

↗ sowing seeds

action learning

The opportunity to engage in reflection



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sitive issues, and share their learning in a supportive environment

➤ What is action learning?

Our understanding and use of action learning has grown and evolved over a number of years. We have learnt that it can be a powerful tool that brings people together to address individual and organisational issues. It encourages individuals through the process of learning and taking action to build sustainable solutions to problems and difficulties that often seem intractable. Whilst we recognise that there are many different interpretations and variations on the theme of action learning, this publication shares a model we have successfully used across public services in Wales.

➤ How can you describe action learning?

- A powerful way for individuals to learn from others
- A simple yet powerful tool for personal and professional development
- A structured networking opportunity with a small group of people giving you the environment to ask questions, seek answers and gain support
- A process where people become mentors to each other – learning with and through each other
- The chance to learn from, and be supported by, a skilled facilitator
- The opportunity to work on real problems and implement solutions, management development which is learning by doing
- To take action in the light of new insight

In action learning, participants are able to raise difficult questions, discuss sensitive issues, and share their learning in a supportive environment, secure in the knowledge that 'what's said in the room, stays in the room'. An action learning set can be with peers from an organisation or a mixed set where individuals work with peers from different sectors and different professional backgrounds.

Learning by doing is not in itself sufficient but must be combined with the ability to reflect on the learning experience

➤ Where does action learning come from?

Action learning was developed in the 1940s by Reg Revans, who set up management development programmes for the National Coal Board. Revans' original training as a scientist enabled him to devise a new process for management development, recreating the benefits of the research laboratory where colleagues share and compare problems, ideas and solutions. He named this learning process 'action learning'.

In creating a model of action learning for the National Coal Board, Revans enabled managers to learn from each others' best practice. Individual learners were invited to join 'action learning' sets where they could gain the support and confidence from peers and introduce new ways of working. He was able to demonstrate that action learning was successful by measuring coal pit productivity. He found that membership of an action learning set improved the pit's performance. For Revans, "There can be no learning without action and no (sober and deliberative) action without learning." (Revans, 1998)

Over the last 60 years action learning has developed as a method for delivering individual and organisation development. As a process, action learning can be challenging and informative. Revans (1983) described it as "The upward communications of doubt" – an opportunity for individuals to engage in learning and identify action, which could make a positive difference to the organisation's effectiveness. Revan was, for example, one of the first to introduce to the National Health Service the idea that nurses, doctors and administrators needed to listen to and understand each other. He used 'action learning' sets to create this

opportunity. Since the time when Revans first began experimenting with the concept of action learning significant developments have taken place in this field. New methods of human inquiry have emerged, such as co-operative or appreciative inquiry, to draw upon the collaborative nature of solving problems through learning and action. Across the UK a number of Universities have developed significant research portfolios using collaborative methodologies.

For Revans, knowledge that already exists and is written down in books, theories and concepts are called 'programmed knowledge' (Revans, 1983). This is an essential ingredient of learning, however it is not sufficient in itself to generate a true understanding. This can only be made real through inquiry. To explain this Revans developed the equation $L=P+Q$. In this context, learning takes place when combined with programme knowledge and questioning skills or inquiry.

