

Introducing action learning

Imagine this scene: You are working as a member of a scientific team and, at the moment when years of painstaking effort seem about to bear fruit, you come up against an intractable problem. Fortunately you are surrounded by other scientists, but they don't in your field. Does this stop you seeking their help? If you want to find a solution, it won't. You put your problem to them. But what can they possibly do to help?

Back in the 1930s, a young man called Reg Revans found himself working with just such a high-powered group at the University of Cambridge. When they were faced with difficult research problems, he found that they would sit down together and ask one another lots of questions. No one person was considered more important than any other and they all had contributions to make, even when they were not experts in a particular field. In this way they teased out workable solutions to their own and one another's problems. Revans was so taken by this technique that, when he went to work at the coal board, he introduced it there. When pit managers had problems, he encouraged them to meet together in small groups, on site, and ask one another questions about what they saw in order to find their own solutions, rather than bring in 'experts' to solve their problems for them. The technique proved so successful that the managers wrote their own handbook on how to run a coal mine.

Focusing on the question

Small children ask questions. How? Why? What? Where? Who? and question When? Parents may despair of the number; sympathetic teachers encourage the quest for knowledge and provide, whenever they can, opportunities for the children to answer their own questions by experiencing something for themselves. As the children get older, their teachers tend not to wait for the questions to be asked. They concentrate increasingly on supplying knowledge and on testing that their students have learned it and can produce the right answers to order. It is a long time before students are considered sufficiently well programmed with available information to start asking questions again which will lead them to find their own solutions to unsolved problems; so long that many will have already gone off to work in the 'real' world, perhaps under the mistaken impression that the answers to problems always exist in books, if only you know where to find them - or the expert who knows them already. Reg Revans called this 'P' for programmed knowledge.

Revans accepted that 'P' is an essential ingredient of learning, but felt it to be insufficient. He believed that there is an equally important component, one which has tended to be squeezed out by traditional educational methods. This he calls 'Q' for questioning Insight. If learning is represented by 'L', his formula for action learning is:

$$L = P + Q$$

Concepts and theory are important, but in action learning, the emphasis is on applying them. And so it is on 'Q' that Revans focused - on the questions which need to be asked and the experience which is waiting to be acquired. For Revans, the core of action learning lay in the ability to ask the right questions at the right time and take effective action.

Asking the right questions

What exactly are the 'right questions' in an action learning context? The 'right questions' are simply those which, when asked of the right people at the right time, give you the sort of information which you need, questions like...

What are we trying to do? What is stopping us from doing it? What might we be able to do about it? Who knows about the problem? Who cares about it? Who can do anything about it? Where can we find out about it? There are many similar questions which you might choose to ask. If you fail to come up with the right questions for a given situation, you fail to get the information which you need to solve your problem. It is therefore vital for anyone involved in action learning to spend adequate time working out what the right questions are for the particular problem which he/she is trying to solve.

Action learning groups

An action learning group must have four basic features if it is to live up to its name. It needs projects or problems on which to work; clients for whom to work; a group of 'comrades in adversity' with whom to work; and a 'facilitator' to facilitate the learning process. We will consider the first two of these below.

Projects

Action learning projects are in effect, the vehicles for learning. A project should be a real problem, task or issue which needs to be addressed and exists in a real time frame. In other words, someone somewhere in the practitioner's organization should want a result by a definite (but reasonable) date. Furthermore, to justify the investment of funds in the project a tangible return is expected. The project should be substantial and demanding enough to enable the learner to engage with it. Further, if a project is part of a practitioner's work and he or she is in a position to implement solutions, it will be very much easier to get fully involved with it and to deliver the tangible return. Projects also need a 'client' who 'owns' the particular problem, issue or task and cares very much about it. He or she may even spend sleepless nights worrying about it. This client might well be the action learner's boss; but, whoever it is, he or she has got to want and need results. The following general points will reduce the risk that the project will fail to satisfy its main objectives:

- It is preferable that in addition to action during the project, the action learner has responsibility for taking action as a result of it. This could involve implementing some or all of the recommendations arising from it.
- Where a number of projects are being carried out in one organization, care should be taken to clarify the relationship between the projects.

