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An Integrated Action Research Action Learning Leadership Development Programme for Managers of Australia Post's Delivery Business Unit in SA/NT

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Abstract

Action Research and Action Learning are increasingly being used for leadership and management development. This case study reports the use of an integrated Action Research Action Learning (ARAL) project in the Delivery Business Unit of Australia Post, showing how an action research group investigated the use of action learning projects within their organisation to develop Delivery Centre Managers and the implementation of a new organisational structure that required the skilling of team leaders to perform in new line management roles.

Keywords: action learning; action research; change management

Introduction

Australia Post is a Government Business Enterprise with the responsibility to operate in a competitive commercial environment for the delivery of mail throughout Australia. Apart from the section of the market protected by legislation for letters under 250 grams, it operates in the markets of logistics, retail and financial services, with its success relying on a staff of 35,000 and a network of 10,000 contractors and agents spread across the length and breadth of the country.

In 2001, a number of changes were introduced to improve the efficiency of its management and operations. The strategy included a significant investment in training and development. Within the Mail Delivery business unit, this was directed at the establishment of a new team leader structure that provided line control for a new Team Leader position. It also required a focus on improving the knowledge and skills of the Delivery Centre Managers who reported through Area Managers to the State Delivery Manager.

Traditionally, such training involved a combination of classroom style internal training, as with induction training, on the job learning, involvement in special projects, work rotations and funded support for external courses. This case study reports the design and delivery of a customised program developed by Gibaran, the State Delivery Manager (SDM) for South Australia and the Northern Territory, and his direct reports, using an Action Research Action Learning (ARAL) approach.

This report is presented in three sections. The first section provides a background into the workplace issue that formed the thematic concern of the action research project. It examines the reason for using the ARAL approach and the expected outcomes from the project. The second section presents a reflective narrative summary of the work and learning outcomes that were achieved during the project. The final section considers the characteristics of action

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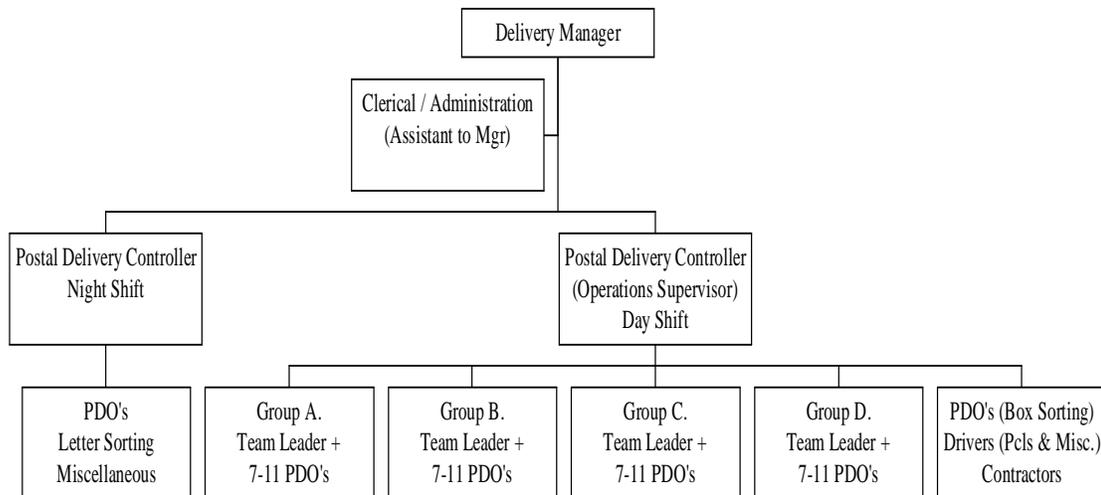
research that were observed during the course of the project and concludes with an evaluation of the outcomes that were achieved.

Project Background

The issue of training and development was raised following a decision in 1999 to change Australia Post's organisational structure in its Delivery Centres. The proposed new structure removed existing line control supervisors and replaced them with Team Leaders who would be upgraded and given line control responsibilities for groups of up to twelve Postal Delivery Officers (PDOs).

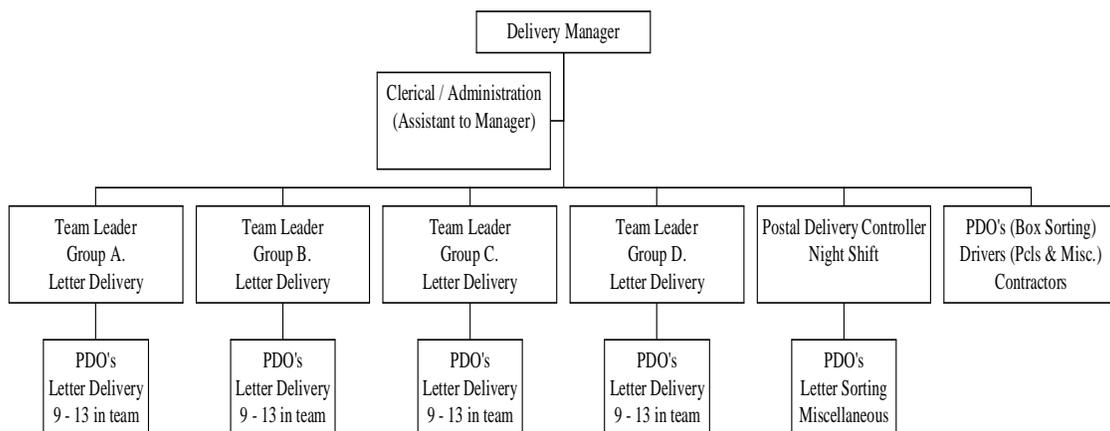
A typical Delivery Centre organisation structure before the change included the Postal Delivery Controllers who had responsibility for the teams of PDOs as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Typical Delivery Centre Organisation Chart in SA/NT (Before Change)



The new structure, in Figure 2, shows the Team Leaders taking line management control for the PDOs.

Figure 2. Typical Delivery Centre Organisation Chart in SA/NT (After Change)



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A pilot study program was undertaken during 2000 at one Delivery Centre in each State to test the proposed new structure. During the pilot, it became evident that Delivery Managers in South Australia and the Northern Territory had a significant task to skill and develop up to four Team Leaders per Delivery Centre, in the wide range of supervisory tasks and skills that would enable them to effectively fulfill their new role and responsibilities.

This new structure was to be implemented from January 2002 and required major changes in the way Delivery Centres were required to operate. Delivery Centre Managers needed help to train and develop their new Team Leaders, to become effective line control Supervisors.

The traditional way of learning and implementing a major change programme would have been to conduct briefings for Delivery Managers, and to provide them with guidelines for implementation. Team Leaders would be given on-the-job training, and perhaps a few specific classroom-type training sessions. Each Delivery Manager would largely be left to implement the programme using their own style and preferred way of doing things. This fragmented approach would result in varying degrees of individual learning, combined with short term projects. There was no consistent system for learning and problem solving in Delivery Centres, and no integrated approach towards individual and team learning at the different levels and functions in the organisation. Delivery Managers had differing levels of ability to develop their subordinate staff. Some were naturally good at this and others were quite autocratic in their approach to implementing change and solving problems.

