Action Learning in Practice

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GOWER
CHAPTER 3

The Power of Action Learning

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Comment from the author: I have been pleasantly surprised how much of this chapter has stood the test of time. I have, therefore, added my thoughts in 2011 in italics to give a modern context.

Action learning is a process for the reform of organizations and the liberation of human vision within organizations. The process is based on taking one or more crucial organizational problems and, in real time, analyzing their dynamics; implementing proposed solutions derived from the constructive criticisms of colleagues; monitoring results; and through being held responsible for these actions, learning from the results so that future problem solving and opportunity taking is improved. In theory this is little different from the logical procedure of any rational person attempting to solve organizational problems. But organizations rarely behave rationally. In practice irrationality is generated by misunderstanding the complexities and uncertainties of modern organizations. Such irrationality interfere with achieving the blend of logic and emotional energy necessary to transcend organizational difficulties. The action learning process attempts to achieve this blend through giving rigour and pace to the cycle of learning and, through using the positive powers of small groups, to sustain this discipline and rhythm. Structural elements of action learning are that the authority and responsibility for analysis and implementation are given to those people who have psychological ownership of the problem and must live with their proposed solution. The whole is underpinned by the proven assumption that people learn most effectively with and from colleagues in the same position.

As such it is a very powerful organizational tool for the reform of working systems and the subsequent restating of organizational objectives. Its power derives from releasing and reinterpreting the accumulated experiences of the people who comprise the organization. The combination of this released energy and the act of moving the authority for problem solving to those people who must live with the consequences is a deliberate devolution of organizational power. Such devolution has two major benefits. First, giving responsibility to those who own the problem gains commitment to any proposed solution, offers participants the chance to consciously develop their own learning, and demonstrates to all concerned the benefits of more autonomous group working. Second, the learned autonomy and reintegration of work groups allows the top managers to concentrate on the increasingly necessary roles of monitoring the uncertain environment, and designing the future to ensure the organization’s continuity, with the time released from not having to watch constantly day-to-day activities.
What became much clearer is the need to differentiate the roles of directors and managers before reintegrating them. This became the theme of my work on The Learning Board from 1992 onwards and was made manifest in ‘The Fish Rots From The Head’.

Action learning can be seen as so powerful by perceptive but faint-hearted souls that they will not allow its use in their organizations because of the perceived risks to the organization and their careers. The fear is usually that uncovering the inadequacies of the organization, and the blocks to reform, will unsettle the stability of all concerned. This is part of the process. Action learning is concerned with balancing risk and uncertainty, but its focus is not on the destructive aspects of negative criticism and buck passing often associated with them. It concentrates on managing risks and uncertainties and on learning from them for the benefit of the stakeholders of the organization. As the recession in the West continues and the uncertainties and risks in just surviving become painfully clear, many people are realizing that there are no risk-free remedies for their organizational ills. They are, therefore, looking for processes of organizational learning and adaptation which though incurring risks are creative, motivating, and cost-effective. Action learning meets these criteria, but it needs some organizational clout to get it started effectively enough to sustain itself as the style of managing and thinking suitable for the turbulent 1990s. One of the few constructive things to come out of the present economic and social recession is that it is creating crises in organizations. As this is the only condition under which truly radical rethinking of the means and ends of an organization can be undertaken, and the results implemented systematically and rapidly, it bodes well for action learning, for action learning thrives in crises.

In 2011 there is growing interest in the differentiation between risk (an essentially managerial concern) and uncertainty (a directorial concern). The work in the 1920s by Frank Knight is a good starting point. It helps us understand that the very nature of our work is to take thoughtful risk in uncertainty; and that this is done by our use of judgment – which we shall never get absolutely right.

Given that action learning is a powerful process of organizational reform; that it involves the devolution of powers and the recasting of managerial roles; and that it is often instigated in conditions of crisis; it is essential that the present holders of organizational power understand both logically and emotionally what is likely to happen in their own backyard if they use this process. It has long been an axiom of management that for any significant changes to occur in an organization the top management must be committed to, and informed of, the proposed changes. Action learning goes a step further and says the top management must be willing to learn from the resulting analyses and implementation in their turn, that is, that they need become part of the total organizational learning system and must play a continuing part in the development of it.

