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National Level Experiments with Action Learning: Belgium and Beyond

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Introduction

There have been two notable examples of action learning being employed at the national level, both of them by Revans – the Belgian and Egyptian (or referenced as the Nile) projects (1968–71). Revans also was involved with public service initiatives in both India and Australia, but on a much less ambitious level than in Belgium and Egypt.

National-level action learning initiatives are difficult to engineer from several standpoints. There are political factors to contend with, and it can be difficult to line up influential supporters because of their diverging interests. In Belgium and in Egypt, it was a case of both the public and private sectors being involved, which can further complicate coordination and planning.

In the case of the Belgian Experiment, the constellations were right, with highly influential people willing to support the initiative in key positions. Further, the industrial productivity of the nation was a source of grave concern at the time. Therefore, there was a receptivity to new ideas and approaches that might help reverse the negative economic trends. Action learning was one of several programs decided on to move the country forward. It was also fortuitous that Revans was a known commodity in European management circles, and in a position to step in and assist with the action learning component. The timing was good all the way around.

The Nile project was, in effect, the offspring of the Belgian project, even umbilically tied to it in some respects. There is much that can be learned from both projects. South Africa has been considering

undertaking a national-level action learning program that draws on what was learned during the Belgian venture. We will examine outcomes of the two projects in our chapter summary and their implications in launching new efforts.

The Belgian Experiment

Reginald W. Revans, the principal pioneer of action learning, would single out several of his major initiatives for emphasis. They were the National Coal Board, the Hospital Internal Communications (HIC) Project, and the Belgian Experiment, and he would occasionally refer to the Nile project. His first action learning program was developed with the National Association of Colliery Managers in 1952.

> Under the aegis of the National Coal Board, 22 bold members of that body formed a consortium to examine the four main problems of their daily operations ... in their own pits and those of their colleagues. (Revans, 1983, p. 56)

Over the three years that the National Coal Board program existed, there was an exchange of experiences between those involved. This was in line with Revans' core belief that we need to learn from and with each other. While Revans labels this action learning, it came before Revans' conceptual framework for action learning had fully matured.

The HIC Project, involving London's ten largest hospitals, ran from 1965 to 1969 (Revans, 1985, pp. 17–19)) and overlapped with Revans' effort in Belgium. The HIC project, while having many of the basic trappings of action learning, did not use action learning teams *per se*. It did call for the staff of one hospital to examine the practices of another hospital, thus falling in line with Revans' belief that more can be learned by having people deal with unfamiliar settings and problems (see Chapter 1). Groupings of people sent from one hospital to another involved three or four individuals. These were informal groups. The various groups were brought together periodically to discuss what they had learned and surface ideas for improving hospital operations. This led to at least a score of initiatives being launched. The results were quite striking and are reported elsewhere in this book.

Belgium was obviously the "crown jewel" to Revans. He would almost always turn to the Belgian Experiment when outlining what constitutes action learning in its most fully developed form. This initiative seems to include some of his best thinking on the subject of action learning.

As will be explained, he would attribute major advances in the Belgian economy to the Belgian Experiment.

In 2007 and 2008, David Bellon of Belgium, with the encouragement and support of Yury Boshyk, performed some important investigative work on the Belgian Experiment. He was able to locate some of the individuals who had assisted with the research in the 1960s, or had been a part of the actual action learning teams and experience. Many have passed from the scene by now, but those who Bellon was able to contact had rather vivid memories of their experience. In various ways, it seems to have been a pivotal point in their lives. Their perspectives add a fresh stream of research information to that already available.

It is important to understand some of the antecedents to the initiative in Belgium, and the dynamics that drove it. First, it was a confluence of interests, both national and individual, that came together in a powerful way. When the two Treaties of Rome were signed in 1957, establishing the first foundations of the European Union (EU) and the European Atomic Energy Community (ECSC); six countries were signatories (Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and what was then West Germany). Brussels was selected as the capital of the European Economic Community (EEC), as it was called then and remains so today. There were expectations set for economic performance, and Belgium was the laggard among the EU countries. There was a sense of urgency in Belgium at the national level to reverse this trend.

