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Developing Ourselves as Police Leaders: How Can We Inquire Collaboratively in a Hierarchical Organization?

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This paper gives a practical account of a recent 18-month long *action inquiry* project, in which the author facilitated (and co-inquired with) a mixed group of police managers with the intention of improving our own leadership practices. Six phases of the inquiry are identified—doing the groundwork, getting the group together, creating a safe environment, sustaining the inquiry, accounting for the learning, and bridging the gaps. It is argued that such forms of collaborative inquiry are particularly well suited to addressing the uniquely complex phenomenon of leadership, and some tangible benefits for members of the project and for the organization as a whole are identified. Particular attention is paid to the politics and practicalities of doing collaborative inquiry in an overtly hierarchical organization, concluding that *action inquiry* must be crafted to its particular circumstances and context to realize its considerable potential to help us improve both individual practice and organizational performance.

KEY WORDS: Action inquiry; police; leadership development.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Improving the quality of leadership is a crucial issue for the police service. Learning *about* theories of leadership is not enough. What really matters is for each of us to understand and improve our own unique practice as leaders."

This was the challenge taken up by a mixed group of police managers (including the author) in the Hertfordshire Constabulary[2] in an 18-month long action inquiry—*Developing Ourselves as Leaders*. For most participants, the results have been positive, exciting, and tangible (although hard to quantify). However, we also found that doing collaborative inquiry in the police context had particular problems—not least that of creating a safe learning environment in an overtly

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[2]A provincial police force in the United Kingdom (an organization of some 3000 police officers and civilian support staff).

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hierarchical organization in which neither the democratic and emergent processes of collaborative inquiry nor the kind of transformative learning claimed by some members of the Action Inquiry Group (AIG) sit comfortably.

This paper will examine some of these difficulties and our attempts to overcome them—hopefully in a way that will prove useful to readers contemplating or actually doing collaborative inquiry in an organizational setting. I shall say something about the *rationale* behind choosing an action inquiry approach before considering some of the *politics and practicalities* of the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* project in more detail. Finally, some tentative *conclusions* will be offered on the basis of this experience.

2. WHY ACTION INQUIRY?

As an educator and senior police manager, I have long been interested in the challenges inherent in police leadership and leadership development (see, for example, Mead, 1988, 1990, 1995). By 1998, I had come to the view that all methods of leadership development are based on assumptions (usually implicit) about the nature of leadership. Warren Bennis, one of the most respected and enduring commentators on the subject, described it as the most studied and least understood phenomenon in social science (Bennis, 1989). In fact, although common usage sometimes requires it, the word "leadership" has little meaning in the abstract. We might even say that it only acquires meaning in action—"leading" as opposed to "leadership."

My assumptions about leadership reflect this basic epistemological position. I take it that leadership is an active process, not an abstract quality. Leadership is not the prerogative of the few, but is distributed throughout the organization: exercised day-to-day by many at all levels. Nor is it a zero-sum game in which the more I lead, the more you follow. Rather, it is a complex and often paradoxical practice, uniquely exercised by each of us in particular circumstances, which we can develop and improve over time.

It, therefore, follows that effective methods of leadership development must be able to support a multiplicity of individual inquiries while holding a common focus (in this case, that of developing ourselves as leaders). They will benefit from diversity of membership—particularly in relation to ethnic origin, gender, level, and area of responsibility, police, and support staff. Because practice changes over time, it requires an iterative process, not a one-off event. And because practice is multidimensional, it is essential to work holistically across all four domains—experiential, imaginal, propositional, and practical (Heron, 1992, 1996).

Thus, when I wanted to offer a leadership development program to the Hertfordshire Constabulary as part of my Ph.D. research, some form of collaborative action inquiry capable of encompassing all these dimensions and domains seemed to be called for. Drawing on writer-practitioners, such as Donald Schon (Schon, 1983), Mike Pedler (Pedler, 1981), William Torbert (Torbert, 1991, 2001), John

Heron (Heron, 1992, 1996), Peter Reason (Reason and Rowan, 1981; Reason, 1988, 1994; Reason and Bradbury, 2001), and Jack Whitehead (Whitehead, 1993), I adopted the nomenclature of Action Inquiry to describe what I envisaged: practitioners coming together as a community of inquiry, encouraging and challenging each other as they engaged in real-time, real-life development over several cycles of action and reflection with the process of the group designed co-operatively to meet emerging themes and interests. I hoped, too, that the term Action Inquiry would be sufficiently understandable and intriguing to attract potential co-inquirers.

