

Action Learning in a virtual world

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Action Learning (AL) has an impressive pedigree dating back to the 1950s, but does it have a role on 21st Century learning? Joan Keevill looks at its evolution and how it is being embraced in the virtual world.

Action Learning as a development tool for leaders and managers has been around for a long time. Pioneered by Reg Revans in the 1950s as ‘a method of problem solving and learning in groups to bring about change for individuals, teams and organisations’, it was described by Professor Mike Pedler in 1996 as ‘perhaps the most important form of management development to emerge in the past 20 years.’ But does it have a role in the 21st century?

Back to basics: What is action learning?

Action Learning is an approach to leadership and management development that assumes those involved have the potential to solve their own problems and indeed are more likely to do so if they develop their own solutions and can change their own behaviour or attitude. Participants work in small groups or Action Learning Sets, and come together on a regular basis, usually meeting face-to-face with a set facilitator; many go on to become self-facilitating. Each participant needs to bring a complex and intractable business problem to the meeting to maximise the potential for learning. Through insightful questioning from their peers, the ‘problem holder’ is encouraged to view the problem differently and explore their role in it. They review the actions they’ve taken to date, consider new actions, try these out back at work, reflect on what happens and in doing so, learn from this.

What are the benefits?

As the cycle is repeated with each participant and over time, sets develop strong relationships of trust and support and real change is enabled. Individuals develop different perspectives, learn to reflect more, build their listening and questioning techniques and their ability to learn and network across the organisation. Managers talk of increased self-confidence in their leadership role and their ability to critically evaluate the way they operate. This in turn can lead to an improvement in the output of their teams and impact positively on performance overall.

What about Virtual Action Learning (VAL)

Virtual Action Learning follows the same principles as Action Learning with the key difference being that participants do not need to be in the same place or even participate at the same time. So how does it work? Dickenson, Pedler and Burgoyne³ from Henley Business School have identified six varieties of VAL practice. These split into events or set meetings which take place at the same time, ie all participants 'meet up' virtually at a set time (synchronous) and those which take place at different times, ie individuals contribute to the 'meeting' in their own time (referred to as asynchronous); all can involve text, audio and video. So, synchronous VAL might mean using instant messaging, a conference call or a live video link for a set meeting, whereas asynchronous could be using a message board (text), recorded voice messages (audio) or recorded video which is available at any time over a given period to participants.

How does VAL impact on participants and facilitators?

VAL of any variety requires the facilitator and participants to overcome any barriers thrown up by the technology or medium of communication. Experiments that have been done recently at the Henley Facilitation Forum involved facilitators participating in either synchronous telephone conferencing (including VOIP via a laptop) or video conferencing VAL to find out what it's like to both facilitate and participate, and to review the impact on the AL process. The conference call set meeting was easier to set up and run, with the telephone being seen as 'low tech' and familiar.

Participants noted the lack of eye contact and body language, the need to manage silence and to concentrate harder on listening. For the purposes of the trial, the set meeting only lasted half an hour but audio call-based VAL can last up to two and a half hours, made easier if participants use telephone headsets with microphones, rather than handsets, and have suitable breaks. Use of mobiles is discouraged due to sound quality and participants are encouraged to mute their phones unless actually speaking, to reduce ambient noise on the call. It's important to ensure all participants are focused and in the moment and participants should of course avoid any distractions while on the call. From the research at Henley, some practitioners suggest it's not essential for participants to know each other in advance, whereas others feel there is a real advantage in people meeting face-to-face first before moving into the virtual world.

Many companies are already using tools such as web conferencing (eg WebEx, GoToMeeting or Perfect Meetings) to run business meetings so why not extend that into a learning and development programme? Clive Shepherd, chair of the eLearning Network, suggests calling this 'live online learning'⁴ and outlines a number of ways in

which L&D practitioners could introduce this. As with any new technology-enabled learning, it's advisable to test the technology in advance of a Virtual Action Learning set meeting to avoid frustrating participants; the multi-tasking facilitator needs to be competent in using the tool, the technology and in set facilitation.

Using a headset during a video conference-based set meeting also seems to provide better quality audio and video-based VAL also encourages shorter meetings, perhaps because you have to concentrate harder than when you're in the same room as fellow participants. The video requirement may mean participants having to move into a dedicated video conferencing space if they don't have a webcam but being able to see participants and put a face to a name is beneficial to the facilitator and to the group if they don't know each other that well. However, if there is pressure on bandwidth the audio stream may drop out and then you risk losing the thread of what participants are saying. One way round this might be to combine video with a telephone conference call, or with instant messaging. It can be helpful to encourage participants to write up their problem or issue in advance or to post notes afterwards, e.g. on a message board, thus combining synchronous and asynchronous VAL.

Once technological barriers have been overcome and assuming set facilitators are confident and competent, VAL can be as productive as face-to-face, with the added benefits (easily measured!) of reduced time away from work, no travel time and no travel costs. So should we be using it more?

Joan Keevill is director of [Designs on Learning](#), a leadership and elearning consultancy, and is also a visiting tutor at Henley Business School. She is an accredited facilitator and has facilitated Action Learning sets in the BBC and at Henley, both face-to-face and virtually. She is interested in members' experiences of VAL and can be contacted via her website. For more information on the Henley Facilitation Forum click [here](#).