

# **Action Learning: Principles and Issues in Practice**

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# 1. An Introduction to Action Learning

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This paper provides an introduction to action learning and reflects on recent advances made in its application. It focuses on practical variations of action learning and discusses in what ways they adhere to or challenge the original principles and established norms of action learning.

This first chapter gives the reader an overview of the original idea of action learning (as framed by Revans). The second and third chapters of the paper look at two areas in which action learning has developed more recently. Chapter 2 looks at the usefulness and limitations of the set facilitator. In particular, we review some of the ways in which action learning sets have taken on board and developed Revans' notion that sets do not need externally provided facilitators. Chapter 3 examines the practice of inter-organisational action learning. This is examined in relation to action learning theory and the rationale for cross-organisational learning in the global economy.

The paper is available from the IES members' area of its website ([www.employment-studies.co.uk](http://www.employment-studies.co.uk)).

## 1.1 Action learning is ...

Action learning has been described in many ways, with varying degrees of detail. At the more prescriptive end, Verna Willis (2004) collates and summarises the work of Reg Revans, the founder of action learning, to identify 23 'critical markers' of what is – and what is not – action learning. This list is given in the Appendix to this paper.

However, as Willis notes, the term 'action learning' is normally applied far more broadly than to the very specific principles such a list defines. Below are some key points to understanding the nature of action learning as a concept and in practice.

- **A way of learning by doing.** Action learning aims to learn from and resolve existing issues in organisations. It is distinct from other types of 'learning by doing' through its focus on the individual's present function in the organisation, rather than on learning a new function or addressing a project

outside their current role. It aims *'to help shake you out of the cage of your current thinking'*, and does this by offering people *'space to reflect, to question what they're at and to challenge their own and other people's assumptions'* (Pedler and Boutall, 1992).

- **Based around the 'set'.** Action learning sets typically comprise five to eight employees who offer each other advice and encouragement and challenge each other to think and act. The set will discuss each member's situation in turn. Sets normally have a facilitator, who guides discussion, ideally without contributing subject expertise, or 'programmed knowledge'.
- **As much a philosophy as a practice.** Although Reg Revans (1980), the pioneer of the action learning set, established certain core practices, he felt that each set should develop its own norms and structure. The most important aspects of action learning are the principles that learning should be open, reflective, practical and shared.
- **Focused on 'problems' not 'puzzles'.** Action learning is best applied to situations where there is no single solution and in which

*'different managers, all honest, experienced and wise, will advocate different courses of action in accordance with their different value systems, their different past experiences and their different hopes for the future.'* (Revans, 1998)

- **A developing field.** On the one hand, the lack of a fixed form and procedure means that the practice of action learning is 'highly situational' (Koo, 1999) and constantly developing. Revans first used action learning systematically in an educational setting in the 1940s. Since then, it has been adapted to many different settings.
- **A loosely applied term.** Yet on the other hand, it has been argued that there are many cases where the term action learning is applied to initiatives that stray too far from Revans' principles to be covered by his ideas.
- **High risk, high gain.** In its pure form, there is no control over how an action learning set is run from outside the set or from the set facilitator. By empowering members to tailor their set's structure and practices, action learning stands to be a more open process and optimally challenging and productive. Nonetheless, we can understand why this principle is not always applied in practice. An employer is quite likely to see a lack of control as risky; and if action learning proves ineffective, one stands to lose a lot of time spent by members of the learning set.

## 1.2 The application of action learning

Many organisations have used action learning, or variations of it, internally, so that the organisation and its employees can

capitalise on the wealth of learning opportunities already present in their work. Action learning has often been used in management and leadership development, but need not be confined to the management population. Action learning sets have also been a fairly common form of learning in programmes run by business schools, where they potentially provide a bridge between learning at the University and learning in the workplace.

Lancaster University is an institution which has adopted learning sets as a very important part of the learning design on some of its Masters programmes. Burgoyne (2002) reported an evaluation of an in-company MBA run for Bass plc. The programme was based on critical action learning with an emphasis on strategic learning, linked to company competencies. The evaluation showed it was quite difficult to get all the elements of the programme working in an integrated way. Even though the programme at the university was designed to relate to closely to work, participants still saw it as detached from practice, and adopted instrumental strategies to get through the course rather than optimise their development.

Action learning sets can be inter-organisational in their membership. Such sets are often arranged by Business Schools through consortium MBAs, or may be funded independently or by government bodies, as the case studies in Section 3 illustrate. Although there can be added complications in organising a set across organisations, many senior managers prefer this approach to avoid the difficulties associated with negotiating hierarchies within an organisation. Further, there are potential learning benefits in encountering the unknown (see chapter 3).

### 1.3 Organising the set

According to Revans, once a set is organised, the members should decide how it will function. There are thus very few elements that are essential to an action learning set. If possible, however, the following should be adhered to.

