

ACTION LEARNING

Why HR can no longer neglect or misunderstand its true value and potential

“One must learn by doing the thing, for though you think you know it, you have no certainty, until you try” **Sophocles Trachniae 415BC**

Take a look at most conference agendas for HR folk and they will be awash with the latest wisdom on leadership, engagement and change. Invariably there will be offerings on the very latest techniques to deploy the wizardry of technology to accelerate HR’s contribution and progress, be that via e-learning, social networks or other systems driven means. This short paper is unashamedly returning to what, in its day, was a ground-breaking approach to learning- and we think it is still that today.

Our purpose is twofold. First, we will demonstrate how Action Learning, in its original form, should be a part of every organisation’s learning strategy today. Second, we will argue that HR should be a role model for the use of Action Learning. They should not only use it within HR, but also become ambassadors for this approach across the business; embedding it within their portfolio of L&D offerings.

SYNOPSIS



REG REVANS
1907 -1993

Action learning, as a term, is widely used, often misrepresented, and we think is used in a sense that does no service to its creator. Our aim is to debunk some of the myths and to clarify some of the confusion. Reg Revans was trained as a Physicist at Cambridge University and noticed the value derived when scientists shared both their ignorance and experiences in what we might today term “communities of practice”. Working in the Coal Board during the 1940s, and later in hospitals, convinced him of the value and productivity increases that could be generated by bringing together managers in small groups. From these beginnings Action Learning was born.

A short paper Revans wrote from his Altrincham home in 1979, and produced on an old carriage-style typewriter, are readily available if you search the web. It contains some nuggets of wisdom which feel just as fresh and relevant in 2014. Here is a sample:

“The pervasiveness of change is amongst the characteristics of our times..... every innovation must necessarily involve risk, every risk presents a challenge and most challenges evoke a response.



“All such adaptation is essentially a process of learning; the organism that can master tomorrow what had yesterday defeated it may be said to have learned..... when change is faster than learning, the organism fails; when learning is as fast as, or faster than, change, the organism survives and is likely to grow.”

He had a simple formula: $L = P + Q$

Learning (L) will result from the combination of acquiring programmed knowledge (P) and of questioning insight (Q).

The process of becoming a “knowledge expert” (P) is dependent on various forms of teaching – be that in the classroom, seminars, reading or e-learning for example.

Questioning insight (Q) cannot be taught but is the stuff of experimentation, which Revans argues is the mission of learning communities in which “real people deal with real changes in real time.”

So what is Action Learning?

Action Learning thus takes place in these learning communities whose members (typically facilitated groups of 5 or 6) are obliged to work by trial and error, featuring conjecture, observation and exchange ALL underpinned by the craft of good questioning. It is a forum in which members learn with and from each other about their scope and limitations, their strengths and weaknesses in a safe community of peer coaches who provide advice, constructive criticism and support.

The group comes together regularly over a defined period and during each “Action Learning Set” (ALS) every participant will have their time in the chair (45-60 minutes) and offer a current challenge or opportunity, over which they have some influence and that is important to them, explaining what they have tried so far and the particular help they are looking for from the group. The process has a robust discipline in which feedback on outcomes and results for things that have been tried out is provided at the next session.

HR’S RESPONSE TO ACTION LEARNING

We look at this through two lenses:

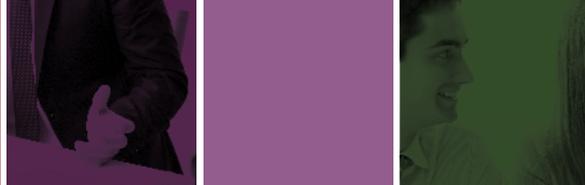
- How can Action Learning contribute to how HR provides better learning strategies and execution?
- What is its relevance to developing capability amongst HR practitioners themselves?

Many readers will be familiar with and work in seemingly countless organisations which use the 70/20/10 learning model, developed originally by Morgan McCall and colleagues at the Centre for Creative Leadership. It has almost become part of the vernacular amongst L&D specialists and larger corporations. By way of a refresher for those who need it:-

The 70 / 20 / 10 Learning Model	
70%	Experiential learning in tough jobs and assignments
20%	Learning from others in a “social” context, usually from the boss in which coaching and mentoring styles predominate
10%	Acquiring knowledge and skills from courses and reading

We would offer Action learning as described in this paper as a means to provide a booster and amplification to learning, be that acquiring knowledge in Revan’s formula (the P in $L = P + Q$) but crucially to give a real edge and momentum to the 20% of social learning, drawing directly from experience gained, but with and from their peers in an Action Learning Set.





