'.

- Knowledge created is of a practical nature, related to issues of practice connected to the immediate environment of the research, and via theorising to wider concerns of practice. Theorising is derived from the data generated by fulfilling the cycle mentioned above, and is built gradually as the research proceeds. In this way both plans of action and theorising are emergent in the research.

In summary, two key features characterise AR. First, AR challenges the notion of the detached researcher observing an unaffected "subject". Rather, the researcher is openly engaging the group (usually a small one) in all aspects of the research and fully acknowledging their effect on the group while doing so. Both the researcher and group frequently reflect on their experience while engaging in the research and utilise this reflection to refine the research questions and assess their next steps together. Second, the researcher and group share a commitment to change and to making things better, and fairer. This commitment impacts the nature of the knowledge generated by the research. Knowledge generated typically bears a direct connection to the purpose of making change for the better; this purpose is the direct intention for creating the knowledge (Khan, Bawani & Azis 2013). Greenwood and Levin (2007) stated:

> "AR is a research strategy that generates knowledge claims for the express purpose of taking action to promote social analysis and democratic social change" (p. 5).

AR can be considered a family of research approaches. Cassell and Johnson (2006) provide a helpful categorisation of the diversity within this methodology by reviewing the various philosophical commitments demonstrated by action researchers. They create a continuum between experimental AR that is based on positivistic thinking and deconstructive AR practices which are flavoured by postmodernism philosophy. Most relevant to this research are the inductive and participatory AR philosophies, located in the middle of the continuum. The inductive approach is characterised by an intervention guided by the researcher who may at times assume the expert role while interacting with the research participants. Probably the most well known of this type of AR is the work of Argyris, Putnam and Mclain Smith (1985) who utilised their expertise in enabling participants to make distinctions between "theories-in-use" and "espoused theory" while engaging in corporate meetings. Participatory AR as categorised by Cassell and Johnson (2006) involves the action researcher taking a primarily facilitative role (moving

away from the role of expert) but engaging only the elite or senior groups within the organisation while doing so. Action researchers who closely adhere to critical theory might object to such an elitist approach and propose a more democratic means of involving more stakeholders. This would serve to avoid the possible imposition of the senior groups' learning on the rest of the organisation following the AR intervention. Cassell and Johnson (2006) include this more democratic AR approach within their participatory AR category.

AL, a more recent conceptualisation than AR, originated with Revans (1980, 1982). It shares many of the same features of AR and for this reason Dick (1997) describes them as closely related processes. Both AL and AR utilise the same experiential learning cycle of planning, action, observation and reflection. AL has been used in various contexts including organisational and leadership development, team development and community development (Park et al. 2013). Dick (1997) describes AL as a process in which a group of people comes together more or less regularly to help each other to learn from their experience. Dotlich and Noel (1998) describe AL with a simple phrase (p. 1): "learning by doing in a controlled environment". Pedler and Burgoyne (2008) say that AL combines self-development with action for change. Marquardt and Waddill (2004) explain that the six defining characteristics of AL are: a problem or challenge of importance to the group; a group of 4 to 8 members (also known as the 'set'); a process that emphasises questions and reflection; the power to take action on strategies developed; a commitment to learning at the individual, team and organisational levels; and an AL coach.

Both AR and AL set learning as one of their goals, and both are intended to improve the world, and practice within it. It is interesting to note that Dick (1997) speculates if the distinction between AR and AL is worth preserving at all. In contrast, Zuber-Skerritt (2001), in a view shared by Kember (2000), says of the two:

> "The main difference between 'Action Learning and Action Research' is the same as that between learning and research generally. Both include active learning, searching, problem solving and systematic inquiry. However, Action Research is more systematic, rigorous, scrutinisable, verifiable, *and* is always made public (in publications, oral or written reports)" (p. 1).

Perhaps the primary distinguishing feature between AR and AL is their different heritage. In the case of AR, this heritage links to early writings of Lewin's (1946), and Collier's (1945) research on Native Americans, then subsequently to critical theory and its philosophy of emancipation from institutional constraint. Original published work by Horkheimer (1974), who was one of the founding members of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, explained five distinctions between critical theory and other theories. Three of those five overlap with the descriptions of AR as listed above. Brookfield (2005) in discussing the connection between critical theory and adult learning, describes critical theory's unambiguous intention to explore how adults learn to recognise and unmask power relations and inequities embedded in ideology and inscribed in everyday lives. Further, critical theory emphasises adults bringing greater consciousness to when power is being used, how to defend against its arbitrary use, and how to build a sense of powerful agency in collective action. Clearly, AR also shares these intentions, and they reveal the liberating intention present within AR to be originally rooted in critical theory.

Perhaps partly as a result of AR and AL's different heritage, Zuber-Skerritt and Farquhar (2002) have commented that AR has historically been predominantly located in the education, health and community sectors while AL has since been primarily situated within the management and organisational arena.

In further distinctions between the two, Fenwick (2003) has commented that AL has historically had less obvious intentions than AR to disrupt power relations and free participants from constraint. Interestingly, Fenwick's comments align with my own observations of The Learning

Organisation (TLO) journal website made in Nov 2012 while considering a submission to that journal for this doctorate. While that journal does not specifically identify itself with AL, it appears Fenwick's observations of AL could be applied to the TLO. Here, Tuggle (Tuggle 2012) in describing information about the journal, comments:

> "Thus the organization continually learns, grows in stature and transforms itself through the knowledge, capabilities and initiatives of each and every member of the workforce. Learning has often been actively discouraged in the old business culture. This journal demonstrates how learning will spearhead the success of the new business culture - companies must adapt or die."

This description of benefits does not express a critical approach: nothing is stated about developing a more just learning organisation. The authors have not made clear what the learning organisation is in the service of, that is, what is its purpose? The organisation learns and grows in status and transforms itself, but into what and to what end? Without clarity of purpose, organisational learning may find itself strengthening deeply entrenched norms to lift shareholder profits as a foremost goal. Questions about how the intention of being a learning organisation might directly address the power imbalances inside and outside the organisation are not raised. It is as if learning is assumed to be entirely apolitical, somehow outside or untouched by existing power imbalances in the organisation (Fenwick 2001). In summary, the notion of learning organisation was not here linked to how such an organisation might make both itself and the community in which it operates a more just, fair and compassionate place. Of note is that since these observations, the TLO journal website has been substantially revised to include liberal references to organisational learning and its connection to critical analysis and the creation of more equitable work environments.

In defense of AL, several researchers have specifically acknowledged the power relations that exist within AL sets and how, especially if unacknowledged, these relations may invisibly inform the work of the

set (Boshyk 2011). Some have labeled this approach critical AL (CAL) (Cherry 2010, Tehran 2011). A small group of researchers have expanded the platform upon which CAL is being built. They are Reynolds, (Reynolds 1998, 1999a, 1999b), Willmott (Willmott 1997) Vince (2001, 2004 and 2008) and more recently Trehan (Ram and Tehran 2009, Tehran 2011). Early critical theorists mentioned in a previous chapter formed the context for these researchers. This relatively young embodiment of Revanesque thought (Revans 1980, 1982) acknowledges that the AL set is not a neutral site devoid of power imbalances, inequalities, tensions and emotional fractures. Rather, the explicit exploration of the emotional, political and social relations within the AL set is a useful, even required, activity for the set to derive insight and devise solutions that might alleviate fixed power imbalances within and outside the set. Not only that, CAL, according to Willmott (1997), overcomes the suspicion toward theory of traditional AL to include an appreciation of knowledge from critical traditions, especially as an aid in surfacing assumptions and exposing power relations. It is understood that through the latter solutions that support both social and self-development are sought, and that such solutions are mutually constitutive.

Vince and Martin (1993) identify the lack of such acknowledgements in the original conceptions of AL by Revans (1980) and provide specific and practical means to enable AL sets to work with social and personal tensions and reactions. In his notion of 'organising insight', Vince (2004) advocated for AL sets to undertake this more sophisticated work. Consistent with this expanded role for the AL set, Trehan (2011) argues that the presence of a facilitator in the set is helpful to:

> "…support participants explore with some intensity their assumptions and emotions about issues under consideration. Within CAL, facilitation…illuminates the ways in which participants resist or reinforce power relations that develop from learning inaction…(and) the complex dynamics that influence collective reflection" (p. 167-168).

In addition, Yeadon-lea (2013) specifically discussed the existence of hierarchies in AL sets that she researched and suggests that those using this methodology should remain aware of the effect of hierarchies on the learning and actions of the set.

In summary, in CAL the AL set is understood to be, in itself, a source of learning about organisational dynamics. Vince (2008) prioritises such an analysis in his AL research. He argued that paying attention to emotion in the set played an important role in understanding the organisational dynamic (2004).

Early in my research, I began to conceive AR as the appropriate methodological approach to adopt. In-fact, I completed all data retrieval from the biomedical organisation AL set for the first of the two articles thinking I had executed an AR approach. However, as I was preparing the first peer-reviewed article including a robust defense of this methodological choice, I began to conceptualise the approach I had taken as a combination of AR and AL. Below is a brief description of how and when these approaches can be usefully combined.

AR and AL were not formally linked until the First World Congress of Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management (ALARPM) in 1990. Since then these two important methodological approaches have continued to be widely used, but the combination of them, known as ALAR, is not so prevalent. Interestingly, even the renowned SAGE Handbook of Action Research (Reason & Bradbury 2008) included sections on Action Learning but no reference to ALAR as a separate approach. Also, Greenwood and Levin's excellent and highly referenced text on AR (2007) does not include one reference to AL. This is not unusual for AR texts. It might be surmised that apart from a small handful of enthusiasts (including Zuber-Skerritt and Dick) these two disciplines have not enjoyed a widespread and easy union.

There have been however a number of interesting studies that have explicitly combined AL and AR. Dewar and Sharp (2006) have utilised AL within the context of a larger AR project. Interestingly, they did not use the term ALAR even once in their description, although ALAR was an established term. Zuber-Skerritt (2001) wrote about the value of combining these two related methodological approaches and Coghlan and Coughlan (2006) used this term explicitly in a detailed description of their integration of AR and AL. Analysis of Coghlan and Coughlan's work revealed that they elegantly described the process I had utilised in my own study with the biomedical company. I therefore began to conceive of the senior executive team with whom I worked as an AL set (of which I was a part), while my reflections upon the set could be framed as AR. Consequently, I re-conceptualised the research methodology as ALAR, and wrote the first paper for the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal consistent with that re-conceptualisation. (The Company Report, which was written earlier, did not include an analysis of the methodology adopted, primarily because such a discussion was not central to the purpose of the Report, and the audience for whom the Report was intended would most likely have found such discussion irrelevant.) I then developed a visual representation of the ALAR approach that I adopted in the study, which I included in the article. This visual representation is shown below:
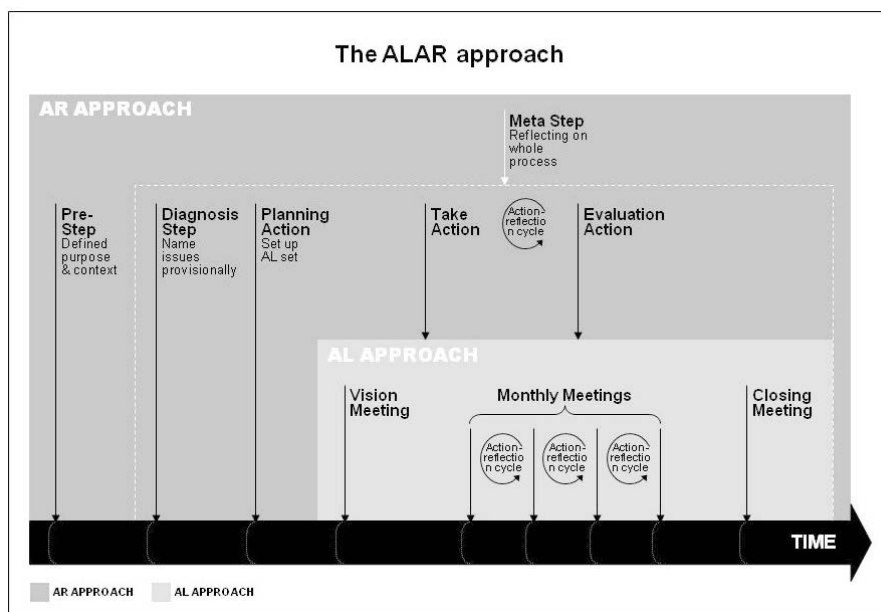

Figure 4 – The ALAR approach

As noted in figure 4, several steps were completed before the AL part of the ALAR project began. These AR steps were the pre-step, and the diagnostic and planning action steps where the context for the work of the AL set was established. Then, while the AL set began its work by engaging in a vision meeting and continuing through the monthly strategy meetings, applying the action reflection cycle, the AR component operated in parallel. The AR activities included a reflection on the work of the AL set (of which I was a part). These activities utilised an action reflection cycle to achieve continued learning from the AL set experience. In addition, an action reflection cycle was utilised to bring meta awareness to the whole process.

Until I understood the ALAR approach, I had conceived of the study as an AR project only. It consisted of cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection that included the senior group and myself, plus additional cycles that I engaged in privately as I reflected on my month-to-month work with the team. Visually, for the purposes of the Dissertation Presentation early in the doctorate, I presented this as two parallel winding cycles. That is, one AR cycle constituting my work as the facilitator of the senior executive group, and a second AR cycle as I reflected on and planned new action in my function as facilitator of the group.

Coming across the concept and language of ALAR served me in a number of ways. First, it validated my practice of analysing conversational text and identifying patterns present within the senior executive group; a practice carried out without their input. (However, these patterns were shared with the group in written form, and discussed.) Second, framing my original research as an ALAR project spiked interest in the editor of the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal. He included in his comments that one of the features he appreciated in my research was that it was an example of ALAR. Thirdly, as mentioned in a subsequent chapter discussing the Company Report, I had begun to entertain doubts about how the work with the

senior team had served as a means of emancipation, and therefore questioned if the term AR could be fairly applied to the project. With the ALAR approach however, the work with the senior team was positioned as AL, not AR. I felt more comfortable labeling the work with the senior team as AL, something the ALAR approach allowed me to do. At the same time, my reflections upon the work with the AL set, combined with the transcribed data and relevant literature, directly and indirectly related to issues of power and freedom from constraint. This is consistent with the AR approach.

Regarding the epistemological and ontological assumptions relating to AR, Trede and Higgs (2010) and Trehan (2011) describe and explore the three kinds of knowledge that Habermas (1972) first introduced as foundational precepts for AR. They are technical that includes empirical, objective and value free knowledge; practical that includes interpretations and subjective knowledge; and critical that includes knowledge aimed at liberating individuals and collectives from policies and practices that cause suffering, power imbalance and injustice.

While modern critical theorists might contest the value free nature of the first category, the legacy of Habermas (1972) carries with it the assumption that all three types of knowledge are important, intending not to privilege any of them. In doing so, the AR approach intends to offer a means of knowledge creation that redresses an historical power imbalance where scientific knowledge is privileged. Redressing this imbalance supports the inclusion of a greater diversity of voice, and more powerful practical solutions.

Both Burgoyne (2011) and Coghlan (2011) describe the knowledge created by AL and AR as 'pragmatic', in reference to the philosophical tradition of pragmatism developed primarily by Dewey (1929, 1938). Burgoyne (2011) makes reference to the famous Revans' equation and notes that programmed knowledge (P) and questioning knowledge (Q) together create what he calls 'practical knowledge'. Practical knowledge, as distinct to traditional scientific knowledge, is concerned with the

relationship between the object of research and the researcher, and with the successful performance of daily tasks. Practical knowledge prioritises solutions for the immediate situation, acknowledging that each situation is unique. Coghlan (2011) notes that the research done in the 'swampy lowlands' described by Schon (1995) enacts very well the generation of practical knowledge as described above. Earlier, Lyotard (1984) described a wider categorization of knowledge; his 'performative' knowledge aligned to Burgoyne's practical knowledge, but he added to it 'speculative' and 'emancipatory' knowledge. Speculative knowledge is more theoretical, emancipatory knowledge has a clear motive to free all persons from individual and collective restraint.

In relation to AR ontological assumptions, Reason and Bradbury (2008) locate AR as distinct from both positivism and postmodern constructualism, but drawing from both. They describe AR as sharing positivistic assumptions about the given 'real' reality, and sharing a constructualism perspective by acknowledging that our attempts to describe that reality are culturally framed. Burgoyne (2011) supports this position by aligning AL (and by implication AR) with the philosophical orientation 'critical realism' (CR.) He describes CR as critical of strong constructionism (or postmodernism) that does not make reasonable inferences about a given reality, and equally critical of hard logical positivist perspectives that do not address the subjective nature of that reality. He describes CR as seeing these two orientations as anti-emancipatory. Burgoyne (2011) goes on to describe ten key terms of CR, acknowledging them to be shared by AR and AL. He also makes the interesting observation that positivism (or the 'world as a machine') overplays Revans' P, while postmodernism (the world as social construction) overplays Revans' Q and that AL, which acknowledges both, sees the world as an 'open system with emergent properties'.

The final subject discussed in this section is the challenges and limitations associated with AR. Issues that really matter to people often create a diversity of perspectives, interests, and power dynamics, which must be managed in the context of the research. AR boldly enters this

contested territory, and does so while attempting to make transparent these power dynamics, support action that genuinely improves the situation, and create knowledge and theory that have relevance not only to the immediate context but also universally (Cherry 2010; Eden & Huxham 1996). Therefore, a practical limitation on the effective use of AR may be the ability of the researcher to navigate the existing power dynamics in a way that supports the research purpose to be honestly addressed.

Cherry (2010) describes this practical difficulty with her own PhD AR students:

> "As an academic supervisor of many action research projects over a long period of time, much of my own effort has been focused on helping action researchers to stay in the action and not to retreat to the margins where they write intense, anguished reflective pieces about their difficulties but accomplish very little." (p. 239).

The implications of the researcher who "retreats to the margins' may be many. For instance, the forum created by the researcher for those engaged in the research may become a site for previously established power relations to be replayed, the usual voices being marginalised, and important issues remaining overlooked. Consequently, planned action may be misdirected, learning impaired, and knowledge production corrupted. Vince (2001), in his carefully theorised case study, shows how even a well resourced organisational initiative aimed at giving voice to previously unheard parties can be decisively blocked by existing patterns of thinking and doing, where the existing 'establishment' was threatened by the new voices. Indeed, Vince gives no account of how the insight generated from his reflections on the data collected from the organisation had a liberating effect on the organisation itself.

In summary, it would seem that one of the very strengths of AR, namely that it focuses on real life problems and the power dynamics that sustain

them, also presents a vulnerability. The AR researcher must be able to stand the heat if they are to stay in the kitchen and cook up worthy outcomes. As Cherry (2010) states:

"Action Research is….concerned with challenging the mindsets of organisations and whole societies. Whatever its scale, this is not work for the faint hearted" (p. 243).

McTaggart (1992) touches on a related concern in the following quote when he discusses the challenges of attempting to utilise an AR approach to realise aspirations to create organisational learning:

"We understand how an emphasis on learning denies the fundamental liberatory aspirations of Action Research. 'Workplace learning' too often means applying routines invented by others, believing reasons invented by others, servicing aspirations invented by others…In contrast, workplace knowledge production means participating in the praxis of intervention and construction of new ways of working, in the justification of new ways of working and new working goals, and in the formulation of more complex and sophisticated ways of valuing work, work culture and its place in people's lifeworlds" (p.238).

Here McTaggart reflects on the problem of using AR in corporations that quietly, and perhaps not so quietly, work to resist the shift in power dynamics that AR was originally designed to address. Indeed, my own experience as a consultant confirms that workplace learning, often badged with an AR or AL title, is typically a 'roll-out' of training programs devised by HR or an outside consultancy based on *their* assessment of what the prospective participants need most. Participants are trained in new behavioural routines that are often incredibly difficult to apply in workplace systems, and in processes and culture that remain largely unaware and unsupportive of the participants themselves. In this scenario, and in the extract by Mctaggart above, participants have been excluded from reflection on what the core problems are, and have not

participated in devising training solutions. Participants become passive receivers of yet another training program, and consequently less able to bring the muscularity required to workplace implementation.

Further, the well-intentioned HR practitioner is often contending with powers that are at work beyond their awareness, or that may overwhelm them. For example, designing programs that are more open ended, where participants are supported to explore the real problems they experience, run contrary to the expectation that the training program address defined behavioural competencies that are determined well before the program begins. In addition, AR (or AL) programs tend to require, by their nature, multiple sessions that complete the learning cycle. They simply do not fit the convenient 'one-day off site training model' that the workplace commonly supports. Consequently, existing structures, policies and routines may work to preserve themselves and the power relations they embed, by marginalising or preventing forums where real problems can be investigated, and solutions uncovered that may challenge existing power relations.

Another challenge of utilising an AR approach as described above, is that the knowledge generated by AR often emerges via a complex, contested social dynamic; that dynamic may have a profound impact on research outcomes. Therefore, while AR's critical heritage is well documented, AR project research questions, and the agenda contained therein, may not (perhaps depending on the skill of the AR researcher) have been exposed to the critical inquiry telegraphed by the AR approach. In addition, those who read AR findings may have difficulty determining if critical inquiry has been employed. For instance, research questions aimed at surfacing commonly accepted assumptions including; how did the researcher create boundaries for the topic under scrutiny, what and who was is in and out and who got to make decisions, how was voice given to silences and what were the roles of researchers and participants or co-researchers (Trede and Higgs 2010), may or may not have been asked; visibility to these aspects of the research may not be easily determined in a 3000 to 5000 word research article.

Finally, a brief word on the specific limitations present in the approach taken in the two research projects reported in this meta statement. It should be acknowledged that first projectt, reported in the first article published in the Action Learning: Research and Practice aricle, was a single site project. While the data collected was done so over a 6 month period, it was drawn from only one group. Consequently, generalising to other groups should be done so with caution. The second research project involved an approach with altogether different limitations. For example, data was collected from multiple sites over an extended period of time and consequently, the dangers of generalisation were reduced. In this research approach however, the combination of data where the context of that data collection may vary significantly, does present a possible limitation. Those sentences and prases collected and analysed in the research were done so from diverse meetings, where objective of the meeting and the relationship between participants may have varied significantly from one another. While they were all uttered at moments of negative affect in the meeting, there exists the danger that combining and forming various clusters of them may misconstrue the original intention in the utterance. The skill of the researcher, in protecting the original intention of the statements is the only strategy to safe guard to this limitation. That skill, demonstrated outside of the readers reach, can not easily be evidenced in the reporting of the research.

2. Determining and Collecting Data

As briefly described in chapter 1, the research for the first of the two papers under discussion was carried out with the senior management group of a medium sized biotechnology company situated in Sydney, Australia. My relationship began with the senior team about 12 months before I began working with the company, when the MD approached me to conduct leadership training for him and his team. I ultimately delivered a two-day training session that focused on fundamental communication skills including listening, assertion and conflict resolution. Based on the favorable relationship we had begun to form, and my assessment that the group demonstrated a low level of competence in communication skills (that over my years of corporate teaching I had

come to expect), I later approached the MD to determine if he might be interested in engaging in 'participative' research, as part of my doctoral studies. The research focus was on improving the group's ability to engage in the group conversations required for collective decision-making, especially in monthly strategy meetings. The MD was very interested. I then spoke with the rest of the group, observed a portion of their usual half-day monthly meeting, and briefly explained to the group the action, observe, reflect and plan cycle we would be engaging in. They then expressed a desire to be involved and we agreed the research would commence. I had now completed the pre-step, and diagnostic and planning action steps shown and described in figure 1 included later in this chapter. I then facilitated a visioning meeting with the senior group, where they clarified their desired outcomes of the research project. The process to that point took about six months.

I then began the process of observing their monthly strategy meetings, each being approximately 4 hours in duration, and facilitating a 30 to 45 minute debrief at the conclusion of each meeting. Within the facilitated debriefs I invited the group to observe the conversational actions they had taken throughout the meeting, reflect on them in the context of their previously planned action, and plan their actions for the subsequent monthly meeting. One-on-one interviews were also conducted in the intervals in between the four strategy meetings that were observed. I then facilitated a final debrief meeting where the group were invited to reflect on their journey, and on the progress they had made toward their desired outcomes and their experience while doing so.

The initial visioning meeting, monthly strategy meetings, final debrief meetings and the one-on-one interviews throughout were recorded and transcribed, and formed the data for the research. My own notes and reflections made throughout were also included in the data.

Data for the research published in the second Action Learning: Research and Practice article was collected in a distinctly different way than the

research described above. Data was comprised of statements and actions observed in various AR sets, over a period of about 2 years, at the time of negative affect within the set. This data was collected partly through the research of Vince, partly of Argyris and Schon, and partly through my own long-term experience as an AL set facilitator. Firstly, Vince (2001, 2002) and others argued for the centrality of emotion in the study of organisational learning since individual and collective anxiety was likely to co-exist with learning. This was because where learning did occur, disruption to existing power relations usually occured and consequently defensiveness or resistance tended to be triggered. So, times of visible negative affect could assist to understand the exercise of power within any set. Likewise, Argyris and Schon (Argyris 1990; Argyris & Schon 1991) argued that moments of collective threat or embarrassment were especially helpful in understanding what theories-in-use were in operation in the group. Consequently, they placed considerable emphasis on such data as a means of making visible the mental models informing visible action. Likewise, my own long-term experience as an AR and AL set facilitator has shown that moments of strong negative feeling (and positive feeling for that matter), when bravely, collectively reflected upon, can be especially valuable in understanding less obvious dynamics and power relations within and outside the set. Facilitating a shared understanding of such relations can raise awareness of how change can be both desired and resisted (Vince 2001). With these broad notions in mind, I began to pay special attention to, and list, what comments or actions occured at times of negative affect in various AL sets with whom I worked, over about a 2 year period. The sets were generally senior executives teams who had come together to temporarily form an AR or AL set to address a particular organisational concern. In that context, they had a stated intention to make change for the better in their organisation, and learn from each other while doing so. So, observations of the functioning of those AL sets, made while they engaged in the action, observe, reflect and plan cycle, comprised the data for the AR project reported in the second article under discussion.

3. Analysing the Data and Theory Generation

It is acknowledged, as described above, that the findings of AR should have implications beyond those from the specific domain of the project itself (Eden & Huxham 1996). Huxham (2003), in discussing AR as means of theory development, say that AR can:

> "lead to deep conceptualizations about what can happen in practice and the reasons for this" (p. 240) and that AR could be a useful means of developing "practice orientated theory" (p. 245).

The discussion to follow relates to the analysis of data collected and the generation of theory for the two articles published in the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal. The process of analysis and theory creation was not unlike that described by grounded theorists Glaser and Strauss (1967) whose process of theory generation constituted data being repeatedly added and compared, with literature seen as additional data. According to Dick (2007) references to grounded theory in the context of AR are not uncommon. He reported several AR theses he reviewed which integrated grounded theory practices into their AR project as a means of strengthening the rigor of theory generation in the project. Dick (2002, 2007), who argued that theory generation in AR might be strengthened by learning from grounded theorists, advocated his 'data engine' approach to theory generation as a means of making more rigorous and explicit the theorising inside AR projects. His approach to building theory bears strong similarity to that described by Huxham (2003) and applied by Huxham and Vangen (2000) who also show a process of continually collecting data, clustering and labeling those clusters, testing and refining the clusters, and creating a conceptual framework around the clusters in the context of additional data and literature. It is an adaption of these approaches, as described in more detail below, that has been adopted in the research presented in both peer-reviewed studies under discussion.

The two studies under consideration here would not be fairly cast as AR projects that are embedded with grounded theory. While this might be an entirely acceptable approach, as others have demonstrated (Hale 2000; Wastell 2001), a better representation of these studies would describe them as AR projects that, in the interests of making more explicit the theory generation, mirrors some grounded theory approaches.

Before describing the process of analysis used for the two projects in detail, the important question of who participated in the analysis bears reflection. There exists a natural tension between rigor in the process of analysis, and participation, especially of the AL or AR set, in the analysis process. Morse (2002) and Charmaz (2006) argue for reserving the right of the researcher to independently engage in their analysis, and consequently ensure their work will not be vetoed by participants. Indeed, the broad approach of ALAR, which was explicitly nominated as the approach employed by the first of the two articles, increases researcher permission to engage in theorizing outside of the work done with the AL set (Coghlan & Coughlan 2006; Dewar & Sharp 2006; Zuber-Skerritt 2001). At the same time, Dick (2007), while acknowledging the broad tradeoff between rigor and participation, argues for and describes his own participative approach that he claims upholds rigor. Here he firmly departs from a grounded theory approach where theorising is always performed separate to those observed, and brings his considerable facilitation know how (Dick 1991; Dick & Dalmau 1991) to the task of involving participants in robust theory making. The approach taken in both research projects under discussion falls into the category of *analysing in the hands of the researcher*. While the various AL sets involved in the research were vigorously engaging in their own action and reflection cycles, the researcher (me) engaged in further analysis and theorising using their work as data. However, it should be added that, as described below, feedback on the analysis and theorising was routinely sought from participants of the AL sets.

Research for the first article included analysis of the text from the AL set with whom the research was performed. Analysis involved the identification and exploration of the social or interpersonal factors that affect collective decision-making. It is helpful here to make a distinction between the latter factors and the structural factors affecting collective decision-making (Dick 1991; Schwarz 2002a; Wilkinson 2004). Structural factors include the rational processes required to support group decision-making. This includes the selection of agenda items and the structuring of interaction with appropriate questions. While the Company Report includes a discussion of the structural factors that were addressed during the research, these factors stand somewhat apart from the text analysis performed as a means of exploring the social aspects that were affecting the collective decision-making of this group of senior executives.

The analysis of the text was not done in a manner consistent with classical conversational analysis (Rapley 2007). Rather, an approach was adopted where the textual data was read and re-read while allowing practical and theoretical knowledge to shape the analysis of it. In this way, the role of previous practice and theoretical knowledge was acknowledged, with the intention of allowing for potentially new knowledge to emerge. As described above, this process is reminiscent of the approach described by grounded theorists Glaser and Strauss (1967) and, as Dick (2007) pointed out, is entirely consistent with an AR approach. The steps involved in the process of conversational analysis performed in this research are listed below. They share aspects of the process developed by Kolb (1984) in relation to personal learning, and Dixon (1999) who applied Kolb's work to the context of facilitating collective learning.

The following steps were taken in analysing the text:

   i) First, I engaged in a relatively brief, but nevertheless context setting, literature search that validated my interest and

concern regarding executive collective decision-making and the related problems associated with this practice.

ii) The transcripts from all four monthly meetings and intervening interviews were assembled, read, and re-read. In addition, my own reflections made throughout the process of data collection were re-read.

iii) After several readings, I began the process of compiling a list of quotes from the meeting transcripts. These were quotes that seemed to be somewhat or significantly more emotionally charged than other utterances made in the meetings. In most cases there was direct evidence of some emotion contained in the text, however, it should be acknowledged that in some cases it might have been my own emotion that was triggered by the words spoken.

iv) I then began to loosely group the compiled quotes. The grouping was done in a rather intuitive way. I simply clustered quotes that seemed to share an underlying theme or intention. It was not until the quotes were grouped that I attempted to articulate the theme present within each group. In this case, three themes were identified.

v) I then reflected on the themes as a group. It appeared that the themes related to various ways of redirecting a conversation in a certain direction. The 'venting', the 'interrogation', and the 'judging' patterns identified seemed to share an underlying intention of enabling the group to avoid other conversations. In each case the conversational pattern resulted in a more tactical, and perhaps more shallow, exchange that generated varying levels of tension within the group.

vi) I then began to write the Company Report (and subsequently the first peer-reviewed article) integrating my analysis. I also engaged in discussion with the senior team with whom I did the research where I introduced the ideas that had emerged from my analysis.

The analysis of text for the second article under consideration was both similar and different to that described above. While it followed the broad steps described above, there were particular deviations that are worthy of mention. First, as above, the subject of analysis was isolated comments and actions at times of negative affect from various AL sets, listed over a period of about 2 years. As the list grew, comments and actions were loosely clustered, then continually compared and reflected upon in the context of additional data and a simultaneous growing understanding of relevant literature. The clustering was also shared with various AL sets throughout the process.

As the clustering continued, it became increasingly evident that deepening my understanding of power and its exercise in the context of organisational meetings would be of assistance. The final outcome of this analysis was a model formed from the combination of data clusters, and the theorising of Argyris, Mindell, Bourdieu, Lukes, and various other CAL authors. Three distinct means of exercising power that appeared to result in the generation of undiscussables were identified and proposed as practical theory that might assist AL sets more broadly.

Finally, what of the re-application of the theory generated from the two research projects back to practice, as might be expected of an AR project? As mentioned above, the categorisations formed during the data collection and analyses were repeatedly tested with the AL sets during the process. This happened both in written and conversational form, and has continued even since submitting the papers for publication. Feedback so far has been encouraging and supportive. Both leaders of AL sets and other members have found the conversational strategies described in the first paper to be helpful and the model

relating to power and undiscussables provided in the second paper to be insightful and applicable. In the second research project in particular, leaders have found it helpful to consider how they might be accessing privilege without awareness or acknowledgement, potentially causing frustration in others as a result, and subsequently generating undiscussables in the very AL sets from whom they most want to hear.

Chapter 5 – Reflection on the Artifacts

An Overall Comment on the Portfolio Components

Before examining each portfolio component in detail, the following pages provide a brief overall comment on them, their relationship to the research questions, and to each other. This is intended to enable the reader to more easily engage in subsequent pages that reflect on each portfolio component in turn.

Table 3 below shows a summary of each of the portfolio components, the research questions addressed, and a broad description of the doctoral contribution intended by each. Of note is that each component addresses the same broad research question, and achieves this in part by specifically addressing a related subsidiary question. Each of these components is discussed briefly below.

Portfolio components; research questions and doctoral contribution

	First AL Research & Practice Article	Second AL Research and Practice Article	Proc. Of 6th ICBM Article	Company Report	Manager Articles (x2 with reflections)	Meta Statement
Primary Research Question	How might the practice of senior executive group decision-making be improved through a focus on the problem of undiscussables?					The meta statement interrogates and articulates the relationship of each component to the research questions and to each other, in the context of literature and methodology.
Subsidiary Question	What patterns of exchange characterise senior executive groups at the time when they are avoiding topics, that is, navigating around undiscussables?	How might the exercise of power be related to the generation and sustaining of undiscussables?	How might undiscussables affect organisational learning, and how is that important?	What patterns of exchange characterise senior executive groups at the time when they are avoiding topics, that is, navigating around undiscussables?	How might a researching practitioner usefully contribute to current HR professional discourse with the intention of widening awareness of the problem of undiscussables as they relate to collective decision-making?	

| Doctoral Contribution | All three peer-reviewed academic articles evidence a line of argument and set it in a theoretical and professional context. The articles further show the significance of this argument in relation to the impact on professional and academic communities.

