# Learning Action Learning

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## What is action learning ?

> I hear and I forget
> I see and I remember
> I do and I understand
> (Confucius)
>
> What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing
> (Aristotle)

The grand philosophers from the East and the West have passed onto us the wisdom of action learning. The concept of action learning was structurally applied in education by Reg Revans as early as 1945. As the contemporary action learning guru, Revans has never provided a single and comprehensive statement of action learning and at different times emphasized one aspect or omitted another (Mumford, 1995). The followings are some quotes from Revans:

> "Action learning differs from normal training that its primary objective is to 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" (Keys, 1994)

> "Action learning is a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical that requires its subject, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change sufficient to improve his observable behaviour henceforth in the problem field" (Smith, 1997)

> "But learning cannot be solely the acquisition of fresh programmed knowledge,… Managers need also to improve their ability to search the unfamiliar, and inappropriate programmed knowledge may inhibit this"
> "Action Learning is the Aristotelian manifestation of all managers' jobs: they learn as they manage, and they manage because they have learned – and go on learning" (Dilworth, 1996)

> " … an approach to education that emphasizes the distinctions between doing things oneself and talking about things getting done by others in general" " …. to ensure that managers shall learn better to manage with and from one another in the course of tackling the very problems that it is their proper business to tackle; it has no truck with academic simulation of any kind" (Newton and Wilkinson, 1995)

Action learning is described by Bourner et al. (1996) as the process of reflection and action, aimed at improving effectiveness of action where learning is an important outcome. It involves testing out ideas and then modifying the respective ideas as a consequence. Sandelands (1998) sees action learning as a form of learning by doing i.e. working on real problem, focusing on learning and implementing solutions. Action learning is concerned with making new ideas by placing them into natural experience, seeking to make meaning from experience (Raelin 1997). It is based on pedagogical (and andragogical) notion that people learn more effectively in real-time problems in their own work setting. Action learning proposes that we learn best about work, at work and through work, within a structure which encourages learning (Peters, 1996).

Limerick et al. (1994) cited Pedler's description of action learning as an approach to the development of people in organizations, which takes the task as the vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning. It implies both self-development and organizational development. Harrison (1996) claims that action learning is a process of mutual learning within a small "set" of managers through questioning and reflection in order to produce action in the workplace and develop individual's learning ability. Mumford (1995) claims that action learning is holistic in its views of the person, the management process and learning. It is highly situational, flexibly treating elusive problems, and combines a social process with individual needs.

Action learning is a process that relies on learners being motivated to learn for themselves (O'Hara, 1997). Sandelands (1998) suggests that action learning is effective in set (group of colleagues who are comrades in adversity). Zuber-Skerritt (1995) claims that action learning promotes self-critical reflection and advice from critical friends (i.e. fellow set members). Action learning always works with "sets" which encourage executives to discuss, share, pool their ambitions and experiences thus creating a *Gestalt* where group synergy benefit can be reaped (Peters and Smith, 1996).

Mumford (1995) proposes the following essential elements for action learning:
1. Learning should mean learning to take effective action
2. Learning to take effective action involves actually taking action not just recommending action
3. The action learning project must be significant to the learners themselves
4. Learners learn best from one another

From a different perspective, Cusins (1996) views action learning as a syndrome of four mutually reinforcing activities for creative decision making:
1. Experiential learning
2. Creative problem solving
3. Acquisition of relevant knowledge
4. Co-learner group support

When these activities are performed effectively, action learning becomes holistically synergistic.

Howell (1994) highlights the similarity between action learning and the andragogical model for adult learning in that the learner is self-directing, can make a valuable contribution from previous experience, and is motivated to learn in order to improve performance, self-esteem, recognition, quality of life, self-confidence, and self-actualization. He (ibid.) quoted the following general definition of action learning as an approach to organizational change and development:

> Action learning is both a concept and a form of action which aims to enhance the capacities of people in everyday situations to investigate, understand and, if they wish, to change those situations in an ongoing fashion, with a minimum of external help. Action learning is concerned with empowering people in the sense that they become critically conscious of their values, assumptions, actions, interdependences, rights, and prerogatives so that they can act in a substantially rational way as active partners in producing their reality.

