

Action Learning for Management Development

What is Action Learning?

Action learning is a process of learning by focusing on real problems in a group of colleagues who are helping each other to reflect on issues and make changes. This allows participants to look at their work differently, reflect critically on their own experience, get support, insight and increased awareness and work collaboratively in developing approaches to difficulties.

Action Learning on the Management Development Programme

During every module three/four participants will take a half hour each to present a current problem or dilemma in their work. The full group will work with them in reflecting on how best to deal with this issue.

It can feel risky to talk openly with colleagues about current problems and difficulties. It helps to agree a number of ground rules beforehand, e.g.

- Confidentiality
- Respect for different perspectives
- Listening to each other
- Giving constructive feedback
- Keeping to the times agreed
- Keep the focus on the issue

Preparing for Action Learning

When you are preparing for action learning these questions may be helpful in clarifying the issues.

- Describe the situation that is problematic for you.
- What is the problem?
- How does it affect you?
- What are you experiencing?
- What does it prevent you from doing/being?
- Why is it important?
- For whom else is it a problem and why?
- How do you normally think and talk about it?
- As you are thinking and talking about it now is your perception of it changing?

When we talk about problems we tend to say that it is an *absence of something*, e.g. there is no leadership in the team. This is actually giving the solution before the problem has been sufficiently teased out. It is often more useful to describe *the existing negative state*, e.g. people are wary of speaking out, there are disagreements about the purpose of the team, there is poor attendance at team meetings.

It can be helpful to think of Action Learning in five stages:

1. You present a recent or current issue or incident in your work, which is challenging to you in some way.
2. You listen to feedback from your colleagues which may be in the form of:
 - ❑ Commenting on the other party/parties in the situation
 - ❑ Focusing on your interventions in the situation, including affirming what you have handled well so far.
 - ❑ Attending to the relationship and process between you and the other party/parties
 - ❑ Exploring the incident in a wider context, e.g. the organisation, cultural/gender issues
 - ❑ Commenting on how you have presented the issue and what that tells them.
 - ❑ Disclosing the images, fantasies and thoughts stirred up in them by what you have said and what this might suggest about what is going on unconsciously in the situation
 - ❑ Sharing their own experience of a similar incident.
 - ❑ Giving relevant information, referring to a useful article or book or making a practical suggestion about who to talk to
 - ❑ Suggesting practical strategies
 - ❑ Suggesting a practical exercise for here and now in the group
3. You say how you are feeling and what you are thinking, having heard what others have said and/or you say what action you are going to take and/or you practice some action through role play, e.g. giving someone feedback.
4. You take action based on your reflections after the Action Learning discussion.
5. At the next module you may fill in the group briefly on what you have done differently and what you have learned from this.

Reproduced with permission of Jane Clarke from Jane Clarke Consultancy, May 2020.