These articles provide an original contribution to scholarly knowledge and professional practice. My own research is integrated with the literature in a coherent and relevant way.

The approval of each of these articles by each journal's relevant academic board provides partial evidence of the doctoral nature of these articles, especially of the contribution to new knowledge. | Shows research related skills including:

1. The retrieval, storage and access of data.

2. The use of data to construct a coherent argument that is clearly articulated.

3. Demonstration of the application of the Action Research cycle and the resultant production of knowledge and improvement of practice.

4. Articulation of the knowledge created and its impact on this group's ability to achieve their research objectives.

This piece also provides evidence of a consulting product that is suitable for high level corporate consulting where the problems are complex and the required solutions are sophisticated. In this way, this piece enhances my own consultancy and employability. | Demonstrates the communication of research findings (my own and others) to the professional community in a way that is accessible to professionals while at the same time upholding the integrity of the research process and the complexity of the findings.

To enhance my professional reputation and thereby increase by my own employability. | The meta statement demonstrates the ability to create a coherent argument across all portfolio elements. The argument integrates the research data and analysis, current academic discourse, and reflection on my own scholarly, professional and personal development.

The meta statement demonstrates skills in reflecting upon my own research practice with rigor, precision and honesty.

The meta statement provides a substantial and original contribution to scholarly knowledge and professional practice. |

Table 3 –Portfolio components, research questions and doctoral contribution

The first Action Learning: Research and Practice article (Donovan 2011) enables practitioners to improve collective senior executive decision-making by mapping conversational patterns that occurred at precisely the time topics were being avoided. Therefore, this artifact does not seek to examine undiscussables directly (as does the second article to be published in the Action Learning: Research and Practice article discussed below), but rather to provide practical assistance to groups interested in observing themselves in the act of avoidance. Informed by the ALAR research project (methodology discussed in the preceding chapter) the article presents three distinct conversational strategies used by the AL set to generate avoidance. The article intends to support heightened awareness within senior executive groups of their conversational strategies that generate avoidance, and is intended to increase their ability to bypass such strategies and inquire more directly into the topics that are being avoided. Consequently, the article is aligned with the broad research question, by addressing the subsidiary question relating to the mapping of conversational patterns at the time of avoidance.

The second Action Research: Research and Practice article (scheduled to be published in July 2014) addresses the main research question by responding to the subsidiary research question concerned with the relationship between the exercise of power and the generation and sustaining of undiscussables. By bringing a lens of power to conversations between senior executives, the article intends to reveal when and how undiscussables are created by the powerful. By elucidating this previously unexamined relationship, the article aims to increase the ability of senior executive groups to understand how power is exercised to generate undiscussables, and to avoid doing so. Consequently, senior executive collective decision-making can be improved by conversations that do not navigate around threatening and strategically important topics, but rather focus on them directly.

The article included in the Proceedings of the 6th ICBM (Donovan 2013) seeks to widen the conversation of undiscussables by exploring the

relationship between undiscussables and organisational learning. It acknowledges that learning is now understood to be a collective phenomena and consequently directly affected by the interactional dynamics shaping and being shaped by the collective. At the same time, undiscussables, and the associated imbalanced power relations that produce them, are powerful in shaping these dynamics, and the learning that can arise from them. Executive meetings are therefore identified as a critical site of organisational learning, with collective decision-making being an outcome of that learning, and undiscussables a central impediment to it. Consequently, the article argues that working to directly address undiscussables is not only critical for improving executive collective decision-making, but also to the organisational learning that informs and is informed by that decision-making.

The Company Report is an artifact specifically intended for the small group of executives with whom I worked during the AR project. It includes the conversational patterns reported in the first Action Learning: Research and Practice article, and therefore addresses the same subsidiary research question as that article. In its function as a report, it also includes other aspects of the project, including actions the executive group took during the project and the associated effects and learning of those actions.

The two managerial articles, and their associated commentary located in this meta statement, broadly address the primary research question by exploring how to effectively contribute to HR practitioner discourse on the important issues of executive collective decision-making and undiscussables. In this way, the artifact extends beyond direct investigation into undiscussables to the question of contributing to HR discourse about them. In the context of a professional doctorate, and its intimate relationship to practice, this research question and its associated artifact is of central importance and worthy of inclusion in this portfolio.

The meta statement investigates the academic literature relevant to the other artifacts, considers issues of methodology, explains the doctoral nature of the other artifacts, includes reflections on the personal and professional development afforded by the other artifacts, and presents a coherent line of argument that acknowledges those arguments presented in the other artifacts.

The above discussion is shown in diagrammatic form in Figure 5 (shown below)
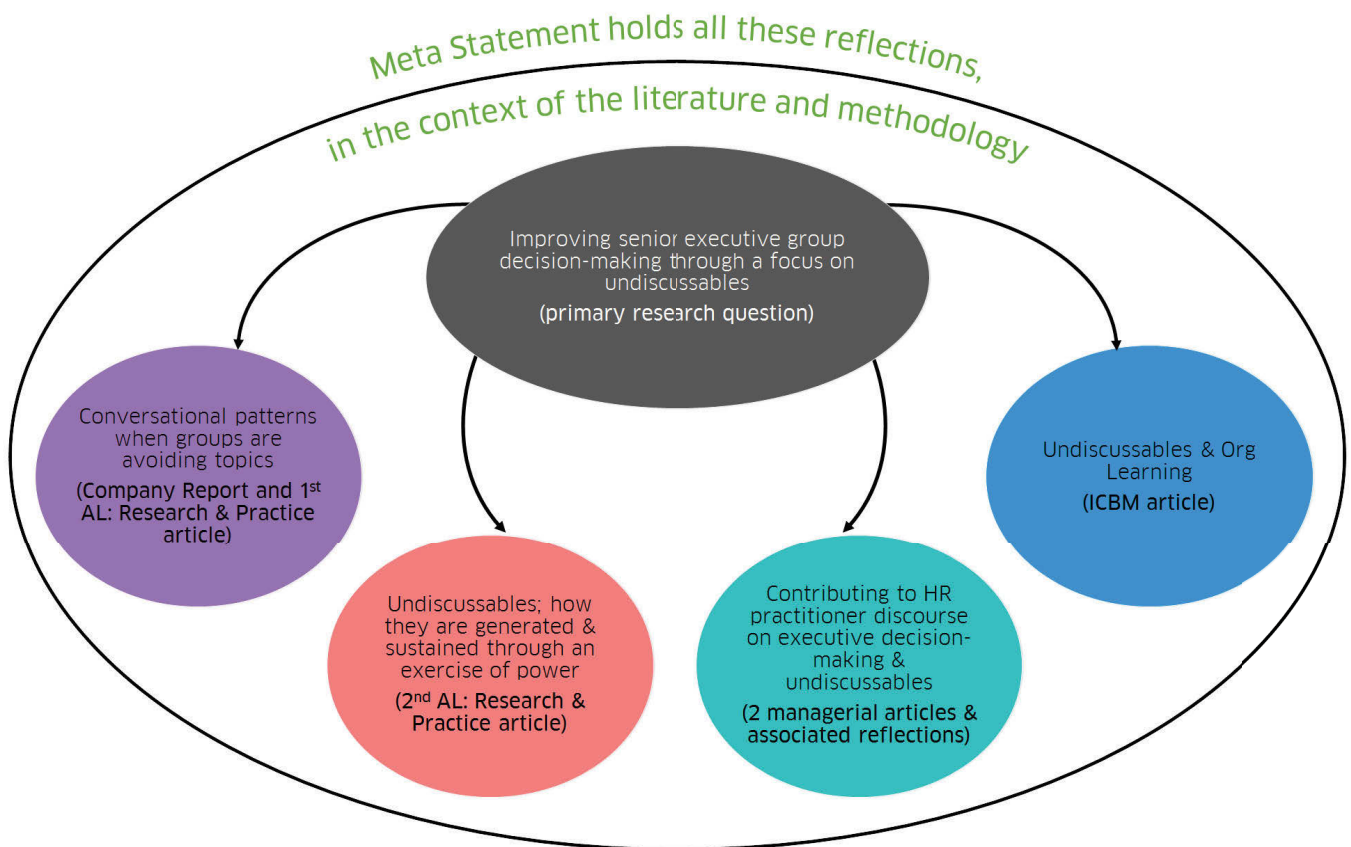
Relationship of Artifacts to Each Other

Meta Statement holds all these reflections, in the context of the literature and methodology

Improving senior executive group decision-making through a focus on undiscussables
(primary research question)

Conversational patterns when groups are avoiding topics
(Company Report and 1st AL: Research & Practice article)

Undiscussables; how they are generated & sustained through an exercise of power
(2nd AL: Research & Practice article)

Contributing to HR practitioner discourse on executive decision-making & undiscussables
(2 managerial articles & associated reflections)

Undiscussables & Org Learning
(ICBM article)

Figure 5 – Relationships of Artifacts to each other

Reflection on the First Article Published in Action Learning: Research and Practice Journal

Writing articles to be submitted to peer-reviewed journals was an important part of the doctoral process. The articles were completed after the other parts of the portfolio, however I deliberately decided to present and discuss them before the other portfolio components. The reasoning for this was presented in chapter 1.

This chapter begins with a brief summary of the purpose and problematic of the article submitted and published in the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal. Next, reflections on the revise and resubmit process are included. This is followed by an evaluation of the article as a worthy artifact of doctoral research. Finally, comments on the academic, professional and personal development associated with the article are included.

1. The Purpose of the Article

The purpose of the article was to respond to the primary research question:

> How might the practice of senior executive group decision-making be improved through a focus on the problem of undiscussables?

and to specifically address the subsidiary question:

> What patterns of exchange characterise senior executive groups at the time when they are avoiding topics, that is, navigating around undiscussables?

in the service of the primary research question. Consequently, the article presents a map of the problematic patterns of conversation that worked to prevent the senior group in question from achieving their goal of improving collective decision-making. These patterns emerged precisely at times when potentially threatening conversations could have

emerged, and enabled the group to avoid such interactions. The map was intended to assist other senior groups or professional practitioners to improve collective decision-making and more effectively manage undiscussables.

In summary, this article examines the conversational patterns evidenced in senior groups when undiscussables are present. So, while not examining undiscussables directly, the article maintains direct relevance to the practice of senior group decision-making, by mapping the conversational patterns when undiscussables are present. In this way, the purpose of this article bears direct relevance to the overall research agenda.

2. Problematic of the Article

The article itself provides a comprehensive explanation of the problematic that provided a context to the research. The problematic was located in the literature as summarised in the points listed below.

- Collective decision-making is an important requirement of senior executive groups. Where it does not happen, power can become unhelpfully centered around one or a few individuals within the group. The consequences of that power imbalance may be far reaching (Miller, Hickson & Wilson 1996; Vince 2001).

- Collective decision-making is an important subset of the larger task of collective leadership, an increasingly important requirement of senior executive groups (Runde & Flanagan 2008; Sinclair 2007; Wageman et al. 2008).

- Currently, the predominant experience of senior executive groups in relation to meetings is one of frustration and disappointment. It would seem that most meetings are at present some distance from providing a useful forum for collective decision-making (Schwarz 2002a; Wilkinson 2005).

- The two primary competencies required for collective decision-making are the organisation of tasks that a group must engage, and the active management of the social context within the team while those tasks are being addressed. The second competency is positioned as the more difficult of the two; the article addresses issues relating to that competency (Dick 1991; Mosvick & Nelson 1996; Wilkinson 2004).

3. Revise and Resubmit Process

I was both delighted and intimidated to learn that my article had been accepted for publication. I was delighted that this long project would see a published artifact, and intimidated because the nature of the requested revisions seemed, at first, extensive. I found guidance in the work of Kamler (2011). In her comprehensive chapter on the revise and resubmit process she provided a blue print for me to follow in this unfamiliar process.

First, I studied the comments made by the reviewers and the editor. The editor helpfully synthesised and translated the requests made by the reviewers, adding his own emphasis where he felt important. I then put these various requests into a two-column table format, populating the left hand column with each specific request in a point form fashion. This initiative enabled me to break down the pages of comments into discrete points that would be addressed one at a time.

Second, in the right hand column of the table, I placed my response to each specific request. This maneuver was more strategic than it might first appear. In articulating my response to the request, I was assuming a position with more agency than if I had simply responded to each request. Indeed, I argued that one particular request would not be wise to meet in the revised article (see reviewer's request number 2 and corresponding response in the table below). While populating the table, and revising the article accordingly, I began to see the revise and resubmit process more as a debate than as a series of demands that should be met. As an inexperienced academic author, this shift was a

profound one. While I was keen to ensure that my responses were not strident, I also intended to take my place as an academic author and respectfully engage with the thinking that prompted the various requests.

Below, I have included the table I sent back to the editor with the revised article. To my delight, with the agreed revisions the article was scheduled for publication.

Reviewers' comments	My Response
Editor's comments: (1-4) 1. Distinguish the terms Action Learning and Action Research more specifically. Be sure those terms are not used interchangeably. Also, consider putting something about AR and ALAR in the introduction for readers who are not familiar with these terms.	1. For readers unfamiliar with this methodological approach, I have included in the introduction some additional text that provides some practical distinctions between AL and AR. I have also ensured that the terms AL and AR always relate to their appropriate activity within the study.
2. Make a stronger case for how the management team considered themselves to be an AL set. Possibly consider the following questions; how were they prepared?, what were their intended behaviour and processes?, was there contracting, initial and continuing outcomes?, role of the facilitator? In doing this, provide more evidence that the paper contributes specifically to debates of AL and not general concerns about group process.	2. In response to this request, more detail about the agreements the AL set made and the behavioural commitments they developed has been included. Also, the progress the AL set did make on their learning journey (which was exclusive to the rational factors of collective decision-making) has also been briefly mentioned. This progress has only been mentioned briefly because it was not in the direction that the article examines.
3. Analysis of data (see below)	See below
4. In relation to the discussion of implications of the paper, provide questions that might be of practical assistance to other AL practitioners.	4. With the intention of providing more practical assistance to AL sets and their facilitators, I have included three questions that sets could usefully direct their attention to, at the beginning of and during their work (p. 19).

Reviewers' Comments: (1-7)	
1. Bring some further distinctions to the differences, or relationship between collective decision-making and collective leadership.	1. In service of providing more clarity, the notion of collective decision-making being a subset of collective leadership has been added to this section (p. 5).
2. The depiction of collective decision-making seems overly positive. What are the negative aspects of it and can some be included?	2. Rather than identify negative and positive attributes of collective decision-making, it seems more helpful, if this issue is to be addressed, to include where collective decision-making could best serve, and where it might not be necessary. While I have access to literature which begins to address this issue, it seemed less a priority than the other issues raised by the reviewer. For this reason, I have elected to foreground the other issues rather than this one. This has allowed me to stay close to the word limit.
3. Further information about the criteria that defines collective decision-making could usefully be included. For example: do the criteria include input, process, or output? How is *genuine* or *effective* collective decision-making different to normal collective decision-making? Provide more reasoning for the inclusion of the two "main factors" (task organisation and management of social context).	3. In regard to reasoning for the two main factors, I have included further reasoning (and literature) for this argument, and the weight of my own experience. In regard to the terms *genuine,* and *effectiv*e, I acknowledge that they had been used throughout the paper without specific explanation. I have therefore utilised *effective* in the abstract and introduction (and elsewhere). In connection with this, I have also included specific behavioural criteria (with reference to relevant literature) that might be applied to each of the two main factors.
4. The use of the terms 'teams' and 'groups' seem to be used interchangeably. Stick to one.	4. Yes, I agree that the use of these terms needs to be consistent. Because of the bigger meaning of the term 'team', and possible requirement of an inclusion of a refereed definition to justify its use, I have elected to use the term group.
5. In relation to the analysis, include more explanation about how you went from observations of conversations to the identification of patterns and strategies in the AL set. For instance: what was the role of your facilitator experience? How did themes or concepts from the literature impact the analysis?	5. Here, I have included (page 9) more specifically the lens I brought to the text, and made reference to the main author who first articulated that lens (Mindell) and others. This lens assists in identifying 'hot spots' in the meeting where new conversational territory is being neared, but not necessarily entered. While Mindell

	offers extensive theoretical underpinning to these notions, it is my own experience (and associated awareness and sensitivity) that supports the identification of these moments.
6. Confirm that the AL set had a clarified intention of more collective leadership or decision-making (earlier than p. 9).	6. Agreed that such a reference might usefully be mentioned earlier. It is therefore included in the discussion about the challenge of collective-decision-making on page 5.
7. Make a better connection between the illustrations of unspoken feelings and tensions and *collective* decision-making. Those things may stand in the way of open discussion, but make clearer the connection between that observation and collective decision-making… (Perhaps related to the earlier issue of criteria of collective decision-making).	7. I have tightened within the discussion, the connection between strategies to avoid tension or avoid certain topics and their implications on collective decision-making. Awareness of the three conversational patterns are intended to assist AL sets in their endeavour to catch themselves engaging in an avoidance strategy, and thereby ensure they are engaging in collective decision-making on the matters that count.

Table 4 – Revise and Re-submit for Action Learning Article

4. The Doctoral Contribution Made by the Article

The first article submitted to Action Learning: Research and Practice represents work consistent with criteria defining professional doctorate quality. First, the article creates new knowledge that is a significant contribution to the field of Management Studies. Second, it is well located within relevant literature and the corresponding discourse. Third, it is not only highly relevant to important problems in the practice of management, it directly supports the application of this new knowledge and the significant impact on practice this application represents. Each of these three points is discussed in more detail below.

The research presented in the article works with empirical evidence to explore the problem of senior group interactions as they attempt to make decisions together. In the field of Management Studies, and the area of Organisational Learning located within that field, such research is uncommon. It is unusual in this body of literature to find studies that present primary research that is grounded in the analysis of data generated from the field of practice. Therefore, presenting patterns of

conversation that a senior executive team actually engaged in when avoiding important conversations or topics relevant to their decision-making, is a novel and significant contribution. The three conversational patterns, named the interrogation, the venting, and the judgement, represent new knowledge concerning the important problem of improving senior group decision-making, especially in relation to the widespread problem of undiscussables. This knowledge enables practitioners (either senior groups themselves or their facilitators), to bring a more nuanced attention to the subtle effects of undiscussables, and to characteristics present in group conversations when the group is failing to address challenging but important issues.

The article locates the problem of improving senior executive group decision-making in the broader challenge of senior groups learning to engage one another in robust and vulnerable ways as they offer shared leadership to their organisations. That challenge is supported by a thorough engagement with academic literature. The article also honors and builds on the pioneering and foundational work of Argyris, and others in the field of Organisational Development (OD) who have investigated the dilemmas associated with undiscussables. In this way, the article is well located in the OD discourse and its relevant literature, and achieves a useful extension of it.

Finally, identifying conversational patterns is fundamentally a practical endeavor, with immediate practical application. In this way, while the article is directly communicates to an academic audience, in language suitable for that audience, it also represents a significant contribution to practice. It enables facilitators or senior executive group members to better identify the often subtle signs that important topics or conversations are being avoided. With the knowledge afforded by this article, practitioners might be more resourceful in raising awareness in a senior group when evidence of such signs appear, and the concomitant likelihood that the group is practicing avoidance. Such awareness may have significant implications for the senior group's ability to make better collective decisions. Understanding that they are avoiding topics of

importance in relation to to governing and manage their organisation may be critical information for a senior group earnestly striving to provide leadership and collective decision-making. The research itself shows that when patterns of avoidance were evident, tension in the room was high and the senior group conversation became shallow and less related to topics of importance for the group. Therefore, while the article is intended for an academic audience, it is at the same time relevant and accessible to professionals working with, or in, senior executive groups. It has direct impact on the practice of these groups as they work together to make decisions.

5. Academic, Professional and Personal Development

Having my first article published in an academic journal was a significant milestone for my academic development. It is one of the first tangible signs of membership in the world of academics and researchers. The discussion of Lave and Wenger (1991) and others since (Iverson 2011) relating to the emergence of identity through professional practice was now my experience. My sense of belonging to the academic community was strengthened.

I felt very proud to receive the journal in the mail and open it to see my article appear in print. Its appearance looked strangely confident, quite at odds with the majority of my experience while preparing it. It was only as the revise and re-submit process was concluding and I began to respectfully challenge, in small ways, the requested alterations, that my confidence began to emerge.

In connection with this publication came another milestone. Approximately 12 months after its publication, I was asked to review a manuscript submitted to The Learning Organisation (TLO). It is safe to assume that the editor of TLO noted my Action Learning: Research and Practice publication and selected me as a potential reviewer for a manuscript addressing issues relating to organisational learning. I reviewed the manuscript for TLO and thereby achieved another important milestone in my growing competence as a researcher.

Professionally, the article has slowly begun to have impact. Recently the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Communications Director of a fast growing Internet based company approached me to work with their senior team. They explained that recent changes to their team required them to 'have it all out' and create a clean slate for their company's future growth. I concurred from preliminary sessions that the way the company's senior team engaged one another was a critical factor in their ability to effectively address issues of strategic importance to their business. I mentioned that I had recently published an article discussing this very topic. The CEO requested a copy, and the Communications Director later informed me that the paper was circulated to the senior team, and had prompted extensive discussion. The article served to prompt new discussions and a deepening of the discourse among professionals in practice. In doing so, one of the main purposes of the article was achieved, at least with this specific senior group. The team was keen to begin their work with me.

Personally, as mentioned above, the published article has provided grounds for an increased confidence in my identity as a researcher and professional. Tangible evidence that I belong to a community of researchers has increased my confidence to take my place within the professional practice community. The critical roles of researcher and professional need to be strongly and sustainably performed for the realisation of my life's ambitions. My growing confidence to fulfill these roles, therefore, has primacy, and the impact of this publication is welcome.

Reflection on the Second Article Submitted to the Action Learning: Research and Practice Journal

In this section, several topics will be covered. First, the purpose of the second article submitted to the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal for publication will be briefly summarised, and related to the research questions guiding this doctorate. Second, the problematic that

formed the context for the article is summarised. Third, a discussion on the article's methodological approach is included. Finally, a discussion of how the article represents work consistent with that expected of a professional doctorate is included. Comments regarding the academic, professional and personal development relating to the article provided in their own subsequent section, due to their length and the fact that they relate to experiences concerning the entire doctorate.

1. The Purpose of the Article

The purpose of the article was to respond to the primary research question:

> How might the practice of senior executive group decision-making be improved through a focus on the problem of undiscussables?

and to specifically address the subsidiary question:

> How might the exercise of power be related to the generation and sustaining of undiscussables?

in the service of the primary research question. Consequently, the article presents new understandings concerning the problems of 'undiscussables', as they occur in executive collective decision-making, with a focus on power relations. In this way, the article represents a direct focus on undiscussables, through the novel lens of power.

2. Problematic of the Article

The article itself provides a comprehensive explanation of the problematic that provided a context to the research. That problematic is located in the literature, and summarised in the points below.

1. Many senior executive meetings seem as ineffective as they are frustrating for the participants (Schwarz 2002a; Wilkinson 2005). Argyris proposed that a major cause of this problem is the practice of creating undiscussables in decision-making

meetings (1986, 1990, 1993, 1995). Others have since confirmed the pervasive nature of this problem (Baker 2004; Donovan 2011; Morrison & Milliken 2000; Noonan 2007).

2. The meetings held by AL sets are acknowledged by many, especially within the category of Critical Action Learning (CAL), to be sites pregnant with complex power relations that shape and re-shape conversations, decisions for action, and learning; this is further complicated by the ambitious nature of AL set objectives (Vince 2001,2002, 2004; Trehan 2011). Consequently, it is safe to assume that in the contested territory in which AL set meetings are often found undiscussables will be present.

3. Very little research has explored the relationship between undiscussables and power. Lukes (2005), Bourdieu (1987), and Mindell (1992, 1995, 2002) offer suitable theory on power to support such an exploration. Research into this relationship may yield valuable insight into how undiscussables are generated and sustained.

4. Stimulus for the AR Project

To preface discussing the doctoral contribution of the article, background describing the initial prompting for the AR project that ultimately informed the article is required. As part of the first AR project, I analysed the text from the final meeting with the biotechnology company AL set. In this final meeting, issues that had remained undiscussable for the duration of the six-month study were finally explored by the group. The reason for this new openness was that the MD of the group had recently been exited by international senior management, and the remaining team enjoyed their new found freedom to discuss the difficulties they had been experiencing with him. Consequently, the meeting provided a most unusual window into the challenges for senior teams to raise difficult topics, at least as experienced by this group. The actual text recorded, transcribed and

analysed was however, entirely out of bounds for a published article. The group's openness was founded on the promise that their disclosures would not be communicated to the departed MD. If their exchanges did appear in an article, those outside the company would not be able to identify the speakers, but the departed MD might be able to do so. This was a significant concern as the Australian biotechnology industry is not large, making it plausible that the paths of the remaining team members and the MD might cross at some later stage.

Nevertheless, the analysis was fruitful. For instance, it suggested specific ways the group experienced the MD as frustrating, irritating or even intimidating, and how those experiences supported their withholding. The response to the MD, as described by team members, was also interesting in the context of understanding wider implications on the generation and sustaining of undiscussables.

Ultimately, my experience with the set, and my analysis of their final meeting transcript, served as stimulus to search more widely across multiple AL sets for data that might give insight into the relationship of power and undiscussables. I drew on my long and active experience as an AL set and management team facilitator in corporate settings to create a 'convenient sample' from whom to collect data. The methodology of that data collection and analysis is described in chapter 4.

Below, I have included some of the analysis of the original AL set and their final meeting, which was not included in the data collection and analysis for the article. The confidential nature of this meta statement affords this possibility. As described, this analysis served as a strong motivator to begin the second AR project where the relationship between power and undiscussables is explored. This analysis makes reference to relevant parts of the literature review discussed in chapter 3.

In the final debrief meeting the AL set (excluding the departed MD) discussed their experience of the MD dismissing topics as no longer deserving his attention, or the attention of the group. Judy described her experience of the MD dismissing topics, and Simon (her colleague) bringing the conversation back to the dismissed topic:

> "….because he (the MD, Phillip) would dismiss something and you'd (that is, Simon) say 'ah, we haven't finished on this'. You did do that at times".

As a side note, the transcripts of the previous four monthly senior team meetings do provide evidence of the MD unilaterally closing topics, usually without any objection or concerns raised by the team.

The implication of the MD's unilateral dismissal was that spending further time on the subject was wasteful and that his expert knowledge and experience gave him the capacity to make such a distinction, when others in the team could not. Importantly, the team was clearly frustrated with this practice but had not succeeded to raise this concern with him. This frustration was echoed in the data collection carried out with other AL sets in the AR project commenced later, and was confirmed by the subsequently analysis of this data in the context of other data collected and literature reviewed at that time.

The final meeting of the AL set also became a forum for the issue of the MD's anger to be discussed. Below are a number of excerpts from that meeting where the team, in the absence of the recently exited MD, described and discussed their experience of his anger. Notice Les's comment below where he explains that the MD's outbursts made it risky to raise issues:

> "Most of us had been given the once over, more than once. And that's a polite way of putting it. He was very well behaved when you were there Paul, but this was not how he behaved on many other occasions. He used to become extremely agitated and

> sometimes angry and lose his temper. We did not trust him
> enough to continue to try and raise sensitive issues with him."

Tony made a similar admission in relation to going 'against Phillip' and how this ultimately resulted in Tony not raising issues in the meetings:

> "I…had just gone 'look it's just not worth it anymore', you know,
> it gets to the point where we know it's important but how much
> do you try and be against Craig, so we probably didn't raise
> things to the meeting because you knew ultimately it wasn't
> worth the headache."

Judy also describing a similar experience said quite plainly of the team's behavior:

> "We weren't raising a lot of things that we needed to be raising
> because you sort of – you gave up in the end."

It seemed at the time that these outbursts were somehow important in the generation of undiscussables for that AL set, and perhaps predictably, I found similar scenarios in the data collected from various other AL sets for the second AR project. While analysing the data from the second AR project, I began to consider these outbursts as ways in which the powerful appropriated the privilege of not needing to exercise self-discipline in relation to the expression of anger and frustration, and whilst also not acknowledging that they were drawing on that privilege. The analysis and findings included in the final article proposed that this was one common way undiscussables might be generated.

The article published included a third way the powerful might generate undiscussables, which emerged from the data and the analysis of it. This way relates to exercise of power by the privileged to distance oneself from the frustrations of work as experienced by those less privileged.

5. The Doctoral Contribution of the Article

The second article to be published in the Action Research: Research and Practice journal meets key criteria required of professional doctorate research. First, it provides new knowledge relevant to the field of Management Studies and the area of Organisational Learning located within that field, by addressing the pervasive and persistent problem of undiscussables in a novel way. Second, this knowledge has significant impact on both the academic and practitioner communities as they address this problem, and on the discourses in which they engage. Third, the research is well located within the body of literature relevant to the problem, and therefore enjoys the academic rigor expected of it. These three points are expanded below.

The article offers a new model on the relationship between conflict, power and undiscussables. Specifically, the model explains how the accessing of privilege associated with rank (or social capital) may result in the exercising of one, two or three-dimensional power. This power is evidenced by covert, overt and latent conflict respectfully. In relation to undiscussables, covert power generates minimal undiscussables, overt power generates significant and felt undiscussables, and latent power generates significant, but possibly not felt or acknowledged, undiscussables. Power, conflict and undiscussables have not been combined in this way before, informed by data from the field and key power theorists. Therefore, new practical knowledge (Burgoyne 2011; Coghlan 2011; Trede & Higgs 2010) is provided by the research presented in the article. It has generated this knowledge in part because, as in the first article submitted as part of this doctorate, it is grounded in the analysis of observations drawn from the field of practice, and the analysis is enriched by a continual investigation of literature, and re-exposure to the field.

This new knowledge has significance for those in practice in, or with, AL sets or senior executive groups, and for academics who define and redefine the boundaries of theory and knowledge in the discipline. Specifically, it provides practical insight into the role of power in the generation of undiscussables via exchanges between players. This

insight can directly impact the work of those interested in the quality of decision-making in AL sets and senior executive groups. It supports the intentions of those who desire to swim upstream to discover the early causes of undiscussables. By understanding how power relations, as evidenced in conversations, can generate undiscussables, practitioners are supported to initiate conversations that may disturb those relations. Thereby practitioners upset the generation of undiscussables. In doing so, the group may be more able to avoid the tense and unproductive patterns of conversations identified in the first article prepared in this doctorate, that involve groups behaving as if they are somehow obliged to 'skillfully' avoid threatening topics.

Academics will find in this article new definitions regarding the exercise of power in relation to undiscussables in AL sets and senior executive groups. These new definitions are primarily due to the novel way in which Mindell's and Lukes's conceptual frameworks have been combined. Combining theories of power with observed conversational strategies, and relating them to undiscussables extends those definitions. In this way the article contributes to the theoretical domain, and will support a new discourse in relation to power and decision-making groups of all kinds. As others have noted (Fenwick 2003), the discourse on power in literature relating to organisational learning has tended to be weak. Therefore, by contributing to a discourse on power that is located central to the concerns of AL sets and organisational learning, the article plays a useful role in furthering an important discourse. This is a role that might be expected of work done in the context of a professional doctorate.

The new knowledge presented in the article stems in part from a thorough and rigorous review of the relevant literature. Not only has the work of key theorists been presented, new relationships between their work has been explored. This is true especially of Mindell who has not been widely referenced in academic literature for reasons discussed in chapter 3. The novel way in which key theorists' work has been combined, and the testing of that combination with preliminary data

analysis and observations made of AL sets over a long professional career in consulting supported the generation of new knowledge. Therefore, the work of the article has been well located in the body of existing literature, and supported by the framework that literature provides.

Reflection on the Article Published in the Proceedings of the 6th ICBM Conference.

The inspiration for this article (Donovan 2013) came from personal reflections made while preparing the second article submitted to the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal. About a year before the article was completed, I began to think more deeply about the implications of undiscussables on organisational learning, and wondered if a deeper exploration of that topic might be required for the article under preparation. Ultimately, I decided that including a brief comment on the topic would be suitable; to include a fuller discussion was beyond the scope of the article. The fuller discussion, including its implications on the practical management of undiscussables, was prepared and completed approximately six months before the second article was submitted to the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal. The discussion was submitted to the proceedings of the 6th ICBM Conference, where, to my delight, it was accepted by their academic board for publication. The ICBM article was tightly focused on the relationship between undiscussables, organisational learning, and practical concerns in the management of undiscussables.

Below, the ICBM article will be reviewed in several steps. First, the purpose of the article and its relationship to the research questions guiding this work is presented. Second, a summary of the problematic that sets a context for the argument is presented. Next, the contribution made by the article, and a defence for its inclusion in this doctoral portfolio is presented. Finally, the academic, professional, and personal development afforded me by the preparation of this article is explored.

1. The Purpose of the Article

The purpose of the article was to respond to the primary research question:

> How might the practice of senior executive group decision-making be improved through a focus on the problem of undiscussables?

and to specifically address the subsidiary question:

> How might undiscussables affect organisational learning, and how is that important?

in the service of the primary research question. This article does not contain data generated by an AR project. Rather, it presents an argument, located in relevant literature, about the central significance of undiscussables on organisational learning. It also draws on the work published in the first research article, published in the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal.

2. Problematic of the Article

The article problematic is located in the literature, and summarised below in the following points:

1. The everyday meeting is generally agreed to be a less than satisfying experience (Wilkinson 2005). Argyris argued that a central underlying problem with many meetings was the presence of undiscussables, and their associated fancy footwork and ultimate malaise (Argyris 1978, 1990).

2. Learning theorists are increasingly convinced that learning is a social phenomenon, achieved as much collectively as it is individually (Fenwick 2010; Garavan & McCarthy 2008). This understanding locates learning in the middle of the complex and changing power relations that shape and reshape our social working world (Clegg, Kornberger & Rhodes 2005;

Stacey 2003). Therefore, learning is in good part reliant on the everyday meeting, and its apparently frustrating collective dynamic.

3. Undiscussables can be understood to be a highly visible, or invisible, sign of a power imbalance within the collective, and work directly to limit the 'multiple voices' required for organisational learning (Clegg, Kornberger & Rhodes 2005). Where important undiscussables exist, power relations are at work shaping and reshaping interaction patterns, especially the patterns of withholding and avoiding. Those patterns in turn secure and solidify the very power imbalances that are creating them.

4. Consequently, undiscussables can be understood to be a key factor in resisting organisational learning, since they powerfully shape the collective dynamic that sustains and facilitates, or resists, organisational learning. Undiscussables, although first considered decades ago, can now be considered of central importance, in resisting, or facilitating organisational learning. Therefore, understanding effective practical means of managing and surfacing undiscussables is very valuable.

