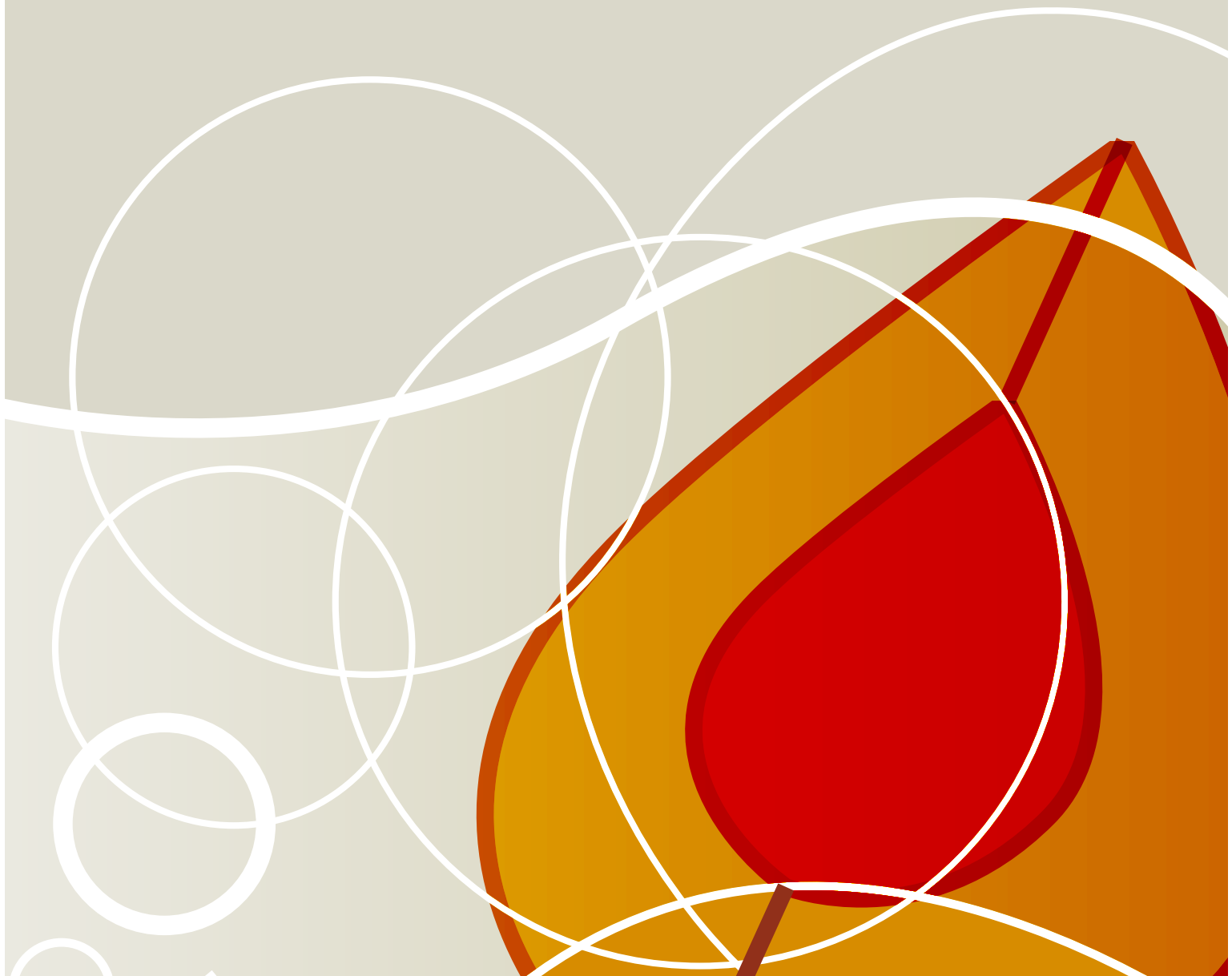


MiL Concepts 9/2012

The Story of Action Reflection Learning

Lennart Rohlin





Original article written by Lennart Rohlin in 2010 and published in 2011 as a chapter in Mike Pedler (ed): **Action Learning in Practice** by Gower Publishing, ISBN 9781409418412. This is the 4th and almost completely revised edition of this well-known standard handbook of Action Learning. The first edition was published in 1983.

The Story of Action Reflection Learning

My ambition in this article is to guide you towards a deeper understanding of Action Reflection Learning (ARL[®]) as something more than a learning methodology.

The first section tells the story about how ARL was originally conceived and developed in the late 1970s, and the second will highlight some key features of ARL, including the importance of reflection, the role of the learning coach and some practical considerations extracted from the early years of practice within MiL Institute. The third section focuses on the roots and perspectives which influenced the evolution of the concept as a practice, and also as a perspective. The fourth section describes how ARL might be geared to the future and adapted to the requirements of the global learning society, complemented by an appendix which recounts the initiatives taken to bring ARL from being a marginal Swedish movement into being a mainstream approach to learning and business development with a global reach.

It is important to note that this history and evolution of ARL is based on my experience as the original innovator, entrepreneur and president of MiL Institute for 32 years. ARL was developed within the MiL network and the other actors who have contributed to the development of ARL are not so well represented in the text, but some of them are recognised in the appendix.

