

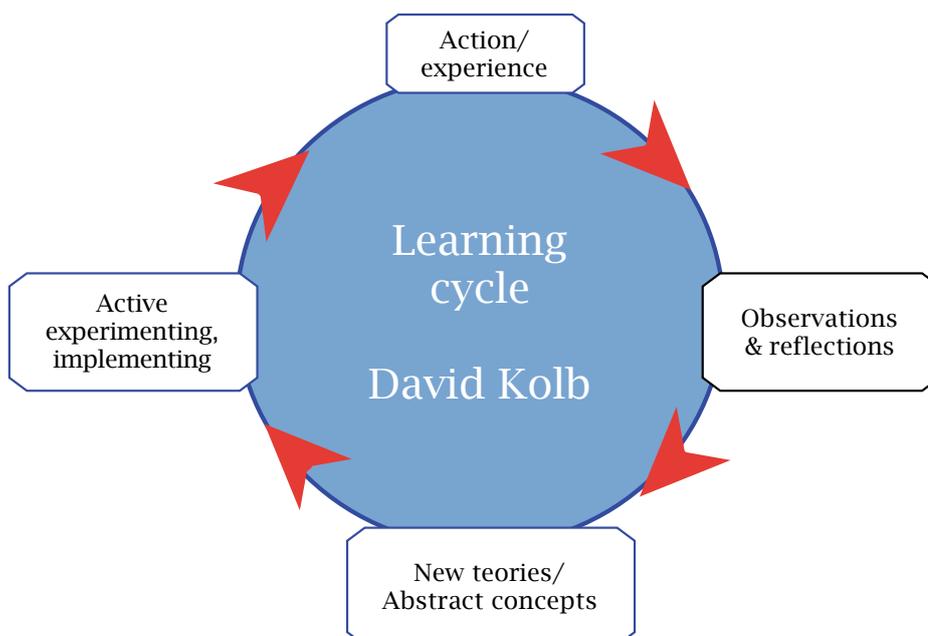
If the goal is to optimise internal and external recruitment you have to make use of the company's potential early on in the process of identifying, selecting and developing the employees. To develop your employees in the most optimal way you need an effective learning process. Action Learning is a method based on dialogue and it has proven to be an extremely effective tool to achieve this kind of goal.

Introduction to Action Learning

It is not easy to face – but many surveys of this subject find that we learn almost nothing attending a course in a classroom setting for one, two or maybe three days. It's important to notice the fact that what we call 'formal' learning processes only constitute about 10 to 20 percent of what we actually learn. And of these 10 to 20 percent we only remember about 1 percent. Research shows that only 1 percent of all improved performances is achieved through formal learning processes. At best we gain much knowledge – but does it lead to real improvements for the company? How effective is the learning if we test the participants a few weeks later? How come we don't get the results we are hoping for when we attend a course ourselves or send our employees?

Learning cycle

The answer to these questions may lie in the theories of learning by David Kolb from the 1980's. Kolb's theory of the learning cycle implies that we have to go through a four step learning cycle in order to learn: Experience -> Reflection -> Abstract conceptualising -> Active experimenting. It is not so important where we begin. What count's for the learning process is that we complete the whole cycle.



Most courses focus on abstract conceptualising. We learn about what we can or should do in different job situations. Some courses give the opportunity of limited experimenting in the classroom, but it is always an artificial working environment – a hypothetical situation – far from real life situations. In other courses we might have the opportunity to reflect and think about our own situation. Action Learning processes go through the whole cycle because the participants try out situations in practice on their job during the course (Active experimenting/implementing).

In a classical course setting it is implied that we have to go home and practice (Active experimenting). In this way we get new experiences that we should reflect upon and see in connection to what we learned etc. The problem is that we don't act this way. We may enthusiastically tell about our experiences to a few colleagues but then quickly return to the daily routine. We don't really change the way we do things.

The philosophy of Action Learning

Action learning is an educational process where the participants study their own actions and experiences to improve performance. This is done in conjunction with others, in small groups called Action Learning sets. It is proposed as particularly suitable for adults because it enables each person to reflect on and review the action they have taken and the learning points arising. This should then guide future action and improve performance.

An unconventional method

The method stands in contrast with the traditional teaching methods that focus on the presentation of knowledge and skills. Action Learning focuses on research into action taken and knowledge emerges as a result that should lead to the improvement of skills and performance. Action Learning shifts the focus from the teacher to the learner.