3. The Doctoral Contribution Made by the Article

The article made a doctoral contribution in two main ways. First, it proposed a coherent and novel argument, located in relevant literature, regarding modern conceptualisations of organisational learning and undiscussables. Second, the article addresses the significant impact on practice raised by the argument, including practical means to respond to the important challenge of undiscussables. Both these contributions are briefly expanded below.

The article published in the proceedings of the 6th ICBM (Donovan 2013) presented the following coherent line of argument, which was located in contemporary research. The article acknowledged the

emerging understanding of the collective, practice based nature of learning, and the complex political array of power relations in which learning is consequently situated (Aslam et al. 2011; Garavan & McCarthy 2008). This understanding is in contrast to the traditional view of learning as the work of separate individuals who acquire a pre-determined portion of knowledge (Elkjaer 1999; Fenwick 2010). Further, the article argued that undiscussables were both a powerful reflector of power relations and a muscular resistor to the learning that arises from them. In this way, the relatively old notion of undiscussables was framed as highly relevant and immediate in terms of their importance to organisations that aspire to learn. The day to day executive meeting, which evidence suggests is less than satisfactory for many participants (Wilkinson 2005), was also identified as a crucial site for organisational learning, and one which suffers from the effects of undiscussables in a pervasive manner.

Secondly, the article not only presented a new argument for the importance of working to surface and manage undiscussables, but also provided practical assistance to do so. The approaches of Argyris, Mindell and the first peer-reviewed article of this doctorate (Donovan 2011) were presented and contrasted, to indicate ways to respond to the pervasive problem of undiscussables with improved practice. In doing so, the article directly addressed important issues of practice as they relate to undiscussables and organisational learning.

Further to the article's contribution to practice, a few brief comments on the portion of the article relating to various means of managing undiscussables is warranted here. Specifically, Argyris's traditional LHC method (Noonan 2007; Senge et al. 1994) is described as inadequate in some situations. The invitation to write down one's withheld thoughts and feelings, and then share them with the group, is in some cases an insufficient means of disturbing the power imbalances that might support the withholding of thoughts and feelings. In other words, some participants may not include in their written LHC important and relevant withheld thoughts and feelings. My own experience as a corporate

facilitator confirms this. In contrast, Mindell's conceptualizations (Mindell 1992, 2000, 2002, 2010) were explored as a means of surfacing undiscussables. His application of complexity sciences to group conversations provides a more subtle and nuanced response to the problem. In particular, the notion of 'field properties' applied to collective conversations supports the group to notice subtle signs of avoidance, where direct expression of a particular point of view is difficult. In addition, the point of view previously withheld can be assigned to a 'role' within the field, rather than strongly attached to a particular person. Consequently, participants can demonstrate an enhanced ability to engage in conversations that include previously unspoken contributions. Such conversations can work to simultaneously reshape power relations in the group and surface undiscussables.

A final note in relation to the article's contribution to practice relates to the significance of including Mindell's writings. He has not, to date, made significant contribution to academic discourse, despite writing multiple books and enjoying a large international practitioner following. Subsequently, his work is rarely referenced in academic literature. This article, accepted for publication by the academic review Board for the 6th ICBM, acquaints a new audience of academics and management professionals to Mindell's work. Consequently, it supports a new, fresh and productive discourse for academics and professionals.

4. Reflections on the Personal, Professional and Academic Development Provided by the Preparation of the Article.

Around mid-2013, it became clear, through the advice of my new supervisor, that I not only had material for another peer-reviewed article, my portfolio required it. For several months I had been reading and reviewing the literature related to the topic of organisational learning, with the dual intention of finding coherent themes, and understanding what useful connection could be made between this literature and that relating more directly to undiscussables. Approximately mid-way through the process (although I did not know it

at the time), I began to become anxious about my ability to grasp the breadth of the literature, let alone comment on it. While the literature was generally not difficult to comprehend, the dizzying array of authors and topics within the area of organisational learning seemed overwhelming. Some articles, for instance Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes (2005) and Fenwick (2010) seemed to occupy my reading time for weeks, while many others were a relatively light and quick read. Ultimately however, the important theme of collective learning and its centrality to organisational learning emerged.

The period of time when my anxiety was heightened was highly relevant to my own development. I spoke to a professional peer at the time, who was also working on her PhD, saying that I felt my process of reading articles, and in turn finding references in those articles and reading them, was an endless, dispiriting process. I was buried in reading material and anxious that I was wasting a monumental amount of precious time in moving from one article to the next.

There was one practice that on reflection was especially valuable, and may have been pivotal in supporting me to continue my search, and ultimately settle on a coherent argument in the light of the literature. That practice was making generous notes while I was reading, and continuing to read over those notes during and in between reading new articles and books. After some thirty-five pages of typed notes, and my often-repeated practice of reading through them, I noticed that themes were emerging and new references could be located relevant to those themes.

This process required a sustained sense of purpose and optimism while engaging in it. The associated anxiety, especially as I was beginning to approach the last stages of the doctorate, that my explorations into the limitless sea of literature would not generate fruitful thoughts about the link between organisational learning and undiscussables was ever present.

Consequently, my own development could be described as being on two levels. One level related to the cognitive skills of reading academic literature, digesting and summarising concepts, writing summaries and noticing patterns emerge in those summaries, and then following those patterns as they appeared in the literature. While those skills are important, they are skills required of a Masters or even an Honors student. The second level relates to the subjective, or emotional competencies required to fulfill the process described above. While experiencing the anxiety of shrinking time lines, hours of reading and writing with no apparent insight, and reduced hope that anything useful would emerge from following an endless train of references, I found myself developing stronger patience. Rather than give in, I learned to better sustain my focus on goals that seemed distant. Remaining committed to the task of skillful literature interrogation unexpectedly helped me to build the emotional competencies required to manage my anxieties, rather than allowing them to direct my behaviour. If unmanaged, the anxiety would likely have prompted me to give up the search, cease the work and possibly withdraw from the degree.

Reflection on the Company Report

1. The Purpose of the Report

The purpose of the Company Report was to provide the organisation with documentation of their learnings and to support ongoing reflection and learning in the group. In addition to an account of the journey taken by the senior team and myself, the Report also included my own reflections and analysis that I developed over the final period of data collection and just after the final debrief with the senior team. I informally shared and discussed the reflections and analysis with the group before delivering the Report.

The purpose of the Report was pertinent to the research agenda of the doctorate. This was for two main reasons. First, the Report contained an investigation into how an actual senior group attempted to manage the problems associated with collective decision-making, especially those

associated with undiscussables. It was an exploration of actual practice, over a significant period of time, in an area where everyday practice has generally not been the focus of research. Second, the report represented a tangible bridge between theory and practice. It articulated theory generated through research that was informed by practice, and communicating this theory directly back to those situated in the world of practice.

The intended audience for the report was the organisation itself, and with appropriate permission, the portfolio markers. Otherwise, the report was confidential.

2. Reflections on the Process of Analysis

The process of text analysis has been described in detail in an earlier chapter of this meta statement. The section that follows includes a personal reflection on that process.

At a personal level, the analysis of the text was at first angst-ridden, and then relatively straightforward and satisfying. The angst arose from doubts about whether there was anything interesting to be found in the data at all. The structural changes the team made to their meetings were straightforward and helpful, however I expected that the group itself would explore the more subtle social issues affecting collective decision-making, especially regarding undiscussables, possibly with my assistance. While there were moments when negative emotions did appear, and the hope of exploring unspoken assumptions within the team was temporarily fuelled, those conversations did not seem to progress. I noticed I was sometimes reading the text thinking, "there is nothing here, this stuff is so flat". It was not until I began my analysis in earnest that I realised the basis for my disappointment was also the basis for my ultimate satisfaction. As I proceeded through the analysis, my angst transformed into curiosity, satisfaction, and ultimately excitement. I began to realise that the team's conversations were in-fact being generated in such a way so as to avoid the very conversations I had been hoping to observe or facilitate. The way the team achieved

this became the primary interest of the Company Report, and later, the basis for the first of the three peer-reviewed article submissions. It was exciting to put language to and categorise three specific conversational patterns ('interrogation', 'venting' and 'judgement'). Labeling them concretised the knowledge I had produced, and soothed the doubts of an inexperienced researcher. I see now that as my skill and experience as a researcher continues to grow I am less dependent on tangible evidence of the knowledge created. I can understand that something of value lies within the data, even it is not as surprising or valuable as in this case.

3. The Tensions and Dilemmas in Writing and Delivering the Report.
Writing and presenting the report involved considerable tensions. These tensions concerned preparing a written piece for a managerial audience, especially a piece that included so many undiscussables. Which pieces of data should be included? Which ones left out, and why? These questions raised sensitive issues and allowed me to reflect again on the pervasive nature of undiscussables: some issues would remain undiscussable within the Report. My challenge was to navigate the undiscussables with as much awareness as possible and where possible bypass the avoiding strategies I had observed in the senior group with whom I had been working.

The first and most obvious question was whether I should include the text that related to the senior group's reflections on the now departed MD. Below is a series of comments made in the final debrief meeting, after the MD had departed, about a number of the MD's behaviours that the group found unacceptable. None of these matters were raised with him in the meetings I observed over the previous six months. It should be acknowledged that some of the transcript portions included below have also been included in chapter 7 where they were analysed in the context of exercising power and the generation of undiscussables. Their inclusion here is discussed in a different context, that is, the identification of issues discussed in the last debrief meeting whose inclusion raises various dilemmas.

One team member experienced the MD as overly controlling, to the point where the team member could not do his job:

> Simon: "It went from support to attention to micro management to over management to the point where I wasn't actually doing my job because someone else was doing it for me."

> Paul: "In particular, Phil was doing it?"

> Simon: "Yeah, which certainly leads to frustration."

Les had experienced the MD's temper and found his outbursts to be unacceptable:

> Les: "Most of us had been given the once over, more than once. And that's a polite way of putting it. He was very well behaved when you were there Paul, but this was not how he behaved on many other occasions. He used to become extremely agitated and sometimes angry and lose his temper. We did not trust him enough to continue to try and raise sensitive issues with him."

> Judy: "Well, how do you raise with someone that I don't like your behavior?"

Judy spoke quite plainly of the difficulty in talking with the MD about his unacceptable behavior:

> "We weren't raising a lot of things that we needed to be raising because you sort of – you gave up in the end."

Simon made a similar admission:

> "I…had just gone 'look it's just not worth it anymore', you know, it gets to the point where we know its important but how much do you try and be against Philip? So we probably didn't raise

things to the meeting because you knew ultimately it wasn't worth the headache."

It was clear in the final debrief that the team did not wish the departed MD to be party to their reflections on his behaviour. This was implied when they made specific inquiry about whether he would see the Report. This was not surprising, since they had worked hard during his tenure to appear compliant with him. But how problematic was it to include these quotes in the Report? The team knew that the biotechnology industry in Australia is not large. Senior managers from one company generally know those of other companies, and the manager with whom you are competing for business one month may be your colleague the next. In this context, there was the risk that a senior manager from the company I was working with (based in Australia or overseas) might see the Report and mention its provocative contents to an Australian manager in a different company. In this way, it was plausible that the MD himself would hear of this controversial document that concerned him. In addition, the departed MD could plausibly return to the company as a more senior executive, even given the nature of his departure. In that event, the report would become accessible to him, and if I included the quotes listed above, he would learn of his senior team's previously unexpressed difficulties. These were sensitive disclosures, and it would be very embarrassing for the team if the MD were to become aware of them. If the MD once again held a position of authority over the team members, such exposure could threaten their further progress, or tenure, within the company.

Even more sensitive was the issue of the team's activities to ensure the MD's departure. The senior team had for some months initiated meetings with senior management overseas, with the intention of prompting the MD's removal. Indeed, the MD's departure had signaled the team's success. All the while, the MD had little idea that his team had been agitating in this way. A very revealing comment from the team in the final debrief shows this:

Simon: "I still don't think he fully grasps that he may not have had the support of his senior managers…I don't think he grasps that."

Judy: "He still doesn't."

Les:"No, he still doesn't get that."

The publishing of this information in the Company Report would have revealed the secret activities of the team and, for the reasons described above, may have been ultimately disastrous for them.

A separate but related topic was the role the international senior management played in this scenario. Their willingness to listen to the concerns of local senior team, and yet, apparently not initiate meaningful conversation with the MD about those concerns, would seem to be poor management, at best. Not only that, as one local senior team member commented, the international management seemed to be active in collecting negative feedback on the MD, without the MD's awareness:

"The other thing was that we knew there was a… breakdown at the next level up, there was a disconnect between Philip and his boss, and we were being encouraged at times to give negative feedback."

In addition, as one local senior team member commented, he believed the inadequacy of the international management's presence in Australia actually added to the local problems. The following is a quote describing how little contact existed between international senior management and the local team of senior managers responsible for Australia:

"I don't think I ever saw Philip's (the MD) boss - I saw Philip's boss twice in two years… and one of those times was to…well one was when Philip was no longer with the company, removed

from the company – no longer here after lunch time…so maybe there was that disconnect between us as well."

This same team member went on to say that one of his learnings from this scenario was the importance of international management being more in touch with how the local team is operating. In response to a question about what he would recommend for another team in their situation, he said:

"Maybe it's just involvement, I think in the meetings. Even if they're (international management) in on a conference call or whether they're in on a video conference, or something like that, but they need to see how the group is progressing….they need to be aware of what's happening, rather than being surprised about it when it is raised…"

As evidenced by the Company Report, I elected not to include this information, and associated discussion, about international management's role in the team's difficulties with their MD. My primary reasoning for not including this information was identical to that described above. The local senior team had no interest in embarrassing international management and I did not consider it appropriate to make a unilateral decision that might do so. The deeper reflection for me as the researcher concerned why I did not discuss with the team the possibility of including some aspects of international senior management's behavior in the Report. It is possible that they may have agreed to include the idea that closer contact between themselves and international management would have assisted the group be more effective. I did not raise this because it was not till some months after writing the Report that I realised the potentially powerful impact of international management on the local team. I had not looked closely enough at the data, or deeply developed my own understanding in relation to it, to grasp the possible centrality of their role.

The chief problem with not including the above reflections is that it risked the Report confirming existing power relations that were

supporting organisational silences. In other words, the Report directly hampered claims that might be made about the Report being emancipatory, or showing a critical appreciation (Trehan 2011). One could pose the following questions about the report: in what way did the publishing of the Report act to disrupt social systems that constrain, dominate or oppress? Did it support a 'communicative action' that challenged the imbalances created by an unfettered capitalism (Kemmis 2009)? Did it help those involved to build awareness about their own application of power by themselves and others (Vince 2004, 2008)? The answer to this question ought to be considered separately for the relationships within the local senior team, and the relationship between the local team and international management.

In relation to the local team relationships, the Report may have triggered some awareness about the team's indiscriminant use of power. The team's discourse in meetings worked to achieve an appearance of agreement while all the while disagreement was present. The three conversational patterns identified in the Report were discursive maneuvers that marginalised conflict and privileged agreement or compliance. This was how the team exercised power over each other in relation to everyday business issues, and with the MD in relation to their significant concerns about his behavior. The Report was intended to increase the team's awareness of these matters, but only in regard to the former, not the latter. It also included a number of practical suggestions and tools to bring awareness and informed action to that problem.

For reasons described earlier, the Report did not address the power relations between the local senior team and international management. This was unfortunate, since it is possible that these relations, although they were invisible to the researcher until the final debrief meeting, were of upmost importance. The discourse between these two groups powerfully supported keeping conflict in the background and marginalising talk that directly addressed confronting or emotionally charged issues. With that pattern being supported in this key

relationship, it is not surprising that it was retained in the relationships between those in the local team. It could be argued that the relationship between the local team members and the international senior managers worked to shape the boundaries of possibilities for the local team. In this case, those boundaries did not include the possibility of direct and frank collective conversation about deeply contested issues. In the context of Lukes's (2005) three dimensions of power, the relationship between the local team and the remote international managers was most likely in the third dimension. It acted to support the senior team to withhold matters from monthly meetings. This was achieved by the secret retrieval of negative feedback on the MD from the team, and by avoiding facilitating an open discussion within the team about their concerns with each other, and especially with the MD. With the implicit support of international management, these issues never got to the table, at least not to a table that included the MD. Third-dimensional power acts to normalise power imbalances so that they are considered a reasonable part of life. In this case, the relationship between the local and remote management may have worked to normalise the behavior of not raising significant concerns about the MD, with the MD. The local team seemed to feel comfortable about this practice, and the relationship with the international managers supported that comfort. In addition, there were no concerns expressed about how the situation was being managed by the remote management. The local team viewed their behaviour as expected, appropriate, and even normal. This is precisely how third-dimensional power is conceptualised to work.

Where does this leave the Report and its level of critical review? In my opinion, severely lacking. While the Report did address some local power issues, it left untouched the more subtle, more pervasive networks of power (Hayward 1998) that were profoundly shaping local practices.

4. The Doctoral Contribution of the Report

The Company Report was not an academic document. It did not locate the identified conversational patterns, or other content, in relation to relevant research or theory. Therefore, the doctoral contribution of the

Report was through meeting other criteria. Two key criteria are identified and discussed below.

The first criterion relates to a professional doctorate being required to address a number of audiences, not just an academic one. While the three peer-reviewed journal articles clearly targeted an academic audience, the Company Report was equally clearly targeting a professional audience, albeit a restricted one. With that targeting comes two main priorities. First, the document must remain a faithful translator of the research and be rigorous in its claims, while using language suitable to a non-academic audience. While the Company Report does not attempt to generalise beyond the senior group in question, it does include claims of conversational patterns present in the senior group, patterns of which the group seemed largely unaware. The need to provide clear evidence for these patterns through reproduced passages of transcript was therefore paramount. That evidence was provided for each of the patterns described. The second priority was that the report must address problems of practice that were significant to the professional audience targeted. In relation to this criterion, the initial one-on-one interviews and group visioning were a useful guide. These provided an anchor point around which significant issues of practice, as articulated by the group in these sessions, could be determined. Ensuring that findings and claims made in the report were relevant to data collected in the initial interviews and visioning achieved alignment to important aspects of practice for the group.

A second criterion of professional doctorate work is the requirement to provide an accurate account of developments over time, how they happened, and their significance to the overall argument of the research. The Report's inclusion of changes the group made to the structure of their meetings over the course of the research period was most relevant to this criterion. These changes were instituted over a period of some months, and in each case the report describes the context for those changes, the reasoning for initiating the changes, and the relationship of those changes to the problems of practice

experienced by the group. For example, approximately half-way through the senior group's monthly strategy meetings, it was decided to fundamentally alter the structure of the meetings. Meetings would no longer begin with a lengthy review of the previous meeting's minutes, followed by a review of company metrics. Rather, the meeting was structured to briefly agree on the previous meeting's minutes, then proceed to discussing a small number of important company priorities. This decision was taken in response to the group's desire to spend more time "looking toward the future, rather than history focused". The Report documents these initiatives, their significance, and the group's experience of their effect.

5. The Report as a Facilitator of my Development as a Researcher and Professional

Writing the Company Report was an important experience in furthering my progress toward claiming membership in a community of researchers. The generation of my own data, leading to my own analysis and subsequent findings guided me to reflect deeply not only on other researchers' work, but now also on my own. It was perhaps the first time I had spent such a considerable amount of time reading text that did not involve trying to understand someone else's research or thoughts. The text I was reading were meeting transcripts (that is, my data) which I read and re-read in order to approach the analysis with integrity.

The work of analysing the data also performed certain functions in my personal development. I gained the useful experience of reviewing data whist maintaining doubts and uncertainty about what the data might yield. These doubts may have helped me avoid leapfrogging to obvious conclusions, which may have occurred had the text contained more controversial, provocative conversations.

As described above, delivering the Report also facilitated the management of several tricky dilemmas and associated ethical problems. I was faced with the challenge of maintaining the integrity of

the research while protecting the well-being and possibly the job security of the participants. These are challenges that researchers must face with courage and consideration (Covey 2004); this research afforded me an opportunity to practice those qualities.

The work's impact on my professional development was significant. Six months after delivering the Report, I offered a client a new service that consisted of observing the senior team's meetings and facilitating a debrief at the end of each meeting. The client was the CEO and his team of directors who worked in a large organisation, and they agreed to me working with them over their next three senior team meetings. At the end of the second team meeting, I shared with the team a pattern of conversation that occurred when disagreements arose. The group found those observations very helpful; until that moment they had not understood why the meetings had been so unsuccessful at creating consensus. Sharing the pattern, and discussing their feedback to it, gave rise to a new conversation about the way they were interacting, and how it had created problems.

The scenario described above is a direct example of how the research for the Company Report enabled me to widen my offering as a consultant. This pattern has been a persistent one during the eight years I have been working on my doctorate part-time. While at first I imagined that my study commitments might impede my business, in-fact the opposite has occurred. With the increased confidence afforded me by my studies, and the additional services that I have been able to develop, the business has grown by approximately 100% over the period of the doctorate. This of course created a growing challenge in relation to progressing with the research.

Reflections on the Managerial Articles

The following chapter provides a series of reflections on two managerial articles published in the HR Leader in 2009. In this reflection, a clear distinction is made about elements of these articles that are doctoral in

nature, and elements that are not. I argue that the managerial articles fell short of their intentions and did not strictly fulfill criteria required of a doctoral artifact. These articles were written and published early in my doctoral studies, and were therefore not informed by my later research and learning. However, I argue that combining the managerial articles with the following reflections does fulfill the required criteria, and constitutes doctoral material.

The following reflection begins with a description of the purpose of the articles, then a brief description of the content of the articles. Following is a discussion of how the articles fell short of their purpose, and a nuanced reading of the field of practice field for which the articles were intended. Next, I briefly discuss the flawed nature of the relationship between theory and practice, and more effective alternate approaches, Finally, I reflect on my own personal and professional development.

1. The Purpose of the Articles

Two managerial articles were published in the HR Leader Magazine, one in March, the other in April 2009. HR Leader Magazine was purchased by Key Media from Lexis Nexis in June 2011 and folded in to Key Media's Human Capital Magazine. The articles were each about 3000 words in length.

The two articles aimed to address, for a managerial audience, the primary research question:

> How might the practice of senior executive group decision-making be improved through a focus on the problem of undiscussables?

And in service of that primary question, to specifically address the subsidiary research question:

> How might a researching practitioner usefully contribute to current HR professional discourse with the intention of widening

awareness of the problem of undiscussables as they relate to collective decision-making?

The formulation of this subsidiary research question was important for two main reasons.

1. To bring scholarly reflection to practice, and in doing so refine and improve practice. Bringing scholarly reflection to a forum where practitioners engage in discourse seemed a useful activity.

2. To build my own professional profile among my professional peers.

The two managerial articles provided a suitable forum. In the first instance, I framed the primary challenge in responding to the subsidiary research question as maintaining the integrity of the concepts and ideas that had emerged to date during my research, while utilising language that would be accessible to a managerial audience. As will be discussed later, I came to realise that this framing brought its own problems, and could be usefully altered.

2. A Brief Description of the Articles

The content of both articles bear obvious connection to the Company Report and the peer-reviewed journal articles, as the following description shows. The March article focused on the role HR can play in enhancing collective decision-making at the executive level, the April article focused on 'games' played in senior executive meetings to avoid tension or threat, and the role HR professionals can take in helping the senior team to avoid such games.

The March article began by identifying the problem of centering decision-making in the hands of just one or two within the senior group and proposed that collective decision-making that engages the whole team is important. This idea is not prevalent in mainstream managerial

literature; it is influenced by a participative management approach (Bradford & Cohen 1998; Straus 2002; Wilson 2012), and by critical theory in the management and educational context (Brookfield 2005; Welton 2005). While the word 'power' is not used in the articles, collective decision-making is fundamentally about equalising power imbalances (Clegg, Kornberger & Rhodes 2005; Vince 2002). The article positions HR practitioners as professionals who might help address collective decision-making challenges within the senior team. Two practical steps for HR professionals are then described. First, four specific questions are provided that the HR professional might use to engage the senior team in addressing these challenges. These questions are loosely based on the foundational work of Kolb (1984), Dixon (1999) and Baker, Jensen and Kolb (2002) who investigated how learning might be facilitated within the organisational context. Second, it is recommended that the HR professional create a proposal for the senior team that includes four main areas. These areas are: individual mindsets, communication skills, senior team culture, and senior team meetings' systems and processes. These four areas are loosely based on Wilbur's four quadrant model (Wilber 2001, 2007) that describes the main areas that need to be addressed in creating change in any system.

The April article takes the popular idea of 'games' and applies this to the executive decision-making forum. It is suggested that games may be hard to identify, partly because they are not discussed and partly because they are played to enable the executive group to avoid threatening or embarrassing scenarios. The three games are "Let's not have this argument now…" "Silence is agreement" and "This is too tactical for us, we should move on…" I identified these games while reflecting on my years of experience as a corporate facilitator and my research to date. They are also influenced by Argyris's writings on the "fancy footwork" (Argyris 1990) that executives engage in when undiscussables are present.

Following the description of the games, a brief description of the games' unwanted consequences is included. Here, I introduced the idea that in

playing the games, the executives are achieving precisely what they do not want, that is, frustrating meetings that frequently repeat familiar material. While I did not mention the term in the article, Argyris (1986) called this kind of group avoidance 'skilled incompetence' since the 'games' are skillful, engaged in repeatedly and instantly, but deliver unwanted effects.

Finally, the April article provides language tools for the HR professional to introduce to a senior team, to enable the latter to avoid the identified games. These tools are based on Argyris's Ladder of Inference (Senge et al. 1994). I acknowledged that the HR professional may find it threatening to raise these issues with the MD or CEO, but that the conversation with those in organisational leadership provides an opportunity to practice what the HR professional will later recommend to the senior team. To this end, I provide specific wording that the HR professional could use to initiate this tricky conversation with the MD or CEO.

3. How the Articles Fell Short of their Intentions

It would seem that the whole positioning of the March article around building better collective decision-making in senior executive groups did not resonate with the editor of the HR Leader. When I submitted the manuscript, the title of the article was:

> How to assist your senior team to engage in more effective collective decision-making.

When the article was published, it appeared with the following title:

> How to be part of the executive decision-making team.
> Executive decisions are often made without the input of HR. Paul Donovan examines this process and reveals how HR can ensure it is part of the executive decision-making team.

At the time of publishing, I gave little thought to the way in which the editor re-shaped the title and sub-title, bringing an alternate slant to the

article. I now consider this a fascinating window into the current HR discourse, and a reflection of how the substance of my article failed to usefully contribute to that discourse.

The new text was generated by the editor and pursued a different direction of the original manuscript. If the editor accurately estimated the HR audience, it would appear that the latter are less interested in the notion of better power sharing among senior executives, and more interested in how to gain membership of the team that appears to hold this power. Perhaps this is evidence of the continued struggle for legitimacy that HR seems to be engaged in (Schied, Carter & Howell 2001).

In the April article I integrated the contemporary notion of 'games' into the main ideas included in Argyris's work. The language used in the article is easy and accessible and, in my mind, easier to grasp than in Argyris's books. At the same time, I would suggest that the article is a faithful representation of his work.

The chief issue with both articles is that they are positioned as ready-to-use tools for the HR professional that is eager to disrupt unhelpful patterns of interaction in their executive team. I now consider such positioning to be unrealistic. In relation to the March article, an HR professional would probably not be in a position to facilitate their senior team to have the kind of discussion intended by Step 1, where the issue of collective decision-making is raised with the senior team. Such a discussion may surface contentious issues and awkward or embarrassing disclosures. Step 2, which involved a four-part proposal to address the problem, raises similar problematic issues of implementation. Likewise, in the April article I offer steps for the HR professional to begin the process of disrupting the existing power relations within the senior team. On reflection, this seems an unrealistic proposal.

While I have used accessible language in both articles, the tasks I was recommending to HR professionals are complex, challenging and risky.

In this way, the articles may lack honesty. On consideration, and in my experience, most HR professionals are insufficiently equipped, and probably lack permission from the senior team or from the CEO or MD to implement the strategies I provide in the articles. I now consider the articles to be better suited to an audience of experienced independent consultants, who specialise in this area, and who may have less at stake. In other words, I attempted to bring the work of a seasoned professional facilitator, via the use of simple steps and templates, within reach of HR professionals who are unlikely to be skilled in these areas. At the time of writing the articles, I had worked as an independent facilitator for 13 years, and before that as an HR professional in a large multinational corporation. I overlooked that for an employed member of a company, it can feel particularly threatening to facilitate sessions that are intended to upset the usual power relations that are in operation within the senior team. Indeed, I often fall short in this, even as an independent facilitator. On reflection, these articles may set the intended audience up for failure.

Relevant to these reflections, is the fact that I received no response from any HR professionals following the publication of either article. I was initially disappointed by this, and a little surprised. I now see that this lack of response was quite predictable. It appears that I may have misread my audience.

4. A Nuanced Reading of the Existing Practice Field

These reflections prompted me to look more carefully at the rhetoric of current practicing HR professionals. Human Capital (HC) Online TV is a significant presence in the HR world; it provides an online forum for professionals to listen to and watch senior practitioners address pressing contemporary HR issues. HC publications (the publishing arm of HC Online TV) purchased HR Leader, the magazine where the two managerial articles in question were published. Below is a segment of a transcript of a videoed panel discussion with four senior HR professional presented on HC Online TV (TV 2011). Of the 42 videos showing on HC Online TV's homepage on July 20th 2011, it was the 5th most viewed.

The transcript provides a window into the concerns that might occupy HR professionals at present. The video was titled "The Future of HR". The interview began with the compere asking the question below; the responses that followed are shown.

"Where does everyone see the future of HR heading? The focus seems to be shifting from asking and demanding a seat at the table, to now once you are there, proving why you should remain there. I recently heard a senior HR person who said "instead of just doing their job, HR was the only discipline who felt the need to continue to justify its existence, instead of just doing its job" There is almost a lack of self-confidence there. What do you guys think, where do you see HR heading?"

One panel member responded by saying:

"I think there are a lot of people within HR community who have a lack of confidence and do feel some defensiveness about the work they do…the challenge for HR is building credibility for HR to deliver within business and demonstrating that really clearly. Once you begin to demonstrate that, the need to be defensive goes away."

Another panel member responded:

"And I think that as HR does become more strategic, they speak more the language that the executive team requires. For example if you were to say that I saved more than $56 million on agency fees alone, which is a statistic from one of our customers, the CEO was pretty happy with that. Imagine saying to the CEO "we saved $10 million on turnover because we brought our retention levels up, over the last 5 years". I think that providing more metrics, and speaking more the business language, is where HR will be moving a lot more forward."

Finally, another panel member followed on by saying:

> "Picking up on that, it's absolutely critical that HR understands what the business strategy is, and if you are going to pick up on one or two things (in the HR strategy), those things have got be delivering to the business strategy. Then (comes) the results, the language, the credibility, and all of that."

It would seem that, according to these senior HR professionals, for HR to build the credibility it deserves, it needs to operate on executive teams' terms. These HR professionals suggest that HR's lack of confidence would be solved by "really delivering in the business, and clearly demonstrating that". One panel member suggests that telling the CEO that they have saved millions of dollars is a successful approach. Above all else, ensuring that HR delivers to the CEO's strategy will assure the future of HR. Interestingly, this rhetoric seems consistent with the tenor of the changes made by the HR Leader editor to the title of my March managerial article.

This HR rhetoric concerns those with a critical approach to HR (Brookfield 2005; Burgoyne 2011; Welton 2005); I share their concern. To begin with, establishing one's credibility is challenging. It implies meeting a set standard which will guarantee membership in a certain group. The problem is that the group to which you are striving to belong is the one that determines the standard. When this becomes the main goal of HR, HR loses its power to offer a disruptive, provocative presence at the executive table. This may be particularly problematic in relation to business strategy. For many businesses the CEO's strategy is premised on what will provide maximum growth, minimum costs, and the highest profit. As many have pointed out, when business makes preeminent such short term goals it is problematic for the wider community and even for the company itself. HR may be in a unique position to advocate for a wider, more humane position in relation to business strategy. However, this interview indicates that many HR professionals are at present unwilling to take such a role. Unfortunately, it seems that current HR rhetoric emphasises ensuring HR professionals' compatibility with existing strategy, rather than emphasising the shaping

of that business strategy in the first place. This presents a double bind: working so hard to gain membership can be the very activity that makes HR dispensable within the executive team, as its primary function becomes to confirm existing policy. Ultimately, according to Schied, Carter and Howell (2001), HR finds itself playing the unhelpful role of being the soft voice to implement hard, inhumane policy. In other words, by HR professionals bending themselves to win a presence at the executive table they lend an unhelpful legitimacy to senior executives who issue inhumane policies.

I would argue that the observations of the HC Online video interviews and the TLO homepage of early 2012 mentioned on page 68 of this meta statement could be plausibly linked to provide further context to my experience of publishing the managerial articles and my reflections on that experience. In both the videoed interviews and the homepage text, HR practitioners (academic or professional) have as a primary, indeed as a singular, goal the intention to strengthen and grow organisations, apparently irrespective of the structural power imbalances that might be supported by this growth. HR practice is located as valuable to the organisation, even critical to their survival, and personally helpful to CEOs, and therefore worthy. That worthiness does not seem connected to upsetting or provoking existing business intentions, or practices that entrench existing power relations. Rather, HR professional seem intent to make business better, and to effectively deliver within the existing capitalistic mind frame. That's not to suggest that capitalism is in itself wrong in some way, but rather that in some cases the current expression of it is has been unfair and unjust.

5. A Flawed Understanding of Practice and Theory

The purpose that I brought to these publications, as stated above, was to bring my research and general insights I had gained throughout my relatively brief doctoral process up to that point, to the HR professional. With this intention was the assumption that my learning would be beneficial to, and eagerly received by, the HR professional. I did not test this assumption, nor did I attempt to discern what might be of concern

and interest to the intended audience. I felt sure that my learning, if communicated in an accessible way, would contribute to changing the practice of HR professionals. I now consider that thinking to be faulty. I had been imagining, albeit barely consciously, that if my research based knowledge could be 'injected' into the environment where practice was being implemented, practice would be changed. Indeed, I recall various power point slides I developed in the second year of the doctorate in connection to early proposals for my research, showing a kind of 'insertion' of knowledge into the practice domain. This conceptualisation did not reflect the understanding about the nature of the relationship between research and practice that I was to develop later.

I now imagine a more nuanced, two-way exchange between these two apparent polarities, and that exchange being supported by an AR approach (Greenwood & Levin 2007; Huxham & Vangen 2003; McNiff & Whitehead 2002; Stringer 2007). In the year or more that followed the initial presentations mentioned above, I became more familiar with the broad methodology that is AR (Carr & Kemmis 1986; Greenwood & Levin 2007; Reason & Bradbury 2008), and the notion of research knowledge being produced in practice, to effect change in practice and wider social change. In other words, I came to understand (as described in chapter 4 of this meta statement) AR as a means to systematically develop knowledge where the problems are experienced, in the world of practice. In this way, problems of practice can be viewed through and re-shaped by knowledge, especially that created through reflective practice supported by an AR approach (Argyris & Schon 1974; Schon 1983). Ultimately, I came to consider that research, theory and practice are in complex relationship with each other.