There Must Be a Better Way

In the late 1970s, a small group of people at Lund University in Sweden gathered around a common concern: why are all programs for management development so out of touch with reality, so much based on outdated models of management and outdated pedagogical methods? They formed a task force of professionals and executives from the business, university and consultancy sectors and got them to join forces into a common vision: To develop a new approach to management and leadership development.

In 1977 the not-for-profit MiL Institute was founded and in 1978 the first MiL program was launched. This was focused on learning instead of teaching and was the most advanced executive program in Sweden at the time: (at least) 50 days during one year of which more than half of the time was work in action learning teams of two to four participants on real business challenges – unfamiliar tasks in unfamiliar settings and maximum diversity in team composition. It was also a most demanding program. The participating executives were challenged (and supported) to develop their own experience-based theories about management, leadership and change. They were also challenged to implement changes in real systems, not just to make recommendations.

THE ACTOR STRATEGY FOR CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

The ARL approach was created by the experience and wisdom of eventually over 100 people who took part in this open-ended development process in the late 1970s, fuelled by a vision and some frames, but without any clear idea about the outcome. In an iterative process executives and academics worked on both analytical and practice-based levels, side by side, on equal terms and with high involvement (the red thread, see figure 1); thereby challenging the conventional linear logic of the time (the grey arrows). This process also became a model for working with projects in many ARL programs.

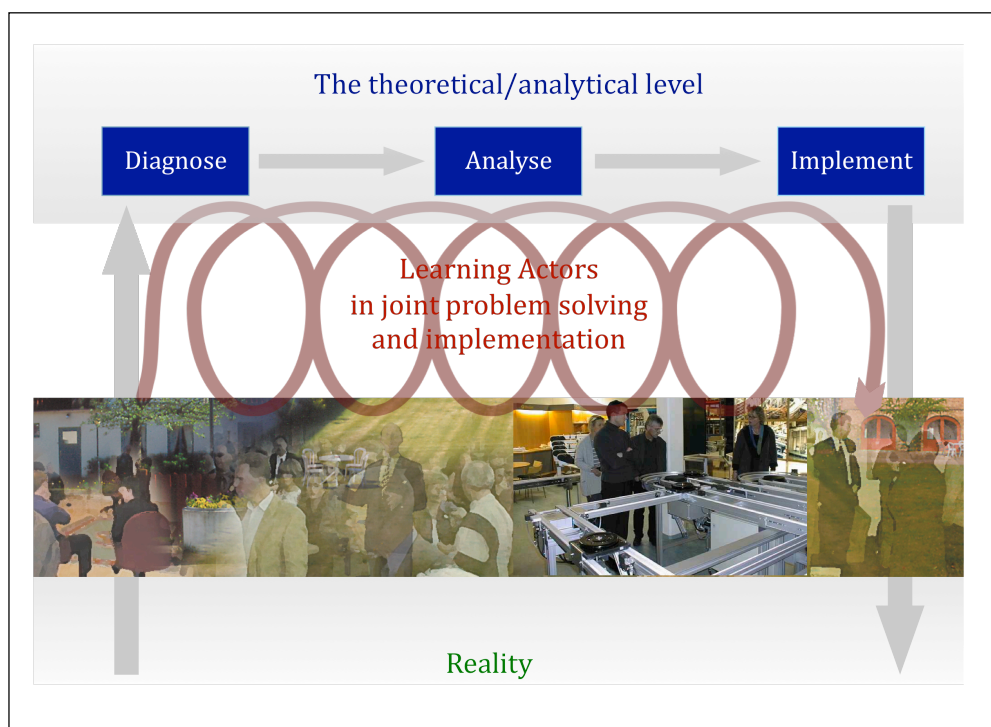


Figure 1. The Actor strategy for change and development

This kind of process had been used in several OD interventions, but maybe not in this kind of inter-organizational development project. There were also influences from other parts of the Scandinavian OD tradition, such as the contingency approach and an open systems view. (Rohlin, ed., 1974)

Many different theoretical and practical inputs were brought to bear on the mission from those engaged in the process. Different philosophies were brought in, notably existentialism and social constructivism. People from different business areas were in majority, but just as much input were made by professionals from other disciplines, especially the behavioural sciences. Interestingly enough, no one specializing in pedagogy took part. Reg Revans was invited at the end of the development project. His enthusiasm and concrete examples from practice were helpful in convincing the last disbelievers.

The Department of Business Administration at Lund University had already established in 1968 the Executive Foundation, Lund (EFL) as a cooperative research initiative with the business community. The networking made here, by myself as the COO of EFL and many others was critically important for the formation of MiL Institute. The pay back to the University came already in 1981 when MiL designed and ran an advanced ARL Masters program for graduates of the Business School and the School of Technology. Since 1998, an Executive MBA has been run yearly by the University, all of which have been directed by members of the MiL Faculty.

A VALUE-BASED APPROACH

The ARL approach requires you to become conscious of your basic values, and open to re-examine them. This is one of the most important processes in the ARL approach. There are many areas of values to look into, but the most important one is probably your perspective on human beings, with its great implications for your ways of acting, reflecting and learning. In the ARL approach, the participants are perceived as intentional subjects who constantly learn and develop. In this way, ARL is normative, see figure 2.

