



# Action learning

Action learning is a learner-centred, team-based and action-oriented experiential learning process in which a small group of people (known as an 'action learning set') meet regularly to explore an opportunity or problem and to learn from their reflections on the actions they are taking to solve the problem.

*"Action learning creates opportunities for learners to transfer knowledge and create new knowledge from structured experiences while simultaneously solving real world problems ... in ... development programs action learning can act as a catalyst to translate new knowledge into effective action" (p. 55, Boshyk)*

The key elements of action learning are:

- tackling real tasks and issues in the real world
- learning with and through each other
- taking individual responsibility, and supporting each other
- actually implementing solutions and plans.

Action learning is built on a pedagogical theory developed by Prof. Reg Revans for use in industry. He proposes that we have two sources of learning: learning from 'experts' and learning from thinking about our own (shared) experience. He summarised this in the equation:

$$L=P+Q$$

where

L = learning

P = programmed knowledge, i.e. what we have been told or shown; our knowledge in current use. This knowledge, Revans argues, is not enough for dealing with our complex and ever-changing environment.

Q = questioning insight, i.e. the learning that comes from what we can think for ourselves; tacit knowledge developed to make sense of our own unique experiences, as well as the world in which we live.

The knowledge and experience of a small group of people, combined with skilled questioning techniques means that participants in action learning can re-interpret old and familiar knowledge to produce fresh ideas. Real solutions to real world problems, and a way to take action and learn at the same time are the major benefits of action learning. Other documented benefits include the development of the individuals in the action learning set in the areas of critical thinking and emotional intelligence.



# Applications of action learning

Marquardt (1999) writes,

*"... For many organizations around the world, action learning has quietly become one of the most powerful action-oriented, problem-solving tools, as well as their key approach to individual, team, and organization development. Organizations as diverse as Exxon, General Electric, TRW, Motorola, Arthur Andersen, General Motors, the U.S. Army, Marriott, and British Airways now use action learning for solving problems, developing global executives, identifying strategic competitive advantages, reducing operating costs, creating performance management systems, and becoming learning organizations."*

## Models of action learning

Action learning programs can be set up in a number of different ways:

- They can either involve participants working together on the same problem/project, or each working on separate problems/projects that they bring to the group for discussion and reflection.
- Projects can be chosen for the participants, e.g. by their organisation, or participants can select their own problems to work on.
- Action learning sets can use an external coach/facilitator or they can be self-facilitating. If self-facilitated, the role of coach/facilitator should be rotated round the group.

Some degree of diversity either in the projects or amongst the set members is valuable in bringing different perspectives when posing questions to help set members reflect on the actions taken on their projects/tasks. If set members are working jointly on a business project, diversity of membership can also contribute to innovative solutions to project problems. Set members may be deliberately chosen from different business units in the organisation to facilitate this.

The core values that underpin action learning, according to Boshyk (p. 16) are:

- "Learning for the purpose of making a difference (rather than learning for it's own sake or for the sake of intellectual curiosity)"
- Feedback (rather than protecting own knowledge from the challenge of action or from the responses of other set members)
- Support and challenge of peers (rather than solitary learning)
- Self responsibility and pro-activity (rather than passivity or reactivity)
- Learning from action and action informed by learning (rather than action and learning being separate domains with learning as the passive one)
- Giving and receiving (the commitment to an action learning set is based on this)

For DeakinPrime, the practice of Action Learning supports the notion of reflective practice and the building of a leadership community of practice to support the development of leaders within organisations and the strength and sustainability of those organisations into the future.

## References:

Boshyk, Y. 2002, *Action Learning World wide – Experiences of leadership and organisational development*, Palgrave Macmillan. UK

Marquardt, M. 1999, *Action Learning in Action: Transforming Problems and People for World-Class Organizational Learning*.

