An Introduction to Action Learning for Partnerships Tackling Child Exploitation

Action Learning is a group process of insightful questioning and reflective listening. It is a structured, strengths based conversation in which peers help their colleagues see different perspectives on a real work issue. It is based on the view that people are more likely to act on ideas that they have come up with themselves, and that adults learn by reflection on action.

Action Learning is an approach that is particularly useful for situations that are novel and emerging, where past experiences are not sufficient to guide current action, and for groups where a variety of perspectives can help inform the way forward. As such it should be of value to those seeking to tackle child exploitation in local areas.

This resource includes an introduction to Action Learning, describing its origins and processes, a longer reflection on why it fits with the ethos and approach of the Tackling Child Exploitation Programme, and some suggestions for further reading, including relevant case studies.

Members of the Tackling Child Exploitation team were trained in Action Learning by Action Learning Associates. The material is shared in order to encourage the growth and development of action learning. It is a breach of their copyright to use this material for commercial gain.

More information, resources and training opportunities can be found on the Action Learning Associates website https://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/.

An Introduction to Action Learning for Partnerships Tackling Child Exploitation

In this resource:

- Credits – Action Learning Associates
- Origins & Background to Action Learning
- The process of Action Learning
- Questions – the key resource
- Application to Tackling Child Exploitation
- Case Studies
- Further Reading

"Action Learning is an approach to the development of people in organisations which takes the task as the vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning.

The method has three main components: people who accept responsibility for taking action on a particular issue; problems, or the task that people set themselves; and a set of six or so colleagues who support and challenge each other to make progress on problems. Action Learning implies both self-development and organisation development." Mike Pedler (1991).

Credits

Members of the Tackling Child Exploitation team were trained in Action Learning by Action Learning Associates, and this document draws on their resources and insight. This material is shared in order to encourage the growth and development of action learning. It is a breach of their copyright to use this material for commercial gain.

More information, resources and training opportunities can be found on their website https://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/.

Origins & Background to Action Learning

Action Learning as a specific process was developed by Reg Revans, who was working in the Coal Board. His objectives were to:

- make useful progress upon the real treatment of some problems or opportunities in the real world
- help managers learn how to approach complex and new problems in the future.

The core principles of Action Learning are

- L= P+Q (Learning comes from programmed knowledge plus questioning insight).
- Participants are peers and "comrades in adversity"
- Questions help the presenter to reflect on their own situation and identify their own actions

