

Action Learning for Managers

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GOWER

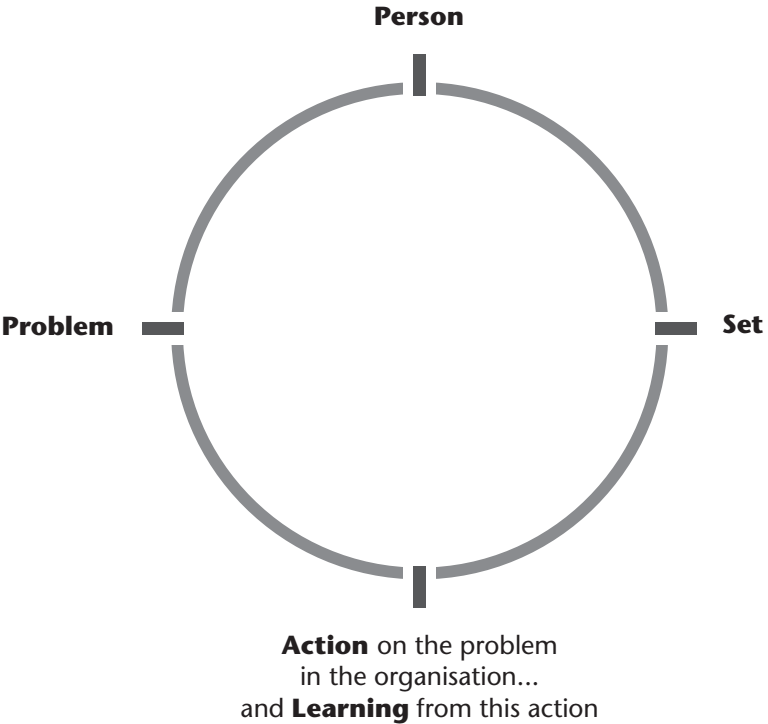
① **What is action learning?**

In some ways this first question is the most difficult. Reg Revans never gave a one-sentence definition and always maintained that there is no single form or version of action learning. The idea is essentially simple, but, because it is concerned with profound knowledge of oneself and the world, it cannot be communicated as a formula or technique.

Given this proviso, it is possible to describe action learning as it is currently applied in many organisations today. Action learning is an approach to individual and organisational development. Working in small groups known as “sets”, people tackle important organisational issues or problems and learn from their attempts to change things.

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Action learning has four main elements:



Revans makes the essential point that learning and action require each other:

*“there is no learning without action and no
(sober and deliberate) action without learning”*

Action learning brings people together to exchange, support and challenge each other in action and learning. So:

first, each person joins and takes part *voluntarily*. (You can't be sent or send anyone else (though you might work hard at persuading people!);

second, each person must *own* an organisational task, problem or opportunity on which they want to act;

third, because we are much more likely to succeed with the help of friends, *sets* or groups of action learners meet to help each other think through the issues, create options, and above all ...

fourth, take *action and learn* from the effects of that action.

There are many small group initiatives in and around organisations that may well be engaging in action and learning in this way. These include “self-help groups”, “support groups”, “learning sets”, “self-development groups”, “productivity improvement meetings”, “quality circles” and so on. It is not important what a group is called; the acid test is whether the people concerned are helping each other to

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take action on their pressing concerns and learning from this work.

This is one of the strengths of action learning. Being *both* profound *and* simple it is never in danger, as mere techniques are, of being here today and gone tomorrow. We always need to re-invent our own ways of putting the basic ideas into practice. This inventing element is what maintains the life in action learning.