This is essential for action learning as it is based on the synergy of simultaneous development at the personal, organizational and business levels to achieve its powerful impact. Such synergy is beneficial both to top management who see it as a suitable and socially acceptable return made on their investment in people – the learning resource of their organization – and to the employees of the organization as it allows them to reform their ways of working by removing the sources of frustration whilst also developing themselves as more rounded people. So for any simultaneous development to occur through action learning, no matter what the level of entry to the organization, it is essential that top management is prepared for the opportunities and risks they face.
Directors’ and top management commitment and the consequent change in their behaviour is necessary because it symbolizes that changes in all the stakeholders’ attitudes are to be encouraged as the meaning of what is meant by ‘work’ in their organization is reconsidered. This process will often seem uncomfortable, even alien, to the people concerned. Hence any evidence, however flimsy, that top management is not serious in their commitment will be used to abort the process. It is the role of top management to provide sufficient personal and organizational ‘cover’ for those people participating in an action learning programme to ensure they are not punished under the existing organizational rules whilst they strive to develop new ones. Time is needed for any significant behavioural and attitudinal changes to occur so carefully monitored ‘pilot projects’ are a useful way of signalling that change is being encouraged from the top and the authority for day-to-day problem solving devolved.

Many people feel that they would like to use action learning in their organization but have not sufficient power or rhetoric to make the case. In the next few paragraphs I have outlined the arguments I have found effective in convincing directors and top managements of the benefits of using action learning to reform their organizations. It is not ‘pure’ action learning theory because it draws pragmatically on the work of many other people to make a point effectively, but the structure and logic of the argument is very much action learning’s own.

**Convincing the Board and Top Management**

I assume that Boards and top managers are interested in the survival and growth of their organizations. In the present age of uncertainty and discontinuity both aspirations are increasingly difficult to attain using current organizational thinking and structures. One is looking, therefore, for a way of thinking and acting which helps cope with these uncertainties and discontinuities. We know from the study of ecology that the essential formula for the continuing survival of an organism is that its rate of learning must be equal to, or greater than, the rate of change in its environment (see Figure 3.1.) If its rate of learning is less than the rate of change, then it dies. This formula is usually symbolized in the action learning writings as \( L > C \). It seems to hold good from the simple amoeba to the largest transnational corporation. Its usefulness is in its focus on learning as the crux of surviving environmental change. In organizations this argues for the development and maintenance of a system of organizational learning to monitor environmental change and take appropriate avoiding action.

*In the UK the Companies Act 2006 has demanded that directors now make a signed statement in their annual report that their company is a ‘going concern’ that is, that they can see that it has a future. This may come as a shock to the general public who assumed that directors must consider this always. They were wrong but this legislative demand will increase the strength of the argument for improving an organization’s rate of learning.*
The only resource capable of learning within an organization is the people who comprise it. The very diversity of the experience of the people in the organization is a valuable asset, if one can learn to use it. No technology can learn to cope with the managerial problems of organizations because it is designed to cope with the solution of technical ‘puzzles’ rather than managerial ‘problems’. Problems are rooted in the quality and quantity of the organizational learning resource and, therefore, reflect the quality of top management’s investment in that area.

Action learning is most effective when used to confront live organizational problems rather than technical puzzles. As learning is at the core of this process it is particularly valuable in developing the structures and dynamics of organizational change. It is, therefore, immediately attractive to top managers as an obvious way out of the present organizational difficulties. But their acceptance is often without sufficient consideration of the unique strengths and weaknesses of their organization. For a system of organizational learning to be developed for effective organizational problem solving, it is essential that top management accept there are no cut-and-dried answers to what are seen as common organizational problems – they are situation-specific. The different social history, personalities and organizational culture, will determine the boundaries of resources and values within which any possible solutions will lay. Encouraging the employees to find effective solutions within these boundaries is a task of top management. They have available to them a highly cost-effective set of tools – the talents and experiences of the people they employ. It is vital that they release and tap the springs of self-sufficient learning within their organization, establishing the atmosphere in which reinterpretation and constructive criticism of people’s experiences is encouraged on a regular basis which is central to this style of managing, so that failure to meet targets can be discussed openly and more realistic targets be mutually agreed. This will enable employees to rise above the usual interpersonal bickering and subscribe to important common tasks which transcend the petty politics and concentrate on the survival of their organization.

