

1 Action learning: its origins and principles

Chapter overview

This chapter introduces the idea of action learning including the values and principles proposed by Revans. After discussing the origins of the idea in Revans' professional and personal life, his ambitions for action learning are laid out in the three systems of Alpha, Beta and Gamma: the decision or strategy system; the influencing or negotiation cycle and the learning process as experienced uniquely by each action learner. These three systems are illustrated with the help of a case example from a manufacturing company.

What is action learning for? According to Revans, it is for tackling the 'wicked problems' of organizations and society rather than the puzzles which are the focus of much conventional education and training. And it cannot succeed in this purpose unless any such efforts are conducted in the light of certain critical values, which are discussed under the heading 'What is action learning really about?'

The chapter closes by introducing 'My practice notes', which feature in every chapter. These are an invitation to reflect on what has been read by writing some notes on how this relates to your current practice.

This chapter contains:

- Introduction
- What is action learning?
- The origins of action learning
- The ambition of action learning
- What is action learning for?
- What action learning is NOT
- So, what is it really about?
- What has action learning become now?

- What does all this mean for the action learning adviser or facilitator?
- My practice notes 1

Introduction

Action learning originates with Reginald Revans (1907–2003) – Olympic athlete, nuclear physicist, educational reformer and professor of management (Figure 1.1).

Drawing on ancient sources of wisdom and more recent philosophers such as John Dewey, Revans sought the improvement of human systems by those who must live and work in them. Action learning suggests that we can address the most difficult challenges and problems through our own experiences and learning. Revans' idea is at one and the same time a pragmatic methodology for dealing with difficult challenges and a moral philosophy based on an optimistic view of human potential.



Figure 1.1 Professor R.W. Revans

What is action learning?

‘There is no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning’

R.W. Revans 1907–2003

Revans never gave a single definition of action learning, and always maintained that there is no one form to what he described as ancient wisdom. The action learning *idea* is essentially simple, but its implementation and *realization* in the organizational and social world is anything but. Because it is concerned with achieving useful change and with the often profound learning that comes from being engaged in this process, it can never be communicated as a simple formula or technique.

However, many people are tempted to try to do just this. One of the main reasons for writing this book can be found in our amazement as what is currently described and sold as action learning. We are part of the movement to bring the action learning idea into practice in the world and our aspiration is to ensure that it is not sold short. Acknowledging that there is no one right or final way to describe action learning, here is our shot at describing action learning as it is currently applied in many settings today: ‘Action learning is an approach to individual and organizational learning. Working in small groups known as “sets”, people tackle important organizational or social challenges and learn from their attempts to improve things.’

This sounds straightforward enough, and it is: action learning brings people together to exchange, support and challenge each other in action and learning:

- First, each person joins and takes part *voluntarily*. (You can’t be sent or send anyone else – although you might work at persuading and encouraging them.)
- Secondly, each person must own an organizational task, problem, challenge or opportunity on which they are committed to act.
- Thirdly, because we are very much more likely to succeed with the help of friends, action learning sets or small groups are formed to help each other think through the issues, create options and above all . . .
- Fourthly, take action and learn from the experience of taking that action.

These four elements are depicted in Figure 1.2.



Figure 1.2 Four elements in action learning

The action learning set

The set is a very distinctive aspect of action learning. This small group meets regularly over time to help each other to act and to learn, and works on the basis of voluntary commitment, peer relationship and self-management. Revans described the set as: 'the cutting edge of every action learning programme' (2011: 10).

Figure 1.3 gives a depiction of a set at work. What do you see in the picture in Figure 1.3?



Figure 1.3 The action learning set

- These five people seem to be engaged in an experiment of some sort . . .
- It seems that they are trying to test some idea they have conceived but don't really know how to go about it . . .
- What is being attempted looks risky, there is the prospect of some danger, at least to the person tied to the top of the 'wheel' . . .
- Of the four people not at immediate risk, two seem to be pushing for the action, one seems to be in a restraining position, whilst the last seems to be observing and taking notes.

This is one picture of what an action learning set looks like in action. It helps its members to choose and tackle new challenges and to learn from the experiences arising from taking that action.

