



Top 5 tips for Running Action Learning Groups

Action Learning is a powerful development option for managers/leaders that helps them to act and learn from action. A group forms, meets regularly and is supported by an experienced coach/facilitator.

In my experience the ideal is to have 6 in a group (often referred to as an Action Learning Set), from different parts of the business and who meet for a day, probably 6-10 times in a year.

Each individual is allocated an equal slot of time to work on his/her 'problem'. With the help of the group, support challenge and encouragement are provided for each to commit to take action on problems and learn from it. Skills are learned in two ways; as the person presenting the problem or as the person participating in helping someone.

At subsequent meetings everyone begins by reporting back to the group on their results and enlists the support of the group in reflecting on their outcomes.

The following 5 tips are aimed at helping you to run successful Action Learning Groups.

1. Individuals should choose to 'sign up' for Action Learning

Successful Action Learning groups stay together because they choose to and not because they have to. It is a good idea that the process for joining an Action Learning group be a voluntary one.

You may want to think about the criteria below as part of your communication to help individuals choose.

Willingness to Learn

Individuals should have an appetite and willingness to learn. Without it Action learning will not work. You can explain that level of skill is not important here. You can learn that. Having the right mind set and attitude is the critical starting point.

Not being preoccupied with role and status

When the group is working together they are working as equals. This dynamic is critical and non negotiable. It is good to talk about hierarchy (and there not being any). Something you could say is, "we leave hierarchy at the door, in Action Learning we are working to get to know each other as people first. Position can get in the way of us seeing each other."

In my experience the presence of the hierarchy dynamic it is the number one reason why groups fails.

2. Pay attention to the environment

Often we don't pay too much attention to where we have meetings. This is not an option when you are running Action Learning.

You want to create and work in a more informal space. The ideal seating arrangement should be a circle of comfortable chairs (no tables), with drinks on hand and good lighting (preferably natural day light).

Don't worry if the circle seems to unsettle the group at first. Unease will soon pass. It is not unusual to hear someone say "Oh, I didn't realise I had come to a therapy group!"

Don't be tempted to change things the shape is important for promoting an atmosphere of equality

Look to remove any symbols of hierarchy that are in the room. An example might be to make sure all the chairs are the same and that you are not sitting in the one leather chair that just happens to be the bosses.

It is a good idea to make a point of checking out the room you are going to work in at least half an hour before you start. Perhaps you can remove some chairs and push some tables to the side to make a room feel relaxed.

3. Work with a skilled Facilitator

In Action Learning the facilitator will role model the skills that others are expected to learn and use in the session. Much of this has to do with Dialogue. The high level of skill comes with having a depth of understanding of this mode of communication.

Chapter twelve in Peter M. Senge's book, The Fifth Discipline is a good read if you want to build your understanding of the theory of Dialogue.

Other good reads are: Dialogue - The Art of Thinking Together by William Isaacs (world leader in theory and practice of dialogue) and On Dialogue by David Bohm (world theoretical physicist)

Nancy M. Dixon, in her book *Dialogue at Work* (part of the Mike Pedler Library) describes the role of facilitator as someone who creates a "holding environment" describing it as an image of 'two cupped hands;' strong and supportive without being dominant.

Using dialogue well a skilled facilitator is able to say the one thing that needs to be said in the moment; that helps personal and group learning.

If you are a facilitator and want to develop your skills in dialogue then here are a couple of things you can try:

- Next time you are in conversation with someone try noticing the conversation that is going on in your own head. When you want to say "yes but..." say to the other person "tell me more....."
- After a difficult conversation, think back over it replay it in your mind, as you were back there. As you do, ask yourself, "what am I thinking and feeling (really) and what am I not saying".

4. Run an introductory session on Dialogue

Running a session on Dialogue will help a group to start as you mean them to go on. The principles will actively help the group not to fall into the trap of developing an inbuilt compulsion to fix other people's problems.

Plan to run the session 2/3 weeks before the first Action Learning meeting. Call the session 'getting started', allow 2/3 hrs for it and tell everyone to come with an open mind and a willingness to have a good conversation.

Begin the session by providing some context for Action Learning and then get them to talk with each other. A good question to ask is "When is the last time you had a great conversation? What did it sound like, what did it feel like?"
Then stand back!

By getting the group to talk about talk something strange seems to happen. They start to have a dialogue. Dialogos, the consulting firm founded by William Isaacs describes dialogue as 'the cycle of conversation that produces higher quality collective thinking.'

For further information their website is www.dialogos.com

Something else you can do is to write the word discussion on a flip chart and write the word dialogue next to it. Then ask the group to talk about the difference.

Another exercise you can try is to ask everyone when was the last time they felt they were truly listened to? Get each member of the group to tell you about it.

Reflection and the ability to do it well is also an important skill of dialogue. Introducing learning logs, a personal book where individuals can capture learning and insights is a helpful discipline. Investigate other ideas for learning the art of reflection. Colleagues at the Association for Coaching is a great place to ask <http://www.associationforcoaching.com>

5. Be rigorous with time

Time and how you use it is critical for the success of an Action Learning session. Everyone must have an equal slot of it and don't be afraid of being up front about it. Equal time for everyone promotes equality and this is exactly what you want to achieve.

There are three 'chunks' of time:

1. Check Ins
2. Individual slots
3. Check outs

An ideal timetable for a day working with a group of six might look like this:

- 30 mins check in (5 mins personal introductions)
 - 1 hr each person (6 x 1 hrs)
 - 30 mins check outs (5 mins personal summaries)
- TOTAL of 7 hrs

If you are worried about how to stop individuals in the group talking too much at the start you can say, "It would be good to hear from everyone in a few sentences, how you are, what is going on for you right now, and what you have brought to work on today?" If you put a boundary around things in respect of indicating how long you want someone to talk for, it can be very helpful for time management. You can use the same principle with the check out section.

It is helpful to allocate the role of timekeeper to one of the group. It does not have to be the job of the facilitator. 5-minute warnings can be useful to prompt someone as can encouraging someone to lay their watch down in front of themselves as a way to self-monitor.

Action Learning is a great process. When a group is working well together the relationships feel really very special. Individuals deeply care about each other, you don't look at your watch and you help each other with all that you have got!

Resources

Reginald Revans first developed Action Learning and there is a lovely tribute to him by Charles Margerison that can be found at:

<http://www.viprojects.com/userfiles/documents/CMargerisonVPL-MemoriesofRegRevans.pdf>

The ABC of Action Learning by Reg Revans (Lemos&Crane) and The Action Learning Guidebook by William J. Rothwell (Book & Diskette)

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If you have found this guide helpful and would like further information on any aspect of coaching, please contact: www.associationforcoaching.com

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