

5 HOW DO YOU GET STARTED?

'By doing what they set out to do, and by setting out to do what they believe to be worth doing, managers are disciples of the Aristotelian ethic.' (ABC of Action Learning, Revans R W, Lemos & Crane, London (1998) page 75)

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Purpose

This unit provides a starter pack for an introductory session to the idea of Action Learning and gives you all the tools and resources you need to run a taster session.

Introduction

Action Learning needs volunteers who want to 'have a go'. The best way to recruit such people, and to give them the freedom to choose to join and choose which tasks or problems they will tackle is to allow them to gain experience of some aspects of Action Learning before they commit themselves.

The unit contains all the tools and materials you need to run such a session. Of course, a starter session is not the same as a full Action Learning experience; Action Learning derives much of its power from the repeated cycle of thinking about the issue, going out to take action and returning to your set of colleagues to reflect on the experience, and plan further moves. It takes time; time to investigate and understand the task; time to act and learn, and time to build up the relationship of close colleagues in a set.

Nevertheless, a starter session can introduce the idea, and give people an insight into some of the key processes and purposes of Action Learning.

Description

This unit describes an introductory session to the idea of Action Learning. It provides five tools and resources for you to use in running this sort of session.

Tool 5A Action Learning: a half-day starter session

Tool 5B Problems and questions activity

Tool 5C Revans' essential questions

Tool 5D Brief for an Action Learning problem

Tool 5E Case study: a problem and some questions

FOR PREVIEW ONLY

How do you get started on Action Learning?

From the definition of Action Learning given in Unit 1:

'Action Learning is an approach to individual and organisational development. Working in small groups, people tackle important organisational issues or problems and learn from their attempts to change things.'

Action Learning requires three basic components:

- people
- problems or issues to be tackled
- a set or small group of colleagues who will support and challenge each other in this work.

The first step in getting started is to find some people – say six to eight of them. Action Learning has no single correct form, and the ideas can be applied in larger or smaller groups than this. However, this size of set is the most usual, and a good place to begin to understand the important elements that make up the process.

So, who are these people? Where do they come from? How will they get to the Action Learning set? These are all questions to think about in advance, remembering that, like the iceberg, a lot of Action Learning is under the surface – how you set it up is important.

Some important conditions for Action Learning have already been suggested:

- voluntary involvement
- peer relationships
- task urgency
- time commitment.

Action Learning can, and does, happen naturally. A group of people come together, perhaps around a job they have to get done, take a quick look at the idea, decide they like the look of it, and each other, and get on with it, without the help of a facilitator or any other outside interference. Whatever you do, do not get in the way of this sort of energy!

However, it is not always like this, and it can be helpful for people to get an idea of what they are letting themselves in for by holding a starter session. This has the great benefit of giving people time and space to decide whether they want to opt in or not. If they do, then you have volunteers – always a major asset. Volunteers make a personal commitment, and they are much more likely to follow through with action on the task and learn from the experience.

So, a starter session is a healthy way to begin. It allows people to get a feel for the idea, ask some questions and make a conscious decision to get involved – or not.

After a starter session you may have to do some more work behind the scenes to get the Action Learning off to a good start. People may want to talk through their concerns about who will be in the set, or what sort of problems they can discuss. If they are 'old hands', they may want to explore the attitude of top management to the enterprise. Some managers may need encouragement to give their people the proper permission to take part.

Questioning insight

Revans' complaint about traditional education is that it emphasises *P*, the accumulated knowledge of the past; rather than *Q*, the acquisition of questioning insight. His aim was to reverse the order of preference and put *Q* first because it is only when you have the right question that you know which *P* might be useful. The '*Q* factor' is at the centre of Action Learning practice; fresh questions are the starting point on the Action Learning journey.

The taster session should communicate this essential insight to those taking part. If people take nothing else away it should be the sense that those things we regard as intractable problems, so far resistant to known solutions, are vulnerable to good questions.

Three questions are at the core of Revans' methodology:

- who knows?
- who cares?
- who can?

These deal in turn with the problems of new knowledge; the problem of finding friends and allies for support and challenge, and the problem of gaining access to power and resources without which successful action and learning is unlikely.

This methodology is so simple and at the same time so profound, that many people seem to miss it.

How to use the tools

Each of the five tools or resources can be used with groups of people to help them understand the ideas of Action Learning. Here are some ways you can use each of the five tools in this unit:

Tool 5A is a design for a starter session. You can vary this according to your needs, but it should be enough to give people a sense of what Action Learning involves.

All the other tools in this unit can be used on that session and Tool 5A indicates where they might be useful. Tool 5E can be given at the end to consolidate the learning.

Tool 5B is a simple but profound activity which can illustrate the key notion of questioning insight or the 'Q factor'.

The facilitator should run this activity in a tight and disciplined way, making sure that people volunteer and do not divulge more than they wish to. It is important to work in a step by step way, and to discuss the outcome in a general way, after the volunteer has finished the process.

The case study in Tool 5E can be used for this general discussion. Once the process of Tool 5B has been completed, hand out Tool 5E and ask people to read it through. Then ask them to discuss in pairs, or threes, what differences and similarities they notice between what happened to George in the case study and what happened in their own experience of Tool 5B. When they have had 10 minutes in pairs, reconvene the whole group, and ask people to share their observations.

