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The ethos of action learning within a virtual Reflective Practice Forum: an account of practice drawing connections between action learning, community of practice and supervision frameworks

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ABSTRACT

As Action Learning has evolved, it has been adapted to promote learning in various contexts. In this account of practice, we share our perspectives as facilitators of the application of action learning principles within Reflective Practice Forums for Mentoring and Coaching Programme Managers. The ethos of action learning was adopted with the forums to enable the programme managers to engage in regular reflections of their current practices and ongoing professional development. In our assessment of the application of action learning principles and processes within the Reflective Practice Forums, we consider the connections between action learning, communities of practice and supervision frameworks to examine and present the 'ethos' of Action Learning within the forums.

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Reflective forum; action learning; community of practice; supervision of practice

Introduction

The Reflective Practice Forum (RPF) for Mentoring and Coaching Programme Managers was created in 2019, shortly after the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) introduced the Core Standards Framework for individual and training provider accreditation. The EMCC Global Programme Manager Quality Award (PMQA) and Individual Programme Manager Accreditation (IMPA) were important developments for those working in the programme management space. The EMCC Global accreditation developments have at long last recognised the role and impact of Programme Managers in the successful design, implementation, evaluation and outcomes related to mentoring and coaching programmes. Individuals can now achieve individual accreditation, either through a direct application to EMCC Global or through the attendance and successful completion of a training course with an accredited training provider. Once accredited, EMCC Global requires Mentoring and Coaching Programme Managers to engage in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and supervision. CPD is a requirement for anyone engaged in professional practice and supervision is required to develop knowledge, skills, self-insight, whilst also providing the opportunity for reflective practice, self-care and to build resilience.

Formation of the action learning sets

The purpose of the RPF is to enable Mentoring and Coaching Programme Managers to engage in reflective dialogue and collaborative learning for the development and benefit of themselves, their colleagues, their programme participants, and their organisations. The RPF supports Mentoring and Coaching Programme Managers' CPD and their ongoing supervision. In the CPD and supervision space, the RPF serves three functions: developmental, resourcing, and qualitative. The developmental function supports the building of knowledge, skills and understanding in the context of programme management. The resourcing function provides a supportive space, whereby participants can share their experiences and develop insight through reflection and dialogue. The qualitative function provides the space to support the quality and robustness of programme management. The wider purpose of the RPF is to build a Community of Practice (COP), creating a network of Programme Managers who are passionate about mentoring and coaching programme management, keen to share practice, develop innovations, learn from each other through ongoing interaction and peer support.

The RPF runs all year round, with monthly webinars 1.5 hours in duration, facilitated by two team members. Currently, participants select to attend six sessions per year. Participants are typically practitioner level graduates of an EMCC Global PMQA training course; therefore, they have at least three years of experience in programme management and have contributed to at least three different mentoring and/or coaching programmes. Some participants are working towards their individual accreditation and have, therefore, not yet completed the EMCC Global PMQA training course. The role of the participant is mutually agreed at the outset and includes the following aspects:

- Preparing for each RPF session: identifying a topic or an area of their programme management practice they would like to bring to the session.
- Presenting the topic, area of practice and relevant issues: saying what is to be explored, what is expected and needed from the peer group.
- Thinking about and developing own learning (objectives); and applying the learning.
- Awareness of own confidentiality: what agreements are in place with others about own practice.
- Practicalities of each session: being on time, observing allocated times and respecting the learning agreement.

Participants are invited to share a dilemma/challenge related to their practice in a confidential and collaborative space. The facilitator supports the peer group to engage in insightful questioning and reflections to assist the participant in their learning.

Framing of the Reflective Practice Forums (RPF) within an action learning ethos

As there is an increasing interest in 'action approaches' to management and organisations, action learning has gained recognition within management education (Levy 2000; Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook 2005). Action Learning is used in post-graduate and post-experience programmes to bring a reflective space to explore work practices,

adding a critical edge to business and management education (Rigg and Trehan 2004). However, the current practice of action learning is often seen to depart from the 'classical principles' proposed by Revans (1998), where learning requires action on intractable organisational problems and is primarily facilitated by a set of colleagues rather than a teacher, trainer, or other expert (Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook 2005). Rather, although Revans' (1998) work continues to shape action learning practices, there appears to be some variation in the focus and balance between P and Q of his action learning equation $L (\text{Learning}) = P (\text{Practice Knowledge}) + Q (\text{Questioning Insight})$ depending on the context and learners are involved (Brook, Lawless, and Sanyal 2021).