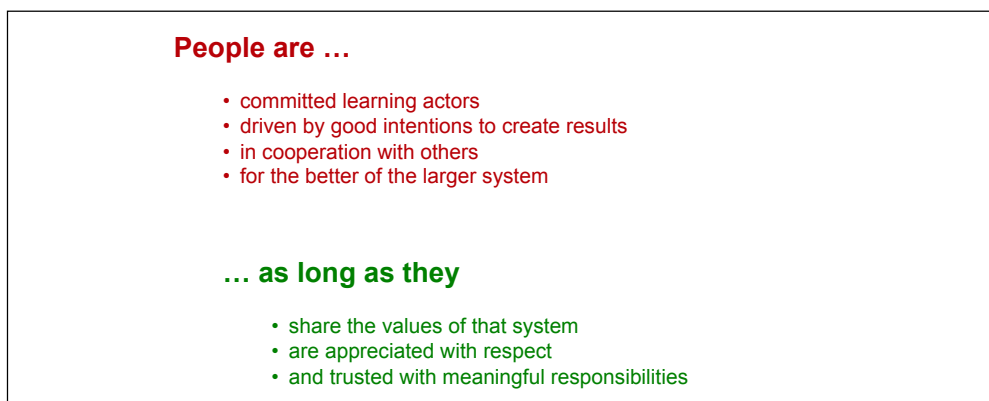


Figure 2. An Action Reflection Learning perspective on human beings.

THE ACTOR MODEL

One way of modelling the human being as a learning actor is shown in figure 3. The model demonstrates how the learning actor acts, reflects and learns in two kinds of learning loops: by being close to the actual situation (action) and by taking out distance to the situation at hand (reflection); and also by making references to both her past experience and her intentions for the future.

This model was developed in several iterative steps during the development project – by asking questions to both behavioural theories and the experience of practitioners (Rohlin, 1982).

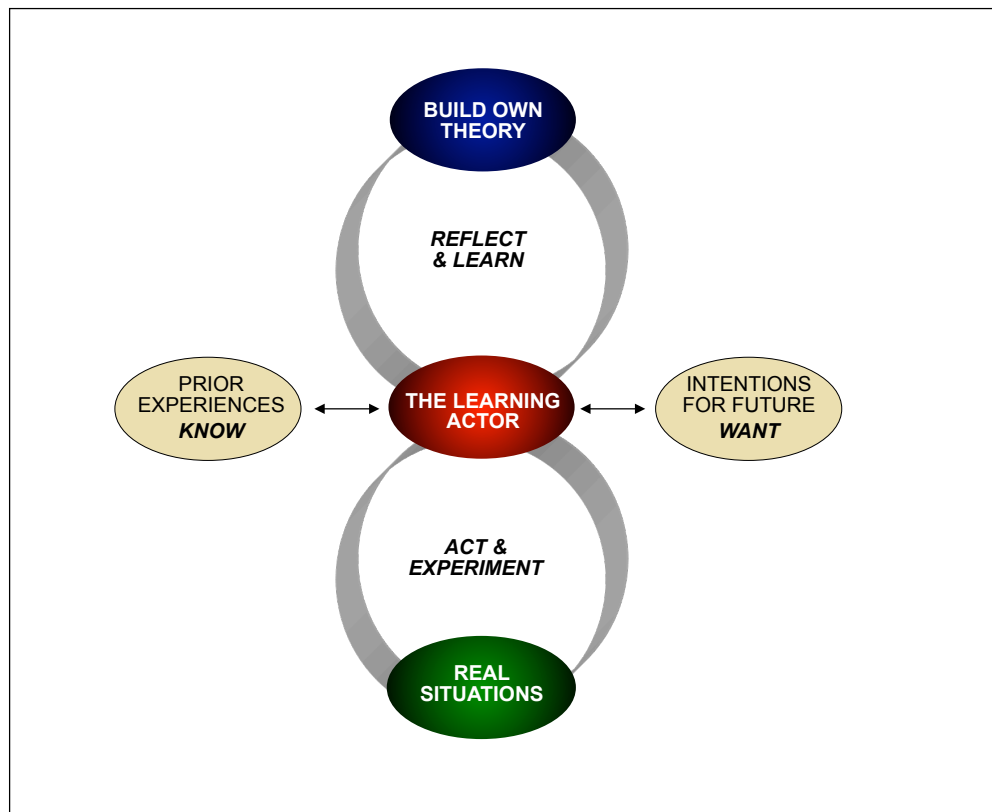


Figure 3. The learning actor model.

THE MANAGEMENT MODEL

As a conceptual base for the structure of substance in the ARL programs, a new management model integrating strategy, managing and leadership was developed, with integration, interdependence and interaction as key concepts, along with direction, value creation and meaningfulness. (Rohlin 1979; Rohlin et.al., 1994/98).

The Practice of Action Reflection Learning

– the Key Role of Reflection

In the mid 1980s, action learning became a very popular pedagogical concept in Sweden. One drawback of its popularity was that almost anything involving 'action' or 'project work' was labelled Action Learning. This was one reason for MiL (with its US partner LIM) to invent the concept Action Reflection Learning (ARL) in 1987.