- **Non-expert members.** This helps to phrase technicalities in new and challenging ways, avoiding thinking within the constraints of the established system.
- **Members unfamiliar with each other's working cultures.** Historically, action learning sets have often been organised across different departments of an organisation, so that the set comprises different functions and subcultures<sup>1</sup>. More recently, as a result of the rise in consortia, it has become more common for cross-organisational action learning sets to be initiated. Yet the principle remains the same, that unfamiliarity brings a

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<sup>1</sup> With transnational organisations, the element of different nationalities may also be introduced.

fresh look at organisational behaviour and cultures/sub-cultures.

- **Non-hierarchical.** It is generally considered best for members to be in similar positions of seniority. This is because egalitarianism fosters a group environment in which all feel able to question, challenge and encourage other members. It is also considered preferable if the facilitator is not senior to the members. A key value of action learning is that it entails genuine enquiry by the set members: this is jeopardised if comments, questions and themes of discussion are to be judged or guided by a more senior person.

## 1.4 Action learning and leadership capabilities

Action learning has often been directed towards leadership development. In this case, it is worth considering which leadership competencies may be particularly enhanced by exposure to action learning. Marquardt (2000) identifies seven such key attributes of successful leaders in the modern economy. The following is a summary of Marquardt's framework<sup>1</sup>:

### 1. Systems thinker

*'Systems thinkers have the ability to see connections between issues, events and data points – the whole rather than its parts.'*

Action learning sets discuss situations that are real and current and thus contextualised within the processes and inter-relationships that explain them. Further, set members are ideally not area experts, approaching problems from a fresh perspective: as such, questions tend to emphasise underlying causes and workable long-term solutions over established theory.

### 2. Change agent

*'The change in the system is "action". The change in the individual is "learning", so that learning to act effectively is also learning to learn effectively.'*

Action learning is widely recognised to build individuals' confidence to create and lead change. Part of this is due to Revans' principle (1980) that 'one cannot change the system unless one is changed in the process'.

### 3. Innovator and risk-taker

*'Leaders should continuously look for "white space opportunities" – ie new growth possibilities that fall between the cracks because they do not naturally match the skills of existing business units.'*

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes Marquardt (2000) unless stated otherwise.



Action learning develops this ability through 'critical reflection, re-framing and context shifting'.

*'The questioning insight of action learning becomes a way of life for leaders who have grown and developed through action learning programs.'*

#### **4. Servant and steward**

*'True leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a desire to help others.'*

Marquardt describes servant-leadership as a powerful paradox that 'emphasises increased service to others, a holistic approach to work, a sense of community, and shared decision making.' In an action learning set, members are encouraged to be supportive yet challenging to each other.

#### **5. Polychronic co-ordinator**

*'Twenty-first century leaders will need to be able to manage and integrate many things at the same time ... And while juggling 50 balls at once, the leader can concentrate on the one that is in their hand at the time.'*

Through action learning, set members learn to be honest, open and inquiring, at times to the point of feeling vulnerable, in order to get things right and achieve. This develops invaluable leadership skills in 'handling problems and co-ordinating confusions'.

#### **6. Teacher, mentor, coach and learner**

*'Everyone, especially leaders, must pass his or her learning on to others ... Since learning is critical for the success of the business, leaders find ways for their people to do it every day.'*

In action learning, all set members are encouraged to learn and help others to learn. Coaching and mentoring skills are continually developed, through practice and by gaining experience of being on 'the receiving end of mentoring'.

#### **7. Visionary and vision-builder**

*'The ability to conceptualize complex issues and processes, simplify them, and inspire people around them is essential for the twenty-first century leader. Charisma may be helpful, but it is much more important to lead through a caring confidence in the people for whom you are a "steward".'*

Thus, an effective leader will not only communicate and rally support for her/his own vision, but also 'encourage personal visions from which emerge shared visions'. Action learning sets go through this process as its members are forced to conceptualise

complex issues on which they are (partially) ignorant and 'develop systems oriented, holistic resolutions'.

## 1.5 Action learning as organisational learning

The framework above can help us think about the possible skill gains at individual level from engagement in action learning. But its impact may go well beyond the individual. There is very strong interest now in organisational learning, although this term also means different things to different people. Revans himself sees a strong link between the learning experienced by individuals and the capacity of the organisation to manage change:

*'The organization that continues to express only the ideas of the past is not learning, and training systems intended to develop our young may do little more than make them proficient in yesterday's technique.'*  
(Revans, 1998)

There are two particular points regarding action learning in relation to organisational learning. Firstly, as Revans argues, it is crucial for the 'learning organisation' to add 'questioning insight' (Q) to its 'programmed knowledge' (P), for which action learning is a highly appropriate technique. Secondly, as Pedler and Boutall (1992) point out, '*Problems seldom have neat boundaries, but will often overlap and be dependent upon other factors within the organisation*'. Specific questions and challenges raised in action learning sets are likely to raise questions elsewhere in the organisation.

