Action Learning: an introduction

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Agenda

- Context
- LF approach to Leadership Development
- What is Action Learning?
- Underpinning propositions
- Values underpinning Action learning
- Structure of meetings
- Effective questioning

Context

- Action Learning is a method of learning appropriate for senior leaders
- Useful for understanding novel problems
- Good for providing support for leaders
- Will be used during the programme to apply learning to institutional situations
- Can be used afterwards to support the development of autonomous operation

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The LF Approach to Leadership Development

- A strong commitment to the importance of distributed leadership
- The critical importance of diagnosis and analysis
- The vital role of self-insight and structured feedback
- Focus on applied leadership
- The role of focused research to inform development activities – authority and evidence
- The need for both 'challenge' and 'support' in all interventions
- The value of HE specific leadership insights and the benefit of external perspectives

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Action Learning

- First used by Reg Revans,
  - physicist from Cambridge University Cavendish Lab
  - worked with 8 Nobel Prize winners 1928
  - Met weekly to 'to see if they could understand their own difficulties'
  - Learn from one another
- Essence of action learning:
  - *a group of peers, each seeking to bring about some change in the world, who meet regularly to discuss where they are each experiencing difficulty and then testing in action the ideas arising from that discussion.*
- used extensively in Leadership Foundation programmes in the UK, including the Top Management Programme.

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Underpinning Propositions

- Management learning and development is about

  developing the ability to get something done rather than developing the ability to talk about getting something done.
- It is about moving from diagnosis and analysis to experimentation, action and implementation.
- Two basic components of learning are P and Q where:
  - P is '*propositional knowledge*', already set out in books or known to expert authorities, and
  - Q is '*questioning insight*', the capacity to identify illuminating questions and fresh lines of enquiry.

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Underpinning propositions (continued)

- Lasting behavioral change is more likely to follow the reinterpretation of past experience than the acquisition of fresh knowledge (i.e. from Q rather than from more P).

- In a context of rapid change today's problems tend to be different to yesterday's problems. P, propositional knowledge, is the product of solving yesterday's problems.

Values underpinning Action Learning

- The ultimate purpose of learning is to make a difference.
- Learning is on-going throughout life.
- AL is about learning from action – and action informed by learning.
- Responsibility and pro-activity are key to its success.
- Support *and* challenge of peers is an essential element of the process.

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Structure of meetings 1

- *Confidentiality*
  - Meetings
  - Discussion of meetings
  - Sources of information
  - Institutions
  - 'Chatham House Rules'
  - (unless express permission has been given)
- *Structure of Meeting*
  - All members have equal time
  - Use one-third of the time to outline the issue and the remainder for discussion.
  - Agree actions and circulate notes

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Structure of meetings 2

- *Approach*
  - Be sensitive to others' approaches to problem solving
  - Seek to assist to resolve the dilemma/deal with the problem, rather than advise on a solution (unless invited to do so).
  - Respect the right of the presenter to limit their level of disclosure.
  - Actively contribute to the meetings and allow each person in the group to contribute.
  - The tone of each meeting should aim to be open and supportive.
- *Logistics*
  - Each group will decide on an appropriate level of note taking to record specific actions arising from each session.
  - *Agreed actions become the focus of the next meeting*
- *Other issues?*

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Selection of Project

- Real management issue, problem or challenge
- Strategic
- Suitable level and size
- Should significantly contribute to achievement

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When selecting a project ask to what extent will it:

- Lead to personal learning and professional development?
- Be substantive and stretching i.e. not something to which the answer is more or less already known?
- Bring about some desirable change in the organisation, or more widely?
- Involve action in bringing about change?
- Be of value to the institution and/or the sector more widely?
- Focus on a significant strategic theme AND be capable of completion (or at least capable of some clear outcomes/milestones) within the timeframe for the programme?
- Be capable of presentation internally within the institution or more widely?

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Questions to guide initial presentation of projects

- What is the project, including its scale and scope?
- Why is this project important to you/the institution?
- What is the relationship between the way things are now and how you would like/need them to be?
- How will you know when you are being successful?
- What do you see as the biggest obstacle to a successful outcome?
- What do you want from your action learning group?
- Why is this important?

Questioning techniques

- Listen actively
- Ask open questions

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Questions for Problem Solving 1

- What would make the situation **better?**
- What do you **want?** What else?
- How do you **feel** about the situation?
- What is **most important** to you in this situation?
- How do you **want to feel** about this situation?
- What **assumptions** are you making about **the situation**?
- What **assumptions** are you making **about someone else** in this situation?
- What could be the cost to you of **not solving** this problem?
- What does your response to this situation **tell you** about yourself?
- **How** do you know this?

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Questions for Problem Solving 2

- What could you **do differently?** Where could get help to **improve** this situation?
- What is **positive** about the situation?
- What is the most **radical** thing you could do?
- What is the **simplest** thing you could do?
- What **don't you know** about the situation?
- What is the relationship between how things **are now & how you want them to be?**
- What about this situation would you **most like to change?**
- What would you like **someone else** to do differently?
- How does this situation **affect you personally**?
- Can you **explain** that further?

Questions for Problem Solving 3

- If you get what you want what will this achieve **for you**?
- What do you need to **do first?**
- What is **stopping you?**
- What do you want **instead?**
- What will happen if you are **not successful** in getting what you want?
- Why do you believe what you want is **reasonable?**
- Why do you believe what you want has **value?**
- Why are you the **best person** to be doing what you are thinking of doing?
- What about this situation causes you most **anxiety or distress**?
- If you are **successful** how will you **feel**?

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Reflections on learning

- What have you learnt about
  - your project? - your colleagues?
  - your organisation? - yourself?
  - leadership and management in your 'time' in the Group meeting?
- What have other members learnt about leadership and management from the Group meeting discussions?
- What could be done to make the operation of the Group more effective?
- Reflections on norms and dynamics
  - What might you find it hard to talk about in the Group?
  - What might we be avoiding discussing in the Group? Why?

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Use of Action Learning

- The technique (or aspects of it) can be used in
  - Group discussions in Almaty
  - After the programme – group meetings
  - In your institution