Revans trained as a physicist and brought the application of scientific method to the resolution of human problems. His crucial insight, which marks him off from most of his contemporaries and many thinkers today, is that the really difficult problems and challenges (those without right answers) are never resolved by experts (who deal in right answers) and can only be resolved by the people who actually have these problems and face these challenges. Resolving our own difficulties and improving our own systems is a difficult and daunting prospect and one we might often seek to avoid. But action learning suggests that with a little help from a few trusted friends, by working collaboratively we can begin work on inventing our own paths to the future.

The action learning set is to help each other to:

- make a voluntary commitment to work together on the 'intractable' problems or challenges of managing and organizing;
- choose problems or opportunities that personally engage the members of the set, so that they become those in which 'I am part of the problem and the problem is part of me';
- check individual perceptions of the problem, help to clarify them and render them more manageable, and also to create and explore options and alternatives for action;
- take action in the light of new insights gained from questioning and discussion in the set;
- support and challenge each other to act and learn effectively;
- reflect on and learn from the experiences of taking action by bringing back accounts of the action and its effects. Learning is first about the problem or opportunity being tackled; secondly it is about personal awareness – learning about oneself; and thirdly it is about the processes of learning itself or 'learning to learn'. (It

is the second and third of these types of learning that are essential for the transfer of learning to other situations.)

- acquire the skills of action and learning and become aware of group processes and what makes for effective teamwork.

That's about as much as you need to know about action learning in order to get on with it.

Revans was always very suspicious of people giving out too much theory or too many explanations; it was all so obvious to him – he wanted people to get on with it. Like eating ice cream or riding a bicycle, action learning has to be experienced. So, have a go and try it out, see how it works for you.

Finally, here's another definition of action learning from a doctor who was reflecting on her experience of working in a set (Box 1.1).

The origins of action learning

Action learning emerged as an important idea in the late 1960s. At this time and with the help of colleagues, Revans initiated two major projects: in a consortium of London hospitals (Wieland and Leigh 1971; Clark 1972; Wieland 1981); and in the UK's General Electric Company (Casey and Pearce 1977). Action learning was – and still is – an unusual innovation in organization development and management education because it is based on managers doing their own research and tackling their own problems. In championing the learners and doers it is opposed to expert consultancy and traditional business school practice.

In 1965, Revans resigned his professorship at the University of Manchester following his failure to influence negotiations over the new Business School, which he suggested should be based on action learning principles. Instead it was decided to build the Manchester Business School around the MBA, which was imported from the standard practice in US Business Schools. Revans left in protest at what he saw as the victory of the 'book' culture of the old University (Owens College) over the 'tool' culture of the College of Technology (later UMIST), which he saw as being closer to the needs of managers (1980: 197).

The action learning idea came to fruition over a long period of gestation and it was only in the 1970s, after leaving university life, that Revans first began using the term action learning. In a series of key books and papers beginning with *Developing Effective Managers* (1971), over the next ten years he laid out the theoretical and practical guidelines of what we now know as action learning. Revans' action learning is not just a new

Box 1.1 Recipe for successful action learning

Ingredients

- 6–8 people
- some tasks or problems
- commitment
- trust
- concern
- time
- experience
- support
- challenge
- risk
- facilitation
- humour

Method

Take a liberal slice of time, and mix thoroughly with the lifetime experience of several committed people. Sprinkle a generous helping of concern for others, and add enough trust to mould the mix until it jells firmly together. An added catalytic facilitator may help it to bind.

Season with a little risk. Add support and challenge whenever necessary. Leave to simmer indefinitely, stirring regularly as you feed in a variety of problems. An occasional dash of humour will prevent the mix from sticking.

Results

So what do you get? *Opportunities!*

- the opportunity to focus on particular areas of your professional life and to discuss at a level which, for a variety of reasons, you cannot do at work;
- the opportunity of new perspectives on such areas based upon the experience of others;
- the opportunity to develop and practise new skills in a relatively safe environment;
- the opportunity for reassurance that others have also 'been there before'.

. . . and friendship.

Source: Adapted from the original by Sheila Webb,
Consultant in Public Health Medicine, Airedale

theory of management and organizational learning, but a philosophy for living and working based on strong ethical values. The importance of moral and ethical considerations is always apparent throughout Revans' writings, and his action learning is as much an ethos as it is a method.