Obviously, these notions are in sharp relief to the notion of a one-way transfer that informed my writing of the managerial articles. These insights may provide some explanation as to why some authors maintain that there is a persistent gap between research and practice (Kember 2000). Where this 'relational' understanding is absent, research may be conducted out of contact with real and important problems of practice.

In this case, knowledge created may find little resonance with those primarily concerned with practice. Likewise, where practice is persistently out of relationship with research, that is, not enriched by systematic reflection and enhanced by an understanding of the work of others, then, according to Schon (1983), practice may become unhelpfully rigid, inflexible, outdated and ineffective.

6. Reflections on Alternative Approaches

While the content of the managerial articles was relatively straightforward for me to write, I hope it is clear from my previous discussion that a deeper consideration might usefully have been given the audience for whom the article was written. The content was directly linked to my research, and to my work as a professional facilitator, but not to sufficiently to the intended audience. Having now looked more carefully into the matters that comprise the conversation of HR professionals, I would produce very different content. The following are a few titles that I suspect would have resonated more profoundly with HR professionals:

- "Building cred for HR professionals, and why we shouldn't bother"

- "Get a seat at the table, or…bring the table to us?"

- "Business Strategy and HR strategy; which should fit into which?"

While I am aware that these titles represent an article direction that might be contrary to mainstream, I would argue that they address topics of real interest to HR professionals. These articles would address the far reaching issues of HR professionals working hard to gain acknowledgement by their senior executive teams, and while doing so forfeiting a role that provokes new thinking, disrupts existing discourse, and challenges unacknowledged assumptions in senior executives. Some readers might disagree with the content, but I suspect it would prompt

more dialogue that the two articles that I did publish. In this way, the articles may have served the purpose of stimulating a relatively new discourse within the profession, which is fitting for a doctorate student who is intent on improving and refining practice.

7. Impact of Writing the Managerial Articles and these Reflections on my Personal, Professional and Academic Development

The exercise of reflecting upon the managerial articles, rather than the writing of them, was the main developmental exercise in relation to these articles. The discipline of reflection delivered three main developmental outcomes, all of which provide evidence of the doctoral nature of the articles and the reflection process.

First, the reflection process strengthened my commitment to the AR approach that I had chosen for this doctorate's primary research initiative. At the time of writing the above reflections I had already chosen and initiated an AR approach with the senior executive team with whom I conducted the primary research, however these reflections deepened my understanding of AR's contribution. I came to understand that the AR approach was more than simply combining action and research; it offered a rich and vibrant exchange between the two that enriches both.

Second, the reflection process provided clarity about my evolving understanding of the relationship between research and practice. My original 'injection' assumptions regarding research and practice are likely to have remained tacit and unexamined if not for the discipline of reflection that I brought to the writing and publishing of the managerial articles. I therefore gained insight into my own evolving understanding, that is, the significant distinctions that separated my original understanding from that which I later gained.

Thirdly, reflections on the articles also afforded me an opportunity to bring critical thinking to the articles themselves, their publisher, and a major publisher in the field of organisational learning. These reflections

were not on someone's theory, but on the real world of publishing (both managerial and academic) and on current HR practice. Building an understanding of critical theory has enabled me to bring questions to factors I would not previously have noticed. Consequently, included in the above reflection is a challenge to the approach of the editor of The Learning Organisation, and the editor of the HR Leader Magazine. In addition, I proposed a plausible connection between observations made of both. Finally, my growing understanding of critical theory provided a new bank of questions that, if applied to future managerial articles, might work to genuinely expand current HR discourse in a way that these managerial articles did not.

Chapter 6 - Reflections on Personal, Professional and Academic Development throughout the Doctorate

This chapter presents reflections of the academic, professional and personal development afforded me by the doctorate as a whole. Inclusion of this chapter is defended on the basis that one of the objectives in completing this doctorate relates to achieving development of the kind here discussed. In that sense, it could be suggested my own changing practice is the ultimate artifact in this portfolio doctorate. This chapter provides evidence of that changing practice. The lens used to discuss this development is informed by the work of the doctorate itself, and gives focus to my changing relationship to power. First is included a far reaching reflection on my changing relationship to power from an early age until now. This is followed by a detailed account of three events that occurred in my experience as a professional facilitator throughout the course of the doctoral studies. Each event is reviewed through the lens of my changing relationship to power. In each case, the implication of that changing relationship is then related to my academic, professional and personal development.

1. My Conceptions of Power, from early Adulthood to the Present

I came to the study of power relatively late in the life of my doctorate, despite my original supervisor's urging. In retrospect, I seemed to be influenced by a personal inertia to begin my study in this area. On one level I felt intimidated to begin my explorations of this enormous and complicated body of literature. On a second level, the study of power exposed a deep ambivalence I had carried about power itself for a long time. The following reflections look more closely at these two levels.

Concerning the first level, as a relatively new researcher, it seems that the study of power challenged my sense of identity as a credentialed researcher. I had previously considered this area of research, and particularly Foucault's work, to be important, philosophical,

impenetrable, and only for the most capable researchers and authors. I was concerned that this area of study would expose my lack of knowledge, or a lack of commitment to learning, or even my lack of capacity to learn.

Concerning the second level, my apprehension about this area of study related to my long-term problematic thoughts and feelings about power itself. While reflecting on my procrastination of the study of power, an incident in my young adult hood came to mind. I was in my final year of high school and the school was identifying its 'senate' and School Captain: to my embarrassment, my name was the most voted. I was placed in the school senate of 12 students, from whom the members of the senate themselves would choose the School Captain. I recall my anxiety about this situation. I did not vote for myself as captain in first, second or third place. However, to my surprise, excitement, and mostly dismay, I was elected School Captain.

On reflection, my early conceptions of power were narrow and limiting. As a young person, I had developed conceptions of power which I brought to this high school scenario, and which informed my beliefs and assumptions. Those beliefs informed my attempts to avoid the position of power, and my angst when given it. My first experiences of power were, predictably, connected to my parental relationships and from those I had drawn far-reaching conclusions. I had noticed within my family a pattern of criticism toward those who were notable, or possessed power. In my young mind I made the clumsy connection that being separate to the group via a leadership role, or being associated with some kind of power, was a dangerous place where a critical crowd would expose your faults. These deeply seated associations of vulnerability in respect to positions of power resulted in a strategy that I was to exercise for years to come. That strategy was to avoid positions that carry leadership and power, but to assume positions that were close to those who were powerful. My experience of becoming school captain had been an unsuccessful attempt to put in place that strategy.

Together with my formative notions about positions with power, came a bundle of assumptions about anger and conflict, their purpose, and their relationship to power. As a young person I observed that one of my parents was, to my mind, frequently angry or threatening to become angry. When this anger was expressed, with its associated conflict, it effectively created compliance in my other parent, in me, and most of my three siblings. So much so that even the subtle threat of anger from that parent was sufficient to shape the family behaviour. Over those formative years I took on the role modeled by my compliant parent and became highly responsive to the threat of anger from others. (It was much later that I realised how often I took the role of aggressor). Consequently, my own behaviour was significantly shaped by my intention not to trigger the expression of anger and conflict in others.

On consideration, I now wonder if these early formed assumptions and associated strategies were at work 20 years later when I left a large corporation to begin my own consultancy. When I reached the hierarchal level immediately underneath the directors' level (within the HR group), I departed the company. While I had multiple motivations for this move, it enabled me to avoid the power and visibility that the leadership role of director would have brought. Meanwhile, my consultancy remained a single person operation for about the next 10 years. After that period, I decided to begin building a larger consultancy, with other trainers and facilitators, and once again encountered my internal resistance to creating a leadership role, with its associated power, this time within my own organisation. The first step to achieving the vision of a larger consultancy was to invite other trainers to observe my training in person, and begin their process of gaining competency in the material I was presenting. I can recall my deep anxiety in first taking that step, about 5 years ago now.

Over the last few years my reading and reflection on issues relating to power have slowly widened. Parsons's (1967), Gaventa's (1980), Clegg's (1989), Lukes's (2005) and Mindell's (2002) writings have worked to provide an increasingly nuanced understanding of power. Lukes's three

dimensions of power have been particularly important as my awareness has grown around the obvious and more subtle ways power can be exercised. Mindell's writings have helped me to understand how power can be exercised by appropriating privilege associated with positions of rank. In particular, acknowledging my own rank has been an important part of altering my relationship to power.

I now have a lessened sense of vulnerability about exercising power, and diminished fears about dominating if I were to exercise it. I am also better able to manage my tendency to compliance toward those who hold positions of rank. My personal conceptualizing of power is now beginning to resemble the ever-present relational fluidity that Foucault describes (Foucalt 1994). I now understand power to be the currency present in all interactions, and my attention is directed to identifying how it is being exercised one conversation at a time; rather than trying to avoid 'having' it or positioning myself in relation to individuals I consider to 'own it'. I have grown my awareness about the subtle expressions of power that surround my day-to-day conversations, and heightened my sensitivity to my resistance to or co-operation with it. I also better understand how I have exercised power in my daily conversations, with little or no awareness. Such a lack of awareness might predictably accompany a self-conception of having little or no power.

Consequently, my professional practice has changed. This growth is discussed in more detail below, where I reflect on three events in my professional life over the period of the doctorate. I have become increasingly awake to the strategies of senior corporate workers who subtly exercise power in relation to each other and myself. In the context of my role as a facilitator and my responsibility to assist groups to have more robust conversations, my confidence to make those strategies plain, has grown. I have also become more curious about how power is being exercised by factors remote to the interaction, but nevertheless shaping the interaction. Understanding and applying aspects of Argyris's, Lukes's, Clegg and Bourdieu's and Mindell's work

has aided me in bringing that curiosity into my practice, and supporting senior executive groups to explore these less visible aspects of power in decision-making meetings.

Regarding my academic life, I became able to overcome my initial inertia to study the topic of power and began to invest time in reading the authors mentioned above. I was then able to bring a deepened understanding of the literature relating to power, to the data I had collected, and to my professional practice. The process of combining the literature and collected data gave me new language and new distinctions with which to engage the academic community in writing. Indeed, the acceptance of the second article to be published in the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal is evidence of the new knowledge and new distinctions presented in the article.

With the intention of tracking a more detailed account of my own personal, professional and academic change over the period of the doctorate, and connecting this change to a shifting understanding of power, I have below included reflections on three separate events over that period. The first was early in the period of the doctorate, the second four years later, and the third two years later again, in the final years of the doctorate. For each event I have reviewed the interactions, then discussed how my interpretation and reaction to those interactions reveal my understanding of power at that time. Connections to literature will be made throughout.

2. Event Number 1: Winning Approval

In this event the General Manager (GM) of the business with whom I carried out the first AR project asked me for personal feedback on himself and the performance of his team following one of the meetings I had recorded. In presenting this request, the GM placed me in an intriguing position. My response to his request was to serve as a watershed in my shifting understanding of power, how to respond to it, and how to exercise it.

When first asked for feedback by the GM, I provided it to him regarding himself and a particular member of his team whose performance in the meeting I felt was below expectations. I gave specific examples of the team member's behaviour and I offered some languaging templates that the GM could use to address his team member about the subpar performance. During the conversation, I noticed within myself two different 'voices' in connection with the situation. One voice was pleased to be taken into the confidence by the GM, and be presented with the opportunity to impress him. This voice was informed by long held assumptions; being considered the MD's confidante was consistent with the kind of proximity to power I had previously decided was safe. The second voice was quite contrary to the first. This voice was awake to the sabotaging effect that compliance to his request could have on the project objectives and the change I was assisting the executive team to make. The team was engaged in an AR project, whose aims included having more open discussions about their own performance. To have private conversations with the GM about the behaviour of others contradicted that objective. My usual pattern of compliance with the most senior manager was, in this case, poor research practice, and also bad consulting. To behave consistent with my relatively new understanding of good research, I now attempted to work with each expression of power, in whichever relationship it might be exercised, one conversation at a time. Following my written reflection on this incident I explained to the GM how our previous conversation had, in my view, been unhelpful to the team objectives and to the research, and that in case of further requests from him of this nature I would encourage him, with my help if appropriate, to bring his requests for feedback to the team. Likewise, I realised it was important to consider bringing my own judgments about particular team member's performance to the team.

In summary, this event served primarily to shed light on a professional practice of mine that while skillful, was incompetent (Argyris 1990). That practice was being informed by a primitive personal relationship to power. It was my early academic training in relation to research

methods, and the support of my supervisor, which increased my awareness of this practice and prompted the beginnings of a new approach.

3. Event Number 2: Upsetting the Director

During the middle of the period over which I completed my doctorate I was working with a senior team of ten directors in a large pharmaceutical business. This consulting work was conducted about two years after the AR project was completed with the biotechnology company. The event discussed below signaled further growth in relation to my ability to work openly with power and, equally, that there remains considerable growth for me in this area.

I had observed a number of monthly three-hour meetings and facilitated a brief post-meeting session with the team to reflect on the meeting; in this session I also provided my own feedback. During one debrief session I raised the behaviour of one of the directors who texted on his phone and read his laptop frequently throughout meetings. No other director did likewise (one other director consulted her phone once or twice during the meeting). I first checked the accuracy of my observation with the group, and then asked for feedback from the director himself, and the rest of the team, on his practice. Upon raising the topic there was a chilled pause. It was plain no one had raised this topic before. The particular director whose behaviour I had raised was the longest tenured director in the team. His contributions were generally very direct, frank and not infrequently critical. He also possessed a very large physical presence, being several kilograms heavier and standing at least four inches taller than any other director. Following my request for team feedback, a number of team members expressed concern about this particular behaviour, and a lively discussion ensued. The directors felt that this particular director's behaviour was inconsistent with the level of focused attention they felt their monthly meetings deserved, and distracting. The director in question remained relatively quiet throughout this discussion, but seemed irritated that the topic had been raised. Subsequently, the MD,

at the request of the team, determined it was no longer acceptable for team members to consult phones or laptops in the meeting, excepting calls from family members.

Before raising the issue of the director's behavior, I considered that his decision to prioritise other matters while in a meeting with his peers, and to not discuss this decision, was an exercise of two-dimensional power (Lukes 2005). I also wondered if he was subtly appropriating the privilege associated with the rank he possessed in the team as the longest tenured and most experienced director (Mindell 2002). If Vince (2001, 2002) was right, the expression of emotion following the raising of this topic was indicative of a power imbalance at work in the team. It seemed that the concern that the other directors had about the practice of the director in question frequently consulting his phone and laptop during monthly meetings had become an undiscussable for them. As Argyris (1990) and Noonan (2007) described, the rest of the group had, presumably without discussion, decided not to raise the topic of the director's behaviour or to discuss this decision. Consequently, the group had created an undiscussed group norm of director attending to other business during the monthly meeting. This dynamic had continued for some time until I raised the topic. Parsons (1967) might have described this situation as a team who had inculcated a series of norms; power was being exercised within the context of those norms. The group's sense of obligation to comply with the director's behaviour, which was mobilised by his exercise of power, had become normatively embedded, and thus had become a shared practice for the director in question, and the rest of the team.

To further reflect on this situation, it is helpful to consider Mindell's conceptions and consider how their application may have led to alternative interventions on my part. For instance, Mindell's notion of a ghost role may have been relevant. He defines this as a role that is not directly expressed in the group, but is nonetheless present and potentially shaping the experience and behavior (the other roles) being more directly expressed in the group (Mindell 2002). Frequently ghost

roles can be sensed by noticing the less conscious communication of the group, for example where body language is at odds with the verbal message, or voice tonal qualities bear similar inconsistencies. This source of information in the group may be thought of as 'orphaned', as it is not being expressed by a participant who dentifies with it. In addition, it is assumed that while only one or two in the room may express the signals indicating a ghost role, the role may be relevant for a larger proportion of the group.

In the scenario under consideration, it might have been helpful to consider a ghost role in the group being expressed by the director in question, via his texting and emailing behaviour. This role, if voiced more directly, might have said:

> "I have more important and pressing matters to attend to than those being discussed in this meeting! I'm under so much pressure and having to attend this meeting is simply making my job harder. I don't have time for meetings!"

As the facilitator, I could have temporarily inhabited that role and, while explaining to the group my intention, voiced the ghost role for the group. I could then have invited the group to reflect on any resonance with the role, to support the expression of the role in their own way. If Mindell's notions were carried through, it would be appropriate to support the polarity, or opposing view of the ghost role, to be directly expressed and assist the group to move toward completing this important, but previously unexplored, conversation. Intervening in this way, rather than the way I did, may have resulted in the director in question having a very different experience of my intervention. With the approach I took he felt uncomfortable, exposed, and I suspect somewhat criticised. The approach informed by Mindell's work, as described above, seeks to honor the disowned communication by the director and complete an incomplete process in the group. If handled skillfully, he might feel less exposed, and even helpful in being part of

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assisting the group to engage in a critical conversation that had up to that moment been avoided.

Nonetheless, my decision to initiate such a potentially contentious conversation within the team was a relatively new practice for me, and signaled a growing capacity to venture into the domain of undiscussables. It was clear to me that in raising the topic of the director's behaviour, I would be risking confrontation with a highly respected, and a little feared, member of the team. Previously, I would either have said nothing, or perhaps have raised my concerns about this team member's behaviour with the MD in a private conversation. My willingness to initiate a team wide discussion evidenced a changing understanding of power, and my relationship to it. I was less concerned with the rank I perceived this team member to have, and more interested in the exercise of power between him and the rest of his team.

The nature of my interactions with this particular director before and after previous monthly meetings, deserves a brief mention. I was a little anxious about my relationship with this brusque team member. He seemed disinterested in building a relationship with me (unlike the other directors) and, as mentioned above, enjoyed a certain rank within the team. On reflection, my anxiety prompted my interactions with him to be characterised by a general orientation to please and accommodate. I exhibited an old pattern of trying to find favour in the eyes of someone I considered powerful, so as to feel safe. At the time I was barely conscious of my compliant strategy toward this director. However, my behaviour may have increased his level of shock and irritation at my raising the contentious issue of his meeting behaviour. When occupying my role as facilitator in the meeting debrief, I was able to bypass my usual reactions to 'powerful people', and to work more directly with the exercise of power through the interactions that occurred during the meeting. While operating in the role of facilitator I employed quite different assumptions to those I had held historically. My interactions before and after the meeting had not yet benefited from these altered

assumptions. I began to understand the importance of bringing a higher level of awareness to my interactions with team participants both inside and outside meetings.

In summary, my personal and academic development converged in this event, to allow me to engage in a relatively new professional practice. While my personal need to comply was beginning to wane, my academic pursuits were providing me new language and new distinctions to apply to a professional dilemma. At the same time, continued work in both these areas was evidently required.

4. Event Number 3: Addressing the Imbalance

This event relates to my work with a small pharmaceutical company about 2 years ago. I had been invited to facilitate a full day session with a group that included the MD, the sales management team of seven who reported to the MD, and a sales representatives team of about thirty who reported to the sales management team. The MD, via his Sales Trainer who was part of the sales management team, had requested a session where the whole group could debrief the sales strategy that had been in place for three months. In-fact, the whole sales team had been newly recruited and all the sales representatives were still on probation, a fact that will have significance in the account to follow.

In preparation for the session I had prepared a draft agenda and gained initial agreement on that agenda from the Sales Trainer and MD. The evening before the scheduled session I briefly interviewed (face to face) four of the sales representatives. Three of them mentioned that they felt it was unlikely the planned meeting would recruit the honest views of the representatives. They mentioned that they had considerable issues with the sales strategy but would remain mute in the whole group meeting in relation to those concerns. This was for two main reasons. First, they worried they might be labeled as a troublemaker if they raised their concerns. Second, while their probation period was still in effect, management could easily fire them if such a label was applied.

Adding to this concern, they had noticed that a couple of representatives had already been exited, and management had provided no explanation other than they had "not fitted in with our company culture".

That same evening (immediately prior to the full day session), I called an impromptu meeting with the MD and the Sales Trainer. I proposed that the session agenda be adjusted to include a separate session for the sales representatives to talk about their concerns with the sales strategy. I suggested that the representatives needed time to explore their concerns without management in the room. I would then present the representatives' views to the combined group. In this way individual representatives could remain anonymous, but their combined voice could be heard. The MD and the Sales Trainer were shocked and disappointed that the representatives did not feel safe to explore their concerns with the strategy in the wider group. They had assumed that their culture was sufficiently open and safe to make such processes unnecessary. They, perhaps predictably, felt quite free to speak, and as Mindell (1992) described, their rank may have been made them unaware of the privilege of safe disclosure they enjoyed. They did however agree to the change in agenda.

The session itself presented a challenge. Shortly after explaining to the whole group the agenda, one of the older and relatively experienced representatives expressed his strong indignation that a separate session would be held for the representatives. Obviously, he was not one of the representatives who had expressed concern while being interviewed on the previous evening. He felt that such an approach was unnecessary, and if it were so, it was an indictment to the company culture. He challenged me to alter the agenda and keep the whole group together. Rather than accept his proposal, I explained that some representatives may feel differently, and I requested his support for the agenda as it had been proposed. He agreed. Within fifteen minutes of the commencement of the separate session, he apologised to his fellow representatives. He realised that many of them not only had profound

concerns with the current sales strategy, but also had sensible reasons to be wary of speaking freely in the whole group.

The whole group meeting, where representatives and management came together, began with me providing a summary of the concerns the representatives had shared about the current sales strategy. The representatives agreed my summary was accurate. The whole group then agreed to work on a key issue in relation to the strategy. We identified roles (or view points) in relation to the issue, and I imitated Mindell's approach (Mindell 1992, 1995, 2002) by standing in different parts of the room to anchor three primary roles. I invited those in the room to come and speak from any of those roles. Both management and representatives joined in and voiced the various roles. At my encouragement, they moved from one role to another, voicing them as they felt moved. The group enjoyed an energetic, at times vulnerable, and very engaging discussion. After about 30 minutes of the roles being voiced, and new roles being identified and expressed, we paused for a rest. I then facilitated a rather more linear session on what actions should be taken now to address the original issue. Many ideas were generated that enjoyed strong consensus within the group and those ideas were organised into a plan.

This scenario gives insight into my changing relationship to the exercise of power, how it was supported by my pursuit of relevant literature, and the ultimate effect on my professional practice. When delivering the confronting news about the requirement of separate sessions to the MD, I was aware that I might have previously avoided such a conversation. Not only was I proposing a radical change to the agenda, I was also positing that his culture was not the safe and egalitarian one he imagined. I risked losing his confidence. Part of me felt vulnerable to be opposing the MD and potentially exposed if my proposed change in agenda failed. The emerging part of me however was concerned that a major power imbalance would eventuate if the change in agenda were not implemented. It seemed that power was being exercised whereby the implied threat of dismissal was generating widespread

undiscussables for the sales representatives. I was fortified by a growing understanding of such power dynamics, and was generally less anxious than previously about securing the favour of a high status individual. I note that my understanding of Mindell afforded me both a theoretical grasp of rank and power, and practical approaches to assist groups voice all relevant roles, not just mainstream ones.

The challenge I received during the meeting from the experienced representative also bears reflection. My response to his assertion that the proposed agenda was inappropriate deviated from my previously patterned responses. I would usually have sought feedback from the group on the best way to proceed. In this way I would have avoided opposing the participant and instead become the facilitator between the various views in the room. From experience, I can confidently say that the discussion would have contained several awkward pauses, as those who wanted the separate session would have been apprehensive to express their desire. Mindell (1992) described this kind of dynamic in terms of the marginalised role struggling to be heard while the mainstream role exercised dominance. The mainstream role was in this case shaped by the rhetoric of the senior management who held that the company culture was open and safe. To imply the contrary was to openly contradict senior management. Those representatives who identified with the marginalised view may not have been willing to speak in support of it, even with my support. In the absence of an opposing view (a polarity), the outspoken representative's injunction to prevent separating the group would have prevailed.

Rather than avoid confronting the confident representative I chose a new approach, for me, of opposing him directly. I felt that to do otherwise would be to minimise the feedback I had received before the meeting and disregard those who expressed their lack of safety to talk freely about their concerns with the strategy in the wider group. I did not allow his confidence in openly challenging me to be an exercise of power that created undiscussables within me. My response to him however, did not directly contradict his input. If I had done so, I would

have risked exercising one-dimensional power (Lukes 2005) and recruited the predictable open resistance that follows such power (Clegg 1989). Instead I acknowledged his experience of feeling free to speak, and his expectation that others in the room should feel similarly. I then requested his patience to support an agenda that included a separate session, in case there were representatives in the room who did not feel such freedom to speak. In taking this approach I was still risking his continued open challenge to me in front of the group, but the empathy I expressed for his view worked to lessen that risk.

It should also be acknowledged that having my proposed agenda accepted and implemented was a highly visible expression of power. Rather than my usual avoidance of being seen as the person "with power" I was more concerned with the moment-by-moment exercising of power via the interactions that were occurring in the room. This altered awareness supported me to take an approach that included new options and, in this case, me consciously exercising power in front of the whole group.

Following the meeting, I arranged for a third party to retrieve feedback from a number of meeting participants. The following are some comments taken from the feedback. The first three are from representatives, the final from a member of the sales management team.

> "The main thing was that there was a safe environment created – Paul created this by using roles/voices and enabling us to speak our opinions but almost as a third party. It was very enjoyable. At one stage he even asked the managers to step out of the room. We really wouldn't have been able to achieve the outcomes we did without this change to the agenda."

> "A gutsy move from the company to organize a meeting like this. The standout for me was how Paul made it

comfortable for us to say what we felt. He was able to pull our side and the management side together seamlessly. I was surprised under the circumstances given the emotion that surrounds this issue. I was also surprised that there were no major "eruptions" from participants and it was controlled very well."

"(We were) given a platform to express exactly how we felt. This helped us achieve the objective of providing feedback on the sales strategy implementation. I was fearful at the start that if I opened up I would lose my job but because Paul provided such a safe environment I was able to open up and tell it how I saw it."

"I enjoyed the session where we had two or three roles speaking in the room. It was really robust and useful. I was happy to put forward my viewpoints, and the meeting provided that opportunity. Paul allowed the Reps to talk, without scapegoating the management team. So while that may have been a bit edgy, I think it was a good thing."

These comments are indicative of the broader feedback received and support the notion that via the facilitation, a 'safe' place had been created where the marginalised views could find expression and a potential power imbalance had been avoided. Some undiscussables were discussed, and in an instance where power had been two-dimensional, with covert resistance, one-dimensional power with overt resistance, was expressed in the meeting (Clegg 1989, Lukes 2005).

In conclusion, this event richly evidenced my professional and personal, and perhaps indirectly my academic, development. It was my academic development that prompted me to organise a session to retrieve feedback from participants following the program. This practice, which I now routinely engage in, is informed by my relatively new understanding of AR and AL. This careful gathering of data post-program allows me to

test my assumptions about the success of the session, deepen my understanding about the participant experience, and more effectively plan for the next professional engagement. This allows me, in my professional practice, to add considerable rigor to my work reflections. The personal and professional development evidenced in this account was intertwined. My increasing ability to avoid my past practice of submitting to strong players assisted me to interact with the MD, the Sales Trainer and the experienced sales representative in new and more assertive ways. Likewise, this supported me to provide a professional facilitation service that included more effective means of assisting the group to robustly engage strongly contested matters of significance.

Chapter 7 – Conclusions

This chapter includes the following areas of discussion. First, I summarise the contribution made by the artifacts, especially the peer-reviewed journal articles, to knowledge created. Second, the impact of the artifacts on practice is examined. Third, the implications for future research is discussed.

The intention of AR projects is to contribute to 'practical knowledge' (Burgoyne 2011; Coghlan 2011) that addresses the world of practice, and to alter practice in a way that evidences shifting power balance and increased freedom from constraint . As described earlier, some (Lyotard 1984) may also call this critical knowledge. In the context of organisational power relations, it's useful to acknowledge that many may be on the powerful side in some relationships, and on the less powerful side in others. In other words, while it's important to support those experiencing constraint to find a voice, it's also important to understand that those same people might be exercising power to constrain others, with or without awareness.

This portfolio includes the work and outcomes from two AR projects, both of which contributed to practical knowledge. The first AR project informed the writing of a company report and the first peer-reviewed academic article. Those documents, although intended for different audiences, enjoyed some overlap in content. The overlapping content represented new practical knowledge relating to how senior executive groups (in the context working as an AL set) work to avoid topics associated with threat. While Argyris (Argyris 1990, 1992, 1993) made clear some decades ago that the 'fancy footwork' of business groups corroded their ability to make effective decisions together, these artifacts mapped three previously un-described examples of that fancy footwork. The elucidation of these patterns represents new knowledge

and, for facilitators or executive groups, a potentially useful tool to create more effective executive group decisions.

The second AR project also delivered new practical knowledge. While the power relations of AL sets have been a focus in the literature for some time now (Ram & Trehan 2009; Trehan 2011; Vince 2004, 2008), the causative relation between these power relations and the development of undiscussables had not been explored. This is surprising, since the advent of undiscussables is possibly one of the most obvious, and concerning, affects of imbalanced power relations within groups and AL sets. By explicating the language contributions made by AL set leaders that exercised power in a way that generated undiscussables, the AR project provided new knowledge. Consistent with Coghlan (2011) this knowledge was practical via its relationship to the subjectivities of the practice world and, through its focus on power and constraint, critical.

The remaining peer-reviewed journal article (Donovan 2013) was not associated with an AR project, but rather presented a novel connection between literatures not previously combined, and insights not widely understood. The article identified the growing stream of recent theorists (Aslam et al. 2011; Garavan & McCarthy 2008; Sessa & London 2006) who understand learning to be a collective phenomenon, and in the context of their work, explored the impact of undiscussables within collectives, on learning. Learning is acknowledged as a collective experience by those dedicated to AL and AR approaches, however the implications of locating learning central to complex power relations, where undiscussables inevitably result, has attracted minimal attention from researchers. Highlighted is the central role of the everyday business meeting that often falls well below the expectations of those participating, but is a site critical to learning within organisations. In summary, by combining literature from diverse areas, the centrality of undiscussables as an important and immediate obstacle to sought after organisational learning is established.

The concluding statements on the impact of the research on practice are combined for all the artifacts. Both Action Learning: Research and Practice articles have clear impact on practice by the provision of practical strategies for executives and facilitators to better notice when undiscussables are at work, and to avoid the generation of undiscussables in the first place. The first article provides pathways for meeting participants to catch themselves in patterns of conversation that signal that avoidance of certain conversations is taking place. With this awareness, groups are more equipped to meaningfully reflect on their collective conversation, and on unspoken strategies of avoidance that might be being played out. Likewise, the second Action Learning: Research and Practice article alerts both group leaders and meeting participants to their role in contributing to the generation of undiscussables. Leaders are invited to consider three specific, behavioural ways they may be unwittingly exercising power by means of accessing privilege associated with their rank, and consequently eliciting withholding in others. In this way, the practice of leaders, especially in managing meetings, was foregrounded in the article. Consequently, the article gives practical direction to leaders intent on altering their practice. In addition, meeting participants have been provided specific direction to bring awareness to three behavioural strategies, with the intention of better expressing their concerns at critical moments, and consequently bypassing the avoidance that typically occurs. Therefore, the practice of participants including expressions of concern or frustration is practically supported by an awareness of leader practices that might be prompting these feeling responses.

The article included in the ICBM conference proceedings highlighted the central importance of the problem of undiscussables as a muscular resistor to organisational learning. The article included specific and practical strategies to surface undiscussable topics. Those strategies are drawn from Argyris's pioneering work, the first article published in the Action Learning: Research and Practice journal from this portfolio, and from my experience of applying Mindell's methodologies to assist groups to traverse topics not usually navigated. In bringing those practical

strategies together, the ICBM article provides a unique service to practitioners who are looking for direction on how to alter their practice.

The research contained in this portfolio prompts further research initiatives. First, identifying and communicating additional ways that leaders appropriate their privilege without awareness, and consequently create frustration in others that is often not directly expressed, would be a welcome extension to this research. The research might usefully take the broad form of Argyris's Action Science methodologies (Argyris 1993, 1995), located in the family of AR. Using this methodology, groups could be tutored in concepts relating to exercising power without awareness, could practice skills in noticing when power is exercised without awareness, and could develop language practices for leaders and group members to draw collective attention to these critical moments. A research project that carefully monitors and supports an executive group's attempts to alter their behaviour, reflects on those attempts, and plans ongoing improvements, might be a sensible way to structure such research.

Second, and on a wider note, Mindell's tools (Mindell 2002), as described earlier, are in the early stages of achieving the prominence appropriate for his significant body of work. Research that tests and retests Mindell's conceptualizations would bring a much-needed critical evaluation to his work. In particular, assisting groups to apply his concepts of the field, hot spots, polarised roles, and ghost roles, and to deeply investigate the outcomes of this work, and the resistors to it, would refine Mindell's work and make it accessible to a larger audience. As Mindell's theory and tools are shown to be helpful in a wide variety of contexts, an appropriate wider application of his work might be made possible.

In addition, bringing a scholarly focus to Mindell's work would enable it to be more thoroughly located in the wide spectrum of researchers in related fields. In this way, the new contribution contained in his work, both theoretical and practical, will be made visible and be more readily tested.

Third, further research that works to increase the ability of senior executives to decisively address the ways in which their power is shaping the society around them would also be of value. Research of this nature extends discussions of power beyond their own group, and their own organisation, to explore how decisions being made by them are affecting their wider environment. Such research could be widened to address the relationship between the decisions made by the executive group and the structures embedded in the organization that effect those beyond the organization. In the spirit of the research conducted in this portfolio, such research would work to increase awareness of rank in executive teams, especially in relation to the wider society. There are undoubtedly some executive groups who already support such discussions and inform their actions on the basis of them, however research that works to widen this practice by rigorously applying an AR approach to a willing executive team would represent a useful contribution. Such research, especially if done repeatedly and in different contexts, might add practical knowledge that enables executives, and the organisational consultants who assist them, to operate in ways that evidence a deep understanding of the wider implications of their practice, and their role in creating a just world.

Further to the topic of other research this portfolio might suggest, is the acknowledgement that power is embedded in organisational structures, policies, procedures and established practices. Research that works to make explicit how that power, exercised only through the faithful implementation of accepted, and expected organisational norms, informs the boundaries of possibilities for organisations and their players.

As a final comment, there is much work to be done in building collective capabilities in executive groups to thoroughly investigate topics associated with threat or embarrassment for the group. The phenomenon of undiscussables, while originally identified many years ago, remains a sensitive indicator of imbalanced power relations. Those power relations have deep and far reaching affect on the decision-

making capability of the executive team who exercises them. In addition, the wider community remains vulnerable to decisions made by resource rich companies. This portfolio of research renews interest in undiscussables, integrates that interest into the rich and active methodologies of AR and CAL, and presents new knowledge that bears strong impact on practice.

