

# Exploring Learning and Advancing Knowledge through Network Action Learning

David Coghlan & Paul Coughlan, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland  
dcoghlan@tcd.ie

In our global economy where change is frequently discontinuous and there is a high demand for learning, there is an imperative for organisations to engage in strategic collaborative relationships with other organizations; in other words to form networks, flexible entities where firms seek solutions for their different problems and needs (Chiarvesio & Di Maria, 2009). There are different forms of networks: strategic, learning and transformational (Docherty, Huzzard, de Leede & Totterdill 2003). Networks typically begin as a strategic network where the purposes and motive are economic with a primary focus on reducing transaction cost and increasing competitiveness. The transition to a becoming a learning and a transformational network, where there is increasing knowledge or capacity to act and to see their own development integrally linked to the development of the other organizations with which they interact is a dynamic imperative.

The notion of organizational learning has been extended in recent years to encompass the inter-organizational setting (Holmqvist, 2003) and learning in networks (Knight & Pye, 2004). Knight (2002) suggests that there is a difference between interorganizational learning, which is about learning *within* networks, and network learning, which is about learning *by* networks. She argues that if a group of organizations, through its interaction as a group, changes its behaviour or cognitive structures, then it is the group that is the learner and not simply the individual organizations that make up the group. To link learning and action intimately requires that the learning process relates to how the network enquires into the experiences of individual firms and of the network itself, and how the emergent insights are evaluated with the view to further action. As learning is both a technical and a social process, asking questions and discussing insights with others becomes key.

Such a setting contains rich potential for action learning. Action learning has largely been confirmed to the intra-organisational setting and its development to the network setting has not been afforded much attention. This paper develops the notion of network action learning and extends an understanding of its dynamics through two network contexts. It reflects on two large-scale action learning research initiatives in different networks respectively. In the first setting, the relationship between the participating firms was non-contractual (Coghlan & Coughlan, 2002); in the second, there was a contractual relationship based on interaction between a system integrator and supplier in the supply chain (Coghlan & Coughlan, 2008). In both settings, the participating firms began their engagement from the economic and commercial imperative of the strategic network and moved to becoming learning and transformational networks.

The paper concludes with a clear presentation of a framework for network action learning.

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