

# THE ACTION LEARNING SET

## HOW TO PREPARE

Brockbank, McGill & Patel Associates  
Website: [www.mentoring-net.co.uk](http://www.mentoring-net.co.uk) email: [admin@mentoring-net.co.uk](mailto:admin@mentoring-net.co.uk)



*By Ian McGill co-author of The Action Learning Handbook<sup>1</sup>*

### A Simple Idea

Action learning brings you together with other people in a small group to work on issues that matter to you - important issues arising from your career, working relationships and your life.

When you work on issues or problems with your colleagues in the set what may seem intractable becomes resolvable and solutions emerge

Action learning is based on the idea that learning and development has to be about real problems in real life with real people.

Action learning is distinctive because the process stresses that it is not only important to understand a situation but professionals and managers should also be able to act in a situation.

*FAQs "What is action learning? How does action learning work? Why is it so relevant now and in the future?"*

### Action Learning At a Glance

- ✓ You meet in a group (known as a set). Usually five to seven people make up the set.
- ✓ You bring a real issue\problem or project to the set that you want to progress.
- ✓ Everyone in the set works on the issue for your benefit.
- ✓ Your aim is to be able to take action on the issue and to reflect and learn from the action you may take.
- ✓ You meet with the set for 3-4 hours (or one day) every 4-6 weeks for a number of meetings over an agreed period (for example 6, 9 or 12 months).
- ✓ As a member of the set you make rules to ensure effective working.
- ✓ The set has a facilitator who ensures the set is run safely and smoothly.

Box 1

Use these e-notes as briefing if you about to start or rejoin an Action Learning Set or as handout if you are going to facilitate an Action Learning Set.

## What You Can Expect

Imagine yourself in a set meeting. Your facilitator asks the set members who would like to take time at the set meeting today. Three colleagues including you volunteer and the set agree each will have about one hour devoted to their issues.

Let's assume you are the first to volunteer. You describe the issue to the set (called presenting). You start by conveying the issue as you see it. Here is a potential issue/problem:

**The Issue.** You are concerned about how you organise your time in your work.

**Talk.** You tell the set what you do currently and how you are always leaving things until the last possible moment so that you are forever chasing and not meeting deadlines. You give a few examples of when this happens and what are the effects on yourself and those you work with. You tell the story in about ten minutes.

**Listen.** Your colleagues and the facilitator have listened to your story. They will then seek to clarify what you have said so they have as full a picture as possible. Then they ask questions that get you to consider and think through how you have used your time. They may ask questions that help you look at the problem differently.

**Understand.** The purpose is to help you as the presenter to understand the issue, own the issue, take responsibility for it and to learn from it.

**Clarify.** Your colleagues in the set will aim to be understanding and supportive, as well as being challenging. They will try not to give advice or tell you what you should do. It is your issue. It is your responsibility to organise your time. They will not be there when you try to improve your use of time.

**Support/Empathise.** But they are not there to criticize you either. Indeed they may well empathise with you by trying to be in your shoes in understanding your situation.

**Frame Action.** Next the other set members will help you to take some steps towards action on how you intend to modify your use of your time. You will be invited to be as specific as possible about any intended actions as this will make them more feasible to achieve.

### Action Learning to Develop Skills

Action learning develops and enhances some of the key skills crucial to effective management:

#### Basic Skills:

- ✓ listening and attending
- ✓ reflecting back and questioning
- ✓ disclosure and assertion

#### Additional Skills:

- ✓ management of emotion and conflict
- ✓ creating rapport
- ✓ building empathy
- ✓ giving and receiving feedback
- ✓ using language effectively
- ✓ summarizing
- ✓ facilitation

Box 2

## Why Action Learning Sets Work

So what is so different about action learning from usual interactions between colleagues?

### Concentrated Time

The presenter is given concentrated time and attention by a number of colleagues. This is quite different from the quick moments of thought offered from our repertoire of individual past experience. Such thoughts tend to be based on what we would do if we were dealing with the situation. It is not our situation. It is the presenter who will take responsibility and any subsequent action. S/he may want ideas and pictures of how set members see her situation, but the purpose is for her to re-frame or re-conceptualise her situation. Ownership remains with her/him as does its resolution and potential action, in contrast to imposed or directed solutions which may lead to incomplete or partially owned commitment.

Through action learning the presenter takes responsibility for his/her issue, asks for what she needs from the set, really listens and reflects on the questions and statements made by colleagues and then concludes with actions - important next steps that are specific, clear and feasible.

### Time for reflection

Another key difference is pace and time for real reflection. Organisational life often leaves too little time for slowing down the pace to enable people to really think and feel their way through to the more intractable issues. We tend to press on with the urgent, giving little time and reflection for the important.

Between set meetings our presenter implements her/his intended actions. At the next set meeting she will report back on those actions she has taken and will engage in reflection upon their impact as well as what she 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.

*Most sets have a facilitator until a set can become self-facilitating. The facilitator models the skills and qualities to ensure that the process results in effective action learning for the set members.*

## Where Action Learning Works

Action learning is useful in encouraging the skills and qualities appropriate for:

- ✓ staff development\appraisal
- ✓ mentoring
- ✓ networking
- ✓ continuing professional development
- ✓ individual and group project development and implementation
- ✓ personal management, supervisory development

### Box 3

## Take account of the process

So far I have emphasized the task but the process is also important. Process and task interweave. When tasks effectively undertaken take account of the process by which they are achieved then real learning occurs.

Action learning enables set members to become aware of and improve their understanding of process. By process I mean how set members interact in the set alongside the task of enabling set members to work on their issues.

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### Attention to the Process

Attention to process is undertaken by consciously taking time in the set meeting to examine:

- ✓ the interpersonal skills (see Box 1), qualities and values presented and expressed
- ✓ how the set is working
- ✓ what and how we learn and develop.

#### Box 4

## Why Action Learning Sets can Transform Organisations

We can now make the connection with the idea of the "learning organisation" or organisational learning. The simple reality is that **only** if staff, particularly its managers, are able to be reflective learners will the organisation move to that state of being able to learn and transform.

### The Most Valuable Assets – People

Thus the relevance of action learning lies in bringing together the following key components of organisational sustenance, survival, growth and sustainability:

- ✓ effective management development
- ✓ organisational learning and development
- ✓ the moving forward of, and action on, issues and problems relevant to the organisation and their employees.

#### Box 5

Some of the most valuable applications are with organisations using action learning for in-house management development and as a means to create the conditions for organisational learning.

Action Learning set help individuals to prepare for the future by developing their potential. Managers cannot rely upon previously developed skills and understandings, or on existing and past ways of doing things. The capacity of the organisation to learn, survive and work with an ever changing environment will depend partly depend upon the kind of developmental

activities they engage in (see box 2 and 5)

<sup>1</sup> McGill, I., & Brockbank, A., (2004) *The Action Learning Handbook*. London: Routledge Falmer.