For several years, the SDM had thought there was a better way to train and develop his people; however this was a matter that seemed to be solely within the control of the Human Resource Department. It was not until after promotion to the position of State Manager Delivery, and commencement of his MBA studies, that consideration was given to the introduction of an action learning development programme. This was brought about by a clearly identified need to train and develop Delivery Managers and Team Leaders in Delivery Centres, and a desire to improve the way in which people learn and implement change programmes. Quite simply there had to be a better way than the traditional way, and it seemed from his own learning, that Action Learning and Action Research could be a more powerful method of learning that would also produce better business outcomes. Now he was in a position to implement a leadership development programme using a project from his MBA studies, and as a researcher, to test the AR and AL (ARAL) method for a real need within the workplace. This led to the investigation of implementing a leadership development programme, initially for the Delivery Managers, and then for the Team Leaders, using the ARAL approach.

Just as there is no right recipe for success in organisational terms, there is no "right" way to develop people. This project was initiated by the researcher because of his involvement in action learning as part of his MBA studies and a desire to change and improve the way Australia Post employees learn in the Delivery Business Unit of South Australia. In addition, there was a need for Delivery Centre Managers to develop their subordinate Team Leaders, following structural change in the organisation.

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The Action Research Questions and Desired Outcomes

The workplace challenges to train and develop Delivery Centre Managers and Team Leaders were incorporated into an MBA action research project and posed a number of research questions, including:

- (i) What was the action learning and action research model that emerged in the study?
- (ii) What were the action research characteristics that emerged in the study?
- (iii) What were the projects that were implemented using the action learning approach?
- (iv) Were the projects beneficial to the Delivery Unit?
- (v) If action research and action learning were not used during this program, would the Delivery Business Unit have achieved the same project outcomes?
- (vi) What were the lessons learned by the researcher?

Answers to these questions were sought during the implementation of the new structure for the Delivery Business Unit, and the SDM had some specific desired outcomes in mind when the study commenced, as outlined below:

1. Develop a skilled and motivated leadership team in all large Delivery Centres within 12-18 months;
2. Involve all Managers in the learning process, and have this become a normal way of operating in the Delivery Business Unit in SA/NT;
3. Delivery Centre Managers to have enhanced Facilitation and Coaching skills;
4. Team Leaders to have a clear understanding of their new role and responsibilities;
5. Team Leaders to have a clear understanding of how their role and responsibilities link to national, state and business unit goals and objectives;
6. Team Leaders to adopt action learning as a way of solving problems and making improvements within work teams in Delivery;
7. Improved Customer Service Quality and Productivity to be achieved with letter deliveries in metropolitan Delivery Centres;
8. An increased understanding of organisational learning and the benefits of developing a learning organisation culture in Australia Post.
9. Implementation of a continuous learning culture throughout all business units in South Australia and the Northern Territory.

These desired outcomes were shared with all Managers who participated in the early part of the programme, and were reflected on during the later stages of the Managers Leadership Development Programme.

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Why Action Research and Action Learning?

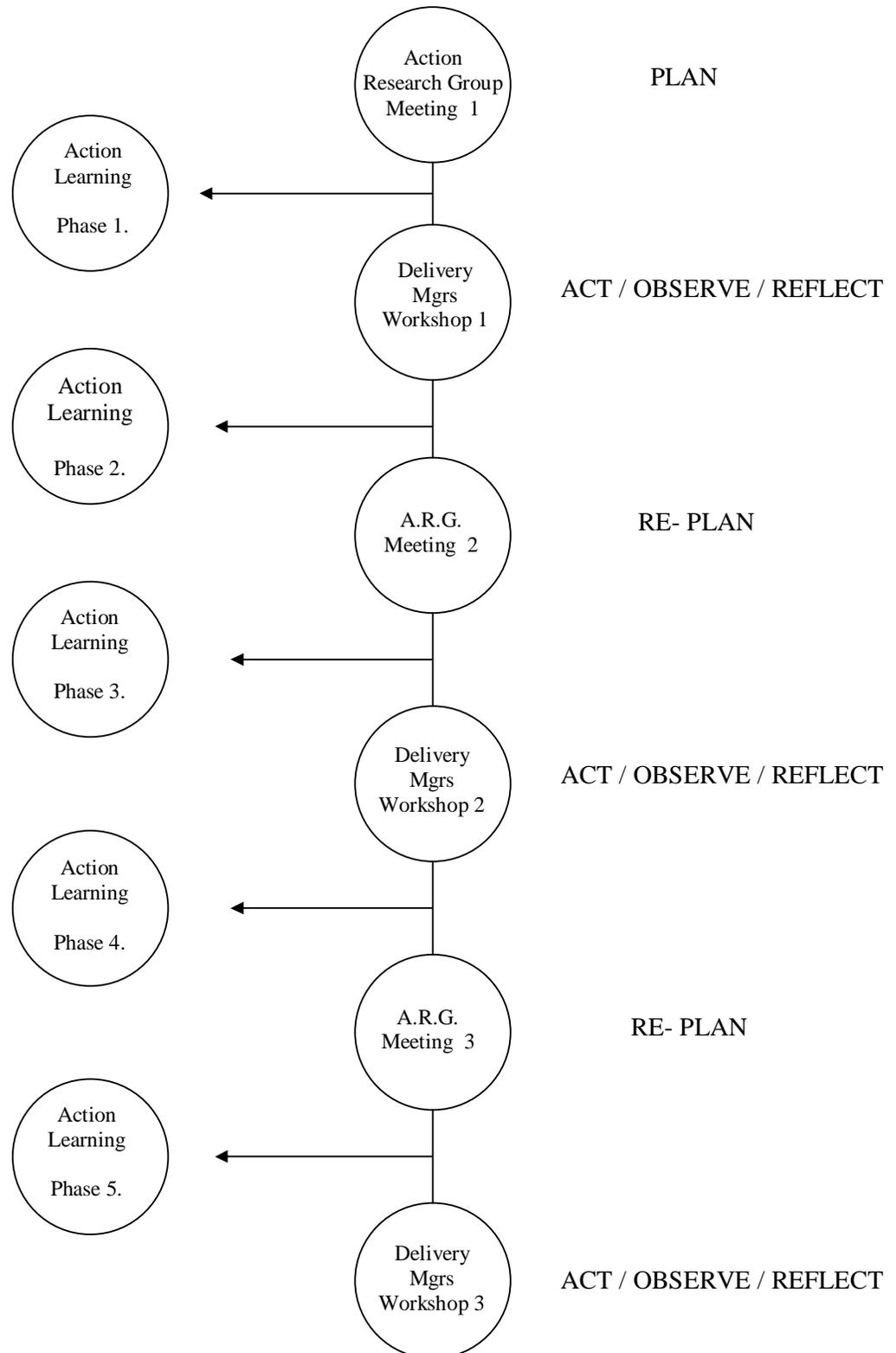
The social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) developed and applied the concept of action research over a number of years in a series of community experiments in post-world war America. Two of the concepts which were crucial in Lewin's work were the ideas of group decision and commitment to improvement (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). Although Lewin did not define the processes of action research, he indicated that action research group members should,

- (i) develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening;
- (ii) act to implement the plan;
- (iii) observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs, and
- (iv) reflect on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of cycles.