The barriers to action learning

Bourne et al. (1996) suggests that we can learn better through looking for the obstacles rather than basking in the successes. It is difficult to learn in action learning if the learner is unable or unwilling to take action (O'Hara et al., 1997). It is unlikely that action learning will flourish in an environment where the emphasis is on teaching rather than learning (Lawson et al., 1997).

Cusins (1996) outlines five anti-group behaviours which hinder effective action learning in a set:
1. The bully (excessive threatening behaviour)
2. The blocker (repeatedly blocking other people's ideas)
3. The joker (continually using jokes to avoid real issues)
4. The cop-out (excessive withdrawal from discussion with implied dissapproval)
5. The rambler (talk on and on without getting to the point)

Another common barrier to action learning is the perception by the employees that they have neither the time nor the inclination to be learners (Peters and Smith, 1996).

The above are some of the commonly experienced barriers in action learning.

The benefits of action learning

O'Hara et al. (1996) outlines the following benefits of action learning:
• Learning to learn (participants develop the capacity to be life-time learners)
• Self management of learning (autonomous responsibility to assess own & others' work)
• Self-awareness (being achieved through group interaction and reflection in set meetings)
• Learning with and through others (reinforcing the social aspects of learning)

Howell (1994) reports that one Graduate from action learning saved A$6 million for his employer. Wills and Oliver (1996) claims that in addition to non-financial benefits of action learning 300+ managers triggered at least ten million GBP of investment to reap a ROI of fifty million GBP. The progress audit option (A+) introduced by International Management Centres (IMC) has ensured greater success in the implementation of the action learning proposals.

Ford and Ogilivie (1997) pointed out that action learning is particularly appropriate in ambiguous circumstances where interpretations of information are evolving and more qualitative. They advocate that business schools need to strike a balance between traditional and action-oriented methods so that participants can wed the rigors of quantitative analysis with the courage and wisdom derived from an action orientation.

The action learning approach provides a situation where the learners becomes de facto in-house "consultants" for their employers. The employers can benefit greatly from the action learning findings, which have stood the rigour of academic requirement on the one hand and have solved real problems in the organizations on the other hand. Unlike external consultants who would disappear after taking the handsome cheques, the action learners are still to be around in the organizations. The learners would also benefit from their pragmatic action learning project which in most cases should help them in their future career development. Action learning generates a true win-win situation.

<u>The learning equation</u>

The most commonly cited learning equation (Beaty et al., 1997;Mumford, 1995; Chan, 1994: O'Neil, 1996; Keys, 1994; Chan and Anderson, 1994; Gregory, 1994)  used in action learning is as below:

$$L = P + Q$$

where  L is learning
P is programmed knowledge
Q is questioning insight


Some variations of this learning equation have been proposed:

(Mumford, 1995):
$L = Q^1 + P + Q^2$
where   $Q^1$  is the need to resolve a managerial problem
P   is the acquisition of relevant knowledge
$Q^2$  is the identification of further management opportunity


(Smith, 1997):
$L = f \{ Q_P, Q_E, Q_L \}$   in a relatively invariant context (Learning is some function, to be determined by the set , of questioning insightful action regarding: what is believed, what is eventuating, and the overall learning activity itself.)


By and large the learning equation ($L = P + Q$) should still apply.  Effective learning should depend on the appropriate mix of the P and Q which in turn is dependent on the A, S, and the E.
Where  A = the learning attitude of the learner concerned
S = the learning skill
E = the learning environment.


The learning attitude (A) embraces:
- the preference by the learner i.e. his personal inclination to P or Q.
- the learning discipline and determination for self-managed learning

The learning skill (S) covers:
- the ability to learning from each other in a set
- the capability to learning from reflection
- the effective use of technologies (i.e. e-mail, WWW, CD-Rom, electronic library)
- the application of learning styles

The learning environment (E) involves:
- the support from the employer of the action learner (i.e. appropriate learning contract)
- the access to data and information required in the study
- the relevance of the action learning project

Action learning sets

Mumford (1996) enumerates the following process objectives for an action learning set:
- Assist each other to define the purposes, timescale and desired end results
- Assist other by testing and clarifying ideas
- Motivate each other to take action
- Share ideas on resolving difficulties encountered by others
- Offer information from own experience
- Monitor progress
- Manage themselves and review the effectiveness of that management
- Take charge of the individual and group learning
- Review and improve their learning

In an action learning set, individual learner should identify their learning styles through the use of "learning styles questionnaire".  It is possible to develop and build one's learning styles.  Together as a set they should develop learning synergy.  It is important to review not only how problems are tackled but also what they are learning from the process of undertaking these things.  Each of them should maintain a learning log (Mumford ibid. prefers to call it Management Learning Diary).