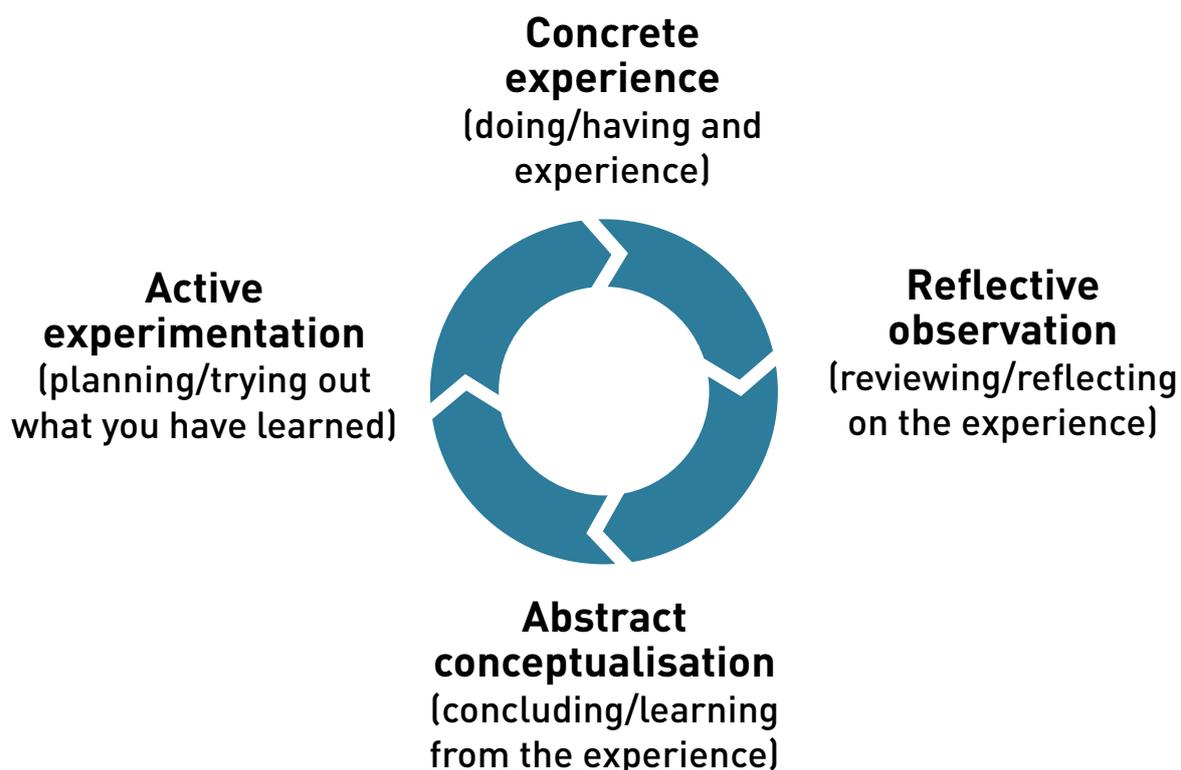
At the heart of action learning is the ability to ask the right questions at the right time and to take action as a consequence. It is the development of questioning insight which can help individuals to deal more effectively with organisational problems and change. Learning is about trying out new ideas, taking risks and sometimes taking actions which might not work.

Learning by doing is not in itself sufficient but must be combined with the ability to reflect on the learning experience. The purpose of this is to identify what exactly has been learned, how this feels and what difference it will make to future practice.

➤ What is experiential learning?

As adults, we have the benefit of a vast amount of experience. However, to learn from these we need to do more than merely have the experience itself. In order for us to learn, and encourage learning in others, we must consider the experiential learning cycle (a cycle because the learner goes round and round it, repeatedly).

This particular representation of how we learn from experience is taken from the work of David A Kolb (1984).



Kolb's experiential learning cycle is juxtaposed against ways in which an action learning set would typically address the issues. The concrete experience stage might be an organisational problem. To address this problem through action learning, an individual would present the issues to the set members. The first task would be to gather data (which could include observation) and to discuss the implications of this with the set. The function of the set is not to provide 'instant' answers or sticking with favoured solutions but to assist the investigative process by posing questions, as part of the reflective process. This is different to programme learning, where a body of knowledge is imparted. Through the process of data gathering, questioning and reflections, new concepts will be generated which in turn will help generate new ideas and solutions. In Kolb's cycle this is followed by the testing of these concepts in new situations, or in terms of organisations it would mean the implementation and evaluation of the new ideas in practice.

This stage is about deciding what to do and trying it out in practice, seeing what works. It is about applying the learning in practice. At the heart of the process lies new learning that can be transferred to new situations. Failing to find a solution to a problem can be just as important as finding a solution provided that learning has arisen from the process.

It is important for effective learning that all stages are completed and in sequence. Without this, learning is an unlikely result. The experiential learning cycle is an effective tool in a training environment, however, it is not only applicable to a learning environment; it applies to all of us in our everyday lives.

“The core of action learning lies in the learning as opposed to solving the problem or issue”

Beatty, Bourner and Frost

➤ How does action learning work?

