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# **Developing Reflective Practice in Managers: Exploring the Contribution of Management Training**

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**Working Paper**

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the contribution of management training to the development of reflective practice in managers. Through a thematic analysis of 24 qualitative semi structured interviews, the author offers four emergent themes that highlight participants' experiences from attending the programme: 1) Noticing, thinking about and questioning what I do 2) Being more self-aware and confident 3) Being more flexible and doing things differently 4) Valuing collaborative working. Literature reviewed highlights that the first three themes are associated with reflective practice behaviour and the study demonstrates that participants note an increase in their engagement in these activities. The learning methods employed on the programme are discussed and the analysis demonstrates that participants attribute the change in their levels of reflective practice to their engagement in specific learning interventions such as action learning and collaborative working on real work projects. The study adds to the body of knowledge on the ways in which managers can be supported in their development of reflective practice, specifically the enhancing learning through strengthening the link between the learning experience and the reflective activity that follows it, providing a collaborative environment with support from other professionals and the notion of learning conversations, all of which were present in the training programme. The implication for HRD professionals is that if there is a desire to encourage reflective practice in managers as an outcome of development initiatives, consideration should be given to 'designing-in' these components into a programme from the outset.

## **1.Introduction**

This study explores the contribution of management training to the development of reflective practice in managers in order to offer some insights into the learning methods that support reflection as an on-going practice for managers once training is completed. The author begins by explaining the context in which the training programme was designed using individual and organisational needs analysis as a starting point and employing a variety of learning interventions to engage participants in work-based learning with in-built opportunities to reflect on their practice and integrate their learning into their work place practice. Reflective practice is defined, its relevance and importance to managers in today's organisations is discussed and links between learning and the development of reflective practice are examined; from this a framework for understanding the data is distilled. Data collection and analysis methods are explained and the findings presented. Key themes emerging from the interviews demonstrate how managers' practice has changed and the value that participants place on some of the learning opportunities presented by the programme. The intent is to inform the future design of management training interventions to support our work in developing reflective practitioners and to contribute to managers' deeper understanding of their practices.

### **The Management Development programme**

In 2008 the author was asked to design and deliver a management development programme for middle and senior managers from a public sector transport organisation facing strategic change. The management population were predominantly experienced technicians with little previous development in leading and managing others. In order to assess the organisational and individual development needs, an analysis was conducted and a bespoke development programme was designed. The needs analysis and the design and delivery of the management training programme, was completed by a team of academics at Newcastle Business School (NBS) from 2008 to 2012. The programme began with the creation of a management competency framework against which all managers were assessed via development centres. Each manager was given feedback on their areas of strength and development need, an individual feedback report and they subsequently attended a tri-partite meeting with their line manager and a facilitator from the Business School to establish an individual learning agreement and plan. Focus groups with senior executives and managers enabled the establishment of a number of key performance indicators that provided a benchmark from which to examine organisational progress. In this way, the intention was to track the impact of the programme, both at an individual and organisational level, by re-examining managers' competence and the key performance indicators once the programme was complete.

The programme consisted of seven two day modules that mirrored the management competency framework, with the first two modules (Personal Impact and Strategic Awareness) being mandatory for all participants. These were linked to small cross functional

action learning sets, taking place after each module of learning. The programme had two strong themes running throughout:

- Developing participants as reflective practitioners
- Drawing on participants' prior work based experience to engage them in learning

To achieve this, there were a number of innovations in the way the programme was designed and delivered. Facilitated action learning sets enabled managers to review how their learning from the programme could be used to improve their practice as managers in the workplace, and participants were encouraged to report back on progress at each learning set. All modules were sponsored by a Director from the organisation who had involvement in the design of the module content and co-delivered the workshops with academics. The learning design included: using real workplace projects as case studies, senior executives responding to presentations and hosting 'question-time' sessions with participants. Additionally, modules included business games, problem solving tasks, and managers were frequently required to complete pre and post workshop activities to relate their learning on the programme to their practice as managers in their organisation.

Thirty three managers completed the programme, with twenty one completing an accredited version of the programme, an MA in Applied Management. As well as demonstrating academic ability, assessments for the Masters programme required managers to reflect on how they intended to apply their learning from the module into their practice at work.