3. POLITICS AND PRACTICALITIES

As Coghlan and Brannick (2001) observe:

> While doing any research in an organization is very political, doing research in and on your own organization is particularly so. . . . Indeed it might [even] be considered subversive (p. 64)

Although my experience of doing research was limited, I had got my fingers burned often enough as a senior police manager[3] to be very aware of organizational sensitivities and of the need to avoid activating its "immune response" to the action inquiry project. In the event, political dynamics moved into the foreground on several occasions. Rather than cluster them together, I prefer to consider them in the particular contexts in which they arose.

In hindsight, I can identify six main phases of the action inquiry—outlined in Table I. In this section, I will follow them in rough chronological order, highlighting the politics and practicalities of doing the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* project.

3.1. Doing the Groundwork

The process of seeking sponsorship and support for the project began in late 1997, about a year before the AIG was initiated, when Peter Sharpe (then Chief Constable of the Hertfordshire Constabulary) agreed to support my application for a Bramshill Fellowship.[4] I wanted to obtain a fellowship for two reasons: because it represented a commitment to fund my studies and, even more important, because it would give my research some official recognition and legitimacy. We were both keen to ensure that I would provide some "return" for this investment in my development and my plan included a proposal to conduct some form of collaborative action research (at that time, in the area of men and masculinities) in the Hertfordshire Constabulary.

The Chief Constable's endorsement of my Bramshill Fellowship sanctioned the project in principle and proved invaluable when I began to sound out other

[3] See *Police Stories* (www.actionresearch.net).

[4] A national scheme to support police officers researching topics of relevance and concern to the police service as part of higher level degrees at recognized universities.

Table I. Phases of the Developing Ourselves as Leaders Action Inquiry

Phase	Theme	Main Activities	Timeframe
I	Doing the groundwork	Personal sanction from Chief Constable Consultation with influential peers Get support from HR and Training	Sept 1997 to Sept 1998
II	Getting the group together	Letter of invitation to 300+ managers Briefings for 50+ potential participants Set-up meeting for committed members	Oct 1998 to Feb 1999
III	Creating a safe environment	Establishing my role as co-facilitator Contracting “ground rules” for group Sharing personal stories, hopes, fears	Feb 1999 to April 1999
IV	Sustaining the inquiry	Developing individual inquiry questions Meetings every 6–8 weeks Holding each other to account	April 1999 to June 2000
V	Accounting for the learning	Individual papers from members Extended review of learning Multiple, creative techniques	Oct 1999 to Feb 2000
VI	Bridging the gaps	Feeding back results to organization Presentations at police conferences Independent evaluation of project	May 2000 to Dec 2001

potential supporters during the summer of 1998. By this time I was outside the organization, seconded to National Police Training, and I was anxious to “test the waters” back in Hertfordshire. Over the course of several weeks, I had long conversations with several erstwhile colleagues who I felt would be open-minded and sympathetic, whose judgment I trusted, and who I knew to be influential “opinion-formers” in the organization. They were happy to lend their personal support to a collaborative inquiry process (indeed, two of them subsequently joined the group), but encouraged me to reconsider my intended focus on men and masculinities—which they saw as too narrow, confrontative, and exclusive.

Their views tended to confirm my own doubts about the readiness of other members of the organization to tackle this issue “head on.” It occurred to me that a more creative approach would be to invite men and women into a space that, by its very nature (i.e., community, collaboration, and diminished sense of hierarchy) would challenge deep-seated notions of hegemonic masculinity. Gender issues, including masculinity, might emerge naturally in such a group if they were really as significant in the organization as I imagined them to be.[5]

[5]In the event, the topic arose only once—6 months into the life of the group—when we shared our respective experiences of being men and women in the police organization. I still believe that it is a highly significant issue for the police service, which demands (although might still not be ripe) for further research.

Thus, I reformulated my proposal to cover a more general inquiry into leadership practice among men and women across the organization—*Developing Ourselves as Leaders*—and, subsequently, put it to the Training Manager and Head of Human Resources on that basis. They were both quite excited by the idea and willing to support it, provided it was offered as a complementary development activity clearly outside the scope of the existing structures for management development. This degree of "distancing" from mainstream training activity was understandable and probably quite helpful in differentiating it in the minds of potential co-inquirers.

