Building Collaborative Governance in Times of Uncertainty

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Chapter 7
Listening and learning together: Using action learning for collaborative governance

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1. Introduction

Action learning is a pragmatic approach to engaging participants “in learning from their attempts to improve things” (Pedler & Brook, 2017, p. 217) and has been applied in a wide range of organisational contexts, including collaborative governance (Hale et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2020; Pedler, 2002, 2020). Associated with the pioneering work of Reg Revans (1971, 1982, 1998), the approach offers a discipline for action-orientated learning which is focused explicitly on problems “that matter to those who are charged with addressing them” (Brook, 2022, p. 7). The classical model of action learning (for example, Pedler, 2008) works with small groups, often referred to as sets, in which participants help each other to tackle their pressing organisational problems and to learn from their attempts to change things. Revans never provided a single definition of action learning. Instead he maintained that, while the idea is simple, it cannot be applied or replicated in a formulaic ‘best practice’ way, because, as he is at pains to point out, “[a]ction cannot be taken in general terms; it’s always was, is, and always will be dependent on its conditions and on those who take it” (Revans, 1971, p. 98). In practice, as Pedler (2008) reminds us, this is one of the strengths of action learning because:

Being both profound and simple it is never in danger, as mere techniques are, of being here today and gone tomorrow. We always need to re-invent our own ways of putting the basic ideas into practice. This inventing element is what maintains the life in action learning. (2008, p. 6)
In Gipuzkoa, small groups of colleagues have adapted and reinvented the simplicity of this idea and made it their own. The story begins with a small but influential pilot carried out in 2018 towards the end of the electoral cycle in which eight elected politicians (and two senior public officials) decided to try the action learning approach in order to ‘listen to society’. Led by the President of the Provincial Council (the Diputado General) and his chief of staff, this pioneer group took enthusiastically to the task of learning (and listening) by taking action, then reflecting on and sharing the results with the members of the group who supported, challenged and, above all, listened to each other. Personal challenges, always treated in confidence, resulted in steps being taken to address the gulf between what the politicians said they were doing, what they actually did and what the electorate heard and understood. The results of this learning experience have been reported elsewhere in the context of citizen engagement (Canel et al., 2022), social capital (Barandiarán et al., 2022) and leadership learning (Murphy et al., 2020). It was during this first pilot that ‘action learning’ became Ekinez Ikasi. In rejecting the verb ‘to do’ (egin) in favour of the verb meaning ‘to initiate action’ (ekin), the translation into Basque adds a sense of dynamism to the original English.

Since this first pilot edition of the programme, people from the PCG have been ‘accoucheurs’ (i.e. the person or persons who, according to Revans, create the conditions for learning to take place, and take root) to no less than 11 groups of action learners and, at the time of writing, stand ready for the next edition which will gather another six groups to the collective learning process. Before we briefly describe the different editions in the following section, it is important to reflect on possible reasons why the approach has proved so timely. We identify three key reasons. First, the approach has given some hope that the day-to-day working relationships which produce collaborative governance may be accomplished differently. Participants are, of course, aware of previous unsatisfactory attempts to ‘manage change’ and consequently treat the positive energy around the programme with respect and care, but most share a sense of excitement that this time, they can make a different sort of difference. Secondly, while action learning is premised on taking action on problems in which “I am part of the problem and the problem is part of me” (Pedler, 2008, p. 11), this is not traditional learning with a focus on individual skills and knowledge, but a shared, collective process of meaning-making which involves contexts, materialities and bodies as well as human minds and motivations (Elkjaer, 2022). Human beings are part of complex ‘situations’ (Dewey, 1939 [1988]), so other factors, including power, emotion, other voices, history and economic matters, are equally important for learning (Carroll & Smolović Jones, 2018; Easterby-Smith et al. 1999;
Vince, 2019; Pedler, 2020). Realised through learning encounters across and between groups, this collective aspect of action learning meant that shared analyses sharpened participants’ understanding of institution-wide problems. Finally, Ekinez Ikasi is inspired by a version of action learning which eschews reliance on external experts in favour of insights born of a shared commitment to action and learning between equals or ‘comrades in adversity’ as Revans called them (Revans, 1998). Participants know that however they choose to proceed, they are making progress on important organisational problems by themselves – and their own diagnosis is much more precise than any external expert intervention might hope to be.