The main reason, however, for this new label was the strongly held belief that reflection is the key to genuine and generative learning. The ARL approach requires you to become conscious of your basic values and open to re-examine them – through self-reflection and in your conversations with fellow learners. Reflection is a primary learning need for many action-oriented and result-driven executives. Moreover, reflection is a process which requires a great amount of deliberation during the design and execution of ARL interventions.

REAL TASKS IN REAL TIME OF REAL IMPORTANCE TO REAL SYSTEMS

Crucial to ARL is working real time on challenging tasks of importance to the organization of the project host or sponsor. The task might be a business challenge, an organizational dilemma, or anything of real importance to the organization and where a new fresh approach or solution is urgently needed. In the ARL approach, there is a requirement to accomplish results in human systems in a way that will bring previously untested solutions to life. In addition, the most sensitive phase of the process – identifying the problems and opportunities in their context – is challenged by the project team instead of being taken for granted. Moreover, this diagnosis is based on real-life contacts with people, not merely on statistics or on a written account drafted by somebody else, as in the case method – the main vehicle for learning in many business schools.

DEVELOP YOUR OWN THEORIES

Practitioners use theories as guidelines for their practice. But the practitioner is not always quite aware of what kind of theory guides her actual behaviour. In ARL, participants will be empowered to identify, reframe and use their own theories. Instead of becoming passive captives of the wisdom and authority of experts – or unreflective consumers of the latest fads in the management field – participants will become learning actors. They will be open to influences from a variety of sources including management experts, but they will always locate the responsibility within themselves.

To support this idea of everybody's responsibility to first look deeply into what theories are actually guiding their behaviour and then develop their own theories, a textbook is given to participants. Titled *Leadership and Management – Experience-based Theories and Practices* by (the participant's name), this book contains only blank pages with the exception of the following sentence:

No experience is more important than your own and no theory is more effective than the one you, yourself, create – as long as you reflect upon your experience and are open to continuous revision of your theories in dialogue with others.

THE KEY ROLE OF THE LEARNING COACHES

The role of the Learning Coach (LC) is another important feature of ARL. It has been argued that there is no need for a LC, as a team of experienced executives presumably have all the experience, skills and ingenuity needed to come up with the best solution. Such a standpoint completely misses the point of engaging a LC. The role of the LC is definitely not to solve the problem and accomplish the task; that would amount to 'stealing learning opportunities' from the team members, which is not acceptable. The function of the coach is to highlight learning opportunities, see to it that they are dealt with by the project team members, and making sure that the group is learning both as a team and as individuals. In short, that there is ample time and techniques for reflection. (Sewerin, 2009; O'Neil, 1999)

Perhaps the most important demand made on the program management or team of coaches is that they live as they learn, walk their talk. The program must serve as a model in practically all respects. There is no virtue in preaching the significance of the humanistic perspective if the design of the program and the actions of the people managing and coaching it are not acting on those very values. The experiences made and the conclusions drawn from what is happening in the program could be used immediately by the participants in their own situations.

PARALLEL PROCESSES IN CUSTOMIZED DESIGNS

In classic ARL programs an important feature is to capitalize on three mutually reinforcing and parallel processes: the project team's work on business challenges; the community of learners in the whole program group at the residential retreats; and most importantly, what is done back home in the participants ordinary management situations. Through these parallel processes the classic separation of theory and practice can be resolved. This way it is much more of learning while acting and acting while learning than the classic pedagogical approach of first learning, then applying.

Although the basic ARL values are normative, there are several different ways of accomplishing results, both learning-wise and business-wise. That's

also an important feature of ARL: it is wide open to the particular phases and situations which participating companies, as well as participating individuals, are currently in. The different designs are truly tailor-made. That is why in-company programs are not labelled “customized” – *all* kinds of programs and interventions are customized! Designing an ARL program is a balance between creating frames for stability and leaving as much as possible to the participants to design themselves. The design builds on the “both-and” principle on dimensions like the ones shown in figure 4.



Figure 4. The both-and principle in design of learning interventions.

MORE THAN MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

According to experiences from several hundreds of ARL projects, the results from just one project in an in-company program often pays back much more than the total investment in the program. Solutions developed through ARL are often more innovative and empowering than those arrived at in more traditional ways.

ARL is an approach to management development that builds on the ways in which mature, responsible managers naturally learn and develop, see figure 5. However, it is just as much an approach to the development of new visions, strategies and structures; New ways of building networks and working effectively across boundaries; To build the learning organization, and enhance human maturity in an empowering change process. It is a combined learning and leadership philosophy as well as a practical way of working with change and development. It could accomplish several objectives simultaneously: strategic reorientation, business results and both individual, team and organisational development. (Rohlin et.al., 2002)

... MiL states its wish to move organizations from “Employees in hierarchies” to “Partners in networks” and from “Authority and control” to “Empowerment and trust”. Participants are encouraged to create their own

**Action Reflection Learning is based on the ways
in which adults naturally learn and develop ...**

- ... broadens, deepens and accelerates this learning process ...
- ... within a structure, designed to attain agreed-upon results ...
- ... in which the participants are stimulated to
 - gain new experiences by addressing real business challenges, understanding real dilemmas and solving real problems
 - reflect on experiences – their own and those of others
 - develop their own theories for interpretation and action
 - mature personally
- ... so that the learning transcends the actual situation.

