



Factsheet

Action Learning

What is Action Learning?

Action Learning is a peer-learning approach which combines solving problems with opportunities to learn from experience. The term 'set' is used to describe the group itself and the semi-structured regular meetings through which the group work together. 'Sets' usually involve 6-8 people and typically commit to meet for up to 6 sessions initially, at 4-8 week intervals, before review.

When the group meets individual members take turns to share their challenge and the other set members ask open questions to help generate fresh perspectives or solutions. Those listening avoid offering advice, although a suggestion or observation from experience can be offered at the end. The next time the group meets, the individual reports back on any actions taken, and the impact, to share their learning and to encourage accountability.

Origins: learning at the coalface

Often in the workplace those with direct experience 'at the coal face' are not necessarily involved in decisions. The founder of Action Learning Reg Revans sought to change this and was an advocate of bringing together practice and theory, as he believed: *'there can be no action with learning, and no learning without action'*.

Action Learning's origins are at the literal coalface! In the 1950s Professor Reg Revans of Manchester University was brought in to help improve productivity at the National Coal Board (NCB). The traditional way of doing this, at the time, would have been to seek expert advice. But influenced by peer review models in scientific research, Revans believed those on the job would be best placed to generate solutions. The model of Action Learning he piloted at NCB led to a 20% increase in productivity and his radical model of peer-peer support and practitioner-led improvement went on to become used internationally by organisations wanting to improve results and develop staff simultaneously.

The core philosophy of Action Learning

There are a number of core beliefs that underpin an Action Learning approach and these are:

Problem-solving skills vs transfer of knowledge - we have limited capacity to learn through being told or instructed by others, but unlimited capacity to learn for ourselves (Revans calls this 'questioning insight', I like to describe it as developing our 'problem-solving muscles').

Action + learning - we learn best from reflecting on our actions, and our actions are improved when informed by our learning.

Learning faster than the speed of change - for organisations to survive they need to learn and adapt quicker than the rate of change in the world around us (so quite quickly at the moment!)

We are our own experts – those who have the challenge are best placed to find their own solutions.

Peers not experts – Revans believed those with common challenges are best placed to support one another's learning. He described this as 'comrades in adversity' who come together to support one another and learn from each other's failures and challenges.

How does it work in practice?

Action Learning has evolved over the past 70 years and guidelines and structures have developed to help sets work well together.

1. *Creating a new set: contracting and core skills*

Before a set is formed, an introductory session is held so that potential set members can try out Action Learning, get to know one another and decide whether they wish to form a set.

To work well there needs to be high levels of trust, mutual respect and commitment in the set. The group also needs a shared approach to non-directive support and core listening and questioning skills.

An introductory session is often led by an experienced trainer or facilitator, who can support the group to develop trust, understand the foundations and develop the necessary skills.

Commitment is crucial and normally a set requires all members to agree to attend all meetings. So in this first session there also needs to be a conversation about practicalities and 'contracting' about how they wish to work as a group, this includes discussing boundaries and confidentiality so the group can share openly and learn from their mistakes.

2. Who can form a set?

A typical 'set' might include 6-8 people and meet for a half-day to enable 3-4 individuals to share challenges each time. When working virtually, slightly smaller groups can work well and some groups prefer to meet for two-hour slots online. It is advised to avoid line-managers being in the same set as their direct reports in case this inhibits openness or limits what can be shared.

Groups can include internal colleagues, or peers from different organisations or groups of individuals who come together for Action Learning (e.g. self-employed people, artists, teachers).

Sets work best when there is common experience but also a diversity of perspectives and experience in the group.

3. Action Learning meetings

When a set forms it agrees how long its sessions will be, how often and whether they will self-facilitate or employ an external facilitator (someone who is not part of the group but chairs the sessions).

The basic format of each meeting includes several core elements:

Reporting in – brief sharing of updates, including outcomes from any actions committed to at previous session.

Bidding – every shares what issue or challenge they would potentially present on and the group decides which issues are selected for the slots available that day. Not everyone presents an issue each time.

Rounds – each issue selected is taken in turn, one at a time. A meeting might include 1 or more 'rounds' of 30-60 mins depending on time available. In a 'round' the individual presents their challenge, then any clarification questions are briefly asked. The main part of the 'round' involves members asking open questions to the presenter to help them reflect more deeply and generate fresh thinking about their challenge – to generate actions. At the end of a round feedback may be offered – which means members can offer a suggestion or insight from their own experience, if helpful.

Process review – at the end of each meeting the group reviews how well it's working and any changes to make for next time.

4. *Review and self-facilitation*

At the outset, the group commits to a fixed number of sessions, and in the final meeting time is allowed for review in which the set decide whether to end or continue. Typically the set members reflect on what they have learned from their membership of the group and decide whether they wish to continue or end this set. After an initial period, if a set wishes to continue, they may chose to begin to self-facilitate or to seek additional training in facilitation to enable them to self-facilitate in future.

What are the benefits of Action Learning?

We all have limited time available for learning, so that means it's important to make sure Action Learning is the right approach for your situation – but if it is then it's a very efficient and effective way to learn and improve your performance.

Action Learning works well for a range of situations including:

- Developing professional skills and practice in groups of practitioners;
- Improving performance and cross-team relationships for in-house groups and teams
- Leadership skills, confidence and self-awareness

Compared with training or less structured networks, Action Learning's more formal approach offers a number of other benefits, including:

Relevance – working with peers means that the questions asked, and suggestions received, are more likely to be relevant and applicable to your situations.

Supportive – peers offer a non-judgmental space where everyone is sharing their challenges and mistakes. Hearing others facing similar challenges, and being honest about what works and doesn't builds self-confidence.

Leadership skills – as a set member you will practice active listening skills and questioning techniques that support others to solve their own challenges and develop their self-awareness. These are leadership skills that translate well to line-management, as well as enabling you to 'self coach'.

Emotional intelligence – the ability to understand our motivations, self-regulate our emotions and empathise with others, known as Emotional Intelligence (EQ), is a competency you will develop through practicing Action Learning. Studies have shown EQ to be 6 times more important in leaderships roles than IQ.

Low-cost/ high impact – Action Learning is a cost-effective way to support your professional development and improve your performance. Regular reflective learning practice can significantly improve your results – a recent study suggested as little as 15 mins reflection each day can lead to a 20% increase in performance.