At the end of the programme an evaluation event re-examined managers' views on how far the organisation had progressed in terms of the key indicators identified prior to the programme commencement and also investigated, through in depth interviews, individual's perspectives on the impact of the programme on their management practice.

The aim of this study is to explore the key themes that emerge from the interviews on how managers' practice has changed and why. This study employs the qualitative approach of thematic analysis detailed in the methodology section and is informed by a literature framework discussed below.

## **2. Key Concepts and Literature**

This study seeks to understand why some managers on the programme report a change in their practice to that of being more 'reflective'. Also examined are the participants' views on the components of the programme that they feel have supported the change in their practice.

To begin to understand this, it is important to firstly outline an understanding of reflective practice; what would a manager be doing or reporting, if they were engaging in reflective practice? Secondly, an examination of previous research into how reflective practice is developed is required, to determine whether particular learning methods implemented on the programme would, according to previous research, support an increase in reflective practice

amongst managers. This will enable the author to analyse the findings from the study and draw conclusions about whether managers have indeed begun to or enhanced their propensity to engage in reflection and how this has come about. To set this in context it is important to firstly identify the importance of reflective practice in management learning and development.

Why reflective practice?

There were many reasons for integrating the development of reflective practice into the learning programme. One was that the principle of developing reflective practitioners is embedded in the Business School's philosophy on adult learning; articulated through the following learning goals for all Postgraduate study at the School:

<b>Be independent, reflective critical thinkers:</b> Objectives - Students will be able to:
Demonstrate awareness of their personal strengths and weaknesses through critical reflective practice.
Understand and challenge personal patterns of thought and behaviour.

Another, more contentious reason was that the client organisation intended to attempt to measure the impact of the programme on managerial effectiveness in the organisation; therefore evidence of demonstrable changes in managerial behaviour and practice was being sought. Many writers argue that to evaluate the impact of a management or leadership development programme on the growth in competence or capability without regard for organisational context is of little value (Bolden and Gosling 2006), it was felt that by also taking account of changes in contextual issues (key performance indicators) this would shed some light on the organisational environment in which the managers were operating. The team at NBS were clear that whilst evaluation of a change in 'hard skills' may be possible, measuring shifts in attitudes and mind sets associated with management or leadership development is very challenging (Mabey, 2013). However, from experience, it was felt that if we set out with the intent of developing reflective practice as part of the programme and were clear with managers as to the requirement of reflective practice and how it relates to their profession, provided the time and space for reflection as part of the programme design and create a collaborative environment of peer support (Wildman and Niles, 1987), this would encourage reflective practice. It is this practice that enables managers to notice and question assumptions in a more systematic way, allowing reframing and planning for future experimentation (Schon 1987). The organisation was clear that they wanted to see a change in management behaviour, from that of 'passive implementer' to one of 'engaged initiative taker' and encouraging participants to examine their current practice in order think about ways of becoming more effective was seen as being a core to the learning; reflective practice was regarded as the mechanism to achieve this. One of the aims of the programme was to develop managers who *take responsibility, make decisions and are prepared to work across departments rather than in distinct functional areas* (Leggett, 2012). Reflection enables us to take control of our lives as *socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers* (Mezirow 2000) and brings about transformation *towards increased openness, flexibility, local autonomy and inquiry orientation* (Argyris and Schon 1996).

The participants all had ‘experience’ of working as managers in the organisation and it was clear that learning needed to be embedded in their experiences of work place practice. However, to have the experience is not enough; learners must have the opportunity *to step back and reflect upon what we are doing in a critical way* (Pearson and Smith 1985 pp). The programme sought to develop reflective learners who think more critically and reflexively about themselves and their actions (Cunliffe 2009), and who are capable of monitoring themselves in a variety of situations (Candy et al in Boud, 1996).

The programme was called the Management Effectiveness Programme and as much research promotes reflection as essential to effective leadership (Kouzes and Posner 1995), it was believed to be an essential ingredient. In the learning needs analysis phase the area of greatest weakness amongst the cohort was found to be managers understanding of themselves and their impact on others. Reflection can be used as a tool that facilitates personal learning, which in turn contributes to personal development (Moon 2004) and an improvement in self-awareness is generally regarded as being a product of reflection (Gardner et al 2005). Many also consider self-awareness as an essential ingredient of personal development, learning and growth in self-esteem (Argyris and Schon 1996, Bourner, 1996 ).

