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3
Transformative Action Learning in the U.S. Government

Robert Kramer and James L. Kelly

Introduction

From 2002 until 2005, Robert Kramer served as director of the executive leadership Master of Public Administration (MPA) program at American University (AU) in Washington, DC. An executive cohort at AU consisted of about 20 participants, most of whom were senior officials in the US government or military. On taking over as director, Kramer's first challenge was to address the problem of transfer of learning from the classroom to the workplace, a problem that had languished at AU – and at every other university teaching public administration – for decades.

Traditionally, after 20 months of intensive weekend courses, the executive leadership MPA program at AU culminated with a "comprehensive" exam, which required participants to prepare detailed answers in academic writing style, over a 48-hour period, to a set of questions concerning a case study. No matter how hard they tried, however, the faculty who graded the exams could rarely reach consensus on the "right answers" to these questions. Since the case study was always too brief to explore the full context of the problem, and none of the actors identified in the case could be interviewed, faculty always saw the "right answers" through the lens of their functional discipline in public administration – bureaucracy; budgeting; ethics; administrative law; research and evaluation, etc. – leading to interminable disagreements in grading and to not a few near-nervous breakdowns by executive participants.

Kramer decided to abandon this comprehensive exam, the main result of which seemed to be to infantilize adults who were being forced to answer questions about problems they cared nothing about and, in any event, could take no action to resolve. But what should take its place? After much reflection, he chose to replace the exam with business-driven action learning (Boshyk, 2002). He would require each of his participants to negotiate a "learning contract" with him and an executive sponsor for the conduct of a real-time work-related project involving real risk and real results.

The purpose of the executive MPA, as Kramer reframed it, was not merely to "master" the intellectual knowledge contained in the academic silos of public administration: administrative law, human resource management, statistics, policy evaluation, budgeting, etc. He would continue to invite executive participants to study public administration through the traditional lenses and vocabularies of each of these functional courses. According to Robert Kegan (2000), functional courses such as these are valuable since they represent "learning aimed at increasing our fund of knowledge, at increasing our repertoire of skills, at extending already established cognitive capacities"(p. 48). This is what Kegan calls "informational learning" – learning that deepens our knowledge about an *existing* frame of reference. "Such learning is literally in-*form*-ative because it seeks to bring valuable new contents *into* the existing *form* of our way of knowing" (*ibid.*, p. 49).

However, learning of this kind, no matter how useful, does not encourage an epistemological transformation in learners. It is not "transformational learning," which, according to Kegan (2000), radically shifts the frame of knowing itself by questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions of the existing epistemology. This is "trans-*form*-ative" learning, where the frame of reference itself – the "form" of knowing – undergoes a radical and discontinuous shift. Informational learning, although valuable because it can stimulate "a change in behavioral repertoire or an increase in the quantity or fund of knowledge" (*ibid.*, p. 48), cannot stimulate a shift in mindset. In essence, informational learning is closely correlated with the received wisdom, accepted beliefs, standard models or prevailing ideologies held by public administration academics.

By adopting action learning, Kramer revisioned his purpose as an executive educator to grow *learning leaders in public service*. What, exactly, are the characteristics of a learning leader?

- A learning leader is a person who models inquiry and critical reflection while grappling, under conditions of high anxiety, with wicked public problems when no one knows what to do but immediate action must be taken.
- A learning leader is a person who learns all the time, not merely for the purpose of applying one of the functional tools of public administration to get a job done.
- A learning leader is a person who is willing to challenge conventional wisdom and unlearn assumptions and beliefs that have outlived their value.
- A learning leader is a person who demonstrates a high level of sensitivity to the anxiety others (especially subordinates) may experience in learning, and who possesses the emotional intelligence (i.e., self-awareness, courage, creative will and empathy) to enable others to learn and unlearn.

These characteristics of a learning leader led Kramer to formulate a second, equally vital outcome for executive education: in addition to learning leaders, he was going to develop *teaching leaders in public service*. What does a teaching leader teach? Not programmed knowledge or the conventional wisdom found in public administration texts or learned through pre-packaged experiential exercises or role plays. By definition, programmed knowledge deals only with past solutions to past problems, and it is insufficient for those who need to learn continually under conditions of "permanent white water" (Vaill, 1996), when fresh problems arise that have never been considered by anyone and, therefore, cannot possibly have programmed answers (Heifetz, 1994).

