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Action Learning

Abstract
{Excerpt} Conventional approaches to learning hinge on the presentationof knowledge and skills. Then again, knowledge is revealedthrough methods of questioning amid risk, confusion,and opportunity. Reginald Revans, the originator of actionlearning, recommended that one should keep away from experts with prefabricated answers. Rather, people shouldbecome aware of their lack of knowledge and be preparedto explore their ignorance with suitable questions and helpfrom others: finding the right questions rather than the right answers is important, and it is one's perception of a problem, one's evaluation of what is to be gained by solving it, and one's estimation of the resourcesavailable to solve it that supply the springs of human action.

Action learning is an educational process by which a person studies his or her own actions and experience to improveperformance. Put simply, it is about solving problems and getting things done. In action learning, a smallgroup of 5–8 persons (called action learning set) meets regularly for a day or half a day over at least 6 months and works collectively on a problem faced in ongoing practice. The action learning set helps a "presenter"work on a problem through supportive but challenging questioning. It encourages a deeper understanding of theissues involved, a reflective reassessment of the problem, and an exploration of ways forward. (Action learningrequires that actions be agreed at the end of each meeting.) By so doing, it provides a structured way of workingthat provide the discipline we often need to learn from what we do and improve practice as a result.

Keywords
Asian Development Bank, ADB, poverty, economic growth, sustainability, development

Comments
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Action Learning

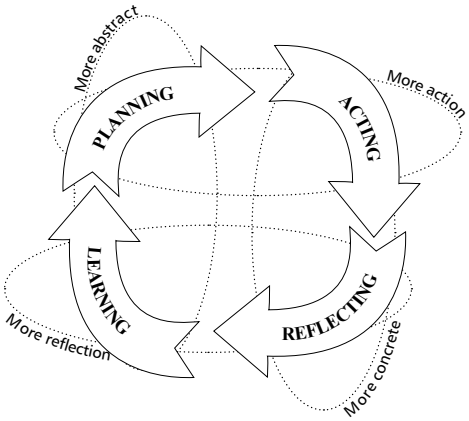
by Olivier Serrat

Action learning is a structured method that enables small groups to work regularly and collectively on complicated problems, take action, and learn as individuals and as a team while doing so.

Rationale

Conventional approaches to learning hinge on the presentation of knowledge and skills. Then again, knowledge is revealed through methods of questioning amid risk, confusion, and opportunity. Reginald Revans, the originator of action learning, recommended that one should keep away from experts with prefabricated answers.[1] Rather, people should become aware of their lack of knowledge and be prepared to explore their ignorance with suitable questions and help from others: finding the right questions rather than the right answers is important, and it is one's perception of a problem, one's evaluation of what is to be gained by solving it, and one's estimation of the resources available to solve it that supply the springs of human action.[2] Figure 1 depicts the cycle of learning.

Figure 1: Learning from Experience



Source: Adapted from David Kolb. 1984. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Prentice Hall.

[1] Revans distinguished cleverness, i.e., knowledge, and wisdom. He described the formula L = P + Q where *L* is learning; *P* is programmed, i.e., taught or read, knowledge; and *Q* is questioning to create insight. Q uses four major questions: where? who? when? what?; and three minor questions: why? how many? how much? From this, he demonstrated that powerful learning comes from people learning with and from others.

[2] High-level questions theorize, reflect, and hypothesize. Low-level questions seek factual answers and tend to converge in that they have correct answers. High-level questions require people to make connections and to engage in application, analysis, interpretation, or evaluation of ideas. Examples include: Are you in agreement with the group's answer? What do you think would happen if …? What is the difference between … and …? How are … and … similar? Why do you believe these differences or similarities occur? Low-level questions require people to recall information that has been presented or to retrieve information from memory.

Definition

Action learning is an educational process by which a person studies his or her own actions and experience to improve performance. Put simply, it is about solving problems and getting things done. In action learning, a small group of 5–8 persons (called action learning set) meets regularly for a day or half a day over at least 6 months and works collectively on a problem faced in ongoing practice.[3] The action learning set helps a "presenter" work on a problem through supportive but challenging questioning. It encourages a deeper understanding of the issues involved, a reflective reassessment of the problem, and an exploration of ways forward. (Action learning requires that actions be agreed at the end of each meeting.) By so doing, it provides a structured way of working that provide the discipline we often need to learn from what we do and improve practice as a result.

Applications

The most common applications of action learning are in professional and managerial learning and development, namely

- A work-based project or program in which set members are involved and for which they have a level of responsibility and are therefore able to realistically influence by their actions.
- An issue that concerns how set members operate in their work context, and one that they wish to improve and that could benefit from the support and challenge of the other members.

Action learning is not useful if the task that a set member is working on is a technical puzzle with a limited number of correct solutions. In such instances, it is better to tackle that the issue through consultation with experts, research, or training.

Benefits

Action learning sets have been used by civil and nongovernment organizations. They

- Increase awareness and enable individuals to identify personal development challenges.
- Develop self-confidence and readiness to take responsibility and initiative.
- Help people relate to and communicate and network with others more effectively.
- Provide structured peer support.
- Enable more disciplined ways of working in powerful teams.
- Enable individuals and teams to learn while working.[4]
- Build leadership competencies.
- Develop systems thinking, creativity, flexibility, and problem-solving skills.
- Foster the emergence of corporate cultures that can handle change and learn.
- Support innovation.

Still, for organizations to really feel the benefits of action learning there must be will to support participation in sets and respect for their outcomes. The disciplines and behaviors that encourage action learning are those of a learning organization. Peter Senge catalogues the attributes of learning organizations as personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, team learning, and systems thinking (the fifth discipline that integrates the other four).

