

Action Learning – An Overview

"Action learning is a continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with an intention of getting things done."

Beaty & McGill, 2001, p11.

Action Learning is an approach to the enhancement of understanding and skills that enables a group of peers to support an individual's development. It is about helping and being helped.

Action Learning Sets meet every four or five weeks – for four or five times – to discuss real issues that members of the set are facing in their working lives. Within each set meeting all members will have a slot during which their issue is considered. A member will present his or her issue and its context; the other members of the set then help the presenter to clarify the issue and to develop ways of addressing it. This one-at-a-time focus on the presenter's issue helps them to identify actions; these will be implemented, and the process and its consequences are then discussed at the next meeting.

The issue or problem must be one of substance so that it can be addressed over a period of time. It should not be a "puzzle", ie something where there is a correct answer that just needs to be discovered.

The emphasis is on learning about action in real – and often powerful – situations. The discussions within the set must therefore be completely confidential to the set.

In addition to helping the issue-holder to address their issue, the process also gives the other set members valuable insights into other people's situations, and the opportunity to develop their own skills in clarifying, reflecting and questioning. Set members are not uncritical supporters of the presenter, their role is to challenge assumptions, to help the presenter check out reality, etc. It is not to provide counselling, though the skills of being an effective set member do overlap with those of the counsellor, ...and those of the manager, and the colleague, and the coach, and the mentor, and the critical friend...

The role of the set leader is:

- to make sure that the set agrees limits – and sticks to them
- to ensure that time is fairly distributed across the set members
- to help make the whole process a productive one

Anyone considering joining an Action Learning Set should:

- be willing to accept the confidentiality conditions
- be able to commit the time to attend all the meetings of the set
- have a significant professional issue that they would like to address

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