So, what does a teaching leader teach? A teaching leader teaches – in day-to-day, face-to-face relationships with subordinates, peers and superiors in the workplace – "*learning as a way of being*" (Vaill, 1996). Learning leaders, in short, model the way for others to learn and unlearn continually. Therefore, Kramer required each executive participant to *teach the action learning model to others inside their organization*. As they taught action learning to other organizational stakeholders, they were stretching their capacity to lead. Not surprisingly, as they got better at teaching, they would find that they were *learning how to lead*. Learning how to teach would constitute, in part, learning how to lead. And learning how to lead would merge, finally, into learning how to learn and unlearn.

The US$4 billion comprehensive exam

In the US Department of Army, the Assistant Secretary for Acquisition, Logistics and Technology (AS) develops, acquires, fields and sustains most of the Army's war fighting capabilities. These capabilities include everything from basic soldier support to space-based intelligence systems.

To perform this mission, AS manages the Army's capabilities programs throughout each phase of their entire lifecycle. Key phases of the lifecycle include:

- Concept and technology development
- System development and demonstration
- Production and fielding
- Operations, support and disposal.

Despite its total lifecycle responsibilities, AS strives almost exclusively towards achieving early lifecycle outcomes such as development and production costs, technical performance, and schedule.

However, this over-emphasis on achieving early lifecycle outcomes often has detrimental impacts on later outcomes such as availability, reliability, and affordability. These impacts are the result of the organizational history,

processes, and culture of AS, which values the rapid development and production of new capabilities over sustainment of fielded capabilities. This unequal emphasis has three negative ramifications for the fielded capabilities of the U.S. Army:

- Failure to meet availability requirements
- Failure to meet reliability requirements
- Failure to meet operating and support budgets.

James Kelly was a senior acquisition logistician working in AS and a participant in the executive leadership MPA program at American University. Kelly sensed the Army's growing frustration with the performance of AS. Wanting to take action, Kelly persuaded the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics and Technology (DAS) to sponsor a business-driven action learning project. Kelly believed that by applying action learning, DAS could be transformed to reframe the acquisition logistics mission of AS to unlearn bad habits and improve the organization's overall performance.

The problem

AS is a relatively new organization within the U.S. Department of the Army. AS did not exist before 1988 because the former staff structure separated the research, development, and acquisition responsibilities for the Army's new capabilities programs from the sustainment responsibilities for its fielded capabilities programs. Under this structure, the Secretary of the Army for Research, Development and Acquisition was only responsible for achieving the early lifecycle outcomes. Not surprisingly, a separate staff organization, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics, was responsible for achieving the later lifecycle outcomes. This separation of the staff responsibilities caused the two organizations to work in near isolation. At times, the two groups worked against each other. Recognizing this deficiency, defense acquisition reformers of the 1990s worked with both the Secretary of Defense and the U.S. Congress to restructure Army Headquarters. The aim of this restructuring effort was to create a new staff organization chartered with total lifecycle responsibilities.

In 1998, this new organization formally became AS and, in 2002, the Army enhanced the organization by adding acquisition logistics to DAS. However, when Kelly began his action learning initiative the restructuring efforts had not fully achieved their desired results. Although the Army had an organization chartered with total lifecycle responsibilities, AS was slow to unlearn old beliefs and behaviors, and embrace its new mission. Despite some six years of trying, the Army was still experiencing the same problems with its fielded capabilities. These problems challenged the

Army's ability to meet the relentless demands of the ongoing global war on terror.

Enter Chinook

As a top official in DAS, Kelly wanted to address these problems, especially in the aviation programs for which he was responsible. He also wanted to improve the acquisition logistics processes of AS so that they would not result in the same problems as other fielded capabilities programs. Moreover, he wanted to improve the organizational and cultural deficiencies that were at the root of these problems. However, he knew that addressing all the problems within AS – structural, political and cultural – would be an overwhelming task. He also knew that because AS manages hundreds of capabilities programs across all phases of the lifecycle, it would be difficult to address so many programs within the time constraints of his American University graduation deadline in May 2004.

He decided, therefore, to address the typical problems associated with a single capabilities program. By focusing on one problem, he hoped to find actionable solutions that would be useful for other programs, as well as the entire AS organization. In addition, he sought a project requiring action during the calendar year, adding urgency and risk elements, and enabling the possibility of achieving tangible near-term results.