Figure 5. Action Reflection Learning, a summary highlighting the learning dimension.

theories through facilitated reflection ... This suggests that the kind of management development an organization uses can influence its very assumptions about managing. (Mintzberg 2004:224)

ACTION REFLECTION LEARNING AND OTHER ACTION LEARNING APPROACHES

There are few differences between the ARL approach and classic action learning. Reg Revans did stress the necessity of reflection as well, but perhaps not to the same degree. The demand on developing one's own theories is not focused in classic action learning, which also has a slightly more programmatic theoretical content. Finally, Revans is sceptical of the use of LCs, but here one should consider the way most coaches were working at the time when classic action learning was developed, that is, more like expert advisors than like coaches the ARL way. (Revans, 1977, 1982). My own experience of Reg Revans is that he was an excellent LC himself.

There are even less differences when comparing to Business Driven Action Learning (BDAL), originally developed by Yury Boshyk in the mid 1990s. One difference, however, would be that more importance is put on reflection in the ARL approach.

The differences are much greater when comparing with what Nancy Dixon (1997) has called the 'modified or Americanized version of action learning'. In this approach, originally developed at General Electric's centre at Crotonville in the late 1980s, the design does not leave much time and space

for reflection. It is compressed in time and extremely task-oriented, the task being to put forward recommendations. The designs are often tailored to an organization's culture so that the program will not jar customary expectations and ways of working. One of the main features of the ARL approach, on the other hand, is to challenge customary ways and invent new ones.

That characteristic of ARL is one reason for classifying it as 'the critical reflection school' (O'Neil, 1999). There are interesting points made in this taxonomy of different AL approaches, but to label classic action learning as 'the scientific school' seems to be too narrow, taking into account all the value-based and social considerations building the platform of classic action learning.

The Context of Action Reflection Learning – the Scandinavian Roots

According to several foreign observers, there is something special, indeed unique, about the Scandinavian approach to management and leadership. Usually it is described in words like 'participatory', 'egalitarian' and 'cooperative'. Others think that even if there is such a thing as a Scandinavian management culture and leadership style, that style is not very effective in international affairs: 'We will have to adjust to the culture and customs of the country we are dealing with anyway'.

Such opposing observations might not be as contradictory as they seem. Yes, we do have to adjust when doing business in other countries. But perhaps that very insight and ability, to sense the foreign culture and adjust accordingly, might be a Scandinavian characteristic? Adjusting with some humility, without taking it for granted that 'our way' is the right way. Even IKEA, which built its original international success on being very Swedish, is adjusting a bit.

The word 'Scandinavian' represents several traditions. Such as mutual respect and cooperation between employees and employers. This boils down to a democratic and participatory approach to decision-making and changes. To use Hofstede's term: very little power distance. Authority is not regarded as something given; it has to be earned. Rank, status and position are not of great importance, and people are encouraged to contribute, and to challenge authority. Let us combine this with another of Hofstede's concepts, namely 'uncertainty avoidance' – that is, the capacity to handle and thrive on changes, even chaos. There is an appreciation of what is required in the global learning society. A society in which the ability to continuously unlearn, take new bearings and learn again will be the main competitive edge, for companies and individuals alike. (Hofstede, 1980)

If you were to combine a Collaborative team approach with the Visionary's orientation toward learning, you'd get the creative business approach called Action

Reflection Learning, pioneered by Sweden's MiL institute ... In their work, MiL consultants typically get task-oriented, Organizer-Driver companies to regroup, and rethink ways of working that solve big problems. (Whitelaw & Wetzig 2008: 183)

THE PARADIGMATIC SHIFT TOWARDS THE GLOBAL LEARNING SOCIETY

During the first developmental stages of ARL, there was a shift taking place in the global economy – a shift from the old industrial society towards a new global learning society. This new paradigm has been referred to by various names: Service Society; Information Society; Knowledge Society, Experience Society to mention a few. The new Learning Society involves a much more global outlook on sustainability, a technological revolution, and a more dynamic and customer-focused production. The learning society is based on the increased significance of competence, that is, value-creating ways of acquiring, developing and using knowledge rather than knowledge per se. The ability to unlearn, relearn and learn the totally new is crucial in this society. Figure 6 shows a way of describing this shift (Rohlin et.al., 1994/98).

The Industrial Society	Change of Paradigms	The Learning Society
Strategic Planning	Strategic Management	Strategic Leadership
Mechanistic Hierarchies	Multidimensional Transitional Forms	Holistic and Organic Network
Integrate and Control	Diversify and Decentralize	Focus on Core Competence
Employees	Co-workers	Partners
Instruction	Delegation	Inspiration
Information	Communication	Dialogue
Indoctrination	Teaching	Learning
Participant as an Object	Participant as an Observer	Participant as an Actor
Action without Learning	Learning without Action	Action Reflection Learning

Figure 6. Some dimensions in the paradigmatic shift (as perceived in 1994).

A STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE

While leaders need to form their own personal views of leadership, they also need to master the strategic dimensions of leadership. Strategic leader-

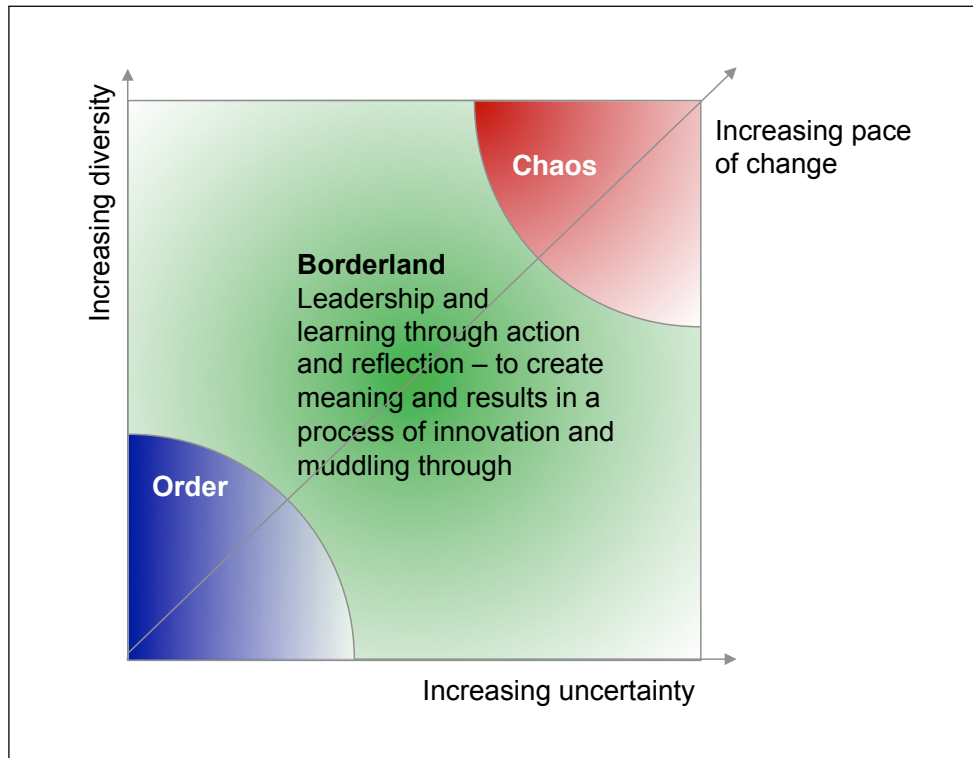


Figure 7. The context of leadership.

ship calls for an awareness of the world at large and the substance (e.g. globalisation, technological development etc.) as well as the characteristics of changes (e.g. increased diversity, uncertainty and pace of change, see figure 7, inspired by Stacey, 2001). In short an outside-in perspective.

Just as important is an inside-out perspective: the mission, the essential values, prime stakeholders and the unique competences that exist or could be developed within the organization. For an example of how a mental map of a new sustainable and holistic whole could be developed, see Rohlin, 2007.

The conditions for leadership and learning are, to a great degree, characterised by what marks the Borderland between Order and Chaos in figure 7. In this borderland, it's hard to foresee things and plan in advance in accordance to notions of stability and the logic of order. Instead, it becomes a matter of trying things out, experimenting and learning as one goes along, creating meaning in the process.

A main focus in ARL interventions is to prepare the participants to develop fresh perspectives and new routines by taking on challenging tasks in new and unfamiliar territory characterized by increased diversity, uncertainty and pace of change.

FROM A DOMESTIC MINDSET TO A GLOBAL MINDSET

One way to summarise this paradigmatic shift would be to stress the difference between a domestic versus a global mindset, see figure 8. The developers of ARL based their management model on a global mindset from the very beginning. That is probably the main reason for the rather fast global reach and recognition of the ARL approach, see the appendix.



Figure 8. Adapted from Rhinesmith, 1993.

Some future directions of Action Reflection Learning

The old tendencies of categorizing in black and white, either-or, will be challenged by much more of both-and, of creating new integrated wholes out of differentiated opposites. The old focus on solving problems will be supplemented by much more of resolving dilemmas, managing polarities and creating new win-win-situations. Transparency and participation building commitment will, evidently, create new levels of leadership; in the market place as well as in social affairs.

As ARL practitioners, we can assist executives in taking leading roles in such transformations.

DIRECTION 1: THE GREATER AGENDA

There is a greater agenda: Our common responsibility for people all over the world, and for our common limited resources. It concerns moral and ethical issues and how people – executives and others – can best relate and act in a fast changing differentiated and uncertain world.

The ARL approach is applicable to social missions and projects in the Civic Society and we will probably see much more ARL work in such arenas. The development of a “sustainability mindset” is not only a necessity, but also an urgent task for humanity. It requires collaborative action as well as innovative systemic thinking. ARL’s principles provide both the framework and the practical guidance to the development of such a mindset, and are already being used for that purpose.

DIRECTION 2: DIGITAL INTERACTIONS AND FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

In 2010 about 400 web-enthusiasts met during a weekend on a small private island to talk about new innovative online moves: This is ‘Sweden Social Web Camp (SSWC)’, an ‘unconference’ about the social web. It was a great success, just as the first time around in 2009. It is based on principles like ‘Dare to tell a story before knowing how it ends, it spurs curiosity and engagement’; ‘Let the participants create the agenda on the spot’; ‘The participants become ambassadors’.