The ARAL model that emerged from this study relates to the four stage process outlined by Lewin. Firstly, a plan to improve leadership qualities for Delivery Managers was developed in consultation and co-operation with Area Managers and three representative Delivery Managers within the Delivery Business Unit. Information was obtained from relevant literature and other sources, both on and off the job. Next, the plan was then implemented with all participants attending a Leadership Development Programme at Gibaran Management Institute to receive tuition on relevant subjects. In between sessions they applied their learning by way of project work on the job. Participants applied the theory of action learning and facilitated their projects with others directly affected at Delivery Centre level. At the third stage, an Action Research Group both participated in the program and met to reflect on events and learning, after each phase of attending the Gibaran Institute for a Graduate Certificate subject. Finally, the plan was reviewed with appropriate adjustment to improve benefits of the program as it progressed. The application of these action research elements can be seen in the model shown in Figure 3.

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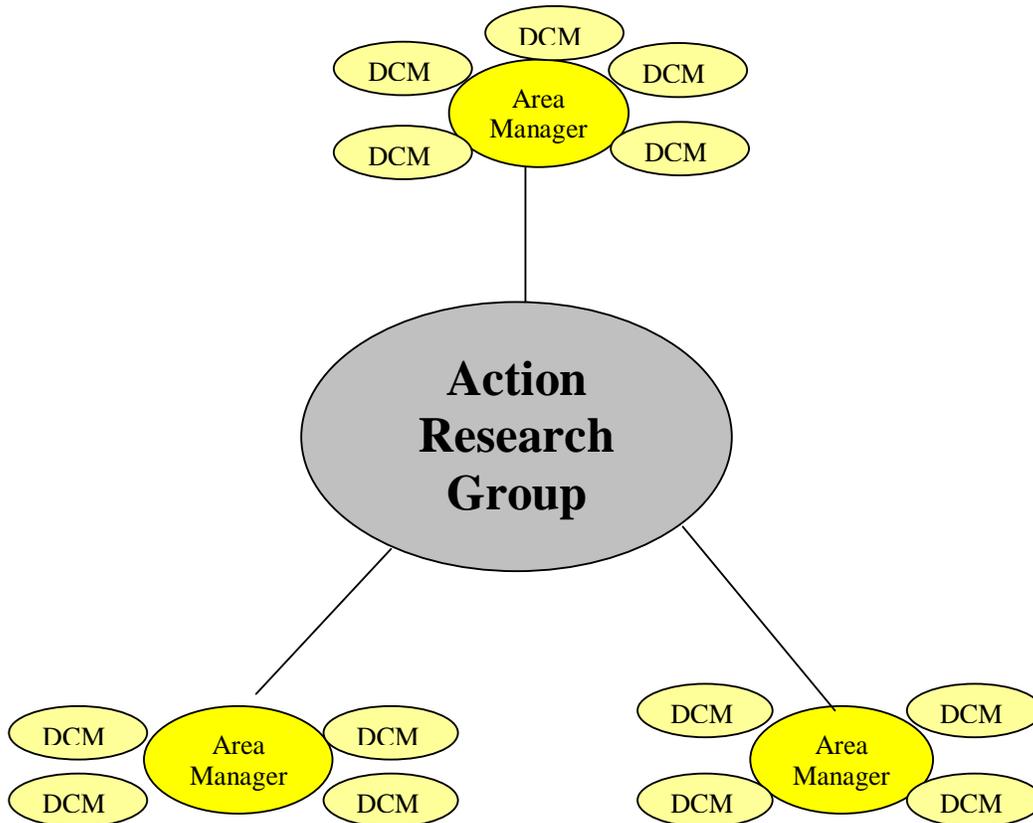
Figure 3. Australia Post Delivery Business (SA/NT) Integrated Action Research and Action Learning Model



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The action research method is described by Cunningham (1993) as “a continuous process of research and learning in the researcher’s and the group’s long-term relationship with a problem. Action research encourages the researcher to experience the problem as it evolves. This is the action of “engaging” in real life problem solving, and getting legitimisation from real organisations. This requires the commitment and interest of those who are experiencing the problems. In the case of the Delivery Centre Managers, the learning programme and project work was relevant and directly related to real working life situations. The Action Research Group met on regular occasions to discuss issues that surfaced during plan implementation, and to ensure learning sessions covered any gaps in the process. The researcher was involved in the process, and was supported by Area Managers, who were also doing project work with Delivery Centre Managers. The model in Figure 4 shows the relationships between the Action Research Group, Area Managers and Delivery Centre Managers (DCM).

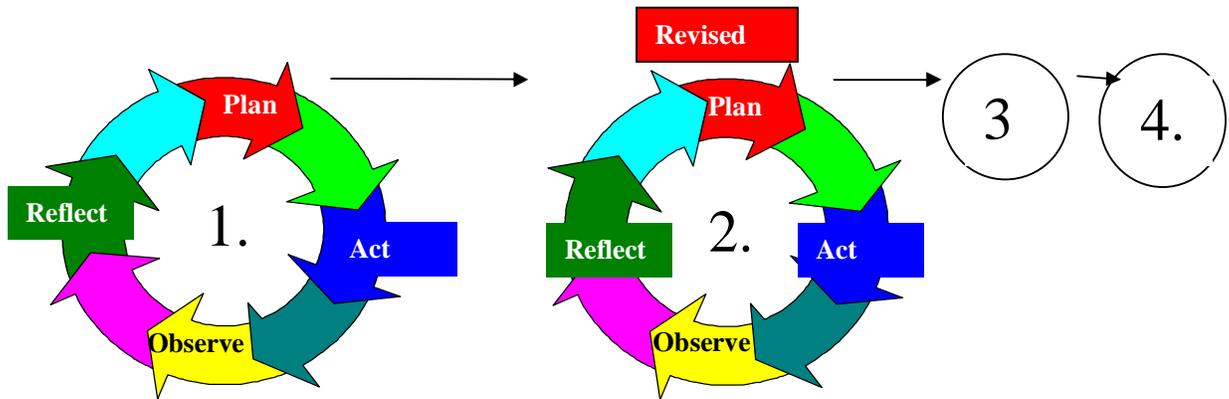
Figure 4. Australia Post Action Learning Groups and Action Research Groups



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Abraham (1994) said that “the action research method is problem focussed in the context of real life situations and the solving of such problems in a research sense would benefit the organisation and contribute to the development of social science knowledge”. Abraham also explains that the action research method when used for the implementation of change, involves cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection, and re-planning. The ongoing process cycles are shown in Figure 5 and continue until the program has finished.