This current thinking and approach in the practice of action learning has framed the design and facilitation of the RPFs. As facilitators, we have worked within the overarching ethos of the action learning principles of working with 'practice' problems in small groups, requirement of action as the basis for learning (although action may not always be immediate) and personal development resulting from individual and group reflections. Thus, the core principles of action learning underpin the RPFs as the overall approach – each participant is invited to present a dilemma and through a process of asking clarifying questions and providing feedback, the individual is supported to consider and reflect on the situation, enabling learning, insight and actions.

Our role as AL facilitators

The RPF is facilitated virtually by a team of expert mentoring and coaching practitioners who are all experienced in mentoring and coaching programme design, implementation, and evaluation. The facilitators are also experienced mentors and coaches and work with EMCC Global to support individuals and organisations to recognise and accredit their practice. The role of the RPF facilitator includes:

- Creating the learning agreement: facilitating the initial and ongoing learning agreement and contract as well as any sessional contracting.
- Clarity of purpose: to help develop clarity of purpose and understanding what is realistic, possible, and feasible within each session.
- Safety: creating a safe place where issues can be discussed openly and honestly and monitoring the group interactions.
- Voice: to ensure that all those who attend can participate and feel that they have a voice in the room.
- Resource: suggesting resources such as texts, books, websites, courses, other institutions, and professionals if appropriate.
- Timekeeper: managing the overall session and individual time allocated to each participant.

The facilitators all bring different strengths to the group. Dr Julie Haddock-Millar leads and co-facilitates the EMCC Global PMQA accredited course for Mentoring and Coaching Programme Managers, alongside Prof David Clutterbuck. Many of the RPF participants are graduates of this programme. Dr Chandana Sanyal and Melissa Richardson are skilled facilitators with experience in action learning and coaching and mentoring programme implementation. The facilitators partner together, so each RPF is facilitated by two

members of the team. One member facilitates the session, the second acts as an observer and enters the space when invited by the lead facilitator.

Overall, our approach as facilitators of the RPFs is to create a safe space for open dialogue, inviting participants to contribute, share, question and develop the participants' insights and experience, thus aligning with the ethos of action learning.

Problems/issues explored by the Programme Managers

The Programme Managers have numerous roles, including strategist, researcher, negotiator, advocate, champion, guardian, designer, co-ordinator, mentor, coach, supervisor and evaluator (Koczka 2017). Therefore, participants have brought a varying range of issues/problems to the RPF space. These include matching processes to enable the 'best fit' between programme participants; relation rift between the mentor/coach and mentee/coachee, particularly when the relationship goes off at different tangents and does not align with the original contract; how to provide feedback to a mentor/coach that is not the right 'fit' for the programme ethos or approach; the importance of building supervision within programmes; the design of impact evaluation strategies, tools and techniques; exploring mentoring for children; considered ways of providing ongoing support for mentors; opportunities for CPD, supervision and individual accreditation; explored working simultaneously with internal and external mentors and more recently, what does COVID-19 mean for our practice as consultants, Programme Managers, mentors and coaches.

RPF and the relationship with communities of practice

In our assessment of the effectiveness and impact of the RPFs, using the approaches and processes presented above and particularly in reviewing the purpose of the RPFs, we have drawn comparisons with two other concepts of group engagements which also offer a safe space for learning and sharing of practices – COP and group supervision.

In the RPF, there is a strong alignment with Wenger's original definition of a COP: 'Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their understanding and knowledge of this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 4). The COP is a community that learns; participants are jointly committed to developing practice, and in this case, raising standards in mentoring and coaching programme management.

Within the RPFs, the Mentoring and Coaching Programme Managers were building a network of relationships to connect and combine the diverse knowledge and abilities that exist in their specific practices for collective learning (Wenger 1998), to apply at organisational levels to design and deliver coaching and mentoring programmes. As the participants had varying experiences of programme management, some were inclined to 'seek' this knowledge from others and often looked to the facilitators as the experts. Thus, we were viewed as the holders of 'P' of the action learning equation: $L (\text{Learning}) = P (\text{Practice Knowledge}) + Q (\text{Questioning Insight})$ (Revans 1998).