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1st Article published in the Action Learning: Research and Practice Journal

'I think we should take this offline...':conversational patterns that undermine effective decision making in action learning sets

'I think we should take this offline . . .': conversational patterns that undermine effective decision making in action learning sets

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Collective decision making is an increasing requirement in organizations where the emphasis is on team work at every level. It is, however, very complex and difficult to achieve in practice. Too frequently, important discussions are bypassed or, while the majority of the meeting participants remain mute, decisions are being made by a vocal few. In other words, the meeting may at first appear to be inclusive in its decision making but the reality may be starkly different. In addition, very little is known about how senior executive groups go about attempting to develop collective decisions. In this action learning action research (ALAR) study, which extended over a six-month period, conversational patterns were identified in which the AL set engaged at precisely the point where they failed to achieve their aim of openly addressing important issues. Through an analysis of three of these patterns, and drawing on the work of Argyris and others, this article demonstrates how difficult topics were avoided by the group, thereby compromising the executives group's capacity to engage in effective collective decision making.

Keywords: collective decision making; undiscussables; senior executives

Introduction

For some years now I have made a living as a consultant who helps senior executive teams make decisions. I have facilitated meetings where senior teams of large and small organizations have, among other things, determined their important business priorities, solved pressing problems, clarified key projects or simply agreed the steps required to work better with each other. My occupation prompts a very reasonable question: 'Why can't they do that by themselves?' This very question has sometimes puzzled my own clients. They seem to be able to progress complex and difficult issues when I am facilitating the meeting, but on their own, they can tend to flounder. Their conversation often becomes stilted or defensive, big decisions are put off or, perhaps even worse, they get made but with patchy involvement in the discussion by the team. Indeed, taking the discussions 'offline' to a subsequent meeting can become a well worn strategy. In addition, even though at first blush the meeting might appear to be a collective exercise, the decisions that do get made often suffer from insufficient group analysis, uncertain collective commitment to the decision, high levels of frustration and flawed implementation. And my clients are not the only ones with this experience. Wilkinson (2004, 2005), Mosvick and Nelson (1996) and Timm (1997) have made similar observations.

Consequently, I began to focus my attention on understanding what goes wrong in non-facilitated senior executive meetings and what can be done about it. I approached a willing senior executive team in a multinational biotech corporation who, after a series of explorative discussions, agreed to become an action learning (AL) set. In practice, this meant two main

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things. First, that they formed a shared commitment to achieving something, in this case to improving the way they met together and made decisions on behalf of their company. Second, that they similarly committed to systematically reflecting on their actions and planning while attempting to achieve, thereby simultaneously generating learning. In turn, I also looked carefully at the discussions the group engaged in with themselves and me in the context of being an AL set and, in doing so, brought an action research (AR) approach to deepening insights gained through the work of the AL set. In practice this meant that I engaged in my own action, reflection, planning cycle in relation to my participation in the AL set. In other words, I adopted an Action Learning Action Research (ALAR) methodology. This six-month journey provided some insight into the persistent conversational patterns displayed by the set that undermined their intention to face big organizational issues and make decisions together. It is suggested that understanding the patterns that emerged with this AL set can assist other groups who wish to avoid these patterns, or ones like them, and their far-reaching unintended consequences and instead engage in effective collective decision making on important matters.

The challenge of collective leadership for senior teams

In recent times, it has been advocated that one of the most pressing challenges for senior executive teams is to become just that: a team (Bradford and Cohen 1998; Runde and Flanagan 2008; Wageman et al. 2008; Zenger and Folkman 2009). Both Joiner and Josephs (2007) and Sinclair (2007) articulate this challenge, calling for our historical notion of leadership where a single heroic figure stands against all odds to lead the way to be replaced by the notion of a team of people who vulnerably reflect with each other, share leadership with each other and together offer leadership to others. The implications of this more collective picture of leadership are as wide as they are deep. Perhaps one of the most important implications is in regard to how senior groups reach decisions and the associated expression of power this process represents. It has been previously identified that the right to make decisions is a primary expression of power within organizations (Miller, Hickson, and Wilson 1996). And, as others have noted, the making of decisions 'out in the open' not only involves collective reflection that is likely to make more visible existing power relations but is also a practical means of sharing power within the group (Vince 2002). Therefore, the challenge of engaging in collective decision making is a practical expression of a sharing of power within senior executive groups and a move toward a more collective vision of leadership. In other words, collective decision making would appear to be an important subset of the larger category of collective leadership and it was this very challenge of collective decision making that the AL set involved in this study committed to address. Interestingly, addressing this challenge effectively requires many and varied skills, which according to Sinclair (2007) are generally not included in corporate leadership development programs.

With regard to senior teams, the challenge of collective decision making has high stakes. As has been previously suggested, and demonstrated in recent research, the implications for senior teams who are able to effectively share power within their own team through collective decision making are far reaching. For example, Wageman et al. (2008), in their exhaustive analysis of effective senior teams, found that the financial performance of the organisation is sensitive to the ability within the senior teams to make collective decisions. They show that those senior teams who simply update one another with activities within their own departments and who provide recommendations only to the decision making CEO lead less successful organizations than their power-sharing peers.

For senior executive groups, indeed probably any group responsible for the taking of action, the making of decisions together represents the final visible outcome of their discussion. For this

reason, it is commonly held that there exists a strong relationship between the quality of group discussion and the quality of decisions that emerge from that group. McLain Smith (2008) goes further to suggest the success of any team depends on the strength of their relationships. At the same time, there is also widespread agreement that corporate meetings are generally frustrating and poor in quality. For example Wilkinson (2005) actually declared a war on ineffective meetings and Timm (1997) also found a general frustration among executives with the meetings they attend. The questions that emerge are: 'What does effective collective decision making actually look like, and why is so difficult to do?'

To answer these important questions, it seems helpful to first identify the two main factors involved in collective decision making. I have derived these from a synthesis of my own extensive experience as a consultant and the insights of published facilitators (Dick 1991; Schwarz 2002; Wilkinson 2004). Both factors will be discussed and the various behavioral criteria identified for each. The following description separates them though in practice they are addressed simultaneously by a group that engages in collective decision-making. It is proposed that it is the attendance to these two factors that makes effective collective decision making so apparently difficult.

The first factor is the organisation of the tasks that the group must engage to make collective decisions. Practically speaking, this relates to the design of the meeting structure and the sequencing and execution of a rational meeting process that provides for shared involvement, analysis and final decision-making by the group. With reference to what this might look like in senior executive groups, certain behavioral criteria might usefully be included. First, data relevant to the decision is shared rather than unevenly possessed across the group. Second, analysis of that data follows the sharing of it. This analysis does not require all participants to speak, however it might include exchanges on relationships within the data, causes behind the data and inferences made on the data. Dick (1991) makes a special point of separating and sequencing these two tasks and explains that observing the fundamental difference between information collection and analysis is often overlooked in unstructured discussion. Likewise Wilkinson (2004) provides distinct tools for 'gathering information' and 'processing information' and recommends they are used in that order. Third, the question relevant to the final decision is then openly posed.

The second factor is the active management of the social context in which those tasks are done. For the purposes of this discussion, I am confining the scope of social context to the inter-personal emotional dynamic present in the group itself while the various group tasks are being done. Of course there are broader social contexts within which the group itself is nested, which impact on the group's capacities to enact collective decision making, Here, though, it is the emotional dynamic of the meeting that is of principal interest: this dynamic will not only be reflected in the group's interactions, but the group's interactions, in turn, shape the emotional landscape. This notion is akin to Fox's (2009) argument that talk is often both in context to something else and the context to further talk. The follow-on to this is that the emotional experience of the participants, while arguably a personal phenomenon, is also very much a collective experience, being shaped and formed by their collective interactions. Interestingly, Vince (2001) points out that the emotions of participants provide important information about the presence and use of power within the interactions. Therefore, there exists a direct link between the active reflection upon and management of the group's emotional experience and the making visible of power relations within the group. Ultimately, active management of the social context present within the group is an essential part of effective group decision-making.

Likewise, various behavioral criteria might be might be applied to that management (Argyris 1992; Bohm 1996; Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2000). These might include

making observations of each other and sharing related inferences, (rather than inferences alone), expressing one's emotion rather than simply speaking 'out of them' and a willingness to reflect on one's own perspective.

While both of these two factors represent significant challenges to a decision making group, the challenge of managing the social context appears be the larger of the two. A fuller explanation about the challenges of managing the social context, how failing to openly address the emotional context of the meeting may result in particular conversational patterns and the wider implications of these persistent patterns on decision making within teams, and on their business, are the main constituents of this paper. In this way, I hope to contribute to this field in a way that provides practical assistance to those who care about these important matters.

Developing the ALAR approach

Over the six-month period of the research, the senior management team became an AL set. As a consultant who sought to develop a more systematic inquiry with this team, I developed an approach that combined AL and AR, an approach that has come to be termed ALAR. As others have shown (Coghlan and Coughlan 2006; Sankaran et al. 2001; Swepson et al. 2003) these two approaches can be combined usefully to create learning both for the AL set and the researcher who may bring additional reflection to the action and reflection engaged in by the set. It is this reflection upon reflection that may be the central distinguishing feature of the ALAR approach. This layering of reflection may also offer some means of addressing the challenge that AL itself does not usually address existing power relations and challenge prevailing organizational structures (Fenwick 2003), although Fenwick herself does provide a useful guide to help make AL sets more emancipatory. In the case of the research discussed in this article, it was my added reflections and analysis on the AL set *as researcher* that were instrumental in identifying the conversational patterns that tended to lock existing power relations in place.

Figure 1 shows the sequence of meetings that were included in the research, the relationship between the AL and AR parts of the project is also indicated. The ALAR approach described in
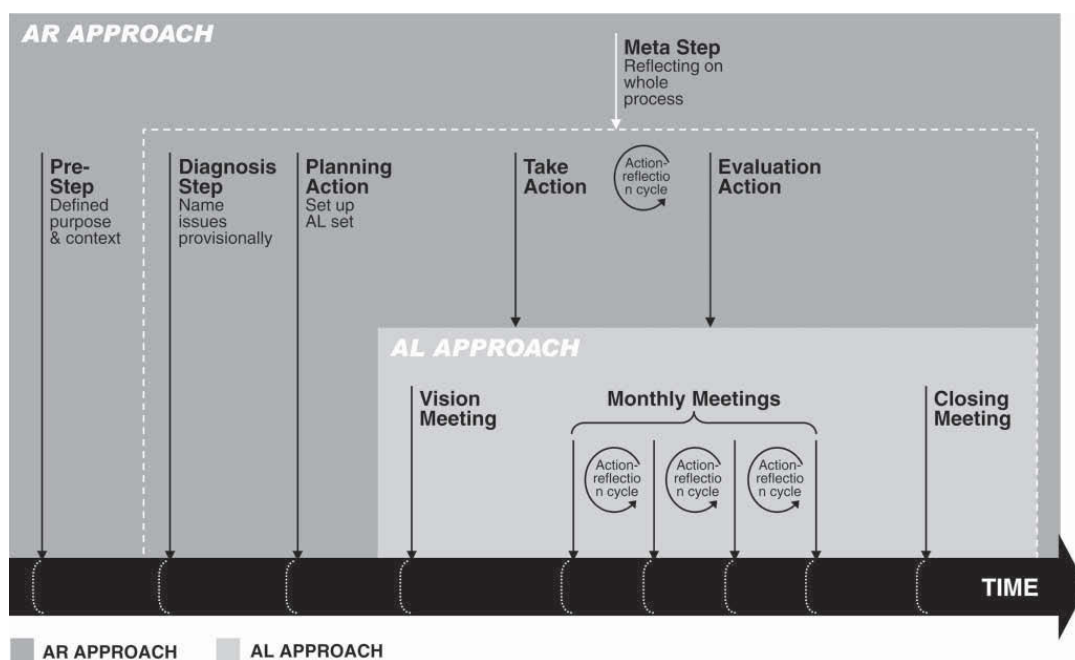

Figure 1. The ALAR approach.

the figure follows the principles set out by Zuber-Skeritt (1996), which were further refined by Coghlan and Coughlan (2006).

With regard to the AL component of the project, first a few words about the set themselves. To qualify to be an AL set, the management team, which was comprised of six people, committed themselves to the notion and practice of 'learning-from-talking-about-action-and-acting-from-that-learning' (Fox 2009). This commitment was evidenced in their willingness to engage in a facilitated reflection on the meetings themselves, develop subsequent action plans and work to execute those plans. While I was the facilitator of their collective reflection, I was also considered to be part of the AL set.

The set initially engaged in a vision meeting, where they formed collective agreement on the key characteristics of the meetings they wished to create together. This was followed by four monthly meetings where they not only went about their usual business but also engaged in the AL cycle of retrospectively observing and reflecting on their behaviour in the meeting in the light of their vision and planning action for subsequent monthly meetings. Between each of the meetings, one-on-one interviews were also conducted.

As indicated in Figure 1, the vision meeting and subsequent four monthly meetings of the senior team AL set were preceded, paralleled and followed by the steps associated with AR that accompanied the AL set meetings. These steps were based upon the action research cycle of a pre-step, main steps and meta step (Coghlan and Coughlan 2006). The AR component of this project enabled further reflection and analysis on data generated by the AL set as they executed their action, reflection and planning cycle. It was this further reflection and analysis that have provided the insights and knowledge that primarily comprise this article.

The process of generating and analyzing the data created by the AL set included the following steps. First, the meetings and associated debriefs were audio recorded and transcribed. Second, I engaged in an initial thematic analysis of the transcript. The analysis applied to the text generated thematic categories was informed by my extensive experience as a professional facilitator of senior executive decision making meetings, the literature on collective decision making and my ongoing discussions with the AL set involved in this work. More specifically, the text was examined for times of emotional charge, or when there seemed to be awkwardness, extended pauses or even laughter. Mindell (1993, 2000) and others (Diamond and Spark Jones 2004) identifie these behaviours as often representing 'hot spots' where a group is nearing an 'edge' of some kind. By 'edge' is meant conversational territory that seems unknown or significantly different to how the group knows itself to converse. The text offered various moments when such experiences appeared to be present and my own awareness and sensitivity as an experienced facilitator supported the identification of such moments. These moments were associated with various conversational manoeuvrers that were grouped into three main categories. These categories are detailed below. Third, I shared my analysis with the AL set for additional feedback and then, finally, continued my reflection on the conversational patterns that had been identified. The company, a high-tech biotechnology organisation, was given the pseudonym of Meditech to protect it's identify. The participants' names are also pseudonyms.

The shared vision developed by the AL set

Before looking more closely into the conversational patterns that undermined the desired change toward more collective leadership and decision-making in the AL set, it is appropriate to briefly describe the vision the group developed for the project. They developed six goals that described their desired achievements in relation to their meetings. Their vision included agreements to aspire toward genuine collective problem solving on important organizational issues, taking a whole organisation view rather than simply one that looked through the lens of their own

departmental needs and an increased level of satisfaction in working together. In addition, the set listed some behaviors they believed would assist them in realizing these aspirations. Some were related to structural factors, others to the social. They included reversing the order of the agenda to consider future issues first, ensuring time was allocated to high level issues, requesting and providing constructive criticism to each other, exercising the full right of response to challenge and engaging in active listening when helpful.

It was also agreed that my role would be primarily facilitative, with the understanding that this role can at times quite naturally become one that provides some support or brief tuition.

The conversational patterns observed in the AL set

Over the six-month period, the AL set implemented a number of changes in their meetings with the intention of achieving their vision. Most of these initiatives specifically addressed goals that related to the development and execution of better structure for their meetings. As an example of one such initiative, the set altered their meeting agenda to reduce time spent on historical matters, such as monthly reports and meeting minutes, and increased time allocated to forward looking organizational issues. While those initiatives provided some improvement to the monthly half-day meetings, they will not be discussed in detail in this paper. Rather, persistent conversational patterns that were at odds with the desired change of the AL set are presented and discussed here. In each case, these patterns prevented the group addressing important organizational problems. Even with the regular review of their goals, these conversational patterns remained.

In particular, three main conversational patterns sabotaged the group's ability to achieve their desired change. In each pattern, a number of important but possibly threatening thoughts or feelings about the meeting (its process, content or the other participants) were withheld rather than raised directly in the meeting. This withholding had the effect of preventing the AL set from addressing the kinds of organizational concerns they expressly agreed to address. Why were they withheld? There are two main reasons, and these two reasons probably overlap: the belief that to raise the issue would have triggered conflict that would have been too difficult to handle and that the thoughts and feelings themselves were at the edge of the speakers awareness (possibly because they were somehow uncomfortable) and therefore not readily accessible. The conversational strategies described below enabled the group to avoid potentially threatening topics. However, and perhaps ironically, the chosen strategy ultimately sabotaged the conversation by triggering further defensiveness in the team. And while the pattern had negative consequences in relation to emotional context of the meeting, it also had the unintended consequence of directing the meeting away from systemic issues toward more superficial concerns. I have titled the three main patterns the Interrogation, the Venting and the Judgment. I will elaborate on each of these below.

The Interrogation

This conversational pattern is evidenced below from the transcript of a monthly meeting where Isaac was asked to present to the group the escalation process in relation to the provision of technical service to customers. This system was designed to send automated email alerts to various levels of management when service jobs logged into the system remained unresolved. Unfortunately, the first case shown on the example sheets showed a rather concerning time lapse between the customer registering their technical service requirement and action taken by the technical services staff. The ensuing conversation was then more dominated by the details of

the case shown than by the process that Isaac was attempting to explain to the group. The exchanges below mark the beginning of the conversation:

Isaac: The flow chart basically is fairly self-explanatory, a call comes in, gets logged in the system, then there's a certain number of filters … [Isaac continues for a few extra lines on the system]

Renaldo: Is this an actual – one that probably happened?

Isaac: This is an actual one, yeah.

Renaldo: Because I'm looking at this escalation process and it looked like nothing happened for two weeks because Matt was on annual leave.

Isaac: Oh, yeah. I read that as well … I did look at that as well when I printed it out. I was saying to Jenny, hmm, we'll need to look at that, but basically, at the end of the day now, we have got back to customer, customer hasn't replied, and that's why it's still open …

Roger: So the instrument was sent in on the 29th of the 7th?

Isaac: Yep, so in-house repair.

Roger: So, and the 29th of the 9th, which is two months later, the customer's got a quote but we haven't heard back from her.

The exchange continued for some minutes in a similar vein to that shown above. Isaac was trying to answer pointed questions on the actual case while trying to assert that this new system is of great value to the organisation.

A key issue with this conversation is that none of the three parties involved directly expressed their underlying feelings on the topic. Renaldo and Roger did not express their concerns about technical service delivery in general and the poor performance they felt characterized this department. This was confirmed when the meeting was debriefed, where the conversation was as followed:

But in reality, they [Renaldo and Roger] don't really want to talk about that case as much as they want to talk about issues of ownership and accountability when it comes to servicing – and when I say that, both are nodding. (Paul [the researcher] speaking to Isaac)

At the same time, Isaac's tone in the recording suggested he was uncomfortable in this exchange but he did not bring his discomfort up directly in meeting. He was being exposed and was ill equipped to provide the detailed answers being requested of him by Renaldo and Roger. In the debrief of the meeting Isaac made this admission:

Paul: I think you felt uncomfortable with that discussion.
Isaac: Yeah, I didn't have the backup.

If any of the three parties had been able to express their underlying feelings during the discussion, it is quite likely that the conversation may have naturally moved to the deeper more systemic issues Renaldo and Isaac believe existed in relation to technical service. Unfortunately, those issues remained un-discussed.

The Venting

The second conversational pattern identified is below evidenced in a brief conversation between Wanitha, the Finance Manager, and Isaac in a monthly meeting. In this conversation, Wanitha spoke with significant emotional strength to Isaac about New Zealand service contract revenues. While the text below does not show Wanitha's tone directly, she does challenge Isaac very strongly (and with a degree of overt aggression) about the volume of service contracts existing in New Zealand. Roger, (the General Manager of the group) begins the exchanges shown below:

Roger: Revenues looking pretty good?

Isaac: Yeah, New Zealand is sort of the struggle . . . [but], contracts are starting to build up so there's a few . . . that'll grow and we should pick up a heap of contracts this month.

Wanitha: What's so busy over in New Zealand, because you don't have many contracts and there isn't a lot of re-age rental over there?

Isaac: In New Zealand? Oh, there's quite a few of our instruments out there, isn't there?

Wanitha: Right down, it's right down.

Isaac: Oh, there's still a hell of a lot out there.

Wanitha: Hell of a lot?

Roger: What's right down, Wanitha?

Wanitha: Oh well I did an audit when I was over there in April . . . and it was just gone, gone, gone, gone, gone it looks like you know, you're lucky if there is like twenty instruments or something. To me it's just way down.

Renaldo: They're consolidating labs.

Wanitha: To me it's just not much there.

Wanitha expressed strong feeling while holding the point that the service contract business in New Zealand is 'gone, gone, gone, gone, gone . . .'. This language is filled with feeling but short on detail and associated reasoning. In a one-on-one interview later, Wanitha confirmed that her strong feeling related to more than the number of service contracts open in New Zealand but in fact to broader aspects of Isaac and his team's performance. However, in the meeting, the conversation did not extend to those underlying issues that had prompted her initial challenge. Therefore, her strong feeling was somewhat out of proportion with the issue to which it was attached. The consequence of this strongly charged contribution was a momentary shut down rather than an exploration of the issues behind Wanitha's strong feeling. It would seem safe to propose that the articulation of Wanitha's unspoken underlying concern may have provided the basis for a wider, more far reaching topic than service contracts in New Zealand. Those underlying concerns were withheld.

The Judgment

The third conversational pattern is evidenced below by series of comments made in a monthly meeting where Jacques had stepped into the caretaker General Manager position following the departure of Roger. Jacques had attended the first monthly meeting, but had not attended any subsequent monthly meetings until the fourth monthly meeting. Jacquess opened the meeting with the following comment:

> I noticed the meeting, the first meeting, we had a bit of difficulty in determining what we were actually discussing in some of the points so – from Amanda's perspective [formally Roger's and now Jacques's personal assistant] – what I'd like to do is make sure that when we are discussing points, any of the key issues that come out of that we do record them . . .

Here Jacques shared his assertion that the senior team meeting he attended some months earlier lacked clarity in determining what topic was being discussed, although he also mentioned that this was Amanda's perspective. (Amanda was the PA to the General Manager). Jacques did seem to concur with Amanda's conclusion since he went on to make recommendations based on it. Unfortunately, Jacques did not share how he reached that conclusion. That information was withheld.

The pattern described above happened on a number of occasions when Jacques advocated a particular position. He appeared to utilize his position as caretaker GM to offer his judgments on the group and their performance. Specifically he said in reference to the senior group (or company as a whole, it is unclear): 'I think we're just in reactionary mode at the moment'.

Jacques did not explain how he reached this conclusion and in turn, no one in the team requested further information from Jacques on how he had. With this information withheld, the group did not engage Jacques in reference to this potentially important and far reaching conclusion he was drawing about the team and/or the company.

Later, in the midst of a discussion about the key strategic goals of the company, Jacques offered this contribution:

Jacques: So each of us, the sales, the service etc. should have measures and metrics in place that we can understand how we're achieving that. And that's what I want to do this year – is make sure each group has got a series of metrics in place both from an individual and also an – from a – if you like a team perspective – that we've got something to even aim at and look at you know and achieve. Comments?
[Long pause]

Renaldo: I got nothing.

Jacques: Yeah OK. I think – I think it's that alignment that we really need to create that's got to be far more effective probably than what we've had in the past . . .

Here Jacques advocated an initiative where each team (and individuals) clarified specific metrics that can measure performance. He did this presumably on the assumption that such metrics did not exist, but he did not test this assumption. He went on to say that the alignment in the company was currently well below that required but did not explain what he had noticed to prompt this thinking or the reasoning that he had applied to these observations. The team did not respond in any significant way to his proposition and it was not raised again in the meeting.

Of particular note is that Jacques's judgments were not investigated by the team. They did not make inquiry into his thinking and therefore the conversation stayed relatively shallow. The group members in turn seemed to have made a decision not to explore Jacques's judgments, but did not explain that manoeuver or what thinking had led them to that decision. This would have represented a potentially awkward conversation and, in order to avoid that discomfort, that conversation was bypassed. A further discussion about this collective dynamic is included below. However, it is appropriate here to say here that without that inquiry, an ultimately far-reaching discussion about the company performance was bypassed. Yet these more strategic and enterprise-wide discussions were the very shared intention of the team.

Discussion

The three patterns described above were in each case were evidence of a team that struggled to find expression for thoughts or feelings that were potentially threatening. The failure to express those thoughts and feelings often created further defensiveness, corralled the conversation away from important topics and thereby significantly hampered the AL's set intention towards collective decision making on strategic issues. This result was entirely contrary to the agreed goals of the AL set. Indeed, in my experience, 'Let's take this offline' is not an uncommon phrase used by someone wielding power to terminate an uncomfortable interaction. In this discussion I will relate the patterns identified above to the work of Argyris and suggest that they offer a useful extension to his work. Kegan and Lahey's (2009) theorization of competing commitments held by the group will further supplement this analysis for the purpose of facilitating a deeper reflection and analysis on these conversational patterns.

In each of the conversational patterns evidenced above, feelings of concern or discomfort were withheld in order to prevent conflict or were at a place at the edge of the speaker's awareness and therefore difficult to easily access and directly express. Of particular note is that this process of marginalization and avoidance of uncomfortable topics appears to be a strategy that in turn is difficult to discuss or is likewise at the edge of the speaker's awareness.

This dynamic is very much aligned to Argyris's (1990) insightful observation that, in the decision-making groups he studied, the un-discussable topic was sealed away from the group's attention by making the fact that the particular topic was un-discussable, in turn, un-discussable. In other words, the group did not raise particular topics because of their potential to create tension and this maneuver of avoidance was also not discussed. To do so would have neutralized the very point of the initial avoidance. It is suggested the identification of these patterns may make it a little easier for groups to become aware that the phenomenon of un-discussables, as Argyris described it, may be at work. It should be included here that it may be an unhelpful assumption that every topic that prompts tension in a group is worthy of the groups' attention.

What is by now most likely very plain is that the tension created in the meeting by the defensiveness demonstrated by those actually doing the talking is likewise also being avoided as a conversational topic by the wider group. The collective tension created by the conversational pattern between just two or three members is thought too difficult to discuss and/or is also marginalized and placed at the edge of each of the other team members' awareness. Therefore, there is engaged a kind of collective manoeuvre to avoid discussion of the tension in the room. Noonan (2007), in his exploration of Argyris's work, identifies a similar pattern when he presented a scenario where two members engaged in a 'defensive routine', which in turn triggered the team to engage in their own defensive routine of withdrawal and silence. The ultimate consequence is a collective conversational pattern that prevents prickly moments in the meeting being discussed and ongoing defensiveness and superficiality becoming the norm.

The effect of this phenomenon, where a defensive conversational pattern displayed by two or three triggers avoidance in the wider group, is seriously detrimental to the team's ability to engage in genuine collective decision-making. It is entirely predictable that topics of conversation that address organization-wide problems might be somewhat exposing, and therefore a little threatening, to some members of a senior team. The team's ability (or lack of) to bring this discomfort to the centre of their awareness and actively manage it while engaging in the required conversation is critical to the team engaging in effective decision-making.

The end result of the process described above is that for the AL set studied, their intended team dynamic was significantly different to the one they continued to create through their conversation. This is the same dilemma that Argyris (1992) described when he pointed out that the groups he studied showed a gap between their espoused values and their values in action.

Argyris held that this gap was caused by a widespread cultural indoctrination that tended to condition all of us to behave defensively if caught in a potentially threatening situation. Kegan and Lahey provide a somewhat different, but complementary proposition. They investigated the notion of competing commitments, first in individuals (2001), then later in the collective (2009). They show that while groups may have a stated commitment to, for instance open robust communication on matters of substance, they may at the same time possess a less examined commitment which will be aligned in entirely the opposite direction. An example of this might be to avoid conflict and group tension. Consistent with this less visible commitment will be a set of group behaviours aligned perfectly to it. These might be, for example, to maintain silence when one or two members of the group express charged negative emotion, for the group to direct its attention to another matter when tension arises or to avoid putting contentious issues on the groups meeting agenda altogether. Kegan and Lahey maintain that while the second, un-discussed commitment remains beyond the groups attention, goals and action plans to achieve the first, public commitment are unlikely to succeed. While such a line of thought might not be entirely new, their methodology to assist groups to systematically uncover their competing commitments is. Kegan and Lahey are keen to assert that the presence of a competing commitment does not signal that the groups' original commitment is insincere or not heartfelt.

Rather it shows the group has two sets of commitments, which are orientated in opposite directions. They utilize the metaphor of having one foot on the accelerator and one foot on the brake.

But what drives this second, competing commitment that is often so successful in preventing the first, more public commitment to be achieved? Kegan and Lahey (2009) explain that in each case, a 'big assumption' of some kind provides the engine for the commitment. In relation to the example described above the group may have a big assumption that if conflict were to arise, it would disintegrate and overwhelm the group and leave them helpless and ineffectual. Kegan and Lahey provide both theoretical and practical evidence that, while such an assumption remains unexamined, it persists as an uncontested truth held by the collective. In that case, the second less visible commitment will remain very much intact. In summary, Kegan and Lahey not only provide some basis for thought in regard to why the kind of conversational patterns we have identified can persist, they also provide a uniquely structured approach to assisting groups to reflect deeply on the thinking patterns which might give rise to these conversational patterns.

But what practical questions might this research pose for the AL sets and their facilitators? Some of those might include: 'How can I/we agree to bring more awareness to our conversations, and how those conversations may be signaling important unspoken concerns?' or 'How can we increase the level of permission within the set to discuss the way we are discussing our matters?' and 'How will we know if our meetings have only the appearance of collective decision making but not fulfilling the criteria outlined above for effective collective decision making?'. Action learning sets who intend to engage in collective decision making may find raising these questions for discussion early and during their work together may find it to be a very worthwhile exercise.

As a final comment, the question could be posed: What did the AL set in the study actually learn from their experience in this ALAR project? The set did make a number of structural changes to their decision-making meetings, which they agreed were very valuable. Their initial feedback on the patterns I have uncovered has been so far minimal. A comprehensive, confidential company report, which includes a description of the patterns, has been provided to the company as an initial step. Further steps with the AL set include the facilitation of their thorough review of the report. This review will include, with their permission, an exploration of the conversational patterns and the possible competing commitments that may be driving those patterns.

Conclusion

Action Learning sets, and, indeed, most managerial teams, are increasingly tasked with the challenge of reaching collective decisions that enjoy genuine commitment. Collective decisions have usually benefitted from rigorous exchange on potentially threatening topics. This research explores the significant challenges encountered by AL sets to engage in such exchanges and the implications of failing to overcome those challenges. In this case, the conversations created by the AL set became defensive, superficial and prevented the set from achieving their agreed goal of addressing important organizational issues and making collective decisions. Three specific conversational patterns were identified as being used by the group to avoid potentially threatening topics. While these patterns may appear in conversations between only two or three within the larger group, they also trigger a wider collective pattern within the group. In particular, as the remainder of the group observed the conversational pattern and its associated tension, they in turn acted in a coordinated but un-discussed way to avoid discussing the tension. Understanding these patterns represents a practical help to groups who want to alert themselves

to their collective avoidance and subsequently engage in more effective collective decision-making.

Note

1. Work was carried out in association with the University of Technology Sydney, Haymarket, NSW, Australia.

Notes on contributor

Paul Donovan is a management consultant and doctoral student at the University of Technology, Sydney. He is currently completing his professional doctorate at the University of Technology Sydney where he is researching collective decision making in senior executive groups. He has also been a professional facilitator and trainer for 15 years, most of this time as director of his own consultancy.

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Article published at the Proceedings of the 6th ICBM (International Colloquium of Business and Management) Thailand 2013

Beyond Undiscussables?

Why surfacing undiscussables in working groups is more important than ever

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Proceedings of the 6th International Colloquium on Business and Management (ICBM) Thailand 2013

Abstract

Decades ago Chris Argyris made famous the notion of 'undiscussables'. He defined them as topics that were avoided by groups, where their avoidance was also not discussed (Argyris, 1986, 1990). This paper argues that the problem of undiscussables remains a major obstacle to organizational learning, especially given our emerging understanding of collective learning. It presents recently published research (Donovan, 2011) relating to identifying undiscussables and innovative ways of surfacing and managing them.

While 'undiscussables' might be old news, it's also now very current. The nature of learning and becoming is increasingly understood to be a social phenomena, richly linked to the dynamic of the groups in which we live and work (Iverson, 2011; Stacey, 2003). The traditional Human Resources (HR) model of individuals learning through acquisition, in apolitical situations, is being replaced by concepts of collectives learning in complex, contradictory contexts textured by intricate power relations (Fenwick, 2010). At the same time, organizational

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learning is said be located at the very fold between order and chaos, between predictability and novelty, a place in 'tension' (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2005). This more nuanced, practice based understanding of learning places center stage the dynamic of the group, where 'undiscussables' are powerful in shaping that dynamic. In addition, and perhaps not surprisingly, undiscussables have also been found to be located close to the most critical business issues for executive groups (Donovan, 2011).

Unfortunately, undiscussables by nature remain mostly invisible, providing at best only subtle signs of their presence. Argyris's 'fancy footwork' remains for most an elusive phrase. It is argued that for many groups, working to surface undiscussables remains a singularly potent strategy to facilitate learning and to increase their agency. Mindell (2000, 2002), through his conceptualization of 'hot spots' provides practical help in this task, as does Donovan (2011) with his three conversational patterns that accompany avoidance of some more threatening topic. This paper concludes by unfolding these practical strategies to surface undiscussables and consequently facilitate learning and agency.

Introduction

The average business meeting has a bad reputation (Wilkinson, 2005). A chorus of authors both from academia and management traditions has commented on the disappointing and frustrating experience of executives in their everyday meeting (Schwarz, 2002; Welton, 2005; Wilkinson, 2005). Petz (2011) reports that a recent USA Today questionnaire showed that respondents found 49% of office meetings be a waste of time. That finding presents no personal surprise based on my own experience as a corporate facilitator and consultant over the last 12 years or so.

While the problem with meetings is undoubtedly multifactorial, Chris Argyris, who many consider the father of modern organisational development, advocated that a central problem with executive meetings was the presence of 'non-discussables', that is, those things thought or felt in a conversation on a threatening topic but not said (Argyris, 1978, 1986, 1990, 1993). This was a term he coined, and which later became known as undiscussables.