### Reflective Practice

Many writers have emphasised the importance of critical reflection in helping professionals improve their practice (Schon 1987). Whilst Moon (2004) purports that there is no evidence of a common definition of reflective practice, this work draws on Schon’s definition that the process of reflection involves:

*an attempt at self-comprehension through beginning to notice and then criticise our own pre-understandings in a more systematic way whilst trying to assess their impact upon how we engage with the social and natural worlds. This requires us to challenge our pre-understandings, by noticing and exploring alternative possible commitments* (Schon, 1987, ppxiii).

And that reflexivity means:

*means recognising that we shape and are shaped by our social experience, and involves a dialogue-with-self about our fundamental assumptions, values and ways of interacting: a questioning of our core beliefs, our understanding of particular events, and how these shape our own and others’ responses. Through this self-reflexive process we may become responsive to others and open to the possibilities for new ways of being and acting* (Cunliffe 2009 p98).

This work also recognises that this can either be experienced in the moment of action – reflection-in-action, or involve looking back on and evaluating experiences and building theories and plans of action – reflection-on-action (Schon, 1987). The importance of reflection in the learning process is further supported by Mezirow’s (2000) work on transformational learning. His transformation theory adds a fifth step to Bruner’s (1996) four modes of ‘making meaning’, namely *‘becoming critically aware of one’s own tacit*

*assumptions and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation.*'(Mezirow et al, 2000 pp4). Mezirow states that these assumptions need to be brought into awareness, with critical reflection by the learner to make possible a greater degree of autonomous learning.

### Reflective Practice and Learning

Critical reflection, is not a practice that comes naturally to managers (Grey 2007, Hardingham, 2004), meaning that it is a practice that may have to be learned or facilitated (Grey 2007). Some of the literature suggests that being able to attain this form of practice is a matter of education or training (Moon 2004). However Keegan (1994, in Mezirow, 2000) states that this kind of learning cannot be accomplished through informational training. Grey's work (2007) reviews the potential of a range of tools that can be used to facilitate groups towards a more critically reflective understanding, including story- telling, reflective conversations, critical incident analysis, reflective journals and concept mapping. He concludes that managers do not automatically engage with reflection and that while some tools can contribute to the learning process, they may require specific interventions with facilitators or collaborative learning with peers. Mezirow (2000) refers generally to activities that help us become aware of how we came to our knowledge and the values that lead us to our perspective, while a study of facilitating reflective practice in teachers, identifies 3 key principles: they must understand the requirements of reflective practice and how it relates to their profession, be allowed time and space, and have a collaborative environment with support from other professionals, (Wildman and Niles 1987, in Moon 2004). A number of studies refer to 'articulation' and 'learning conversations' as aids to reflection (Jaworski 1993, Candy et al, 1985 in Moon 2004). These studies propose the notion of learning conversations as the process by which a person reflects on the state of their current understanding or awareness of a particular issue and the process by which they will attain further knowledge and understanding. Schon (1987) also emphasised the need for a Reflective Practicum – a safe environment in which a reflective conversation can be held.

Action learning, a process originated by Reg Revans in the 1940s (Revans 1945) is an approach whereby colleagues learn from and with each other through discriminating questioning, fresh experience and reflective insight. As described by Smith (2001), it is a group learning process that provides a mix of practice-based experience using real issues, where the job environment is the classroom. The dual benefits are that not only do individuals learn and develop their practice, but often action learning sets can be used to resolve significant organisational problems. Action learning is a means by which an individual can use the reflective processes of a group to bear on a problem or an issue; the group may be self-led or facilitated (Moon 2004). By promoting reflection on action and insightful inquiry from perceptive peers and by leaving responsibility for implementation of the solution in the participants' hands, it is particularly suited to enhancing leadership capabilities (Smith 2001). Additionally, Leonard and Lang (2010) promote action learning as a leadership development method due to its flexibility, efficiency (encouraging participants to focus on the skills that are most relevant and important to them) and because it provides real practice, accountability and actionable solutions to real problems. Boud et al stress that in order to enhance learning

organisers need to *strengthen the link between the learning experience and the reflective activity which follows it* (Boud et al 1998 p26).