Recent research (Boshyk et al. 2010; Boshyk 2011) suggests that Revans' early life experiences and personal development as a young man shaped the later development of his ideas in important ways. For example, there is an influence of Quaker values, perhaps from his family and certainly later from attendances at Quaker meetings in Cambridge in the 1930s when he was moving away from physics because of his doubts about being involved in research that could be used for aggressive purposes.

The similarities between Quaker belief and practices and action learning are quite striking. As Boshyk notes (2011: 89): 'Quakerism puts an emphasis on action or "practice", which takes precedence over belief, which "has meaning only in so far as it is enacted in practice".' Boshyk et al. (2010: 54–9) comment on the similarity between the workings of the traditional Quaker 'clearness committee' and the action learning set: any person seeking clearness on a deep personal problem or decision can call together five or six diverse but trusted people to help them find their inner voice. The clearness committee meets for about three hours, on one or more occasions, and starts with a 'centering silence'. Members do not speak to the focus person except to ask honest, caring questions to serve that person's need rather than their own curiosity. The clearness committee, dating back perhaps to the 1660s, was devised to draw upon communal wisdom to address the taxing problems of life, whilst acknowledging that these inevitably fall to individual responsibility and so must protect that person's integrity and essential self-direction from the risk of invasion by the judgements and beliefs of others.

Action learning, like the person calling clearness committee, starts in 'not knowing', or as Revans often said, unless we understand and acknowledge our own ignorance in the face of difficult problems, then we are not able to seek questions and learning. And there are other parallels between action learning and Quaker beliefs and practices: Quaker values include pacifism, equality, standing up to injustice and 'speaking truth to authority'; Quaker practice focuses on the importance of doubts and of the posing of questions and holds that quietness and reflection are essentials. Finally the strong belief in community resonates with Revans 'Comrades in adversity'.

The ambition of action learning

However, action learning was designed for an industrial society and for an age marked by the increasing predominance of large scale organizations. Behind the simple rules of action learning described in the first part of this chapter, Revans' thinking is based on what he called a 'praxeology' or 'general theory of human action' made up of three interacting systems: alpha, beta and gamma (Box 1.2).

Box 1.2 Revans' General Theory of Human Action – alpha, beta and gamma

alpha – *the strategy system* encompassing the external environment, the available internal resources and the managerial value system;

beta – *the decision system or negotiation cycle* required to implement the decision or strategy – of survey, trial, action, audit and consolidation;

gamma – *the learning process* as experienced uniquely by each action learner, involving self-questioning and awareness of self and others.

Source: Revans (1971: 33–67)

Alpha, beta and gamma are not easily separable in practice and are perhaps better seen as interacting parts of a whole. Taken together these three systems illustrate the scope and ambition of Revans' action learning:

- *System alpha is the source of the organizational problems to be tackled.* It sums up what Revans learned from his operational research phase in the 1940s and 1950s when he applied his scientific training to studies of mines, factories, schools and hospitals. The analysis of the external environment is necessary to reveal what opportunities and challenges may exist, whilst the inventory of internal resources is needed to see what may be deployed to exploit them.

In adding the managerial value system to this orthodoxy of mainstream strategic thinking, Revans makes it clear that decisions are not just rational acts, but are contested and involve moral choices. System alpha is not just an intellectual analysis, but one which pays attention to history, cultures, power, politics and risk-taking in considering what different groups think ought to happen, and what they need to do about this.

- *System beta describes how the organizational problems should be tackled* via successive cycles of planning, action, reflection and learning. This, at the same time, is the cycle of scientific endeavour, the project cycle and also a 'cycle of institutional learning' (1971: 129). Addressing the problem involves an initial definition but also a negotiation of this meaning with important sponsors, clients, other actors and groups who are implicated or affected. The problem evolves as a result of learning from successive trials as options and opportunities for action emerge and effected.
- *System gamma is concerned with the personal learning of the individual* in their interactions with systems alpha and beta. All learning is voluntary, and how we learn from taking action on problems embraces both the person and the problem situation. It includes 'the effect of the change or action upon the manager, in one direction, and its complementary effect upon the situation, in the other' (1971: 54–5). System gamma recognizes that it is the individual who must make sense of the interaction of the three systems as the basis for their actions. Revans wrote of system gamma that it was: 'the essence . . . [it] represents in its own way the structure of all intelligent behaviour, and offers, in conjunction with systems alpha and beta, one starting point for a general theory of human action, for a science of praxeology' (1971: 58).

