

USING ACTION LEARNING

WHAT IS IT?

Action learning is a way of working in small groups with other people in similar roles in order to work on real issues and thereby improve effectiveness. It is aimed at developing a skilled response in the person whose issues are worked on as well as in the other members of the set. It is a vehicle for problem solving, self-discovery and for finding solutions to 'wicked' problems - i.e. those which defy common sense or obvious solutions because every solution seems to cause a problem for someone or something else. It is suited to situations where the stock of uncontested knowledge is small, where practice leads theory and where self-awareness is critically important. Experience suggests that it works best with more senior rather than less senior people. This may be because the more senior people are, the less likely they are to have a confidante, or it may reflect the more complex and ambiguous nature of their problems.

WHAT HAPPENS?

A set of between 4 and 7 meets in conditions of complete confidentiality.

There is usually a set advisor or facilitator, though this role may be taken by members of the set after a period of time.

The set adviser invites members to bid for space in the session and an issue-holder emerges. A given amount of time is negotiated.

The issue-holder describes the situation, possibly using a flip chart: they will often set out who the main people involved are, what has already been tried; why the problem is an important one to them and so on.

The issue-holder then sits out while the group members discuss what they have heard. The main points are often recorded on the flip chart.

The issue-holder then resumes sitting inside the group and leads the discussion that follows. In this way he or she works towards clarification of their issues and to seeing options.

In the last five minutes of the time allotted, the issue holder sums up how they see the issue now.

The set advisor then invites another problem-holder to come forward.

WHAT KINDS OF ISSUES?

These may include anything that the problem-holder thinks important enough to bring before the set. Typical problems may be

priorities in business planning

career issues - where next?

relationships - e.g. with fund holders; commissioners; colleagues

personal issues

WHAT HELPS A SET TO WORK?

- The problem genuinely belongs to the problem-holder
- The problem is important - it has the potential to affect lives
- It is safe for the problem owner to admit to need
- Feelings are acknowledged to be as important as 'facts'
- Not taking sides - set members remain open to the problem-owner's perspective; seeking to understand, not to judge; establishing trust; listening with empathy - listening to the tone of what is being said and to the emotion; listening to the things that are not being said but which are felt
- Not offering advice
- Asking genuinely open questions which begin: tell me... how...what...when...Examples

tell me why this matters so much to you now?

when you were faced with that situation, how did that make you feel?

which bits of the situation make you feel most anxious?

can you tell us what the essence of the problem seems to be?

what kinds of questions are you finding most helpful?

are you ready to go on to the next part now?

what resources could you tap into here?

where could you get the information you need?

what do you think could be done to overcome that difficulty?

what would an ideal outcome be here?

how will you know you are beginning to succeed?

does this problem remind you of others you've been in?

- Patience; encouragement; gentleness: being willing to give the problem owner the time they need
- Allowing silence; not interrupting; not telling anecdotes about your own experience

- Not colluding with problem-owners who think that all the problems are with others
- Confronting sparingly and with a wish to *help* not to attack the person
- Saying *I* all the time, not *we* or *they* or *people*
- Awareness of how groups work
- Sitting in a circle to create easy eye contact; no spare chairs.
- A set advisor who can 'hold the space' by: discreet time management; creating trust and the right atmosphere of disclosure; close observation; drawing attention to gaps and assumptions; letting go when necessary and handing the role on to the group.