Even as a senior "insider," getting high level support for the action inquiry project required persistent and delicate negotiations. Powerful players needed to be convinced of the potential benefits of this approach and reassured that, although challenging, it did not represent a fundamental threat to the organization. In managing the micropolitics of these interactions, I found it helpful to present myself as a "tempered radical" (Meyerson and Scully, 1995), as someone authentically committed to the mission and goals of the organization who is also seeking to bring about radical change in some aspects of the way it does business. This ambivalence—this state of living contradiction—is a powerful spur to action but, as I have written about elsewhere,[6] can also be an uncomfortable and uneasy position to occupy.

It no doubt helped that I was also able to call on my track record as director of other successful management and leadership development programs[7] to establish my credibility and competence in the field. Despite these credentials, doing the groundwork was a slow and painstaking business—but absolutely essential to securing the levels of access and support it would take to get the project "off the ground."

3.2. Getting the Group Together

By October 1998, we were ready to launch the group. Working closely with Roger Barrett, the Force Development Manager, a letter of invitation was drafted, refined, and sent out to over three hundred middle and senior managers throughout the Hertfordshire Constabulary. We wanted to offer the chance of participating to as wide a range of people as possible without being overwhelmed by potential participants. After much debate, we set eligibility criteria based on rank or grade. Although setting an arbitrary cut-off, these grounds had some logic and were defensible in terms of existing organizational practice.

Between 50 and 60 people responded to the letter by coming to one of the briefing sessions, some of them familiar faces, some new to me—men and women,

[6] See *Police Stories* (www.actionresearch.net).

[7] Having directed the Special Course (a national scheme for young officers with outstanding potential) from 1988–1991, and the MDP Management Development Programme (for middle managers in Hertfordshire) from 1995–1997.

police officers, and civilian support staff of many ranks and grades. To the nonpolice reader this may not seem particularly noteworthy, but such heterogeneity is still comparatively rare in police management and leadership development programs. The briefings were designed to help people make a positive decision to opt in to the action inquiry or to decide, without any stigma, that it was not for them. The underlying principle was that of voluntary, informed self-selection. I spoke a little about the rationale for offering this opportunity to focus on leadership and said something about the participative and democratic ethos of action inquiry. I talked about the possibility of transformative learning and asked people to decide if they wanted to take part using their head (Do you have enough information? Does it make *sense* for you to do it?), heart (Are you intrigued, curious, drawn? Does it *feel* right for you to do it?), and will (Are you able and willing to meet the commitment? Do you really *want* to do it?).

I then told the story of *Jumping Mouse*—a wonderful Native American tale of journeying, sacrifice, and transformation (Storm, 1972). It is a long story—20 minutes or so—and telling it felt like a risky thing to do. The possibility of ridicule was high. Nevertheless, I had been talking in a fairly conventional way about a radically different way of learning and I wanted to be more congruent. It was a defining moment. As I looked at the audience, I saw some eyes glaze over while others began to sparkle with interest—choices were being made. We closed the session with questions and a general discussion and everyone was given a short paper reiterating the main points of the briefing and a reply slip with which to notify their decision within 3 weeks.

Sixteen people confirmed their intention to take part and we arranged a preliminary meeting in mid-February 1999 to resolve any outstanding issues and to set up the inquiry group. Not everyone could make the meeting (a consistent and seemingly inevitable feature of organizational life), but there were enough of us to share some hopes and expectations and to arrange a series of meetings over the coming year beginning with a 2-day residential event in April to kick start the inquiry process.

By staging the process of self-selection (invitation, briefing, written reply, preliminary meeting), and with a bit of good luck, we had managed to recruit a manageable number of committed people. It also turned out that the final group was well mixed in terms of police officers (8) and civilian support staff (8), and in terms of men (10) and women (6). There was also a wide spread of police ranks and civilian support staff grades from many different specialties and locations. We could not have asked for a more promising start.

3.3. Creating a Safe Environment

This issue was always present to some degree, and was figural in the early stages of group formation and, again, toward the end when we considered how to

feed back our learning to the organization and beyond. It featured strongly at our inaugural residential event in April 1999. Twelve of us came together at the Police Staff College, Bramshill from Friday lunchtime to Saturday teatime (a fair blend, we thought, of work and personal time). As we moved through the weekend, three main issues about the safety of the learning environment arose.