This general theory and its three systems set out the vision of action learning as a blend or admixture of individual action and learning, successive trials and cycles of experiment and wider systems change. Revans' thinking prefigures the interest in the learning organization and organizational learning which emerged some 20 years later.

This brief sketch of Revans' ambitions for action learning also serves to frame the challenge for the action learning adviser or facilitator: to achieve these aims calls for far more than the facilitation of small groups. Facilitating sets is but a small part of the picture, as the example from John Tann Security shows (Box 1.3).

Box 1.3 John Tann Security

Colin, John, Les and Pete were senior line managers at John Tann Security Ltd., a heavy fabrication company making safes, vaults and security equipment. They formed themselves into a management action group with the help of an external adviser.

The company was faced with a number of problems including small batches, high product variety and changing fashions in the market for security equipment. The directors wanted to increase output and efficiency and also develop the management potential of their key people. Unusually perhaps, they also felt that 'often good ideas in a company do not originate at Board level'. They wanted to establish an environment in which 'ideas would flow upwards through the company structure'.

The four managers met weekly with the external adviser over six months and worked well as a team. At the last meeting they reviewed their success together with their sponsoring director. Unusually however, they did a second review four years later (all of them were still working in the company) and evaluated the benefits under four headings:

- 1 *Productivity* – over the four years productivity improvement was +11%, +19%, +17% and +13% (the original target = 15%). Whilst not stemming entirely from the action learning, this was seen as the major factor.
- 2 *Individual management development* – the four managers believe that the action learning experience 'was the most significant factor' in establishing better decision making, more delegation, less defensive attitudes and improved ability to take criticism, improved self-confidence and leadership, proper application of disciplinary procedures and the ability to confide in their director in the belief that 'he wanted them to manage and would allow them to do so'.
- 3 *Team building* – they now operate as a much more effective team.
- 4 *Continuing use of action learning* – the four formed a set for their deputies and shared the role of adviser in order to pass on what they had learned. This set was not so successful; it met for several meetings but then petered out. The four managers put this down to the presence of one of themselves as part of the company hierarchy and the absence of an external adviser.

Source: Adapted from Brown (1991)

What is action learning for?

The John Tann example illustrates several of the purposes of action learning. Action learning is for tackling the really difficult challenges and problems facing us as managers and citizens, but it is also a profound source of personal development. The 'principle of insufficient mandate' holds that unless we can change ourselves we cannot change anything that goes on around us (Revans 2011: 75–6), or to put it another way round, when we set out to change things in the world and we do this from a starting position of openness to learning then we also find ourselves changed in the process. The four John Tann managers are developing themselves as persons as well as managerially by tackling the productivity and other challenges of their organization.

Colin, John, Les and Pete set up their group because they sensed that they needed to learn in order to resolve the problems facing the company. Revans' change equation holds that:

$$L \geq C$$

which means that people, organizations or societies only flourish when their learning (L) is at least equal to, or better still, greater than, the rate of environmental change (C). He further suggests that adults learn by combining what we already know with fresh questions about what we do not know. His learning equation holds that:

$$L = P + Q$$

so that learning is a combination of P (*programmed knowledge*), or what we already know; and Q (*questioning insight*), which is inspired by fresh questions about the challenges where we do not know and do not have solutions. The element of Q is the key to the distinction Revans makes between:

PUZZLES and PROBLEMS

Puzzles have 'best' solutions and can be solved by applying P with the help of experts. Revans uses the word 'problems' to describe situations where there are no right answers and which are best approached through questioning which provokes new lines of thinking, action and learning. Action learning is not designed for puzzles, which are 'difficulties from which escapes are thought to be known', but for situations where 'no single course of action is to be justified . . . so that different managers, all reasonable, experienced and sober, might set out by treating them in markedly different ways' (Revans 2011: 6).