Figure 5. Action Research Cycles for Implementation of Change



According to Cunningham (1993):

action research is a process where employees become jointly responsible for managing the process of change through a steering committee or Action Research Group;
before action research can begin, there must be an acceptance of its goals and methods as well as a positive and cooperative attitude among those who are carrying it out;

People cannot make intelligent choices about action research techniques unless they feel competent to deal with the problems of other people, and the best way to train the Action Research Group is by practical application (Cunningham 1993). In this case, the researcher was the most senior functional manager for the Delivery Business Unit, and therefore able to authorise the use of resources to successfully complete the programme. In addition, the most senior state manager gave his endorsement to the programme.

Action Research Group Members

The Action Research Group comprised the following members:

- Colin Brimson was the State Delivery Manager, an MBA student and initiator of the change program;
- the Southern Area Manager who usually acted as State Delivery Manager when he was absent;
- the Eastern Area Manager;
- the Northern Area Manager;
- the Glynde Delivery Manager who usually acted as the Eastern Area Manager in his absence;
- the Port Adelaide Delivery Manager;
- the Somerton Park Delivery Manager who usually acted as Southern Area Manager in his absence.

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- Chris Riley was the Gibaran Management Institute Consultant and Facilitator of Delivery Managers Leadership Programme.

Others were invited to meet with the group as required.

The Action Research Leadership Development Project

Delivery Centres vary in size and have between two and four Team Leaders, and up to twelve Postal Delivery Officers in each team. The effect of the structural change on the Team Leaders in the Delivery Centres was that they had to be trained and developed to take on first line managerial responsibilities. The leadership development programme included the development of Delivery Managers as well as the training of the Team Leaders. It was structured into two tiers and delivered in several phases.

The Phase 1 intervention involved the researcher (State Delivery Manager) working with consultants from Gibaran Management Institute Australia to customise the Leadership Development Programmes for Delivery Centre Managers and their Team Leaders. In the first phase, Delivery Managers were introduced to the principles and practices of Action Learning and the facilitation of workplace projects.

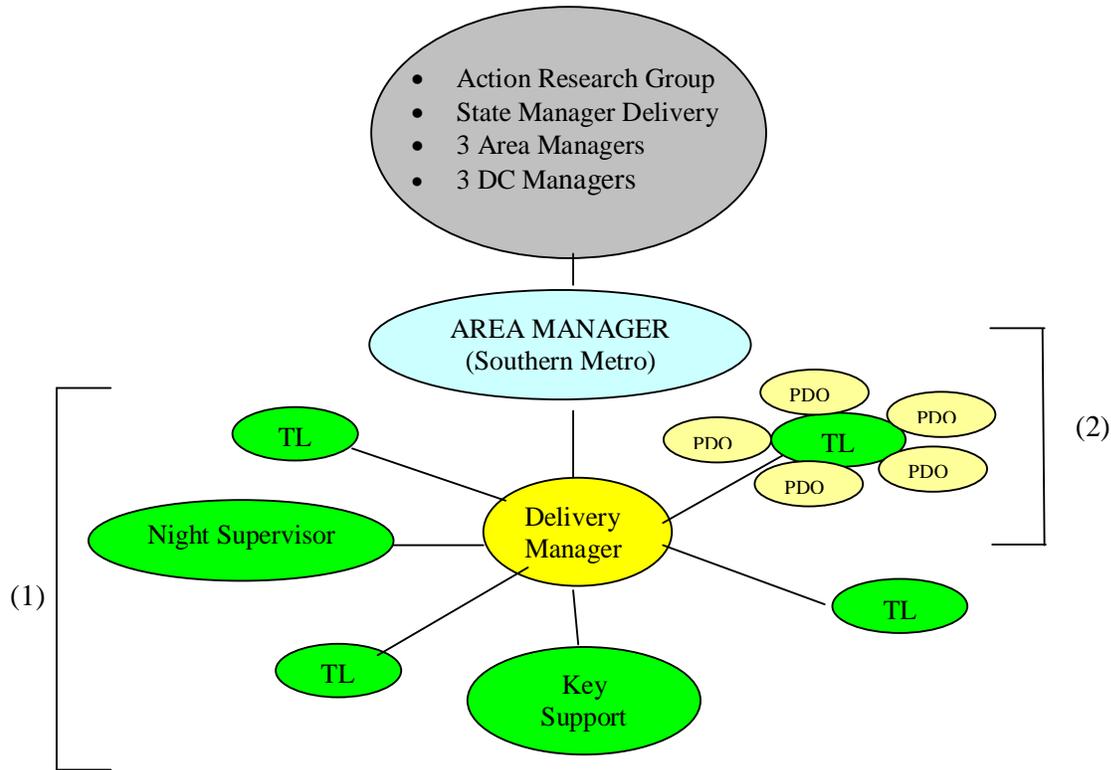
The Phase 2 intervention involved the development of Team Leaders. This was undertaken through an internal Australia Post program, and a Certificate IV program at Gibaran that incorporated the principles and practices of action learning. Participants in each intake of the Certificate IV program consisted of one Team Leader from each of the Delivery Centres, to ensure that every Delivery Manager had at least one Team Leader who had an understanding of action learning principles and was able to facilitate a team working on a real problem in the workplace.

The Phase 3 intervention of the program involved Area Managers and Delivery Centre Managers in continuing to develop their skills at Gibaran Management Institute, gaining Graduate Certificate accreditation, and cascading the facilitation of action learning projects throughout the Delivery Business in South Australia and the Northern Territory.

The Action Learning Programmes

The action learning programmes were linked to the Delivery Business Unit plan to improve Customer Service Quality and Productivity. Area Managers had a key role in driving improvements, as each one embraced the concept of action learning. All participants in the program were required to undertake projects linked to service quality or productivity improvement and initial projects formed the basis on which learning would take place in the long term. Team Leaders would later undertake a Certificate IV programme at Gibaran, also embracing the action learning concept by working through projects on the job. Hence the first model (Figure 4) can be expanded to show proposed learning sets at the next two levels, as illustrated in Figure 6