It is based on a development of Kolb's learning cycle – ie that one learns from experience. In Action Learning your colleagues are using their experience to help you learn.
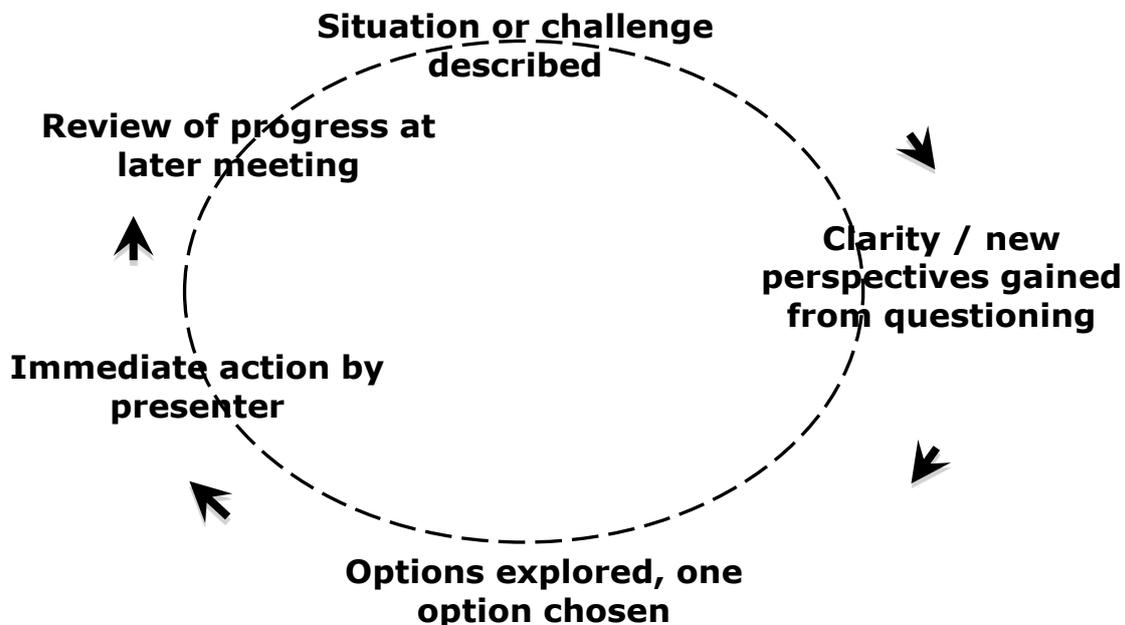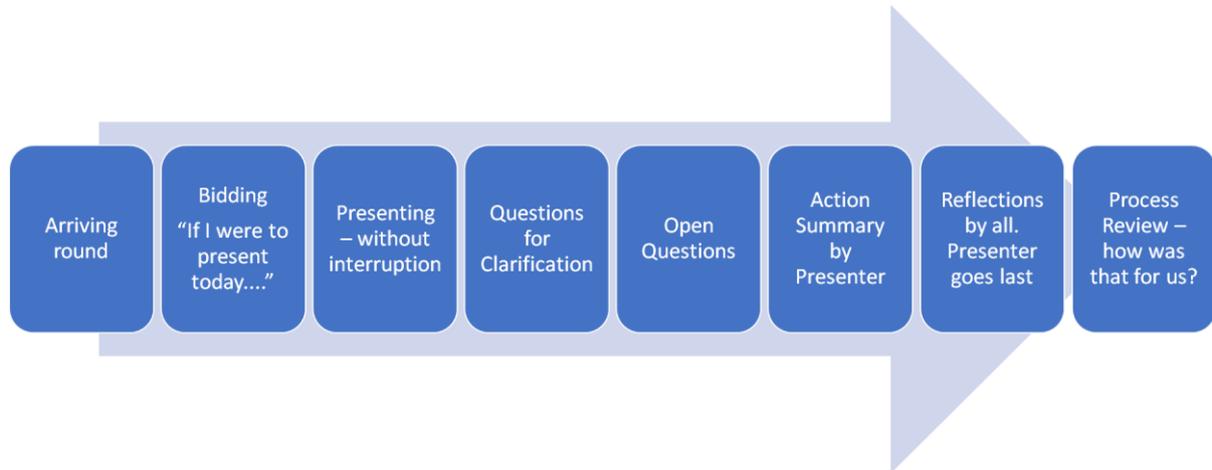

The process of Action Learning

An Action Learning Set is a group of 6-8 people who meet regularly to help each other to learn from their experiences. A facilitator helps to manage the process. The set is not a team since its focus is on the actions of the individuals within it rather than on a shared set of work objectives.

A typical Action Learning Programme would be established as follows:

- Six to eight peers meet regularly in a "set" for an agreed number of meetings (usually five or six over a year)
- The meetings are spaced to allow action to be taken between each meeting
- At each meeting, two or three people present an issue
- At a future set meeting, the presenters update on how they have taken forward their actions.

In each Action Learning Set session the same seven step process is followed (see below). The presenter has 5-10 minutes to describe the issue, and following a few minutes for clarification questions, the heart of the session is the asking of open questions by fellow set members. These questions are designed to help the presenter reflect on the issue and identify actions.

Arriving round → Bidding "If I were to present today...." → Presenting – without interruption → Questions for Clarification → Open Questions → Action Summary by Presenter → Reflections by all. Presenter goes last → Process Review – how was that for us?

Questions – the key resource

The key resource in a successful Action Learning Set is the use of good questions. Good questions are open, and enable the presenter to think differently about their issue. Importantly, a good action learning question is asked to benefit the presenter, not to display your own cleverness (unlike many questions we hear asked in Conferences and Seminars!). There are plenty of examples of good action learning questions on the internet, but here are a few that are consistently useful:

- What does success look like?
- Who are your allies in this issue?
- What's the worst thing that could happen?
- How do you feel?
- How do you think they [the other person/group] feels?
- What are your options?
- Where could you start on this issue?
- What assumptions are you making in this situation?
- What metaphor could you use to describe the situation?

Application in Tackling Child Exploitation

Action Learning as an approach fits with the ethos, values and approach of the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Support Programme, and can support local strategic partnerships in their work to tackle child exploitation and reduce extra-familial harm.

