



Good Practice Guide: An introduction to Action Learning Sets

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This guide has been prepared by the University of Sheffield and CFE Research to assist the local partnerships delivering projects as part of the BigLF Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs initiative. Many of the local partnerships have identified Action Learning (AL) as a core element of their learning strategy. This guide sets out a brief background to AL, and in particular Action Learning Sets (ALS), how they operate and some key factors to consider in making them an effective mechanism for individual and organisational learning.

Background

Action Learning (AL) was pioneered by Professor Reg Revans in the 1940s. Revans was a scientist by background, who went on to work with the National Coal Board, where he developed a new approach to learning. He later encapsulated the approach in his formula:

$$L = P + Q$$

where L is learning, P is programmed knowledge (that is, knowledge in current use) and Q is questioning to create insight.

AL involves exploring real-world problems, developing and implementing solutions, and reflecting on what learning has taken place. It is a form of 'learning by doing'.



Revans developed Action Learning Sets (ALS) as a method for facilitating AL. These involve a small group of people coming together to work on challenging issues they are facing at work – with the group providing a space for questioning, reflection and generation of new ideas.

ALS have been used worldwide in private, public and third sector organisations. The basic ALS formulation has been adapted and varies between practitioners, organisations and countries. This guide describes the typical format most often applied in the UK.

Purpose and benefits of ALS

ALSs are seen as particularly beneficial for people and organisations working in environments which are complex and multi-layered, and where problems can be intractable with no ‘right’ answer. Hence their attraction for those working to support people with multiple needs.

AL initiatives alone may not solve deep systemic problems in organisations and ways of working. However, some of the benefits ascribed to ALS are¹ :

For individuals

- *The opportunity to reflect*
- *Practising the postponement of judgement, providing an opportunity for new connections and answers to arise*
- *Receiving support and challenge in relation to specific issues*
- *Being held accountable for actions and their impact*
- *Setting goals, developing options and taking action that would not have been possible working on their own*
- *Learning to listen carefully, ask powerful questions and offer ideas, without telling others what to do*
- *Learning about group dynamics and how to contribute effectively within a group.*

For organisations

- *Staff who can listen to, and work with, others*
- *People who take responsibility for their actions and the impact of those actions*
- *New perspectives on real issues - often leading to breakthroughs on long-standing issues*
- *Enhanced confidence to bring about change*

¹ Source: <http://ifal.org.uk/action-learning/>



- *Greater self-awareness among staff*
- *A clearer understanding of how learning occurs*
- *Staff have reduced stress levels*

In addition, ALSs create contact networks and can form the basis of ongoing [communities of practice](#) well beyond the life of the set.

What does an action learning set involve?

A group of people (usually between five and eight) initially with a facilitator, meet regularly (for example, every two months) for an agreed period (for example, over 12 months). The set meetings are likely to require time commitment of at least half a day.

At each meeting, a typical format will be:

- *The facilitator might remind set members of principles of ALSs and ground rules (see below).*
- *Each set member reports briefly on progress against agreed actions since the previous meeting.*
- *Set members then choose who will speak in more depth about a particular situation they are currently facing. A presenter will be typically allocated around an hour.*
- *The presenter describes the situation, problem or challenge (uninterrupted).*
- *The other set members will then ask questions of clarification, moving into reflective and analytical questions and, towards the end of the allocated time, questions about future action. Set members do not give advice, tell anecdotes, pass judgement or talk about their own situation – they stay focussed on the presenter.*
- *The set helps the presenter review their options and decide on action.*
- *The presenter feeds back on how they experienced the process and what learning may have taken place.*
- *Group members may also comment on their observations and learning on both the process and content.*
- *The process will be repeated for the next presenter (the number of presenters depending on the time available to the set).*
- *The next meeting is arranged.*

ALS principles

To assist the effective operation of the set, certain principles need to be adopted. These include:

- *Committing time. It is important that set members, and their organisations, commit to setting aside the time required to attend the ALS and prioritise this commitment over other work pressures.*