The work of Argyris and Schon's (1996) on the importance of inquiry in organisational learning, includes lessons that can be drawn from inquiry by such methods as:

Interpretations of past experiences of success or failure
Inferences of causal connections between actions and outcomes and their implications for future action
Descriptions of shifting organisational environment and its likely demands on future performance
Analysis of the potentials and limits of alternative org strategies, structures, techniques, information systems or incentive schemes
Descriptions of conflicting views and interests that arise within the organisation under conditions of complexity or uncertainty
Critical reflections on organisational theories in use
Descriptions and analysis of the experiences of other organisations
Images of desirable futures and invention of the means by which they may be achieved

**Table 1: Methods of Inquiry – to bring about changes to organisational theory-in-use**  
(Argyris and Schon 1996 pp17)

#### Key Issues for Reflective Practice

This study seeks to understand whether managers on the programme report a change in their behaviour at work, specifically, that they have experienced an increase in their engagement in reflective practice since attending the programme. The literature reviewed suggests that the activities and behaviours listed in table 1.1 below are synonymous with reflective practice; therefore in order to determine whether there has been a significant increase in the practice of reflection amongst the cohort of managers, the themes below are used as a framework for understanding the data from the interviews.

<b>Reporting Behaviour</b>
Noticing behaviours and behaviour patterns (Schon 1987)
Critically aware of own assumptions (Mezirow 2000)
Questioning and inquiry orientation (Mezirow 2000)
Exploring alternative courses of action (Schon 1987)
Increased openness, flexibility and local autonomy (Mezirow 2000)
Growth in self-awareness (Argyris and Schon 1996)

**Table 2: Indicators of reflective practice in managers**

In order to address the question of how and why any change has come about, it would seem apposite to look to the literature on methods of developing reflective practice in managers, in order to assess whether any of these learning methods are cited by managers as having supported them in their development of reflective practice. The themes identified below in are sourced from the literature reviewed above, focusing particularly on those applied in this programme.



<b>Learning Methods Applied in the programme</b>
Articulation or learning conversation (Jaworski, 1993, Candi, 1985, Moon 2004) in a safe environment (Schon 1987)
Action learning (Revans 1945, Smith 2001)
Interpreting past experiences of success or failure (Argyris and Schon 1996)

**Table 3: Methods of developing reflective practice in managers**

### 3. Methodology

#### Data collection

This research is based on a qualitative study involving semi structured interviews conducted with managers who had completed the management development programme in March 2012. Data was collected by five interviewers, all academic staff from the Business School. The client organisation and the individuals gave their consent for this data to be used for research purposes. A semi structured interview guide was used to facilitate exploration into a similar range of topics across participants who were asked about their experiences on the programme. Specifically, participants were asked what they had learnt from the programme, what had changed about their practice as a manager as a result of the programme, and what aspects of the programme had helped or hindered them in transferring their learning into practice. Interviews lasted on average 40 minutes, these were recorded, transcribed, anonymized, coded and returned to participants for approval. None of the participants are identified.

All managers from the programme were invited to attend the evaluation day where the interviews were conducted; however some were unable to attend for work and personal reasons. Interviews were conducted with 24 managers; 4 female and 20 male, which represented the female to male ratio in the client organisation and on the programme. This comprised a wide age range from late twenties to sixty years old and work experience ranging from five years to over thirty years. Interviews were seen as an appropriate method of collecting managers' views on how their practice had changed as a result of the programme and what aspects of the programme had supported them, in making those changes. This would enable researchers to understand what changes managers had noticed, and help in understanding how managers believed these changes in practice had come about.

#### Analysis

This research adopts an interpretivist stance; that is a search for understanding rather than an intention to determine truth in an absolute way. Understanding in this research is advanced by interpreting the transcripts of interviews where managers are making sense of their experiences as participants on the programme and as practising managers in the workplace. By conducting a thematic analysis, using King's (2004) template analysis, the author can make some useful inferences whether participants experienced an increase in reflective practice and whether this is due in any way to their attendance on the management training programme. It is not the intention to establish a causal relationship between these two elements, but simply to identify, analyse and report themes within the data. King maintains

that this type of analysis is suited to evaluating programmes of activity or projects, particularly in applied or real world research (King 2004) as it allows an open-endedness towards the data and allows the researcher to focus on the research question that they need to answer.