After researching many candidate programs, Kelly chose the US$4 billion modernization program for the Army's CH-47F Chinook Cargo Helicopter. ("Chinook" refers to the Chinook people of the Pacific Northwest of the

Illustration 3.1   CH-47D Chinook helicopter

United States.) The primary mission of the Chinook helicopter is to move troops, artillery, ammunition, fuel, water, barrier materials, supplies and equipment on the battlefield. Its secondary mission is medical evacuation, disaster relief, search and rescue, aircraft recovery, fire fighting, parachute drops, heavy construction and civil development. The CH-47F can fly at speeds of over 175 mph with a payload of 21,000 lbs (9,530 kg). In 2008, Chinook helicopters logged over 90,000 flight hours in the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan, fought forest fires across California, provided food and shelter relief to victims of flood and earthquake disasters around the world, and rescued climbers stranded in a snowstorm above 10,000 feet on Mount Ranier in the western U.S.

Modernization would provide future Army and Joint Force Commanders with an improved heavy lift helicopter capability by upgrading 529 of the Army's 40-year-old CH-47D Chinook helicopters. Upgrades include adding a new digital cockpit, flight controls and avionics, more powerful turbine engines, a reduced vibration fuselage, and several other enhancements. Together, these upgrades result in a better-than-new CH-47F helicopter with an expected 20-year service-life extension. These upgrades also improve the helicopter's high altitude hot temperature performance margins (critical for flight in Afghanistan and Iraq), enhance its joint interoperability, and reduce its operating and support costs compared with the CH-47D helicopter. In addition, 72 Special Operations Forces (SOF) variants of the helicopter provide a long range capability to insert or extract SOF troops anywhere in the world.
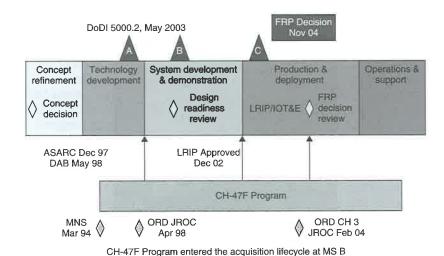

Figure 3.1   Reframing acquistion logistics – a generic overview

Examining the CH-47F program schedule in detail, Kelly discovered that AS had already made most of the milestone decisions for the early phases of the lifecycle. In addition, the U.S. Army and the Boeing Company had already completed the helicopter's development and flight-testing. Because of the successful milestones and tests, the Army awarded Boeing an initial production contract for the first lot of seven helicopters in December 2002. To date, the initial production had been proceeding quite well.

Accordingly, the only major milestone remaining was the full-rate production (FRP) decision scheduled for November 2004. Kelly also discovered that, in typical fashion, AS had focused its CH-47F program objectives on achieving early lifecycle outcomes (production costs, schedule, and technical performance) rather than later lifecycle objectives: availability, reliability, and operating and support costs. Based on past experiences, Kelly believed that this focus would likely result in the CH-47F helicopter experiencing similar problems found in the Army's other fielded capabilities. "How can I help transform the mindset of Army acquisition logistics?" Kelly wondered. "How can I help my colleagues unlearn what is no longer useful?"

Considering the CH-47F program's history, objectives and schedule, Kelly certainly could have chosen something easier for his action learning project. However, he would be playing an important role in meeting the FRP decision milestone. He wanted to do a better job with his part of the milestone so that the CH-47F would not experience the typical problems after fielding. With this in mind, he decided the program's tight schedule and flawed objectives presented an opportunity to test action learning and improve his overall contribution to the milestone. He also wanted to transform the acquisition process for future aviation capabilities programs, while enhancing the overall AS organization.

Results

In mid-December 2003, Kelly's first step was to meet with the DAS to introduce him to action learning and to secure sponsorship for the project. His next step was to meet with various Army staff and CH-47F program officials to gain their support and to solicit from them ideas about the problems. With sponsorship and support in hand, his final step was to select members of the action learning team, listening closely to their ideas and verifying their commitment to the project. In doing so, he picked a team of four all-stars, who would bring key experiences to the table:

- The DAS Policy Division Logistician was an expert at formulating and applying Army and Defense Department acquisition policy and procedures
- The DAS Combat Systems Logistician was proficient at establishing and conducting capabilities program testing and evaluation

- The Acting DAS Combat Support Systems Division Chief was skilled in the requirements-generation process; and, finally
- The DAS Resources, Oversight and Analysis Division Chief was a skilled practitioner of the Defense budget process.

As a result of these meetings and initial feedback, Kelly set near-, mid- and long-term objectives. First, he would use the action learning process to help improve his contribution to the CH-47F FRP decision so that the Army could unlearn its standard operating procedures and minimize the typical post-fielding problems with the helicopter (near-term). Second, he would build on the near-term learning results in order to improve the acquisition process for future aviation capabilities programs (mid-term). Finally, he would build on these transformative learning results in order to reframe the overall acquisition logistics mission of AS (long-term).