Individuals in a position to exert influence on events now came into play. The first was Gaston Deurinck, who had founded the Belgian Productivity Centre. He was later to help establish the Fondation Industrie-Université in 1956, becoming its Managing Director, and the European Association of Management Training Centres (1959). The latter was merged into what is, today, the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) in 1971. Deurinck was well-connected to the academic institutions in Belgium and well-versed about things American as he had studied in the U.S. on a scholarship. The latter was important, as both the Fondation and the EFMD were supported by the Ford Foundation. Deurinck was, in turn, the brother-in-law of Max Nokin, President of the Société Générale (the largest holding company of its day in Belgium). He had 15 companies over which he had direct influence, and this no doubt helped involve many large and well-known Belgian companies in the experiment (DeSchoolmeester, 2007).

At the time (1965), Revans was working in Brussels for three years as a research fellow of the European Association of Management Training Centers, and had served for a time as its President. He had

just left his position by mutual agreement, as a professor of Industrial Administration at the Manchester Business School at the University of Manchester – a position he had earned in large part because of his outstanding record with the National Coal Board. In any case, from conversations with Revans (with Robert L. Dilworth) the situation became untenable for Revans at the University of Manchester, and he resigned his professorship in 1965.

We will now focus in on some of the most significant aspects of the Belgian Experiment. Here are the ingredients of what constituted a high potency advocacy for the Belgian Experiment.

1. A country that felt itself on the cusp of greatness, but needed to prove itself;
2. A businessperson with considerable clout and influence (Gaston Deurinck), including academe, who wanted to move the Belgian economy along, and get some credit for it in the process;
3. A business magnate who was the brother-in-law of Deurinck (Max Nokin) who also wanted to move the economy forward, and his business interests along with it;
4. A professor and prognosticator of management and action learning (Revans), emerging from a bad professional experience (University of Manchester), who was highly motivated to make his mark, perhaps vindicate himself, and build his theories in practice;
5. Academics in Belgium (e.g., Andre Vlerick, for whom the Vlerick Business School is now named), who were "tuned" into the moment and ready to try new things).

It would be hard to imagine a more powerful tonic for launching a major new program. This was a marriage of mutual interests. While the Belgian Experiment germinated with Deurinck, he needed an agent and intellectual "engine" and innovator to give it life. He knew Revans through the European Association of Management Training Centres. He also knew that Revans could be depended on to do something highly innovative and make a difference. Revans became the key ingredient in the mix, the seasoning that brought the flavors together.

This led to the creation, by the Fondation Industrie-Université, of the Inter-University Program for Advanced Management – a consortium of the five universities in Belgium and its 21 largest firms. (Revans, 1971, p. 3). Revans outlines the essence of the program this way:

> In the spring of 1968 the five universities of Belgium and a score of her larger firms set up a consortium in which each enterprise

exchanged a senior manager with another for a year, to work on a strategic problem of the receiving partner. The universities provided support in the form of research method, experimental design, and other techniques. There were thus three parties to the program:

- Senior managers learning how to tackle unstructured situations
- Business enterprises learning about their dynamics and inertias
- Teachers of Management learning to examine the action problem at first hand (Revans, 1982).

The conceptual design

The Belgian Experiment was inherently different from any action learning program before or since (except perhaps for its virtual Siamese twin, the Nile project, to be addressed later). Here is the core essence of program design, as a backdrop for the program specifics we will be covering.

Business and Academic institutions formed a consortium and worked together closely.

Senior managers considered to have high potential were designated by their firms as possible participants. They then went through a panel selection process to determine if they had sufficient motivation and the attributes to be successful:

- Each individual selected, or "fellow" as they were called, was assigned a tutor to help prepare him for the program
- Each fellow was matched with a fellow from another industry, and they were, in effect, exchanged
- Fellows were formed into action learning teams, usually five members to a team
- Each member of this team (the Diagnostic team) had their own individual assigned problem to pursue and, by design, they were from an industry far removed from their own (Revans' belief in removing people from their familiar settings and problems in order to generate fresh questions and innovative thought)
- As each fellow grappled with the problem he or she had been given, they shared their concerns and learning with others in their action learning team who were pursuing different problems.

