

An Introduction to Action Learning



Action learning is a powerful tool for achieving profound individual learning and simultaneously creating change and improvement on an individual, team and organisational level.

This introduction will provide you with a summary of the action learning technique, and of the *Corporate Instinct approach* to delivering enhanced value through action learning.

Action learning was developed in the 1940's by professor Reg Revens who created the management development programme for the post-war National Coal Board. The technique he developed realised astounding results, - those mines where managers engaged in action learning were able to demonstrate a 30% improvement in output.

Over the subsequent 60 years or so, action learning has developed as a method for delivering individual and organisational development improvement and has proved effective in widely diverse environments; in industry, in the National Health Service, in the Higher Education sector, in and across government departments and across the third sector.

At the heart of action learning is the ability to ask the right questions at the right time and, critically, to take action as a consequence. It is the development of a deeper insight into a problem or situation through constructive challenge that helps create new learning and innovative and powerful solutions.

The knowledge that is written down in books, theories & concepts is termed 'programmed knowledge'. This is vital for learning, - but it's not enough; only when we use that knowledge in challenging enquiry and then apply it can it become true, valuable and impactful learning.

How Does an Action Learning Set Work?

An action learning set comprises 5-8 members who commit to meeting together in a closed and confidential group for an agreed number of sessions. A set is facilitated by a trained facilitator.

At each set meeting there is a disciplined process:

- Each set member reports briefly on what has been happening to them.
- Set members take turns speak about a particular situation they are currently facing. This is known as presenting.
- The presenter describes the situation, problem or challenge.
- Set members ask open questions which help the presenter come to a deeper or different understanding and so be open to new solutions, attitudes and behaviour changes.
- Set members do not give advice, tell anecdotes, pass judgement or talk about their own situation – they stay focussed on the presenter.
- The set helps the presenter review their options and decide on action.
- Set members reflect on the group process, respond to the presenter about what they have heard and talk about their own individual learning.
- The presenter takes what they have learnt back to their workplace – initiating changes and trying new ideas or approaches.
- At the next set meeting the presenter reports on the action they have taken.



At each set meeting, every set member gets to present and work through their issue.

To be successful at achieving real change and improvement, an action learning set will have a strong motivation to achieve outcomes. A set is certainly not a 'cosy chat' – yes, the set will build up a close and supportive relationship, but members will challenge each other and hold each other to account for taking agreed actions and supporting each others development.

Why is Action Learning Different from Other Forms of Learning?

Action learning focuses on the experience, feelings and insights of the individual. Rather than jumping to solve a problem as quickly as possible, action learning enables deeper enquiry and results in deeper understanding. This supports a learner firstly, to reach the *best* solution rather than adopt the first one that comes to mind, and secondly, to gain insight about themselves and others which will enable future challenges to be met with more confidence and success.

The *Corporate Instinct* Approach to Action Learning

Richard Andrews, Director of *Corporate Instinct Ltd.* is a fully trained Action Learning Set facilitator as well as being qualified to Masters Degree level (ILM level 7) as an executive coach. Appreciating the power of the action learning methodology, and the complexities of the facilitation process, Richard accesses professional supervision for his action learning facilitation

practice and ensures his continuing professional development.

He has facilitated action learning in a wide range of contexts including working with very senior leaders and in cross-sector environments.

Whilst ensuring that an action learning set provides the highest levels of support possible for learners, Richard is aware that organisations and partnerships need to evidence return on investment for all learning activities.

A *Corporate Instinct* action learning set makes best use of this powerful learning tool to realise tangible benefits for the individual and their organisation creating a “**high challenge, high support**” learning environment and maintaining a focus on achieving business or service impact in the short and long term.

At *Corporate Instinct*, we believe in building in sustainability for our clients. Throughout the process of delivering an action learning set, learners will be supported to develop their own action learning set facilitation skills so that the organisation develops internal capacity to continue this valuable learning process.

“The power in the Action Learning approach is that it can achieve extraordinary results: Remember the National Coal Board experience, a 30% enhancement in productivity!

In the current economic climate we can't afford to limit our ambition or water down the potential of this powerful learning tool”

To discuss how action learning or other powerful learning and organisational development programmes or projects can support your organisation please contact Richard Andrews at Corporate Instinct Limited using one of the methods below.