These are all features of the actor strategy for change and development employed by the original developers of ARL back in the 1970s, even though ‘co-creation’, ‘open space technology’ and ‘unconference’ were not invented as concepts back then. The basic values and principles of ARL seem still to be valid, also in the web-world, even though the technological enablers are quite different.

We face radically new ways of looking at different forms of interactivity. The integration between face-to-face meetings and the ever increasingly interactive social web is the key: seamless and fast, interactive and interdependent processes are made possible! Both-and.

DIRECTION 3: SLOWING DOWN OF “THE FAST SOCIETY”?

There has, for long time, been a clear trend towards shorter programs and other interventions. The first open ARL program had a duration of 50 days, while the equivalent 53rd program in 2011 has a duration of 30 days. At the Global Forum 2010, an action learning-inspired intervention of two days was among those initiatives being presented. But there is also a reaction towards ‘the quicker, the better’, that is, fast food is balanced by slow food.

Again, it is not a choice between ‘either-or’, the trick is to do both and to develop a sense for timing – when to take the fast route and when to take the slow one, and how to combine the two in ways that are both developmental and productive. This is one characteristic of the global learning society.

DIRECTION 4: BETTER MEETINGS AND THE ISSUE OF SPACE

Executives are spending about 70 per cent of their time in meetings of various kinds, and few are satisfied with what comes out of all these meetings. To make meetings more effective is still a great challenge! The issues of *who* are invited, to accomplish *what*, and *how* it should be designed and executed to best match these whos and whats are usually considered, as well as the timing (*when*). However, the space (*where*) seldom gets the same professional attention. My belief is that the physical as well as the virtual environment will get a lot more attention in the future.

DIRECTION 5: FOCUS ON INNOVATION AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

We have learnt from practice about what constitutes the best conditions for learning and business development in the complex and fast-changing world of today, as well as invented efficient methods and techniques for action, reflection and learning. That is, by the way, one reason explaining why excellent results could be reached in shorter times today.

This imbedded 'DNA of ARL practitioners' makes it possible to shift focus from the learning objectives towards the business development objectives. You could look at the learning consequences of an ARL intervention as a natural and inevitable result of the way we are working. Not as the primary objective in itself. 'Catch Management' (Rohlin et. al., 2002) and 'Completion Workshop' (www.milinstitut.se) are examples of 'earning while learning' becoming 'learning while earning'; and 'business-driven management development' turning into assisting companies in 'management-driven business development'.

We can focus on creating business results and organizational transformations, and at the same time secure learning in the process. By using the ARL approach, we can contribute in creating new innovative solutions, new businesses and new processes as well as more effective working methods – with impact on individual learning, on the organizational culture and ultimately shaping the business-oriented learning organisation.

References

- Boshyk, Yury & Robert Dilworth (eds.) (2010): *Action Learning. History and Evolution*. Palgrave macmillan.
- Dixon, Nancy (1997): “More than just a Task Force”, in Mike Pedler (ed.), *Action Learning in Practice*. Gower.
- Hofstede, Gert (1980): *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Sage Publishing.
- Marsick, Victoria J. & Lars Cederholm (1988): “Developing Leadership in International Managers: an Urgent Challenge”, *The Columbia Journal of World Business*, vol. 23(4), pp. 3-11.
- Mintzberg, Henry (2004): *Managers not MBAs*. FT/Prentice Hall.
- O’Neil, Judy (1999): *The role of the learning advisor in action learning*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- O’Neil, Judy & Victoria J. Marsick (2007): *Understanding Action Learning*. AMACOM.
- Revans, Reginald (1977): *More than Management Development: Action Learning at GEC*. Gower.
- Revans, Reginald (1982): *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*. Studentlitteratur.
- Rhinesmith, Stephen (1993/96): *A Manager’s Guide to Globalization*. McGraw Hill.
- Rimanoczy, Isabel & Ernie Turner (2008): *Action Reflection Learning. Solving real business problems by connecting learning with earning*. Davies-Black.
- Rohlin, Lennart, ed. (1974): *Organisationsutveckling* (Organisational Development). Gleerups.
- Rohlin, Lennart (1979): *The Management Model*. Unpublished paper. MiL Institute.
- Rohlin, Lennart (1982): “An Action Perspective on Management and Management Development”, in *Trends in Management and Management Development*. MiL, pp. 153-166.
- Rohlin, Lennart & Sven-Åke Nilsson & Per-Hugo Skärvad (1994/98): *Strategic Leadership in the Learning Society*, MiL Publishers.
- Rohlin, Lennart & Katarina Billing & Anders Lindberg & Mikael Wickelgren, (eds.) (2002): *Earning while Learning in Global Leadership. The Volvo MiL Partnership*. MiL Publishers.
- Rohlin, Lennart (2007): *Strategic Leadership – Quest for a New Paradigm*. MiL Concepts 2/2007.
- Sewerin, Thomas (2009): *Teams, Leadership and Coaching*. Tertulia Books.
- Stacey, Ralph (2001): *Complex Responsive Processes in Organizations*. Routledge.
- Turner, Ernie (2009). *Bring Strategy to life – Apply ARL principles*. MiL Concepts 5/2009.
- Whitelaw, Ginny & Betzy Wetzig (2008): *Move to Greatness*. Nicholas Brealey.

