



Guide to Action Learning in HE

“The end of learning is not knowledge but action”

– Dr Peter Honey



What is Action Learning?

The concept of action learning was pioneered by Reg Revans (1907– 2003). It is a method of collaborative learning where a small group meets to reflect on real work issues. Its basic philosophy is that the most effective learning takes place when we are faced with a real problem to solve. Revans’ vision was of people learning from each other at work, creating their own resources, identifying their own problems and forming their own solutions. Action learning is about promoting courageous choice – helping people to take action that is meaningful for them, rather than directing people into a course of action that *you* think you would take in their shoes.



How Action Learning works:

The group focuses on real work goals or challenges. Group members share:

- Common aims of achieving progress in relation to their work/ development
- The ability to act as peer coaches to one another
- The willingness to learn from their own and others' activities.

Each group member has the opportunity to bring relevant issues. The ‘issue holder’ retains responsibility for and ownership of their issues, solutions and actions. Usually an Action Learning Group would comprise 4–6 members. The primary job of the group is to listen, providing the individual with space and time to think through real issues and challenges and to identify new ways forward. The issue holder will start the process by framing their issue as a question *“How can I.....?”*



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What topics can we discuss?

What is the SEAL programme?

The SEAL programme includes five action learning events, taking place at approximately monthly intervals during the period March to July, allowing for holiday periods. The participating HE institutions will host the action learning groups in turn, so you will get the opportunity to visit participating institutions.

We think carefully about the construction of each action learning cohort, striving for a balance of academic and professional services staff. Each cohort has a designated facilitator to guide the discussion and ensure confidentiality. The same facilitator will support you throughout the programme.

We will have four to five cohorts running each year and they will run in parallel on the same date, so that you get the chance to network with the other group as well as with your own cohort. There will be five meetings in total. The first meeting will introduce you to the network, explain how the programme works and also give you a taster of the action learning process. The final meeting will include a networking lunch and an opportunity to evaluate the programme.

When the programme concludes, you can of course continue meeting with your cohort, independent of the programme. By then you will have the skills to become a self-facilitated group and can agree amongst your cohort how you want to take things forward. You will have time to discuss this at the final event. We plan to include alumni events so that you can continue to build a strong peer network of leaders and a collaborative learning community.



Selection of your topic could be based on an issue which is likely to evolve over the next three to six months, or it could be a long standing challenge you have perhaps been avoiding!

Topics are likely to be complex and allow the possibility of a variety of approaches rather than have a simple solution.

Previous examples of topics that have been brought to groups include: forthcoming restructures or integration of teams; relocation of activities; reshaping of services; enterprise and income diversification; addressing conflict or misunderstanding; career development choices; process review and improvement; alignment of local activity with wider strategic goals; building a new team; work-life balance; overcoming unconscious bias; navigating through the early weeks of a new leadership role; or just plain trying to understand 'what's going on' !





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Why use a cross-institutional approach?

The most effective learning takes place when we have real problems to solve. However, sometimes it can be difficult to share these with others who are experiencing exactly the same issue. People can become paralysed by their shared context and history, or they can find it hard to challenge assumptions and prevailing wisdom for fear of damaging working relationships.

By bringing people together to reflect on real work issues who do not regularly work together, this creates an opportunity to explore different perspectives, which stimulates broader thinking about an issue than if you were left to tackle it alone.

The confidential context of this collaborative learning approach can also help to:

- build peer relationships across the sector
- broaden perspectives through networking with other institutions
- change practice through exploring differing approaches
- appreciate different contexts /experiences, deepening awareness and understanding
- create a safe space to develop the skill of holding non-judgemental conversations.



A structured process:

Action learning groups meet at regular intervals and follow a structured process designed to help members stay focussed and move forward in relation to the issues they bring, and to reflect on their learning about themselves and their learning about problem solving. Meetings generally include:

- establishment/review of progress/ground rules
- a 'check-in' from previous meetings
- agreement of running order and/or priority topics
- group members having sufficient 'air time' to bring their issue, using the group members to help them explore the assumptions or barriers that surround it, and gain different perspectives on it
- review of learning about self, issues brought to the group, actions and the process.

A common action learning process follows a group coaching approach:

- 1. Topic:** "I want to talk about.../my issue is about/how can I..."
- 2. Goal:** definition by the issue-owner of what they want to find a way forward on: "*What can I do to ...?*" "*I want to go away with...*"
- 3. Reality:** the group helps the issue-holder to reflect further, thinking more widely, and deeply, in order to gain clarity. For the SEAL programme we use the Post-It™ Method to achieve this
- 4. Options:** the issue-holder reviews the solution-focussed questions and observations on the post-its from the group members to identify possible options for action
- 5. Will/Wrap up:** the issue-holder identifies her intended actions.



