

Action Learning Sets

“Turning Learning into Action”

What is Action Learning?

“Action Learning is based on the relationship between reflection and action ... where the focus is on the issues and problems that individuals bring and planning future action with the structured attention and support of the group. Put simply, it is about solving problems and getting things done.” (Fry et al)

A major advantage of action learning is that participants are able to look at the real problems which concern them, rather than considering hypothetical ones, and they are responsible for the selection of the topic(s) / problem(s) discussed. Feedback from previous participants is often very favourable about this aspect of the programme.

What is an Action Learning Set?

An Action Learning set is a group of usually 4 - 7 people who get together (on a regular basis) to discuss issues of personal or mutual importance. They are designed to deal with the specific needs of the set members and require agreed action by the end of each meeting. Sets may, or may not, be facilitated, or may start with a facilitator and later become self-facilitating. Whichever the case, it is important for some ground rules to be negotiated at the outset.

Action Learning Sets can enable participants to make commitments to action, which they would not necessarily be in a position to do after having listened to a lecture or seminar, or as an individual working in isolation. There are usually three stages: identifying and clarifying the problem; listing possible actions; and selecting which specific action to take.

How Action Learning Set sessions can be organised

- Participants will begin to build up relationships with other participants in their group. Action Learning will form part of these sessions.
- Each participant will bring a real issue or problem to the set; due to time constraints one or two issues only will be covered each session
- The facilitator will help the group to set up explicit ground rules for the set
- The whole set will look at each issue in turn
- The person who has described the issue will decide on at least three action points to address after the module

Action Learning Sets outside of the Modules

Groups will be encouraged to meet up at times and places organised by themselves, or organise themselves into 'self-help' groups with communication by e-mail. The project will be able to cover travel costs for the action learning sets, as long as meetings are confirmed with the Project Manager in advance. Participants will also be asked to report on their experiences of this mode of professional development.

The Role of the Participant

Participants will work together on their chosen topics, listening and supporting their colleagues, and helping them to decide on courses of action. Participants will help individuals to understand the problem better and to challenge their underlying assumptions, rather than to offer advice. Each participant will be invited in turn to share his or her problem. Their peers will look at the problem from their own perspective, and through pertinent questions, discussion and sharing of experience, participants will be helped to move on in their understanding of an issue or problem, and to come to see possible ways forward. Participants will be encouraged to show empathy rather than be judgemental, to listen and provide support for each other.

The Role of Facilitator

The facilitator develops the ground rules for the operation of the set. This will include allocation of time, confidentiality, attendance etc.
