ABC of Action Learning

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GOWER
In any epoch of rapid change those organizations unable to adapt are soon in trouble. Adaptation is achieved only by learning, namely, by being able to do tomorrow that which might have been unnecessary today, or to be able to do today what was unnecessary last week.

PROGRAMMED KNOWLEDGE

The organization that continues to express only the ideas of the past is not learning, and training systems intended to develop our young may do little more than to make them proficient in yesterday's technique. Thus learning cannot be solely the acquisition of new programmed knowledge, howsoever important the possession of that knowledge may be. When none can say what the morrow shall bring forth,
none can tell what stock of programmed propositions is most economically applicable; the teaching institutions can do no more than offer their own selections.

But all managers will be caught up by the currents of change, and swept into new unknowns never before encountered, let alone lived through and explored. In such conditions, nobody can say what programmed knowledge those in such predicaments may need, since their first obligation will be to search what they are able to perceive as their new environment.

In such exploration of the unfamiliar too great a reliance upon inappropriate programmed knowledge may become a fatal weakness: the idolization of the past has been the downfall of countless traditions – and a tradition on its deathbed may be guaranteed to deflect attention from what is killing it. So it is that the subjective aspects of searching the unfamiliar, or of learning to pose useful and discriminating questions in conditions of ignorance, risk and confusion, must become as well understood, and as effectively employed, by managers as are all the syllabuses of programmed instruction.

**THE LEARNING EQUATION**

Action learning takes up from the start the need to help managers – and all others who engage in management – acquire this insight into the posing of questions by the simple device of setting them to tackle real problems that have so far defied solution. We may structure our argument from the outset by identifying the acquisition of programmed knowledge as P, and of questioning insight as Q, so writing the Learning Equation as:
\[ L = P + Q \]

In this, our principal interest is in \( Q \), the idea of action learning. We do NOT reject \( P \); it is the stuff of traditional instruction.

**TWENTY ASSUMPTIONS OF ACTION LEARNING**

The inalienable assumptions of action learning programmes are set out below; procedural recommendations, or logistics, follow next.

1. *Learning is cradled in the task.* The primary occupation of managers is to treat their problems (or to seize their opportunities) and these may be defined as the conditions that either obstruct or advance the attainment of their goals. Managers, in other words, must make up their minds about what to do and settle for doing it. All secondary activity should be linked as closely as possible to this everyday task.

   For this simple reason, action learning is cradled in the very task itself, asking whether that task can be done so that, merely by reflecting upon how it currently seems to be done, the very doing of it supplies the learning generally offered far from the scenes of managerial activity.

2. *Formal instruction is not sufficient.* This does not imply that action learning rejects all formal instruction (P). It merely recognizes that such instruction, aimed at imparting what is normally known to others and often classified in such ways as to test by written examination how much has been imparted, cannot of itself stimulate the posing of insightful questions (Q) in other fields altogether, of which some may be so ill-
defined as to suggest, at the outset, no branch of programmed knowledge worth exploring.

On the contrary, action learning recognizes that, in the absence of such insight, the use to which a wealth of programmed knowledge may be put is limited. That which may be known cannot be applied until insightful questions have been asked; P may be necessary, but, in the absence of Q, cannot be sufficient. As was said by a distinguished authority: ‘Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil’. (Matt. Chapter 5 v. 17)

3. Problems require Insightful Questions. Traditional instruction (P) prepares for the treatment of puzzles, or difficulties from which escapes are thought to be known (troubles with programmed solutions), even although the escape or solution may be hard to discover, and calls for the skill of experts. Action learning, on the other hand, deals with the resolution of problems (and the acceptance of opportunities) about which no single course of action is to be justified by any code of programmed knowledge, so that different managers, all reasonable, experienced and sober, might set out by treating them in markedly different ways.

Problems and opportunities are treated by leaders who must be aware of their own value systems, differing between individuals, and of the influences of their past personal experiences. These will strongly influence their subjective judgements and, hence, their predisposing willingness to take risks. Such risks are diminished to the extent that further discriminating questions are posed and answered; this demands exploratory insight (Q).
4. *Learning involves doing.* Managerial learning implies an ability to carry out the solution of the problem as well as to specify that solution. The difference is more subtle than is often understood, otherwise case methods, business games and the like would scarcely have been so long at work to bring management education to its present condition.

