Action Learning

Action learning is a specific process for workplace-based professional development that has grown out of the work Reg Revans (see, for example, Revans 1980; 1982 and 1983). It has been widely used in British industry since about 1945 (Keys 1994), and has spread to Continental Europe (especially Scandinavia) and other parts of the world. The term is sometimes with broader meanings, to include a range of ways action learning principles have been adapted to more or less different processes (see Pine 1989), but in the interests of clear communication, it is best to use the term to refer to the work of Revans and his successors.

Action learning is different from mainstream training, education and professional development. The main objective is to learn how to ask appropriate questions in conditions of risk, rather than to answer questions that have been defined by teachers, and do no allow for ambiguous responses because the examiners know the approved answers (Revans 1982: 65). Action learning always involves groups of people (learning sets) working on real workplace problems. It is about people learning to solve problems at work, from experience through reflection and action.

While action learning is individually focused, it uses a small group, known as a 'learning set', which provides a forum where set member's ideas can be challenged in a supportive environment.

Action learning is an iterative, experiential process, involving a cyclical notion of learning. The elements of the cycle are:

- an action;
- reflection - considering of the effects, successful and unsuccessful, of that action;
- generalizing - identifying new learning from this experience, that can be applied; and
- planning - on the basis of generalizations, deciding how to act in the future (Preston and Biddle 1994: 2).

While all elements of the cycle are necessary for the action learning process to take place, the notion of reflection is particularly crucial to an understanding of action learning: Action learning is based on the relationship between reflection and action

- reflection is the essential link between past action and more effective future action
- reflection is a necessary precursor to effective action and
- learning from experience can be enhanced through deliberate attention to this relationship (McGill and Beaty 1996, p21).

References


Running an Action Learning Set

AL derives its strength from the interaction of six elements: a problem, the group, the questioning and reflection process, the resolution to take action, a commitment to learning, a facilitator (and then successful self-facilitation).

Each meeting follows the same procedure:

- **Report in.** Set members report briefly on what has been happening to them including, for those who presented last time, any actions/resolutions on the presented topic;

- **Bidding process.** Set members decide between them who is going to present a particular situation that s/he currently face (in some groups time is divided equally so all members present);

- **Presentation.** The presenter talks, without interruption and for as long as they wish, about their problem/situation/challenge;

- **Questions.** When it seems appropriate the space is opened up to the group to ask questions. These questions will be designed to assist the presenter come to deeper understanding. They do not give advice, tell anecdotes, pass judgement or talk about how it compares to their own situation;

- **Formulation of action.** The set assists the presenter review options and decide on action i.e. develop an action plan, no matter how small;

- **Feedback.** The set then reflects on the group process and gives feedback on what has taken place. At a future set meeting the presenter reports on the action taken.