Each firm with a problem being addressed had a client organization designated within the firm that would be responsible for implementing the recommended solution team and action plan, once determined. Along the path to arriving at a solution, they were to be kept informed

of progress being made. Therefore, they were primed and motivated to spring into gear when the nature of the problem had been identified; namely, launch of an action learning set to deal with the implementation. The fellow in the diagnostic set would then finish the last four months of the year-long assignment helping to move the implementation along. This is one of the most intriguing design features of the Belgian Experiment, and truly unique.

Revans was very clear about the importance of the secondary, implementation oriented-action learning team in the receiving company. There had to be a "Framework of Welcome", with "buy in" for the recommended solution and action plan, when it was received in the client organization. Further, the action learning team to handle the implementation phase had to have three types of people in it (those who Care, those who Know and those who Can (Revans' overview of the Belgian Experiment).

The program ended up going through four cycles, each a year in length in a biannual pattern. Before each program year began, participating executives were selected. They were drawn from a pool nominated by the major firms of senior executives who were deemed to have high potential. The candidates appeared before a selection panel of five to six people who assessed their qualifications and motivation level.

Daniel Deveusser, one of those selected, recalled the selection interview during an interview with David Bellon on December 5, 2007. He was asked two questions:

- What do you feel about such a challenge?

(Deveusser states "All I had to show was my motivation")

- Were you expecting some more university studies here?

(Deveusser already had three Master's Degrees, and told them "No", which is what they apparently wanted to hear.)

Each selectee was designated a "fellow". This term was selected by Revans for a purpose. Two of the definitions for the term are "equal" and "comrade". Revans believed deeply in egalitarianism in action learning, everyone to leave their mantle of authority at the door when they entered an action learning team. Participants were organized into action learning teams of five members.

Over the four one-year cycles of the program in Belgium, we know that no more than 40 executives were exchanged between enterprises over

the four cycles. Revans launched a replica of the Belgian Experiment in Egypt in 1970, with 13 nationalized enterprises exchanging senior managers. Called "The Nile Project", it used the staff at Al Azhar University as academic advisors. Revans states that:

> in Egypt and Belgium fifty managers have actually been exchanged between fifty enterprises. (Revans, 1982, p. 399)
>
> The one-year program cycle can be broken down this way:
>
> - a preparatory tutorial phase,
> - a two-month orientation course,
> - a three-month diagnostic phase,
> - a visit to America of about a month,
> - an action phase of four months.
>
> (Revans, 1982, p. 330)

Let us examine the program components more closely. The preparatory tutorial phase involved interaction with each designated fellow to review the program and the expectations. The tutor was apparently assigned six months before the start of the program.

> This tutor first advised each participant how to go about it, either by reading or written exercises, to maintain the academic standard necessary for entering the formal scheme. (Revans, 1971, p. 6)

Two-month orientation phase

This phase, according to Revans, dealt with "action ideas, such as interviewing and sampling, the nature of motivation, risk and learning" (Revans, 1982, p. 330). It is interesting to note that this front end orientation phase, except for about a week, ended up being a series of lectures or, in Revans' parlance, Programed Knowledge, or P – exactly what Revans suggests should not occur in starting an action learning related effort. He emphasizes beginning with Questioning Insight, or Q. The strong inclusion of P in this instance may have been a compromise on his part with those in the academic community in Brussels in the interest of program harmony and gaining their support. In any event, it happened. After events in Manchester, he may have been disinclined to stir up another hornets nest. Dirk Deschoolmeester, when interviewed by David Bellon, explains the use of lectures during the orientation phase this way:

> I guess Professor Revans expected each of the participating schools to bring one of their courses into the program ... for example Philippe

> Dewoot might have given two to three days on strategy ... Professor Vanlommel was asked to give a little module in cost control ... because the participants expected to receive some kind of course in this program rather than just talk philosophy about systems.