The impact of technology on action learning

The rapid development of Internet offers learners convenient access to essentially unlimited sources of information.  Learners become active agents in the process of learning and not passive recipients of knowledge from others.   IMC has pioneered the use of Internet in creating a virtual university for learners from every corner in the world.  All faculty members and course participant have access to e-mail and the World Wide Web for communication and information retrieval.  Sandelands (1998) pointed out that a more appropriate supervisor could be located than otherwise.  He offers the following Web sites relating to action learning:
- http://www.imc.org.uk/imc/al-inter/
- http://www.anbar.co.uk/anbar.htm
- http://www.free-press.com/journals/gabal/
- http://www.imc.org.uk/imc/welcome.htm
- http://www.imc.org.uk/imc/coursewa/alr/alrhome.htm
- http://www.imc.org.uk/imc/coursewa/ais/ais-paper-001.htm

The era of electronic publishing has greatly assisted self-managed learning.  Wills (1996) defines electronic publishing as: "The exploitation of electronics in any and every cost-effective and cost-beneficial way that can facilitate the process of publishing".  He further explains that *publishing* means: "Conceiving, creating, capturing, transforming, disseminating, archiving, searching and retrieving academic and professional knowledge and information".  With these economic advantages for the publishers, the future trend will be proliferation of electronic publishing to meet the needs of researchers and business practitioners.  Action learning can be greatly facilitated with this development.  Access to needed knowledge will be faster, easier, more comprehensive, and hopefully cheaper as well.

In addition, there are many news groups on the Internet where action learners can freely discuss their ideas and seek assistance from each other.  Learning can be achieved rather conveniently without the need of brick and mortar and face to face tuition.  Learning through

Internet offers an entirely new horizon with virtually unlimited boundary. Never before has learning been made so convenient, flexible, dynamic, exciting, and challenging.

The development of action learning in Hong Kong

Action learning has become more and more popular in recent years in Hong Kong. In addition to the various action learning degrees (up to doctoral level) offered by IMC, other local and overseas universities are developing programmes or modules blended with action learning approach.  As the employment market gets tougher and tougher, more and more people realize the importance of continuous self-development in order to keep abreast of the rapid changes which they cannot ignore.  The Government of the SAR Hong Kong has upgraded the status of many higher educational institutes in the recent years and is putting much emphasis of the quality of education provided by the education institutes.   One important yardstick of measuring education quality is the end product of the education system, namely the relevance of the knowledge and skills acquired by the learners.

Action learning is particularly pragmatic in applying what the learners have learnt.  Unlike the traditional approach where learning success is measured by the amount of programmed knowledge acquired by the learners, the key objective of action learning is to generate something useful to both the learners and their sponsoring employers.  It is likely that action learners will develop an inclination to become lifetime learners.  The utopia for action learning is not to help develop a learning organization but a learning society!

The universities and education institutes should critically review their curricula to see if there are more places for action learning.  Perhaps a customer (i.e. the employers and students) survey would shed some light on the requirements.  The teaching faculty should receive training on action learning.  Some kind of partnership with veteran (e.g. IMC) in action learning can drastically shorten the learning curve and allow the learners easy access to the electronic library facilities without the need to reinvent the wheel.

In short, it is important to learn more about action learning for those who are or should be interested [i.e. the education providers (the government and the education institutes), the teachers (in action learning jargon the set facilitators), the students (learners), and the employers of the learners].  They should at the least browse those Web sites cited earlier and start their discussions on action learning approach among themselves.

The purpose of this article is to pose some "Q" (questioning insight) on action learning per se. Hence, the title "Learning action learning".

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