Action Learning – The Basics

"Those best able to help in developing the self are those comrades in adversity who also struggle to understand themselves."

Reg Revans

What It Is

Action Learning was pioneered by Professor Reg Revans (1907 – 2003) in the 1940’s and has since been developed worldwide. It is based on a radical concept:

Learning (L)  Programmed Knowledge (P)  Questioning (Q)

Where Programmed Knowledge is knowledge in current use and Questioning is insight.

It uses a small group to provide challenge and support. Individuals learn with and from one another as they each tackle their own issue and implement their own solution. Action Learning involves working on real issues, focusing on learning, and implementing solutions – learning by doing. As a process it accelerates learning and enables people to handle difficult situations more effectively.

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“Action learning is a process of learning and reflection that happens with the support of a group or ‘set’ of colleagues working with real problems with the intention of getting things done.”

Ian McGill and Liz Beaty
2001

3. Action Learning involves working with real situations, focusing on learning and implementing new ways of working. It is a way of learning by doing and encourages the ability to think ‘out of the box’, expanding ideas and solutions to problems or evaluating opportunities effectively.

4. Action Learning enables sharing learning across the organisation and makes a visible contribution to group processes and projects.

5. Action Learning can provide a way of flattening hierarchies with people from different level in the organisation working together on a particular issue.

6. Action Learning is a process of inquiry, beginning with the experience of not knowing ‘what to do next’ and knowing that the answers are not available through current expertise.

7. Action Learning happens with a facilitator job it is to manage the group process and ensure good questions flow and action is agreed.

8. The Action Learning Set work together to achieve successful learning outcomes to problems, issues, ideas, innovations, projects and possibilities that cannot be resolved by the usual methods.

9. In Action Learning Set members use a questioning approach to facilitate understanding and to change old habits.

10. People who have worked with an Action Learning Set find that they have found far more than a new investigative technique; they have in fact discovered a way of life where taking responsibility for one’s learning is the key to personal and organisational development.
Action Learning – The Basics

“There is no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning.”

Reg Revans

How it works

The process brings together:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<td>(into what is obscure)</td>
<td>(about what is unknown)</td>
<td>(to resolve a problem)</td>
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This is a development process. Over time set members work together in a small group to tackle important personal and/or organisational issues or problems and learn from their attempts to change things. Action learning is not management or skills training or an education based programme; it is a learning process deeply grounded in the belief that we learn best by reflecting on our experience and experimenting with doing things differently.

Each person in the group is supported, challenged and encouraged to take action on their issues or problems and learn from this. The reflection and review within the group enables learning to happen and effective action to be taken.

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Where it came from

Reg Revans drew on his experiences of working in a scientific research laboratory where he found that colleagues shared and compared problems, ideas and solutions. He incorporated these behaviours into management development programmes for the National Coal Board. He put managers into groups to enable managers to learn from each other, and called these action learning sets. Managers gained support and confidence from learning from and with their peers and found that they were able to introduce new ways of working as a result. Revans demonstrated that action learning was successful by measuring productivity in their workplace (the coal pit).

Revans was convinced that the rate of learning in an organisation must be at least equal to the rate of change in its external environment if it was to survive. This became known as Revans' Law, and remains highly relevant today.

Over the past sixty years action learning has developed as a method for the development of both individuals and organisations. You will find it being delivered in many different contexts and ways, some of which pay closer attention than others to Reg’s original intention, to always be challenging and informative.

The potential of action learning within organisations is for individuals to engage in learning and identify action which could make a positive difference to the effectiveness of the organisation. Reg was one of the first people to introduce the idea that nurses, doctors and administrators in the NHS need to listen to and understand each other, with action learning sets the vehicle for doing so.
Where it is used

In the UK many small businesses and large organisations have become involved. Among them are GEC, ICI, Motorola, Texaco, Prudential, Zeneca, Thorn EMI, Lloyds TSB, Littlewoods, Financial Services Authority, NHS, water companies, local authorities and government departments. Many business schools and colleges such as Henley and International Management Centres, and professional institutes and universities such as Lancaster and Manchester are also increasingly incorporating action learning into their activities.

Source: International Foundation for Action Learning
http://www.ifal.org.uk/

Benefits

Individuals benefit from:

- Reflecting based on practical situations
- Practising ‘slow thinking’ and the postponement of judgement, providing an opportunity for new connections and answers to arise
- Giving and receiving personal feedback
- Learning from the parallel patterns between behaviour within and the action learning sessions
- Safety and mutual support, which enables more comprehensive knowledge to be created


Based on our experience we would add:

- Receiving support and challenge in relation to specific issues
- Being held accountable for their action and its impact
- Setting goals, developing options and taking action that would not have been possible working on their own
- Learning to listen carefully, ask powerful questions, offer ideas without telling others what to do
- Learning about group dynamics and how to contribute effectively within a group
Organisations benefit from:

- Staff who can listen to and work with others to help them take responsibility for their action and its impact (holding them accountable)
- New perspectives on real issues—often leading to breakthroughs on issues that have been around for a long time
- Enhanced confidence to bring about change
- Greater self-awareness
- A clearer understanding of how learning occurs
- Reduced stress

**Action Learning and Coaching**

Action Learning and coaching are both concerned with change in whatever context the presenting issue or problem is grounded.

Action Learning originated in a project-based context, where set members aimed to make practical progress on a common, complex and important issue or problem. The approach has since been developed to encompass other contexts, and may support individuals from different organisations who choose to work together to support and challenge each other.

Coaching focuses on the person being coached exploring options for change and taking practical action to progress specific issues.

In coaching the coach works on to one with an individual. In action learning the set members work together with an individual, with set members acting as coaches for each other. We believe that coaching skills and behaviours are relevant in action learning sets, and base our practice as Action Learning set facilitators on the core competencies of the International Coach Federation.
More about Reg Revans

Reg’s achievements include competing in the Olympics, working as an astrophysicist, educational administrator and university professor, to a career as an international management consultant.

Professor Reg Revans pioneered action learning considered by some to be one of the most important ideas in the field of organisational development. Reg, a man of action himself, started his career as a physicist and an athlete.

The origins of Action Learning is Reg Revans, and his inspiration came from the plight of the Titanic, Revans puzzled why the great liner sank. His thoughts passed on to questions like, "what is the difference between cleverness and wisdom".

His training as a scientist provided him with the insight to "ask silly questions" when he lost his way in the pursuit of answers to his questions. In fact action learning has become more concerned with questioning that answering.

Revans was in good company in his work in science, he worked at the Cavendish Laboratories at Cambridge University and rubbed shoulders with JJ Thomson and Ernest Rutherford.

His first real work in action learning was for the National Coal Board, then the world’s largest employer; he was asked to write an educational plan for its workers, from this in 1945, action learning the theory was born.

Revans went on to develop action learning in projects for the Nation Health Authority, the core expression L = P + Q was born. Action learning has gone on and on still being developed to this day despite Revans’ death in January 2003.

http://www.ifal.org.uk/origins.html
Further Reading

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development Factsheet http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/factsheets/action-learning.asp


International Coach Federation http://www.coachfederation.org/

International Foundation for Action Learning http://www.ifal.org.uk/


Pedler, M (1991), Action Learning in Practice, Gower


www.actionlearningsets.com