

Action Learning Sets

What is Action Learning?

Action Learning is based on the relationship between reflection and action ... where the focus is on the issues and opportunities that individuals bring and planning future action with the structured attention and support of the group. Put simply, it is about solving problems, learning and getting things done with more confidence, awareness and insight.

A major advantage of Action Learning is that participants are able to look at the real scenarios which concern them and they are ultimately responsible for the selection of topics they wish to discuss.

Why Use Action Learning?

- Action Learning gives participants the opportunity to learn from each other and engage in shared learning
- Enhance the opportunity to consolidate internal practices
- Support innovation
- Allow time for reflection on current practice - and encourage further action
- Allow participants to highlight areas of interest where they have a particular strength or weakness
- Enable participants to discuss management problems to find a way forward
- Offer time to build stronger relationships and more consistent management
- Enable participants to commit to further action

What is an Action Learning Set?

An Action Learning set is a group of usually 4 - 7 people who get together (on a regular basis) to discuss issues of personal or mutual importance. They are designed to deal with the specific needs of the set members and require agreed action by the end of each meeting. Sets may, or may not, be facilitated, or may start with a facilitator and later become self-facilitating. Whichever the case, it is important for some ground rules to be negotiated at the outset.

Action Learning Sets enable participants to make commitments to action, which they would not necessarily be in a position to do after having listened to a lecture or seminar, or as an individual working in isolation. There are usually three stages: identifying and clarifying the problem; listing possible actions; and selecting which specific action to take.



How Action Learning Set sessions can be organised

- Groups will be encouraged to meet at times and places agreed by themselves with e-mail support
- Participants will begin to build up relationships with other participants in their group. Action Learning will form part of these sessions
- Each participant will bring a real issue or problem to the ALS; due to time constraints one or two issues only will be covered each session
- The facilitator will help the group to set up explicit ground rules for the set
- The whole set will look at each issue in turn
- The person who has described the issue will decide on a number of action points to address

The Role of Each Participant

Participants work together on their chosen topics, listening and supporting their colleagues and helping them to decide on next actions. Participants help individuals to understand each issue better and to challenge underlying assumptions, rather than to offer direct advice. Each participant will be invited in turn to share his or her problem. Their peers will look at the problem from their own perspective, and through pertinent questions, discussion and sharing of experience, participants will be helped to move on in their understanding and see possible ways forward. Participants will be encouraged to show empathy rather than be judgemental, to listen and provide support for each other. In effect they are practising the arts of coaching and mentoring whilst being 'present'.

The Role of the Facilitator

The facilitator develops the ground rules for the operation of the Action Learning Set. This will include allocation of time, confidentiality, attendance and taking notes for future Action Learning Sets. The facilitator will guide on the skills required by each participant often in coaching, mentoring, effective meetings and any of the skills that were a catalyst for the Action Learning Sets to commence; for example, leadership skills. Facilitators will also support the recording of relevant information for participants to commence the agreed actions before the next Action Learning Set.

Recommendations

- Participants should be made familiar with the intent of the interventions (possible briefing)
- It is preferable for participants to attend voluntarily and be committed to attend all sessions
- Participants should plan for each Action Learning Set with thoughts on areas they wish to discuss
- Participants should commit to actions between each ALS and embrace the changes they have agreed

