

Leading libraries Briefing paper on action learning sets

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1. Introduction

This briefing paper is intended as an introduction to action learning sets which can be used very effectively as a 'safe space' in which to reflect, experiment, learn to develop yourself, and to increase your impact at work.

The theory of action learning was developed by Reg Revans (1982) and used as a method to support business and organisational development and develop problem-solving capabilities. Action learning is practised by educational institutions, businesses, governments and non-profit organisations and is a valuable means of supporting professional development.

2. What is action learning?

Action learning is defined as a "continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with an intention of getting things done" (McGill and Beaty, 2001, p. 11). In other words, individuals work on real work issues, openly reflect on their experiences and offer supportive challenge with a view to taking subsequent positive action. One of the fundamental aims of action learning is to help participants develop the skills and make time for active reflection in order to solve their own problems.

3. How does it work?

Action learning sets are small groups of people who are willing to offer as well as seek help from one another in a supportive and confidential learning environment. For the participant in a learning set, action learning involves identifying a situation you want to change or improve.

Participants bring a problem, challenge, development issue or task from their current workload that:

- is current and specific
- involves them
- requires them to take an action or decision (even if that is to think / approach something differently).

The process of sharing the issue with a group of fellow learners (the learning set) enables the individual to tap into the ideas and experiences of others and to have assumptions and preconceptions challenged in order to gain different and deeper insights. This increased understanding then provides the impetus for action; applying what has been learnt at the same time as bringing about change.

Subsequent reflection with the learning set on the impact of the change enables set members to learn and benefit from each other, as well as looking for opportunities to transfer the learning to other aspects of their life and work.

4. The action learning set process

Action learning is best practised with a small group, each taking turns to act as coach, presenter and facilitator / time keeper, all underpinned by a set of pre-agreed rules. Issues such as confidentiality, trust and respect are key to the effective running of the learning set. The set members will discuss this, agree 'ways of working', and provide a framework for the organisation of the group and its effectiveness.