Tool 5C contains Revans' essential questions. They are generic questions that can be applied to any issue or problem.

Hand them out to people after they have completed Tool 5B and suggest that these underlie most of the specific questions in Action Learning and contain the essential logic and process of the idea.

Tool 5D is a brief for the specification of a suitable Action Learning problem. This is not for use on the taster session, but can be given to people as they leave so that those intending to take part can work up their ideas before the first full session.

Tool 5E is a case study fictionalised from an experience of using Tool 5B. Give this to people after they have completed Tool 5B, or at the end of the session to help with general discussion.

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9:00	Welcome and introductions	(Facilitator)
9:30	Where the organisation is going and what might get in the way	(Senior Manager)
9:50	What is Action Learning?	(Facilitator)
10:10	Activity – Problems and questions (See Tool 5B)	
10:30	Activity – Working in a set (See Tool 5C)	
	(Split into groups that act as temporary sets for an hour on the issues raised by members, helped by a facilitator.)	
	(Tea/coffee is taken in these groups)	
11:30	Feedback and questions	(Facilitator)
12:00	Next steps	(Facilitator)
	Including:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invitation to join the programme 	
	(Note: Action Learning seeks volunteers so it is OK <i>not</i> to join for all sorts of reasons including both personal or professional.)	
	If you decide to join, then the next steps are:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to sign up with the nominated representative (the facilitator or other relevant person) • discuss the programme and your proposed problem or issue with your manager or sponsor or mentor • prepare an initial statement of your problem as you see it (See Tool 5D). 	
12:30	Close	

Problems and questions activity

This is an activity to be done in the whole group on a starter session and will help prepare people for working together in smaller sets afterwards.

Step 1

Ask each person to write down their response to the question 'What is the most significant issue, concern or problem facing me at this time?'

(Note: It is important that people do this, even if they choose not to volunteer to make this public at Step 2.)

Step 2

When everyone has written something down, ask for a volunteer to read out their statement.

Step 3

Before the volunteer reads out their statement, ask all the other people to turn over their paper on to a blank sheet, and put their own issues out of their mind in order to concentrate on what the volunteer will say.

Step 4

Ask the volunteer to read out their statement, and ask everyone else to write down all the questions they can think of that might help the volunteer explore the particular issue with which they are concerned.

(Note: Only questions are allowed.)

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Step 5

When someone has five or more questions, tell everyone to stop writing and ask the volunteer to take a question from each person in turn, but to simply write the question down and not to try and respond to it.

Step 6

When the volunteer has perhaps 15 or 20 questions written down, ask them to take their time and go through them putting an asterisk against three or four of the questions that were of special interest to them. Perhaps these questions caused a different reaction to the others?

Step 7

Now ask the volunteer to read out the questions they have chosen and ask them in each case: 'Why was that question of interest to you?'

Step 8

When the volunteer has finished their explanations, call an end to the activity. The whole group can now be invited to give their reactions. What did they observe? What is the quality of good questions? Who decides what is a good question?

Revans' essential questions

Questioning is the key process in Action Learning – it is where fresh ideas and *Q*, or questioning insight comes from.

When considering their problem or issue, each person should think about the following questions:

- What am I trying to do?
- What is stopping me from doing it?
- What can I do about it?
- Who knows what I am trying to do?
- Who cares about what I am trying to do?
- Who else can do anything to help?

(*ABC of Action Learning*, Revans R W, Lemos & Crane, London (1998)
pages 33–41)



Brief for an Action Learning problem

Here are six questions to help you think through a suitable problem, opportunity, or issue, for work in an Action Learning set.

1. Describe the problem or issue in one sentence:

2. Why is this important?

a) To you?

b) To your organisation?

3. How will you recognise progress on this problem?

4. Who else would like to see progress on this problem?

5. What difficulties do you anticipate?

6. What are the benefits if this problem is reduced or resolved?

a) To you?

b) To your organisation?

Case study: a problem and some questions

In a starter session on Action Learning, George was surprised to be asked to write down on a card his answer to the question: 'What is the most significant issue, concern or problem facing me at this time?'. He found himself writing:

'I want to develop the skills to work better with my colleagues.'

George further surprised himself when he responded to the facilitator's request to volunteer to read out his issue to the group.

As a consequence, people asked him a long list of questions, including:

- What makes you think that you have a problem?
- What skills do you think you do not have?
- How skilful are your colleagues?
- What have you tried to do so far?
- Why do you want to do this?
- Who have you talked to about this issue?
- What would working better look like?
- Which colleagues are you thinking about?
- What feedback do you get from your colleagues?
- How do you think you can go about learning these skills?
- How does this affect your work?
- How might things be if you had better skills?
- What would your best friend say to you about your working situation?

The facilitator then asked George to choose the three questions that most interested him. After some thought he picked:

- How skilful are your colleagues?
- What would working better look like?
- What would your best friend say to you about your working situation?

The three questions that George picked out as most interesting were those that had either not occurred to him before, or suddenly made him think. Each question led to a new train of thought.