DEVELOPMENT FOR HR PRACTITIONERS

Somewhat depressingly, we know from our own research that 49% of HR leaders acknowledge that developing their own people in HR is not a high priority, compared to supporting the development needs of the business. This is hardly acting as a role model for the cause. Once again the “cobbler’s children’s shoes syndrome” is at work! As we scan what development is taking place, it is a concern that the focus is predominantly on the acquisition of knowledge and skills (the 10% of the learning model). The CIPD and other professional bodies offer a wealth of “technical HR” courses and any number of high-quality providers (including Oxen Park) offer programmes to develop “business partnering”, consulting and behavioural skills. These are supplemented by leadership programmes that are available via L&D portfolios. Much is also made of the need for HR people to develop their confidence and commercial acumen, the latter addressed sometimes by short “finance for the non-financial manager” and equivalent courses.

All of these have their place, of course, and whilst some HR leaders have worked hard to improve the quality of coaching and mentoring provided across the business, yet again little of this has materialised within HR itself. In response to this, Oxen Park introduced in 2011 an action learning programme specifically targeted at HR practitioners.

FUTURE HR LEADERS' PROGRAMME

In developing it, we took a calculated risk as nothing comparable existed in the HR development space. How could we convince HR executives to invest in a 6 day programme where the content to be covered was unknown, and to be determined largely by the participants themselves?

Target participants are seasoned HR practitioners with the potential to grow into significant HR leadership roles in 3-4 years. The programme, two or three of which are now run each year, is designed to complement existing and more orthodox development investments in the individual, and also to address the lag between these development investments and any discernible impact on business outcomes. Each programme comprises of 6 participants from different organisations who come together for 6 days over a 5 month period.

Central to the programme is an Action Learning Set (ALS), of the type advocated by Reg Revans, in which each participant brings to the table (actually not a table as the group sits in a circle!) a current issue or opportunity over which they have influence and for which they seek input from their peers in the set. Examples of these might be to discuss how to get started on a very difficult new project, and improving a difficult relationship with a business executive or a direct report. Actions are identified and outcomes are reported on at each stage of the programme.

POSITIVE FEEDBACK FROM PREVIOUS PARTICIPANTS

“The programme was career-changing... helped me to make a major career decision and move forward.”

“Offered me the time and space to think with a diverse group of peers to challenge and share ideas.”

“Genuinely, a transformational experience.”

“Helps individuals to build valuable networks and realise their potential.”

“The mix of personal development, technical knowledge, confidentiality and use of action learning as a tool is invaluable.”

“The approach is both people-centred and work-related... how to drive career and organisational change.”

Boots
Bristol City Council
Cornwall Council
Dupont
Land Registry
Nabarro LLP
Norbert Dentressangle
Novartis
Royal Bank of Scotland
Severn Trent
Sovereign Housing Group
SwissRe
Tesco

Participants tell us that it is a challenge to adjust from the frenetic pace of their day jobs to the reflective and intense nature of a day in their ALS. They also tell us they get at least as much value and learning from listening to and “coaching” their peers as they do from their own hour in the hot seat. Additionally, we deliberately change the focus by interleaving the learning with the experience described by five external speakers (typically HR thought leaders and experienced executives). They join the group to provide different perspectives on topics chosen by the participants themselves.

We believe that the best action learning sets are characterised by moments of high emotion, memorable conversations, momentous decisions and lasting relationships. Tangible benefits are strengthened leadership and coaching skills, networking and, above all, positive actions and outcomes. Here is a sample of what participants have said and some of the 30 plus organisations which have participated.

We are convinced, and can now demonstrate, that action learning is a low cost and high impact approach that should play a significant part in the development journeys for all HR practitioners. We also believe that HR people (and not just L&D specialists) should be advocating action learning, as created by the genius of Reg Revans, and embedded in every organisation’s learning strategy.

So our call to action is this. We know and can demonstrate that HR practitioners, the functions they are part of and the business gain from an investment in the individual. Our vision is to see action learning as we have described it embedded in how people and the business learn and grow.

CALL TO ACTION



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