A key challenge for Dr Haddock-Millar and Professor Clutterbuck is not to slip into the role of teacher, tutor or programme leader. As many of the RPF participants had previously experienced Dr Haddock-Millar and Prof Clutterbuck in the role as course

leader, facilitator, and tutor, some participants continued to view the RPF as an extension of the course and expected there to be an ongoing sharing of knowledge and skills. There is some overlap here with the role of mentor; someone that may guide others, drawing on their contextual knowledge and experience. As facilitators, we have reflected on this:

- 'From my perspective, one of the challenges is that I am the joint Programme Leader for the Programme Manager accredited course and this Forum primarily supports graduates of the programme. I have to work hard to ensure I do not fall into the role of teacher, tutor or programme leader.'
- 'There was often experimenting in the moment; some requiring more direction than others ... they were hungry for a broader understanding of the approach to managing a mentoring programme.'
- 'I suppose we are seen as holding the 'knowledge' and there is intense sharing not just within the room, but reference papers and handouts are shared as well after sessions so there is also storing the knowledge for the future.'
- 'The passion for the topic and interest in learning was really apparent; some, who were in the early stage of practice, were keen to learn from others and valued the shared space to learn.'
- 'The creation of a drop box for shared information relate well as a feature of community of practice a shared repertoire of resources.'
- 'They brought the learning from the programme within the AL space to relate to their practice of mentoring project managers.'

We observe that some principles and features of COP had been adapted into our practice within the RPFs to offer a space for ongoing learning and building a network, which is one of the core purposes of these sessions. There is a realisation that many of the complexities and struggles experienced by participants are commonplace in the context of mentoring and coaching programme management. The likelihood for future collaboration and networking extends beyond the RPF which has begun to transition into a COP. This includes the opportunity for collaborative research, sharing of methodologies, resources and tools. In the longer term, the participants may feel comfortable to organise self-managed action learning sets; however, for now, participants draw on the facilitators' breadth of knowledge and experience to inform their practice.

RPF and the relationship with group supervision

Group supervision involves the use of a group setting to enable members to reflect on their work to improve the skills and capability of both individuals and the group. According to Hawkins and Smith (2013, supervision offers a developmental function of enhancing skills, understanding and capacities of the professional; a resourcing function by providing a supportive space to process practice experiences and a qualitative function which is concerned with quality, work standards and ethical integrity. This aspect of supervision was built into the RPFs to contribute to the ongoing development of the participants as Coaching and Mentoring Programme Managers and to build a broader view of their practice. As facilitators, we acknowledged that we had a 'supervisory' role in the development and growth of the participants within the RPFs.

- 'There was certainly a supervision element as it allowed more continued education and learning of the practice of coaching and mentoring programme management.'
- 'One aspect that works well is not having a fixed agenda but rather encouraging the participants to bring their practice dilemmas and challenges in a supportive environment, whereby participants can benefit from the experience and insight from others.'
- 'The supportive element was particularly strong within these sessions as participants expressed uncertainties and doubts about some aspects of programme management'.
- 'We offer a restorative space as well in looking after the overall well-being of the participants, which I think was an added value.'

Overall, as facilitators, we were mindful of the aspects of supervision as defined above. We facilitated a supportive learning space to engage in and share practice experiences and offered advocacy as required to enable the participants to build competence and confidence in their practice.

Our RPF framework underpinned by the AL ethos

As facilitators of the RPFs, we were adaptive in our approach to address the issues brought to the learning space and to offer the support needed to enable the participants to develop and build their practice as coaching and mentoring programme managers. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the action learning ethos and the different aspects of our approach, drawing the connections with CoP and supervision frameworks, within the context of the RPF.