Following Kings methodology, an number of a priori themes were identified from a sub set of the data; these were themes that emerge from an initial reading of six of the transcripts, highlighting anything of relevance that was linked to the research question of whether managers were experiencing an increase in their propensity to reflect on their practice as a manager and whether they were doing anything differently as a result of their attendance on the programme. In practical terms the a priori themes are led by the research question (King , 2004), and as the interviews were conducted with the aim of answering these questions, it seemed logical to begin with these themes.

This allowed a first attempt at developing a template, where by meaningful clusters of themes are described and assigned a code. At this initial stage there were fourteen themes, some with subthemes. All of the transcripts were then read with data from the interviews (statements by participants) coded against the initial template. At the same time, the template was modified, as it was found that some of the descriptors of the themes needed to be revised, some of the themes became redundant, some themes were subsumed by others, some themes were merged and some new themes were added. This iterative process continued, with repeated reading of the interview transcripts and coding of the data. For each code of the template, the author was looking for data in the interview transcripts that either described or illustrated the themes. The final template had six main themes with many sub themes for each; the total data was coded against this template. The resultant data was examined using the theoretical framework summarised in the literature, in order to understand what interpretations could be made. The examination looked for patterns, regularities and irregularities - data that supports and refutes the theoretical framework.

The final template used for analysis consisted of six themes relating to reflective practice and two themes relating to learning methods used on the programme to support managers in developing their practice. These themes evolved throughout the refinement of the template and can be seen below.

Table 4 shows the main and sub themes used to explore the interview data. The themes refer to behaviours associated with reflective practice that the interviewees said they have experienced since completing the programme.

<b>Main Themes: Reflective Practice</b>	<b>Sub Themes: Reflective Practice</b>
Noticing what I do/being more aware of my behaviour/thinking before doing/asking questions of myself before doing	Noticing what I do Thinking about what I do Questioning myself about what I do
Reflecting on what has happened/thinking about success and failures/drawing meaning and learning from past experiences	
Knowing myself more/having a better understanding of my strengths and weaknesses/more self-aware	
Increased confidence in myself and what I do	
Open to different ideas and ways of doing things	More flexible – considering alternative actions Doing things differently
Having a different perspective at work/understanding others' viewpoints more/having a different mind-set about my work/taking more personal responsibility	Having a different perspective on things at work Taking more personal responsibility

**Table 4: Themes associated with Reflective Practice Behaviour**

To examine the way in which managers experienced the learning on the programme to support and encourage changes in practice, a similar approach to the analysis was taken. There were two main themes in the template which incorporated a number of sub themes. Table 5 below shows the themes; which refer to learning activities and programme content such as group discussions, action learning and activities that promoted a more strategic understanding of the organisation.

<b>Main themes: Learning Methods</b>	<b>Sub themes: Learning Methods</b>
Collaborative working	Working with others on the programme to solve work issues, peer support, action learning sets, opportunities to talk to colleagues that wouldn't normally meet
A strategic perspective on the organisation	Understanding more about what separate parts of the organisation do, hearing others perspectives, understanding the bigger picture

**Table 5: Themes associated with Learning from the programme bringing about a change in practice**

## 4. Findings

### *Noticing, thinking about and questioning what I do...*

This theme reflects participants articulating a change in their practice from ‘doing’ to ‘thinking before or while doing’ or being more consciously aware of what they do and questioning themselves about the appropriateness of their actions or behaviour. This theme was present in the transcripts for more than three quarters of the participants. At the simplest level, some participants talked of being *‘mindful of it when doing things....’* or *‘it’s something now that I’m very conscious of’* which relates to the early stages of reflective behaviour as described by Schon, (1987). Others were clear that they were thinking more about their practice in general *‘I’ve thought about things before I’ve done it’* and *‘it helps you think about what you’re doing rather than just doing it’* or questioning their assumptions about their ‘usual’ practice, *‘I am asking more questions in my role’* and *‘I look on successes and I look on failures and ask questions....why do you need this done?’* These more critical reflections, where managers are not simply accepting the tried and tested practice in the organisation but questioning it, is resonant of Argyris and Schon’s work on bringing about changes to organisational theory-in-use through the use of inquiry about interpretations of past experiences (Argyris and Schon 1996) and Mezirow’s (2000) questioning and inquiry orientation.