The confusion tends to arise because so much managerial action is necessarily an exchange of words (issue of instructions, agreement to pay, approval of measure, and so forth) that the distinctions between getting something done and talking about getting it done may be simply overlooked. However this may be, there is an observable difference between consulting past reports of the Olympic Games to decide that one may need to clear two metres forty to win the next high jump, on the one hand, and, on the other, actually sailing over that height before the crowd in the stadium. It is likewise not enough that the manager should be able to specify such-and-such a way of resolving their difficulty; he or she must be able to effectuate it as part of their contractual mission.

5. *Learning is voluntary.* Any person, whether manager or not, changes their observable behaviour, or learns in the sense in which that word is used here, only if they wish to do so.

One learns, or changes one’s behaviour, of one’s own volition and not at the will of others (unless under duress, bribery or other influences, which are not inspirations to learning in the sense here implied). Moreover, one may be cognitively aware of a need to behave differently and yet remain determined not to do so in practice. This is often the consequence of inadequate self-understanding, when the subject either does not know what they believe in, or, more profoundly, has not grasped the concept of belief.
6. *Urgent problems or enticing opportunities provide the spur for learning.* The menace of urgent problems, or the lure of enticing opportunities, are likely to reinforce a desire to learn, should behavioural change – or even fresh belief – be called for to clear up the problems or to bring forward the opportunities.

7. *Action and feedback.* In learning such new behaviour, persons must attack real problems, preferably ill-defined, or fertile opportunities, howsoever remote, in such manners as to remain continuously aware of their progress and of the influences determining that progress. In scientific jargon, any system that is to learn, whether an individual manager or a national cabinet, must regularly receive and interpret inputs about its own outputs.

8. *The risk imperative.* These attacks, whether upon problems or upon opportunities, must carry significant risk of penalty for failure.

Those who are not obliged to assess the risk to themselves of pursuing, or of trying to pursue, such-and-such lines of action cannot, by their indifference to the outcome, explore their own value systems nor identify any trustworthy pattern of their own beliefs. Non-risk exercises, such as case discussions, often motivated by exhibitionism or a need for social approval, may draw from some participants declarations of belief that, while not misleading those who hear them, can help only to deceive those who express them. Even US educators, such as Argyris, now criticise the case method.

9. *Learning as re-interpreting past experience.* Lasting behavioural change is more likely to follow the reinterpretation of past experiences than the acquisition of fresh knowledge.
Among senior managers, in particular, it is in rereading what is already scribbled on the cortical slate that leads to changed behaviour, rather than in copying out new messages upon it.

10. *The contribution of peers.* Such reinterpretations of past experience, being necessarily subjective, complex and ill-structured, are more likely to be intelligible through exchanges with other managers themselves anxious to learn by reordering their own perceptions than through discussions with non-managers (including teachers of management) not exposed to real risk in responsible action.

11. *The central importance of the set.* In consequence, managers readily learn to accept and to discharge their real-life responsibilities by contrived exchanges with other managers during the prosecution of real-life activities. They learn both to give to and to accept from other managers the criticism, advice and support needful to develop their own managerial powers, all in the course of identifying and treating their own personal tasks.

This is the argument for the centrality of the ‘set’ that is the cutting edge of every action learning programme, by whatever variety of names such programmes are now becoming known. *It is particularly important that the set is kept mainly to the reporting, analysis and planning of real-time action continually being taken by the participants in their operational backgrounds.*

So-called sets that meet to exchange feeling and opinions not immediately derived from a current undertaking to change some reality observable to others may be justified as ‘sensitivity training’, as an ‘encounter group’ and as a dozen other modish rituals. Unless, however, its discussions are based on the verifiable evidence of deliberated achievement
it may be little more than an efficient (and expensive) means of replacing one set of misconceptions for another. Since it is easy to run, it will be widely on offer.