In practice, action learning works within organisations, or consortia or networks of organisations, in two main ways, to which we now turn.

### 1. Breaking down barriers

Action learning is employed to break down barriers between an organisation's departments or a consortium's organisations, enabling them to work together more effectively. This happens in two ways. Within the set, members come from different working sub-cultures or functions to provide each other with insight into how their departments work. Currently held misconceptions can thus be dispelled, especially those about the role of other functions, the nature of their working practices or the effects of one's own practices.

Members also take what they learn beyond the set. Developing lateral thinking, a better understanding of issues and the ability to see the bigger picture impacts beyond a leader's immediate team: it affects how he/she interacts with colleagues from other departments. Thus, action learning has a broader knock-on effect on both thinking and social relationships within the organisation.

## 2. Resolving key issues

Action learning lends balanced and thorough consideration to problems, pooling the different perspectives of set members and keeping firm sight of practicalities. It is thus an appropriate method for addressing issues of great organisational importance.

*'Companies such as Boeing, Du Pont, Motorola, Alcoa, and Nokia have recently turned to action learning to solve their critical, complex problems as well as to grow the competencies and attributes needed by their leaders if they are to succeed in the twenty-first century.'*  
(Marquardt, 2000)

Action learning tends to be time consuming and costly in comparison to some other development methods. Employers are thus more likely to give it the necessary support if it deals with an issue of real significance to the organisation. Organisations are then getting two benefits from the activity – learning for the individuals and attention to a real problem. One might also hope that continued use of learning sets would shift the organisational culture in favour of continuous learning and more collaborative working.

## 1.6 Benefits of action learning over conventional training

So what does the literature claim are the distinctive benefits of action learning in relation to conventional taught training as a means of development?

- **Training for an uncertain world.** Unlike conventional training, action learning centres on addressing uncertainty (Peters and Smith 1998). Set members learn

*'how to ask appropriate questions in conditions of risk, rather than to find the answers to questions that have already been precisely defined by others - and that do not allow for ambiguous responses because the examiners have all the approved answers.'* (Koo, 1999)

- **Contextual learning.** Action learning is steeped in the context of individuals' day-to-day jobs. Traditional training isolates dimensions of work and is thus deficient in this respect:

*'[Traditional training produces] individuals who are technologically literate and able to deal with intricate problem-solving models, but ... the social and interpersonal aspects of the organizations that largely create the dynamics of corporate culture are left unattended.'*  
(Dilworth, 1996)

- **Learning by doing.** Confucius is attributed as saying, 'I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand' (Koo, 1999). People frequently learn best through practice: classroom training and e-learning often go 'in one ear and out the other'. They are simply less vivid and engaging. Action learning is a very direct and sustained approach to learning by doing.

- **Find your own solutions.** Individuals also learn better when they have to find solutions themselves than when they are the recipients of didactic teaching. The same can be said for organisational learning: if the managers who will implement and maintain systems are chosen to develop them, they will probably come up with solutions which are more practical and more appropriate for the organisation's specific situation.
- **Part of the job.** Training is often considered 'time out' from the job. This largely explains why action-oriented organisations designate little time for reflection. Although time consuming, action learning is a form of reflection that can be justified as part of the job at hand.

## 1.7 Do we really need it?

Action learning sets are costly and not easily controlled, so it is understandable that employers will be suspicious of their outcome. Why have time-consuming meetings that do not follow a standard structure, when you can put your managers on a one-day training course?

This can put significant pressure on set members to achieve demonstrably positive results and yet, paradoxically, because action learning does not follow a standard procedure and pivots around reflective inquiry, results are very difficult to guarantee.

Nonetheless, there may be no better way to develop effective leadership skills. Certainly, leadership cannot be taught in the way that management can. Peters and Smith (1998) argue that while 'managers deal in efficiency' and can follow established models, 'leaders [deal] in effectiveness' and are concerned with change and improvement. Thus, good leadership

*'... comes from a feel for factors such as organizational politics and culture, networking, the art of influencing others, the skills of timing and presentation, the knack of having and selling ideas.'* (Peters and Smith, 1998)

It is imperative to recognise that developing leadership is both crucial and possible. As Drucker (1996) writes, '*there may be "born leaders", but there are surely too few to depend on them*'. Yet the requisite skills are best learnt not from a heavily didactic programme, but from experience and guided reflection.

The skills traditionally associated with leaders at the top of organisations are now required far more widely within the workforce. Action learning principles can be used to give far more employees experience of open-ended problem solving and working with colleagues who have different perspectives.