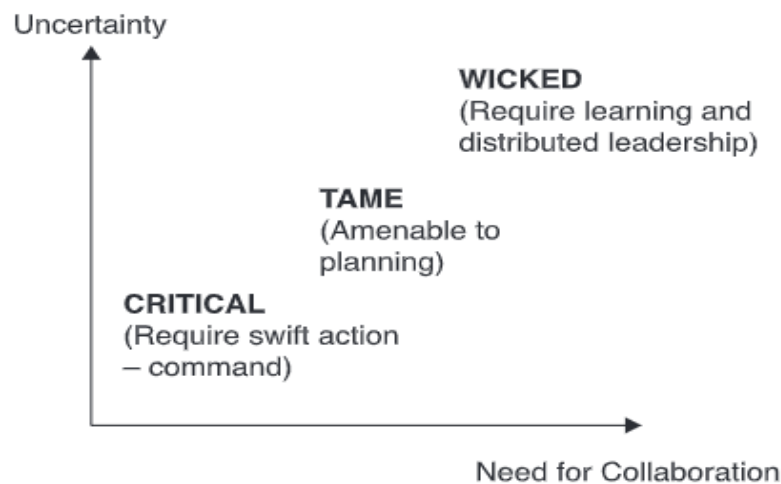


Figure 1.4 Three types of problem

Source: Grint (2008)

Another name for this sort of challenge is 'wicked'. Grint's (2008: 11–18) leadership model (Figure 1.4) has three sorts of problems and the progression from 'critical' to 'tame' to 'wicked' shows up in increases in uncertainty about solutions and the much greater need for collaboration. *Critical* problems such as heart attacks, train crashes or natural disasters demand swift action, leaving little time for procedure or uncertainty. Although *tame* problems such as planning heart surgery or building a new hospital can be very complicated, they are 'tame' because they are amenable to the tools of rational planning. Wicked problems defy rational analysis and require *leadership and learning*. Wicked issues are messy, circular and aggressive. Eliminating drug abuse, homelessness or crime in a neighbourhood; motivating people; developing entrepreneurship or working across boundaries in organizations are all tricky in this way. Simple strategies and straightforward actions often lead to unintended consequences due to the complex interdependencies of issues and stakeholders on site.

Action learning is the process intended for such wicked issues: proceeding by questions, by not rushing to solutions, by learning from making deliberate experiments and deliberated risks.

What action learning is NOT

Revans is famous for saying what action learning is not (2011: 62–74) rather than what it is. It is NOT 'Project Work, Case Studies, Business Games and other Simulations. Group Dynamics and other Task-free

Exercises, Business consultancy and other Expert Missions, Operational Research, Industrial Engineering, Work Study and Related Subjects' nor even 'Simple Commonsense'. Revans concludes his review of what action learning is not, by saying that:

action learning is less structured than these other approaches . . . It makes little use of teachers, specialist and other professional sclerotics, and tries to encourage the managers themselves, those who have to take the decisions about their own tasks, to discover how best to help each other.

(2011: 74)

On the other hand, it also follows from his account that there may be many efforts at organizational improvement that can achieve action learning. Call them 'quality circles', 'productivity improvement teams', 'action inquiry groups' or whatever you wish. It matters little what a group is called (the naming should fit the circumstances); the acid test is whether the people concerned are helping each other to take action on their problems and challenges, and whether they are learning from this work.

Indeed, one of the strengths of action learning is that, being never defined once and for all, it must be re-interpreted or re-invented to fit the present conditions. This means it is never in danger, as fixed techniques often are, of being popular today and forgotten tomorrow. The basic ideas are simple, but we always need to craft the practice and fashion our own ways of applying them. This inventing element is what maintains the life and vitality of action learning.

So, what is it really about?