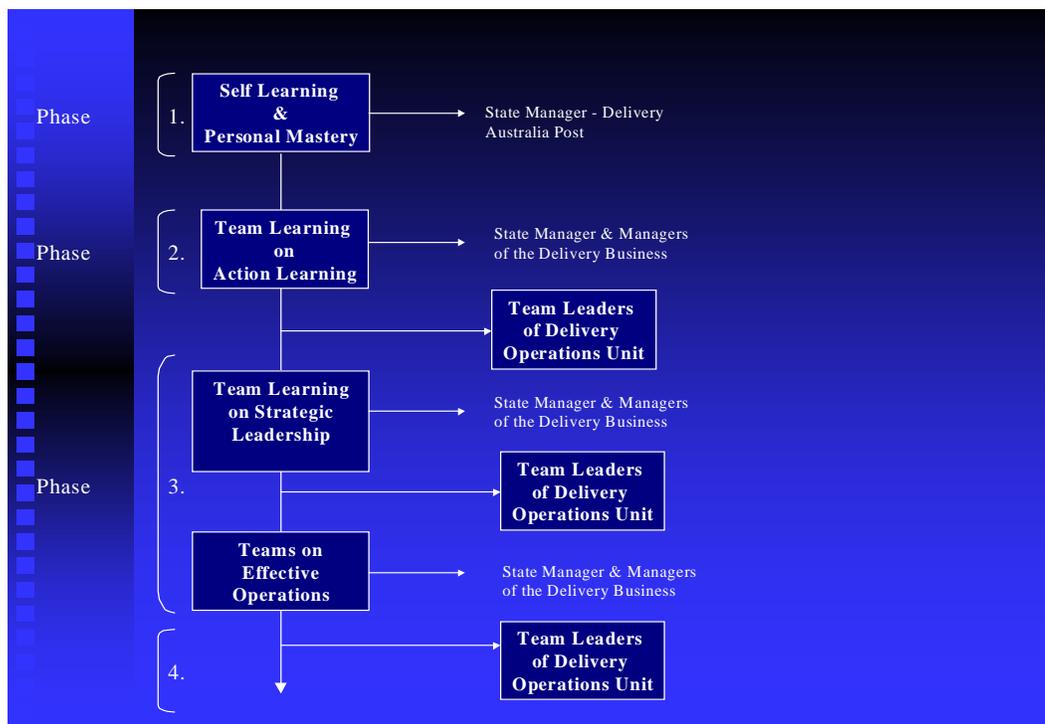
Figure 6. Second and third level Action Learning Groups
(1) Delivery Centre (DC) Managers with Team Leaders and key staff
(2) Team Leaders (TL) with Postal Delivery Officers (PDOs)



Planning for each phase of the programme was done by the Action Research Group. All members of the Action Research Group participated in the development programme, and the researcher co-facilitated the Managers programme, which had been specifically tailored towards business needs of the Delivery Business Unit. After each workshop, the Action Research Group met to discuss outcomes, share observations and reflect on implementation of the plan. Each group member was allocated tasks and was required to bring knowledge back to the group throughout the programme. Special guests and participants were invited to join the group, make presentations and provide feedback to the Action Research Group. The leadership development programme for the Delivery Business Unit was thus an integrated Action Research and Action Learning (ALAR) programme. The various phases and learning groups in the ALAR programme are shown in Figure 7.

The programme effectively started with the researcher's own learning whilst undertaking MBA studies. This was followed by the Delivery Managers, who were given the opportunity to undertake a Graduate Certificate in Management. One Team Leader from each facility then commenced a Certificate in Frontline Management programme (Certificate Level IV). Phases 4 and beyond represent the continuing programmes for new cohorts of team leaders from the Delivery Centres.

Figure 7. Leadership Development Programme for Delivery Business Unit in SA/NT using Action Research and Action Learning



Action Research and Action Learning Work and Learning Outcomes

The State Delivery Manager was closely involved in all stages of the learning and development programmes and kept a record of the activities of the Leadership Development Programme for the Delivery Centre Managers and the Frontline Management Programmes for the Team Leaders. A listing of the individual action learning work projects and their outcomes is shown in Appendices 1 and 2. Observations of the activities of the action research group, the managers and team leaders provide useful reflection and insights into the workings of the ARAL method and are presented in this section.

11 Sep 2001 Initial discussions at Gibaran considered a proposed general framework for the action research project and the development of a “customised” Leadership Development Programme for Delivery Managers. Possible members for the Action Research Group (ARG) included three Area Managers, three Delivery Managers (one from each network) and the Delivery Training Coordinator. It was not known at this stage what level of support would be provided by the General Manager.

26 Sep 2001 At a meeting with the Area Managers and the Delivery Business Unit training co-ordinator the broad plan for developing Delivery Managers and Team Leaders, using Action Learning was presented. It involved formation of a review team (later to become an Action Research Group), which included Area Managers and one key Delivery Manager from each network. The review team’s role was to assist Delivery Managers on a “continuous improvement” journey, starting with implementation of the new Delivery Structure. It was emphasised that Delivery Managers had to change the way

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they operated and would be required to train and develop Team Leaders in their new role. All Area Managers were asked to present the plan to Delivery Managers and provide feedback. They were required to explain the role of the review team, and to consider the nomination of a “key” Delivery Manager from each network.

- 3 Oct 2001** The plan for development of Delivery Centre Managers and Team Leaders was presented to the Mails Business Unit Manager. He gave his full support and suggested that the plan be presented to the entire Mail and Networks Management Team for SA/NT and make a presentation to the National Manager. During the presentation, the National Manager had questions relating to measurable outcomes and gave his support for the programme.
- 11 Oct 2001** The Action Research Group (ARG) met and considered progress made with the Delivery Centre modelling exercise. This was an exercise designed to clarify the tasks Team Leaders were required to carry out, and how much time was needed to do the work. A national team comprising members from Australia Post management and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU) were responsible for the review and its recommendations. The placement of Delivery Operations Support staff was considered along with Team Leaders who were to be translated into the new higher graded positions. The Managers Development Programme Plan and the role of the Action Research Group was reviewed with one of the Delivery Centre Managers offering to bring a videotape on team development to the ARG meeting.
- 16 Oct 2001** Met with ARG and provided an update on the leadership program for Delivery Managers. Introduced the Gibaran Facilitator, who explained the concept of action learning, the methodology and associated formulae, including work-based learning $WBL = PK + PQ$ (**W**ork **B**ased **L**earning includes **P**rogrammed **K**nowledge and **Q**uestioning **I**nsight applied to a real work **P**roject). We agreed that the ARG members would submit their thoughts about suitable projects to me via Email, with further discussion at the next meeting.
- 24 Oct 2001** Day 1 of the Leadership Development Programme (LDP) started with an explanation of Action Learning, followed by a videotape and discussion on the importance of having a vision for the organisation. Small groups were formed to consider appropriate project topics and these ideas were presented for further discussion by the entire group. The State Delivery Manager presented his “desired outcomes” to the group. One of the Delivery Centre Managers said that it was all “mumbo jumbo” and other participants were a little uncertain about some of the “project” issues. These concerns were addressed with further clarification of the action learning processes to be used in the projects.
- 1 Nov 2001** Day 2 of LDP started with reflections of Day 1 and led to discussion about leadership styles. The ARAL model was presented (Figure 6) to show how action learning teams and the ARG would operate. I spoke about the process of problem solving and implementing change programmes using action learning groups, with Managers facilitating projects. We broke into groups to confirm potential projects and consider the development of project plans. All agreed that projects must relate to the key issues of improving customer service, productivity, the training and development of Team Leaders, or a combination of these. Explanation was provided for participants on how they

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could use their LDP projects to help obtain a Graduate Certificate in Management qualification.