Some participants in the Belgian Experiment, based on interviews by David Bellon in 2007 and 2008, believed that this front end loading of lectures was less than inspiring. From what participants had been told, this would not occur, and when it did, they could find it counterproductive. In part, they were receiving instruction on things that they already knew. Here is what Daniel Deveusser, one of David Bellon's interviewees, had to say:

> It was really a fiasco ... We were already grown up within our organizations, we were managers ... at such training you do not tell things everyone should know ... It was really not good ... even Gaston Deurinck [the head of the foundation] gave a lecture. It was not what we expected.

The first week of the orientation phase was viewed more positively. It was seen as providing useful tools, including interview techniques and some work with learning styles and psychological tests. There was also sensitivity training (also referred to as T Groups). Some, including Deschoolmeester, apparently found this aspect a problem point in the orientation in that it triggered conflict and, in their view, was of questionable value. It is worth noting that this kind of training can trigger a wide range of responses, but it may well have helped open up communications and thought processes. You would have needed to be there to judge the dynamics.

Three-month diagnostic phase

The diagnostic phase centered on delivery of an action plan, together with a practical roadmap for what needed to happen, by whom, and by when. It involved asking many "Why?"-type questions in getting to the bottom of what was occurring and how to go about resolving it.

Revans' favorite story related to a banker who had been given a thorny problem plaguing Belgian's largest steel company to diagnose. The problem had persisted for some time, despite concerted efforts to solve it by both internal and external consultant teams of experts in the steel industry. The problem related to alloy steel. The company had some of the most modern technology in the world for production of

alloy steel. However, they could not seem to get it out of the door. Sales sagged, and the Japanese were gaining market share, forcing the company to sell off some of its assets to remain solvent. It was clearly an urgent situation.

The banker, who knew next to nothing about the steel industry, began interviewing people throughout the company, including a number of hours spent with the chief executive officer (CEO). A picture gradually started to emerge of what was going on – and it was entirely different than expected. It took a nonexpert in steel to figure out the nature of their problem and, when they learned what it was, the senior executives were amazed that they had missed it in all of their studies. They had simply been looking in all the wrong places, using the lens that came from their long-held underlying assumptions and expertise. They had been entrapped by their own assumptions and knowledge.

The problem related to compensation. The entire remuneration system for the company, from entry level to corporate boardroom, was predicated on the "tonnage of steel shipped". That translated to pig iron and other heavy steel products, *not* lightweight alloy steel. They had to reconfigure their compensation system and probably negotiate with the Labor Council in the process (Revans' 1994a).

Problems rooted in metrics are not all that uncommon in business. Steve Kerr, when CLO for General Electric, told the story of how performance in producing chandeliers was measured in the old Soviet Union. Like the Belgian steel company, it was also related to weight. The heavier the chandelier, the better. Finally, matters came to a head when chandeliers began breaking loose from ceilings and killing people. The ceilings could not withstand the weight (Steve Kerr in discussion of metrics with Dilworth).

Visit to America (one month)

Revans indicates that the purpose of the American visit was to submit action plans to the criticism of informed opinion, both in the leading business schools and at the headquarters of major firms (Revans, 1982, p. 330).

Daniel Deveusser in his interview by David Bellon states:

> The visit to the United States lasted only one week ... we went to the States just to make a presentation of our project. I gave mine at IBM. Others went to General Electric ... some presentations were not ripe yet. Some were just theory. Some were good. It was really not the best moment.

The action phase

As already highlighted, this phase involved the fellows, who had performed the diagnosis and created the action plan, working with the client organization in the receiving enterprise in helping to guide the implementation. This also entailed helping to "seed" the implementation team in getting it up and running.

Revans had formulated a very advanced approach in this design, because it has been found time and time again in business operations that the strategic implementation often falls short in matching up well with the strategic formulation. Here, we see a mechanism for establishing a nexus and alignment between strategy as conceived and what actually transpires.

Impact of the Belgian Experiment

As pointed out in discussing the dynamics that gave impetus to the Belgian Experiment, there were important reasons for wanting it to be successful. There was a thirst for positive results. Revans preformed many statistical analyses of the Belgian economy during the experiment and for at least the next 30 years. He hinged his analyses on what he termed "National Spontaneity", and tied them to his learning equation – L (for Learning) equals P (Programed Information) plus Q (Questioning Insight).