It takes time to change organizational culture, management styles and organizational structures. Action learning is significantly faster and more effective in achieving these ends than other forms of organizational change. However, the interim period is always difficult so ‘cover’ within the business for the first projects is essential. Whether these are called ‘pilot programmes’, ‘management action groups’ or other such names is unimportant. What is essential is that the top managers are sufficiently committed intellectually and emotionally to want to become part of the organizational learning system. However, it is often alarming how quickly top managers ‘buy’ the action learning idea intellectually without having bought it emotionally. Then as information is uncovered that does not fit their stereotypes, they withdraw cooperation or react negatively to the initiative. Questioning their assumptions and work processes is an essential part of the organizational learning process. Once they
can be seen to change when faced with authentic information which questions their operating assumptions, then the change in organizational attitudes will disseminate rapidly through the organization.

Keith Grint’s work at Templeton College, Oxford and later at the University of Lancaster, is worth noting here. His argument that there is no such thing as ‘not learning’ because we learn all the time. The question is whether the organization’s structure and cultures are such as to encourage ‘good learning’ or ‘bad learning’. The argument is that bad learning takes up to four times the organization’s resources than good learning.

The organizational learning of which I am talking is not just the acquisition of impersonal and codified knowledge. It is not just a matter of collecting as much data as possible on any problem area. Data, the ocean of facts available in the world, is useless on its own. What are needed for effective managerial decisions are the attitude and skill to select from that sea of data the specific pieces which form the information needed to resolve the problem. So I am looking for a meaning for ‘learning’ in an organization which integrates attitudes, knowledge and skills through action on live problems via a process of reflection and reinterpretation that develops higher-quality question posing and answering. This I see as the core of the learning organization.

This argument was developed in my 1987 book ‘The Learning Organisation’.

Built into organizational learning in a rapidly changing world is an ever-present element of risk taking. This is why developing higher-quality questioning is central to managing such risks. We have seen that the application of technical knowledge alone is insufficient to resolve complex organizational problems. Even if it were, the intervention of a single variable, time, is sufficient to ensure that managers are usually unable to have sufficient learning to take risk-free decisions. It seems to be an axiom of management that decisions have to be taken always before one has had time to gain the full facts. The consequence is that the difference between the level of learning held by a manager, or an organization, and the level needed theoretically for a totally risk-free decision is a measure of the amount of risk being taken (see Figure 3.2).

My argument is that it is impossible to avoid risks in the present economic climate so a prime role of top management is to create the organizational climate in which thoughtful risk taking and subsequent learning are encouraged. Top managers face the same risk-taking dilemmas as the employees they lead. We all fantasize about the amount and consequences of the risks we face. Recent work has shown that there are three main categories of risks about which people concern themselves – physical; financial; and emotional. In an unsupportive or destructively critical organizational environment fantasies about all three types breed with each other and stifle action. ‘Dynamic conservatism’, or creative inactivity, are common causes of learning loss in organizations. Action learning counters learning loss by encouraging supportive and constructively critical behaviour within individuals first, and then disseminates it throughout the organization.

An essential foundation of the action learning argument is that of ensuring that the authority and responsibility for action and learning is passed to the lowest appropriate part of the organization for the work in hand. This is usually in direct contrast with the behaviour in most organizations. The argument for doing this is that a system that encourages people at all levels of their organization to be as self-sufficient as possible is inherently healthy in itself as it will keep up the necessary rate of learning. But more than that it also releases the time and energy of top managers and directors to look upwards
and outwards to undertake the strategic aspects of their jobs which are often neglected in times of crisis. It assumes that the daily operational problems are dealt with by the people who must live with them and any proposed solutions; whilst senior managers get on with monitoring the environment and integrating the boundaries between the internal operational world and the external environment (see Figure 3.3.)