The chapter describes the application of action learning methodology that has been used in the Etorkizuna Eraikiz initiative with the express objective of developing the listening and learning skills and competencies needed for collaborative governance. The chapter begins with a description of the four completed editions of the programme before going on to outline the role played by the bidelagunak, or ‘travelling companions’ who took on the task of advising and supporting their own Ekinez Ikasi groups. Next, we address the future by looking at how the initiative might develop in continued support of Etorkizuna Eraikiz, including the fifth edition of the programme, which is in progress at the time of writing. We conclude with reflections about our collective learning and lessons for practitioners.

2. **Ekinez Ikasi: the story so far**

This section briefly summarises the way the programme has been developed by its participants, including the institutional steps taken to evaluate and learn from the experience as it evolved.

2.1. **First edition: the políticos (elected politicians), 2018**

The ten-strong políticos group of action learners met off-site five times over a six-month period, each time for an uninterrupted five-hour session. Problems brought to the group included how to: reach out better to citizens; involve civil servants more; align different departments with the goals of Etorkizuna Eraikiz; show the authenticity of one’s willingness to count on stakeholders; increase the transformational capacity of one’s departmental policies; and allocate functions and tasks to make departments ready for change. The process of support and challenge required by action learning helped members of the group to develop important questions focused on learning and action.
These included: What do citizens think about this project and how do you know? What do you think matters for citizens? Do you think the PCG is not attracting good talent, and if so why? Is your willingness to involve civil servants sincere? What do you mean exactly by ‘listening to society’? Are you ready to hear criticism from citizens? Do you believe we really want to share power with citizens? Actions agreed included to: involve the top leader (Diputado General) in cross-departmental meetings; make changes to the format of public encounters with citizens; invite new and different people to public encounters; collect data about petitions people are making through participatory budgeting and reflect on readiness to adequately respond; arrange a meeting with a hospital and use good practices of listening and then reflect on how to extend them to other departments; and explore the list of voluntary organisations to analyse better how society is evolving in their engagement with volunteer work (see Murphy et al., 2020, p. 6 for further details). At the end of every session the group reflected on the usual questions in action learning (see Pedler & Abbott, 2013), their learning about themselves, their group, the Diputación and Etorkizuna Eraikiz; questions about their learning about listening and about society were also added.

The (written) reflections were analysed, synthesised and presented back to the group who then identified important gaps and challenges for the future. Decisions were taken to continue to develop and adapt Ekinez Ikasi to requirements of the institution by extending the experience to council employees and by setting up of an oversight group with a remit for making sure actions decided upon in the groups received full support from the top. An important consequence of this first edition was that the participants so appreciated the renewed cohesion that the action learning programme gave them, they decided to invite employees (technicians and civil servants) to join action learning sets as they took steps to improve the way they worked.

2.2. Second edition: the funcionarios (career civil servants), 2019

Two groups of eight senior civil servants were formed by approaching those people usually willing to commit additional time and effort to improvement activities, especially Etorkizuna Eraikiz. The groups had backing from the chief of staff, whose genuine commitment to personally see that organisational blockages were removed left participants feeling able to tackle problems with organisation-wide consequences. Like the políticos they also met five times for five hours every five or six weeks. Coordinators were appointed to liaise between participants, the steering group and the two ‘outside’ facilitators (the first and second authors). Different kinds of problems were identified,
actions undertaken, and individual and organisational outcomes achieved. At the end of the programme a joint session was arranged for participants to compare and contrast their experiences and learning. Conclusions drew attention to the difficulties of collaborating within the government and its institutions, and also to the need to open up deliberative processes in such a way that the voices of technical teams could also be heard.

