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Action Learning in Education



How Learning Happens: Action learning in an academic context

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Introduction

The session is designed to give a very brief overview of action learning in an academic context. The emphasis is placed on doing action learning.....

1. What is action learning?

Pedler and Boutall (1991:7) defined action learning as being:

A method of management and organisational development. Over several months, people working in small groups tackle important organisational issues or problems and learn from their attempts to change things

Rimanoczy (2007:247) described the process of action learning as:

A form of learning through experience, by asking questions of each other, the task being the vehicle for learning.

McGill & Brockbank (200: 185) wrote that:

Action learning is a continuous process of learning and reflection that happens with the support of a group or 'set' of colleagues, working on real issues, with the intention of getting things done. The voluntary participants in the group or 'set' learn with and from each other and take forward an important issue with support of the other members of the set. The collaborative process, which recognises set members' social context, helps people to take an active stance towards life, helps overcome the tendency to be passive towards the pressures of

life and work, and aims to benefit both the organisation and the individual.

Notes

2. How does an action learning set differ from another group?

A more formal approach is taken in that:

- Group size is restricted;
- Each person has a specific amount of air time;
- Each person has a live issue;
- The group is facilitated by one person;
- The process of reflection is formalised; and
- Specific roles are carried out in the set

Notes

3. What happens in an action learning set?

Differing roles include:

- Presenter – the person who owns the issue
- Enablers – other members in the set
- Facilitator –the person in charge of the set processes – not the expert

The goldfish bowl exercise



Types of questions

Insightful questioning

Revens, 1982 saw questioning as the key process in action learning. In considering a problem or issue, each individual is encouraged to think about the following questions:

- What am I trying to do?
- What is stopping me from doing it?
- What can I do about it?
- Who knows what I am trying to do?
- Who cares about what I am trying to do?
- Who else can do anything to help?

Questioning insight

McGill and Brockbank (2004:228) cite typical questions for the enablers to help the presenter develop an insight into their own issue, questions include:

- What did you know....?
- How do you feel...?
- What were you aware of ...?
- What would make a difference...?
- What helped you....?
- What got in your way....?
- What would happen if you.....?

Action Planning



- Reflecting back on events – highs/lows
- Reflecting forward – next action and rationale

Notes

4. The first and second set meeting

Remember this is daunting for all concerned...how has each individual been prepared?

Layout of the room – what does it look like?

Creating a positive culture:

- Introductions-why am I here?
- Ground rules –collective effort
- Getting to know each other activities:
 - Self portrait (Appendix 1)
 - Lifeline
 - Picture of me

Ending the set- how was it for you?

Notes

5. What and how do students learn?

By actually taking part in the process of action learning, students have the opportunity to learn many things about themselves and others, such as:

- Communication skills- listening, hearing, silence
- Understanding complex issues -analysis
- Appreciation of differing perspectives -empathy

- Time management
- Personal insight
- Reflection, reflective practices
- Giving and receiving feedback

Courses in the Business School that use action learning as the underpinning philosophy

- Doctor of Business/Public Administration
- MSc Healthcare Management
- BSc Enterprise

Notes

6. Final thought

It takes time and patience to make it work!

References

McGill, I & Brockbank, A (2006) *The Action Learning Handbook*, Routledge Falmer.

Pedler, M and Boutall, J. (1991) *Action Learning for Change- A Resource Book for Managers and other Professionals*. NHS Training Directorate.

Revans, R. W. (1982) *The origin and growth of Action Learning*, London: Chartwell Bratt

Rimanoczy, I. (2007) Action learning and action reflection: are they different?. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, Vol 39, no 5, pgs 246 – 256.

Appendix 1

Getting Started: Who am I and how am I feeling

1. Who am I and what I do;
2. Is there something keeping me out of this room and which I would like to leave in an imaginary suitcase outside this room ?;
3. What is it that I have and would particularly wish to bring to this set so the set can work well ?;
4. Something unusual about myself that no one else in the room knows about me and I am willing to share with the set now.

Source: McGill, I & Brockbank, A (2006) *The Action Learning Handbook*, RoutledgeFalmer pp71-72