Action Learning
Practice Guide

Even though you do not always realise it, you learn every day at work. Your personal and professional development relies on your ability to learn and improve your knowledge and practice. However, some people get frustrated at the problems and inefficiencies they experience at work. They become disillusioned and disengaged when change does not happen or when innovative ideas never get tested or evaluated.

One approach many companies and organisations have been using to promote learning and engagement in the workplace is Action Learning. They are using this process to encourage employees to discuss the problems they face at work and work together on solutions which can develop the effectiveness and capabilities of individuals, teams, and their organisation.

Action Learning was introduced by astrophysicist and researcher, Reg Revans. He spent his life advocating for the process of action learning as a way of enabling and empowering people to learn with and from each other. Revans used a simple formula to describe Action Learning. He said: $L=P+Q$, which means that Learning is a dynamic experiential process, the result of our Programmed Knowledge (what we learn from what we are told or shown by others) and Questioning Insight (when we reflect and gain insight into our own experiences).

> There is no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning
> Reg Revans

The philosophy of Action Learning is that the most effective learning takes place when we are faced with a real problem to solve. So, while there are many ways to conduct and apply Action Learning, many people form a small group of learners (often called a 'Learning Set') to meet regularly to reflect on real work issues.

To work successfully, the Learning Set needs to be people who volunteer to be part of the process. They can be from within one organisation, or from different organisations within a sector. They:

1   Work together to discuss individual perceptions of what happens at work, clarify issues and explore alternatives for action.

2   Take action in the light of new insight and ideas.

3   Bring an account of the consequences back to the group for further shared reflection and discussion.

Action Learning works best when the Learning Set prioritises and focuses on the learning process more than solutions for the problem they are discussing. Powerful things can happen when individuals realise that by communicating and supporting each other they can create a culture where learning in the workplace is dynamic and continuous, as opposed to relying solely on intermittent formal training.

The Learning Set Meeting

Learning Sets meet regularly to share workplace experiences. Generally, the process will involve each person presenting an issue they would like to discuss or be challenged about. Then a facilitator and the other members of the group use some intelligent questioning to help everyone think about, analyse and see the issue from different perspectives. Once the issue has been fully explored the group begins to generate ideas for action or practice.

It is important that members of the Learning Set adhere to some general ground rules to help build strong relationships within the group. These include respect, confidentiality, commitment to the process and taking responsibility for following through any agreed actions. It is often a good idea to use a volunteer convenor or nominated facilitator to help the group stick to these rules as well as guarding against individuals controlling the discussion or the group loosing focus.

A facilitator can also be the person who helps the group stay motivated. It is not uncommon for Learning Sets to start with a great deal of enthusiasm, but over time become less committed as the pressures of daily work and life get in the way. Having an agenda sent out to the group in advance of meetings, good time management and strict deadlines for task accomplishment and reporting back, can help overcome this issue.

The Action Learning Cycle

Action learning is based on the concept that learning is achieved by following a cycle. Reflecting on an action helps you to make decisions and plan new action in light of what you have learnt.
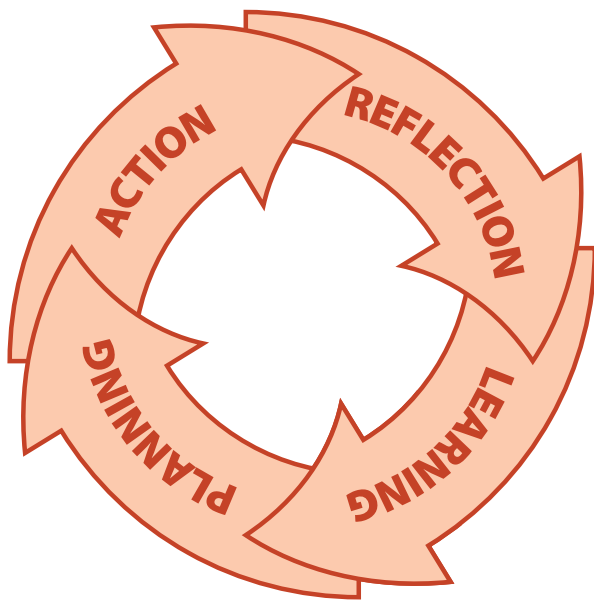
Learning is not a spectator sport.
Chickering and Gamson

Action Learning Sets can be seen as the mental equivalent of going to the gym to get physically fit. They exercise our "learning muscles" in a structured, safe and enjoyable environment.
Chris Pay, BOND

The Benefits of Action Learning

Action learning is a highly effective means of learning that can be much cheaper than formal workshops and courses. It can make employees more enthusiastic about developing their learning skills and looking for solutions to problems they face at work. It can promote employees to be more open to change and increase workplace morale. It often creates workplace environments that are more engaging and innovative.

By promoting Action Learning organisations can become more caring and supportive, because the Action Learning process is a way of team building and empowering employees to be engaged in continuing learning and development.

If the Learning Set has members from different organisations, Action Learning helps people to network and gain insight and empathy about other organisations' work practices.

Ultimately, organisations should always be looking for ways to become more healthy, efficient and effective and Action Learning can help employees achieve this. The results of Action Learning can be fed back to funders and supporters, which increases the opportunity for the organisation to demonstrate the positive impact it is having on the community.

If you think you understand a problem, make sure you are not deceiving yourself.
Albert Einstein