In order to demonstrate his capacity as a learning leader, Kelly began to teach action learning to the team before formally starting the project. He spent a significant amount of time helping one member of the team to become a learning coach. Kelly and the coach worked through several days of one-on-one sessions, practicing open-ended questioning techniques, facilitator skills, and problem-solving drills. All told, the team's training and preparation took about 30 days, from mid-January to mid-February 2004.

With the training and preparation complete, the action learning team met for the first time on February 26, 2004. To start the meeting, Kelly acted as the learning coach and another member of the team presented a simple, but real problem for the team to unpack. The problem involved the team member's dilemma over how to use a "free" airline ticket that was due to expire in just a few days. Within 20 minutes of open-ended questioning and dialogue, Kelly knew the team's training and preparation had paid-off. Members quickly determined that the real problem was not deciding how the team member should use the airline ticket, but rather how his family should determine its travel priorities. This was a powerful experience of group unlearning, learning and relearning in action. After a few more minutes of questioning, the team suggested several solutions and the team member was able to act on both the free airline ticket and his family's travel priorities. Following the practice session, Kelly became the problem owner and another team member served as learning coach.

Kelly presented the problems and challenges related to the CH-47F program, explaining that his overall desire was to allow the Chinook to enter FRP, but not experience the typical problems after fielding. After about two hours of questioning, the team agreed that Kelly's immediate problem was deciding how to do a better job at a routine task – making a better logistics contribution to the CH-47F FRP milestone. Upon agreeing on the problem, the team mapped out an initial problem-solving strategy. This included developing, scheduling and conducting a comprehensive integrated logistics

support (ILS) review before the milestone. The team felt that the ILS review should cover all of the program's logistics elements, as well as its operating and support cost budgets and its post-fielding evaluation plan (none existed).
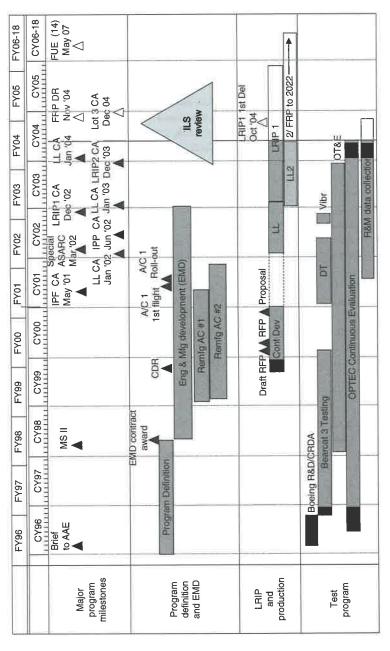
With significant learning accomplished, the learning coach closed the meeting by posing several questions, which the team agreed to answer via email after a couple of days of individual reflection. The answers to these questions and the time for reflection allowed Kelly to develop a draft ILS review framework, addressing all of the team's recommendations.

With the draft ILS review framework completed, Kelly met with the CH-47F Army Systems Acquisition Review Council Integrated Product Team (IPT) on March 3, 2004. The IPT is a team of senior Army staff officials who would prepare the CH-47F program for the formal FRP decision milestone in November. During this meeting, Kelly informed the members that he wanted to improve his logistics contribution to the milestone. He also presented his draft ILS review framework, which by now included both aircraft system elements (safety, suitability and supportability), and key logistics support elements (supportability strategy, business case, support cost budget, and post-fielding evaluation plan). He explained to the IPT that he would use this framework to conduct his assessment of the CH-47F program and to formulate his position for the FRP decision.

After Kelly presented his plan, some of the IPT members, especially the CH-47F program logisticians, were clearly uncomfortable with what he was proposing. They explained that, with so much of the program's effort focused on early outcomes, they had little influence on the program's later outcomes. They also made it clear the program would likely face similar post-fielding problems as previous programs had, and that there was little that they could do to change the situation.

However, after further conversation, the IPT agreed that conducting a formal ILS review (using the ILS framework) before the FRP decision would assess the post-fielding potential of the program. If the assessment were negative, the IPT could take steps to improve the program before fielding. Having the IPT validate the ILS review strategy gave Kelly a tremendous boost of confidence. He related his confidence to the rest of the action learning team at its next meeting on March 15, 2004. The positive feedback energized the team, and they began to develop the ILS review for the CH-47F program.

After some powerful questioning, everyone felt that the ILS review should establish measurable goals and objectives for the operations and support phases of the lifecycle, along with a meaningful evaluation plan. All felt the evaluation plan should consider both helicopter system elements and support system elements. They also felt the ILS framework should include an analysis of the financial resources required for this phase of the lifecycle – from budget submission, through execution, and audit. As the project owner,

Figure 3.2 Reframing acquisition logistics – specific to the CH-47D

Kelly felt this framework could support all three phases of the project: near-, mid-, and long-term.

