



Compendium Notes: Action Learning

So what is Action Learning (A/L)?

- ✚ Deceptively simple but.....
 - 'impossible to define' 'learning to take effective action'
- ✚ Extraordinarily powerful
- ✚ Uses principles of Experiential Learning (Kolb; Honey and Mumford)
- ✚ 'Grown up' learning – a chance to:
 - raise difficult questions about real problems
 - deal with sensitive issues in a supportive environment
 - learn with, through and from each other
 - support and challenge
 - work on real challenges and implement real solutions
 - develop new skills and behaviours which can be applied at work
 - 'give' to the process as well as 'taking' from it
- ✚ Learning by Doing!
- ✚ You learn....you are not taught!
- ✚ It achieves change!!

Origins of Action Learning

Action Learning was developed by Reg Revans (1907 – 2003):

- ✚ Astrophysicist, Olympic athlete, educational administrator, university professor, international management consultant, father of Action Learning
- ✚ '*Sharing their ignorance*' (Revans): In his early life as a scientist he attended weekly meetings where he and his colleagues would share and compare problems, ideas and solutions. He used this experience to develop A/L.
- ✚ Developed A/L in the 1940s as a tool to support management development programmes for the National Coal Board. Revans enabled pit managers to work together to identify and 'treat' their problems via Action Learning Sets. Productivity increased by 30%
- ✚ Used in many other industry sectors, notably in NHS
- ✚ Revans was scathing about 'chalk and talk' training!!



Other things you need to know about Action Learning

- ✚ Iterative – it's not a 'fixed' process. It's dynamic and unique to each situation and each Set
- ✚ Formula for A/L: $L=P+Q$ (we extend our learning beyond our previously programmed knowledge/understanding through/ with others, using insightful questions)
- ✚ The 'mere acquisition of management learning is overvalued'. Learning REALLY means a mixture of programmed knowledge (P), that which is already known; and critical questioning insights (Q)
- ✚ The world is changing so much and so fast that P is not enough. Just using P is like trying to drive a car by only looking in the rear view mirror
- ✚ A/L enables us to test out what we think we know and/or have been taught
- ✚ A/L promotes the concept of a Learning Organisation – one which is always expanding its knowledge, which helps it to function effectively
- ✚ '*Comrades in Adversity*'; '*Fellows in Opportunity*' - phrases which Revans felt described the sense of the learning community which was key to the success of A/L
- ✚ Uses co-coaching approach –leading to development of important coaching skills by set members

Who can use Action Learning?

- ✚ Anyone who is prepared to be part of the process - no passengers!!
- ✚ People working on a common project
- ✚ People involved in a change programme
- ✚ Following the formal part of a management development programme

A typical Action Learning process

- ✚ Individuals meet as a group (Action Learning Set) – usually 5 – 7 people
- ✚ The Set meets for ½ to 1 day on a regular basis (every 1 – 2 months) over an agreed time (e.g. 6 months, 12 months)
- ✚ Set members are normally at comparable levels and work in related fields (can be internal or cross-organisational)
- ✚ Each member brings a real issue, which s/he wants to progress, to the Set
- ✚ A Set Adviser (facilitator) acts as a catalyst, supporter and co-ordinator
- ✚ At the Set Meeting:
 - All members report back briefly on what has been happening
 - Set members decide who will present her/his current situation
 - The presenter describes the situation/dilemma/challenge which is troubling/exciting her/him

- 2 -

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- Set members ask insightful questions to help the presenter come to a deeper understanding of the issue
- Set members do not give advice ('if I were you...' 'when this happened to me...' 'ooh, that's awful' 'I remember when...')
- Presenter may ask set members to share any knowledge they have on the subject being tackled
- The Set helps the presenter to reach new understanding, identify and review options, and decide on action (to be tested in workplace)
- The Set reflects on group process and gives feedback to each other on what has happened at the meeting
- At a future meeting, the presenter reports back on action
- Learning is noted, conclusions are drawn, new knowledge is integrated into practice
- (The Set can decide to deal with one, some or all of the issues identified at the start of the meeting – whatever seems practical)