## 2. Self-facilitated Action Learning

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In this chapter of the paper we look in more depth of the issue of whether learning sets can really be self-facilitated or need a facilitator. In practice, the vast majority of action learning sets have an expert who initiates, facilitates and/or advises on the group's learning. Indeed, the role of a facilitator is often assumed to be indispensable throughout the action learning process. However, Reg Revans, the pioneer of action learning, envisioned that the role of facilitator would change and diminish as the group dynamics allowed.

Revans' original thinking on action learning dates back to the late 1920s, when he was one of a group of nine eminent scientists at Cambridge University who met every week to discuss their research. Their aim in meeting was 'to see if we can understand our own difficulties', and between meetings they would test out the ideas generated in practice. So obviously his first real experience of action learning was not externally facilitated.

O'Hara *et al.* (2004) comment that, 'For us this is the essence of action learning', despite there having been no input from HR or management experts in designing, setting up or facilitating this group. Clearly, action learning is not in principle dependent upon a facilitator. The questions thus arise: What are the benefits of having a set facilitator? Can we do without them, and if so, what are the benefits of having a self-facilitated set?

### 2.1 The usefulness of the set facilitator

The facilitator typically acts both to embed the processes of action learning and to monitor them, ensuring quality. There are three main areas in which the set facilitator works:

#### 1. Establishing ground rules and procedures

Some ground rules, such as hearing out and showing respect for views that contrast to one's own, should always be firmly established from the outset. Other rules and procedures are often tailored to the set by its members, with the aims of action learning in mind and as they see fit for the group.

In neither case is it strictly necessary for a facilitator to attend set meetings, as preliminary training can explain both precise ground rules and the process and objectives of action learning. However, understanding the principles is far easier than putting them into practice and most sets find an experienced facilitator useful as a tool to keep them on track in the early stages.

Further, this part of the facilitator's role overlaps with promoting action learning and initiating sets. The set initiator identifies, or helps organisations identify, fertile ground for action learning, proposes action learning and explains how it works. It is a short step away from this to working with a group to make sure they get started in the right direction, embodying the right principles.

## **2. Directing the topics of discussion**

One step on in the process, the facilitator is valuable in ensuring the set conceptualises problems that are appropriate for action learning.

Most importantly, the facilitator should guide conversation away from, or at least through and beyond, problems the set members can do little about. In itself, such discussion will result in no more than circular grumbling about distant powers or other people's inefficiencies. Rather, the facilitator should encourage the set to discuss members' concerns about their own roles, which is prerequisite to developing a proactive problem-solving approach.

## **3. Encouraging a problem-solving perspective**

One of the key principles of action learning is that the set should deal with 'problems' not 'puzzles'; that is to say, that there is no one right answer (Revans, 1998). Facilitators have a key role in fostering a mentality that is open to other ways of thinking and conducive to problem solving.

It is here in particular that the facilitator's analytical skills and emotional intelligence really come into play. Many of the techniques they will use are straightforward and arguably common sense, such as asking a member, 'What could you do about that?', or encouraging members to 'turn things on their head' and think about something from a different perspective.

Yet even in such simple ways, the facilitator's presence can be of substantial value. Being a non-member enables her/him to be more sensitised to the thought processes of the group. By contrast, the set members themselves, caught up in the practical issues being discussed, may not consider the psychological aspects of the set.

## **2.2 Working yourself out of a job?**

*'Over the last seven or eight years some management teachers, trainers and consultants have taken up this role [of set adviser] professionally – we use it to earn our living, to justify our time'. (Pedler, 1983)*

*'... the record of self-facilitated sets seems to have been, at best, mixed. Some have been successful; others have failed or simply ceased to meet as set members have dropped out.'* (O'Hara et al., 2004)

Perhaps the most obvious benefits to be had in reducing or removing the role of an external facilitator is in the cost of action learning programmes. For some organisations this may condition whether they can use action learning or not; for others it may enable them to roll out an action learning programme much more broadly. SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) may find the use of external facilitators a particular cost barrier to their adoption of action learning.

There are also benefits to be had from self-facilitated action learning in the effectiveness of the activity. Revans maintained that a facilitator may be of use to initiate a set, to 'launch the set quickly into its discussions' and 'speed the integration of the set'. Yet he also believed that reliance upon an external facilitator or adviser ran contrary to the philosophy of action learning, which distrusts experts and received knowledge. Further, he was suspicious of the notion of set facilitation as a profession and argued that

*'as soon it is clear there is money to be made, educational advances assume a package quality ... which can thus be more easily propagated and "sold"'. (Pedler, 1983)*

Thus, Revans (1998) asserted that the action learning set

*'... must contrive that it achieves independence of [its facilitator] at the earliest possible moment, and open discussions between the substantive members of the set and the supernumerary to plan this should be pursued without embarrassment.'*

Some action learning sets have followed Revans' model, gradually becoming self-directed as the facilitator takes a back seat and eventually works her/himself out of a job. An example of this is the National Action Learning Programme in Ireland, where 70 organisations participated in 13 sets (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2004).

