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# '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
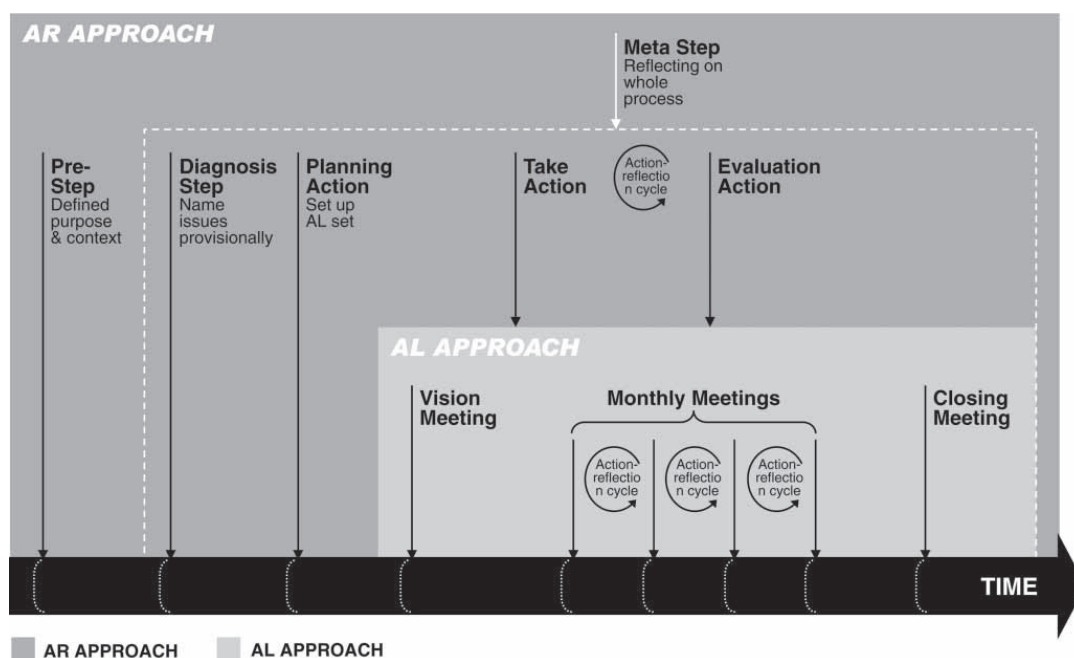


Figure 1. The ALAR approach.

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) identify 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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