

Action learning sets

The central methodology of action learning is in the exploration of problems, and the focus of that exploration is the investigation of self. What is my contribution to this problem? How do my current actions contribute to its maintenance? What can I do differently that would impact positively on this problem? What responsible action can I take?

The notion of a “problem” in this context is those matters which are unresolved or which contain risk and uncertainty, or ideas which are only partially formulated. The best material to bring to the set is that with which one’s mind is preoccupied and to which one’s mind constantly returns of its own volition in its attempt to find creative solutions.

The key principle of action learning takes the view that such problems are integral to ourselves, and that the largest elements of their solutions are contained within the expression and manifestation of the problem itself – “I am part of the problem and the problem is part of me”.

The journey towards finding answers to the questions about one’s own contribution to the problem and how one’s own actions contribute to its maintenance necessarily involve an exploration of one’s own values and beliefs and the ways in which one’s own actions express one’s values and beliefs, consistently or otherwise. This is a learning journey, through which people learn about themselves and discover their own new and creative approaches to resolving problems.

Action learning, as its name suggests, is about both learning from action and taking action from learning. It is essentially a reflective process. It takes place with no more than five others in a specifically created time and space which is dedicated to this process and designated as an action learning set. Set members use the set to share their uncertainty, to explore their problems, and to engage in a process which has the potential to generate greater self-understanding and which holds the keys to the deep and profound learning that will release creative solutions to problems.

What does it mean in practice?

Action learning has a concept of “airtime”. Airtime is the time given to each set member which is theirs to use with the set for their own learning and thinking. Each set member is listened to as he or she articulates the problem, issue, concern or uncertainty. The set members engage with that person in a complex set of processes to help them to learn more about it and to understand it better at a deeper level. It involves a mixture of support and challenge, of reflection and questioning, of investigating assumptions, perceptions, values and beliefs, of engagement with existing knowledge, known in action learning terminology as P (programmed knowledge), and through these processes to the discovery of new insights. It is an evolving process and it requires the development of skills of collective and individual reflection, skills in developing Q (the action learning term for questioning insight), a focus on individual and collective learning which is

dedicated to the creation of greater understanding rather than directly seeking pragmatic answers, advice and quick fixes.

One of the many challenges for a set lies in how to manage airtime equitably amongst its members and at the same time allow sufficient time for the development of this essential in-depth exploration.

Sets have to face many challenges to create conducive learning environments, which effectively create learning opportunities for the development of deep and profound learning. Sharing oneself is not easy and it requires sets to create an environment in which its members can trust each other. This involves issues of confidentiality, but it is also about creating an environment in which it is safe to share aspects of one's vulnerability. Group members work hard for and with each other to help one another to reach their goals. This means being honest enough to disclose, to give feedback, and to ask awkward and uncomfortable questions which may challenge the person's assumptions and perceptions.

The most successful sets are those which create strong bonds of trust, friendship and support, so that people feel safe to disclose and share in the certain knowledge that what they offer will be received and responded to with sensitivity, genuineness and care; and through that, and because of it, it is safe to challenge, to ask probing questions and to give each other feedback. The most successful sets spend little of their time in reporting back on events, or sharing things that are already wholly or partially resolved, nor do they give each other advice or try to solve each others' problems. Instead they enter into the process with the others and travel part of their journey with them. They respond to what they hear rather than react to it.

Lastly, sets need to focus on themselves in the set and to recognise that what happens in the set is also encapsulated in "I am part of the problem and the problem is part of me". If the set is unsatisfactory, the group needs to look more honestly and closely at how it is functioning. If it is working well, the members need to understand how and why, so that it becomes useful learning to take elsewhere. Set members need to look at their own and each others' behaviour within their set, as that too contains material for exploration which is pertinent to the problems being discussed.

Action learning is experiential. Describing it, therefore, is problematic and often counterproductive. All action learning writers identify this problem. This phenomenon, which I have termed Casey's Paradox, is described by David Casey in *Action Learning in Practice* (Pedler et al): the paradoxical situation of action learning itself – that one cannot know about it until one experiences it and one cannot experience it as an effective means of learning unless one has an understanding of what it is about and how it works. Its power and potential as a means of learning have to be experienced first, and later enhanced and improved with the understanding from reading linked to experience.

It takes time to create an effective action learning set. It requires building the group and developing the skills required. Committing oneself to the process is an act of faith and trust. Only when participants commit themselves to trusting the process, the set and each other does it reveal itself as a route to learning at a profound level of the type that Weinstein refers to as "learning through a process of inner experiencing", which is the essence of action learning. This is the aspect of action learning that is described by participants as having impact at the level of their assumptions, values and beliefs. The

learning that derives from this inner experiencing comes from the power of the dynamic combination of oral reflection in the set with individual reflective writing.

Other key points

- Issues need to be current.
- The owner of the problem must want to act to resolve it.
- Each member is helped by others to review in a way which allows new insights to develop, from which new ideas about solutions emerge.
- The process works for problems rather than puzzles:
 - Puzzles have right or best answers, usually found by use of expertise.
 - Problems have creative solutions rather than right answers – best arrived at through asking questions, exploration, thinking, risk-taking and developing insight and understanding.
- Listening and questioning by the group is focused on better understanding and insights and on supporting the problem owner rather than on solving the problem for them.
- The process supports different levels of learning about:
 - the problem
 - oneself
 - the process of learning

The facilitator's role

- helps the development of the action learning set
- facilitates the supporting and challenging process
- helps reflect on learning
- helps group members to hold one another to account for agreed tasks
- models a style of questioning
- draws attention to group processes, behaviours and feelings
- helps the group to become self-managing – responsibility lies with all group members

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