Benefits of Action Learning

- ✚ Gets below the surface, causes 'disturbance' at deeper levels – thus can lead to real and sustained change
- ✚ A new way of problem solving
- ✚ Time to solve problems and develop strategies for overcoming organisational blocks
- ✚ Enriches ability to ask insightful questions which really make a difference
- ✚ Increases awareness and practice of group processes
 - 'develops an attitude of questioning and reflection to help individuals respond effectively in a rapidly changing world' (Revens)
- ✚ Enables user to learn how to learn from, and how to work effectively with others (e.g. MBTI issues and Learning styles)
- ✚ Enables user to learn not only about the issue being tackled, but also about what is being learned about self.
- ✚ Democratic approach – the process encourages fairness
- ✚ Helps effective use of the Experiential Learning Cycle
- ✚ Lots of practical skill and behavioural benefits which are directly applicable to your everyday work situation
- ✚ Supportive and challenging
- ✚ Enables user to find out 'new knowledge' and put it in to practice
- ✚ Encourages clarity and enables a disciplined approach to what might appear to be an 'informal chat'
- ✚ Personal growth
- ✚ Helps to manage stress
- ✚ Develops links and partnerships



Things to consider, and a few banana skins to avoid

Inside the set:

- ✚ Requires self imposed discipline to maintain the process
- ✚ Requires a group of people who want to do it – mature learners NOT passive trainees
- ✚ There is no 'set of answers' which can be relied upon every time
- ✚ Risk exists
- ✚ Someone may railroad the set – e.g. take too much time
- ✚ People give each other the 'benefit' of their opinion
- ✚ Some people will find A/L more attractive than others

Outside the set:

- ✚ Not only is achieving a solution important, but so is the journey to the solution (what have you learned along the way?)
- ✚ Risk exists
- ✚ If no action takes place after the set meeting – why?
- ✚ Is the time spent on Action Learning understood by others? Do they see it as going away on a 'jolly'?
- ✚ People will start asking insightful questions in all sorts of situations! A Learning Culture develops!!
- ✚ **HEALTH WARNING!! Things will happen! Is your organisation ready for this?**



Want to know more?

To talk about Action Learning or other Compendium 'stuff', contact Alex.....

Compendium Learning Ltd. was established in 2002, headed by Alex Kendall. We are a supportive network of consultants, developers, trainers and coaches, with a broad range of skills, qualifications and experience.

We:

- ✚ Develop a genuine and enduring (informal AND professional) relationship with the organisations we work with, based on respect, trust and shared values. We work with you, not for you!
- ✚ Listen well and ask challenging questions. We will make you think – and take you beyond your comfort zone!
- ✚ Stretch you and your colleagues – in the nicest possible way! You won't get let off the hook!!
- ✚ Have fun!!

Our reputation!

- ✚ 'We use Compendium because they do the job we want them to do, and because participants mark them high during evaluation, and ask us to use them.' *Honorary Lecturer, INLOGOV, University of Birmingham*
- ✚ 'There's no formula delivery with Alex: everything is tailored to your needs and delivered in a way which is in tune with the culture of your organisation.' *Senior HR Manager, Housing Trust*
- ✚ 'Effective at any level from front line up to Director, Alex adapts her style to make sure that development meets the needs of everyone involved.' *HR Director, Manufacturing*
- ✚ We use Compendium because they provide what we need, which through dialogue and discussion may be different to what we think we need. It's this dialogue that sets Compendium apart from many other providers.' *HR Director, Housing Trust*
- ✚ 'Compendium's costs represent excellent value for money.' *Senior Manager, Local Authority*
- ✚ 'Interesting, informative, relaxed, informal, easy to understand.' *Operational Manager, Leisure Management*
- ✚ 'Absolutely brilliant – would definitely recommend to other supernumerary employees.' *Participant, Supernumerary Scheme for People with a Disability, Local Authority*
- ✚ 'Enjoyable, productive and relevant – just what was needed!' *Regional Organiser, UNISON*
- ✚ 'We trust Alex Kendall with our students. They trust her. She's as indispensable as they come.' *Honorary Lecturer, INLOGOV, University of Birmingham*

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