12. The place of expertise. The undue intervention of experts carrying no personal responsibility for the real-life actions that bring the set together is, at best, ambiguous; in general, opinionative; and, at worst, reactionary.

In action learning, as it is now accepted, expert advice (P), once the need for it has been defined, is increasingly sought from other participants (primarily interested to develop their own personal Q). In most programmes there is a sufficient access to P through the Q-seekers and their friends to make the ad hoc intervention of experts unnecessary. The quest for Q, indeed, becomes more fruitful when a participant is able to understand, by supplying another participant with P, how their colleague perceived that a quota of P was needed.

13. The responsibility of management teachers. The responsibility of management teachers in the development of action learning is to contrive, with those managers themselves and those with whom those same managers normally work, the conditions in which they may learn with and from each other by the exchanges described above.

It is particularly vital that these conditions respect the need for the management teachers themselves to learn from such contrivings. Only if their involvement is manifestly a learning experience for teachers of management subjects, helping them from the comments of the real-life managers to see more clearly the relevance of their programmed knowledge (P) to the solution of the problems on which participants are engaged, should such specialists be offered a continuing
attachment to a set. Even this role for the professional teacher, all the same, is less satisfactory than to allow them to become a Q-seeking participant to tackle a project quite independent of all predisposing P knowledge.

14. *Learning with and from each other.* Exactly as managerial learning is a social exchange in which managers learn with and from each other during the diagnosis and treatment of real problems (and opportunities), so may teachers of management learn together, with either managers or other teachers.

This can be done by tackling the design, introduction, conduct and review of action learning programmes and by regularly meeting in sets intended from the outset to monitor what is going on in the substantive activities of the managers at work on the real-life problems and opportunities. This may be seen as action learning of the second order, or action learning to improve action learning, rather than, say, patient care or factory costs.

15. *The facilitator role.* To launch the set quickly into its discussions (and so to conserve the time of its participant managers), there may be a need when it is first formed for some supernumerary.

Such a combiner, brought in to speed the integration of the set must contrive that it achieves independence of them at the earliest possible moment, and open discussions between the substantive members of the set and the supernumerary to plan this should be pursued without embarrassment. It is vital that action learning takes advantage of our present disillusion with the academy to escape yet another round of dependence upon ambiguous facilitators. It may well be that, in the near
future, any help to get fresh sets underway can be adequately provided by managers now participating in action learning sets as substantive members.

16. Learning is measured by the results of action. The success, or otherwise, of the managers as they work upon their real-life problems or opportunities is to be assessed solely by their applications to practice, whether in the phases of diagnosis, prescription or therapy.

It is particularly important that the interpretation of what is going on by discussion within the set is not unduly influenced by non-involved facilitators – one school of which is now advocating freedom from real-life involvement, a step back to the case discussion method run by star faculty who know the case. Only continuous comparison between prediction of outcome and observation of actual result, made week after week at the set meeting, will bring home to its members the nature of their learning sequences and the five stages of which those sequences are composed.

17. Fresh questions. The allocation to each participant of a real-life exercise that is ill-structured and obscure from the outset (and for which there can be no preconceived line of attack) must encourage in each of them an ability to seek for, and to identify, those fresh questions likely to open up promising avenues of enquiry.

Participants become encouraged to explore what they cannot see around them as well as what they imagine they can, and in this vital mapping of their own ignorance they are encouraged by their colleagues in the set. The essence of action learning is to pose increasingly insightful questions from an origin
of ignorance, risk and confusion. This quest for insight (Q) complements expert drill (P).

18. *The cycle of action learning and research.* The structure of the approach to experimental investigation known as the *scientific method* – as distinct from dialectic and sophistry – identifies five successive stages (observation, provisional hypothesis, trial, audit and review) and is identical to those of:

i) the *rational decision* (survey, first decision, pilot run, evaluation and final decision);

ii) the *learning sequence* (awareness of ignorance, new idea, taking a chance, watching effect, remembering for next time); and

iii) the *advisory argument*, either given or received (admission of need, choice of counsel, test of confidence by action, estimate of outcome, confirmation – or rejection – of counsel).