Theory developed by Reginald Revans

Professor Reginald Revans, the originator of Action Learning, died aged 95 in January 2003. He had invented and developed this method in the UK in the 1940s, working in the Coal Board and later in hospitals where he concluded that the conventional instructional methods were largely ineffective. The starting point is the awareness of relevant knowledge. People have to be aware of their lack of relevant knowledge and be prepared to explore the area of their ignorance with suitable questions and help from other people in similar positions – to learn effectively.

'Embedded knowledge' doesn't lead to permanent changes

According to Revans' theory we learn most by working with real life problems in situations where we receive an immediate and clear response on our decisions and preferably in association with other people in a similar situation. Because why should we use so much energy on reading 790 pages about a given theory if we don't exactly need it in that very moment. There's a risk that the knowledge that comes from this reading gets 'embedded', and often it doesn't lead to real improvements in the job situation.

New problems call for new solutions

"...it is neither books nor seminars from which managers learn much, but from here – and – now exchanges about the operational job in hand"

Reg Revans

The other reason why Action Learning is so effective is the experience that you can't solve new problems with 'old' knowledge. Most challenges and problems we meet in our jobs happen as a result of a world that is rapidly changing. A leader's job can't be viewed as a puzzle with only one right way to put the pieces together. In a complex world – with constantly changing variables – there are many ways to solve today's problems. These solutions are rarely written down in an answer book. You find the solutions by constantly generating new knowledge.

New knowledge comes from asking questions

We create new knowledge by looking at existing knowledge and ask critical questions. If this happens in a setting of groups of 3-5 persons we have the opportunity to be an inspiration to each other and thereby reach solutions that we had not thought of before. Sounds a little too simple? Maybe – but simple solutions does not leave out great effects. On the contrary. The most spectacular example we have seen in this connection is Giga Healthcare Systems in USA where Dr. Gay Jarret as a part of an Action Learning project documented and implemented new purchase processes that lead to savings up to 250 million dollars per year!

Another person, famous for his extraordinary results, was Jack Welch, who is also firmly convinced about the effects of using Action Learning.

"An organisation's ability to learn and translate that learning into action rapidly is the ultimate competitive advantage"

Jack Welch

A world wide recognised theory

Although Q is the cornerstone of the method, a more relaxed formulation of the method has enabled Action Learning to become widely accepted in many countries all over the world.

In Revans' book there are examples from the USA, Canada, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia Pacific.

Important distinctions

Revans distinguished between theoretical puzzles and real problems, noting that Action Learning is capable of solving real problems, e.g. improving productivity or morale rather than theoretical puzzles e.g. constructing a balance sheet. He also noted (from his experience working with Nobel Prize winning scientists at University of Cambridge) that there was a distinction between cleverness (i.e. knowledge) and wisdom, which showed in the form of insightful questioning. He showed that much powerful learning comes from people learning 'with and from others', hence many action learning programmes put the 'action learning set' at the heart of the process.

Other key writers on the subject

In the UK key writers on the subject have been Mike Pedler and Alan Mumford and in the USA Michael Marquardt and Joe Raelin. Revans achieved major honours in Belgium where he linked higher education with industry achieving major results that had an impact on national economic recovery. Revans' theory of Action Learning was cited by Stuart Cramer as one of the 75 Greatest Management Decisions Ever Made in his book of the same title.

The Key Elements of Action Learning

A development process based on Action Learning has the following key elements:

- Is collectively useful for the whole group of employees and at the same time useful seen in context of the individual employee.
- Creates an authentic environment for growth and development – an informal learning process.
- Initiates a specific and ongoing learning process that shifts the focus from urgent-and-important to important-not urgent.
- Supports a strong network, sharing of knowledge throughout the organisation and a geographical spreading of the communication.
- Make use of the presence of highly qualified resources to solve important problems.

Specific and real learning

Action Learning initiates a developmental process that supports the employees in focusing on questions/problems that is important to solve – but not urgent. A one-sided focus on urgent matters leads in the long run to firefighting as the dominant way of solving problems. With constant firefighting we are not able to learn. We use the tools, methods and knowledge that we have learned throughout our lives – we do the thing we know how to do. It is basic knowledge – the kind of knowledge that we don't question. In this way we often reach solutions that don't really solve the problem – instead we just postpone the matter indefinitely. But we can be sure that it will return if we don't deal with the core of the problem.