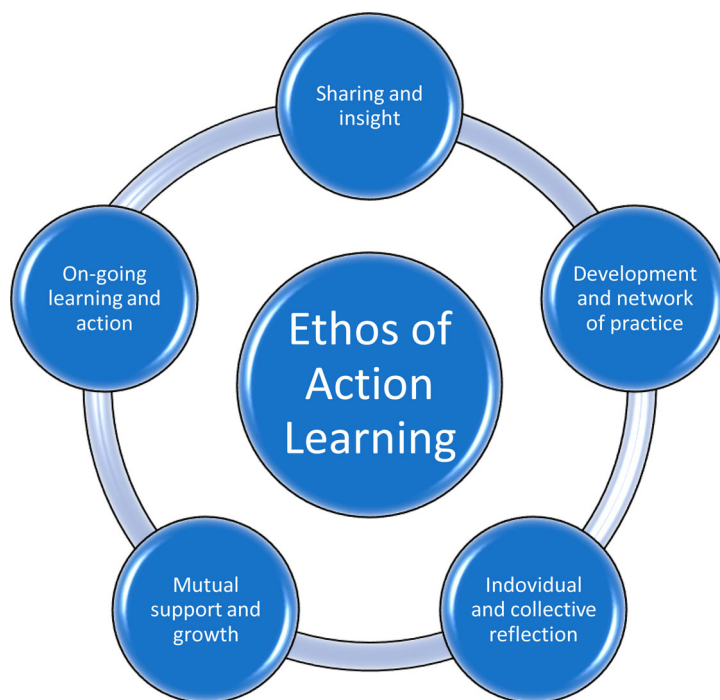


Figure 1. Reflective Practice Forum framework.

We recognised that the RPF offered an opportunity for ongoing learning, which for most participants was a continuation of the EMCC Global PMQA accredited course for Mentoring and Coaching Programme Managers which they had recently completed. The RPF space offered the opportunity to bring 'learning' from the programme, to relate this to their practice, and then consider the implementation of the mentoring/coaching programmes in organisations. This relates to the ethos of action learning as well as aligning with principles of COP and Supervision.

The participants also engaged in both individual and collective reflections in considering the issues presented. They shared their own experiences, including challenges, asked questions and sought clarifications, leading to further insights into the practice of coaching and mentoring programme management. Here the elements of supervision became apparent as the developmental function of enhancing skills, understanding and capacities of the professional were addressed through the facilitative process. Thus, reflection on and development of practice was a core aspect of the RPFs.

Finally, as newly trained Programme Managers, the participants had the opportunity to start building a network, that is, come together as a practitioner group which aligns with the key concept of COP. The participants come to understand each other's contexts, situations and challenges. This bringing together of the Programme Managers through the RPFs, fostered a feeling of camaraderie and mutual support. Programme Managers learn and develop together in a shared space. They committed to creating a mutually supportive and collaborative environment, where they had the opportunity for shared learning experiences in a group setting.

In sharing our account of practice, we present an adaption of action learning, designed and facilitated to offer a learning and developmental space for coaching and mentoring programme managers, both experienced as well as newly accredited. The integration of some principles and features of Supervision and COP within the overall ethos of action learning has enabled us to ensure that learning, reflection and action are at the core of the RPFs. Revans' (1998) action learning core values have shaped our practice as facilitators and on occasion have also challenged us not to slip into the roles of a tutor or programme leader and thus be seen as holders of 'practice knowledge' of Revans' action learning equation. However, the variation in the focus on development, ongoing learning and reflective practice has enabled us to ensure that the ethos of action learning is underpinned within the RPFs.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Chandana Sanyal is a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management and Development at Middlesex University Business School and European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) Global Work Group Lead for Individual Accreditation for coaches and mentors. She is an EMCC Global Senior Practitioner Accredited Coach, Fellow Member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and Higher Education Academy. Chandana's current research interests are action learning, leadership development, mindfulness and self-care and impact evaluation in coaching and mentoring.

Julie Haddock-Millar is an Associate Professor of HRM at Middlesex University Business School, Visiting Professor at the International University of Monaco and EMCC Global Work Group Lead for the International Standards in Mentoring and Coaching Programmes. Julie is an EMCC Global Senior Practitioner Accredited Coach, Master Practitioner Mentoring and Coaching and Mentoring Programme Manager. Julie's research interests are mentoring and coaching for well-being and resilience, action learning and reflective practice, and mentoring and coaching impact evaluation.

David Clutterbuck is one of the early pioneers of developmental coaching and mentoring and co-founder of the European Mentoring & Coaching Council. Author of more than 70 books, including the first evidence-based titles on coaching culture and team coaching, he is visiting professor at four business schools. He leads a global network of specialist mentoring and coaching training consultants, Coaching and Mentoring International.

Melissa Richardson is the founder and Managing Director of Art of Mentoring, a mentoring software and services firm based in Australia. She is a global assessor for the European Mentoring and Coaching Council's ISMCP Award (International Standards for Mentoring and Coaching Programs) and has post-graduate qualifications in organisational coaching, counselling and marketing strategy. Melissa directs the Art of Mentoring research agenda and regularly speaks on mentoring best practice and technology-enabled mentoring.

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