

Action Learning & Action Learning Sets

Introduction

When devising this programme, it was important to us to ensure that as participants you were not only 'taught' or trained, but you had opportunity to put learning into action. Experience has shown us that unless we practice new skills and ideas soon after a programme we tend to forget the lessons learnt.

Action Learning is one of the methods this programme uses to help you apply your learning. Other formal approaches will include your Line manager and your mentor.

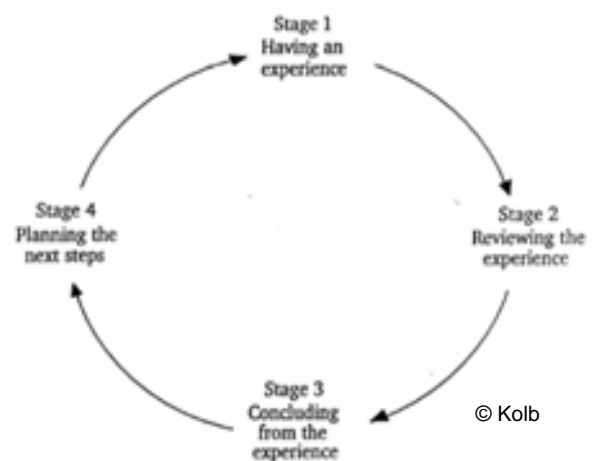
Action Learning works best when a 'Set' of individuals are put together as a support group for the duration of the learning activity – in this case the GMDP.

So what is Action Learning?

Action learning is based upon the concept of learning by reflection (or reviewing) on an experience. It is underpinned by the cycle of experiential learning as shown below, where the stages of reviewing and concluding are worked through with the Set.

In practice many of us tend to short circuit this cycle and often skip the reviewing phase as it is often difficult to do 'out of context'. Action learning will help 'close the loop' and ensure our learning is as effective as possible (more about learning cycles in module one). Action Learning Sets are primarily focused on the individual's learning.

The Learning Cycle



An Action Learning programme involves the following key elements:

- **The Set:** a group of 6 - 8 people who meet regularly.
- **The Projects:** each participant works on a project or task over the life of the set
- **The Set Advisor:** a facilitator who helps the group to work and learn together.

Although Action Learning is flexible, it is not unstructured and focuses on the individual and their need NOT on the programme.

Participants have quoted many benefits which they have gained from action learning:

- learning a more 'disciplined' way of working
- learning to network
- learning to relate to, and communicate with, others more effectively

- gaining increased self-confidence
- gaining increased awareness
- gaining increased readiness to take responsibility and initiative.

In summary, the values which underpin action learning are:

- membership of a set is voluntary
- commitment must be demonstrated in making the process work
- a positive, constructive approach to life
- reflection as the key to learning
- the presenter is focused (on her/his own issue)

A definition of Action Learning

"Action Learning is an approach to the development of people in organisations which takes the task as the vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning. The method has three main components: people who accept responsibility for taking action on a particular issue; problems, or the task that people set themselves; and a set of six or so colleagues who support and challenge each other to make progress on problems. Action Learning implies both self-development and organisation development." Mike Pedler (1991)

Action Learning Set

Who is in it?

An Action Learning Set is a group of 6-8 people who meet regularly to help each other to learn from their experiences. A Set Advisor is appointed to help manage the process. The set is not a team since its focus is on the actions of the individuals within it rather than on a shared set of work objectives.

Experience has shown that sets often work better when participants come with a similar level of experience. The Set Advisor is part of the set in one sense but has a particular responsibility to create a learning environment by encouraging, challenging and focusing on learning. Some Action Learning Sets are self-facilitated.

A 'Set' Meeting

The Set will decide on its own way of working but usually a 'meeting' involves a series of individual time slots where participants take turns in presenting their project/ challenge/ issue to the set. This will normally involve:

- an update of progress on actions from the last meeting
- a presentation of current issues/problems
- an agreement on actions for the future.

Throughout this, other participants will work with the presenter (by listening and questioning) to help them to decide what actions to take.

Time is always a limited resource in a set meeting and the Set Advisor must ensure that set participants get their full allocation (it is not a free discussion). Some Sets develop a fixed agenda to speed up the start of the meeting but in any case, all participants should come fully prepared for the meeting.

Action Learning Projects

The project is the piece of work around which the participant learns. It does not need to be linked to specific outcomes such as setting up a safety audit carrying out a particular task but could also be about acquiring skills or knowledge. For the purposes of this programme, however, the project must have a learning focus.

Participating in an Action Learning Set

Preparing for a Set meeting:

Before the meeting it will help to get the best out of the session if participants can think through what to focus on with their set. The set may be somewhere that participants can 'experiment' with different behaviours such as consciously asking more questions than usual or being more reflective if they are usually very talkative. Presenters should:

- prepare for meetings
- structure their time
- be clear about what they want - or want the set to - focus on
- learn to ask for what they want
- listen
- generate action points for them self.

Structuring your time:

Usually, the presenter will use their time to report on action taken as a result of the previous set meeting. It is useful to think about:

- what I did
- what happened
- what was different from what I expected
- what I did not do - why - what I did instead
- what can I/have I learned from this?

This can form the basis for reporting back to the set who will then ask questions. The presenter can continue with:

- what is the issue now
- what actions could I take now
- what action points can I identify

Alternative Approaches

A presenter may wish to concentrate on a particular aspect of their project that s/he thinks the set can really help with. This gives a depth of focus which may be a more appropriate use of time than an overview.

Alternatively, the presenter may wish to ask the set to talk about a particular problem and s/he will listen and only ask for clarification at the end of an agreed time. This is helpful if the presenter is stuck for ideas to take the work forward.

The reverse of this is where the audience remains silent and the presenter talks through the project. A listening, attentive audience may help the presenter to clarify thinks for her/himself.

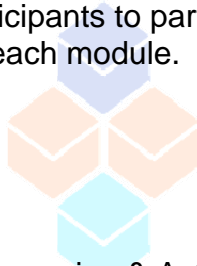
Reviewing your time

At the end of each participant's time slot it is useful for the presenter to review with the set the process by which the action points have been identified. S/he might ask for feedback on how s/he presented the project or might give the set feedback on what was helpful or unhelpful about the set's interventions. This can also be done by the whole set near to the end of the meeting. It helps the set to develop a supportive learning climate to work in.

A typical meeting might follow this format:

- **Introduction** - a warm-up activity and confirmation of programme for the meeting
- **In agreed order each person in the Set:**
 - 10 Minute presentation of current 'state of play'/ position
 - 10 minute of exploratory questions from the Set to help the presenter think through the issue
 - 5 minute presentation to the Set on the action plan.
- **Closing session** - time taken for the whole group to finish the meeting rather than drift off at the end. Would include an element of evaluation – what will we do differently next time.

The programme expects all participants to participate in at least one Action Learning Set meeting between each module.



For more information on Action Learning & Action Learning Sets contact Mike Morrison @ www.rapidbi.com

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