However, although this is recognised by many as an ideal, it often does not work in practice. More frequent are cases where an external facilitator continues throughout the programme, despite her/his diminishing importance. For example, in an inter-organisational set in the construction industry (Davey et al., 2004), the role of set adviser was crucial in the lengthy initial stage when the project area was identified. In particular, the adviser encouraged the set to focus on issues on which they could have an impact, and to have a 'can-do' attitude. But at later stages, the role was far less necessary and at one meeting that the adviser could not attend, the set functioned better, leading to 'a more focused, in-depth discussion'.

One model for self-facilitating sets from the beginning is that developed by McGill and Beaty (1992) and endorsed by Revans (1998), where future facilitators pick up the requisite skills through being in a facilitated set themselves. Such sets are not without a facilitator, but they are independent of an *external* facilitator, the role instead being taken up by an employee. However, O'Hara *et al.* (2004) found scant evidence of this model being used in practice.

Part of the reason for the persistent use of external facilitators would appear to be that at the outset, the employer or organising body plans and costs for the action learning programme as a package that includes external facilitation. Also, although employing a facilitator is costly, organisations weigh that cost against the risk of an unsuccessful action learning programme. Where there is potentially great wastage of managerial time in the organisation and execution of a process, organisations naturally want assurance that the initiative will work.

Another reason is the dynamics of the group itself:

*'... the reality is that both the facilitator and group members tend to hang on to the status quo. For the facilitator it is very difficult to relinquish such an attractive role as the 'wise and insightful'. Especially when others come up to you afterwards and say "I'm really glad you said that in the group." Or "I don't know how you see those things that just go over the heads of the rest of us." Who wouldn't want to hang on to such a valued role?' (Dixon, 1998; cited in O'Hara *et al.*, 2004).*

## 2.3 An innovative model

Researchers at the Management Development Research Unit at the University of Brighton have developed an innovative model of self-facilitated action learning for a programme for the North Western Health Board, Ireland (O'Hara *et al.*, 2004). Contrary to the view outlined above that people can learn facilitation from the experience of being a set member themselves, O'Hara *et al.* decided that the necessary skills are better learnt through formal preparatory training. Thus, they included in the programme a

*'five-day induction workshop to ensure that participants had the necessary skills to self-manage their own sets and to begin to identify the work that would be done in them'.*

The first two meetings were facilitated by 'experienced set advisers ... to model good practice and ensure that sets started well'. After that, the members facilitated and managed the meetings on a rotating basis. Their sources of backup were: support materials, including 'tips on how to get the most out of the meeting'; a workshop after six months that reviewed the set process and cemented the skills learnt in the introductory workshop; and



the option of intervention by an experienced action learning set adviser if the members felt unable to resolve a situation.

An evaluation of the project carried out by IES found the results to be exceptional: *'Our overall view was that the programme was a positive and courageous exercise in changing the culture of the Health Board'* (Tamkin, 2000). Further, the relatively low cost of this form of action learning meant that its use could be more widespread. From May 1999 to September 2003, 380 managers participated in over 60 sets, all of which completed the programme.

However, the set was not completely free of external intervention. For reasons of quality control, the set adviser who attended the first two meetings also attended the last 30 minutes of each consecutive meeting. This was because

*'Quality control of any action learning set is problematic and in our experience rests for the most part on the trust in the skills and professionalism of the set facilitator.'* (O'Hara et al., 2004)

The responses of the sets to the regular presence of the process adviser were 'very mixed'.

*'Some sets thought the [process adviser] played a major role in helping the set in its process of self-management, especially in terms of motivating them and surfacing learning. Other sets thought that the arrival of someone for the last half hour of the meeting soon became a mechanistic and redundant device for performing a function that they could carry out themselves.'* (O'Hara et al., 2004)

Here we see a quandary that is part and parcel of action learning in contemporary organisations: action learning sets can function best when complete control is given to its members, but this requires trust from the employer that the set is being run well. The level of trust may be substantial and is certainly something to bear in mind. Action learning is, after all, a time consuming and thus expensive enterprise.

## **2.4 Key points on the role of the facilitator**

A certain amount of guidance is necessary for sets to develop the appropriate dynamics, whether through a coaching role such as a facilitator, or introductory training. How much guidance is needed depends on the individual members and the group dynamics. At the same time, there is a danger in over-prescribing the involvement of a facilitator, who can hinder as well as mobilise the set.

From the point of view of management consultants involved in propagating action learning, it is easy to fall into the trap of offering *Action Learning* as a package that they can administer from start to end. It is also tempting for organisations to make the safe move of hiring a set facilitator from start to end to minimise

the risk of failure. And it is easy for set members to become reliant upon their facilitator when they could in fact manage without her/him. Arguably, none of these situations are disastrous, but equally arguable is that they deviate from the key principle of action learning that people take full control of their learning.