The performance of the Belgian economy did show a remarkable upward spike about the time the Belgian Experiment was put in place and in the ensuing decade. Revans seemed to believe that the "National Spontaneity" (his expression) resulting from the Belgian Experiment had played a significant role in lifting the economy. A lengthy report that he prepared for the First Action Learning and Mutual Collaboration Congress in 1994 is entitled "Action Learning or Partnership in Adversity: The Economic Effects of National Spontaneity". It establishes the linkage with the learning equation and underscores the importance of asking "Why?"-type questions in order to grasp what is really taking place, and, in effect, "get out of the box". He expresses his philosophy this way in one section of the report (p. 9):

> Only *the awareness of one's own inability to grasp what is happening* can be the valid starting point of one's race against a quickly changing world, so that it is not merely the event around one that may need deeper examination. It is one's own personal responsibility to recognize one's inner helplessness that is now so imperative. It is not what we are drilled by others to do in this rapidly-changing world of

> today that is the essence of salvation, but what we ourselves, as different individuals, may learn from the practical interpretation of our immediate and threatening embarrassments.

He goes on to say (p. 9) that:

> Our first declaration is that we need to learn as rapidly as the world around us is changing; our second is that learning consists of both what we pick up from others and what, from here-and-now experience, we find out for and about ourselves.

What we see in his basic treatise on National Spontaneity are the threads of two philosophical constructs that did not emerge until much later. The first was "Emotional Intelligence", and the second, related specifically to his National Spontaneity argument, are behavioral economics and behavioral finance. Behavior, mindset and emotions do influence economic activity (e.g., the Consumer Confidence Index). This seems to be Revans' underlying theme. In sum, he is saying we need to exercise both sides of our brain, the emotional and intuitive side as well as the fact-driven, hard analysis side.

There is substance in the way Revans philosophically frames things. However, when it comes to ascribing Belgian's economic progress to the Belgian Experiment he seems to go too far. That he does see such linkage is clear. In a compendium of documents prepared for distribution at an International Action Learning Seminar in 1996 (Revans, 1995) he uses some statistics and rationales he has used repeatedly over the years with regard to the economic performance of Belgium. He states (p. 4):

> Since the majority of Belgium's largest enterprises agreed in 1968 to try a new form of managerial development, now known as action learning, and derived from managers working together as comrades in adversity upon real and threatening troubles that all are ready to admit they do not understand, it is interesting to see from Table Three [a table encompassing economic performance from 1953 to 1987] that Belgium is alone among the twelve economies monitored by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to show any improvement in output per hour after that year.

He goes on to say:

> The difference of over three percent in Belgium's performance relative to the other eleven manufacturing economies is very highly

> significant; some assignable cause must have been introduced during 1968, but it has been impossible to suggest what this might have been ... were it other than the action learning program designed to achieve operational improvement in manufacturing and overseas markets. (p. 4)

In all fairness to Revans, few would argue that the Belgian Experiment did not have a favorable impact. It may have even to some degree changed management thinking in those areas that were impacted by it. It was certainly a new way of dealing with executive development. However, cause and effect relationships are hard to prove, and there are reasons to damp down just how much influence the Belgian Experiment with action learning may have had on the economy:

1. It was not the only initiative in being by the Foundation and by others;
2. There were a number of exogenous factors at work in the world economy;
3. This period saw the beginning of a strong upsurge in the world economy;
4. There were only 40, or fewer, executives involved in the Belgian Experiment, and while some of the problem solving (like the example in the steel company) was obviously very significant, others produced less meaningful results.

What did those interviewed by David Bellon have to say about the impact of the experiment on the Belgian economy?

Leopold Vansina:

> It would not be scientifically correct to say that the Belgian economy jumped as a result of the experiment ... the number of participants was far too limited to achieve such impact ... also the era was one of the most glorious economic periods of the century. Everyone was booming.

Daniel Deveusser:

> How to measure the impact of the experiment is a good question. The number of people who passed through the program was limited. We are talking about 40 people. It is impossible to say that this made a difference.