- 7 Nov 2001** The ARG met to review days one and two of the program, and discuss day three content. The training needs for Team Leaders was discussed and it was agreed that the Training Co-ordinator would develop a training matrix for identification of required training modules. It was emphasised that all managers needed to provide on the job training as soon as possible, and not wait for the internal programme to do it for them. One of the DCMs thought that he had “lost the plot” after having reading the action learning articles but the facilitator explained that this was not an unusual reaction in the early stages. Participants now had a better understanding of the ARG member’s role, with sharing tasks and information gathering.
- 22 Nov 2001** In Day 3 of the LDP each manager gave an update on their activities, including how they approached set members and how they decided on their project topic. Shortly after one of the managers had finished telling us that his project was progressing well, a call was received call from the State Secretary of the Communication, Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU) indicating that this project had not involved consultation with the Union. The group used this development to discuss the issue of working with the union to keep them informed of developments so that they could better understand and support the programme. Several Managers still seemed unsure about the concept of action learning and how it linked to their project.
- 29 Nov 2001** The ARG reviewed programme activities and agreed to invite the Union Secretary to join one of the sessions. ARG member observations and reflection indicated that the Managers programme was moving along well, with less anxiety and greater participant understanding of how working on a project was part of action learning.
- 10 Dec 2001** The CEPU Secretary and the Industrial Officer were invited to provide input into development of a Team Leader training program. The Union Secretary accepted the invitation to attend one of the workshops to show his support and to talk about effective consultation between Delivery Managers and the Union.
- 10 Jan 2002** The ARG meeting included two DCMs who had been working with trialling the new organisational structure in their facilities. The State Training Co-ordinator also attended to develop a training programme for Team Leaders that would help them fulfil their new role in a revised Delivery Centre structure. Issues from the trials included re-organising rounds, delegating tasks and building the confidence of Team Leaders. The ARG reflected on identified needs and developed an outline of internal and external training. Internal training was to focus on (a) technical knowledge; (b) people leadership; (c) quality customer service; (d) injury prevention; (e) injury management; (f) basic financial analysis and (g) key performance indicators. External training was to focus on personal development in national frontline management competencies covered within the Certificate IV Frontline Management qualification.
- 25 Jan 2002** The ARG Meeting agreed to assist in the development of six internal training modules, and this training would run concurrently with the Certificate IV in

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frontline management programme at the Gibaran Management Institute The design would engage DCMs and their team leaders in action learning projects.

- 31 Jan 2002** Day 4 of the LDP day reviewed what participants had learned from the Action Learning literature they had been provided at the previous workshop. Some had read the articles, and with varying degrees of understanding. All of the managers were provided with a copy of Weinstein's (1995) book on action learning.

When reporting the progress on project activities most said that they were progressing well, but there were some exceptions. One manager was having difficulty getting a team together and another was extremely frustrated and unsure of how he was going. These concerns were discussed and considered as a group. The willingness of the participants to share their problems enabled different levels of learning with and from each other. The frustrated DCM proved to be a good barometer on the progress of the program because he was always frank and open with his thoughts. He was open to receiving advice from others and those who knew his style of working recognised that his approach was one of doing, rather than delegating responsibility and authority.

- 27 Feb 2002** The ARG reviewed developments with design of the Team Leaders internal training programme and were allocated tasks to assist in completing the detailed content for each session.

- 28 Feb 2002** Day 5 of the LDP revealed a number of issues with the progress of projects and the associated learning. Finding time for the projects was considered a problem for one manager. Another worked in a different structure with a cross functional team that did not report to him directly, and this required the use of a different set of management skills. The action learning method was considered too slow by one of the managers, whereas another had completely misunderstood the difference between facilitating his project and past projects. His reflection, after reading the Weinstein text on Action Learning, was to expand the scope of the project to achieve better work and learning outcomes.

The CEPU Secretary joined this session and shared his knowledge about consultation, communication and developing trust in the workplace. This was followed with a discussion about the development of Team Leaders and CEPU support in their new role.

- 18 Mar 2002** ARG meetings now included more questions about the programmes, learning and how to improve in the future. One of the Area Managers noted that the current approach to learning was quite the reverse of Australia Post's traditional approach to achieving change and direction.

- 26 Mar 2002** The State Delivery Manager welcomed the group to Day 1 of the Team Leaders Certificate IV Programme. He was one of the facilitators for the session and each day there would be at least one DCM present as a facilitator. The team leaders were given an outline of the programme and how it linked with the Delivery Managers programme. They learnt about the action learning projects to be undertaken in their Delivery Centres and spent some time discussing potential project topics and the issues Team Leaders confronted in the workplace.

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- 27 Mar 2002** During Day 6 of the LDP, the SDM shared his desired outcomes from the programme and answered questions about the project presentations that were to be delivered to the General Manager. It was decided that a PowerPoint template would be provided for participants to use in delivering their reports. Managers would also be given the opportunity to make one or two practice presentations before the final presentation to Australia Post's senior management team.
- 12 Apr 2002** The ARG reported feedback obtained from Team Leaders about their introduction day. Various degrees of confidence and fear were noted, along with concerns about using a computer to write assignments. The SDM explained how Mission Australia had a communication training package that could provide basic computer skills training for the Team Leaders to help them with the Certificate IV programme. The ARG decided that members would each attend one day of that programme and provide a report back at ARG meetings.
- 2 May 2002** Presentation skills were covered in Day 7 of the LDP. While a few of the Managers had produced draft PowerPoint presentations, in this session all of the managers delivered a report using notes and the white board. They each received feedback and tips on how to improve their presentations and it was agreed that another session would be arranged for managers to deliver their PowerPoint presentation as a final practice before presenting to the Australia Post General Manager and State Mails Manager. One of the outstanding reports was from the manager who initially described the action learning process as "mumbo jumbo". The presentation highlighted his early frustrations and how much he had learned from his participation in the programme.
- 5-7 Jul 2002** Over a three day period, due to the numbers involved, the Delivery Managers presentations their PowerPoint reports to the General Manager and State Mails Manager for Australia Post.

The General Manager was most impressed with learning and outcomes of the projects, and the structure and process that had been introduced to the Delivery Business Unit. He said that Delivery were well placed to lead change and manage issues confronting the business, and most likely better prepared than other States. The SDM expressed his thanks and congratulated them on their achievements. They were reminded that this was not the end of the learning journey but that action learning would continue to be an integral part of their working life.

Action Research Characteristics observed in the Project

Abraham (1996) lists twelve characteristics as a benchmark for understanding action research. An analysis of these shows that a majority of the elements that define an action research project were evident in the Delivery Managers Leadership Development programme.

1. Problem Focus Characteristic

The action research method is problem focused in the context of real life situations and the solving of such problems in a research sense would contribute to the practice and the development of social science knowledge.

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A real training problem existed for the Delivery Business Unit whereby a change to the structure of the organisation required rapid development of Team Leaders to equip them for their new responsibilities. First however, there was a need to develop Delivery Managers' leadership skills.

2. Action Orientation Characteristic

The diagnosis of a problem and the development of a plan can only be considered to be action oriented if it becomes part of a process to implement the plan. This brings an action element to the solving of an immediate problem of the organisation which has strategic change implications for the organisation.