1. Within the group—how did group members want to behave toward each other and be treated?
2. My role as facilitator—how would I offer leadership and to what extent would I participate as a co-inquirer?
3. Outside the group—what were the appropriate boundaries with the organization and how could they be maintained?

We addressed the first issue in several ways; sharing our hopes, fears, and life stories in a series of creative exercises, gradually deepening trust and empathy by taking small risks, allaying some of our concerns by building relationships and getting to know each other. We also spent some time midway through the process generating ground rules for the group, such as:

- Confidentiality—we own our own stories
- Feedback—challenge with respect
- Listening—allow others to speak uninterrupted
- Honesty—tell it like it is
- Proactivity—take responsibility for our own learning
- Process—flexible, fun, and realistic

The list is neither surprising nor startlingly original. What matters is that these agreements were generated organically by the group on the basis of shared experience. We knew what they meant for us and we never needed to refer to them again.

I found the second issue—my role in the group—a particularly knotty one at first. Clearly I had initiated and convened the group. I was the only person with prior knowledge and experience of collaborative inquiry and, as if this was not enough, I also held the most senior rank/grade. Concerned that these factors might distort the group dynamics and make it impossible to establish peer relationships, I had played down my role at our preliminary meeting in February, stepping out of the limelight for fear of dominating the group. Unfortunately, it left the stage bare so that our meeting was stilted and confusing. It was "good enough" not to put too many people off (although three of them did drop out afterward), but we could so easily have fallen at this first hurdle. I debriefed the experience with Roger and consciously decided to play a more active role (although still rather tentatively) on the residential event in April.

Two things occurred that weekend that shaped my subsequent role in the group. On Saturday morning, two members of the group challenged me to stop

"playing small" and encouraged me, in the words of Nelson Mandela,[8] to allow myself to be "brilliant, talented and fabulous," to "let your own light shine." They made it very clear that they did not need me to stand aside for them to be powerful too. It was a lesson I hope never to forget. (Thank you Judy and Carol.)

On Saturday afternoon, as we coached each other in formulating our individual inquiry questions, I offered: "How can I lead (in) this process of Action Inquiry with authenticity, integrity and joy?" By making my leadership within the group an object of inquiry, any taboos or awkwardness around it seemed to fall away and I continued to lead wholeheartedly (if sometimes inexpertly) for the remainder of the project. The fact that I had so publicly committed myself as a co-inquirer did much, I believe, to reduce the distortion of hierarchical power in the group. I was personally powerful but not because of my rank.

The third issue—that of the relationship of the group with the wider organization—also manifested in several ways. Although all members of the group had identified themselves as exercising leadership in the organization, and all were committed to working in its best interests, for some there were also strong feelings of alienation—a concern that "I can't be me" in the workplace and an equally strong desire to "be me" in the AIG. There was a feeling of unease and a fear of making oneself vulnerable by stepping outside cultural norms.

Some members of the group were actually in hierarchical working relationships (there were three boss–subordinate dyads/triads in the group). Could they deal openly and honestly with each other in the group—and what effect would that have on their outside relationships? For the most part, the "confidentiality contract" and sensitive mutual exploration of these edges defused potential problems–although one member did withdraw from the group because he felt that his presence was inhibiting a more junior colleague. As the group became more established, there were few, if any, signs of reticence or reservations about these outside working relationships.

The issues of authenticity and alienation, however, continued to be a puzzle. Why should we (for I shared some of these feelings) be so concerned about the tensions and contradictions between our personal and professional personas? Why were we so driven to explore them? What underlay our intuitive sense that finding some resolution of these dilemmas was crucial to improving our effectiveness as leaders? Paradoxically, it seems that some of the very qualities and activities that are required to achieve high standards of organizational performance—originality, creativity, co-operation, and relationship-building—are not highly valued in a "command and control" culture.

At the time, Roger Harrison's notions of organizational *alignment* and *attunement* helped me make sense of this phenomenon. Alignment refers to the focusing

[8]From a poem by Marianne Williamson quoted by Nelson Mandela in his inaugural speech as President of South Africa.

of individual effort and will on organizational objectives, attunement to promoting healthy relationships, and quality of life within the organization. He argues (Harrison, 1983) that a healthy, effective organization will find a balance between these two dimensions. Perhaps, in a highly aligned organization, the AIG was providing much-needed opportunities for attunement. The supportive behavior that was so apparent among group members would suggest that this was so. Indeed, as one reader of an earlier draft of this article suggested, perhaps the most radical (and useful) thing we did was simply to create a space within the organization in which we could "be ourselves."