Again gaps and challenges for the future (brechas) were identified. Two specific challenges stood out: first, the enormous gulf between the politicians (including political appointees in management positions) and local government officers and staff; and second, the gap in understanding and administrative coherence between directors, managers and employees of the county council and those working in other public service bodies under direct control of the council. As a result, the steering group was re-positioned as the grupo de escucha interna (vehicle for internal listening) and given a broad remit for ensuring continuity of the programme after the elections scheduled just before the end of the funcionários edition. The first important decision taken at this time by the internal listening group was to steer Ekinez Ikasi towards the organisational problem of collaboration that had been identified in the form of two specific gaps: 1) across the public sector and 2) among elected politicians and government employees. In other words, Ekinez Ikasi began to be seen as a vehicle for learning about how collaborative governance might be achieved in practice. Hence, the second influential decision taken by the internal listening group was to form two new mixed groups which focused on these organisational problems and which were made up of both political appointees and government employees. Undertaking this step was considered to be a big shift since so far it had never happened that politicians participated together with technicians in a learning experience that put all sides on a level. At this point, the programme broke for what the steering group thought was for the summer (2019), to be resumed once the new government was in place.

2.3. Third edition: the grupos mixtos (political and administrative roles), 2020–2021

The newly elected government needed to negotiate and agree the details of its coalition. Until decisions had been taken about which party would lead which department, and which departmental directors were therefore to be appointed, Ekinez Ikasi was held in waiting. It is important to understand that political appointees hold the influential roles in the organisational hierarchy, and without them, little of consequence can be undertaken. The autumn progressed and the decision was taken that it was in everyone’s interests
to launch the third edition in January 2020. Bringing together political appointees and civil servants was seen as nigh impossible and, given the high profile of the two focal issues, no one wanted to take any unnecessary risks. Then the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic further complicated everyone’s workload and availability. Furthermore, *Ekinez Ikasi* had so far been a face-to-face experience and no one was really sure if this still delicate seedling would survive the online environment. Several months passed before the steering group took the bold step of setting dates for the third edition face-to-face, hybrid or online depending on the public health regulations. As soon as circumstances allowed, the second author was given special permission to travel and the groups met face-to-face. The first author attended online throughout.

Bringing the mixed groups together to work on problems of shared concern lent new energy and drive to the process, exceeding expectations of how people across party and professional divides would be willing and able to work together. Actions, which were taken individually and in collaboration, made breakthrough progress against stubborn organisational blockages – particularly in the work regarding the relationship between the government and the wider public sector, as well as building trust between the directors (i.e. political appointees of differing colours) and the employees (career civil servants). At the end of the cycle, the groups were again invited to come together to reflect on their achievements and learning, and to identify any further gaps or challenges that they considered *Ekinez Ikasi* to be a suitable vehicle for action and learning. As well as concrete outcomes from the actions undertaken, there was widespread agreement that the slow and incremental process of seeing one’s colleagues in a new and generally more favourable light, developing trust and even friendships, and seeing the traces of positivity in places that had previously seen only tension were slowly opening up possibilities for thinking and behaving in new ways. At the final meeting of the internal listening group, members harnessed this cautious optimism and decided to make a step-change in the way the programme was to run. No longer seen as a pilot, and also having the full backing of the authorities responsible for the management of the staff (the county councillor for governance), the decision was taken to train up internal people, both political appointees and local government officers, to support this approach to learning, including setting up and facilitating their own action learning sets. These sets advisors were to form a new kind of group established in order to learn how to support their own *Ekinez Ikasi* groups. Two further mixed groups were also agreed, which, in order to distinguish them from the facilitator training, became known as the ‘ordinary’ groups.

The development of the fourth edition took a number of twists and turns. Some key action leaners from previous editions left the groups to become facilitators. And while there had always been a careful balance between new members and ‘old hands’, there had been enough continuity of membership to build up a level of group competence. Setting up the facilitator group was a hugely important step which in the end proved to be the most important decision the internal listening group had taken, but the ‘ordinary’ groups stumbled: attendance became a little more patchy, at times new members were puzzled by the unfamiliar process, and ‘old hands’ wondered if they were not just going round in circles. This was a critical moment for the programme and one only the action learners themselves were in a position to make sense of and address. It was at the mid-point – session three of five – that the groups took charge by naming the issues that were hampering their progress and ‘grasping the nettle’ of what their groups were actually for and what they wanted to do in them. The group of facilitators on the other hand, although at first unsteady on their feet as action learning facilitators, were united by a strong sense of shared purpose. Their *Ekinez Ikasi* meetings were designed as a forum where issues related to establishing, supporting and best serving their own *Ekinez Ikasi* groups could be shared. We worked on the principle that while *teaching* the skills of running an action learning set would be inconsistent with the values and practice of action learning, these skills could nonetheless be *learnt*. Furthermore, given that the group of facilitators also led four other new groups, a total of 41 participants, the end-of-cycle learning exchange became an important forum for collective learning. Before going on to address facilitator training and learning exchange in more detail in the next section, we close this section by drawing attention to the organic development of the initiative. In four editions, the emphasis has moved from the political elites to diverse groups of learners, from individual ‘problems’ to high-stakes organisational issues, and from looking to external facilitators to trusting the power of their own expertise. We believe that the critical success factor has been the enormously strong commitment of the people to living, breathing and owning their own *Ekinez Ikasi*. 
3. The *bidelagunak* travelling companions