Now, decades later, the problem is taking on new dimension. Executive meetings, in our increasingly networked and collaborative world, are now understood to be a critical site for generating learning and getting work done, where learning is central to knowing the right work to do. Learning theorists have proposed a migration away from the traditional focus on the individual learning through acquisition, to a collective, practice based understanding of how learning actually works. Therefore, we now understand that meetings, and working together, are a critical site for organisational learning. In other words, the learning that for decades has been prized as the main strategy to preserve our companies is in

good part reliant on the everyday business meeting. The trouble is, commonly those business meetings suffer from the presence of undiscussables, and the resultant dynamic is resistant to learning. Consequently, undiscussables are now understood to have more far-reaching implications than ever.

Building understanding about how undiscussables work, why they are so important, and how they can be identified and surfaced remains a top priority for relevant practitioners, researchers and business executives alike. This paper attempts to contribute to that understanding by reviewing the latest research, including that published by the author, and distilling practical, actionable strategies.

How do 'undiscussables' work?

It was Chris Argyris who first coined the term non-discussables, which later became known as undiscussables. His writing was centrally located in the field of Management Studies, with an emphasis on organizational learning. He contended that an organization's inability to address issues that might create threat or embarrassment creates non-discussables and that they, in turn, lead to managerial mediocrity, poor market performance and malaise (Argyris, 1995). In other words, non-discussables prevents learning, and results in poorly conceived decisions. Conversely, as its leaders learn to engage in conversations that address these "non-discussables", they increase their ability to create robust conversations, thoroughly interrogate various strategies, create organizational learning and ultimately make effective

decisions. Argyris also maintained that the ability to do this is more necessary in a world becomingly increasingly complex (Argyris, 2003).

With the intention to shed light on how organizational defensiveness actually works, Argyris explains that when issues emerge that prompt feelings of being threatened or embarrassed, groups tend to navigate around the issue or "cover up". Not only that, they do not discuss that they are avoiding the issue and in doing so, cover up the "cover up". This strategy has the effect of sealing the original contentious issue away from the groups' interactions and therefore ensuring that problematic decisions required by the group will not be dealt with directly. He went on to say the groups' behaviour in navigating around the contentious issue is in fact "skillful" since it is produced in milliseconds, is spontaneous, automatic and unrehearsed. For this reason, he calls it "skilled incompetence" because it produces what they do not intend (mediocre managerial stewardship) and they do so repeatedly, even though no one is forcing them. Argyris explains that this "fancy footwork" which enables the group to avoid contentious issues leads to malaise within the organization as the employees become more and more non-questioning or challenging about the behaviour of the organizational groups to which they belong (1990).

Learning in Organisations

There seems little doubt that for organisations to succeed, and for them to play their role in creating a more just and sustainable world, they must learn. Yet, the

literature relating to organisational learning is complex, contradictory and contested. Indeed, one of the main points of agreement is that the field lacks cohesive, unitary definitions to bind it (Crossan, H., & White, 1999; Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999; Tsang, 1997). Interestingly, it is not even agreed that these contradictions are a bad thing. Clegg et al (2005) call for an acceptance of the divergence and inconsistencies within the field, suggesting they are an important part of the field continuing to learn.

In the 1990's, two broad streams of writing within this field operated side by side, and largely independently (Garavan & McCarthy, 2008; Rebelo & Gomes, 2008; Tsang, 1997). One stream related to the Learning Organisation, and was largely prescriptive, normative and intended for business people and HR professionals. The second related to organisational learning, and was focused on how learning actually happens in organisations. It was primarily academics and researchers who participated in this second stream.

By the end of the 1990's the flow of these streams started to wane, especially the one relating to the Learning Organisation. This coincided with an increasing number of critical reviews and reflections (Belasco, 1998; Clegg, et al., 2005; Fenwick, 2001; Stacey, 2003). These authors advocated that to use 'the learning organisation' language was to anthropomorphise something highly elusive, let alone inanimate. In addition, Fenwick (2001) says of the literature that upholds the learning organisation ideal;

"The organisation is thus construed as a unitary, definable, intelligent entity. It is not, nor is it stable and bounded….how can this fluctuating combination of sub-

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groups be totalized as a single, monolithic organism that somehow 'learns' and has memory?" (p78).

Consistent with the character of this field, Ortenblad (2005) gave a lively defense for the notion of organisational learning in his article "Of-course Organisations can learn!" by advocating that analysis at the individual level should not be done in exclusion to analysis at the organisational level.

While controversy regarding the learning organisation concept emerged, the concepts of collective learning seem to have steadily gained weight over the last few years and decades. Interestingly, even those who expressed doubt (sometimes cynicism) about the concept of the learning organisation seem convinced that individuals do not learn in isolation. While the original theories of organisational learning centralised the notion of individual learning (Elkjaer, 1999), recent literature has framed individual learning as insufficient as a means to create organisational learning and change (Aslam, T., Tanveer, Khan, & Shabbir, 2011; Garavan & McCarthy, 2008; Sessa & London, 2006; Shani & Dochery, 2003). Most commonly the individual, group and organisational learning are shown or implied to be nested circles, indicating systems within systems, each at different levels. Sessa and London (2006) said, "Organizational learning builds upon group learning, which is dependent on individual learning. Yet group learning is more than the learning of individuals in the group, and organizational learning is more than the patterns of behaviour established by groups in the organization" (p6).

Stacey (2003), who supported the fundamental notion of learning being social, looked to contribute a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between individual and group learning than the nested circles image suggested. Rather than place the collectives at some higher level than the individual, he maintains the individual and group arise together, and at the same time. Individuals form the social, while being formed by it. He maintained they are constitutive of each other and that interdependent individuals learn in the context of their exchanges with each other, that is, the collective. Consequently, he advocated that while learning was indeed social, the collective did not represent a higher system to the individual.

While this somewhat esoteric discussion about learning may create some interest, the notion that learning is basically a social affair, embedded in practice as we work together, has taken root (Elkjaer, 1999; Fenwick, 2010; Garavan & McCarthy, 2008; Iverson, 2011). This understanding stands somewhat contrary to the concerning observation that Human Resource Development literature bucks this trend by continuing to feature the traditional concepts of learning as individual acquisition (Fenwick 2010). Nevertheless, with this more collective understanding of learning comes the acknowledgement that it is deeply vested in the political forces that shape the social space. Power relations that shape and reshape the exchanges between workers equally inform the learning and action between them. These power relations are subtle, complex and changing and reflect not only the immediate members of the collective in question, but also of some who exercise power outside the group.

While locating learning in the collective obviously increases the complexity of the undertaking, Clegg et al (2005) moves to deepen that complexity by arguing that learning in organisations resides in places of ambiguity, uncertainty and the vulnerability of unknowingness. He also describes the learning journey to be straddling method and planned structure on one side and haphazard meandering without clear direction on the other. Consequently, to facilitate learning it is required that "learning becomes the task of providing room for multiple voices and creating openings for those voices" and "organisational learning can evolve through decentralised power…where there is no decentralised power, there is no organisational learning" (p149).

Undiscussables as a powerfully limiting factor in organisational learning

Undiscussables may be the most obvious (if indeed they ever are obvious) symptom of a power imbalance in a collective. Indeed, they give immediate evidence that the "multiple voices and openings for those voices" referred to earlier, that are required for learning, is not being facilitated. In such a context, one or more in a group may not experience the freedom and agency to express their concerns or reflections on a particular topic, but instead avoid the topic in question and withhold their thoughts and feelings. The multiplicity of voices is reduced, undiscussables generated and learning limited.

Importantly, and perhaps not surprisingly, at least one recent Action Research study found that undiscussable topics in the senior executive group studied overlapped with some of the most pressing strategic concerns for the organisation

(Donovan 2011). Placing those topics beyond the reach of the collective shielded them from the collective interrogation, critical reflection and planning that might be expected of the senior team on matters of import. Consequently, without the power balancing effect of open exchanges on the topic, existing imbalanced power relations became entrenched. Practically speaking, this was evidenced in the practice of just one or two from the senior team making important organisational decisions outside the meeting. The groups capacity to learn by evaluating the effect of action previously taken, consider their assumptions that they may be bringing to those reflections, and plan subsequent action, was hamstrung. Learning in those important areas was disabled.

Interestingly, Fenwick (2001) says one of the topics that may suffer from the 'cover up' of undiscussables is the topic of organisational learning itself. She said that questions including, what does organisational learning value, what kind of learning is invisible to the organisation and therefore deprioritised, how has learning become seconded by the priority of profits, and how is it being used to support existing imbalanced power relations are usually overlooked or avoided by managers and educators.

Practical approaches to working with undiscussables

Given the speed and complexity of interactions that occur in most executive meetings, practical assistance to executives and practitioners in helping them remain alert to the potential presence of important undiscussables is of value. Argyris provided some foundational approaches which will be discussed, followed by the more recent methodologies offered by Mindell and Donovan.

Argyris, in addition to his ground-breaking work defining undiscussables also provided practical means of working with them. Probably his most well known technique was the 'left hand column (LHC) exercise (Noonan, 2007; Senge, LKleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994) Participants were invited to identify a somewhat uncomfortable conversation (ideally with someone in their team) and write down the spoken dialogue on the right hand side of the page and their related withheld thoughts and feelings on the left hand side. Individuals were then invited to share their 'left hand column' with the group. He provides evidence that this tool, when mixed with his considerable interrogative ability can be successful in facilitating new conversations in topics previously avoided.

In my own professional experience however, this approach can have mixed success. In some cases, participants may not feel they have a sufficient sense of safety, or strong enough permission to speak, despite the invitation via the LHC exercise. In other words, simply being asked to speak what was previously withheld, after writing it on a page, may not be adequate to re-ddress the power imbalance that generated the undiscussable in the first place. In such cases the additional assistance offered by Mindell and Donovan may be of value.

Mindell (2000, 2002, 2010) was an early member of a growing group of researchers and authors who have applied concepts from complexity sciences to organisational development (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Karpiak, 2000). As a theoretical physicist, he may be more credible in doing so than some. As part of his conceptualizations Mindell describes groups as generating a 'field'. He described this 'field' as having a self-organizing property that supports the

realization of various 'roles'. The roles generated by the field are balanced, that is, polarities of each role exist in the field. For example, where one particular view on a topic exists within the group, the quality of the field is such that it can be assumed that an opposing view will also exist in the group, even if it is unexpressed. He describes the field as shaping the interactions within it, and being shaped by the interactions within it, and therefore suggested that focusing on one in exclusion of the other may be imbalanced. He also proposed the field to be constituted not just by the given set of interactions within it, but also by the wider societal or global context.

Of particular interest here is his related notion of 'hot spots'. A 'hot spot' is usually evidenced by an awkward silence, a felt tension, or nervous laughs or giggles. Mindell suggests that in such moments a polarized or opposite view to the dominating mindset is being felt in the field, but is struggling to be expressed. With these concepts in mind, groups can notice their own behaviour, and alert themselves to the possibility that thought and feelings are being withheld because a 'side' or polarity relating to the issue is somehow difficult to express. If attended to, groups may invite a new conversation, even on an old topic, and in doing so avoid generating and sustaining undiscussables, and their far-reaching negative consequences.

Donovan (2011), in his Action Research Study examined the conversational patterns of executive groups at precisely the time when strong feelings, awkwardness or discomfort seemed to be present in the group. The conversational patterns appeared to emerge because of collective tension present, but in all cases did not address the tension directly. Rather, the pattern seemed to be employed by the group to avoid another more threatening topic. The three

patterns were the 'interrogation', the 'venting' and the 'judgement'. The 'interrogation' was characterized by a strong interest, and often very direct questioning of a member (or members) of the group in relation to specific details of some work. While the questions usually carried an underlying sense of urgency, or irritation, those feelings were not discussed directly. Consequently, the interrogation worked to shield the group from the more jugular concerns that were driving the questions. The 'venting' pattern was characterized by one (or more) members using strong, emotionally charged language about a particular issue or topic. The effect of the 'vent' was to silence another group member or close down the topic, since most executive groups are very shy to have open conflict. Consequently the concern behind the vent remains unexplored and root causes to the issue identified were not discussed. The 'judgement' pattern was perhaps the subtlest of the three. It consisted of one or more members drawing conclusions on an important topic, stating the cause of something or describing something as 'right' or 'wrong' but not including their reasoning for those various inferences. The truthfulness of the statements was taken to be self-evident by the speaker, and others in the group did not inquire about their reasoning. Especially if used by someone who was higher in the organisations hierarchy, the result of this pattern was that the opposing view remained unexpressed in the group. Consequently, the exchanges in the group became one-sided, superficial, and various polarized views held in the group were withheld. Undiscussables resulted.

Donovan suggests that identifying and describing these conversational patterns could assist groups to avoid the avoidance that these patterns afforded. He argues

that doing so will reduce undiscussables and support executive meetings to fulfill their role as important sites of learning.

Conclusion

While the concept of undiscussables is not new, our understanding about the implications of them is growing. Organisational learning has more recently been conceived to be at least as collective as it is individual, and consequently deeply informed by the dynamic of the collective. Undiscussables are both an unambiguous reflection of the power relations that shape that dynamic, and a muscular resistor to the required power relations required for collective learning. Therefore, it is clear that groups who wish to create learning in their meetings should attend to their undiscussables as a matter of priority. The practical approaches of Argyris, Mindell and Donovan are presented and contrasted as means of addressing this important problem.

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2nd Article published in the Action Learning:

Research and Practice Journal

(to be published July 2014)

Leaders Behaving Badly: using power to generate

undiscussables in Action Learning sets

Leaders behaving badly: using power to generate undiscussables in action learning sets

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'Undiscussables' are topics associated with threat or embarrassment that are avoided by groups, where that avoidance is also not discussed. Their deleterious effect on executive groups has been a point of discussion for several decades. More recently critical action learning (AL) has brought a welcome focus to power relations within AL sets. This paper brings these two streams of research together by exploring the relationship between undiscussables and the exercise of power by AL leaders. Analysis of statements and actions at times of negative affect in various AL sets over a two-year period showed three distinct categories of activities of AL set leaders that seemed effective in generating undiscussables within the set. It is argued that each of these categories represented an exercise of power by AL set leaders as they accessed privilege associated with their rank. Also proposed is that these activities seemed to be done without awareness by the AL set leader, with that lack of awareness being central to achieving the result of undiscussables. The paper concludes by inviting both AL set leaders and members to consider the described activities as a means of growing awareness about their role in generating undiscussables.

Keywords: undiscussables; power; rank; action learning

Introduction

Undiscussables, formally known as 'non-discussables', have been a point of discussion for over 30 years. Their widespread and far-reaching effect on collective effectiveness has been well documented (Argyris 1986, 1990; Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2008). Chris Argyris, who first coined the term, maintained that they were in good part responsible for the 'fancy footwork' that predominates many meetings and prevents honest, robust inquiry of critical assumptions, problems and solutions.

At the same time, a growing literature identified as critical action learning (CAL) identifies action learning (AL) sets to be far from the neutral sites of learning perhaps once considered (Vince and Martin 1993; Vince 2001, 2004; Trehan 2011). In particular, the power relations at work within the set

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are now understood to be constantly forming and reforming, and while doing so shaping conversations, decision-making and learning within the set.

Relatively unexplored however is the relationship between power and undiscussables. While it should be acknowledged that anyone might participate in generating an undiscussable simply by withholding, how do leaders of AL sets, with the rank and privilege that comes with acknowledged positions of influence, exercise power in such a way that others might become more unwilling to disclose, and undiscussable topics or points of view are generated?

This study examines data collected over a two-year period of facilitating various AL sets. The data consisted of contributions and actions of AL members where negative affect was also apparent. As Vince (2001) has made clear, expression of emotions (especially negative ones) presents a unique window into power relations at work. They do not tell us everything, but rather tell us where to look carefully and examine. The various phrases and sentences were listed and repeatedly clustered as more data were added and literature was reviewed. Throughout the process, it became clear that contributions from AL set leaders were especially predominant, which in turn inflected the literature to be more focused on issues of power, privilege and rank. It is the findings of that process that are presented. Three particular clusters of AL set leader behaviors persisted through the analysis, specifically, dismissing topics, liberal expressions of anger and remaining remote and detached to others' needs. Each one represented ways which AL set leaders may generate undiscussables, but with little awareness that they are. With this information at hand, AL sets and their leaders may be better equipped to minimize undiscussables and their unwanted effects.

This paper continues with a description of the methodology, and then followed by a brief review of Argyris's work as foundational to understanding undiscussables. CAL is then consulted with a view to understanding the problem from those who make power relations within AL a deliberate focus. Next, key theorists, including Bourdieu, Mindell and Lukes, are then briefly reviewed as a context to presenting the data collected and their analysis.

Methodology

While this researcher has previously utilized an action learning action research (ALAR) approach to conduct social research and report on interactions between members of a particular senior executive team who became an AL set (Donovan 2011), the use of such presents rather specific challenges in the context of exploring the sensitive topic of group 'undiscussables'. If the topic does in fact remain 'undiscussable', then the only means available for the researcher to gain insight into the avoided topics is to hear about them in one-on-one interviews or a subgroup conversation of some kind. In that context, the researcher is unable to report those conversations, even if they give unusual insight into the 'undiscussables', since they are likely to be disclosed by participants with a

request to prevent such being communicated to the remainder of the group. Therefore, there does exist some challenges in utilizing ALAR or ethnographic approaches to the study of 'undiscussables', if those undiscussables remain so to at least part of the group. Consequently, an alternate methodology was developed for this research, which is described below.

Data for this research comprises statements and actions observed in various AL sets, at the time of negative affect within the set, over a period of about two -years. These data were collected partly because of the research of Vince, partly of Argyris and Schon, and partly from my own long-term experience as an AL set facilitator. First, as described above, Vince (2001, 2002) and others argued for the centrality of emotion in the study of organizational learning since individual and collective anxiety was likely to co-exist with learning. This was because where learning did occur, disruption to existing power relations was usually provoked and defensiveness or resistance tended to be triggered at such times. Consequently, times of visible negative affect could be helpful in relation to understanding the exercise of power within any set. Likewise, Argyris (1990) and Argyris and Schon (1991), as described below, argued that moments of collective threat or embarrassment were especially helpful in understanding what theories-in-use were in operation in the group. Consequently, they placed considerable emphasis on such data. Likewise, my own 15 years of experience as an AR and AL set facilitator had showed that moments of strong negative feeling (and positive feeling for that matter) can be especially valuable in understanding some of the less obvious dynamics and power relations within, and outside the set.

With these broad notions in mind, I began to pay special attention to, and list, what comments or actions were happening at times of negative affect in various AL sets with whom I worked, over about a 2 year period. The sets were generally made of middle management or senior executive teams who had come together temporarily to form an AL set to address a particular organizational concern. In that context, they had a stated intention to make change for the better in their organization and learn from each other while doing so.

The process of analysis and theory creation was not unlike that described by grounded theorists Glaser and Strauss (1967) who report their process of theory generation in the context of data being repeatedly added and compared, with literature seen as additional data. According to Dick (2007), references to grounded theory in the context of AR are not uncommon. He reported several AR theses he reviewed which integrated some grounded theory practices into their AR project as a means of strengthening the rigor of theory generation in their project. Dick (2002, 2007), who argued that theory generation in AR (and AL) might be strengthened by learning from grounded theorists, advocated his 'data engine' approach to theory generation as a means, among other things, of making more rigorous and explicit the theorizing inside such projects. His approach to building theory bears strong similarity to that described by Huxham (2003) and applied by Huxham and Vangen (2000) who also

showed a process of continually collecting data, clustering and labeling those clusters, testing and refining the clusters, and creating a conceptual framework around the clusters in the context of additional data and literature. It was this approach that was adopted in the research presented in this paper.

As most of the comments were associated with those who were identified with AL set leadership (for instance, the MD of the executive group), those contributions became of particular interest. Consequently, literature relating to power, rank and privilege became more central, compared to more general organizational development literature. Consistent with Layder (2005), theorizing was a continuous process throughout data collection and analysis and included the sharing of that theory with various AL sets from whom data were originally taken. Ultimately, only three categories of comments or behaviors emerged that were of sustained interest. Those three categories are described in this paper.

Chris Argyris and undiscussables

Chris Argyris was the first to describe 'non-discussables', later called undiscussables, and identified them as a substantial problem for business groups and their meetings (1986, 1990, 1993, 1995). He defined them as topics that were avoided due to an associated threat or embarrassment, and where that avoidance was in turn not discussed. Meetings that navigated around potentially threatening topics became flat, stilted, boring and dangerously irrelevant. He described the 'fancy footwork' that characterized these meetings as 'anti-learning and overprotective' (Argyris 1978).

Argyris also said that groups' behavior in navigating around contentious issues was in fact 'skillful' since it is produced in milliseconds, is spontaneous, automatic and unrehearsed. For this reason, he called it 'skilled incompetence' because it produces what they do not intend (mediocre managerial stewardship) and they do so repeatedly, even though no one is forcing them (1986).

As background to the above, Argyris maintained that we hold two 'programs' in our head; one contains a set of beliefs and values describing how each individual should maintain their lives and the other the actual rules they use to manage those beliefs and their actual behavior in the world. The first is their espoused theories of action; the second is their theories-in-use.

Because the behaviors demonstrating theory-in-use are observable, Argyris was able to discover that while the behaviors varied from person to person, the actual theory-in-use did not. He called this theory Model 1. Model 1 theory-in-use instructs individuals to seek to be in unilateral control, to win and to not upset people. It therefore informs action strategies that are primarily selling and persuading, 'easing others in', and strategies to save their own and other's face (Argyris and Schon 1974).

The dilemma with Model 1 emerges because of its authoritarian features. For its use to be effective, the recipient must become submissive, passive and

dependent, which is of-course opposite to Model 1. Therefore, if Model 1 is defined as the effective theory-in-use, its implementation requires others to be ineffective by the very terms of Model 1. The intention to win, and to win over by persuasion while keeping all parties on an emotional equilibrium and looking in control, ensures issues or topics that might threaten a convincing argument, prompt upset or embarrass are avoided. Therefore, where Model 1 is applied, undiscussables get generated.

Argyris and Schon (1974) offered an alternative model, which he called Model 2. The governing values of this model are valid information, informed choice and responsibility to monitor how well the choice is implemented. Model 2 is characterized by less 'sell', less 'strategizing', more transparency about what one is trying to achieve in the conversation and an open invitation to make inquiry about one's reasoning and assumptions in that conversation. In short, more vulnerability. Consequently, Model 2 conversations do not tend to generate undiscussables, but it must be added, Argyris found little or no evidence of Model 2 in action in the groups he studied.

It is the context of Model 2 being practiced that Argyris proposed that 'double-loop learning' might then become operational. As opposed to single-loop learning, where conversation is limited to solutions that immediately fix presenting problems, double-loop learning invites contributors to make more transparent the associated assumptions and pre-existing beliefs that might be framing or causing the problem or the proposed solutions.

Since Argyris, others have looked at the effect of undiscussables. Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2000) found the 'unsaid' was responsible for unresolved tension and the persistence of unexplored business dilemmas. Runde and Flanagan (2008) proposed that the ability to discuss contentious topics was a defining competence for effective teams, and the absence of such yielded short-term frustration and long-term disappointment. Donovan (2011) found the conversational strategies employed by AL sets avoiding topics resulted in important issues remaining unaddressed. Others have explored the effect of undiscussables and found similar results (Morrison and Milliken 2000; Baker 2004; Noonan 2007; Avery and Steingard 2008; Mclain Smith 2008; Runde and Flanagan 2008). In short, many business meetings have become tedious and superficial and the presence of undiscussables is strongly indicated. Undiscussables remain a central concern as they relate to the persistent problem of frustrating and ineffective meetings, where both collective decision-making and learning is required.

CAL and the AL set

CAL, a recent manifestation of Revanesque thought, brings the above dynamics center stage in the life of an AL set. It could also be said that if there were ever a kind of meeting that might be a candidate for the generation of undiscussables, it would be that held by the AL set. The ambitious,

challenging work of the AL set requires collective conversation to carefully observe existing reality and reflection on assumptions on the context of planning. This could be confronting for some, and uncomfortable topics may loom up ahead like hazard signs on a remote highway. Not only that, if one considers the relatively recent theorizing of learning within organizations by Stacey (2003) and Clegg, Kornberger, and Rhodes (2005), nuanced dialog on sensitive issues is required (Donovan 2013). Interestingly, Clegg et al. consider learning conversations to be in the 'tension' between chaos and predictability, where uncertainty and ambiguity reside.

A small group of important workers have created a platform upon which subsequent CAL is currently being built. They are Reynolds (1998, 1999a, 1999b), Willmott (1997), Vince (2001, 2004, 2008) and more recently Trehan (Ram and Tehran 2009; Tehran 2011). Early critical theorists in turn formed an important context for these.

Fundamental to the approach advocated by CAL is the foregrounding of tacit assumptions in relation to policy and practice, and the

> ... explicit engagement with the tension, contradictions emotions and power dynamics that inevitably exist both within a group and in individual managers' lives. (Trehan 2011, 164)

Vince (2001, 2002, 2008) has written with much effect on the challenging emotional territory traversed by many AL sets and the usefulness of examining collective and individual emotions (especially anxiety) as means of making visible power relations. As Vince and Martin (1993) said years ago,

> We believe that bias is always present in learning groups, that it shapes the language and the interaction used to address a work task. In addition, we believe that set/group members will bring, and act out, social power relations as an inevitable part of the group process. (208)

Vince and Martin describe the AL set a site beset with subtle (or not so subtle) power relations that will shape and form the group's action and learning. And they are not alone in such a description. Trehan (2011), in advocating the role of a facilitator in AL sets, describes the context for learning by AL sets in the following way;

> participants resist or reinforce power relations that develop from learning inaction ... (and) the complex dynamics that influence collective reflection. (168)

Cherry (2010) discussed a related problem when supporting her PhD students in Action Research projects.

> As an academic supervisor of many action research projects over a long period of time, much of my own effort has been focused on helping action researchers to stay in the action and not to retreat to the margins where they write intense,

anguished reflective pieces about their difficulties but accomplish very little. (239)

She goes on to say of the meetings where action and learning are required;

> (they are) ... concerned with challenging the mindsets of organisations and whole societies. Whatever its scale, this is not work for the faint hearted. (243)

To many AL practitioners, these observations are likely to resonate strongly. While Reg Revans (1987) may not have highlighted these subtle but decidedly practical difficulties in the life of an AL set, some of us experience them with regularity.

While there has been acknowledgment of power relations at work in AL sets shaping learning and action, very little research has specifically explored the subtle relationship between power and undiscussables. How do some members, especially leaders, actually precipitate in others an unwillingness to disclose? How do they conversationally, or otherwise, actually exercise power to create such an effect? The following section reviews some theorists on power, followed by a consideration of data collected from various AL sets in the context of those theorists.

Power and undiscussables: a conceptual frame

In this section, the relationship between power and undiscussables has been briefly discussed through the lens of three key theorists, Bourdieu, Mindell and Lukes. While these do not represent an entirely comprehensive analysis of the operations of organizational power, they do serve as illustrative and are supplemented by useful other theorists such as Clegg, (1989), Parsons (1967) and Foucault (1994).

Bourdieu was a renowned French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher who authored several books and vigorously engaged in academic, and later in his life, public, discourse. While Bourdieu (1987) created a considerable body of work, and most famously developed the conceptualization of the 'Habitus', the part of most interest here are the various kinds of 'capital' that he contended were utilized, or exercised as power by social agents. He specifically identified four different kinds of capital each of which can be utilized by an agent in a social setting. They are economic, cultural (primarily related to knowledge and information), social (primarily related to connections and group membership) and symbolic capital, which all the others transmute to when they are perceived as legitimate. Each of these kinds of capital brings rank and privilege to the social agents who possess them. While the first of these 'capitals' is objective, the others are subjective, and in his view at least as important in providing means of exercising social power.

In connection to the power that is exercised by those with capital, Brubaker (1985) described Bourdieu as identifying two kinds of power, one material or

economic, one symbolic, with the understanding that even economic power has a crucial symbolic dimension. He describes these forms of power as interconvertable, where it is understood they may transmute into each other, or exist in the absence of the other.

Of particular importance to this review is the effectiveness of symbolic power. Brubaker (1985), in describing Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power, and how others experience it when it is exercised, says,

> It is not perceived as power, but a source of legitimate demands on the services of others, whether material . . . or symbolic, such as the expression of deference; and it is precisely this perception or misrecognition that makes it effective as a form of power. (756)

It is here that Bourdieu's theorizing (as expressed by Brubaker) may be at its most helpful in this research. When agents exercise symbolic power, many of those to whom the power is exercised may barely identify that power has been exercised at all. It is subtle. The scenarios where this kind of power is exercised are generally embedded as cultural norms. Consequently, the legitimacy of the demands of the person exercising symbolic power seems self-evident, may not be tested, and indeed possibly 'not perceived as power' at all. Perhaps a related proposition is that those who are exercising symbolic power may also have little or no awareness they are in fact exercising power, primarily because of the same accepted norms and tacit assumptions about the anticipated and expected nature of their practices. These notions and their connection to the data will be explored later.

Mindell, a psychologist and physicist, has also provided a useful and relevant contribution to the area of power. While he has published extensively for an audience of practitioners (Mindell 1992, 2000, 2002, 2010), he has not engaged in academic research and publication. There is however, in addition to a number of texts exploring further the philosophy and application of his ideas (Goodbread 1997; Diamond and Spark Jones 2004; Goodbread 2009), a growing body of research that examines Mindell's conceptualizations, especially in the area of social rank and power (Audergon 2004; Audergon and Arye 2005; Morin 2006; Collett 2007). It is also partly because of his significant presence in the life of so many practitioners around the world that his work has been referenced here. He established the Process Work Institute in the 1991, and Institutes are now established on every continent. Every year thousands of facilitators attend workshops facilitated by a highly qualified faculty, and so far about 120 have graduated with Process Work Masters degrees of some kind.

Mindell also discussed power using the associated ideas of rank and privilege and suggested rank has certain privilege associated to it, and appropriating those privileges is an exercise of power (Mindell 1992, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2010). He described rank to be a kind of potential energy, which may or may

not be used. While he categorized various kinds of rank (including psychological and spiritual), the most relevant kind to this study is what he called social rank. Mindell said that for any human group, our gender, race, religion, sexual orientation and age give us more or less social rank than others. Added to this can be the rank provided by organizational positions that are higher in the hierarchy to other positions. While a detailed comparison of Mindell and Bourdieu is beyond scope, many of the terms used by Mindell, including field, rank and privilege and their associated meaning, have an overlap with Bourdieu.

Interestingly, Mindell, in his predictably practical approach, maintains that generally, the more rank we possess, the less aware we tend to be of the associated privilege. Importantly, he finds this lack of awareness to be a primary cause of conflict. That is, privilege being enjoyed without understanding and acknowledgment that indeed a privilege has been accessed tends to create angst in others. Mindell's notion of unwittingly accessing privilege provides a novel lens through which to observe groups who are attempting to discuss threatening topics. Considering how those with rank in such conversations may draw on their privilege to lessen their sense of threat, without acknowledging they are doing so, may provide a useful portal to investigate how power might be exercised in conversations. In other words, Mindell's conceptualizations may be of practical assistance in understanding how power is being exercised, and conflict created, in our everyday experience. It was this potential strength of Mindell's approach that was of particular interest in this study.

Mindell does not however provide any further distinctions in relation to the kinds of conflict that might be triggered, or to the power that might be associated with those various kinds of conflict. In addition, the connection between the exercise of power via the use of rank, and undiscussables, is not directly explored.

Lukes, using a more sociological perspective distinguished three dimensions of power that are in turn, subtler and potentially more pervasive (Lukes 2005). One-dimensional power is limited to discrete situations where person A has power over person B, to get them to do something they do not want to do. Helpfully, Clegg (1989) clarified that overt resistance and visible conflict evidence one-dimensional power. Two-dimensional power was first elaborated by Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1970) who suggested that the hidden face of power was not about who won or lost, but about which issues and/or actors were prevented from coming to the table in the first place. In other words, a 'mobilization of bias' may be at work suppressing certain interactions. Lukes (2005, 22), quoting Bachrach and Baratz argues that: ' . . . power may be, and often is, exercised by confining the scope of decision making to relatively "safe" issues'. Therefore, two-dimensional power is not just about the challenge of one party openly attempting to dominate another, (as in one-dimensional power), but it concerns *who* participates in the conversation, and *what* is discussed in that conversation. Covert conflict and the stifled resistance of a

party who is struggling to be heard in the most effective forum evidence it. Lukes (2005), in offering a radicalization of two-dimensional power, suggested,

> the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place. (27)

He therefore conceived of three-dimensional power where the powerful achieve this by influencing consciousness by the control of information, the mass media and the process of socialization. Gaventa (1980) and Clegg (1989) note that where three-dimensional power is exercised, it may be accompanied by resignation, hopelessness and acceptance. Therefore, person B may no longer resist, overtly or covertly, as in one- and two-dimensional power, respectively, but rather appear to willingly do what A wants them to do, even though it is contrary to their objective, real interests. The conflict here is therefore latent.

In drawing distinctions in relation to types of power and associated conflict, Lukes provides an available means to connect power more directly to the phenomenon of undiscussables. For instance, it might be expected that overt conflict might be associated with less undiscussables than covert conflict, where resistance cannot be easily voiced. Further, latent conflict may also be expected to be associated with undiscussables, but awareness of them may be minimal.

In summary, Bourdieu, through the conceptualization of subjective kinds of 'capital', showed that 'symbolic' power can be exercised by those with enough of it, and because of our socialization, we may not notice when such power has been applied. Mindell, through his more practical exploration of rank, power and privilege saw that we tend to create conflict, usually unwittingly, by the exercise of power without awareness. Lukes, in proposing his three dimensions of power, showed how each resulted in a different kind of conflict. The section to follow combines these conceptualizations with the data that were collected and analyzed and proposes how power might be exercised within AL sets to generate undiscussables.

Three ways AL set leaders may mediate power to generate undiscussables

The following section, by virtue of the clustering process applied to the data and refining of that process through the addition of further data and literature (especially that reviewed above), describes three categories of activities by AL set leaders that seem to mediate power, and ultimately the strong possibility of undiscussables.

1.   *Those with rank dismissing topics in a meeting*

A certain category of contribution from those who were identified as having rank in the group consisted of comments that worked to dismiss topics as no

longer deserving their attention or the attention of the group. Various languaging was used to achieve this end, and some were more direct than others. Examples that constituted this category are listed below, and one or more may sound familiar to those who have experienced this kind of event;

'Let's now take this topic off-line'

We have spent enough time on this topic, and therefore I would ask Bob provide us with an update/report on this next time we meet

We are not getting anywhere here and need to move on . . .

It seems like we are going around in circles, so let's progress to the next item

Time is short, I suggest we have a sub-group look at this, so we can keep going

It is proposed that the person speaking, being the manager of the management group who had temporarily become an AL set, had 'rank', or in Bourdieu's language, possessed more cultural capital within the organization. The implication of the person with rank's dismissal is that to spend further time on the subject is wasteful or negative and that his or her expert knowledge and experience gives them the capacity to make such a distinction, when others in the team may not. And because of this assertion, they closed down the discussion. Importantly, in many cases, the person with rank doing the closing did not explain their action or reasoning, or request feedback on that reasoning. Instead, exercised power by accessing privilege associated to their rank, without acknowledgment that they had done so.