### *Being more self-aware and confident*

This theme is associated with managers describing that they understand themselves more as a result of the programme, including self- acceptance and an increase in their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. Just under half of the interviewees expressed that they experienced this from general statements of *‘I’m certainly more self-aware,’*, *‘I understand myself a lot better’* and *‘I also think my knowledge of myself has improved,’* to *‘it helps you know your own limitations’* and *‘I think its reinforced some views that I had about myself but it did throw a few surprises and .....I didn’t think I was like that at all...’*. The first module of learning was dedicated to self-analysis and understanding personal impact and many key writers on leadership would advocate that all leadership development begins with an understanding of self (George 2003) and an improvement in self-awareness is generally regarded as being a product of reflection (Gardner et al 2005).

For themes related to self-belief, participants were clear that they had experienced an increase in their levels of confidence and that this had helped them in the execution of their work and particularly in working with others across the organisation. Participants’ reports of feeling ‘good’ about themselves, being better able to deal with a range of work situations, and able to present themselves more confidently were widely described in the interview transcripts. At times it was difficult to separate the concepts of self- awareness and confidence: *‘I think with increased self-awareness comes more confidence,’* which concurs with Bourner’s (1996) view about the link between self-awareness and self-esteem.

### *Being more flexible; doing things differently*

Being more open to different ways of doing things at work and being more flexible in their approach were highlighted by the majority of participants in describing their response to the management training programme. Some identified a change in their general approach: *'I think it's the change in mind-set which has been more beneficial; opening to different ideas and different ways of working'* and *'it's given me more flexibility from a point of view of understanding different ways of how to manage;'* while other participants gave specific examples of the change in their practice: *'personally the way I look at people or talk to people or interact with people is different from the way I did before.'* There are links here to increased openness, flexibility and local autonomy described by Mezirow (2000) and Schon's exploring alternative courses of action (Schon 1987) as indicators of reflective practice. There are many examples of where participants joined the two concepts of reflection and opening up to alternative courses of action by stating that the programme enabled them to *'explore new ideas, take a step back and understand new ways of doing things.'* Related to this a theme of participants feeling more autonomous (Mezirow 2000), and taking more responsibility emerges from the data. For some this was about having gained a different perspective in relation to the organisation as a direct result of the programme, explaining that *'the directors have listened to some things (we said) and are doing some things differently for the better'* and the realisation that they could have an influence in the organisation resonated with many participants: *'We've also got some say in where we're going'* and *'rather than..... waiting for the solution to come to you, you propose the solution.'*

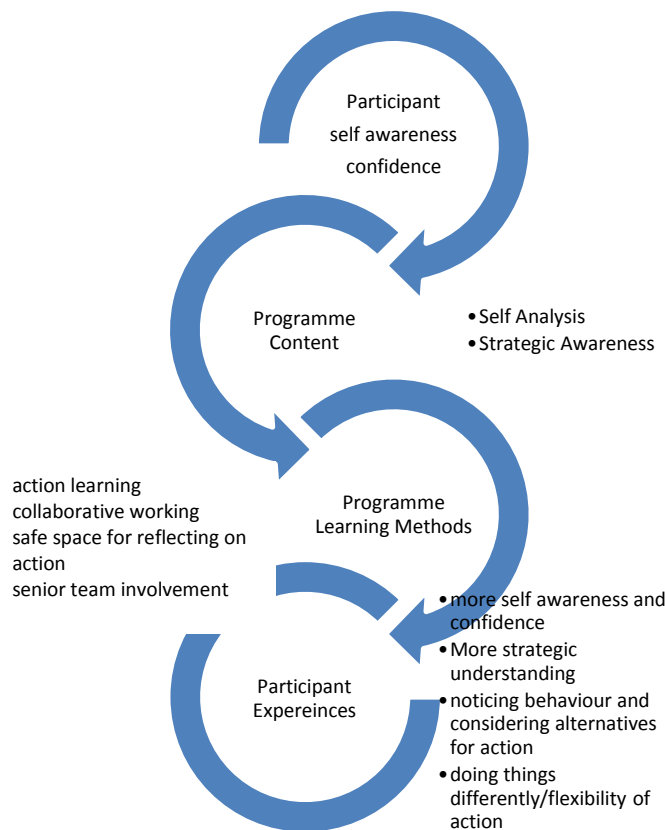
### *The value of collaborative learning*