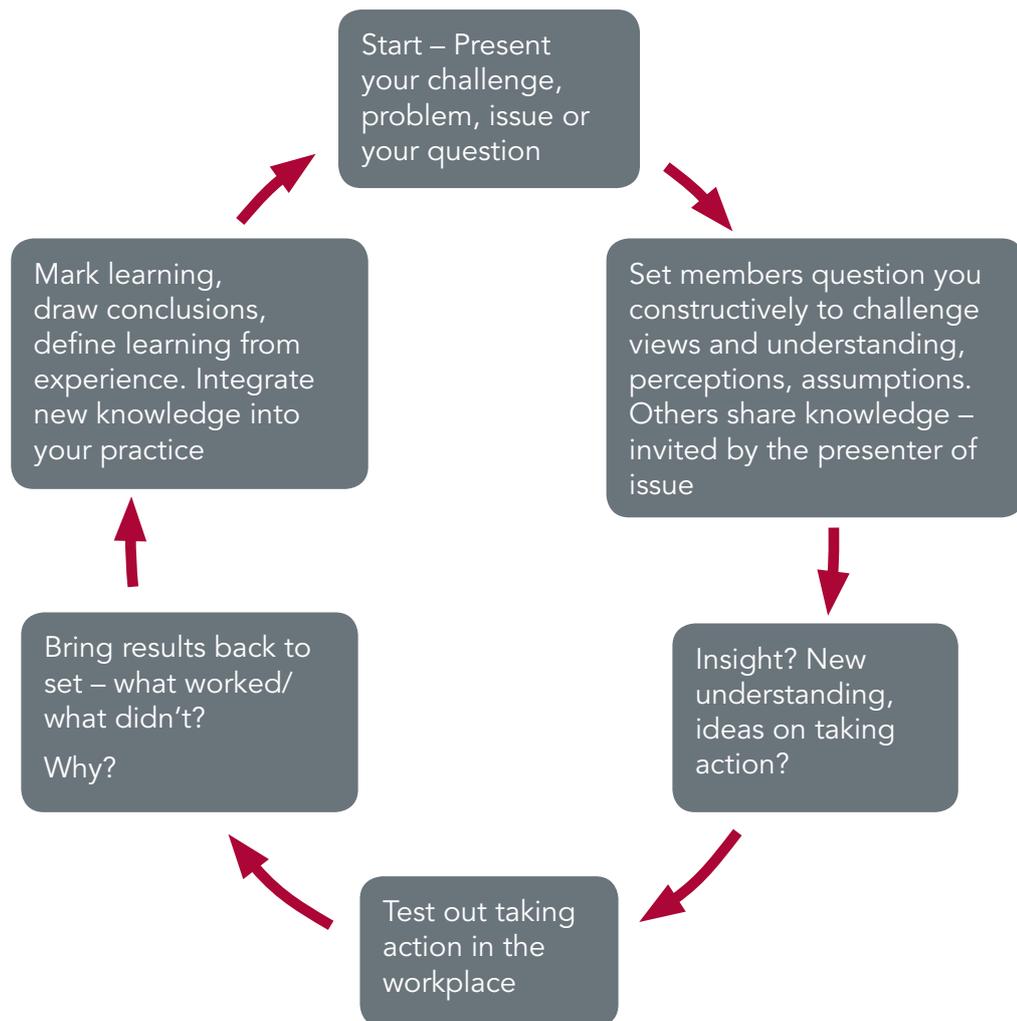


Fig 1: Reproduced under the creative commons licence CC BY-NC:
www.odi.org/publications/5230-action-learning-set-process

The set should meet frequently to sustain momentum and commitment. Often, sets meet for a fixed period, although experience would suggest that fewer than six meetings generally do not have a sustained developmental impact on individuals' roles in their workplace.

Action learning develops collaborative and shared leadership skills and allows creative and strategic thinking to take place in a safe environment. It also engenders self-awareness and can be challenging. Action learning is non-directive and places great emphasis on gaining commitment to action and on set members' understanding and mastering of key coaching principles and techniques. This is a good developmental method as long as each individual transfers their learning into their day-to-day role, thus facilitating their own development as leaders.

Each set member also needs to approach action learning with an attitude of a learner, being open to self-disclosure and having the willingness to change and commit to actions. If these attitudes and behaviours are not embraced then action learning will be unlikely to provide the desired benefits.

In addition to action learning sets meeting face to face, action learning can also be carried out virtually. Action e-learning (AEL) as defined and implemented by Waddill (2006) provides an alternative for organisations interested in adapting this learning process across sites, organisations and physical boundaries.

5. How does a learning set operate?

Learning sets can operate in different ways. The most frequently used approaches are:

- 'Open' sessions where individual members discuss issues of concern. The members agree at the start of each meeting which member will present their issue. The focus is on using questioning from other members to help the individual understand their issue and assist in identifying an action plan for addressing it, rather than providing direct advice or sharing experiences.
- 'Planned' sessions where the topic is agreed in advance. This model may be helpful where a learning set is supporting members who are all developing the same set of skills at the same time, and where members will benefit from brainstorming and sharing experiences of implementing new skills. Common focuses for discussion may include 'what worked for me and what didn't – and what would I do differently next time'.
- 'Combined' approach where the meeting is divided between 'planned' and 'open' sessions, allowing both the structure of a planned approach with opportunities for individuals to raise current issues as well.

6. What are the benefits of using action learning?

There are many benefits to using action learning as a developmental approach. Three key benefits are:

- Learning from others: because the focus of action learning is sharing work-based issues with others, one of the most important benefits is being able to learn from others' experiences of dealing with similar issues. This enables participants to gain insights through learning with others and offers opportunities to broaden awareness through hearing others' views.
- Extending your leadership repertoire: evidence shows that little sustained learning takes place when a person is just given advice, and often those in leadership roles end up 'taking on the problem'. Action learning focuses on changing this by working on asking open, probing, and challenging questions.
- Having impact at work: one of the problems with many developmental approaches is that they do not focus sufficiently on work impact. People are typically sent on training programmes, and development is seen as individual not organisational. One of the key benefits of action learning is that it focuses on real work issues.

Participants can expect to experience many positive changes including:

- acquiring long-lasting problem-solving skills
- developing leadership skills
- being challenged by the team
- learning best practice
- evolving fresh ideas
- forming effective plans for immediate implementation
- achieving desired results in a constructive way.

7. Conclusion

One of the main benefits of action learning is that it enables people to both reflect on a work-based issue and share experience with others. As a result, it encourages the formulation of actions and decisions that can be taken back to their workplaces and implemented, resulting in change.

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