

## - SAMPLE ONLY -

The concept of action learning is not a new one. It was developed by Professor Reg Revans in the 1940's at the National Coal Board, where he was Director of Education. He developed the idea, according to Johnson (1998:296), "that *the colliery managers who were experiencing organisational problems might learn from one another by talking through their difficulties and personally taking action*". Revans continued with his work on action learning all his life, (1907 – 2003), inspiring many others, including Mike Pedler, (Revans professorial fellow at the University of Salford), who has updated an original book by Revans (The ABC of Action Learning 1983) in particular, to take the concept on board. The Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research is based at the University of Salford. This provides an illustration of how much progress action learning has made within academia since its inception in the 1940s as action learning was ridiculed by management schools in the 1960s and 1970s. However, as Revans described action learning as "*freedom from teachers, from any form of printed syllabus or regulations, from any fixed institution or even from any literature save the most occasional... not even a case study or business game*", and referred to what was being taught in business schools in 1976 as "*an inexhaustible avalanche of lofty hocus pocus*", it is perhaps not surprising that they were sceptical to say the least.

It is this taking of action that distinguishes action learning from any other. Bourner et al (1996), state that action learning is a "*process of reflection and action, aimed at improving effectiveness of action where learning is an important outcome*". However, the author notes that learning by doing is a long standing concept. Koo (1999), provides two very early quotes, firstly, "*What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing*" (Aristotle, a 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Greek philosopher) and secondly, "*I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand*" (Confucius 500 BCE). The author's preference for a quote is "*...one is forced to enquire into what one really believes, as distinct from what one may claim to believe while arguing in the seminar or at the case-study*". (Revans).

In action learning the learner should be the focal point of the learning process. The success of action learning relies on the learners being motivated to learn for themselves. (O'Hara 1997, cited by Koo 1999). There should be a collective approach to the problem solving of real problems with a cycle of inquiry that never varies. This cycle consists of a person presenting their problem without interruption, being questioned by the other set members,

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exploring the problem, then the person to summarise what they have heard, state what action they intend to take. This continues for as many set members as time allows and then there is a review of the progress of the set at the end. This could be about the process or content or both. This cycle of inquiry will begin again at the next set meeting, except that the members who agreed actions need to report back at the beginning. The set needs to be strict about timing and process boundaries each time and recognise that the conduct of the set mirrors its values. Pedler (1991) sums up action learning well by saying it has three components: the people who take responsibility for taking action (this is key); the problems or tasks themselves and the set of colleagues who support and challenge each other to make progress on problems. Zuber-Skerrit (2002) identifies the latter as critical friends. Revans, (1998) makes the distinction between problems and puzzles. He argued that the difference is that there is often some knowledge and a solution to a puzzle, whereas there is no right answer to a problem. Revans also formulated a learning equation for action learning which is  $L = P + Q$  where L is learning; P is programmed knowledge; Q is questioning insight. There have been some variations to this suggested (Mumford 1995, Smith 1997) but Revan's equation still seems to be the most widely used.

There would seem to be a plethora of articles written about action learning during the 1990s as more programmes for degrees (both under and post graduate) and management programmes within organisations incorporated action learning as one of, or the primary method of learning. Indeed the author was the programme manager for Bury Metropolitan Borough Council for a Diploma in Management by Action Learning in 1992/93. This was carried out in collaboration with Manchester College of Arts and Technology (MANCAT) and Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). In this programme, the author had a role as a Set Adviser to one of the three sets; project supervisor to some students on the programme and as a co-deliverer of the design. Recruitment to the programme and co-delivery of the residential induction part of the programme were also part of the role for this project and was the first central in-house programme incorporating action learning. There were approximately 20 middle managers from a variety of departments with a mixture of responsibilities on the programme and this was reflected within the author's set. Much of the published research focuses on managers from the same organisation taking part in action learning sets. As this was the author's first experience of action learning, I have used it as part of my reflections of

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action learning within the Msc programme. It will have affected the approach to the action learning for the MSc programme too. It is recognised that although this former experience is now some 14 years ago, it was one of the most challenging and richest experiences of my life and therefore the memory of it is clear and can be used to illustrate how it could be incorporated into the thinking and reflection of the more recent experience.

There are reflections sheets for each of the sets attended between December 2005 and February 2007 included in appendices 1-6 using the format by Pedler (1996:85) which will be referred to briefly in the following paragraphs. However, the author has decided to use the perspective on action learning offered by Bourner & Frost (1996) when they looked at how action learning had been experienced by the reflections of