By late March 2004, Kelly's action learning team and the IPT settled into a biweekly meeting schedule. The two teams continued to support each other until the CH-47F FRP decision milestone was made in November 2004.

The action learning team's results were impressive. First, they helped Kelly verify the problem and establish a realistic problem-solving strategy. Second, they helped Kelly develop the ILS review framework, which established new policies and procedures for guiding Army capabilities programs throughout the acquisition lifecycle. Third, they helped Kelly apply the ILS review framework to the CH-47F program and improved his contribution to reducing the typical post-fielding problems. Finally, the team helped Kelly prepare to accomplish the other project objectives, for which the ILS review framework would drive changes that reframe the acquisition logistics mindset of AS (long-term).

In August 2008, the Boeing Company was awarded a five-year U.S. Army contract valued at US$4.3 billion for 191 CH-47F Chinooks, plus options for an additional 24 aircraft over the course of the contract.

Transformative learning

Kelly unlearned, learned and relearned a great deal about himself and his organization. While he had always been an effective leader in the very structured hierarchical environment typical of the U.S. Department of Defense, action learning forced him to lead in situations where he had no formal authority and where he had to rely on others for both resources and action. Experiencing a huge shift in bureaucratic mindset, he was forced to unlearn his already successful leadership approach and develop and use new leadership skills – especially brokering, coaching, and facilitating. He dealt with unforeseen challenges ranging from facilitating meetings for senior executives (surprisingly difficult) to leading and coaching peers so that they could meet the FRP decision milestone (surprisingly easy). Over the course of the project, Kelly's leadership style evolved from being "in charge" to working himself "out of a job." He took great pleasure in helping his work teams become self-led groups.

Kelly also learned much about the structure, people, politics and culture of AS, an organization that was still too inflexible and resistant to change, despite the many compelling reasons to transform itself – the end of the cold war, expanding roles and missions, smaller defense budgets, and the often poor performance of the Army's fielded capabilities. As a relatively new senior official on the acquisition logistics team, Kelly had a mindset that largely reflected that of a 20-year Army aviator and test pilot in the field. While he was used to seeing the results of acquisitions decisions for various Army aviation capabilities, he was not used to questioning the

activities, policies and processes that led up to those decisions. The power of action learning was in the questions, which promoted learning, unlearning and relearning.

Why did business-driven action learning work so well? All the members of the team had a stake in improving the outcomes for the project and all fully shared in the risk of failing. Kelly discovered that it was relatively easy to employ action learning throughout the U.S. Department of Defense, formally and informally. The ILS review ensured that any logistics support contracts for the Chinook would be performance-based. Applying action learning to other aviation programs has produced meaningful results outside the Chinook initiative. For example, following the Army's termination of the RAH-66 Comanche Helicopter, Kelly has now successfully applied action learning and ILS review to three of the Army's Comanche replacement programs – light armored reconnaissance, a light utility helicopter, and the future cargo aircraft.

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4
Action Learning in the Military

Robert L. Dilworth

Introduction

I travel out of two streams of thought in writing this chapter. The first relates to over 31 years of active military experience in the United States Army, including service as a general officer. The second is an 18-year association with action learning, including a close friendship with Reg Revans, the principal pioneer of action learning. These two streams interplay throughout, and I ended up being surprised by how much they mirror one another.

There are several core ingredients you look for in a full expression of action learning. They include a real problem that is difficult to deal with; a team of no more than four to eight people; equality within the team; empowerment of the team to solve the problem; starting with questioning insight rather than past solutions; where possible, placing people outside their comfort zone (unfamiliar setting, unfamiliar problem, unfamiliar associates); and having the learners critically reflect on the experience.

Having worked with many action learning teams that met these tests, I can attest to just how powerful a tonic this can be. Problems that had previously resisted resolution can tumble, and individuals can acquire a much greater sense of self-confidence, having helped overcome a difficult challenge. It is a highly effective way of developing leaders, and the learning that occurs as a result of critical reflection can increase the capacity of both individuals and organizations to deal with future challenges.

One major takeaway from my experience in the military and with action learning is that it does not need to be labeled action learning to be action learning. Some would disagree with this premise, but it is results you are after, and if the results are there and cover most of the bases that are ascribed to action learning, that would seem to meet the tests. From a phenomenological point of view, we learn that a simple question can bring clarity to an issue – "What's happening?" To put it in the vernacular, "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is probably a duck." Revans understood that action learning can occur naturally, and would point to