

A profile of Reg Revans

‘Learning must be equal to or greater than the rate of change’ Reg Revans

What is action learning and who invented it? It is hard to be sure where and when it was first used, but Reg Revans is widely credited as the man who used and developed action learning in Europe and he is profiled here. His vision was of practical people learning from each other, creating their own resources, identifying their own problems and forming their own solutions.

His scientific career

Reginald William Revans was born on 14 May 1907. One of his earliest recollections was of the memorial service for Florence Nightingale in 1910. His mother's interest in Nightingale arose from her voluntary work at the family's local hospital in Portsmouth. His father worked as His Majesty's principal surveyor of mercantile shipping and was heavily involved in the inquiry into the sinking of Titanic. The family lived by the docks, and Revans recalled a steady stream of sailors coming to his home to report on their experiences aboard the ill-fated liner. Revans recalls asking his father which lesson was the most important to be learnt from the tragedy. His father eventually said that we must learn to distinguish between ‘cleverness’ and ‘wisdom’. Perhaps this reply prompted the young Revans to discern the importance of asking ‘why’ questions that seek understanding, rather than ‘what’ questions that yield mere information.

After attending Battersea Grammar School, Revans studied physics at University College, London, where he took his finals after just two years and won the prize for best student. In 1929 he was awarded a research fellowship at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where he earned his doctorate. He won a double-blue in athletics - his Cambridge long-jump record stood for 30 years - and he went on to represent his country at the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam. After a spell studying in the US, he returned to Cambridge (1932-35) to work on his own research at the Cavendish Laboratories in a team led by the nuclear physicist Ernest Rutherford. This gave Revans the insight to develop his ideas on action learning. Every week Rutherford would gather together his research team of more than a dozen future Nobel Laureates - and encourage them to question their own knowledge and to collaborate on developing fresh ideas.

His industrial career

Revans left the scientific world in 1935 to become director of education at Essex County Council. While there, a colleague asked him to look at the high level of staff turnover among nurses in hospitals. Why did so many leave after training? His investigations revealed dissatisfaction among newly qualified nurses - the culture in which they worked did nothing to encourage them. The outcome of his research was a paper written in 1938 that contained his formative thoughts on action learning. He predicted continuing unrest until senior managers ‘...understand that they will only know their (the nurses) problems if they understand what they are thinking’. During the second world war, Revans became head of emergency services for the East End of London. The Blitz of 1940 was perhaps the ultimate lesson in crisis management. As the incendiary bombs dropped all around, there was no time for considered planning. Revans remembered some Aristotle that he had been taught at school: ‘That which we must learn to do, we learn by doing’ (Revans also cited the Bible as an invaluable text on action learning).

After the war, he was invited to work on the restructuring of the coal industry, which went into public ownership in 1946. He was responsible for planning recruitment, education and training, but began his task in typical style by working for several weeks at the coalface in Durham. He championed a staff training college to be run by the colliery managers. Outside ‘experts’ were not invited because Revans saw no need to ‘...sit at the feet of gurus’. The pits that tried out his methods reported a 30 per cent increase in productivity.

Revans became the first professor of industrial management at the University of Manchester in 1955, a post he held until 1965. Revans anticipated that his methods would be adopted by the new business school. But as UK management education sought academic recognition, the practical action learning approach - which is not reliant on expert knowledge - did not fit the emerging paradigm. It seems likely that this experience shaped Revans’ low opinion of the emerging business school model - ‘Moral Bankruptcy Assured’ was the alternative phrase he coined to interpret the academic MBA concept. Nor was he much kinder to consultants and management trainers, who he felt tended to skim the surface rather than encouraging managers to solve their own challenges.

Writing in *the Guardian* newspaper (8 March 2003), Simon Caulkin comments: 'Ironically...the conventional business education he so excoriated, and indeed UK management as a whole, is coming under increasingly sceptical scrutiny; his grounded idea of management as something pragmatic, concrete and rooted in experience - the very opposite of the prevailing, wheeling-and-dealing, short termist Anglo-Saxon model - has never been nearer vindication.'

Revans' left Manchester to head an inter-university project in Belgium which had been set-up to advise on how to advance the Belgian economy which had been under-performing at the bottom of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development league. Traditional measures had not worked and under his leadership, five Belgian universities and 23 of the country's largest corporations worked together to find a solution to this national problem. Dramatic advances were subsequently made and Belgium's average industrial productivity growth rate between 1971 and 1981 (102 per cent) meant that the country out-performed, in relative terms, the USA, Germany and Japan.

During the period from 1965 to 1968, Revans also led the hospital internal communications (HIC) project, when some 10 London hospitals used action learning to work together. Informal groups studied the different ways of working and decided which issues to tackle and how to approach them. Here, Revans gained a reputation for persuading senior managers to listen to nurses. As an outcome, morale improved, reflected by lower levels of absenteeism, accidents and staff turnover. Further, significant savings in costs per patient were made and waiting lists shortened. An independent study by the University of Michigan showed that, in wards where an HIC-type project was implemented, patients recovered more quickly. Staff morale was higher, and that meant better care. Caulkin observes: 'From first-hand observation down pits and on hospital wards, he was able to show that pits in which managers paid close attention to their men were safer and more efficient than others, while patients in hospital recovered faster when doctors listened to nurses. In all cases, people learned better, faster and more enduringly from their own problems than from management 'experts' importing 'prefabricated' knowledge.

His legacy

By now Revans had become a passionate advocate of action learning and in the 1970s (and until the mid-1990s) he travelled widely and spoke with evangelical passion. Revans had argued that learning is about recognizing not what we know but what we don't know. Action learning provides a near perfect mode of inquiry, as learners meet in small groups, with or without a facilitator. Revans had found that once small groups are working effectively together they are 'comrades in adversity' - held together by a shared desire to find implementable solutions to their questions. In essence, group members ask each other questions about how they see the problems being considered and in so doing, each participant acts as a mirror to help the group recognize what it doesn't know. The learning is most effective if it is self-managed and focused on finding internal solutions, rather than seeking external help. Original business thinkers are a rarity, and Revans certainly battled against the 'management fads' that might so easily have crowded out his ideas. Reg Revans died on 8 January 2003, aged 95 but his legacy lives on!