Tackling difficult challenges and wicked problems is perhaps demanding enough, and yet there is more. Revans was passionate in encouraging people to help themselves, and also urged us to help those who cannot help themselves (1982: 467–92). Action learning is founded on an uncompromising moral philosophy about how to be and how to act. Whilst the action learning 'rules of engagement' are easily understood, they have to be enacted via these moral values:

- *starting from ignorance* – from acknowledging inadequacy and not knowing;
- *honesty about self* – 'What is an honest man, and what do I need to do to become one?' (Belgian manager quoted in Revans 1971: 132);

- *commitment to action, and not just not thought* – ‘be ye doers of the word, and not only hearers of it’ (St. James quoted in Revans 2011: 6);
- *in a spirit of friendship* – ‘All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship’ (John Macmurray quoted in Revans 2011: 6);
- *for the purpose of doing good in the world* – ‘To do a little good is better than to write difficult books’ (The Bhudda quoted in Revans 2011: 6).

In action learning, and in contrast to other learning theories, spirit, heart and courage are as important as intelligence and insight. In challenging situations, the warmth and support of friends and colleagues are as vital as their knowledge and critique. We return to the importance of these values in Chapter 7.

Box 1.4 Nine ways to kill action learning!

Action learning is a powerful approach and discipline for personal and business development. However, success is not guaranteed. Here are a few of the ways in which you can stop action learning working:

- Come along when you don’t really want to
- Come without a real issue to work on
- Bring something along that you already know how to do
- Keep quiet about your real issues – don’t give anything away
- Turn up infrequently to meetings
- Don’t take any action between set meetings
- Talk about other members and their issues outside the set
- Give everyone the benefit of your advice at every opportunity
- Use the set meetings to score points and show how clever you are

Do any or all of these and you are sure to have a deadly impact!

What has action learning become now?

Since its appearance in the 1960s and 1970s, action learning has been controversial in promoting learning over teaching, and championing

practitioner knowledge over that of experts. There has been a substantial growth of action learning activity since the 1980s and it is perhaps closer now to the 'mainstream' than at any other time in its history. There are two main reasons for the growth of activity:

- *The use of action-based approaches in corporate programmes* Leadership development programmes in large organizations are reported as increasingly using approaches such as coaching, work-based learning, problem-based learning and action learning.
- *Interest from academics and universities* This partly reflects the increased corporate usage which creates opportunities for research and practice-oriented postgraduate programmes. Academic interest comes both from organizational researchers interested in 'actionable knowledge' (Coghlan 2011), and from those looking for a more critical business and management education (Trehan 2011).

Alongside this growth of use and interest, action learning itself is changing. This is evident in both how it is practised, and in how it is perceived:

- *As a family of approaches* Action learning has spread as an idea rather than as a specific method, and whilst there is agreement on the key features of the idea, there are wide variations in its practice (Pedler et al. 2005: 64–5). These variations can be seen either as departures from 'Revans Classical Principles' or as developments of them. For example, much current practice focuses on 'own job' projects and personal development, rather than on organizational problems, and can therefore lose what is vital in Revans' vision. However, there are also new practice developments which he could not have envisaged, such as virtual action learning (VAL). Because different practice communities have developed their own versions of action learning this means that it is sensible to think of it not as a unitary practice but as a family of approaches.
- *As a member of the family of action-based approaches to research and learning* More broadly, action learning is also part of a wider growth of action approaches to management and organizational research, which aim to produce 'actionable knowledge'. These include action research, action science and participative action inquiry amongst others with similar perspectives.

What does all this mean for the action learning adviser or facilitator?

There is a lot to take in here and at least as many ways of playing the facilitator role as there are of interpreting action learning. As we shall see in the next chapter, Revans did not pay a great deal of attention to the role of facilitator and rather distrusted people who assumed this status. This causes a number of problems for people who take on this role, especially as there is not one single definition of what action learning may be, so there is no one right way to facilitate. This means that every facilitator of action learning is condemned to be continually asking the question: am I doing it right?! (Pedler and Abbott 2008).

You may like to record your reflections so far in *My practice notes*.



My practice notes 1

My practice of action learning

Write yourself some notes on action learning as it relates to your current practice. Record your thoughts on these questions:

- 1 What do I make of action learning as an idea?

- 2 Does it fit with my current skills set?

- 3 What do I value most about action learning? Is it something that fits with my personal values?

- 4 Which aspects of action learning practice do I want to develop next?

Reflection on *My practice notes 2*:

Reading through what I have just written, what does it say about me and my practice?