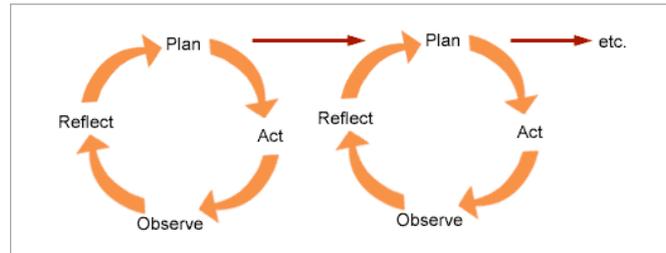
Studying the problems in depth

When we shift our focus to “important – but not urgent” we are able to learn and begin to do things in a different way. We can thereby study the problem in depth and work with different ways of solving problems. When we choose a solution by taking our time to do it thoroughly there is a good chance that we actually solve the problem without creating new problems for ourselves at the same time.

When we choose this perspective on problem solving we are able to learn, gain knowledge and put new tools and methods into practice when we are facing problems. In this way we develop our capabilities and know how. Action Learning supports the employees in developing the ability to shift focus to “important – but not urgent” concerning the problems that occur in the organisation. This is the key to achieve very effective learning and development.

Action Learning is informal learning

Jay Cross, author of “Informal Learning” makes the following pertinent points about formal versus informal learning: “Workers who know more get more accomplished. People who are well connected make greater contributions. The workers who create the most value are those who know the right people, the right stuff and the right things to do.”



Formal learning is like putting everyone on a bus. A great solution if your goal is to get everyone to exactly the same place at the same pace and at the same time. Informal learning is like riding a bike. The route, speed and direction is adjusted to fit the needs of each person – and then there is also time to take a break, reflect or even lend a hand to other learners if needed.

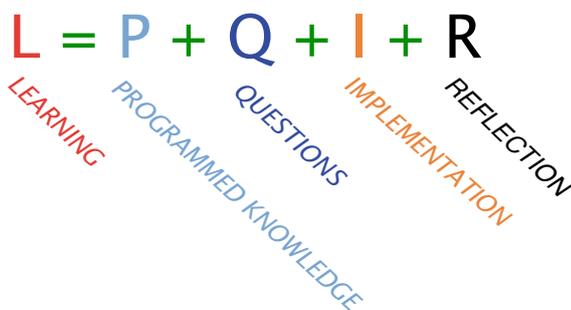
Learning to learn – at work

At work we learn more in the break than in the classroom. Here we discover how to do our jobs through informal learning by observing others, asking the person in the next cubicle, calling the help desk, trial and error and simply working with people in the now. Informal learning is effective because it is personal. The individual calls the shots. The learner is responsible. It’s real. And it is very different from formal learning, which is imposed by someone else. People are pulled to informal learning; formal learning is pushed at them.

Action Learning – a well proven method for optimising informal learning

Based on the above, Action Learning reinforces informal learning in a conscious way, puts it into a common and well structured format and enables the individual to utilise the process to grow in the direction and with the pace that is optimal for him/her. When the goal is to develop individuals for their individual career in a common framework, action-learning is an optimal process and supporting structure.

The formula of Action Learning – asking questions to create insight



Revans made it clear in the opening chapter of his book (Revans, 1980) which describes the formula: $L = P + Q$. L is learning, P is programmed (traditional) knowledge and Q is questioning to create insight.

Q uses 4 “major” questions:

- Where
- Who
- When
- What

And three “minor” questions:

- Why
- How many
- How much?

The basic setting for an effective Action Learning environment

To make Action Learning processes function optimally the following key elements have to be present in the learning environment:

- **Problem/question**

Every participant needs to formulate a problem or a ‘question’ that is of interest to the organisation as well.

- **Sets/group**

The term ‘set’ is a key term in Action Learning as a term for the group of participants. An Action Learning group consists of typically 20-40 persons. Every set is divided into smaller groups – subsets – which typically consists of 5-7 participants. The major part of the learning process takes place in the subsets. The major set typically meets occasionally – every 6-8 weeks – and the subsets meet in between those meetings.

- **Question technique**

Important in the Action Learning course is the art of asking good questions. The subsets support each other in the individual problem solving and learning process by using question techniques that enhance reflection and dialogue between the participants.

- **Reflection**

To make learning take place during the Action Learning course there has to be time to reflection. It’s important that the teachers make sure that there is continuous reflection and documentation of these reflections in the groups. That is why the participants are going to write down their reflections in a so called ‘learning log’ that functions as a personal journal of the Action Learning course.

- **Teacher**

The teacher’s role is to be a coach or facilitator for the group. He or she supports the participants in working with Action Learning by guiding the participants in the question techniques and constantly supporting them to reflect upon the whole process and write down their experiences.