Professor Dirk Deschoolmeester:

> Revans always said that Belgium became the most productive country, and he had statistics around that, and he said this is thanks to our efforts. In my opinion he exaggerated on that, but it could be true. But I do not see a tangible relationship between the experiment and economic performance. The country is too big for that. The experiment was very small. But it is interesting that Max Nokin was using this to show things were moving, to shareholders.

Dirk Symoens:

> Trying to make a relation between the increased productivity figures of Belgium and relate them to bi-yearly programs was very emotional but, in fact, rather weird.

From his experience with all the interviews, David Bellon makes this observation:

> A lot of the people interviewed perceived the experiment as "interesting". However, not one of them linked the experiment to a better performance of the economy. Research also revealed that this experiment was one of many (see also Activity Reports of the Fondation Industrie-Université in which the experiment took only 2–3 pages per report). From a political viewpoint, it seems the Belgian government launched a large wave of initiatives which ultimately lead to an uplift in the economy. The experiment was not of major importance for the Belgian political establishment. It was one initiative among many.

The Nile Project

As we outlined in discussing the Belgian project, some very important people were in a position to promote the effort. Similar good luck and networking helped bring the Nile project into being. Professor Saad Ashmawy of the Department of Business Administration at the University of Cairo had been a doctoral student of Revans at the University of Manchester.

Revans was invited to speak in November 1969 at a seminar on problems of productivity in the Middle East in Cairo, Egypt. In his remarks, Revans struck one of his favorite themes. He said:

> [O]nly Africans can understand and develop Africa, that Africans can be effectively taught only by their own responsible study of African

> problems, and that if the intervention of Western professors is not to be actually harmful (in addition to being unconscionably expensive), a great deal of thought needs to be given to their role. (Revans, 1982, p. 373)

Revans gave examples of his work with London hospitals and Belgian enterprises. Presiding over the session was Abdel El Abd, Director of Training of the Central Training Organ (CTO) of the United Arab Republic. He saw the wisdom of Revans' philosophy and appears to have been primed to receive the message. He had a close relationship with the Inter-University Program in Belgium and was well aware of the Belgian Experiment with action learning.

From this catalyst, an active collaboration quickly developed, including a decision to inaugurate a smaller version of the Belgian Experiment. Managers from Belgium started coming to Egypt to assist in setting up the program, and managers from Egypt went to Brussels. However, the first task in Egypt was to interest the presidents of some of the major companies to participate and free up some of their high potential executive talent to serve as fellows and go through an exchange of executives with other companies. Thirteen companies were ultimately enlisted to participate:

1. The National Bank of Egypt
2. The Automotive Repair Company
3. The Eastern Tobacco Company
4. The Coke Company
5. The Metal Construction Company
6. The Cooperative Petroleum Company
7. The Sugar and Distillation Company
8. The Organization for Metal Industries
9. The Alexandria Soap and Oil Company
10. The Plastics and Electric Manufacturing Company
11. The Tanta Oil and Soap Company
12. The Copper Factories Company
13. The Soyof Spinning and Weaving Company (Revans, 1982, 379–380).

While this diversified list of companies signed up to participate, there were some caveats. They agreed with having the executives work on projects with which they were unfamiliar. However, they also decided that there should only be a limited number of project themes. Three themes were initially decided on: the relevance of training, the sources of motivation, and the flow of productive operations.

Rather than run through an in-depth examination, the program pieces in the Nile Project – since they largely followed the pattern used in Belgium – we will cover a few highlights and areas that seem in need of particular attention.

The induction of fellows phase in Eqypt "opened up with a part-time Induction Course concerned with the skills of interviewing, and with such ideas as self-awareness, the nature of learning and the origins of reinforcements of resistances to change (Revans, 1980, p. 55).

The highlighting of potential resistance during the induction phase was in some ways a harbinger of what was to come. Hurdles and resistance were encountered, but especially at the end when it came time for the fellows to outline their findings and recommendations to top management.