IES recommends that, for this reason and for reasons of cost and efficiency, organisations tailor the role of set initiator, facilitator or adviser to the needs of the target group. Thus, sets should be designed at the outset (*ie* at the stage of initiation) to include as much or as little external facilitation as is deemed necessary.

Judging employees' propensity for action learning may prove recondite and will certainly require in-depth knowledge of the potential set members, but only slightly more so than for judging effectively whether action learning is appropriate at all. Difficulty in estimating the need for a set facilitator can be mitigated by consultation with the set members and it can be made clear to them that the presence of a facilitator may be negotiated at a later date.

# 3. Inter-organisational Action Learning

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In this final chapter of the paper we reflect on the potential use of action learning as a device for shared learning between organisations.

Historically, the majority of action learning sets have occurred at an organisational level. This reflects an independent attitude to organisational strategy, whereby operational problems, individuals' development and training budgets are considered purely internal matters. Problems within the organisation are likely to touch on sensitive information and anyway are of most relevance to its employees: surely they will have the most to say about them? Leadership and management skills can be culture specific: surely individuals will develop more usefully from an internal perspective of action learning?

Because of changes in the global economy over the last two decades, this is changing. The emphasis in competition is shifting 'increasingly from inter-firm rivalry to that between supply chains and networks' (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2004). In this context, strategic collaboration, information sharing and integration have been seen to enhance the performance of supply chains, building them into close-knit 'extended enterprises'.

Action learning may be an appropriate tool for enhancing collaboration and integration, as it can break down barriers to efficiency and effectiveness that exist between complementing functions or organisations. In particular, it can help build trusting relationships and foster partnership and co-operation.

Yet even where no collaborative relationship exists and organisations are unrelated or in competition, action learning can be fruitfully applied to subjects of mutual interest. A key element of action learning is encountering the unfamiliar, so that fresh thinking can be applied to problems irrespective of received knowledge and expertise. Although this may be done in large organisations by grouping together disparate functions, an alternative might be inter-organisational sets. The following three sections describe case studies of inter-organisational action learning in various settings.

Where business schools have used action learning in their teaching (most often on MBAs or other masters programmes), it has also been a natural part of consortium MBAs. The attraction of consortium MBAs is that employees from a number of different organisations can learn from each other as well as from the course tutors. Action learning sets have been one natural mechanism for achieving this, as representatives of the different organisations work with each other on their own work-based problems. It does seem, however, that employers have rather backed away from consortium MBAs over the last five years (CEML, 2002) as they are very resource intensive to set up and vulnerable to a partner withdrawing. This form of inter-organisational action learning may thus be less evident now than in the past.

### 3.1 Unrelated organisations

The National Action Learning Programme (NALP) in Ireland, used action learning sets made up of senior representatives from firms that had no direct commercial relationship (Coughlan *et al.*, 2002; Coughlan and Coghlan, 2004). Funded by the European Union, the initiative was organised by the Irish Management Institute and ran from 1997 to 2000. The broad aim was to help organisations 'change, upgrade and become learning organisations' (European Commission, 2005).

The programme was based around inter-organisational 'learning networks', each typically comprised of ten to 12 members and representing four or five organisations. In the pilot phase, which ran to autumn 1998, 20 firms participated in four networks. In the second phase, 70 organisations participated in 13 networks.

Networks were clustered around themes, derived from real work issues identified by the participants as being of substantial consequence in their organisations. They included:

*'... securing and expanding the mandate of the multinational subsidiary, adopting world class practices in the well-established organisation, managing the voluntary organisation, implementing strategic change in the public sector, managing the SME for growth and creating sustainable service advantage in the service firm, to cite some examples'. (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2004)*

Networks progressed through four general stages: detailed self-assessment, action planning, action learning and evaluation. Conventional action learning was supplemented by various other learning interventions, including

*'...self-assessment instruments, monthly presentations by each company in the group, feedback from the other participants and programme staff, lectures and inputs from experts, case studies, visits to company sites and personal individualised coaching'. (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2004)*

The action learning sets themselves were seen to work 'parallel to existing formal organisational systems', bringing successful and sustained innovation to them. Members unanimously agreed that

*'They received support and challenge from colleagues and network group members from other organisational settings in a psychologically safe environment which fostered questioning and reflection in action'.  
(Coughlan and Coughlan, 2004)*

## 3.2 Consortia or extended enterprises

CO-IMPROVE, also funded by the EU, built on the NALP by applying action learning and learning networks to three 'extended manufacturing enterprises' (EMEs) that were centred in Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2004). The project started in March 2001 and lasted for three years.

