

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

'Action Learning' - an introduction

In a fast changing world organisations and individuals have to adapt continually in order to engage with their changing environment. This presents two immediate problems - how to deal with the sense of isolation that fast change can bring about, and how to find the time to learn and develop when day-to-day issues are already draining time and resources.

These issues are very relevant to those in the voluntary arts. Practitioners, staff and volunteers at every level often feel as though they are working alone and with little personal support. Professional meetings tend to be based around an agenda rather than a concern for individuals and time pressures and travel problems make informal networking difficult. On top of this, competition and demands for flexibility cause managers to feel uneasy about admitting their anxieties to their peers for fear that they will lose out on funding, or that their reputations will be compromised.

Since change is being thrust on us faster than our ability to learn it is becoming increasingly necessary to find ways of being able to act and learn simultaneously. So, how do we do this?

The learning organisation

Organisations now need to become 'learning organisations'. Learning organisations recognise the impact of global communications, new technology and the dramatic increase in information, and they understand that they will have to continually reorganise, restructure and develop new skills.

A learning organisation keeps expanding its knowledge - not academic knowledge but knowledge that helps the organisation function effectively. It encourages individual and group learning by providing access to information and resources, and opportunities for developing skills and new attitudes.

It encourages a desire for continuous improvement. The key factor in this process is not what organisations know but rather how quickly they can learn. Thus, a learning organisation is one that makes learning a part of its work i.e. part of everyone's job description.

Action Learning provides one method of achieving these aims. It is a powerful action-oriented, problem solving tool, as well as a key approach to individual, team and organisational development.

So, what is Action Learning?

Action Learning (AL) is a practice which enables managers* to develop themselves and their organisations. It is based on the principle that people learn best from what they are doing and that they have an unlimited capacity to learn from experience but a limited capacity to learn from being taught.

It is a process of learning and reflection, supported by a small group or 'set' of people with the intention of moving issues forward. Individuals learn with and from each other by working on their own particular situations and reflecting on their experience.

AL recognises that professional development comes from a combination of knowledge, skills and personal growth. People bring the whole of themselves to the process and have the freedom to explore as much as they feel comfortable doing, without making a firm boundary between work and non-work. Over time set members build a deep understanding and trust of each other, which allows both a high degree of support and positive challenge. This helps people take an active approach to the pressures of life and work.

Perhaps the greatest value of the AL process lies in its capacity for equipping individuals, teams and organisations to respond more effectively to change since it promotes fresh thinking and new ways of looking at and dealing with situations.

One set participant reported *'It is very powerful to share one's story, and to share it with a friendly stranger is*



even more powerful. The set was one place where I could express my self-doubt about our strategic direction and relationships with stakeholders. It gave me the confidence to make difficult choices. Part of this success has come through knowing that this group of people is there to talk to. You need to take time to work on yourself - you owe it to yourself and your organisation. AL is about giving'.

(*A broad definition of manager being 'people who take responsibility for their lives and work'; therefore within organisations all staff can be considered.)

How did Action Learning come about?

AL began in the 1930s when Reg Revans, a Cambridge scientist, observed how his colleagues shared problems, questioned each other and received support from the group. All the scientists had contributions to make, even when they were not experts in a particular field. In this way they evolved workable solutions to their own and each others problems.

Later, he developed this approach as director of education and training at the National Coal Board. Since then AL has been carried across the globe and applied extensively within and across organisations in every sector. An MBA based exclusively on AL was started in 1985, and in 1995 Revans hosted the first Action Learning conference in London.

When is AL useful?

People in senior positions, paid or voluntary, often have difficulty finding others who are able and willing to explore work situations and offer objective evaluation of possible courses of action. AL can alleviate this problem because it can simultaneously address: problem solving, organisational learning and development, team building, and personal and professional growth and leadership development.

It is particularly useful when:

- **it is necessary to map out ways to deal with a new situation;**
- **needing to test out new ways of working and/or to change the way things are done;**
- **a job or role or organisation is changing;**
- **faced with major challenges;**
- **looking for continuous management development.**

What are the benefits of AL?

AL offers:

- problem solving time;
- support, feedback and positive challenge from peers who understand each others work, but have no vested interest in the outcome;

- a safe environment to explore personal and professional strengths and weaknesses, take risks, experiment and ask for help;
- the bringing together of skills and the opportunity to learn from good practice;
- an antidote to isolation and a group of people who become, for short periods of time, mentors for each other;
- an opportunity to express feelings as well as facts about their work situation;
- an opportunity to hear and be heard;
- learning by doing and developing how-to-learn skills;
- a move from a culture of training (where someone else determines /provides the tools for others development) to one of learning (in which everyone is responsible for his or her continuous development).

What skills do participants of AL sets gain?

- Improved communications and teamwork.
- Empathy, a non-judgmental attitude, listening and diagnostic skills.
- Greater self awareness, insight into hitherto unknown hidden resources and self confidence.
- Facilitation and coaching skills.
- Insight into the way individuals relate in a small group which increases understanding of work relationships.
- Ability to ask better questions, review, critically reflect and get to the heart of a problem.
- Increased ability to take an active rather than passive approach to life.

Why do we learn so well from an Action Learning set ?

AL embodies a number of key learning principles:

- Learning is increased when we are asked questions and reflect on what we did in the experience, when we are given time and space to deal with problems, when we can see results, when we are allowed to take risks and when we are encouraged and supported.
- We can learn critically when we are able to question the assumptions on which our actions are based, ie. when we receive feedback from others and from the results of our problem-solving actions.
- When relying totally on experts we can become immobilized and fail to seek or trust our own solutions.
- Non-hierarchical groups from across organisations or departments and functions are often better able to gain new perspectives.