Revans (1998) understood the critical, and oft under-appreciated, task of enabling action learning to be the most difficult challenge of all. The facilitators’ learning journey began in exactly this spot. The eight-strong group – still a mix of directors (political appointees) and government officers – chose to work in pairs, starting with the task of gathering a group together for them to work with so that they were able to learn first-hand about facilitating *Ekinez Ikasi*. We struggled to find a word in either or Basque or Spanish which captured the essence of this task and the particular way the members of the group wanted to engage with it. ‘Training’ was too formal and deficit orientated, ‘animator’ suggested ‘entertraining’ and ‘facilitator’ evoked the consultant-led change programmes the group so wished to avoid. Finally, in an echo of the naming of *Ekinez Ikasi* itself, a member of the group suggested *bidelagun* (plural *bidelagunak*), which translates as ‘travelling companion’. This captured the egalitarian spirit of a jointly undertaken endeavour that the group so wished to preserve. Each pair engaged with possible participants, discussed the scope and values of *Ekinez Ikasi*, recruited new action learners, set the timetable of meetings and launched themselves into the unknown. Guided by the first author, the *bidelagunak* met seven times in total, first to prepare themselves for the first meetings, and later to prepare and share materials, to share successes and challenges of guiding their own groups and to learn how best to develop the programme overall.

The early action learning meetings of the *bidelagunak* concentrated on getting their groups established and engaged in both action and learning. This was by no means an easy task. *Ekinez Ikasi* had previously been experienced positively but the number of participants was modest and, to an extent, still under the radar. By engaging with a new set of participants whose roles and work challenges were highly visible, the development raised the profile and the stakes of *Ekinez Ikasi*. The professionalism and dedication of the *bidelagunak* meant that by the mid-point all their groups had gained their own sense of purpose and cohesion. At this point the issue of continuity was raised. The group wanted a resource they could use with new groups as they formed and as new *bidelagunak* stepped up to the challenge. This resource needed to be concrete so as to be a support to those taking on the role, yet flexible to adapt to evolving practice and new organisational learning from action. A design workshop was held to harvest lessons learned and these formed the basis of a draft, updatable resource which drew together local adaptations based on published materials (Chivers & Pedler, 2004; Pedler & Abbott, 2013; Pedler, 2008; Murphy & Canel, 2020; Nesta, 2022), worksheets that
had been prepared for reflection between sessions, and a synthesis of the ‘what works’ conversations held during the design workshop. This ongoing, updatable resource for the bidelagunak belongs to the group and the current plan is to update it every year.

The practice of joint reflection at the end of each group session (Pedler & Abbott, 2013, p. 80) became a habit, and the more experience they gained, the more the participants learnt to make these sessions meaningful. For this reason, the end-of-cycle ‘learning exchanges’ which brought groups together were found to be rich and stimulating, and this was particularly the case with the learning exchange at the end of the fifth edition. The two-hour session, which brought together 35 participants, was co-designed and run by the bidelagunak along ‘World Café’ lines (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). Groups worked around tables, jotting down ideas on the make-shift paper table-cloths and moving between tables from time to time. They addressed two principal questions:

1) What have we done/achieved/learned so far?
2) What do we want to do now?

The table notes, which were analysed, synthesised and transcribed by the third author, formed the basis of the end-of-cycle meeting of the internal listening group. Some of the issues highlighted in the session went beyond the individual learning generated by Ekinez Ikasi, such as: “Ekinez Ikasi has made it possible to generate spaces for dialogue; it has enabled to the participants to break out of their usual patterns and inertia; it has been possible to activate skills such as: listening, empathy, engagement” and so on. On the top of that, Ekinez Ikasi has generated important intangibles such as trust between people in the organisation, knowledge of people and realities in other services and departments, and a sense of belonging to a group and to the organisation, all of which are essential in order to work on organisational problems.