The group

Action learning is a sociable activity, not something which you do on your own. It needs a group of people - whether they be physicists, pit managers, bank managers or a mixture of all three. They are, to use Reg Revans' phrase, 'comrades in adversity'. They all have their backs against the wall, in that they all need to find solutions to real and pressing problems. History shows that people work best together when faced with some difficulty or threat. Each member of the group is as important as every other member and each has a contribution to make. They need to be able to support, advise and freely criticise one another. The group also needs to be able to call on external experts and specialists when required, but not to have them thrust upon them. Each member of the group takes on a firm commitment to get a useful piece of work done and to understand what is being learned in the process. The strength of the group is a crucial factor and mottoes such as 'If one fails, we all fail' might help to underline the importance of collective responsibility for each other. Group working is widely credited with our highly successful completion rates.

Some questions about action learning

Who invented action learning?

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 for practitioners.

In the 1930s he had worked as a member of Ernest Rutherford's research team, at the Cavendish Laboratories, University of Cambridge. This gave Revans the impetus to develop his ideas on action learning. Each week Rutherford would gather together his team - which consisted of more than a dozen future Nobel Laureates - and encourage them to question their own knowledge and to collaborate on developing fresh ideas. In 1935, Revans became 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 the main reason for dissatisfaction among newly qualified nurses: the culture in which they worked did nothing to encourage them. The result of his research was a paper written in 1938 that called for a prototype version of action learning. He envisaged continuing trouble unless senior practitioners 'understand that they will only know their problems if they understand what the workers are thinking'.

The war interrupted Revans' work in education and he became head of emergency services for the East End of London. At the end of the war, he worked 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 by working for several weeks at the coalface in Durham. He championed a staff training college to be run by the colliery practitioners - outside 'experts' were in his view, not needed. 'We do not need to sit at the feet of gurus' said Reg. The pits that tried out his methods reported a 30 per cent increase in productivity.

Revans went on to become the first professor of business at the University of Manchester, where he worked until 1965. Revans' vision was of practical people learning from each other, creating their own resources, identifying their own problems and forming their own solutions. This was not how most academics saw it.

Revans' next big challenge was in Belgium. He headed the inter-university project, which had the task of moving the nation up from the bottom of the organization for economic co-operation and development (OECD) league, where it had languished for several years. Traditional measures had been tried but had failed. Under Revans' stewardship, five Belgian universities and 23 of the country's largest business organizations worked together to find a solution to the national malaise. This collective approach succeeded in putting Belgium's industrial productivity growth rate, at 102 per cent, ahead of the USA, Germany and Japan between 1971 and 1981.

How does action learning work in practice?

Here are some typical responses:

What do practitioners learn from action learning projects?

- How to appreciate the bigger picture and how to focus on a significant piece of work.
- The value of: reflection; Undertaking a live project (as a learning vehicle in its own right); Undertaking independent / small group work as a means of generating fresh thinking and confidence.
- That action learning is simpler to use than some of the literature suggests and once familiar with it, users viewed it as a better way of working.

What do practitioners learn from working together in a small group?

- That face-to-face discussion is the richest form of interaction and easily achievable.
- That networking is the single most beneficial aspect of the action learning process. Action learners share with each other as part of attaining a common goal (finding and implementing unique solutions to each others' work challenges and problems).

Additionally, that:

- Learning about different styles and ways of working (from other group members) is valuable;
- Own (personal) network support helps to overcome low points;
- Group working provides a form of reflective mirror feedback from fellow group members;
- Problem ownership is a key ingredient of action learning. The adage: 'a problem shared is problem halved' seems to reflect the reality of action learning when it is working effectively.

What do practitioners learning from the action learning process itself?

Common experiences of the process are that:

- Action learning helps the learner to strengthen personal reflective skills – the focus on personal and shared learning helps to ensure that deeper level learning occurs.
- Learning and (work) experience go hand in hand.
- It helps the learner to reflect on how the organization in which he/she is employed, really works.
- It helps in framing workable solutions – this ensures a double benefit: personal satisfaction (it deals with the question: 'what's in it for me?') and organizational value ('solutions found and implemented').
- Active learning helps the learner to customize his / her own skill set as appropriate to the task in hand.
- The process, once familiar, encourages the learner to challenge everything and in so doing, it tends to produce more carefully considered action.