The primary aim was to improve collaboration within the EMEs, especially 'in the areas of new product development and order fulfilment' (Integrated Information Systems, 2005). The project also aimed to improve the general capacity of European SMEs for collaboration, thus increasing 'their competitiveness and attractiveness as partners in (other) EMEs'. Specific areas of concern were human capital, long-term employability, quality of working life and the usability of scientific knowledge in EME business models and software systems.

Learning networks pivoted around 'systems integrators', the companies that served as the main actors in the EMEs. Each systems integrator selected three or four strategically important suppliers, usually SMEs, for the programme. Similarly to the NALP, networks progressed through four stages, namely: self-assessment and benchmarking; in-depth analyses and diagnoses; developing action plans and implementing the CO-IMPROVE business model and software system; and a review to distil their learning and feed back to the researchers.

Action learning was used to implement the CO-IMPROVE initiatives, in particular focusing on challenges encountered by the EMEs. Networks met as action learning sets 10 to 14 times over 15 months. Each set comprised two or more representatives from the systems integrator, two representatives from each of the EME suppliers and two researchers who acted as facilitators and learning coaches. Outside the set,

*'... the systems integrators met occasionally with their individual suppliers on a project basis, in addition to maintaining the normal routine commercial relationship and contact'. (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2004)*

The fact that the EME suppliers were selected, rather than volunteering themselves, affected the motivation of their participants. Discussion among set members and feedback from the learning

coaches thus served an important role in encouraging participation and building commitment to CO-IMPROVE, 'particularly where collaborative improvement and action learning were not familiar to participants' (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2004).

Overall, the action learning worked as 'a platform for the exchange of ideas and opinions with a view to building trust and reaching common ground for collaboration'.

The expected results include a 50 per cent reduction in stock, a 50 per cent improvement in delivery performance and a measurable quality improvement. At the time of writing, the CO-IMPROVE website announces, '*The investigation of the requirements of the participating EMEs was recently completed with very interesting findings*' (Integrated Information Systems, 2005). Results are due to be disseminated soon.

### **3.3 SMEs in a competitive environment**

Collaboration through action learning is examined in a case study by Davey *et al.* (2004) among SMEs that were in competition with each other, and thus could not achieve strategic or operational integration. They could, however, develop integration at a tactical level on a specific project and took a step towards cultural integration, both of which were most unusual in the construction industry.

Small organisations are unlikely to be able to benefit from action learning on their own. Inter-organisational action learning allows SMEs to form sets whose members are unfamiliar with each other's managerial situations and which are not too costly for each organisation. As the case study below shows, although it can be difficult to recruit members to such action learning sets, they can be very worthwhile once they are up and running.

The study describes an action learning set organised across construction SMEs in the Watford area, sponsored by the Chartered Institute of Building. They chose action learning because of 'its potential to overcome the cultural lack of creative learning' in the industry (Davey *et al.* 2004). Specifically, the set aimed 'to promote innovation and the use of new technologies' among the SMEs.

The set was inhibited in the range of issues it could discuss, due to competition between the members' organisations. Instead of addressing issues that affected the day-to-day running of their business, the set discussed industry-wide issues. For the first three meetings this was also problematic, because the focus was consistently on issues over which the members felt they had no control and to which they could not develop a group response.

However, once they had identified an appropriate subject, namely the quality of recruitment, the group immediately clarified what commitment was required and found the impetus to make that commitment, arranging the next six meetings. From there the set focused on what they could do to enhance recruitment procedures and resources in the industry. They did this as a group project, using the meetings 'to gain feedback on actions taken outside of the set'.

The solution they finally came up with was a 'one-stop shop', to be provided from a bus that would tour the country. Its aims would be to provide:

*'Better careers information for potential recruits and improved access to placements, training and jobs; greater access to information about local builders; and job opportunities for local builders'.* (Davey et al., 2004)

The initiative also had implications beyond recruitment issues, as it would also 'help educate domestic clients, reduce skills shortages and improve the image of the construction industry'. One member envisaged the 'one-stop shop' becoming 'as relevant to the construction industry as the AA is to motoring or the [Citizens' Advice Bureau] is to legal and benefit services'.

The case is of particular interest because the set members were in competition with each other and thus had to refrain from discussing many aspects of their work. This runs contrary to the original principles of the action learning set which require honest and open reflection between members on challenges they face in their daily work. Such an environment is considered prerequisite to set members being able to

*'... give to and accept from other managers the criticism, advice and support needful to develop their own managerial powers, all in the course of identifying and treating their own personal tasks'.* (Revans, 1998)

Yet the set members did face similar problems and could potentially learn as a group, so the challenge was to identify issues or, as it turned out, a single issue that could be discussed openly – ie irrespective of sources of competition – and with fruitful results.