More recently, I have found support for this suggestion in Jurgen Habermas's notion of "communicative spaces."

> . . . in which people come together to explore problems and issues, always holding open the question of whether they will commit themselves to the authentic and binding work of mutual understanding and consensus (Kemmis, 2001, p. 100)

It is this, says Habermas, which makes communicative action and the healing of the system-lifeworld split possible. It might also help to explain how the strong personal focus in the Action Inquiry Group contributed to some very tangible organizational benefits.

3.4. Sustaining the Inquiry

Of course, every collaborative inquiry will follow its own unique path, but a number of practical issues arose in sustaining ours, which may be of interest. The first, to which I have already alluded, was the difficulty of getting everyone to meetings. We held five interim meetings, 6–8 weeks apart, with an extended review of our learning at a second residential event in January 2000. We never had a "full house" and no one (not even me) managed to get to all the sessions, so we could not afford to be too rigid about what constituted membership of the group. A few dropped out never to return, one person "joined" halfway through, and some stayed on the fringe. Nevertheless, there was an identifiable core of ten who remained deeply involved throughout. Work pressures often impinged on meeting times, despite prearranging the dates of meetings for the whole year—and without such advance planning it is doubtful whether any of the meetings would have been sufficiently well-attended to be worthwhile.

At the residential event in April, each member of the AIG formulated his or her own individual inquiry question under the umbrella: "How can I improve the way I exercise leadership in the Hertfordshire Constabulary?" The focus on our own practice informed each subsequent cycle of action and reflection. As individual inquiries gathered momentum, I found that it took a considerable amount of energy and attention to hold the whole process together. Although we shared the tasks of arranging venues and of "rounding people up" for meetings, a good deal of

the work came my way—from negotiating a budget to cover our costs for the year, to writing innumerable letters keeping members in touch with developments and making sure that those who could not get to particular meetings were kept in the picture.

We found that the simple act of sharing our stories, telling each other how we had been getting on with our inquiries, was enormously powerful—both to deepen the relationships between us and as a way of holding ourselves and each other to account. We quickly got into the habit of tape-recording our sessions and sending copies of relevant sections of the tapes to individuals to aid further reflection. Most sessions began with an extended "check in" of this sort and then pursued whatever themes emerged. On one occasion, following a "spin-off" meeting arranged by several women members of the group, this lead to a fascinating exploration of gender and leadership. We learned to trust the process of action inquiry and that, in an organizational setting at least, it needs to be sustained by careful cultivation and lots of energy.

3.5. Accounting for the Learning

Although much of the time we concentrated on supporting each other in our individual inquiries, we were also curious to see what common themes were emerging. This desire seemed to arise quite naturally after about 6 months and we agreed that each of us would write about what we were learning about our own leadership practice as a result of our inquiries and circulate it within the group. In the event, nine papers were produced, which we took to our meeting in October 1999. We discussed each paper in turn, checking for clarification, offering feedback to the author, and noting our own reaction. A few days later, Roger and I met to listen to the tape recording from which we distilled what seemed to be key statements and themes, which, in turn, were circulated to the group for comment and consideration. Our "midterm paper" proved to be an extremely useful exercise both in terms of getting a feel for where the group had got to and of providing a mirror to individual members.

Our paths then diverged once more until we came together for an extended review of our learning at the second residential event in January 2000. (See Fig. 1

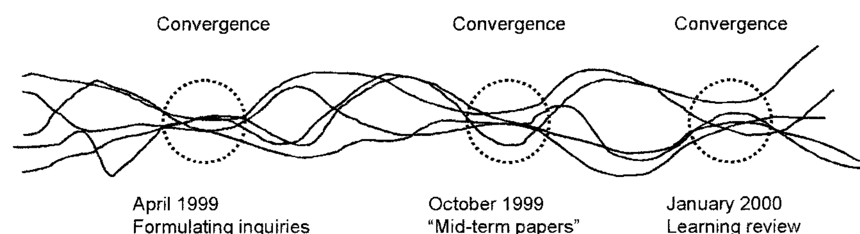

Fig. 1. Convergence and divergence in the action inquiry process.

for an illustration of the patterns of convergence and divergence during the inquiry.) Again, we met from Friday lunchtime until Saturday teatime at Bramshill—eight of us—collaboratively designing the process on the basis of some questions and principles we had decided previously. We used three different activities to provide accounts of our learning. First, we all brought objects symbolizing what we had learned about ourselves as leaders. Each of us, in turn, displayed the object on a central table and spoke about what it meant. The "presentations" were recorded on videotape and the objects gathered together for the weekend to represent and hold the energy of the group.