What do practitioners learning about their own careers as they work together?

- Change is an organizational constant – action learning reinforces this and assists with the on-going challenges of re-aligning and re-focusing personal learning and development with the needs of the business.

In a career context, action learning:

- Helps with the re-appraisal of career development and options.
- Can be (and is for some respondents) the catalyst for career change.
- Is an 'enlarging' experience – it expands personal horizons.
- Assists with self-confidence in career planning and development.
- Promotes a greater awareness of the resources available to assist with career development.
- Facilitates better career decisions.
- Helps to align awareness of 'own talent' and personal contribution with 'best fit' career options.
- Provides a vehicle for integrating career development and workplace challenges.

What are the specific benefits of learning with (and from) other practitioners?

- A realization (early in the process) that work and career values and objectives are often similar / shared.
- Mutual dependency is helpful and desirable. It can be fostered via peer review and support.
- Respondents gain encouragement from supporting each other and appreciate face to face opportunities.
- Shared responsibility ('comrades in adversity') encourages the desire to complete together.
- Respondents cite examples of how learning extends beyond the action learning group – impacting others (not directly involved in action learning) in the organization and vice versa.

What are the elements and dynamics of quality assurance as perceived by practitioners?

- Independent analysis and verification are essential to interpretation of the outcomes from the process.
- Skilled facilitation helps the learner to establish a clear sense of personal direction and this is a necessary precursor to the shaping of applications and specific outcomes.
- The need to move from the generic to the specific (re: customized learning) means that generic standards attained by all are less meaningful and relevant.
- Peer involvement is a helpful quality assurance component – it helps to address gaps in own learning and experience and with broader-based benchmarking of what learners know in relation to one another.
- Learning coach inputs are re-assuring in terms of confirming the ways in which the learner is making sense of his / her own challenges and so the timing / frequency of feedback is important.
- Feedback should always be two-way – a dialogue characterized by dynamic interaction between the reviewer and the learner is the ideal.
- The external reviewer's role is helpful in objectively confirming and assuring the value of the individual learning process and the way(s) in which customized learning have connected for the learner and been applied (with tangible evidence) in the workplace.

What do practitioners learn about learning and how do they sustain their own learning?

- Continual adjustments are needed to hold in balance the value of personal experience as it is further shaped by the exploration of ideas (from the body of knowledge), action and reflection.
- It is not possible to sustain learning unless the learner continues to take action via action learning.
- Action learning helps the learner to realize that active learning is a way of life, not merely a better way to attain qualifications. In this sense: 'Learning is changing and changing is learning'.
- The challenge for the facilitator seems to be: 'How can the learner learn to use the workplace to sustain personal learning and encourage others to learn?' Customized action learning is a proven and effective way of responding to this challenge.

How do practitioners in small groups plan to maintain momentum?

- The group may choose and collectively own a decision to maintain the social cohesion that arises from working together. Evidence shows that this is commonplace.
- Looking beyond the group, there is also evidence to suggest that the wider network created by the questions-driven process of action learning provides the momentum necessary to sustain learning. If so, these are ideal conditions in which to encourage broader organizational learning – sustained by a growing community of individual active learners.

What are the main benefits of action learning?

- Learners stay in-post; time and cost to the organization are minimized, with no re-integration problems.
- New pathways can commence at any time and expectations are not raised unrealistically.
- Commitment to the organization is reinforced.
- Transfer of learning is immediate.
- The cross-fertilization of ideas occurs.
- The process exerts influence on the organization and on colleagues.
- Learning and solutions are relevant and work-related.
- The organization has a major influence on the process via the identification and selection of projects.
- The boss is likely to be involved.
- It is a method of learning suited to individual learning styles.
- Impact on the bottom line is tangible.
- Projects of strategic significance to the organization are addressed.