- Individuals meeting together in a group (known as a set). For ease of working, about five to seven people make up a set
- Each individual brings a real issue/live challenge or project to the set that they wish to progress
- The whole set works for the benefit of the person presenting the issue
- The aim for the individual presenting the issue, is to be able to take action on the issue and to reflect and learn from the action
- Typically the action learning set meets for one day, every 4 – 6 weeks, over an agreed period (for example 6, 9 or 12 months)
- The set creates explicit ground rules to ensure effective working and confidentiality
- The meeting is facilitated by an individual outside of the learning set who acts as a catalyst and coordinator, supporting individuals through the process of learning

To take action on the issue and to reflect and learn from the action



➤ What pattern of learning does a typical action learning set follow?

- Members of the action learning sets take turns to present a particular situation that they currently face within their lives which requires action
- The presenter talks, for as long as they wish, and describes their situation/dilemma/challenge. During this time, the presenter should only be interrupted to enable them to clarify their issue or move forward
- Set members ask questions which are designed to assist the presenter to have a deeper understanding of their issue
- Set members do not give advice, tell anecdotes, pass judgement, or talk about how it compares to their own situation
- The set assists the presenter to review options and decide on action. The action point should be realistic and focus on the issue, problems or opportunity presented
- The set reflects on the group process and gives feedback to each other on what has taken place
- At a future set meeting, the presenter reports on the action taken

➤ What is the role of the set facilitator?

- Explain the process of action learning
- Encourage the group to reflect on group processes
- Model the skills of action learning
- Create safety and works to develop trust in order for individual members to explore sensitive issues
- Take the group beyond superficial analysis to a deeper level of understanding
- Keep the group focused on the individual presenter
- Ensure that group members follow action learning conventions
- Encourage reflection throughout the process and commitment to action
- Enable the group to draw out general lessons on management development

➤ What is the role of the set member?

- Create the conditions that support learning by giving people time to think without interruptions
- Support group members through encouragement and practical help
- Ask questions and where necessary challenge habitual thinking and assumptions
- Being open to the challenge of colleagues and listening to alternative suggestions
- Take action by trying something new in and outside set meetings
- Engage in the learning process, share the experience and personal insights
- To focus on learning, not only on the issue but also what is being learnt about oneself

➤ Why is action learning successful as a strategy for overcoming problems and difficulties

Action learning is based on the idea that learning and development, to be effective has to be about real problems, in real life, with real people. Action learning is distinctive because the process stresses the importance of understanding a situation fully and then being able to take action to address it.

It is not necessary that at every meeting all members present their issues but it is useful to recognise that issues become resolved not through a single act but as a consequence of a series of actions. Regularly reflecting upon progress with the support of set members can help to reframe the issue and overcome unexpected obstacles.

The role of both the presenter and listener are clearly defined within the action learning

set. The presenter is given concentrated time to articulate their issue unhindered and unrestricted by interruption or deviation. Thus begins the search for action based solutions. Listeners will be encouraged to ask questions that seek to enable the presenter to consider, define, or re-define the problem/issue and their relationship to it.

Listeners will offer empathic understanding and support, as well as being challenging. The purpose here, as in all the interaction and dialogue, is to enable the presenter to take some steps towards action. The presenter will be invited to be as specific as possible about any intended actions as this will make them more feasible to achieve.

➤ Why is this different from other forms of learning

In short, the presenter is given concentrated time and attention by other members of the learning set, in order to come to terms with the issue they wish to address. This is a prerequisite of ownership and taking action. Listeners are required, not to interpret the presentation from the realm of their individual experience but to understand the situation from the perspective of the presenter. This provides the opportunity to ask questions that aid the presenter in their understanding of the issue. In this respect, this is quite different from those moments of thought

or truth drawn from our personal experiences that we offer to others in the course of general conversation. Such thoughts tend to be based on what the listener would do if they were dealing with the situation, but the purpose of the session is for the presenter to re-frame or re-conceptualise the situation. Ownership remains with the presenter as does its resolution and potential action. This is in contrast to imposed or directed solutions that may lead to an incomplete or partially owned commitment to action.

g in greater self awareness and enhanced self-confidence

The opportunity to engage in reflection is a key feature of action learning. This is often absent in more traditional learning methodologies and a victim of the fast and furious pace of organisational life. Set members can learn to reflect in an open and inquiring way. This can help to develop the skills for reflective problem solving inside the work environment.