Second, we each made a brief statement in response to the question: "How has your practice as a leader changed and improved through the AIG process?" and were then interviewed by a colleague in a "goldfish-bowl" setting so that other members of the group could also listen and respond. The interviews were sympathetic, but challenging—friends acting as enemies (and as friends). These were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Third, we spent some time making visual representations—pictures and collages—responding to the question: "What has the story of the AIG looked like for me?" These were then displayed round the room and we took it in turns to speak about our images, using the video camera once more to record the event. The material from all three activities was later copied, transcribed, and fed back as a record of the learning and as a stimulus to further action.

We closed the meeting by reviewing what we wanted to share about our learning with others, who we wanted to share it with, and how we could make it safe to do so. As in the early stages of the inquiry, strong concerns were expressed about how "the organization" would react to what we had been doing. By this time, however, we had come to believe that it was possible to bridge the gaps—provided we were politically "savvy" going about it, for example:

- Challenge, but do not confront or criticise
- Choose the right audiences (15% is enough)
- Continue to respect individual confidences
- Seek the new Chief Constable's seal of approval
- Use the learning to add value to existing programs
- Maintain contact with each other for mutual support
- Be content to sow seeds—do not try to do it all at once

Finally, each of us made public commitments to take specific actions to begin the process of communicating our learning to others in our own organization, and beyond to other researchers and practitioners.

3.6. Bridging the Gaps

From the organization's point of view, the most immediate benefits of the inquiry are to be found in the improved leadership practices of its members,

although, of course, there are so many variables in human behavior that, while one can ascribe these benefits to the AIG, one cannot "prove" the connection. In police-speak, we may have reasonable grounds to suspect, but we cannot prove the case beyond all reasonable doubt. Fortunately, there is considerable room for maneuvering between these two standards—perhaps we could be satisfied with "on the balance of probabilities?"

Although I have expressed it rather flippantly, what we discovered, as soon as we began to try to communicate what we had been doing, were some significant epistemological gaps, major differences in our understandings of what constitutes useful and valid knowledge. Guy Claxton (1997) speaks about a propensity to believe that people have only learned something if they can codify and reproduce it (which may go some way toward explaining the current fashion for leadership competency frameworks and the like). But that would be to oversimplify the matter—what we met, as we sought to communicate our learning, was not hostility but a mixture of interest, pragmatism, and scepticism.

I personally briefed our new Chief Constable, in May 2000. He expressed considerable enthusiasm about promoting "leadership" in the Constabulary and urged me to speak with the Head of Human Resources to make practical arrangements for bringing the benefits of the research back into the organization. I did so in June and we agreed, in principle, that I would advise and "shadow" an in-house facilitator if another action inquiry group was formed. To date this has not happened, but I have become more closely involved in some other leadership development initiatives in Hertfordshire.

Seeking a wider audience, with three other members of the AIG, I offered a workshop on *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* at the high-profile 2000 ACPO Research Conference.[9] We expected about fifteen participants but found that there was a huge interest in the workshop—over forty delegates came to our session—where we described the process of the AIG, presented some of our individual and collective learning, and made ourselves available for small group discussions. We had some lively debates. Delegates were not unsympathetic but most were somewhat sceptical. Typical of their comments were: "I can see that you are all very enthusiastic and believe that you have learned a lot, but can you prove it?" "How have you evaluated the impact of the course [sic] on organizational effectiveness?" "Yes, I believe you but I'd never be able to sell it back in force without some sort of evaluation."

This was a blow—what better evidence of the effectiveness of the process could there be than us four living examples presenting our learning to the conference? If these delegates, broadly representative of the U.K. police service were not convinced, what chance did we have of persuading others of the value of our approach? But these arguments also pointed the way to how we might begin to

[9]ACPO, Association of Chief Police Officers.

bridge some of the gaps. On the advice of one delegate, I approached the Home Office Research Unit with the suggestion that they might fund an independent evaluation of the impact of the AIG. I am happy to say that, after some delay, they agreed that this would be a useful strand of their overall research program and, at the time of writing (March 2001) the evaluation is actually taking place.