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The The Post- It™ Method of action learning

Usually there are six participants in each cohort and each individual can expect to have around 25-30 minutes for their topic. We are using the Post-it™ Method for the discussions as this enables us to cover a lot of ground in a short space of time.



Each cohort has a designated Facilitator who will structure and support the sessions and remain with your cohort for the duration of the programme.

The first individual, the issue-owner, starts by outlining (concisely and briefly) in two or three minutes the challenge they wish to discuss. This topic must be something that they are personally involved in and have some responsibility for changing/solving/improving.

The Facilitator then invites group members to offer their questions to the issue-holder. Each member states their question and hands the post-it to the issue-holder, one question at a time, on a round robin basis. This process is followed until all questions have been asked.

The issue-holder may choose to answer a clarification question immediately if they consider it appropriate.

- The issue-holder may group, categorise or discard questions as they see fit by re-arranging the post-its. When she is ready, she will address the questions she wishes to answer in the order she wants to respond in. The issue-owner chooses how to answer the questions but may also choose not to respond immediately and to give further thought to the questions. There is no requirement on any individual to follow the line of questions of any other cohort member. The purpose is to empower the issue-owner to be the architect of the next actions and, ultimately, to identify a solution to her problem.
- Group members may probe and follow up on responses, again using the post-its to record the questions as they probe, clarify and expand the issue. It is human nature to want to offer help and advice so the Facilitator will encourage you to avoid asking questions that are really a solution in disguise (e.g. “why don’t you do xxxxx”).
- They will also be quick to spot when a question has become an anecdote and will bring everyone back to asking probing questions. As you get used to the action learning approach, we expect that all members will monitor the process and encourage great open questions, avoiding suggesting solutions or sharing anecdotes. It is the questioning process that is most likely to help the issue-owner identify any gaps in her knowledge, question assumptions or provide alternate interpretations.

In the last few minutes of the allotted time the issue-owner will be encouraged to identify three actions that will move the issue forward (not necessarily solve the whole issue); these actions should be achievable in the next three to four weeks.



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Simple one-step actions are preferable to complex multi-step ones. The actions are written down by the issue-owner who agrees to undertake the actions in a reasonable time scale.

The process is repeated for each member of action learning cohort.

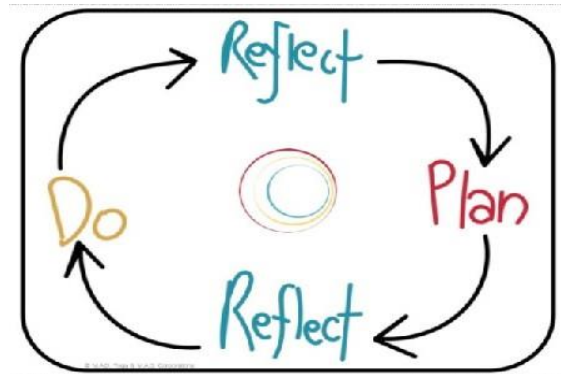
The key to unlocking thinking is by asking relevant and appropriate questions. The most effective questions are generally open. There are other ways of helping an issue-holder move forward, including observation, reflection and challenge, without expressing opinion or judgement. *“I noticed that.....”*
“What do you mean by?”

The group works together, acting as coaches for the issue-holder, listening, providing space for them to think, and asking relevant open questions to help them find their own way forward. Group members are not responsible for finding solutions, do not generally make suggestions and they don't give advice.

Useful Questions

Group members ask insightful questions that help clarify and deepen understanding of the topic being discussed. Questions which challenge the assumptions and perspectives of the issue-holder are especially helpful at the exploratory stage of the process. Questions to clarify understanding could include:

- What exactly happened?
- How do you see the situation?
- Why do you say that?
- Can you provide an example?
- How do you feel about the situation?
- What assumptions are you making?
- Are you saying that ?



The process of action learning is intended to encourage reflection and the cycle of Reflecting, Learning, Planning and Action can also be useful for framing questions, for example:

- **Reflecting:** Upon reflection, why do you think that happened?
- **Learning:** What have you learnt from the challenges experienced so far?
- **Planning:** How do you think you could plan more effectively going forward?
- **Action:** If all the decisions were in your control, what would you do now?

Roles in Action Learning Groups

The Issue-Holder presents their issue, outlining the key facets of the topic, then responds to questions from the group and ultimately seeks to move to action.