According to Bourdieu's theory, these leaders were exercising symbolic power afforded them by virtue of their hierarchical status, to unilaterally close down conversation. In most cases, no objection was raised, which was entirely consistent with Bourdieu's description of the use of symbolic power. That is, it may achieve its aim partly because it is often not noticed or recognized, at least in the first place, and consequently not challenged.

Mindell, however, suggested that exercising power without acknowledgement (or awareness) is likely to create angst or conflict in others. Therefore, even if compliance is achieved as Bourdieu observed, covert conflict may ultimately eventuate.

In connection to Lukes' conceptualizations, it is proposed that when the person with rank (or more cultural capital) dismissed the topic, they were exercising one- or two-dimensional power, depending on the response of the team. On the few occasions where team members openly objected, active resistance was visible and one-dimensional power was exercised. Undiscussables were minimized. When those in the meeting did not raise their concerns (on the occasions when they might have had them), they were then unable to be heard in that forum in relation to the topic being dismissed, or their feelings

about the topic being dismissed. Conflict became covert, two-dimensional power was exercised and undiscussables likely generated.

The above reasoning is graphically shown in Figure 1. Beginning at the top, the person with more rank or cultural capital exercised power in relation to person B who had less rank, without acknowledging they were doing so. The kind of conflict that occurred in response provided an indication in relation to which dimension of power had been exercised, as per the previous discussion. Likewise, the implications of each kind of power in relation to undiscussables are also shown.

2.   *Liberal expressions of anger by those with rank*

The second cluster of contributions by AL set leaders to be discussed relates to liberal expressions of anger. Below are listed examples taken from the cluster. The tonality, which cannot easily be conveyed in these short sentences, was critical in the delivery, and central to the experience of others in the AL set. The tonality was usually conveying one or, or a combination of; aggression, impatience, irritation or exasperation.

> Why can't you just get this right?

> How long does it take to get an accurate answer around here?

> Now I'm mad, and things will change around here … watch.

> What? The report has not been finished yet?

> What would you say is the main reason for this failure?

> They can't do this, they're imbeciles

The response of the remaining AL set to these comments by the leader was usually an awkward pause or silence. It is proposed that when those with more cultural capital, or more rank as Mindell might express it, openly and liberally expressed anger in the AL set meeting as shown above, it constituted an appropriation of privilege, and an exercise of symbolic power (also shown in Figure 1). As a point of explanation, they were appropriating the privilege of not needing to exercise self-discipline in relation to their expression of anger and frustration. The remainder of the team was likely to be aware that they did not enjoy the same privilege of being able to freely express their anger toward the person with rank, and even possibly with each other. In some cases, to do so may have ultimately threatened their employment. Further, in most instances, the leader did not acknowledge that he or she was drawing on their social 'capital' or rank to do so. As Brubaker also explained of Bourdieu's symbolic power, our social conditioning is such that we barely know
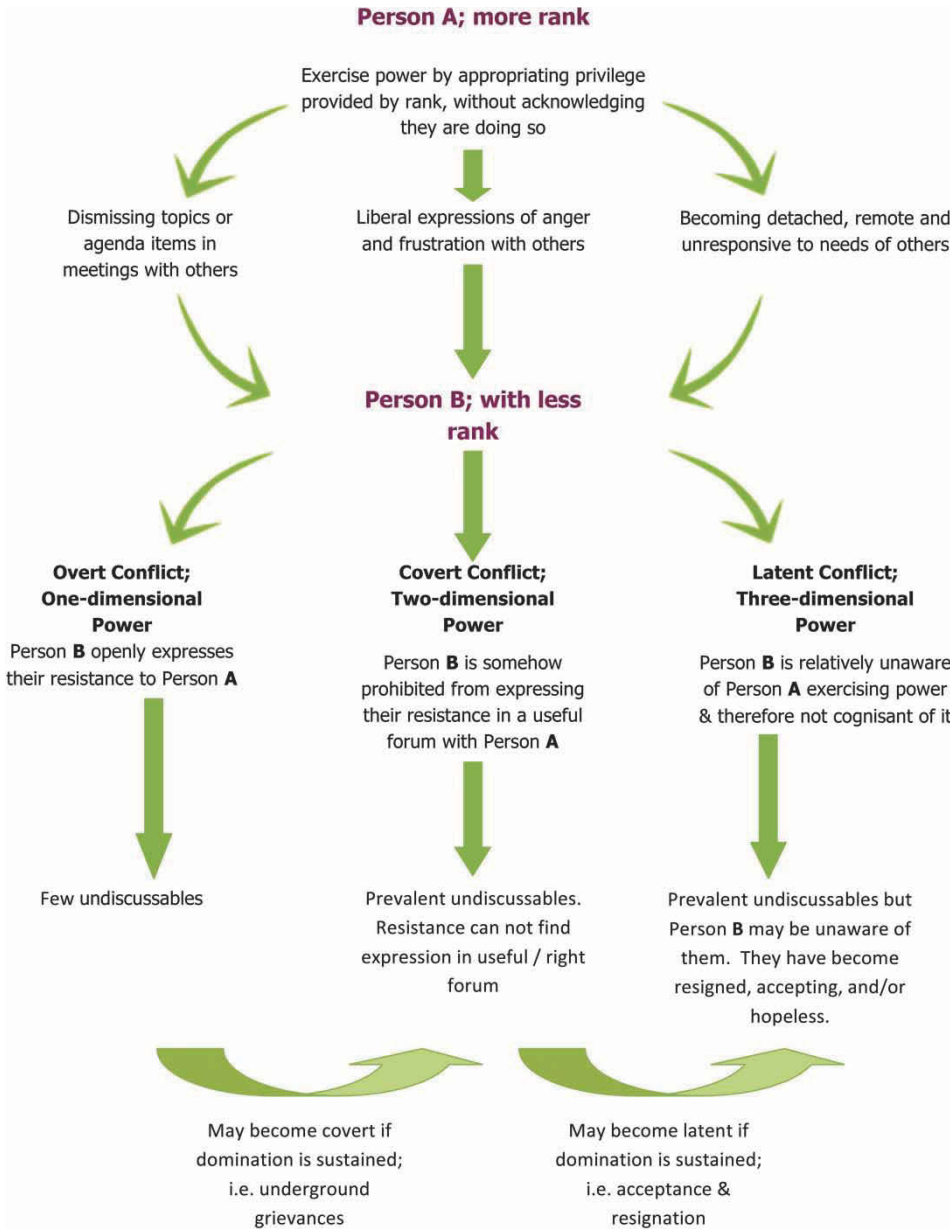
Person A; more rank

Exercise power by appropriating privilege provided by rank, without acknowledging they are doing so

Dismissing topics or agenda items in meetings with others

Liberal expressions of anger and frustration with others

Becoming detached, remote and unresponsive to needs of others

Person B; with less rank

Overt Conflict; One-dimensional Power

Person **B** openly expresses their resistance to Person **A**

Few undiscussables

Covert Conflict; Two-dimensional Power

Person **B** is somehow prohibited from expressing their resistance in a useful forum with Person **A**

Prevalent undiscussables. Resistance can not find expression in useful / right forum

Latent Conflict; Three-dimensional Power

Person **B** is relatively unaware of Person **A** exercising power & therefore not cognisant of it

Prevalent undiscussables but Person **B** may be unaware of them. They have become resigned, accepting, and/or hopeless.

May become covert if domination is sustained; i.e. underground grievances

May become latent if domination is sustained; i.e. acceptance & resignation

Figure 1.   Power, conflict and undiscussables.

when that power has been applied. Somehow, in the case of this exercise of power, it was collectively understood that the boss had the right to lose their temper, a right the rest of the set did not possess.

Where, on rare occasions, the team raised their concerns with the person with rank about his or her outburst of anger, Lukes' one-dimensional power

has been exercised and overt resistance was evidenced. It is argued here that undiscussables were minimized in that case. The more common response of an awkward silence would seem to have evidenced a possible discomfort that remained underground, and in that case second-dimension power had been exercised. A bypassing of topics, at least on the topic of the leader's outburst, or perhaps from any topic that might prompt further outburst was likely. In short, the team may actively withhold in relation to some important concerns and undiscussables created.

As Clegg (1989) confirmed, this expression of power is difficult to perceive when compared to one-dimensional power, since the usual behavioral signs of meeting conflict are not easily visible. Interestingly, the person with rank, or leader, although generating undiscussables through their unacknowledged exercise of power, in turn may not raise the issue that those in the meeting seemed uncomfortable, or withholding. To do so would blow the whistle on their original exercise of power.

3.   *Those with rank remaining remote and detached*

The third cluster (also shown in Figure 1) of comments made or associated with negative affect to emerge from the process of analysis that was a point of direct discussion for some AL sets. Here, they spoke about a group or individual who were outside the AL set, but whose influence was being felt inside the set. In this case, one or more members of the set felt they required certain resources that a powerful group or individual outside the set controlled, but the resources were not forthcoming. At the same time, set members felt the powerful individuals outside the set were indifferent and dismissive of the set's need. Examples of the statements made by AL set members are listed below. Accompanying these statements were usually tones of frustration or resignation. Below is a sample of the cluster.

> They said they would get back to us about our budget request, but not a word. The silence is deafening

> It was confusing. They asked for our proposal but gave so little time for discussion, and almost no feedback

> The delays in Head Office returning our emails are huge. We will ground to a halt if we don't hear soon. The whole things seems of no consequence to them

> I explained the obstacles to completing on time, but we've had no response for weeks

While we cannot be sure about the intentions of those the set were speaking about, what did emerge is that when those in the set concluded that those with rank or capital outside the set, on whom the set were relying for something, were experienced as remote, detached or somehow dismissive to the needs of

the set, negative affect emerged. It is proposed that those with rank, apart from the possibility of exercising economic power to obstruct resources, were also experienced as exercising the symbolic power of removing themselves from the frustrations of the set. Their privileged position enabled them to do so, and they were doing this without any apparent acknowledgment they were drawing on their elevated rank to achieve it. If Mindell was right, it is the accessing of this privilege without awareness or acknowledgement that was a major point of upset for the set.

Interestingly, Bourdieu in his own research into the French bourgeois who possessed significant privilege through their economic, cultural and social capital echoed this third cluster. He described them as 'distant, detached or (with) a casual disposition towards the world or other people', as described by Brubaker (1985).

In terms of applying Luke's model to this cluster, it is the response of the set that will determine which dimension of power was being exercised, and the ultimate impact on the generation of undiscussables. Where the set openly raised their concerns with the powerful about their remoteness and lack of involvement, one-dimensional power had been exercised and undiscussable minimized. Where the team did not do so, but rather spoke only to each other about their frustration, covert conflict was generated, two-dimensional power had been exercised and undiscussables generated. In that case, at least one undiscussable topic between the set and the powerful was the set's experience of feeling dismissed.

There does exist a third possibility, and one, which I would contend, is not uncommon. Here, the set might become accustomed, even socialized to expect those with power to remain remote and unresponsive to their needs, and may be entirely resigned to this scenario. In such a scenario, conflict will remain latent, and according to Luke's conceptions, three-dimensional power has been exercised. An undiscussable topic for the set that relates to the behavior of those with rank outside it might exist, but the set may be unaware of it. These are the features that characterize the use of three-dimensional power.

Figure 1 serves as a graphic summary of the previous discussion where the relationship between power and undiscussables is shown, with the exercise of two- and three-dimensional power creating them. In the bottom part of the diagram, it is suggested that continued use of one-dimensional power may ultimately become two-dimensional, where resistance becomes covert and undiscussables prevalent. Likewise, continued exercise of two-dimensional power may ultimately transform into three-dimensional power, where resignation, acceptance and latent conflict are present. In this case, undiscussables may be prevalent but elusive.

Conclusions

It is now understood that the work of planning and learning for which AL sets are charged is centrally located in contested territory, where uncertainty is present

and anxiety is provoked. Consequently, the work of leading AL sets is not for the faint hearted. The growing area of research called CAL has made the power relations of AL sets of central concern, and underlined the requirement of AL sets to authentically include issues of politics and power connected to the changes they are striving to achieve. In the spirit of CAL, this research focuses on those within AL sets who possess cultural capital, or rank, and three ways they may be tempted to draw on their rank to subtly control conversation to somehow lessen their discomfort or prevent an approaching vulnerability. At the same time, AL set members have become so socialized to the demands of their leaders, they may barely know power has been applied and fail to challenge the legitimacy of the demands. This pattern leads ultimately to the generation of undiscussables within sets, and their far-reaching unwanted consequences.

The title of this paper, Leaders Behaving Badly is intentionally provocative. While the study intends to show how leaders, when they forget their rank, can become agents of discord, it also could be argued that the AL set member, whose forgetting lulls them into unquestioning deference, then covert frustration, unwittingly supports this unwanted dynamic. The responsibility of AL leaders is to consider how they may be accessing their privilege to protect their vulnerability. At the same time, AL set members also have a critical role in disrupting this unwanted dynamic by staying alert to their frustrations and finding more ways to respectfully voice them. If both parties practice bringing their awareness to this situation, especially by listening carefully to their subtle feelings of discomfort, a new dynamic where undiscussables are minimized may more easily emerge.

Note on contributor

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Company Report

Company report
for Bio Rad Australia

Prepared by Paul Donovan

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Executive Summary
Research Project involving the Bio-Rad Australia Senior Team

A research project was implemented over a six-month period with the senior team at Bio-Rad Australia. The objective of that program was to identify and implement ways to **increase the team's ability to engage in group communication that would enable more effective collective decision making.** The methodology chosen was Action Research. This approach is suitable for generating reliable data and insights that adds to our knowledge **and, at the same time,** facilitating genuine organizational change.

A shared vision for success in this project (in the context of the objective as stated above) was developed by the group. This vision was expressed in the form of six broad goals. The team then worked to achieve their vision for the project within the context of their usual monthly meetings. A debrief was facilitated at the conclusion of each meeting to assist the team to reflect upon their performance in the meeting and their progress in relation to their six goals. All meetings were recorded and transcripts were prepared and analysed.

Genuine progress was seen in relation to a number of the goals created by the team. Broadly, this progress could be summarized as relating to the structural aspects of creating the desired team meetings. Firstly, by adjusting their agenda and inserting a small number of company-wide issues for discussion, the team was able to spend more time addressing strategic, future-oriented issues. Secondly, the goal of setting aside department hats for 'boardroom hats' was to some degree achieved as a result of this initiative. Finally, the facilitated debriefs at the conclusion of each monthly meeting assisted the team in addressing some organizational issues more thoroughly and with a greater degree of disclosure.

The team struggled to address the more subtle social (or interactional) aspects of developing the group communication required to make more effective collective decisions. This was observed in the ongoing use of automatic, habituated conversational strategies that tended to prevent the group from discussing topics that were potentially threatening. In each case, the result of these unconscious maneuvers was increased defensiveness and a failure to address the more strategic, far reaching issues at hand. The following report discusses those conversational strategies in detail.

This report also includes a series of recommendations designed to support ongoing success in those areas the team experienced progress and address those aspects where the team experienced difficulty.

Statement of Purpose of this Report

This report is a written record of our experience together as we worked to increase the ability of the senior team at Bio-Rad Australia to engage in meetings that delivered better quality decisions. The report also includes further reflections of the author following the completion of the scheduled meetings.

The purpose of this report is to support the ongoing learning of those who engaged in the research, and others with whom they deem appropriate to share this report (see below). It is intended that such learning would enable those involved to increase their ability to engage in meetings in a way that enhances the quality of the interactions and thereby support the making of better collective decisions on behalf of their company.

Confidentiality Recommendations

This report is intended in the first place for members of the senior team of Bio-Rad Australia who participated in this research and who remain employed by Bio-Rad Australia.

It is for this reason that no effort has been taken to disguise the identity of those speaking where segments of meeting transcripts are shown. In fact, first names are used, since the members of the senior team know who they are.

This document is therefore a rather personal communication between me (the researcher) and those remaining members of the Bio-Rad senior team who participated.

It should be acknowledged that the recipients of this report may wish to share it with others, both within and outside of Bio-Rad. I would like to make a couple of comments about that here.

In its present form, this report is not intended for viewing outside of Bio-Rad Australia. In the event that the intended recipients wish to share it with other Bio-Rad employees, I would suggest that they secure the agreement of the other members of the senior team who engaged in the research.

We would not recommend the sharing of this document, in its current form, outside of Bio-Rad Australia. Where that is intended, the document should be altered to protect the identity of those involved and the Bio-Rad organization.

Company Report

1. The Context

My relationship with Bio-Rad began some years ago when I delivered a three-day residential leadership program for the senior team. The primary focus of the program was the teaching of communication skills for situations where one or more of those interacting were emotionally charged. I received strongly favorable feedback from the team about the program. It was three years later when I approached Philip Dafas (the country General Manager) to test his interest in being involved in a research project that comprised part of my Professional Doctorate at the University of Technology of Sydney. I described to him a project that would serve as a natural extension to the work done in the leadership program and where the team would endeavor to **increase their ability to engage in group communication that would enable effective collective decision making.** I took Philip through a one-page document that attempted to make a case for the research and its possible benefits to those involved (see appendix 1). He expressed interest in the project and in the development of himself and his team. I then submitted my formal proposal for research to the University, where it was approved.

Why make effective collective decision making the focus?

There are two main reasons why collective decision making was made central in this research project:

> **First,** there may be no greater responsibility for a senior team than to make effective decisions on behalf of their organization.

> **Second,** in my experience, most senior teams struggle to engage in the robust interactions required to deliver collective decisions that have benefited from team analysis. In many cases issues that may be associated with some kind of threat, or possible loss of face, escape group discussion. And this avoiding happens without the team publicly or deliberately agreeing to do this. As a consequence of this dynamic, important decisions tend to be made by only one or two team members and away from whole team interrogation and analysis. The flow-on consequence of that pattern are far-reaching in terms of the quality of the senior management team decision making, the way power in the senior team is distributed and the leadership offered to the organisation by the senior team. As a related observation, senior team members themselves have

often expressed to me their frustration with their meetings. This is not surprising, given the pattern I have just described.

My first meeting with the team (that is, in relation to this project) occurred when I observed a segment of a senior team monthly meeting, and there briefly spoke about the research project. I described the objective of the project and what their involvement was likely to entail. After some questioning, general agreement from the team was reached about proceeding. Our journey together had begun.

2. Method

The methodology used in the project

The methodology used in this research project is Action Research. Action Research is a methodology that is well placed to simultaneously support organizational change and provide reliable data upon which wider generalizations can be made. In this way, Action Research can be used to both support the practical management of change and add to our knowledge base upon which further insights and learning might be drawn. This has been confirmed by many others, but perhaps most notably by Zuber-Skerritt (2003) in her widely referred article describing the practical steps for the application of Action Research to addressing organization issues, concerns or problems.

The spiral approach that characterizes Action Research is represented by the diagram that follows;
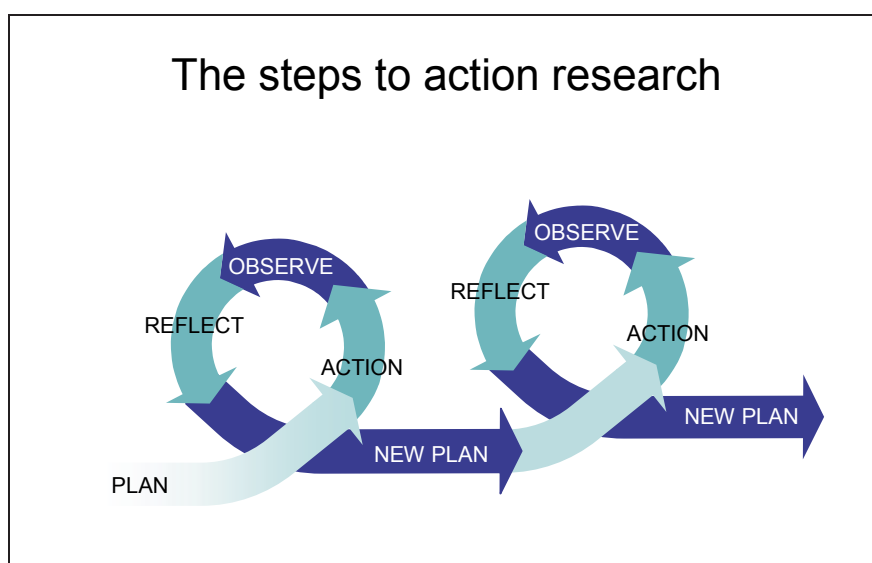
Figure 1. The steps to Action Research

As you will notice from the diagram above, the four main steps comprising Action Research form a recurring cycle. This cycle provides a simple structure that facilitates reflection on behaviour and its consequences in the context of an agreed vision. Informed by this reflection new behaviours are then planned and actioned. The associated outcomes are noted. These new behaviours and outcomes are in turn observed and reflected upon, and the cycle continues. As described above, these steps can be used to support the management of change within organizations and create learning while doing so.

It is important to note that in Action Research the researcher is openly engaging the group in all aspects of the research and fully acknowledging of their effect on the group while doing so. Both the researcher and group frequently reflect on their experience while engaging in the research project and utilize this reflection to refine their work and assess their next steps together.

The steps to our project

The Bio-Rad senior group and I engaged in several steps that structured our project together. I have listed those steps in order below:

Vision meeting: the team created a shared vision describing the desired characteristics of the decision making meetings.

Four monthly meetings: the group then continued in their usual monthly decision making business meetings where I observed. At the end (and at times throughout) the meeting, I debriefed the meeting and invited the team to reflect on their interactions. In these debriefs the group considered their interactions in the context of their shared vision of group interaction. Progress was assessed and further action was planned for the subsequent monthly meeting.

One-on-one interviews: in addition to the above meetings, I met with the participants one-on-one to invite their personal reflection on the meetings and on the progress of the group toward their shared vision.

Final Meeting; the team engaged in a final assessment of their progress toward the vision and considered their personal and collective learning from their journey. Finally, the participants were invited to share their experience of the overall process.

These steps are shown diagrammatically below (NB: for reasons of space and simplicity, this diagram shows only three meetings).
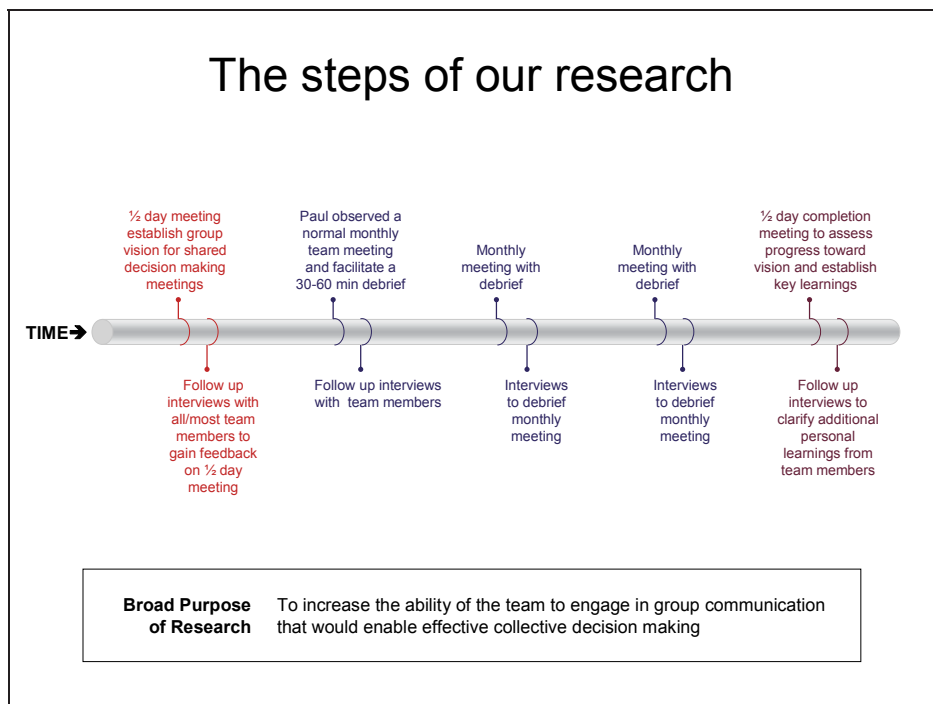

Figure 2. The steps of our research

The data collected in the project

The data collected in this research project comprised the following:

1. audio recordings and transcripts of the vision meeting, four monthly meetings, one on one interviews and the final debrief meeting.

2. the researcher's written reflections throughout the process.

3. The Project Vision

How the project vision was expressed

The vision the group created was expressed as six goals. These goals could be defined as broad directional statements and are not overly specific. They are also not time bound as you might expect an action plan to be. Rather, they are a group of six statements that are intended to describe what success would look in their monthly meetings. The subsequent monthly meetings were to be engaged in the context of this agreed vision.

We did not specifically attempt to relate the vision we created for this project to the organizational vision for Bio-Rad or any other pre-existing strategy documents within the organization.

The process we used to develop the project vision

The team engaged in a three-hour process to create a vision for their monthly senior team meetings. The process we used to develop the vision is shown below.

First, the team was invited to reflect individually about their desired vision for their meetings, especially their monthly meeting. Each team member committed aspects of their personal vision to post-it notes.

Second, these separate visions were then reviewed together and the themes emerging through the combined individual visions were identified. The post-it notes were grouped to show these separate but related themes.

Third, each of the themes was then named and became a broad directional statement, (or goal), that defined the shared vision. Six goals were developed in this way by the team and were expressed in the present tense. They are listed below.

The Six Goals

1. The Management Team is aligned around company goals and ground rules
2. Our meetings help the process of the wider organisational staff being aligned around shared vision (that is, the organizational vision and strategy)
3. We share strategic problem solving and find solutions
4. We create a team dynamic without department hats but rather wearing boardroom hats
5. We have a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment as we fulfill our purpose and staff benefit
6. Our processes are effective

With the intention of indicating something of the relationship between the goals, the team arranged the six goals in the manner shown below.

Figure 3. The six goals comprising the project vision

Team Practices Required to Implement the Project Vision

With the intention of creating finer distinctions in relation to the vision and how it might specifically impact their meetings, the team was asked to list the practices required to implement their vision. These practices are listed below. They are grouped under four headings: Process, Preparation, Alignment and Team Dynamic.

Process (we engage in effective team process)

1. Time on top-level topics

2. Specific time slots (discussion in certain areas)

3. Reverse the agenda (future first, then reports)

4. Time keeper appointed

Preparation (we prepare for meetings to ensure we are effective as possible)

1. Item synopsis on the agenda

2. Preparation – pre reading, highlighting specifics (so comments are informed).

Alignment (we create alignment by keeping the vision visible)

1. Vision printed on top of each agenda

Team Dynamic (we contribute effectively and are supported to do so by right team dynamic)

1. Full right of response

2. Request and give constructive criticism

3. Responsibility to speak

4. Active listening

5. Always suggest first solution to issue

4. The Themes that Emerged from Reviewing the Data

From a review of our experience together, and the associated data, a set of key themes emerged. These themes comprise the key insights derived from our activities together. They are listed below and illustrated by indicative selections from the transcribed data, to show how the theme was evidenced in the interactions. These themes will form the basis of the recommendations provided in the subsequent section.

1. Assuming a 'board room' role in the meeting was achieved with reasonable success.

The group agreed that it would be helpful for them to take a broader perspective to the meetings than simply the concerns of their own department. Infact, it is mentioned specifically in one of the six goals which comprise the team's vision for the project;

> 4. We create a team dynamic without department hats but rather wearing boardroom hats

In relation to the challenge of engaging in topics that were not directly related to their own departments accountabilities, Tony commented in the debrief of the first monthly meeting in the following way: (NB where Tony uses the words 'your' and 'you' it was understood that he was referring to himself.)

> *your intensity or your energy spiked when it was either something that you were involved in yourself or it actually dovetailed with what your – I guess with what you have a strong interest in.*

This comment was indicative of the usual approach to the meeting where participants were not practiced at directing their critical attention to matters beyond their immediate responsibility or interest. Consequently, their level of interest and the intensity of attention was elevated when the

matter under discussion was directly relevant to their departmental accountabilities but dropped when otherwise.

Later in the debrief at the first monthly meeting, some team members did nonetheless feel that genuine progress has been made in regard to this aspect of the vision. Les reported for himself and one other member:

> *I think we both thought in terms of dropping the department hats, it was far more open discussion, where we weren't in the normal defensive mode -- 'I'm being attacked' type thing --, this was far more open.*

Again, at the end of the second meeting, Simon commented in relation to the discussion throughout the meeting:

> *I enjoyed the discussion. I just thought the budget could be a little bit…going through the whole process…but I think people left their departmental hats off a bit more than I've seen before. You know, they were talking LSG and you were talking abut TSG…..*

While the inclusion of strategic issues in the agenda (discussed below) precipitated enterprise-wide discussion, the practice of bringing their critical attention to the work of other departments remained an ongoing challenge. In some ways, this is not surprising. As Les noted above, it takes a certain amount of openness to bring your own department's work to the scrutiny of the team.

2. The changes to the structure of the agenda helped the team address larger organisational issues.

Following the vision meeting, Philip pre selected a small number of strategic issues that were included in the agenda. In addition, he reduced the amount of time dedicated to reviewing organisational performance metrics and the minutes from the previous meeting. He made these changes in response to one of the six goals which related to the team engaging in more strategic problem solving together;

> 1. We share strategic problem solving and find solutions

Most participants appreciated the opportunity to address organization-wide issues that was provided with the adjusted agenda from Philip. In the debrief to the first monthly meeting, Philip specifically requested feedback from the group about whether they saw the inclusion of the strategic issues in the agenda as a positive change. Judy responded by saying;

> *I think so*

Simon echoed this sentiment with;

and yeah, I think it works well.

Another participant said of the altered agenda;

I think we did well with the strategic problem solving and solutions, you know, talking about the Symbion side of it, and everything that came up from the other departments, I think that was at a good level…

Tony commented on the inclusion of strategic issues in the agenda;

whereas this kind of thing is more likely a 'there is no right answer' so makes you want to throw it up and get a collective group of brain matter put onto it.

The list of strategic issues included in the agenda of the following three monthly meetings included: reviewing the process to win the Symbion contract, examining the implications of the global financial crisis and reviewing the technical service escalation process.

In summary, the changes to the agenda seemed to assist the group to direct its attention toward the strategic, future orientated issues. This structural change was significant in its effect on altering the topics that attracted the group's critical attention. Before this change, the monthly meeting included significant time reviewing reports describing past financial performance. While it was understood that such reporting is essential, it was agreed that devoting significant portions of the monthly senior meeting to reviewing those reports was unwarranted and inconsistent with their vision.

3. The meeting 'debriefs' seemed to add involvement and depth to the meeting.

The group energy levels were high during the debriefs that were held at the end of each monthly meeting. This was demonstrated by the speed of speaking and that the air space was shared more or less equally by all of those in the room. The debriefs served the important purpose of providing the participants with support to reflect on their meeting experience. They were able to recognize and share which parts of the meeting were more interesting to them and which parts were uncomfortable or threatening. As a result, the team expressed many of the feelings they had felt while in the meeting, but had not articulated. Of course, this practice was ultimately intended to be folded back into the meeting and, in doing so, make more robust the meeting itself (this is discussed further in the next section).

Philip commented on the debriefs at the end of the second meeting:

I'd like to say…… I think it's very helpful to have these sort of extra discussions, because it helps us set the right level of how we operate, you know, and I do want robust discussion, it's important…..we've got robust discussion where people come out saying it was a bit robust with

the whole process, but actually we have come out ahead you know, we've come out positive with the whole process

Here Philip shared his personal experience of the debrief sessions and confirms them to be helpful in his view. He believes that they help the team speak at the 'right level'.

The debriefs also provided an opportunity for the participants to take some discussions from the meeting much deeper. Consequently, some topics that were touched upon in the meeting were investigated with significantly more depth and rigor in the debrief. This seemed to happen because I facilitated a discussion on those topics with sequenced questions designed to support the collective reflection of the group. The team in turn responded to my questions with searching, thoughtful responses.

One example of this was a discussion the group had in the second monthly meeting. I intervened and invited the group to reflect on their discussion in relation to Simon's presentation on the process involved in the recent winning of a large contract. This mid-meeting debrief was prompted by simply asking the group to reflect on the conversation of the preceding 90 minutes and list the insights that were generated within that conversation. Within five minutes the group had listed ten specific insights they had generated from hearing Simon's presentation. It was as if the group was simply waiting to be asked to reflect upon their conversation. This short debrief harvested significant insight that the group were then in a position to deliberately and consciously share with others and apply to other departments and situations.

Two further examples include the discussions about the global financial crisis and the sales budgets for the year to come; both of which were in the third monthly meeting. In both cases the group discussed these issues in the debrief with more depth and rigor compared to their discussion in the meeting itself. Additional recommendations or action plans were developed in both cases.

4. The pattern of withholding potentially threatening thoughts or feelings resulted in defensiveness and superficiality.

A number of important but possibly threatening thoughts or feelings about the meeting (its process, content or the other participants) were withheld rather than raised directly in the meeting. Conversational strategies were employed which enabled these threatening issues to be bypassed. The chosen strategy ultimately sabotaged the conversation by triggering further defensiveness in the team.

This pattern had negative consequences on the quality of dialogue and had the unintended consequence of directing the meeting away from systemic issues toward more superficial concerns.

In the first place, this theme was broadly evidenced by the number of times important thoughts and feelings about the meeting were expressed in the debrief at the end of the meeting. Based on the examples discussed below, I would suggest that if some of these thoughts and feelings had been appropriately expressed in the meeting itself, it is likely they would have served to deepen the discussion within the meeting and identify more systemic causes and solutions to the problems that were under discussion. In each of the three main examples below there appeared to be underlying thoughts or feelings that were not expressed directly in the meeting. In each case the strategies utilized to bypass the threatening topic triggered defensiveness of some kind.

Three examples of this theme will be discussed in detail below. In the first example, titled The Interrogation, unexpressed concerns of a deeper nature were bypassed and a strategy of questioning on a more superficial topic was employed. This was met with defensiveness. The second example, titled The Venting, shows strong feeling being expressed, but this appeared to be out of proportion in relation to the marginal issue to which it was associated. Therefore, while feelings of frustration were apparent, they were not accompanied with a plausible explanation or attached to some bigger issue. Defensiveness and shut down resulted in those to whom the strong feeling was directed. In the third example, titled The Judgment, negative judgments about the senior team performance were expressed more or less directly but the reasoning that led to those conclusions were withheld or bypassed. Consequently proposed action based on those conclusions fell flat and appeared to enjoy little or no buy-in.