It's as simple – and as hard – as that. The only certain way to get a taste for what action learning is like is to do it. However, you can get a better idea of what is involved from listening to others engaged in action and learning. Here is a **case example** which gives a flavour of the life in a set meeting:

CASE EXAMPLE

An action learning set of doctors and managers have been meeting together in a hospital. Don, a consultant physician, is tackling the degree of stress experienced by nurses and other staff in his unit. Here the set members are questioning him about the problem and also wanting to know what has happened since their last meeting:

Don: *Well, it's worse than I thought – our length of stay figures are too high, and the turnover interval is down to less than a day – no wonder everyone rushes around like headless chickens. Morale is low, sickness and absence is way up amongst the nurses and the standard of care is generally too low.*

Shamilla: *It sounds awful, but what about the other figures you were going to bring after the last meeting ... you know, about the types of admissions, the case mix and so on?*

Don: *Ah well ... yes ... this is a bit embarrassing. When I looked at admissions it seems that my senior colleague has far more electives than anyone else – about 40% compared with 10% elsewhere.*

Paul: *So ... what do you make of that?*

Val: *"Research" of course – what else!*

Don: *Er, yes, probably.*

Shamilla: *So, what can you do about it then, Don?*

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A discussion follows about possible options for action. At the same time Don is getting a lot of support from his set, who are well aware that this is a delicate situation. No-one tells Don what to do:

Don: *(tentatively) Well, I could publish my figures at the next audit meeting ...*

Lawrence: *What effect would that have?*

Don: *Well, he might start to argue, but more likely he would just walk out and say my figures are rubbish and I don't know what I'm talking about*

Paul: *What else could you do? Who else would like to see this issue tackled?*

Don: *The Chief Executive wants it badly, but I doubt if she'd back me up if it came to it*

Lawrence: *Have you asked her?*

Don: *Not exactly ... but you know how it is.*

Lawrence: *OK I can see the problem, but until you do ask ...*

Eventually, and after several more rounds of suggestions and questions, Don decides that the best course of action is to try talking to his senior colleague in private. He'll do this before the next meeting and bring back the results. He looks far from confident. However, with Don having had his turn, the set turns its attention now to Shamilla ...

Taking action in organisations – action of the “sober and deliberate” sort – is often not easy. It may require us to do something different – to “fit out” rather than fit in. There is risk involved in learning in this way; sometimes of incurring the wrath of others, but more often with risking some aspect of ourselves – our reputation or self-image. The learning from such risks can be profound, and the support and challenge of others is important in such circumstances.

The following is a **resource** which gives a more formal definition of action learning and which can be used as a handout.

RESOURCE

What is Action Learning?

Action learning was developed by Revans as the best way to educate managers. It is based on his premise that:

“There can be no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning.”

Revans suggests that organisations (and the people in them) cannot flourish unless their rate of learning (L) is equal to, or greater than, the rate of change (C) being experienced:

$$L > C$$

Learning has two elements – traditional instruction or *Programmed Knowledge*, and critical reflection or *Questioning Insight*. This gives the learning equation:

$$L = P + Q$$

Revans distinguishes between *puzzles* and *problems*. *Puzzles* have “best” solutions and can be solved via the application of programmed knowledge and with the help of experts. *Problems* have no right answers and

are tackled by people in different ways by the exercise of questioning insight. Programmed knowledge can be helpful here but should only be sought after careful reflection on what knowledge is needed and why.

Action learning sets bring people together in order to:

- Work on and through *hitherto intractable problems* of managing and organising. This must be a voluntary commitment.
- Work on problems or opportunities which personally engage the set members – situations in which “I am part of the problem and the problem is part of me”.
- Check individual perceptions of the problem, to clarify and render it more manageable, and to create and explore alternatives for action.
- Take action in the light of new insight. This insight begins to change the situation. An account of the effects of the action are brought back to the set for further shared reflection and exploration.
- Provide the balance of support and challenge (*warmth* and *light*) which will enable each member to act and learn effectively.

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- Be aware of group processes and develop effective teamwork. Usually sets have an adviser or facilitator whose role is to help members identify and acquire the skills of action and learning.
- Focus on learning at three levels:
 - about the problem or opportunity which is being tackled
 - about what is being learned about oneself
 - about the process of learning itself, ie “learning to learn”.

The second and third levels are essential for the transfer of learning to other situations.

(Adapted from the original by Kath Aspinwall)

Cases and handouts like these can be helpful in introducing the idea of action learning, but it is usually best to do this quickly and get on with experimenting with the *experience* of action learning. You can't really teach action learning; but you can set up situations in which people can learn with and from each other through taking action.

There is guidance on how to do this later in the book, but at this point, you might be thinking, “This action learning seems very simple yet powerful; but will it work in my organisation?”