- Group responsibility for the task empowers the members and enhances learning.
- We are most challenged when we work on unfamiliar problems in unfamiliar settings, where we can unfreeze some of our previous ways of doing things and develop new ways of thinking.
- By working co-operatively with others on real issues, the group can move to a higher level of learning.
- People learn when they do something, and they learn more as they feel more responsible for their task.

What AL is not

Although AL may share the characteristics of other types of group work it is a unique process.

It is not: a task force, learning and reflecting on the job, an outdoor adventure, a simulation exercise or a discussion group. Nor is it group work, a lecture or training session, advice giving, counselling or group therapy.

THE NITTY-GRITTY WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS IN A SET?

AL derives its strength from the interaction of six elements: **a problem, the group, the questioning and reflection process, the resolution to take action, a commitment to learning, a facilitator (and then successful self-facilitation).**

Each meeting follows the same procedure:

- **Report in.** Set members report briefly on what has been happening to them including, for those who presented last time, any actions/resolutions on the presented topic;
- **Bidding process** Set members decide between them who is going to present a particular situation that s/he currently face (in some groups time is divided equally so all members present);
- **Presentation.** The presenter talks, without interruption and for as long as they wish, about their problem/situation/challenge;
- **Questions.** When it seems appropriate the space is opened up to the group to ask questions. These questions will be designed to assist the presenter come to deeper understanding. They do not give advice, tell anecdotes, pass judgement or talk about how it compares to their own situation;
- **Formulation of action** The set assists the presenter review options and decide on action i.e. develop an action plan, no matter how small;
- **Feedback.** The set then reflects on the group process and gives feedback on what has taken place. At a future set meeting the presenter reports on the action taken.

Action Learning Conventions

AL works because it provides a safe and neutral space for people to explore sensitive and troubling issues. This sense of safety is established and maintained through a commitment to ground rules or *conventions* as follows:

i. **The Contract**

Usually the group creates their own contract together - what it is they all agree to do and not to do as a group i.e. an agreed number of meetings, being there for meetings unless it is absolutely impossible, not leaving without discussion.

ii. **Confidentiality**

What happens in the AL Set must remain confidential. Set members agree not to discuss anything that occurs in the set with anyone within or outside the set, outside set meetings and outside the presentation time.

iii. **Presenters Space (time)**

The presenter gets as much time as s/he needs to present (or the time allotted). This space belongs entirely to her/him. The role of set members is to give their whole attention, appreciate the value of silence as time for reflection and ask inquiring questions.

iv. **'I' Language**

Use of the word "I" instead of general terms 'one', 'you', 'we', 'they', etc. is encouraged as this helps the presenter get closer to the problem/situation.

v. **Open Questions**

Participants may not give advice or tell stories of their own experience. They can only ask questions. Apart from a few clarification questions all questions should be open. Typical AL questions might be: What result do you want? How do you feel about this situation? What could you do differently? How do you know this? Can you explain that further? What is the best possible outcome?

What does the facilitator do?

The facilitator ensures that the set is comprised of 'peers', explains the principles of AL at the outset, and establishes the groups needs and expectations. S/he helps the group to work effectively and safely, to avoid superficiality and to remain focussed, following AL conventions.

A good facilitator will ensure that participants have the option of easily opting out at the end of the first day. AL will not suit everyone!



JOINING A SET

Who can 'do' Action Learning?

AL was set up originally as a management development tool but can be used in alternative situations e.g. individual artists looking for professional development. Sets can be within an organisation (in-house sets) or across organisations (mixed or open sets). They usually consist of between 5 and 8 people.

It is advisable that set members are broadly at the same level e.g. running organisations, senior or middle management, self employed or freelance, and broadly understand each others' worlds although they do not necessarily have to come from the same professional background or sector. They must come voluntarily and agree to be in the set together, and be committed to learning as well as acquiring the skills that will make the group work e.g. listening, reflection, empathy, insightful questioning etc.

Difficulties can arise if set membership includes line management relationships i.e. one participant and their boss. If there is a good reason why this should occur then both need to agree that the set will not be used to substitute for standard management processes. When set members are from the same organisation or where other relationships exist (e.g. members of each others boards, best friend of another members boss) then the confidentiality ground rules need to be explored and the members need to feel happy with the agreement that they have reached.

How long does AL take?

Sessions are usually a full day though shorter periods of time eg. half a day can also work. Initially sets contract to meet for 5 or 6 sessions, initially with an external facilitator. They can then re-contract to continue meeting, with or without the facilitator. Some sets have a short life span but it is not unusual for sets to last for several years.

Is AL expensive?

Facilitators can charge high fees, in the region of £400 a day. However, bear in mind that this cost is borne by the whole group and is comparable with the costs associated with most professional development programmes.

IN CONCLUSION

AL is a process that enables individuals to make connections - connections within themselves; between themselves and their groups; between themselves, their homes and their current workplace; between themselves and the world. Because the connections are personal, learning is always personally relevant as opposed to didactic learning, which is often personally irrelevant. Relevant learning is quality learning and this can have a positive and cascading impact on the culture and structure of the organisation.

Thus, addressing personal awareness, knowledge and skills and bringing about individual change at many levels is crucial to achieving a well-balanced and strong organisation.

References

- McGill, I & Beaty, L - *Action Learning (second edition)* 1992, Kogan Page, London.
- Marquardt, MJ - *Action Learning in Action* 1999, Davies - Black Publishing, USA.
- Cook, Ruth - *Action Learning Facilitation* (Course Notes)

Related VAN Briefings

Briefing 49 - Becoming Masters of Change - making change work for you!

VAN and VAW currently have three staff and two board members engaged in AL sets. VAW has also organised AL sets for voluntary arts organisations in Wales and trained six facilitators.



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