The Interrogation. The first example came from the second monthly meeting where Greg was asked to present to the group the escalation process in relation to the provision of technical service to customers. This system was designed to send automated email alerts to various levels of management when service jobs logged into the system remained unresolved. Unfortunately, the first case shown on the example sheets showed a rather concerning time lapse between the customer registering their technical service requirement and action taken by the technical services staff. The ensuing conversation then was then more dominated by the details of the case shown than by the process that Greg was attempting to explain to the group. The exchanges below mark the beginning of the conversation:

Greg: the flow chart basically is fairly self-explanatory, a call comes in, gets logged in Barn, then there's a certain number of filters, which, if the call was not solved within a particular number of days it'll get an email report will be shipped out to various people……(Greg continues for a few extra lines on the system)

Simon: Is this an actual – one that probably happened?

Greg: This is an actual one, yeah.

Simon: Because I'm looking at this escalation process and it looked like nothing happened for two weeks because Matt was on annual leave

Greg: Oh, yeah. I read that as well, and I'm going that's – customer name – is it Sarah or, Sarah, yeah, so Sarah informed, yeah, I did look at that as well when I printed it out I was saying to Brook, hmm, we'll need to look at that, but basically, at the end of the day now, Mathew has got back to the customer, Sarah has got back to customer, customer hasn't replied, so we can see why, that's still open, and that'll stay open until we get in touch with that customer or they, you know, there's problems there, Sarah's tried, Mathew's tried –

Philip: So the instrument was sent in on the 29th of the 7th?

Greg: That's when the call was logged

Philip: It was sent in - the instrument was sent in by customer on the 29th of the 7th, case logged, says it right up the top, case logged 29th of the 7th, instrument sent in, so in other words they sent it in for repair

Greg: Yep, so in-house repair

Philip: So, and the 29th of the 9th, which is 2 months later, the customer's got a quote but we haven't heard back from her.

Greg: No, well, there was a customer was, yeah, quote provided, waiting to hear back from customer, yeah, so Sarah was liaising with the customer, but the basic detail is, we can look at this and see who's been informed, Sarah's been informed, first contact with the customer, no word from Sarah, so it's basically –

Simon: So you're just pending the thing. Because I look at this, and I go – is it waiting on Sarah to come back, or is it waiting on tech support – I know this is an example, but I'm sort of confused to know –

The text continues for some pages in a similar vein to that shown above. Greg was trying to answer pointed questions on the actual case while trying to make the point that the system is actually doing what it is supposed to do.

The real issue with this conversation is that none of the three parties involved directly expressed their underlying feelings on the topic. Simon and Philip did not express their underlying concerns about technical service delivery in general and what they perceived as a lack of ownership and accountability in that area. This was confirmed in the debrief which proceeded as follows;

Paul (speaking to Greg): But in reality, they don't really want to talk about that case as much as they want to talk about issues of ownership and accountability when it comes to servicing, and when I say that, both are nodding

At the same time, Greg's tone suggested he was uncomfortable in this exchange but he did not bring that up directly in meeting. He was being exposed and was ill equipped to provide the detailed answers being requested of him by Simon and Philip. In the debrief of the meeting Greg made this admission;

> **Paul** (speaking to Greg); I think you felt uncomfortable with that discussion.
>
> **Greg**; Yeah, I didn't have the back up.

If any of the three parties had been able to express their underlying feelings during the discussion it is quite likely that the conversation may have naturally moved to the deeper more systemic issues at hand. Unfortunately, the more challenging and far reaching issue of technical support performance remained un-discussed and not directly addressed.

This example illustrates the point that the team struggled to find expression for feelings that were potentially threatening to raise in the meeting and that the failure to express those thoughts and feelings corralled the conversation to less strategically important topics. I am not suggesting that the players in this interaction were consciously trying to avoid a discussion topic. Rather, I strongly suspect that their underlying feelings of discomfort were marginalized so as to prevent them being directly expressed. This process of marginalization would appear to be a relatively unconscious strategy aimed at avoiding raising potentially uncomfortable or threatening topics.

The Venting. The second example of this theme relates to a brief conversation between Judy, the Finance Manager and Greg in the second monthly meeting. In this conversation, Judy spoke with significant emotional strength to Greg about New Zealand service contract revenues. While text below does not show Judy's tone, Judy does challenge Greg very strongly (and possibly aggressively) about the volume of service contracts existing in New Zealand. The exchanges are shown below;

> **Philip**: Revenues looking pretty good?
>
> **Greg**: Yeah, New Zealand is sort of the struggle I suppose but again, that's mainly our diagnostic base over there, so, contracts are starting to build up so there's a few, things like the Bioplex and things, so that'll grow and we should pick up a heap of contracts this month. October is our big on for service agreements so they'll look busy, knocking them off at the moment
>
> **Judy**: What's so busy over in New Zealand, because you don't have many contracts and there isn't a lot of re-age rental over there?
>
> **Greg**: In New Zealand? Oh, there's a couple of V2's out there, isn't there?
>
> **Judy**: Right down, it's right down.
>
> **Greg**: Oh, there's still a hell of a lot out there.
>
> **Judy**: Hell of a lot?

Philip: What's right down, Judy?

Judy: Oh well I did an audit when I was over there in April between Keith and Barney and it was just gone, gone, gone, gone, gone it looks like you know, you're lucky if there is like twenty instruments or something. To me it's just way down.

Simon: They're consolidating labs

Judy: To me it's just not much there

Simon: We haven't lost anything, though.

Philip: Just to clarify Judy; what's gone?

In this conversation, Greg seemed unable to directly respond to Judy's challenge and it was a minute or so later that Simon ultimately provided the data that appeased her. In the debrief, Greg acknowledges his lack of response to Judy and says instead he was trying to *figure out where it* [that is Judy's comments] *came from.* Greg had momentarily been wrong footed by the emotional strength of Judy's challenge. Later in the debrief, after we had discussed the difficulty of these kinds of charged interactions, Philip explored his own thoughts on the interaction between Judy and Greg;

> *Philip: Would have been – it would have been a very different experience though if she had said to you, 'you know I don't quite understand that because I bla bla bla. So there is something about her feeling, it's her feeling that has the effect, it's an expression of the feeling, as much as anything else, which is to the point of it matters how it's said to you, and Judy had no intention to do that to you, she doesn't even know she's doing it, so it's got nothing to do with it, and that's one of the reasons why it's actually as much Judy's learning to understand hang on, I want, I'm here, I'm a senior executive, I want good robust discussion, all I've done is blow someone off their feet for a few seconds, that's actually not helpful for me, and she didn't read that, so um, you know.*

Philip here is reflecting on the ultimately unwanted impact of Judy's strenuous challenge upon Greg. He had realized that Greg had been unable to respond effectively to Judy and indeed seems to place a good deal of the responsibility at Judy's feet.

Judy expressed strong feeling while holding the point that the service contract business in New Zealand is *gone, gone, gone, gone, gone*…. This language is filled with feeling but short on detail and associated reasoning. It seems entirely possible, even likely, that her strong feeling is related to more than the number of service contracts open in New Zealand. However, the conversation did not extend to the underlying issue that may have prompted her initial challenge. It would appear that her strong feeling was somewhat out of proportion with the issue to which it is attached. Or at least, if her strong feeling is truly associated with the issue, the connection between her and the issue is not made clear. So, the consequence of this strongly charged contribution was a momentary shut down rather than an exploration of the issues behind Judy's strong feeling. It would seem safe to propose that the

articulation of Judy's unspoken underlying concern may have provided the basis for a wider, more far reaching topic than service contracts in New Zealand. Those underlying concerns were withheld.

The Judgment. The third example comes from the fourth meeting where Bill had stepped into the caretaker General Manager following the departure of Philip Dafas. Bill had attended the first monthly meeting, but had not attended any subsequent monthly meetings until the fourth monthly meeting. He also did not attend the Vision meeting which preceded the first monthly meeting. This example consists of three instances in which Bill speaks to the team.

Bill opens the meeting with the following comment:

> *I noticed the meeting, the first meeting, we had a bit of difficulty in determining what we were actually discussing in some of the points so – from Issy's perspective – what I'd like to do is make sure that when we are discussing points, any of the key issues that come out of that we do record them….*

Here Bill shares his assertion that the senior team meeting he attended some months earlier lacked clarity in determining what topic was being discussed, although he also mentions that this is Issy's perspective. (Issy is the PA to the General Manager). Bill does seem to concur with Issy's conclusion since he goes on to make recommendations based on it. Unfortunately, Bill does not share how he reached that conclusion. That information was withheld.

This is an example where there have been important thoughts and feelings that Bill has entertained which have supported him to reach a particular conclusion about the team's lack of clarity in their discussions. I suspect he did this because to have a longer more searching conversation on the topic may have seemed somewhat threatening. It is clear from the transcript and the pace of his speaking at this point he does not wish to discuss the conclusion he has drawn. However, passing this judgment on the senior team and their meetings without checking for agreement or clarifying his interpretation could be described as unhelpful.

The pattern described above happened on a number of occasions when Bill advocates a particular position. He appears to utilize his position as caretaker GM to offer his judgments on the group and their performance. Specifically he says in reference to the senior group (or company as a whole, it is unclear);

> *I think we're just in reactionary mode at the moment*

In turn, no one in the team requests further information from Bill or how he arrived at that conclusion. With this information withheld, the group does not engage Bill in reference to this potentially important and far reaching conclusion he is drawing about the team and/or the company.

Later, in the midst of a discussion about the key strategic goals of the company, Bill offers this contribution;

> **Bill**: so each of us, the sales, the service etc should have measures and metrics in place that we can understand how we're achieving that. And that's what I want to do this year – is make sure each group has got a series of metrics in place both from an individual and also an – from a – if you like a team perspective that we've got something to even aim at and look at you know and achieve. Comments?
>
> Long pause.
>
> **Simon**: I got nothing.
>
> **Bill**: yeah OK. I think – I think it's that alignment that we really need to create that's got to be far more effective probably than what we've had in the past…

Here Bill advocates an initiative where each team (and individual) clarifies specific metrics that can measure performance. He does this presumably on the assumption that such metrics do not exist and he does not test this assumption. He goes on to say that the alignment in the company is currently well below that required but does not explain what he has noticed to prompt this thinking or the reasoning that he has applied to these observations. The team does not respond in any significant way to his proposition and it is not raised again in the meeting.

The real difficulty with these interactions is that Bill's far reaching conclusions about the company are not fully investigated by the team. They do not make inquiry into his thinking and therefore the conversation stayed relatively shallow. Bill's reasoning is withheld and ultimately a potentially far reaching discussion about the company performance is bypassed. However these more strategic and enterprise wide discussions were the very shared intention of the team.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations have emerged from careful analysis of all the data, including but not limited to the examples described above. They also bear the imprint of my own professional experience and expertise.

In broad terms, the analysis showed the ability of the senior team to act on and extract benefit from making structural changes to their meetings and a lack of progress in regard to the subtle, social factors relating to meeting effectiveness. The following recommendations recognize both these two key area and represent the ultimate outcome of all of the analysis completed.

1. Continue the practice of engaging in meeting debriefs at the end of your monthly meetings.

It is clear that this practice is beneficial to the work of the team for at least two main reasons.

First, the team will use this session to reflect on and express some of the important feelings about the topic (or even the way the team was discussing the topic) that they had during the meeting, but did not express in the meeting itself. It should be acknowledged that for many people the opportunity to reflect on their thoughts and feelings in a dedicated 'post meeting session' is highly beneficial in prompting their awareness. The pace of the meeting itself may be too fast for some to become aware of their feelings and find expression of them. In addition, it is often quite challenging to express thoughts that may appear threatening to one or more of the team. However it is often those thoughts or feelings that are richest for the group's learning and ultimate decision making. The debrief itself is likely to reopen some discussions with the addition of this previously undisclosed information and enable the team to better find and address more strategic, more systemic issues than those previously discussed.

Second, implementing a regular meeting debrief will help the team get better at sharing their thoughts and feelings in real time, in the midst of the meeting itself.

I have included below a suggested structure for a monthly meeting debrief:

i) Ask meeting participants to reflect on the discussions of the meeting and identify when their energy was high and when it was low.

ii) invite each member to share with the team their highs and lows. Share some of the thoughts you had at these times that you did not share in the meeting.

iii) consider what may have stopped you sharing those thoughts and feelings you had but did not say. What commitment are you honoring in not sharing?

iv) identify together a relevant goal (perhaps one of the 6 we developed together). What alternate behavior to that demonstrated in the meeting might this goal suggest?

v) keeping in mind the preceding discussion, consider what initiatives may help the team more fully achieve its goal.

vi) agree to new action plans to be implemented at next meeting.

2. Continue with the practice of structuring your agenda for the monthly meeting to include 1 or 2 strategic issues.

As described above, the team has already experienced the benefits of directing their attention to strategic issues that effect most or all of the company. The issues for inclusion could be decided by the General Manager or be discussed by the whole team.

What might be the criteria used to decide what strategic issues get on the agenda? The following are a list of possible criteria:

i) does the issue have organisational wide impact, or at least across more than one department?

ii) is the issue prevailing against previous attempts of solution?

iii) do obvious actions intended to fix the problem tend to exaggerate or create other problems?

iv) do strong feelings exist in the team or company about the issue?

3. Look for signals while in the meeting that there may be more to be said on the topic.

Such signals may include an unusual quietness, nervous laughter, a strong outburst or the especially swift movement on to another agenda item. Slow down to explore the unspoken when such signals appear in the meeting. Each time the team respectfully and compassionately does this, you can expect the team to build their ability to share those thoughts and feelings that may be threatening to express.

How should one invite the expression of such thoughts and feelings? If the team can be assured that such expression will be met with acceptance it may be as simple as following the simple three step process shown below:

i) name the behaviour that you have noticed

ii) explain how that particular behaviour has prompted curiosity if there is more to be said

iii) ask the group directly if there is something more to be said on this topic, that is, any thoughts or feelings in relation to the topic that have not been expressed directly.

4. Pay attention to the expression of views where evidence and reasoning are not included.

In this situation, it will be helpful to slow down the conversation and make inquiry about the view being expressed. Generally, there are three different kinds of conclusions that people draw; proposing action, explaining and evaluating. Each of these is briefly described below. In each case, if evidence and reasoning are not provided, then inquiry is required.

Proposing action; listen for statements like "We should do" or "lets not do that" or "clearly we need to".

Explaining; listen for statement like "they didn't turn up to the meeting because…." Or "they didn't buy because they don't trust us"

Evaluating; listen for statements like "this will be good for you and your team" or "they are a bad influence on our culture" or " it's simply the right thing to do"

In each case, the speaker is providing a variety of conclusion but not including their reasoning or the data upon which they have reasoned. In the interests of making more robust and rigorous your group discussion, make a respectful inquiry of the person providing their conclusion.

How do you make respectful inquiry? Following these three steps is one way to approach this task:

i) restate the conclusion made and ask confirmation that you heard it correctly

ii) explain that you are imagining that there is experience and reasoning behind the statement but that you are unaware of it

iii) request the reasoning and data that is associated with the conclusion that has been offered.

5. A comment on trust.

In the third monthly meeting, Bill briefly raised the issue of trust in relation to the objective of this project. Some of the associated questions on this issue would include the following;

- Is there point in attempting to improve collective decision making within the group if there is not sufficient trust already present?

- Is the group helpless in the absence of high levels of trust?

- Shouldn't the group simply work to build trust and the rest will look after itself?

- How could trust be built in the first place?

- What specifically should the group do to build trust between each other?

The following are a few thoughts in response to these questions:

There are good grounds to suggest that increased trust may lead to an increased openness within the group. However, important questions remain which need to be answered in response to the assertion that trust is required in the first place for a team to usefully address its ability to make effective collective decisions.

I would suggest that implementing the recommendations listed above is in-fact a practical means of increasing trust within the team. In particular, as the team experiment with skillfully disclosing more of their previously unspoken thoughts and feelings about potentially awkward topics they will build their capacity to broach these topics and hear each others concerns. In other words, their level of trust will increase. I would go further to say that failing to provide practical tools to assist the group to speak about threatening issues is failing to equip the group to successfully build trust. Without these specific action strategies the team is likely to continue to engage in its habituated conversational patterns that enable the group to avoid these tricky conversations. Consequently, at just the moments when trust is required most, the team will likely bypass the necessary conversation altogether.

I would suggest that it remains each team member's responsibility to find ways of raising any personal concerns they have about their lack of trust in the other members within the team. Rather than simply assuming that they are a victim to a lack of trust, each team member needs to take an active role by applying the tools described above to share their concerns about trust with the team. They may then also begin to understand their own role in creating the unwanted dynamic.

6. Final Comments

It is my sincere hope that this document facilitates the further learning of those members of the senior team at Bio-Rad who generously opened their meetings to my involvement. To that end, I offer those recommendations listed above as one means of continuing that learning.

I would like to say that the task of redeeming meetings from shallow, stilted and protected conversations to those that are robust, explorative and rigorous is not a task achieved overnight, in one training session or even over one 6 month project. It requires no less than a long term commitment to personal and collective mastery in communication. At the same time, early wins can be experienced.

It has been a great pleasure and a privilege to work with you as a team. I can genuinely testify to learning a great deal while doing so. It has prompted me to reflect deeply on those ways in which we talk which are helpful, and those ways which are not. This kind of reflection was made possible because I was able to work with real meetings with honestly motivated people. Thank you so very much.

References

Zuber-Skerritt, O. 2003, A Model for designing action learning and action research programs, The Learning Organisation, Vol 9 No 4 pp 143-149

Appendix: Research Project Provocation Sheet

The Primary business of Senior Executive Groups is to make decisions. The question is, how do those decisions get made? To what extent are the decisions made by the group and to what extent to the decisions get made by individuals after or before the meeting?

And…why is this important?

If senior executive decisions get made primarily by individuals, then organizational power is being centered in the hands of individuals rather than the group. This means that accountability is carried by individuals, and the reasoning behind decisions is largely inside only one person's mind.

Perhaps an alternative is to make decisions "in public". In this way, reasoning can be tested against the collective mind and assumptions can made visible and respectfully challenged. AND, accountability for some decisions can be truly shared.

The problem is that many senior executive meetings do not include the hard work of carefully considering the assumptions behind their beliefs and opening them to scrutiny. In-fact, some research suggests that senior executive groups have a canny way of navigating around threatening or embarrassing issues so uncomfortable feelings are minimized.

So, the work of making more effective shared decisions might involve more than just coming up with a fancy new meeting process. It probably involves practicing new communication skills that enable courageous, respectful interaction.

Interested in making your team's collective decision making more effective?

My name is Paul Donovan and my number is 0419 403 161

Managerial Articles
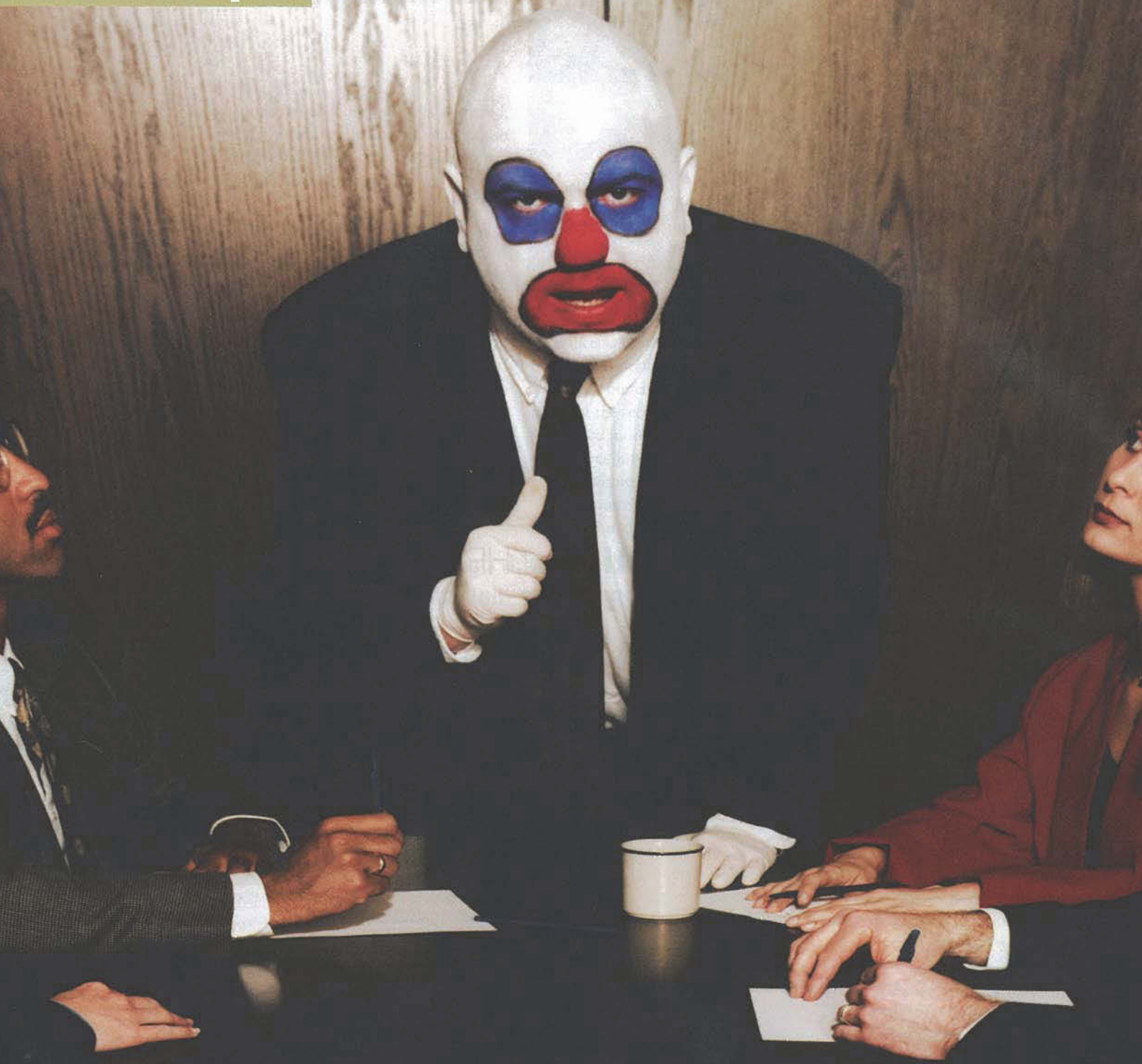
Executive games

The fear of losing face in a boardroom meeting can often lead executives to stay quiet on issues when they should speak up. This can mean important issues are not being dealt with. **Paul Donovan** explores the telltale signs of executives avoiding issues and what HR can do stop it.

While things might look sophisticated in the boardroom of your company, it is possible that games are being played that might fit better at the schoolyard lunch table.

These games can be hard to pick among the suits and grown-up language. to add to the mix; they are being played without the group acknowledging to themselves that they are being played. So discussing the games is actually out of bounds.

The great problem with this scenario is that the games have many and far-reaching unwanted consequences for the group and the organisation that they lead.

What are these games?

Your senior executive group may be using certain phrases or approaches in their meetings to trigger a strategy that enables them to avoid threatening situations. While they may be effective at achieving that end, these strategies are also likely to be creating frustration or resentment in some of the group. I have listed three below. There are others.

"Let's not have an argument now ..." Just when things start to get a bit heated someone with power in the room may saysomething like this. It may sound grown-up and very reasonable but statements such as this may represent nothing more than an unwillingness to have negative feelings in the boardroom. The expression of those negative feelings may appear as a threatening lack of control by whoever has power in the room. In an attempt to avoid the situation, the person with power may unilaterally shut down the conversation while appearing to serve the group.

"Silence is agreement ..." For some executive groups this particular example of "meeting ground rules" may seem an efficient way to move through an agenda, but in our experience it rarely leads to robust dialogue within executive groups. Rather, it becomes permission for the group not to explore their own silence.

Gaps, pauses and hesitations are a rich source of information within a group about how the participants are processing the issues discussed. Within these brief silences can often lay the unspoken questions and challenges that the group requires to create in-depth investigation of some organisational issues. Therefore, rather than interpreting silence as the signal to move on, it may be an important trigger to slow down the meeting and provide the group with a little more space to voice the thoughts that are more difficult to say.

"This is too tactical for us, we should move on ..." It sounds very "executive" indeed, but sometimes the intention to stay strategic can camouflage the fear of getting down to brass tacks. If getting real data into the conversation is going to be threatening for one or more members, then it is likely that the whole group will support a strategy to stay general in the meeting.

Here are some examples. Exactly how many times has the service group complained about how the salespeople talk to them? What specific part of the email sent out by the Financial Controller created frustration in the sales teams? Specifically which sales teams have brought the average growth rate down and what can we learn from that?

Sometimes questions such as these can threaten the group and, if so, the group may unconsciously agree to avoid the discomfort.

Why are these games played?

First, our research suggests these games are played largely because they are effective in enabling the group to avoid the experience of feeling threatened, embarrassed or of some member losing face. Generally speaking, these feelings are a "no go" zone for executives and they are definitely not ones to let your team members know you are having.

> **"Games are played largely because they are effective in enabling the group to avoid the experience of feeling threatened, embarrassed or of some member losing face"**

As a consequence, rather than endure the discomfort of having those feelings, the group engages in strategies to avoid them altogether.

Fundamentally then, the games are played because of a lack of emotional intelligence. The inability of the group to become aware of their feelings and manage them without enacting a reactionary strategy is at the essence of this issue and at the heart of emotional intelligence.

What are the unwanted consequences of the games?

Senior executive teams who do not focus on and explore the dynamic that is shaping their interactions risk organisational-wide implications. In the first place, some of the executives themselves are likely to harbour negative feelings about their experience with

Language templates to skilfully advocate a point of view;

1. **Make your thinking more visible, eg**
- "Here's what I think, and here's how I got there"
- "I assumed that … and I came this conclusion because …"
- "I noticed that … and it led me to conclude …"

2. **Publicly test your conclusions and assumptions:**
- "What do you think about what I have said?"
- "Do you see any flaws in my reasoning? Can you add anything?"
- "One aspect of my reasoning which I am a little unsure about is …"
- "Do you see this differently?"

Language templates to skilfully inquire about another's point of view;

1. **Ask other to make their thinking process visible, eg**
- "What leads you to conclude that?"
- "What data do you have for that? What causes you to say that?"
- "Can you help me understand your thinking here?"
- "I'd like to ask you about your assumptions here because …"

2. **Compare your assumptions to theirs, eg**
- "Am I correct in saying that your assumption is …?"
- "My assumption is that … and while I can't be sure, it would seem that your assumption is that …"

their peers in their meetings. These negative feelings are likely to eventually find expression within their own teams. This may flow on to ultimately result in that senior executives team relating less well to other teams in the organisation.

In the second place, these games can result in decisions being made that some senior executives do not genuinely support or cannot live with. Subsequently, the behaviour of those senior executives following the meeting may not be consistent with the senior group's decision.

This leaves the situation where communication to the organisation from the senior group may be saying one thing, but some executives will be acting in a contrary way. This breeds organisational cynicism and, ultimately, malaise.

What can HR do about it?

As an HR professional it may feel threatening to broach this issue with your senior team. This is understandable and it does not mean that you are out of your depth in raising the issue.

Before raising it, I would recommend that HR spend a little time doing the very thing your senior team will ultimately need to learn how to do. That is, allow yourself to have the uncomfortable feeling and briefly explore some of your personal concerns relating to raising this issue.

Following this, you may choose to raise the topic of senior executive meetings with the MD or CEO (or whoever is the head of the senior team). Your first sentence may sound something like this:

"While I can't be entirely sure, I suspect the team may be avoiding discussing some issues and that this avoidance is having implications on the team (and organisational) performance and culture.

Would you be willing to talk about this with me now?"

Then, with the CEO's permission, it may be helpful to provide the whole senior team with some language tools that will enable the group to raise issues that have previously remained underground.

These tools will enable the team members to raise issues while minimising the threat the issue may represent. I recommend a series of language templates to kick-start a more effective way of discussing issues within the group. These templates are based on the "ladder of inference" model developed by Chris Argyris. (See box above)

Finally, seek to gain the group's agreement to instigate a process of reflection at the end of each important senior group meeting. In this reflective time, the group could talk to the following simple (but brave) questions;

- What parts of the meeting (if any) created any peaks of feeling? Those feelings may be positive or negative.
- In association with those feelings, what did you think or feel that you did not say?
- What did you think might happen if you did say it?

> "It may be helpful to provide the whole senior team with some language tools that will enable the group to raise issues that have previously remained underground"

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How to be part of
the executive
decision-making team

Executive decisions are often made without the input of HR. **Paul Donovan** examines this process and reveals how HR can ensure it is part of the executive decision-making team

Rich cautionary tales of poor decision-making abound in recent corporate downfalls around the world. And within these examples a strong theme emerges which requires our attention: the decision-making in many of these scenarios was centred in the hands of just one or two within the group. As a result, the decisions lacked balance and wisdom. This practice made the group and the company extremely vulnerable.

But can you blame these leaders? The vast majority of corporate leadership texts promote an individualistic, heroic stand by individuals who hold their ground against the tide of opinion. It rarely celebrates the leader who openly invites their colleagues to test their reasoning, expose and challenge their assumptions and evaluate their conclusions. The problem is that the individualistic approach has been historically successful (and glorified) but is now simply dangerous in our current world.

Does your senior executive group know how to engage in genuine collective decision-making? In my experience, most executive groups do not know how to share their decision-making within their own group. That's right; the chances are that many of the important decisions are made outside of their meetings, by one or two powerful people. Our research has shown that this practice remains the predominant approach, especially for contentious decisions. After all, how often have you heard the phrase "I think we'd better take this offline" when discussions get charged or threatening?

What can HR do?

What can the HR professional do with their senior management team to increase their capability in this critical area of collective decision-making?

First, you require some buy-in from the team to even discuss the issue. Gaining buy-in can be tricky since there will most likely be powerful people who will have unspoken intentions of keeping the status quo. I would suggest that the first step would be to secure permission to

engage the whole team on the subject of their decision-making.

Having gained that permission, facilitate their discussion with the following four questions:

- Let's list your general observations about how decisions are made in your group.
- What themes emerge? What feeling do you have about those themes?
- Which themes represent a concern to you and what might be the implications of not addressing it as a group?
- Having identified this problematic pattern(s) would you be willing for me (the HR professional) to draft a proposal for action that we can consider together?

Next, write your proposal. There are four main areas that your proposal should

address. Each of these areas, while separate, are related. I would suggest that your proposal include a very brief description of each area and a broad statement about the required action for each area.

The details relating to the action would be best determined with the group. Below, I have included a summary of these four areas as a reference as you prepare your own proposal.

1. Individual mindsets as they relate to leadership. Our individual histories have informed our understanding of leadership, power and decision-making. It is entirely necessary that we bring some awareness to our individual beliefs about these important topics. To do so will enable us to avoid being directed by old assumptions that remain untested and that are no longer useful. In addition, it increases our ability to consciously align ourselves with those beliefs which are helpful in managing our current environment and its demands.

2. Communication skills present in our senior team. "That's not going to work!"

"Yes it will, I think we need a more positive approach here"

"I think it's better to be realistic than naïve"

And so it goes. Interactions like this might look extreme in print, but our research suggests that they are common in senior executive meetings. I would go on to say communication skills required for effective collective decision making remain a rarity in the meeting rooms of Australian senior executive groups. What are those skills? They are fundamentally

Practical exercises to address each of the four areas

Individual mindsets
We recommend that members of the group reflect on their earlier experiences of leadership. In particular, any demonstrations of leadership that stand out are unique or somehow important. We invite them to briefly write about these experiences, one before the age of 18 (as a kid), one after they left school say in their early 20's and one that has happened in the last 2 to 4 years. Once they have completed their journals, we suggest they share them with each other, most likely in a pairs or threes. Following their sharing with each other, we suggest they simply reflect on the following question "How have these early experiences of leadership shaped my current beliefs and assumptions about leadership?"

Communication skills
We recommend that they begin by applying the following advocacy template to a discussion about a contentious or threatening issue. The template is as follows:
1. My opinion is ... (share conclusion, eg 'that marketing approach won't work')
2. My reasoning and associated assumptions are....(e.g. We tried that approach 2 years or so ago and the results were patchy at best. Customer recognition of campaign was low when tested 6 months later and no significant change in revenue was associated with the campaign)
3. Could someone comment on my reasoning and is there relevant data that I'm not considering?

Culture of the senior team
Invite the group to become deliberate about the culture required to create high quality collective decision making. Facilitate their agreement on the 4 to 6 statements that are to guide their overall approach to these important discussions.

Systems and processes of the senior team meeting
I would recommend the senior team initiates a weekly tactical meeting that lasts for no longer than 60 minutes. Patrick Lencioni maintains that this approach cuts down on emails and expedites the making of tactical decisions. It also leaves your monthly 3 to 4 hour strategic meeting to be just that; focused on a maximum of 2 to 3 strategic issues.

those of advocacy and inquiry described by Chris Argyris.

Put simply, skilful advocacy is the practice of contributing ones point of view (or conclusions) in a way that reveals your reasoning, while at the same time inviting others to test and comment on your conclusions and associated reasoning. Skilful inquiry is the practice of requesting others to share their reasoning, assumptions and evidence associated with a conclusion they are drawing.

3. Shared culture of our senior team meetings. The reality is that the culture of most senior executive groups runs contrary to the practice of collective decision making. And by culture we do not mean the company's values statement or vision and mission. We mean the unwritten, usually unspoken rules and guidelines that shape the group's interactions. Here are seven common and very problematic unspoken guidelines I have found to be operating within many senior executive groups:

Don't openly challenge the viewpoint of the boss in the meeting and definitely don't surprise him (or her) with new information.

Don't raise any business concerns that could cause a loss of face to others in the group and if you do, raise it so generally that nobody will feel put on the spot.

Always stick to the topic and don't raise concerns about the way we are talking.

Only raise potentially contentious topics if you have garnered sufficient support from key group members before the meeting.

It is simpler and better for decisions to be made outside the meeting, by one or two of us. After all, a fast meeting is a good meeting.

If you raise concerns about a problem, for God's sake you better have the solution as well.

The person who offers the solution will carry responsibility for its success.

There are many more like these and in each case these beliefs can have devastating effects on the group's ability to engage in the robust dialogue required for effective collective decision making.

4. Systems and processes associated with our senior team meetings. Many senior team meetings suffer from what Patrick Lencioni calls the 'pot-pouri' approach to meetings. In this approach the group attempts to oscillate between enterprise wide strategic issues to smaller tactical issues and back again, all in the one meeting. In my research, I have found it is common to have such issues about a major marketing campaign and discussion on the best company Christmas party venue on the same agenda. The problem is that these topics require very different quality of discussion and it is very difficult for these to co-exist in the one meeting. The first requires a reflective, thoughtful even explorative approach, the second a much faster rational problem solving approach.

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