An Action Research Group was formed to solve the problem that required significant change in the way learning and development occurred for the Australia Post Delivery Business Unit in South Australia.

3. Cyclical Process: Spiral of Steps

The action research method involves cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection (evaluation). Also the cycles of the action research method allow the group members to develop a plan, to act, to observe and to reflect on this plan and to modify this plan based on the needs of the group members and the requirements of the organisation and situation. A record of the processes of each cycle enables its strengths and weaknesses to be reviewed so that modifications and strategies can be developed for future cycles.

The cycle of steps as described by Abraham (1997), are evident in the Delivery Business Unit Leadership Development programme, as action learning programmes were designed, monitored and adjusted as a result of observation and reflection by the Action Research Group.

4. Collaborative Characteristic

Collaboration is a fundamental ingredient of the action research method, because without this team effort to solve problems in an environment of participation, action research cannot exist. Collaboration on group problems using the action research method can be viewed as a continuum from total dependence on the facilitator, who acts as a leader directing the group problem solving process, through to the total management of the problem by the group members, with the facilitator acting as a resource person. The position of the facilitator and the group on this continuum depends on the situation and the needs of the group.

Collaboration occurred between members of the Action Research Group, that included co-facilitators – one external to the company and the other being the researcher. There was an element of self-managing as the group held two meetings in the absence of both co-facilitators during the project.

5. Ethical Basis Characteristic

Community interests, improvements in the lives of the group members, justice, rationality, democracy and equality are some of the themes of 'ethical' behaviour. The ethical basis of action research is an important characteristic to consider, because the action research method involves to a large extent, groups of people with limited power who are open to exploitation. It behooves the researcher to compromise his or her personal needs so that the needs of the group are given the highest priority.

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Certainly a degree of democracy and equality was evident during the Delivery Business Unit Leadership Development programme. All members of the Action Research Group had input and all decisions were put to the group for consensus or at least majority agreement. Outcomes of the ARAL project have provided benefits to group members' working lives.

6. Experimental Characteristic

Experimental action research involves the rigorous testing of hypotheses and can thus contribute to knowledge in social science. Nevertheless, the quality of the action research may be affected by the control group which can lead to other problems and complications.

This characteristic did not emerge during the programme, although a number of questions were posed in the early stages.

7. Scientific Characteristic

Since the action research method does not have a scientific basis and can provide an alternative to the positivistic view of science, it is essential that the research be conducted in such a way as to defend itself against criticisms of lack of scientific rigour.

Members of the Action Research Group kept diary notes. Discussions were held with participants during the programme. Audit on the effectiveness of participants on the job before commencement and during the programme occurred. Discussions with selected senior management and union leaders occurred, with feedback, and in the case of the Union they provided some input to the programme. Use of this triangulation technique gives more credibility to the programme as data from various sources on the same subject can be compared. Documents relating to the programme were kept in both hard copy and electronic form.

8. Re-educative Characteristic

Action research can be viewed as re-educative, since it contributes to a change in the knowledge base of the client organisation, a change in the skills, attitudes and knowledge of the individual group members and a change in the skills and knowledge of the researcher. It also makes a contribution to several of the social sciences.

All participants developed their facilitation skills and become more effective in developing their subordinate staff. A new structure and process for problem solving and implementing change has been introduced to Australia Post's delivery facilities in the metropolitan area of Adelaide.

9. Emancipatory Characteristic

The action research method includes an emancipatory characteristic which will result in some improvements in the lives of the people involved in the action research project, and may also lead to wider social action and reform.

Approximately half of the participants in the programme elected to work towards gaining a Graduate Certificate in Management, and a few of these have continued their formal learning towards an MBA qualification. Evidence demonstrated that learning during the programme had a positive affect on the working lives of Delivery Managers. The process required use of their facilitation, coaching and delegation skills, and this resulted in faster learning by Team Leaders. One Manager commented that his Team Leaders were 50% more effective than he thought they were going to be at that stage of the programme.

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10. Naturalistic Characteristic

If one accepts that action research should be scientific but that there are problems in adopting a positivistic model of science and applying it to social science settings, then it follows that a naturalistic approach is appropriate for the action research method. The approach involves qualitative descriptions recorded as case studies rather than laws of cause and affect tested experimentally with statistical analysis of data.

The whole process was quite natural, in that participants continued work at their normal times and worked on projects that were required as part of their leadership role and responsibilities.

11. Normative Characteristic

The normative characteristic of action research implies that the social 'norms' of the group are not only considered during the research, but, in order to bring about change in the group, they are modified during the action research process.

All participants learned the skill of reflection and in the early stages of the programme commented that this was one area previously given less time than desired. In the latter stages, it was evident that reflection had become a normal part of the process, as did observation during plan implementation.

12. Group Dynamics Characteristic

The success of the action research method will depend on how well the group can operate as an effective team. An understanding of group dynamics therefore seems essential in facilitating this process and dealing with problems that arise during the action research cycles.

Good teamwork existed during the programme. All problems encountered were discussed and participants replanned and took action to overcome such problems. Participation in the action research group, the action learning projects and the workshop sessions at Gibran provided many opportunities for observing, reflecting upon and learning about team dynamics.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of the study was to investigate the implementation of a leadership development programme using the Action Research and Action Learning method for Australia Post's Delivery Business Unit of SA.

It is important to recognise that this learning, development and change program is ongoing. Research findings were current at the time of writing, however the nature of research is the continual posing of questions, combined with planning, action, observation, reflection and recording findings for public reference. Action research is all about people explaining to themselves why they behave as they do, and enabling them to share this knowledge with others (McNiff 1992). The purpose of this study was to test the action research method by using it on a real workplace issue to evaluate the worth of the method in collaboration with validating colleagues, who were in a position to judge whether or not the researcher and the action research group had made a contribution in enhancing the quality of learning and managing change in Australia Post's South Australian Delivery Centres. The satisfaction of these objectives confirms action research as "research by particular people on their own work, to help them improve what they do, including how they work with and for others" (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988).

Management development programmes have traditionally been designed by Human Resource Managers, with little input from participants, and limited involvement by operational

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managers. In addition, training and development programmes have traditionally been aimed at individual learning, rather than group learning, and they have seldom been linked directly to Company goals and objectives.