[3] Revans believed that those best able to help in developing the self are those comrades in adversity who also struggle to understand themselves.

[4] Learning can take place at several levels. They include learning about the wider organization of which the set members are a part, learning about group processes, learning about the issue being presented, learning about oneself, the way one works and interacts with issues and people, and learning how to learn.

Key Principles of Action Learning

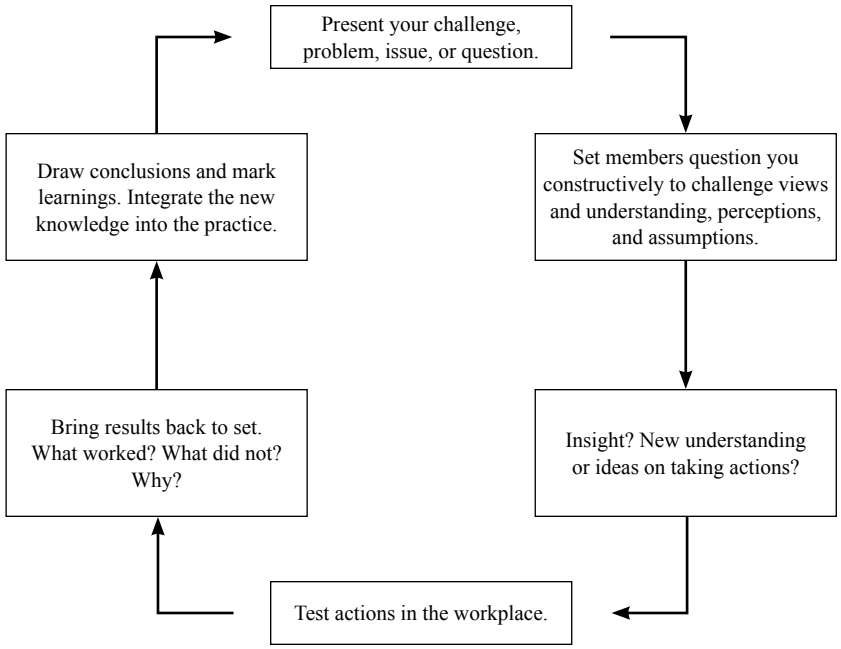
The key principles of action learning are that

- Learning begins with not knowing.
- Individuals and groups who assume responsibility stand the best chance of taking actions that will make a difference.
- Learning involves both programmed knowledge and questioning insight. Learning should be greater than the rate of change.

Process

Action learning brings together small groups of participants with the following intentions. Figure 2 depicts the action learning process as cyclical: it begins at the top of the diagram and moves round systematically, giving each set member the opportunity to present a problem and comment on others.

Figure 2: The Action Learning Process



Source: Adapted from National Primary and Care Trust Development Programme. 2008. *Welcome to Action Learning*. Available: www.natpact.nhs.uk/cms.php?pid=274

A typical set meeting might run like this:[5]

- Before the meeting, each set member thinks about the work-based issues he or she wishes to bring to the set.
- Set members agree to set aside the necessary time for the meeting. It should be held where they will be free from distraction.
- The facilitator might remind set members of the ground rules established during the formation of the set and may recap the key principles of the methodology.

[5] This section draws from BOND Guidance Note No. 5. 2004. *Action Learning Sets*. Available: www.bond.org.uk/data/files/als.pdf.

- The set members check-in and those who had an opportunity to explore their issue in the previous set report to the others on actions taken since the last meeting.
- One of the set members is given airtime for about one hour. This begins with the member taking 5–10 uninterrupted minutes to outline the work-based issue that he or she is bringing to the set members. Then, the other members ask questions of clarification, move into reflective and analytical questions, and towards the end question future action.
- During this process, the facilitator may sometimes "stop" the set to raise awareness on matters of process, for example if set members are giving advice packaged as questions.
- At the end of the airtime, the set member presenting the issue provides feedback on how he or she experienced the process and what learning took place. Set members also offer observations and learnings on both process and content.
- The process of airtime is repeated for as many set members as possible in the time available. (This is normally two members in a half-day or four in a full day meeting).
- The meeting may conclude with the completion of an action review sheet that aims to capture key learnings and action plans from the meeting. The logistics of the next meeting are also agreed.

Facilitation

A significant aspect of action learning is the "unlearning" of all-too-common habits of jumping from problem to solution and offering advice. For this, it is necessary to adhere to a disciplined methodology of good listening and questioning. A skilled and experienced facilitator can help to achieve this. Specifically, a facilitator would help create safe space for honest discussion, remind set members of the methodology, model helpful questioning, ensure that the questioning moves around the action learning cycle at an appropriate pace, draw attention to issues of process, and act as timekeeper.

Tips

Action learning is most effective when the commitment is voluntary. It should also focus on real-life, practice-related problems that are open-ended in nature and do not have a right or wrong answer. Importantly, action learning sets should be clear about the objective; engage the support of management; decide on selection criteria for set members; commit regular time; set dates for meetings and workshops; make sure there is some energy; be honest with themselves and others; respect others and their viewpoint; learn to listen; ask helpful questions;[6] refrain from giving advice; follow the action learning cycle; give individual airtime to others; take responsibility for their actions; and decide early on how the program will be evaluated, who will be involved, and how the results and future actions will be communicated more widely.

Further Reading

World Institute for Action Learning. 2008. Available: www.wial.org

For further information

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[6] Examples include: What other questions does this question raise for us? What is it that we do not understand about this situation? What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we do say about this situation? Why did you draw those conclusions? How does x affect y? In your opinion, which is best, x or y? And why? What are the strengths and weakness of …?

Asian Development Bank

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