Figure 3.2  Diagram of the typical amount of risk taken by a manager

Figure 3.3  The two worlds of the organization and the integration mechanism
Two models seem to help directors and top managers clarify their thinking in relation to what will be an appropriate launching and development action learning strategy for them. The first concerns the organizational structure and roles of their business. It is a highly simplified version of Stafford Beer's excellent 'Brain of the Firm' (see Figure 3.4), where the notions of what should happen at the equity distribution and business integration levels can be usefully debated. Most action learning interventions in the UK have happened at level 3 as this is typically the area where externally or internally-generated crises are felt. Action here can usually be disseminated downwards, to where the work is happening, very fast. With the time then released top management can give better thought, and develop better questioning, about the strategic levels, reasonably secure in the knowledge that the operational side is self-regulating within its agreed plans. This can be represented by a simplified adaptation of Argyris' model of 'double loop learning' (see Figure 3.5) that is, the idea that the internal operational sphere and the external strategic sphere need integration through a learning mechanism.

I was influenced later by the book 'Change: Principles of Problem Formulation and Problem Resolution' by P. Watzlawick, J. Weakland and R. Fisch which helped me develop the three cycles of learning. It was only later that I found Reg Revan's own version of the three cycles – Systems Alpha, Beta and Gamma.

In terms of an intervention strategy for the use of action learning by top management this could be seen as:
1. Activation of senior functional managers to tackle key organizational survival projects.
2. Dissemination of the approaches learned by senior managers to the wider employee base, to encourage their reconsideration of present work practices and structures, in preparation for the devolution of authority to become self-learning and self-regulating within the plans agreed with top managers.
3. Activation of the top management to reconsider their thinking and roles following the devolution of most daily operational problems; and their need to concentrate on environmental monitoring and the integration of strategy with operations.

These simple models and arguments proved sufficient to convince a range of top managers to launch pilot activities for the reform of their organizations in many parts of the United Kingdom, France and The Netherlands in the early 1980s. 

*And many others since!*

**Making it Operational**

If such arguments are powerful enough to cause debate amongst the top team and demands for subsequent action, then the focus turns to ‘What do we do from here?’

The four key elements of the action learning process:

1. a crucial organizational problem;
2. people willing to take risks to develop themselves and their organizations;
3. authority to take action on the problem;
4. a system for learning reflectively
are all that are needed to guarantee success with the pilot programme. The reader should now be able to design his/her own programme subject only to the personalities and history of their organization. The rest of what I have to say is, therefore, more anecdotal and may overshadow the simplicity of the above elements. What follows is a distillation of my experiences over the last ten years. It is not a series of formulae the application of which will guarantee that what you are doing is action learning. Only you can decide that through your learning.

One thing I have learned is that there is a need for a ‘programme manager’. This is not necessarily a personnel or training department person. Line managers are just as competent to do it and often have more commitment to see the learning project through. The role is arduous and political. It is a good training for general managership. It is the link between the logic of top management’s action learning strategy and the emotional responses, positive or negative, of the employees. It is therefore not an easy job, but any risk-taking manager can do it. Perhaps one of the most regular surprises for people taking the programme manager role for the first time is just how fast top managers grasp the idea of getting cost-effective development launched in their business. Within this enthusiasm for the logic of the idea there are a series of traps for the unwary programme manager. There is no direct connection between the acceptance of the logic of an idea and its emotional acceptance. This latter aspect requires an attitude and behavioural change which the former does not. So, rather than just accepting top management’s verbal acceptances of the logic, the programme manager must be courageous and keep a firm link with the top team even during times of negative feedback from the staff to gain their emotional commitment to the practice of action learning within their organization.