Between set meetings the presenter implements their intended actions. At the next set meeting they report back on those actions that have been taken and engage in reflecting upon their impact as well as what the individual has learned. Other set members replicate the approach when it comes to their turn.

Thus a cycle of learning and action is built into the process for every set member:

- Intended action leading to learning in and from the experience of the action (between the set meeting)
- Leading to the set meeting where the presenter reflects and questions with others that experience
- Leading to a\ reframing of the picture and/or new way of seeing the situation, leading to new action

As a consequence, set members learn beyond the previous accumulation of 'programmed' knowledge and understanding with and through others.

➤ What about ground rules?

A set needs to agree its ground rules at the outset. Typically this will include allocation of time, confidentiality, a commitment to attend all set meetings and a readiness to participate actively and positively throughout the sets. It is useful for the set to discuss the values and principles that underpin the ways in which they will respect and manage difference and the way in which they offer challenge and support. This should include how the set will collectively manage the more difficult issues of conflict, for example, having an issue with someone inside the set, if people are not learning and wish to leave or the set is becoming a burden.

➤ Some questions and answers about action learning

What will you and your organisation gain from action learning?

- Having time where you are listened to in a non-judgemental way
- Personal growth resulting in greater self awareness and enhanced self-confidence
- Different ways of solving problems and more choices about the way forward
- A clearer understanding of how you learn and manage change
- The ability to support, challenge and motivate others
- Develop partnerships
- It motivates individuals to face issues and reduce stress
- Excellent inquiry skills

How can you contribute to action learning?

- If you think a lot, you will ask good questions
- If you do a lot, you will like supporting people to devise action plans
- If you know a lot, you will share that information
- If you are not an expert, you will bring a fresh approach and challenge assumptions
- You will bring your unique perspective on the world

How can you use your time slot in action learning meetings?

- You may ask the group to stay quiet while you give a brief presentation and then ask for comments afterwards
- You may want to take comments and questions as you proceed
- You can use a flipchart to illustrate
- You may ask for information
- You may ask the set to focus on the consequences of your action or inactions since the last meeting

- You may ask the set to discuss the issue while you sit and say nothing
- You may ask someone to take notes
- You may structure your time around key questions
- You may want to record your time slot and replay

“The most important thing to remember is to ask the set members for what you want.” **Set participant**

What does action learning contribute to our work as public servants?

- It values the individual and their perspective
- It creates networks across organisations and professional boundaries and breaks down barriers
- It uses listening, questioning and challenge to promote understanding
- It has no unnecessary hierarchy or bureaucracy
- It often works in conditions of confusion and risk with contested concepts such as equality
- It is flexible and responds to and creates change by considering new ways of doing things
- It supports and empowers individuals, groups and organisations

“Great questions are key in action learning approaches.”

Set participant

➤ Questions to ask the presenter of the issue - an aid for reflection

Do I ask questions that clarify the issue?

- Who do you report to?
- How many people do you manage?
- How long have you been there?

Do I ask questions that enable the presenter to open up?

- What are you trying to do?
- How do you see it?
- What might help you?
- What obstacles do you envisage?

Do I ask questions that probe?

- Please explain more
- What exactly do you mean?
- What assumptions are you making?

Do I ask questions on action?

- So what can you do next?
- What are you going to do next?
- What are you going to do yourself before the next meeting?

➤ Questions for facilitators – an aid for reflection

- How clear am I on the role and responsibilities of an action learning facilitator?
- How do I enable the set to focus on the learning rather than the detail of the issue?
- What action learning skills can/should I model?
- When is it appropriate to intervene?
- How am I enabling the set to keep to task and to maintain the timetable?
- How can I encourage all set members to contribute their perspectives?
- How can I build an atmosphere of comfort, trust and openness?
- How can I enable set members to take more responsibility for their learning and actions?
- Why is it important not to impose my knowledge and view on the set?
- How do I help to maintain a positive atmosphere and keep energy levels appropriate?
- What am I learning?
- What should/could I be doing differently?
- How do I help the group work towards self-facilitation?
- How do I promote and encourage the ideas of recording learning?
- What tools can I introduce to help participants express themselves well?

