

# An Introduction to Action Learning

Action Learning is a technique used primarily in leadership and management development. It was developed by Professor Reg Revans and he himself emphasised that it was a very simple idea – that leaders and managers learn best by working together in a group (called an Action Learning Set) to help each other to find solutions to real work problems by discussion. They go off to attempt to make progress on their problems (by taking action, hence the name) and then meet again to discuss and review the outcomes of their actions. This not intended to be like a committee tackling each problem, but to help each individual to acquire a wider range of skills, understanding and models for action that can then be used and refined when dealing with future problems.

The way Revans expressed his model was through an equation:

$$L = P+Q$$

where:

L = Learning

P = Programmed (or expert-provided) knowledge

Q = Questioning

In other words, we learn best when our learning is driven by the power of inquiry (questioning) supported by access to the knowledge and experience of those who have come before us – accessed through learning resources and expert tutors. Underpinning this approach is the principle that learning should be focussed on finding solutions to real world problems, with the impetus for learning coming from the learner and the development of the learner being as important as finding a solution to the problem.

Although Action Learning Sets normally meet together, physically, in recent years Virtual AL Sets have been operated very effectively. These use forms of collaborative communications technology, such as Skype, FaceTime and Second Life - there's a useful paper about this by Mollie Dickenson, John Burgoyne and Mike Pedlar at <http://www.slideshare.net/elearningpapers/val-1067066>.

To learn more about Action Learning, Mike Pedlar's *Action Learning for Managers, 2nd Ed* (Gower Publishing Ltd: 2008) is one of the best introductions, although there are plenty of other books on the subject. It is also worth reading Reg Revans' own descriptions of the methodology in *ABC of Action Learning* (Gower Publishing: 2011), and paying a visit to the website of the International Foundation for Action Learning (IFAL - <http://ifal.org.uk>), which has some useful resources as well as offering a valuable opportunity to network with others involved in Action Learning.

## Action Learning Sets

The Set is the group within which an individual engages with other learners to ask questions and explore solutions to problems. An AL Set should usually consist of between four and six people – the lower figure is an absolute minimum, the upper figure may be stretched to seven or an absolute maximum of eight if this is unavoidable. Outside this range an AL Set will not work effectively and therefore will not meet the requirements for using Action Learning on an ILM Leadership programme.

The first stage in forming a set is to explain its nature and purpose and to help the members get to know each other (ice-breaking activities focussed on individuals and their work roles can help here). Once formed, Sets should be allowed to develop their own working style. However, a few basic rules are important:

- Each individual should be allowed around 30 minutes at each meeting to have their problems addressed by the Set
- The Set is run by its members
- The Set Advisor (Tutor/Trainer) is not part of the Set and has no active role in the running of the Set.

- The Advisor is a source of Programme Knowledge (information and advice) if requested. (Alan Mumford quotes favourably the comment that ‘. . . the purpose is always for participants to learn. "So you often bite your lip." ’)

One important outcome of all Set meetings is the date of the next meeting, by which time members should have implemented the ideas agreed at the current meeting – this is one reason for an Advisor to intervene, if no meeting is agreed. The only other reasons are to prevent harm or other serious damage as a result of ill-informed decisions, or if there is such serious disagreement that the Set is failing. Simply making a bad or ill-informed decision that would have negative but not threatening outcomes is not a reason. Mistakes are part of learning!