Whilst this can appear initially as a daunting prospect to a new programme manager it is a necessary test of the resolve of each side in the process. An honest and humble approach to working alongside the top team to research their views as to what are the crucial problems of the organization can build the credibility of the programme manager rapidly with them. The selection of key problem areas by individual top team members usually generates a varied list which needs debate and comparison by the whole team before they can focus on the structural elements of policy and strategy for their organization. From this debate it is usually easy to identify one or more managerial problems that need resolution within, say, 12 months and would, therefore, make suitable action learning projects. Once the top team has selected these projects the programme manager is locked into a line manager role. He or she needs to operate within the time and money budgets agreed with the top team to achieve the stated performances. Any deviations from the required targets will need careful monitoring and reflection by the top team to determine whether their target setting is unrealistic, or whether the failure to achieve lies with their employees. In either case there is a need to develop a system of organizational learning which allows the business to do significantly better next time.

Elements of Programme Design

Having gained the commitment and operational targets of the top team, the next stage is essentially one of design. Dogmatism can raise its ugly head at this point as to what is the nature of ‘real’ action learning. Rather than become embroiled in a fruitless game of restrictive definition I prefer to take a contingent stance and stress that, if there exist
the four key elements mentioned above (p. 28), the appropriate design will depend on the history and resources of the organization, the personalities involved, and the wit and creativity of those charged with the programme design.

Central to an appropriate design is an awareness of the processes by which adults learn. Reg Revans in *The ABC of Action Learning* describes four typical managerial blockages to the problem of deciding honest sources of information in conditions of uncertainty and risk – the four correctible handicaps:

1. the idolization of perceived past experiences;
2. the charismatic influences of (other) successful managers;
3. the impulsion to instant activity;
4. the belittlement of subordinates.

Within the employee’s energy and enthusiasm for actions based on ill-considered learned responses – their action fixation – lays both the blockage and opportunity for true learning. We know that adults learn best from live projects; from the support and constructive criticism of colleagues; from rigorous self-reflection leading to serious reinterpretation of their previous experiences; and from a willingness to test their hypotheses in action.

We need to design, therefore, an organizational learning process that links analysis, prognosis, implementation and testing, with a group of colleagues facing similar problems who will respect the personal experimentation and reconsideration that lies at the heart of the action learning process. This grouping of colleagues is called the ‘project set’. It is a group of comrades in adversity who will give, and expect as a reciprocal, personal support and honest, constructive criticism as the rights and duties of each project set member. The set gives the rigour and pace through the regularity of its meetings for each individual to develop the ability to reflect upon both proposed plans of action and the consequences of them. Then it encourages reinterpretation of the realities of that plan and its implementation as they unfold.

The action-fixated cycle of learning can be characterized as shown in Figure 3.6 and can be contrasted with the action learning cycle shown in Figure 3.7. At this point in the design the programme manager can link the projects, as agreed with the top team, with the participants in the project set. We can then characterize the basic logistics as shown in Figure 3.8. The elements I have now added are those of the ‘client’ and the ‘set adviser’. The client is the person who ultimately owns the problem under investigation – the person who will finally be held responsible for the resolution of the project on which the participants work. In pilot programmes the client is typically the top team member with responsibility for the key problem area. The set adviser is usually a person external to the organization who helps with the developmental processes of the individuals and the set. Whilst theoretically unnecessary because the experiences already reside within the employees and simply need reinterpretation, they are usually helpful for a first programme both to ‘legitimize’ the action learning process within the organization and to help participants experiment with the changes in learning and management style demanded.

There are characteristics of successful programmes which depend on a combination of project type and situation. The simple matrix which describes these can be shown as in Figure 3.9. Observation of the effectiveness of each part of this quadrant seems to show that:
Figure 3.6  Action-fixated cycle of learning

Figure 3.7  Action learning cycle

Figure 3.8  Projects and participants in the project set
1. Own job projects tend to be effective for personal (role) development and the reinterpretation of specific jobs within an organization.

2. Internal exchanges tend to be effective for personal development and establishing better links between specialist functions within an organization.

3. External exchanges tend to be highly effective for personal development and in helping the client organization learn to value different experiences and views.

4. Technical exchanges tend not to be effective for the development of managerial problem solving because of their over-concentration on technical puzzles but are useful for the dissemination of best practice.

