

The History of Action Learning

Professor Reg Revans was the founder of action learning when, working as a young academic at Cambridge in the 1920's, he noted that student managers were relatively passive and lacked energy in the classroom, yet came to life when they discussed their own problems with one another. He formed groups or 'learning sets' for the purpose of engineering an exchange in which managers learned from one another during the diagnosis and treatment of real problems.

Revans was reluctant to define action learning, but in a publication of 1982 he volunteered the following:

"Action Learning is a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical, that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change sufficient to improve his observable behaviour henceforth in the problem field. Learning-by-Doing may be, perhaps, a simpler description of this process.... Subjects learn with and from each other by mutual support, advice and criticism during their attacks upon real problems, intended to be solved in whole or part. The learning achieved is not so much an acquaintance with new factual knowledge nor technical art conveyed by some authority such as an expert or a teacher (although such fresh acquaintance is not ruled out), as it is the more appropriate use, by and reinterpretation, of the subject's existing knowledge, including his recollections of past lived experiences. This interpretation is a social process, carried on among two or more learners who, by the apparent incongruity of their exchanges, frequently cause each other to examine afresh many ideas that they would otherwise have continued to take for granted, however false or misconceived. Action learning particularly obliges subjects to become aware of their own value systems, by demanding that the real problems tackled carry some risk of personal failure, so that the subjects can truly help each other to evaluate in what they may genuinely believe." (Revans, 1982)¹

Action Learning Sets are used across private and public sector industry to improve organisational, team and individual management and leadership ability. Action Learning provides a powerful tool for the development of leadership capacity and personal effectiveness. Engagement in a set enables individuals to develop themselves, their teams and their organisations. It is based on the principle that the participants can learn best from what they are doing and that they have an unlimited capacity to learn from their personal experience but a limited capacity to learn from being taught.

¹ Revans, R.W. (1982) The origins and growth of action learning, Bromley, UK: Chartwell-Bratt

Active reflection on complex work issues is often neglected within the operational pressures of day to day work, yet this activity is vital in a fast changing, ambiguous and uncertain environment with emerging challenges. Reflection is an essential and important component of innovation, improvement and learning, fostering a spirit of enquiry and analysis and developing problem solving, communication and group work skills.

In other words the acting learning set can provide a mainstay for those engaged in the difficult and complex word world, providing them with an opportunity to talk to people experiencing similar struggles and dilemmas. They have the opportunity for support and development, to share the learning arising from their education and put new ideas into practice and have the space and time to reflect on this.