APPENDIX: Towards global reach and recognition

The ARL approach has made a journey from being practiced by a group of rebels in the south of Sweden towards becoming internationally recognized and having a global reach (cf. Boshyk & Dilworth, 2010):

In **1981** the first *International ARL Program* was launched with week-long sessions at Ashridge, LBS, IMI and IMEDE (later merged into IMD) and INSEAD. These programs were based on the ARL approach with real business challenges, as well as ARL designs and processes guaranteed through program directorship and learning coaches from MiL. In co-operation with these well-known business schools these international programs gained in both respectability and world-class content. Later several other *institutional partnerships* contributed to the proliferation of ARL.

In **1981** the MiL faculty went for a three-week *discovery tour to the USA*. The group was welcomed with generosity by such diverse organizations as AMA, Aspen Institute, BCG, Berkley, Esalen, HP, Harvard, MIT, Motorola, NYU, Stanford, Tarrytown, UCLA, and USC. The ARL approach met understanding and appreciation. The ARL way of working with *out-of-the-box learning internationally* has continued. All in all different ARL programs have made discovery tours to about 40 different countries.

In **1982** the *Scandinavian Action Learning Society* was founded at a conference in Lund based on the experience of MiL. Reg Revans was the guest of honour and the conference featured his monumental work (Revans, 1982). MiL became member of the *European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD)*, Brussels.

In **1983** the first *incompany ARL programs* were launched, and the ARL approach took another step in the mission of making real impact in real systems.

In **1987** the first *International ARL Partner Program* was launched with IKEA, ABB, Novo Nordisk, SAS SP and other global companies, as well as the first *Scandinavian Business Development and Leadership Program*, with an even share of participants (and faculty) from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. *The yearly MiL Days* became international.

In **1987**, a US network of ARL coaches, *Leadership for International Management (LIM)*, was formally incorporated in the USA with Lars Cederholm and Ernie Turner as the primary entrepreneurs. MiL was among the founders and suggested the name LIM, while LIM suggested ARL as the brand for what MiL (and LIM) were offering. Since then, LIM has advanced ARL globally and today has 30 certified ARL Learning Coaches working in 18 different countries (www.limglobal.net). The same year, Victoria J. Marsick, a Columbia University professor, researched the impact of taking part in different ARL interventions as a 'researcher in residence' at MiL. Victoria has certainly contributed to the worldwide recognition of the ARL approach through her writings, as have other members of *ARL Inquiry* (Judy O'Neil, Lyle Yorks and others). See O'Neil & Marsick, 2007.

In **1988** Victoria Marsick and Lars Cederholm published the first article in English about ARL in *Columbia Journal of World Business*.

In **1991** MiL co-founded *Scandinavian International Management Institute (SIMI)*, Copenhagen. SIMI was founded to run an international Executive MBA program with some touch of ARL. MiL also co-founded *Scandinavian Academy of Management Studies (SAMS)*, Copenhagen, where several doctoral dissertations in the Action Research tradition were produced.

In **1994** the *EFMD annual conference 'Business Driven Management Development'* was co-hosted by MiL. 150 participants from well over 30 countries started at MiL Campus with a 'cross-cultural walk and talk', designed according to ARL principles. *MiL International Newsletter* was born and handed over to the participants when they arrived to Copenhagen Business School and joined another 150 people for the second

half of the conference. The participants could read about the actions in Klippan including ARL programs in IKEA, Volvo, Grace Cocoa and Stena Line; Two years later, the series of *MiL Concepts* were launched.

In **1998** the first English book about the ARL approach was published: *Strategic Leadership in the Learning Society* (Lennart Rohlin, Per-Hugo Skärvad and Sven Åke Nilsson). MiL became the first Scandinavian member of the US-based *International University Consortium for Executive Education (UNICON)*. I was invited by Yury Boshyk to give the introductory speech at Global Forum at Sophia Antipolis on 'Action Reflection Learning in Business Driven Management Development: Lessons Learned from Twenty Years Experience'. This was probably the speech about ARL with the most impact to that date. Yury was about to build an international network of action learning practitioners which today might be the most important one for the proliferation of action learning on a global scale.

In **1999** MiL Campus hosted a first conference of the *International Community of Action Learners (ICAL)*, an initiative taken by Jean Lawrence, one of Reg Revans closest collaborators.

In **2002** the book *Earning while Learning in Global Leadership* is published by four editors and 17 authors – from different Volvo companies, from MiL and LIM, and from independent research bodies. Experiences and learning from 40 joint initiatives involving 1,000 participants during 12 years are presented – and scrutinized by independent researchers.

In **2008** the book *Action Reflection Learning* is published by Isabel Rimanoczy and Ernie Turner. Isabel took on ARL as the topic of her Masters thesis research, identifying the principles and elements of ARL. Ernie is directing LIM and Isabel became interested in ARL at the EFMD conference on MiL Campus in 1994 and shortly thereafter a partner in LIM.

In **2009** the 30th MiL Days featured *Make Strategy Happen* with many examples on how the ARL approach could help executives and management teams to bring strategy to life, see Turner, 2009, for one example.

In **2010** The *Global Forum Award for Professional Achievement* is presented to me and I am, for the first time, writing an account of the history and evolution of ARL, that is, this article.