> At these meetings, each set of fellows, backed by a few counterparts, gave an account of his findings and recommendations, outlining his methods, his evidence, and so forth. The frankness with which some of the visitors described what they had seen, supported by the conviction with which they urged their recommendations for action, had never been anticipated and aroused more than a little defensiveness and recrimination. (pp. 56–7)

One top manager described the dynamics that unfolded this way:

> At first I refused to accept the fellow's report about my company. Then I tried to find reasons for persuading myself not to accept it. I thought – and how sour were my thoughts! – and the criticisms were against us, against my staff, and against me. But as I hear it this room tonight, the same criticism is being made by all the fellows, against their own companies as much as against the others, since they all worked in pairs; it is a common feature of the whole programme. We are all of us in the same boat. This makes the findings of all the fellows very important and very relevant. (p. 57)

Revans was dissatisfied with one aspect of the Nile Project – the implementation phase. He states his displeasure this way:

> We did not, during the development of the Nile Project, appreciate the importance of the client group for implementation, or therapeutic, phase of the projects; the Egyptian fellows were not advised to make a team out of those, who would be called to answer the questions 'Who knows? Who cares? Who can?' (p. 58)

Revans goes on to say:

> Our ignorance of the implementation process was brought home very clearly when, at the end of the first Nile Project, most of the Egyptian managers came to Belgium to compare progress with the fellows of the Inter-University Programme [Belgium]. (p. 59)

What were some of the positives of the Nile Project? Six of the 13 fellows were rewarded at the end with major promotions (Revans, 1982, p. 423). This clearly suggests that their worth was reinforced to top management, and that recriminations were perhaps minimal. Overall, the fellows reported that they had learned a great deal, including better self-knowledge.

After organizing a second program in action learning from his own university in Cairo, Professor Ashwamy helped create a similar program in Libya.

Lessons learned

What broad lessons learned can be drawn from the Belgian Experiment and the more limited project in Egypt?

1. It suggests that national initiatives are worthy of further consideration. In fact, there is a case – Revans certainly visualized it – for using action learning on an international scale to deal with disputes, as well as the development of programs that require several international players;
2. The Belgian Project in particular showed great promise in opening up communications and bringing some solution opportunities to bear on persistent and urgent problems, by getting people to think differently and operate outside their comfort zones;
3. You can argue over some of the apparent contradictions and flaws in the two programs, but the pluses seem to exceed the minuses by a significant margin;
4. The benefits derived from the program in Belgium, in terms of greatly improved economic performance, seem a bit overstated.

Applying knowledge gained in the Belgian Experiment to other national efforts

When asked for their thoughts on implementing the Belgian model elsewhere, two of the individuals David Bellon interviewed, each a veteran

of the Belgian Experiment, said this:

Dirk DeSchoolmeester

> The only thing I can say is just do it. Revans was more the feminine way, the soft skills, reflect, propose again. You have to accept that the approach is more feminine, I do not mean women doing it. The masculine way is more that we shoot from our hip and we will solve it. You know that there are political systems all around so you reflect, you propose, you try again. That's what I like about Business Process Management [DeSchoolmeester teaches the subject in an interdisciplinary way]. We know it will take time. Some managers do not like that. They are more 'give me what is'. That's more like solving puzzles. That's not Revans. Living in modified environments, that's what I have learned. Revans' approach was more a slow methodology than an analytical one.

Daniel Deveusser

> They should be prepared to be strategic and engage in long term thinking. For high level executives, a year is too long. Three or four months should be sufficient if it is intense and with a group, not individuals. Young graduates need a longer time ... You need an organization that supervises the whole program. It needs to be structured.

Those contemplating other national level programs should bear in mind:

1. The Belgian model used in the 1960s cannot be used without significant adjustments. The world has changed;
2. Both Belgian and Nile experiments seemed a bit heavy on formal instruction prior to launch. The fellows, by definition, were high performers and highly experienced. As those who were interviewed in 2007 and 2008 by David Bellon (who had participated in the Belgian Experiment) suggest, they were being taught things they already knew and that seemed out of place in this kind of program;
3. Whatever the model, as Revans continuously emphasized, it must be fitted to the culture and context. It must be tailor-made for the nation and setting in which it will be used;
4. The core essence of what was done in Belgium – which aligns rather directly with the basic precepts of action learning – can still serve as the central design.

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