The programme designer has a number of permutations of personal and/or organizational development to negotiate with the top team using this quadrant. Many highly successful programmes have been completed over the past 20 years using the individually-orientated approach mentioned above. However, in the present economic conditions, it has been noticeable that top managers have been keen to get fast and cost-effective results throughout their organizations. In these conditions the personally-orientated approaches tend to be seen as too slow and other approaches are needed. Within the last two years there has been a rise in the number of team-based programmes. These small teams – typically four or five participants usually but not exclusively from one organization – work on a crucial problem of the business as a single project. As a team they form a much stronger political force for change in the organization than an individual. This increased strength usually guarantees that changes will disseminate fast once the action learning process is under way. Team projects are, therefore, a powerful tool for organizational renewal.

Figure 3.9  The job/organization matrix
This demand for increasing the scale and speed of dissemination of action learning within organizations, and its focus away from individual development towards the reform of the total organization, brings into sharp relief the earliest and rather neglected work of Reg Revans in the National Coal Board, the NHS Hospital Service and West Africa. These emphasized the need to develop a 'learning community' attitude at all levels of the organization. This change of scale does not negate the fundamental idea of using intelligent people, naive to the functional specialization that forms the basis of the project they are confronting, asking basic questions about fundamental organizational problems. The power of 'intelligent naivety' in questioning the working assumptions of an organization is the leading edge of the action learning process. The rigour and pace of the project set forms the plane; and the motive force for organizational take-off is the energy released through the devolution of authority to solve problems. With this combination it is possible to truly undertake organizational reform.

The Changing Roles of Trainers and Developers

Other chapters in this book will deal with life in project sets, the processes of personal development and organizational change, and the advantages and disadvantages of using advisers for the project sets. What interests me is the significant change in roles 'traditional' trainers or developers need to embrace if they are to become effective practitioners of action learning. Systems of organizational learning are much too important to be left to trainers. They are central to the survival and growth of any organization and therefore reside ultimately with the top team. The practice of developing such a learning system is a line management job in its own right and needs, therefore, line management skills. Perhaps the biggest trauma for a trainer or developer to face is that the programme manager need not be a trainer; but any trainer undertaking the running of an action learning programme must be a line manager. An entrepreneurial, risk-taking stance is essential if the programme manager is to be successful. I use the word 'entrepreneurial' here both in the sense of selling to top managers the cost-effectiveness of the proposition and, more importantly, in its original French sense of a 'stager of dramas'. The use of the action learning process with its resultant release of hitherto untapped energies is most certainly a drama to be staged and managed. This is easily understood by line managers but often proves more difficult for trainers and developers to assimilate, particularly if they have been running courses or programmes which have been hermetically sealed from the real time pressures of their organizations.

In addition to the entrepreneurial role, there is that of programme designer. Here it is not sufficient to be just a technical expert on action learning or the processes of the project set because both lock the trainer back into the easy stereotype expected by participants. This will inevitably lead to the rejection of the trainer and the possibility of rejection of the total process. A more appropriate stance for a programme designer seems to be that of the contingent consultant working from the problems as they exist and, through using a wide and flexible range of behavioural, attitudinal and cognitive inputs, working towards the assimilation of the action learning process within the brain of the firm through the demonstration of its effectiveness.

Parallel with the entrepreneurial and design stages, and continuing throughout the programme, is the adviser and counsellor role which helps everyone involved in the
process interpret it through their own experiences. This calls for the ability to explain what is proposed and expected in a language appropriate to each part of the organization. An essential part of this role is the ability to demystify the fantasies of the participants as to why ‘they’ (top management) wish to launch the action learning process, and then following through the process by highlighting the individual and group learning as it develops. As the total strategy unfolds, then the programme manager needs to ensure the development of the top team’s strategic role and ensure that it links into the operational learning systems as they grow.

In all these new roles it is impossible for the trainers to maintain a safe, off-line, role. Commitment to launching action learning processes in an organization is undoubtedly more risky than traditional stances. But the reward is in bringing the trainer directly into the line functions as part of their career development. It seems that the management of an action learning programme is a useful test of general management competence. Perhaps in the future we shall see this as a natural move in any manager’s career path as the acid test before general managership.