- *Working on real issues which are current and actionable.*
- *Learning to question. The Action Learning Cycle follows the process of reflecting, learning, planning, action, then back to reflecting. This provides a useful framework to guide the type and sequence of questions. Questions are likely to flow from clarification of the experience and issue being described, through reflection and then deeper analysis of that issue - looking at it from different angles and possibly re-framing the original problem. Following this cycle ensures that participants avoid the common pitfall of jumping from problem to solution without investigation of the underlying causes.*
- *Learning to listen. Set members need to listen carefully to what is being said, and avoid the temptation of giving advice or making judgements – so that the presenter can come up with their own solutions*
- *Giving individuals airtime. The set decides who will present their issues, and will then spend around an hour exploring the presenter’s issue in depth.*
- *Equality of set members. Generally, it is best to avoid having set members with line management relationships, as this can bring in real or perceived inequalities.*
- *Individuals take ownership of their own learning.*
- *Allowing time for reflection and feedback.*
- *Behaving with respect towards fellow set members and respecting any confidentiality shared within the set.*

Some practical considerations

When planning an ALS, there are some key questions which need to be considered.

Set membership: Will the set bring together people from a variety of organisations working on similar issues or from one organisation? Will the members be a similar level of seniority (for example, all in leadership roles) or would a mix be more beneficial for generation of new ideas?

Commitment: Are all individuals and organisations taking part committed to prioritising the time required for ALS, and will they safeguard that time even when other urgent issues emerge?

Briefing set members: Set members will need to be clear in advance of what is expected of them, and will wish to consider what issues to bring to the set. It may be that the membership of the set will suggest certain topics (for example, if a set is made up of evaluation professionals, they are likely to wish to discuss evaluation issues rather than more generic management challenges). Whatever the make-up of the set, the types of issue brought to the set are usually: significant, difficult, actionable within a reasonable timescale by the set member and open to challenge (by both the individual and organisation).

Facilitation: Not all ALSs are facilitated. However, in the early meetings of an ALS an experienced facilitator can add considerable value to a set as the members adjust to what may be a very different



way of working and interacting than they are used to. The facilitator helps in ensuring that set members comply with the principles of an ALS, particularly the approach taken to listening and questioning; they can also act as timekeepers and ensure questioning progresses and moves to action when required.

Online/face-to-face: ALSs have traditionally been held face-to-face. However, in recent years, many organisations have started to develop online approaches to action learning, including virtual action learning sets. A virtual set has the obvious advantage of reducing the time and cost of travelling – and research suggests that virtual environments can be very effectively used for knowledge exchange. Nevertheless, online interaction presents a number of challenges which need to be borne in mind if going down the virtual ALS route:

- *Technical: you will need to decide on which system to use (for example, Google hangouts, skype, WebEx, Adobe Connect, GoToMeeting) and ensure members are able to download the appropriate software/register in advance. Members may need technical support, and a practice session to get everybody familiar with the software before the first meeting is advisable.*
- *Equipment: members will need a quiet area and internet access (often a fixed link will work better than wifi). Headsets with microphones will give a better sound quality than relying on inbuilt microphones on computers.*
- *In a virtual environment it is harder to get important cues from the body language of participants. This can make it more difficult to convey feelings, develop empathy and build trust. Listening skills are of paramount importance, as is a facilitation style which provides sufficient verbal cues to aid participation.*
- *Fully participating in an online discussion demands the full attention of set members. However, when online, it is tempting to multitask and carry out activities such as checking email. Set members need to agree to switch off phones, emails etc. during the course of the set.*
- *Face-to-face sets typically last for half a day – most people would struggle to maintain concentration for this amount of time online – so, the format used has to be shorter and incorporate breaks.*
- *Some of the benefits of ALS are gained through the interactions which take place away from the formal set meeting, such as conversations over the coffee break. In a virtual set it helps to establish other ways in which members can interact beyond the formal set, such as discussion fora, social media and facilities for sharing documents.*

Resources and further sources of information

Books

Pedlar M, 2012, Action Learning for Managers, Gower

Pedlar M & Abbott C, 2013, Facilitating Action Learning: A Practitioner's Guide, Open University Press



Revans R, 2011, ABC of Action Learning, Gower

Weinstein K, 1999, Action Learning: a practical guide, Gower

Websites

International Foundation for Action Learning www.ifal.org.uk

Bond guidance note on action learning (produced in 2004, primarily for UK NGOs)

<http://www.bond.org.uk/data/files/resources/463/No-5.1-Action-Learning-Sets.pdf>

Action Learning Associates (consultancy specialising in action learning and virtual action learning)

<http://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/>