The Facilitator supports the group and manages the process of action learning, maintaining a non-directive approach to problem solving. Specifically a facilitator will:

- Allocates and manages time
- Facilitates the questioning process.
- Intervenes if the issue-holder is being bombarded with advice/suggestion or if any behaviour is displayed which they consider is detracting from the process and from the issue-holder finding their own way.



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Group Members: support and appropriately challenge the issue-holder in order to enable her to explore her issue. This means asking helpful questions, with a focus on seeking to generate insight for the issue holder rather than just seeking clarification for the group members.

Group members take responsibility for managing their own behaviour and for resisting the impetus to 'tell' or 'advise'.

Issues: these are the problems or challenges for which there are a number of options for action.

Ground Rules



During the Launch event, we will seek your agreement to the ground rules for how the action learning meetings will be run. All group members are expected to respect and adhere to the ground rules, including maintaining confidentiality.

We expect these to cover:

- confidentiality within the cohorts
- open sharing of information
- active and respectful listening
- sensitivity to others' contexts and circumstances
- willingness to be challenged

- ownership by individuals of actions relevant to their issue
- avoidance of judgemental statements
- commitment to remaining on-task
- respect for the process and equal allocation of time between participants.

Commitment required of a SEAL participant

Action Learning works well when ALS group members are prepared to commit their time to meet regularly with their cohort for the duration of the programme. To get the most out of the programme requires balancing a focus on actions whilst remaining open to experiencing the ALS process as a learning process, - whether learning from other group members' reflections or from your own reflective processes. You need to be prepared to discover something new about yourself, - this could include obtaining new knowledge or perhaps you will become more self-aware or challenge/change inner values and beliefs.

Preparing for the meeting

The issue to be presented must be something that is real, urgent and important as this will stimulate creative and exploratory thinking. As the issue-holder you may want to prepare for by considering the following questions:

- What is happening?
- What could be happening instead?
- What is getting in the way of what could be happening?
- What attempts have been made to put into practice what could be happening?
- What isn't within the scope of the issue being presented?



Tell your story as openly as you can, presenting the issue honestly and providing appropriate and realistic contextual information. By offering sufficient, focused information you allow exploration through the group questioning process.

Stay open minded when group members are questioning, as the root of the problem identified may be different from the initial issue you presented.

Commit to action. A number of approaches and actions are likely to be generated from the discussions. As the issue-holder you will need to commit to putting into practice an action, or to try out a number of actions, to see if they are effective. The rationale for not selecting an action to try out should also be made explicit to the group.

Reflect: reflection is an important part of the experience gained from the Action Learning process; reflection in and on learning can facilitate development in role and personal growth. Learning takes place during the group meeting, resulting from the process and posing and answering questions, as well as afterwards as you review the experience. Using the Post-it™ method enables you to review the questions posed and reflect upon them further. This opportunity to revisit the meeting, challenge your assumptions and explore these in greater depth, enables you to engage in a process of more meaningful continuous learning.

Feedback: the outcome of the actions you commit to will be brought back to the next Action Learning meeting for further discussion

and analysis. It is also important to capture the learning from the experiences of trying out new actions, not just share successes or failures. A journal to record reflections and learning can be helpful when trying out new actions. This can also help with the process of feeding back to the members at subsequent meetings and ensure actions are balanced by insights from the learning experience.

The action learning process relates to different learning styles and the learning cycle. It focuses on real tasks, issues and problems. The process uses reflection and analysis and helps group members plan what actions they will take. The learning that occurs comes from working out new ways of tackling tasks and problems and from new insights gained from skilled questioning. Members reflect on their experience and what they have learned about themselves, their issues, other group members and the working of the group.

Getting the most out of an Action Learning Group meeting:

- Before: prepare which problem or issue you would like to share with your group. Consider whether it is about (i) making sense (past history); (ii) making meaning (present situation); (iii) potential action (future)
- During: choose 1-3 questions that struck you as particularly useful or insightful that you experienced during the meeting. Read these aloud to the group and describe what you will do in relation to these questions – an action!
- After: record the outcomes from your actions e.g. successes, things to do differently. This will help you plan for your next Action Learning Group meeting and also allow yourself time to reflect on your own ideas and plans.

Action Learning Record

Before:

My issue that I want to share with the group is....

During:

3 questions that struck me as particularly insightful were

After:

The action I took was..... As a result of this outcome I learned I now intend to do the following differently.....

The most significant learning occurs when individuals are able to shift the perspective by which they habitually view the world, leading to greater understanding (of the world and of the other), self-awareness and intelligent action.

Rimanoczy, I. and Brown, C, 2008