The deliberated diagnosis, prescription and therapy associated with action learning thus makes (a) deciding, (b) learning and (c) advising all three aspects of the same essential and logical process – the application of the scientific method to changing real systems managed by real people.

This simple analysis suggests that the distinctions drawn by academics between research, action, learning and communication are highly artificial, if not knowingly misconceived. There can be no action without learning, and no learning without action (See Figure 1.1).
19. *The multiplier effect.* Since management systems learning must involve more than one person, in that whoever questions what goes on around them must also raise questions in the minds of others, an action learning programme will cause not only the set members to learn, but also those in the fields of the projects upon which the substantive members are engaged.

In some programmes this multiplying effect will equal, or even exceed, that of the set exchanges in the value of the managerial learning to which it gives rise.

20. *The objectives of action learning.* Action learning necessarily has three major objectives, and it is idle to design programmes intended to concentrate on one of them. None can be accomplished unless its two counterparts are also encouraged. They are:

i) to make useful progress upon the treatment of some problem or opportunity in the real world;

ii) to give nominated managers (and many others within the operational fields of the problems or opportunities on which they will work) sufficient scope, variable but sustained, to learn for themselves, and in the company of colleagues, how best to approach ill-structured challenges to which nobody can, at the outset, suggest any satisfactory response; and

iii) to encourage teachers and others in management development to perceive their missions afresh. They should no longer try to teach managers anything about how to manage, but should see themselves as having to contrive, with senior managements, the conditions in which all managers, including those at
the top, learn with and from each other in the pursuit of their common and everyday duties.

These three objectives are to action learning what the three sides are to a triangle, essential to its character and incompatible with the suggestion that any one of them can be greater than the sum of the other two.

THE FUNDAMENTAL NATURE OF ACTION LEARNING

This coda to the first section has little to do with any programme of action learning, but our review of the subject, however condensed it is supposed to be, would suffer by its omission. It has therefore been included to demonstrate that the argument of 18 above (to relate learning, advising and deciding by assimilating them all to the scientific method, and forming a broad statement of rational behaviour called action learning) is in the very nature of things, like Pythagoras’ theorem or the laws of electromagnetic induction.

THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

This intellectual structuring of experience to achieve a command over the world consists in five steps:

1. observation or survey – collecting and classifying reports of what seems to go on;
2. theory or hypothesis – suggesting casual relationships between those happenings;
3. test or experiment – carrying out activities dependent on those causal relationships;
4. (audit or review – asking if those activities go as was expected;
5. review or control – rejecting, changing or accepting the causal relationships.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>element of grammar</th>
<th>(1) survey or observation</th>
<th>(2) theory or hypothesis</th>
<th>(3) test or experiment</th>
<th>(4) audit or evaluation</th>
<th>(5) review or control</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>first person</td>
<td>admitting one's own ignorance</td>
<td>guessing at likely knowledge</td>
<td>referring to reliable authority</td>
<td>assessing measure of agreement</td>
<td>retaining or dismissing guesswork</td>
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<td>second person</td>
<td>admitting need for support on support</td>
<td>speculative discussion</td>
<td>cooperating in realistic rehearsal</td>
<td>arguing over results</td>
<td>reinforcing or ceasing cooperation</td>
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<tr>
<td>third person</td>
<td>taking associative clues on support</td>
<td>defining trial strategy</td>
<td>piloting with controls</td>
<td>comparing pilot and forecasts</td>
<td>confirming modifying rejecting strategy</td>
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**Figure 1.1 The Prime Idea of Action Learning**

**PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

These are referred to here solely in the grammatical sense of first, second and third person, something common to all languages by the nature of language itself: person(s) speaking, person(s) spoken to, and person(s) or thing(s) spoken about. Language may be taken as a model of awareness, too: awareness of self, awareness of companions, awareness of third parties and of the external world.
It may also be taken as a model of influence: influence upon self, influence upon companions, and influence upon third parties and upon the external world.

These three may be seen as learning (changing self), advising (changing others), and deciding (action changing the external world).

Since very few activities can be pursued in one-person-form alone, all three levels of the general model are necessarily involved. When the activity is rational it generates our figure; this sets out the prime idea of action learning.