Outcomes for the meeting were synthesised into a series of learning points and distributed to everyone involved. It was clear from these results that problems being identified were no longer limited to individual or even departmental issues but could only be addressed by tackling significant institution-wide structural questions. Therefore, a subtle shift of balance took place as a result of this meeting. First, the ‘ordinary group’ were recast as ‘extraordinary groups’ in recognition of their now critical (but time limited) corporate remit of addressing the quality of leadership and decision-making across the institution. The change in name had another effect. The bidelagunak who had previously seen themselves as learners in an experiment, could now see themselves as the more permanent players. What was experimental became more ‘ordinary’ with the realisation that the ball was firmly in their court.
4. What is next?

At the time of writing, we have just launched the fifth edition. This is made up of two ‘extraordinary groups’ comprising old hands, previous bidelagunak and also a small but influential number of participants who are new to the process, and a group of bidelagunak who have welcomed new members to their number. The first, most important task is to make sure that all these groups are gathered together well, that they understand the values and purpose of Ekinez Ikasi and that they identify important problems or opportunities to work on in action. The story of Ekinez Ikasi in the PCG is one of a series of incremental changes: the positive results with the políticos group led to establishing the groups of funcionarios which in turn enabled the creation of the grupos mixtos and bidelagunak. This next phase calls for consolidation around issues of more collective and institutional significance, in other words grupos corporativos. Other issues, secondary for the time being but being put forward with increasing urgency, include making best use of the flexible learning resource and exactly what it means in strategic and operational terms for the bidelagunak to take over the running of the programme. How, for example, might a repeatable pattern be established? How is the process to be kept fresh and appealing to people inside the PCG and more widely across the territory? How can those involved make connections with others who take this approach so that they are inspired to keep learning and so that others can also learn from them? And lastly, we face the challenge of consolidating the dynamic and ensuring the continuity so the change of legislature is not a rupture. That said, the link between Etorkizuna Eraikiz and Ekinez Ikasi is increasingly direct. An important Etorkizuna Eraikiz challenge is extending the approach across the governmental institutions. Specifically, the model demands that new and wide-ranging deliberative spaces are configured. Innovative ideas about managing knowledge and collective intelligence can only work if actors external and internal to government are involved. By engaging organisational members who deal with and care about the problems in question, Ekinez Ikasi has shifted away from a reliance on external experts and, as a result, this has meant a step-change in working practices aligned to the philosophy of Etorkizuna Eraikiz. The Ekinez Ikasi and bidelagunak experiences have, above all, demonstrated the usefulness of a forum where people listen to each other, take action and learn from the results of that action individually and together – the very engine of collaborative governance.
5. Learning

In particular, we reflect on our own learning in order to consider the role action learning has played, and might play in the future, in the development and practice of collaborative governance. We draw attention to three important aspects:

1. Action learning helps to establish spaces for critical listening and learning. The existence of these spaces is fundamental in developing the collaborative skills needed to make a collaborative governance model work in practice.

2. Regarding skills, we specifically draw attention to the ability to listen with humility, to be reflexive and positively self-critical, to open up new angles on problems, and to look at individual problems in an organisational context. For collaboration to work, it is crucial to establish bridges between individual and personal development and an organisation-wide perspective on collective learning.

3. Action learning helps to locate positive energy for change among members of an organisation and/or system, channel this energy into concrete steps and actions, and connect the people who are committed to making change happen.

6. Lessons for practitioners

Finally, in our lessons for practitioners we highlight the following:

- It is important to involve the most senior political and managerial teams from the start. That they are engaged and open to learning in this way themselves is critical for success.

- Listening, learning and acting in this way has to be voluntary for it to impact change from within. The overall direction of the work may, of course, be guided ‘from the top’ to ensure alignment with the overall governance strategy, but the final responsibility and accountability for learning and success lies with each and every one of the action learners.

- Action learning takes time and effort – but in practice this is not an extra burden for already extremely busy people. This is because the approach involves the identification and subsequent resolution (in action) of real problems involving real people in real time, including finding ways to address challenges thrown up by the global pandemic.