This leads us to another interesting aspect of the set: it developed a collective response to a single issue, on which the members were knowledgeable and experienced. This is in opposition to the established form of the action learning set, where each member has individual ownership of a 'problem'. Members normally offer each other comments and suggestions as non-experts, so that problems can be seen in a new light, challenging received wisdom. Yet despite challenging or, as some would view it, contravening Revans' principles in this way, the set was successful in learning and generating innovation.

Finally, action learning functioned to break down barriers in a competitive environment. One member described the main lesson learnt:

*'I've worked all my life in construction and I'd come to believe that it is always adversarial, especially between people who are competitors. But, if we spend enough time together, we can share ideas'. (Davey et al., 2004)*

### **3.4 Key points on inter-organisational action learning**

Action learning may be deployed to great effect in various inter-organisational settings, heightening the learning benefits that may be had from encountering the unknown. Reflecting on a problem with people who have a similar degree of responsibility in a different organisation can provide the stimulus needed to turn the problem on its head, think differently and learn.

Inter-organisational action learning can be a successful response to the need for learning and breaking down barriers across the organisations of consortia. However, it may also be a useful tool among organisations not in a collaborative relationship and can even work where the set members are from organisations that are in competition with each other.

A key consideration for any employer who may wish to use action learning in conjunction with another organisation will be how to fund such a programme. It is notable that of the above case studies, two received EU funding and one received funding from an employers' association. Perhaps a more common way of funding inter-organisational action learning has been to pay for a consortium MBA that includes action learning. Another option is for organisations to agree to jointly employ management consultants or academics to design a bespoke programme.

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If you have found this paper interesting and would like help with designing, implementing or evaluating action learning programmes in your organisation, IES HR consultants and researchers would be happy to help. Please contact Paul Fairhurst on 01273 678866 or Penny Tamkin on 01273 873675.



## Appendix 1: Critical Markers of Action Learning

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Based on personal conversations with Revans and his seminal book, *The ABC of Action Learning* (1998), Willis (2004) compiled the following list of critical markers that define action learning. 'Each item should be read as if prefaced with the words 'Action learning' ... The words in quotations in the list are Revans' own' (Willis, 2004: 17).

### Rules of engagement (macro level)

1. is easily differentiated from other kinds of small group activities by virtue of the dominance of 'Q' (*ie* inquiry based on the assumption that no one has the answers or even the right questions)
2. demands across the board engagement with all three systems: alpha, beta and gamma<sup>1</sup>
3. excludes all 'fabrications of reality' and insists on working with the real thing in the real world
4. is consciously and deliberately subjective about personal experience and learning, while simultaneously scientifically, rigorously objective about the facts of the problem and its content
5. has 'singular, explicit and undiluted purpose'
6. finds formal instruction and 'expert' talks largely irrelevant for its purposes; insists that 'P' [*ie* programmed knowledge] exists in and is the province of the set and learners themselves, and prefers that adding any 'P' should be triggered by the need to fill a learning gap about the problem itself
7. is, set by set, self-organising – and by a systemic kind of organisational osmosis and influence, in turn creates other self-organising systems
8. deliberately seeks to cross-pollinate learning through interdisciplinary, inter-firm, interagency set consortia and

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<sup>1</sup> Systems alpha, beta and gamma 'link the individual learning aspects of action learning to the organisation development ones via scientific method' (Pedler, 1983: 3). Of the three, only system beta has been commonly followed (Smith, 1997).

exchanges, capitalising on learning that results from encountering unfamiliar demands

9. must have willing, fully committed, politically mature and trusted sponsors
10. depends, for future success, on fair and accurate representation of Revans' theory and practice in the public media. Action learning cannot be allowed to be transmuted by special interests.

### **Rules of set operation**

11. requires small, cohesive sets, with regular attendance and egalitarian participation
12. needs a 'short induction' to 'induce curiosity', to gain commitment to addressing the real problems, and to state 'rudimentary ideas' about decision, information, learning, risk, system and value inherent in the work
13. drives performance through commitment to the set and the challenge of the problem, with the intention to reach and implement solutions
14. cannot be driven by facilitators who, by intervention, interfere with the self-organizing properties of the set
15. does not deal with puzzles that presumably have consistent solutions, but instead tackles ill-defined problems for which there are no answers.
16. asserts that unlearning of false assumptions enables new learning, and that tests of new assumptions through action are the means for obtaining wisdom
17. models heterarchy and democratisation in the conduct of organisational business
18. must have clients who are generous with time for involvement in their problem owning and desire for real solutions.

### **Rules of individual participation**

19. recaptures natural curiosity, but demands intellectual and personal honesty
20. requires self-observation, unvarnished reflection and willingness to adopt change in perspective and behaviour
21. locates social learning in the exchanges, constantly learning with and from each other and serving collectively as 'tutors'
22. surfaces and uses tacit knowledge
23. values multiple perspectives.

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