At the outset of this study, the researcher developed measurable outcomes that were referred to as his "desirable outcomes". At the time of writing the summary report, some progress had been made towards achieving the outcomes and these are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Delivery Managers Project Outcomes

	Researchers Desired Outcomes	Comments / Results at time of writing
1.	To have a skilled Delivery leadership team within 12-18 months	Managers and Team Leaders have improved their leadership skills during the programme, and results have been most encouraging. Research has shown that leadership development is a slow process and more time may be required to reach desired levels of competency.
2.	Involve all Managers in the learning process, and have this become a normal way of operating in the Delivery Business Unit in SA/NT.	The Action Research Group continues to meet on a regular basis to discuss all matters pertaining to learning and leadership.
3.	Delivery Centre Managers to have enhanced Facilitation and Coaching skills.	Outcomes from phase one of the programme were very good and evidence that facilitation and coaching skills were enhanced.
4.	Team Leaders to have a clear understanding of their new role and responsibilities.	An audit has revealed that a majority of Team Leaders have a sound understanding of their role and responsibilities.
5.	Team Leaders to have a clear understanding of how their role and responsibilities link to national, state and business unit goals and objectives.	Special presentations occur each year as the national and state plans are communicated to all staff and implemented. Team Leaders understand this and their role and responsibilities.
6.	Team Leaders adopt action learning as a way of solving problems and making improvements within work teams in Delivery.	The special audit has shown that only a small number of team leaders have adopted an action learning model, facilitating projects (i.e. problems and change) within their team. Further development is required.
7.	Improved Customer Service Quality and Productivity associated with letter deliveries in metropolitan Delivery Centres.	Customer service performance nationally has improved to the highest level during the December'02 quarter. South Australia has the best service standards of all mainland states. Customer complaints have declined 20-30% during the programme. Not all success can be attributed to the leadership development programme;

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8.	An increased understanding of organisational learning and the benefits of developing a learning organisation culture in Australia Post.	Several participants have expressed a desire to continue with their learning. Change that has occurred to date is certainly a step in the right direction.
9.	Implementation of a continuous learning culture throughout all business units in South Australia and the Northern Territory.	The Adelaide Mail Centre leadership team has undertaken a programme similar to that of the Delivery Business Unit. The Northern Territory has also embraced the concept of action learning, along with similar structure and process operating in their Delivery Centres.

While it is recognised that the ARAL methodology is not the only way of developing and implementing a learning programme, the researcher has experienced encouraging outcomes from the project implemented at his workplace. This case study documents the results that can be achieved through applying the ARAL methodology and this approach is recommended for implementing major change and learning development programmes in organisations with similar human resource and industry structure.

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Appendix 1

Delivery Managers Graduate Certificate Programme

Projects and Outcomes

Participant	Project Description	Outcomes
Manager Lonsdale DC	Aligning labour to work offering for street mail delivery function.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved productivity (not specified) and customer service Balanced workloads – improved morale Structure and process for learning and change implemented Team Leaders learning
Manager O'Halloran Hill DC	Understanding cost drivers at O'Halloran Hill and reducing operating costs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear understanding of costs – team learning Operational savings realised
Manager Somerton Park DC	Improving customer service in the Somerton Park delivery area and improving internal cross functional relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Redirection complaints reduced by 21% Incorrect Delivery complaints reduced by 33%. Retail / Licensee / Delivery & Transport relationships improved Operational savings realised
Manager Marleston DC	Improving on time service for business customers in the Marleston area, and enhancing flexibility of resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Service standards improved from 85% to 98% Operational savings realised. Team learning Structure & process to resolve issues & implement change
Manager Regency Park DC	Improving the workplace environment and mail processing activities at Regency Park Delivery Centre.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Level of missorted mail reduced from 50kg to 5kg per day. Changed housekeeping culture to maintain tidy work areas Reduced costs (unspecified) to service Retail Shops in area
Manager Port Adelaide DC	Better management of staff on restricted duties due to injury or illness at Port Adelaide.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limitations of all affected staff reviewed Specific duty statements and job descriptions issued Improved productivity (not specified) and morale
Manager Salisbury South DC	Reducing the amount of rework at Salisbury South associated with receipt of missorted mail.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced level of missorted mail by 75% Operational savings realised Enhanced continuous improvement culture

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Manager Elizabeth West DC	Improving quality customer service at Elizabeth by reducing mail redirection errors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redirection failures reduced by 49% • Cost reduction (not specified) • Improved customer satisfaction
Manager Modbury North DC	Effective utilisation of staff that are ill or injured in the workplace.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance improved • Productivity improved • Operational savings realised • Morale improved
Manager Melrose Park DC	Review of labour utilised to meet work offering.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff workloads balanced • Operational savings realised • Improved service to business customers • Team learning
Manager Glynde DC	Alignment of labour to workloads and improvement of customer service.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operational savings realised • Attendance improved by 2.7% • Service to business community improved from 97.3% to 99.6% delivery on time. • Redirection failures and incorrect deliveries reduced by 50%
Manager Unley DC	Improving productivity and service to business customers in the Unley Delivery area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service to private boxes improved from 85% to 98% • Customer complaints reduced by 30% • No increase in labour utilisation • Manager and Team Leaders learning • Improved morale
Manager AddressPOST Unit	Review of Australia Post's Mail Redirection System with recommendations that will reduce customer failures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data gathered and analysed • Root causes identified (4 key areas) • Recommendations made (State & HQ)
Area Mgr Southern	Improving leadership in Delivery Centres by assessing needs for Team Leaders, developing and implementing internal & external training programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit undertaken to assess Team Leaders training needs • 3 internal training modules developed and conducted • External program arranged to improve communication skills of all Team Leaders • Structure and process for Managers to deal with problems and change • Team Leaders learning
Area Mgr Northern	Reduce the number of lost time injuries and more effectively rehabilitate injured employees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compensation claims reduced by 40% • Compensation costs reduced • Managers more knowledgeable with Compensation and Rehabilitation Act

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Appendix 2
Team Leader Certificate IV Programme

Projects & Outcomes

Participant	Project Description	Outcomes
a/g Team Leader Lonsdale DC	Improving letterbox provision and placements in area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduced safety risk • improved productivity • QCS improvement
Team Leader O'Halloran Hill DC	Improving letterbox provision and placements in team area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduced safety risk • improved productivity • QCS improvement
Team Leader Somerton Park DC	Improving team performance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improved productivity • QCS improvement
Team Leader Marleston DC	Improving letterbox provision and placements in team area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduced safety risk • improved productivity • QCS improvement
Team Leader Regency Park DC	Reducing the level of missorted mail and re-work at Regency Park Delivery Centre.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QCS improvement • Improved productivity
Team Leader Port Adelaide DC	Customer Commitments and a Review of Response Procedures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QCS improvement • Reduced re-work • Improved productivity
Team Leader Salisbury South DC	Conduct a review of delivery arrangements in the Salisbury Evens group, to include the provision of deliveries to new housing development in the area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QCS improvement • Improved productivity • Improved cost effectiveness
Team Leader Elizabeth West DC	Improved safe working practices at Elizabeth West Delivery Centre.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QCS improvement • Improved productivity • Cost reduction
Team Leader Modbury North DC	Improving letterbox provision and placements in area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced safety risk • Improved productivity • QCS improvement
Team Leader Kent Town DC	Improve utilisation of staffing arrangements including relief arrangement and splits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced HR usage • \$dollar savings • Improved customer service • Improved productivity
Team Leader Glynde DC	Improve utilisation of staffing arrangements including relief arrangement and splits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced HR usage • \$dollar savings • QCS improvement • Productivity improvement
Team Leader Unley DC	Develop Quality Action System for Relief staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved customer service, internal & external • Reduced rework • Quality control measures in place

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