One stipulation of the invitation to tender was that the research should be conducted in a way that is congruent with our own collaborative methodology and contributes to our further learning. As a result, the researcher will be presenting the provisional findings to the AIG for discussion and feedback as part of the analysis. The independent evaluation is a high-risk strategy, and one could argue that no external examination could ever capture the richness of our experience, but if its findings tend to confirm our claims of improved leadership practice, we may be at least halfway across the bridge.

An even more ambitious attempt to influence public policy was sending a short case study on the AIG to the Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit as a contribution to their research and still-awaited report on Public Service Leadership. Within a couple of weeks I found myself sitting round a Whitehall table with members of the "Prime Minister's Leadership Project" team. There was some interest in our work and a shortened version of the case study (which I never saw) was included in early drafts of the report (which I also never saw). Although it was dropped from later drafts "on grounds of space," the Cabinet Office has, in recent weeks, accepted a proposal to deliver the Learning Set element of their new Public Service Leadership Scheme through facilitated Action Inquiry Groups, which I will oversee for the next 3 years. Our work in the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* project has provided the foundation from which we can extend the focus on leadership practice and the improvement of service delivery across the public sector.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Did we manage to inquire collaboratively? I think the answer is a qualified "Yes." There is ample evidence in the transcripts of our meetings and in the accounts of our learning to substantiate the claim that, at the individual level, we created and took opportunities for transformational learning: learning that was grounded in our day-to-day practice as we variously engaged with the demands of delivering a high-quality service in the complex environment of contemporary policing.

The emerging findings of the independent evaluation confirms these claims, suggesting that members of the AIG have been assessed by colleagues as having become calmer, better able to work under pressure and more strategic in their outlook. Nearly all members of the Action Inquiry Group described the process as worthwhile and rewarding. Here are some of their comments recorded at our penultimate meeting:

> "Now I have really got some sense of direction as you can see in this picture . . . ."
>
> "I need a helping hand sometimes to get to where I want to go . . . that's when I come to the group."
>
> "We shared our inquiries and from that came the learning and the feedback."
>
> "The thing about this has been the honesty . . . in these sessions we have said when we disagree and why we disagree with somebody."
>
> "It is about light and focus and being able to find your way through the dark."

In case this is beginning to sound like yet another "victory narrative" of action research (MacLure, 1996), I should point out that it did not work for everyone. Several members of the group "dropped out"—generally pleading lack of time, although one said she was bringing "too much emotional baggage" to the group and that her continued presence might interfere with other people's learning. Although I think she was mistaken in this regard and overly self-critical, one has to respect her decision to withdraw.

Furthermore, it would be fair to say that—as yet—our collective learning has had less impact. We are still struggling to communicate the benefits of a collaborative approach to leadership development to a wider police audience, hampered by a training orthodoxy that places a high value on *uniformity* (role definitions and competency frameworks), *compulsion* (if it works, everyone should do it), and *assessment* (preferably pass or fail). Perhaps the independent evaluation of our work will lend weight to our own voices. We have certainly learned that, as sense making and knowledge creation move in to the public domain, they can become highly politicized and the potential difficulties of conducting collaborative inquiry in a hierarchical organization such as the police service should not be underestimated.

For me personally it has been an immensely satisfying experience. I have become a much more confident and effective practitioner of collaborative learning, more willing to "let my light shine" and more conscious of the choices and choice-points in such a process. We, for example, were quite a closed group: we adopted an informal, loose approach to the action-research cycle and we focused quite strongly on our individual leadership practices. Had we communicated more openly with others during the life of the group (say by publicizing our "midterm paper"), had we adopted a more rigorous pattern of action research, had we addressed systemic leadership issues, we may have had fewer (and narrower) gaps to bridge later on. Yet I am not sure I would make many different choices if faced with similar circumstances. Members of the group came with strong personal agendas, which demanded a high level of safety and, thus, confidentiality in the early stages—and I was reluctant to reinforce the prevailing hierarchical culture by imposing too much structure or discipline on our proceedings.

Action Inquiry is not a standard technique that can be applied (like a coat of paint) to meet every need. It is a sophisticated and powerful approach to human inquiry, with enormous potential to help us improve both individual practice and

organizational performance. To realise this potential, it must be crafted to its particular circumstances and context. There are no guarantees of success but, with a little courage and a lot of determination, a little imagination, and a lot of energy, much is possible.

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