What is apparent in the data in terms of the learning methods employed in the programme is that participants' emphasise the way in which the programme offered an opportunity and a 'safe space' for managers to consider their current practice. The action learning sets clearly provided a forum for this, and these were cited by two thirds of the participants as being very helpful in promoting discussion with peers, ideas generation, problem solving and general collaborative working that wasn't in place before the start of the programme. *'I just think they felt they can open up a bit more, to get advice from five or six managers.....all from different bits of the organisation which has been really helpful'* and *'I found the practical side more beneficial.....just hearing about how other people approach things in practice'*. Action learning (Revans), along with participants' engagement in learning conversations (Jaworski, 1993, Candy, 1985, Moon 2004) in a safe environment (Schon 1987), with other managers and the opportunity to interpret past experiences of success or failure (Argyris and Schon 1996), were the second most prevalent theme in the data. As each module of learning was followed by an action learning set this provided a link between the learning experience and the reflective activity which Boud et al (1998) advocate as a way of enhancing learning.

Many participants also report a feeling of empowerment through the opportunity (from the programme) to form new cross functional network of colleagues in the organisation, which enables them to solve problems more readily, understand perspectives of other departments and functions and generally have a greater strategic understanding of the organisation.

Examples include: *'being able to.... look at it more from an organisational point of view,' 'I take a more holistic approach to my activities now'* and *'there is a bit more understanding of what the business does as a whole and how it....fits together.'* This theme was raised by just under half of the participants in the study. The sense of working through conflict and difficulties together described by many participants has echoes of Argyris and Schon's (1996) descriptions of conflicting views and interests that arise within the organisation and critical reflections on organisational theories in use (both experienced by participants in their action learning set discussions), as methods of inquiry used to bring about organisational change.

The themes discussed are interlinked and relational; however, there is no attempt here to establish a causal relationship between the training programme experienced by participants and their reported levels of confidence, self-awareness and propensity to think more about their actions at work than previously. The training programme overtly set out to develop reflective practice in managers, and a number of components of the programme learning design were targeted at this, namely the action learning sets and working collaboratively with peers. Clearly, participants are describing a change in their practice during the interviews and they are discussing this in the context of evaluating the management training programme. Figure 1 below depicts the links between the various components of this study.



**Figure 1: Illustrating the links between the training programme and participants experiences**

## **5. Conclusions, Implications and Limitations**

Participants report that the opportunity afforded by the programme to work collaboratively with peers and have a safe space in which to engage in learning conversations and reflect on their practice has supported them in embedding reflective practice behaviours into their work. Many also state that they now consider alternative approaches to activities and that they have increased levels of self-awareness and confidence as a result of their learning and development on the programme. This study adds to existing body of literature by confirming the role of reflection in developing self-awareness (Gardner et al 2005) and the link between self-awareness and self-esteem (Bourner 1996). It highlights the conditions and methods appropriate to the development of reflective practice, by emphasising the value of action learning (Smith 2001), the importance of linking the learning experience to the reflective activity (Boud 1998). It also supports the work of Grey (2007) in the value of providing collaborative environments with peer support. The implications of the study are that HRD professionals, in designing training or learning programmes for managers, give attention to the provision of these components if programmes are aimed at developing reflective practice in managers.

It should be noted that this management training programme was one of a number of HR initiatives taking place in the organisation at that time in order to prepare the workforce for strategic change. There were changes to graduate recruitment, employee reward and performance strategies being implemented concurrently, therefore these findings will undoubtedly be influenced by the changing context in which the participants were working. A further consideration is that under half of the sample, had completed the accredited version of the programme (MA in Applied Management) and as this entailed completing work-based assessments for each module, requiring them to reflect on their learning, assimilate appropriate theory and apply their learning to their workplace practice. As a consequence, they may understand the requirements of reflective practice and how it relates to their professional practice to a greater extent than their colleagues on the non-accredited programme. However, no account of this has been taken in the analysis for this research.

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