

Action Learning Sets

Introduction

Action learning is a structured mechanism for working in small groups to address complicated issues. **Action Learning Sets** are made up of between six and eight people who meet together regularly over a reasonable time period and ‘present’ and collectively work on problems faced in ongoing practice. The group will then help the ‘presenter’ work on that problem through supportive but challenging questioning: encouraging a deeper understanding of the issues involved, a reflective reassessment of the ‘problem’, and an exploration of ways forward.

Action learning sets are particularly appropriate for professional and managerial-level learning and personal development work. The most common applications fall into two categories:

- A work-based project in which action learning set members are involved and are able to influence the outcomes by their actions.
- An issue that concerns how specific action learning set members operate in the work context (e.g. creating partnerships), and one which they wish to improve and which could benefit from the support and challenging of the other set members.

Detailed description of the process

Figure 12: Action learning set process

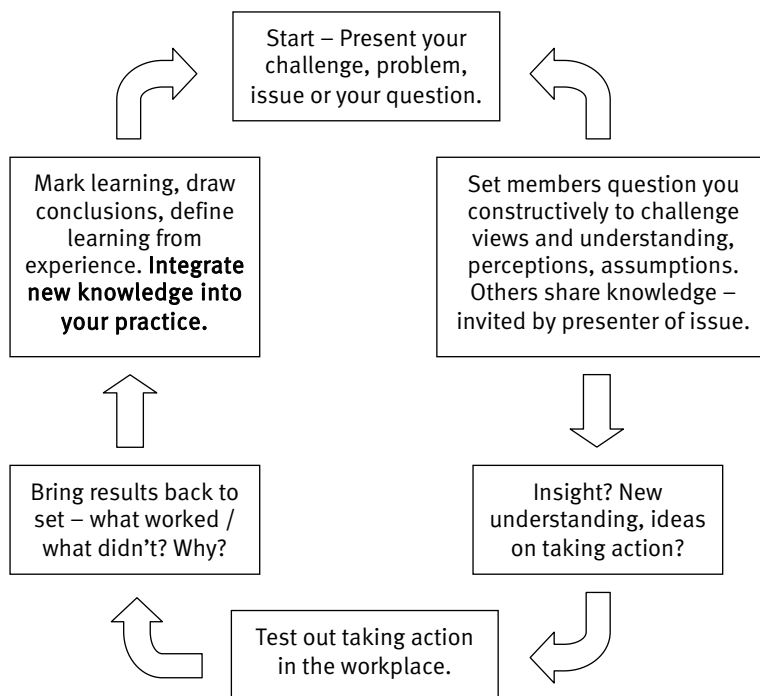


Figure 12 (www.natpact.nhs.uk/cms/316.php) shows how the action learning process is a cyclical one, starting at the top of the diagram and moving round systematically, giving each member the opportunity to present a problem and comment on others.

Key points/practical tips

- Action learning sets are most effective when the commitment is voluntary.
- Action learning sets should focus on real-life practice-related problems, ones which are more open-ended in nature and which do not have a right or wrong answer.
- The ground rules for action learning sets should include:
 - Being honest with oneself and others;
 - Respecting others and their viewpoint;
 - Taking responsibility for our own actions.

Example: BOND action learning set programme

In 2002-03, BOND set up the Learning Practitioners Initiative, a pilot programme for NGO staff with a specific brief in the area of organisational learning/knowledge management/staff development. Nine individuals from various NGOs worked in two facilitated groups on practical organisational learning issues, using a process of action learning over a period of a year. The action learning sets were supplemented by two workshops in which all participants came together to focus on issues of common concern arising from the sets.

A review of the pilot initiative provided the following feedback from participants:

[... meeting together with others from different organisations doing similar roles] ... provided a very useful combination of objectivity (since others were not part of my organisation) and understanding of the work area to which the issue was related (because they performed similar roles). The themed nature of the sets meant that I was learning useful things related to my role all the way, regardless of whether or not it was my turn to present...

Sources and further reading

- Liz Goold and David Harding run the BOND Action Learning Programme which focuses on UK NGOs, see: www.bond.org.uk/lte/alsets.htm#aboutal.
- See also NatPaCT website: www.natpact.nhs.uk/cms/316.php.