➤ Questions on how to decide what issues to work on – an aid for reflection

- Is the challenge important, significant, complex, current and real?
- Who, if anybody, needs to approve of my choice of issue?
- Am I certain I will be able to take action on the dilemma?
- What is the time frame for making progress on the issue?
- How would I feel if I were not able to resolve the problem?
- Can I explain what is in my head and heart to other people?
- Am I willing to be challenged on this area of my work, life or personality?
- Would it be most useful to work on a familiar or unfamiliar issue?
- What is troubling me or exciting me about work?

➤ Questions for listeners/supporters – an aid for reflection

- How do I ensure that I ask questions rather than offer solutions? What can I do to show my empathy and concern?
- How do I demonstrate my belief that the presenter is the expert on the issue?
- To what extent do I reflect back what the presenter says?
- How am I helping the presenter to think in different ways about their problems?
- How do I welcome the perspectives offered by other set members?
- What are my motives when asking questions?
- When is it appropriate to support and when should I challenge?
- How does the presenter want me to help?
- What can I learn from this?

➤ Question for action points – an aid for reflection

- What do I want to do/improve/change by the next set meeting?
- Who will carry out the action points?
- What might prevent me carrying out my action points?
- Who do I need to work or consult with?
- Where can I get more information about this?
- What is the timetable for carrying out the specific action points? How realistic is that?
- What are the competing priorities and how will I handle them?
- What are the risks of acting in this way for me and/or the organisation and/or other people?
- What do I hope to feel when I have taken action?
- If I choose not to take action, how do I justify this?

➤ What do action points help us do?

- Take a step-by-step approach to problem solving, change and development
- Develop leadership skills as we take charge and reach our goals
- Test our learning back in the workplace
- Identify the support and resources we need
- Help us to make organisational and personal changes
- Become more realistic about how we manage our time
- Recognise that there are many possible solutions
- Stay positive as we realise we can do something
- Learn more about ourselves, our issues, our set and our organisations
- Transfer our learning across the organisation
- Take ownership and personal responsibility for an issue

➤ Questions for all set members when reviewing the learning – an aid for reflection

- What have I learned in this action learning session?
- How have my thoughts about my issue changed?
- How different are my feelings about my problems now?
- What changed behaviours do I notice about myself?
- What is the impact of my learning on my boss, my team and my organisation?
- What helps my learning?
- What hinders my learning?
- What are my learning needs and how can I meet them?
- What more do I want to learn?
- How do I ensure that my learning is transferred across the organisation?

➤ What should set members avoid?

- Habitual thinking, it keeps you in your comfort zone
- Interrupting the presenter, make a note of any thoughts, points or questions and contribute these at a more appropriate time
- Telling anecdotes, giving advice, passing judgement on the situation/issue presented
- Asking questions which are designed to illustrate how clever you are, instead ask questions which open up the presenter's own view of the issue
- Closed questions, they can produce defensive actions and behaviours
- Do not spend time discussing something that does not lead you to generating action points even if you find it interesting
- Obsessive behaviour
- Disabling yourself from taking action through deficit thinking
- Bringing a trivial issue/problem to the set. The action learning process depends on the individual bringing an issue which is of personal significance
- Turning up for the learning set unprepared. It is important that you are clear about what you want to say at the set meeting



➤ Conclusion

In the context of public services in Wales, engaging in action learning has proved to be a community experience. This requires individuals to be responsible for their own learning and that of others. Combining the skills of inquiry with a commitment to learn and then act provides a framework for achieving success in whatever we choose to do both inside and outside of the work environment.

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...To live so that which comes to me as seed goes to the next as blossom

That which comes to me as blossom goes on as fruit.

Dawna Markova

Action learning was written by Voirrey Manson and Dr Neil Wooding and is one of the series of Sowing Seeds topic papers published by Public Service Management Wales.

The seeds of ideas become the basis on which we grow our knowledge and understanding, in turn, enabling us to develop the organisations in which we work.