

Teachers' Toolbox

Action learning

“Action learning is a method of problem solving for managers which also offers scope for personal learning and development. The manager prepares for taking action on the job and at the same time learns about her/himself as a manager and as a person”¹

Why action learning?

- Ø To enable each person to develop capabilities, to develop strategic direction, challenge situations and challenge own personal style
- Ø To help 'solve' real life problems and to learn from doing so
- Ø The core of action learning lies in the process of learning from and with others, rather than solving the problem

What is action learning?

- Ø It is when a group of people agree to work together in a mutual support structure to explore issues and find more creative solutions to management and organisational challenges
- Ø Set members learn from helping each other, gaining greater skills in listening, questioning, diagnosing, coaching, role playing and creative problem solving

Action learning – the process

- Ø Appoint a 'convenor' – to keep time and ensure people keep to the ground rules, this should be rotating
- Ø Go through and agree ground rules
- Ø Have a quick 'round', each person has time to say how they are and what has happened since the last meeting, what they want from the day
- Ø What people want from the day forms the agenda

Typical structure of an action learning set

- Ø Warm up – recent highlight
- Ø Report back on what I went away to do
- Ø What worked (no matter how small)
- Ø What didn't (where I got stuck)
- Ø What I need help with today (old case continued or new case)
- Ø Agree division of time and time keeper, everyone needs to be an issue holder at some point, taking turns is important
- Ø Take each issue in turn to help owner see the case differently and/or their relationship to it, get to action step
- Ø Close – what I have valued about the group today and/or an individual
- Ø Agree arrangements for the next meeting

Action learning - Working through an 'issue'

- Ø Describe the situation or problems with which they want help
- Ø Express any feelings they have in relation to the situation
- Ø Restate the problem – this time, the problem owner includes a definition of what a positive outcome must include. Visioning a creative, positive outcome is the first step towards realising it

- Ø Explore the resources available for tackling this problem – ask:
 - Who knows? Who has the necessary information?
 - Who can? Who has the necessary skills?
 - Who will? Who will give necessary support, political or otherwise?
 - Who cares? Who will be affected by the changes involved?

Some principles and ground rules (1)

- Ø Keep to the external and internal time boundaries to ensure each person has a fair share of the time available
- Ø Only one at a time. Only one person at a time is the issue holder, for that time, the set members are there to listen and to enable. If the problem owner is not getting the sort of help that is needed, he or she should say so.
- Ø Important to avoid too much anecdotal comment or other set members' parallel problems ("I have a similar problem in my department.....")

Principles and ground rules (2)

"Only in a group where it is safe to disclose ignorance, admit weakness and ask for help is it possible for the problem owner to learn at sufficient depth for him or her to develop as an individual"¹

- Ø There has to be total confidentiality and trust amongst set members.
- Ø There has to be safety to admit need and take risks:
- Ø Members need to be able to try out new ways of relating, knowing that they will get constructive feedback and not be blamed for getting it wrong
- Ø Members need to get over any notion of competitiveness or 'better than' notions

Principles and ground rules (3)

- Ø Need to all sign up to the idea of a learning community/community of practice
- Ø Challenge each other and yourselves – be critical friends
- Ø Say "I" – rather than saying "one", "we" or "you" when you mean "I". This helps to ensure that everyone owns their statements
- Ø Actively listen to one another and give each other space
- Ø Enabling, not advising – you are to help the issue holder find their best course of action, not offer own solutions, unless asked to as part of generating possibilities
- Ø Cannot be seen outside the organisation in which you work but as a leader, you continuously shape that organisation

And finally.....

- Ø *You have got to want to change things* – fundamental to action learning is that participants learn whilst tackling problems
- Ø *You can only know by doing it* – you can only learn about action learning by actually doing it

References and further reading

- 1 Gaunt, R. 1991. Personal and Group Development for Managers: An integrated approach through action learning, Longman: London

Brockbank, I and McGill, A.2004. The Action learning handbook: Powerful techniques for education, professional development and training, Routledge Falmer: Oxon

Reavens, R. 1983. The ABC of action learning, Chartwell-Bratt, Bromley, Kent