Strengths Based: Action Learning is an explicitly strengths-based approach. It starts from the premise that I, as the person with the issue, am best placed to identify a solution to it, and that we, as a group of peers, are able to help you do that, by our questions. It puts all of us in the position of continuous learners and it does away with the distinction between "experts" and "learners". It is non-judgemental.

Recognises Complexity: At the heart of Action Learning is the premise that "programmed knowledge" – that which is taught in Universities, CPD or written in journals - is, by definition, not immediately applicable to the changing and complex issues which today's leaders and managers are

facing. Action Learning creates the safe space in which individuals can reflect on the complexity of their issues, including their emotional responses to them, and identify actionable ways forward.

Action Focused: Action Learning sits in a school of learning approaches based on a belief that adults learn through action, and that action is the best opportunity for learning. It creates a space for reflection on past actions, in order to recognise patterns, and enable different actions to be taken in future. Further, the process explicitly promotes that, as managers, we are responsible for taking action on the issues we raise – that isn't the role of the facilitator, the group or the TCE programme.

Evidence Informed: Although the focus of Action Learning is on reflection and peer support, there is an explicit acknowledgement that evidence and professional knowledge provide a foundation for approaching new issues. The classic formula L=P+Q describes how learning happens when "programmed knowledge" (which includes evidence) is coupled with active and insightful questioning.

Dialogic and Empathetic: The process of Action Learning requires the group to listen to the issue as faced by the presenter, to understand how the presenter perceives the issue, and to focus on what would be helpful for them. It is emphatically not a process in which the group "advises" or "suggests" ways forward.

Recognises Context: Through the presenter's description of the issue as they see it, Action Learning recognises the reality of the complex context in which leaders and managers are operating. It does not extract issues from their context, nor seek to simplify them or codify them. It offers the opportunity to discuss the reality of power relations, "taken for granted" assumptions and institutionalised human behaviours which form part of organisational contexts.

Case Studies

In 2019-20 The Children's Society (TCS) commissioned an Action Learning Programme for staff working in and with its Disrupting Exploitation (DEx) Programme. The DEx programme (grant-funded by The National Lottery Community Fund) works in Birmingham, Greater Manchester and London. Delivery sees youth workers in each geographic area working directly in one to one and group settings with criminally exploited children. Staff also undertake systems change work - identifying changes to local systems that will improve the response to child exploitation more widely.

The objectives of the programme were to support practitioners in putting systems change concepts into practice, and to spread learning about systems change across the Disrupting Exploitation programme and across TCS. A key design feature was that the programme was structured around a live issue which the participants had identified themselves. The programme comprised eight project workers and service managers, and three Head Office staff who were working on systems change, and took place on five one-day sessions over ten months.

Following the L=P+Q approach, each day of the programme involved an short introduction to a particular concept within systems change (such as journey-mapping, or prototyping), a case-study from someone within the group or elsewhere in TCS describing how they'd put the theory into practice, a practical session in which participants tested the ideas, and an Action Learning Set to reflect on issues emerging.

The review of the programme concluded that it

- Provided a structured and supportive framework for practitioners to deliver local systems change and was successful in supporting frontline practitioners to make progress
- Offered a safe cross-organisational space in which people from different parts of the organisation were able to learn and reflect together.

Participants said:

"Being in the same room as others who are going through the same problems with systems change was very helpful."

"Found ALS sessions to be useful and very therapeutic. Help you to think through your problem and think of things you might not have thought of before."

"Helped structure and focus my thought process."

Other Case Studies

The Action Learning Associates website has a selection of case studies of how action learning has been used in different situations. Examples include:

- VCS chief executives working in the same region, focusing on the challenge of delivering operations and achieving system change at the same time: https://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/lankellychase-foundation-2014-15/

- Senior managers within an organisation after a merger, providing a space for managers from both organisations to reflect on how their roles were changing and build a shared culture: https://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/using-action-learning-for-mergers/

- Personal Case Study: A warm account of one person's experience of applying action learning in a Housing Association: https://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/delberth-hemley-my-life-with-action-learning/

- Commissioning in Health & Social Care Case Study: A case study of using Action Learning to support CCGs: https://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/commissioning-in-health-and-social-care-action-learning-as-a-process-to-support-leaders-dealing-with-complexity-and-change-2/

- Action Learning as part of a management development programme, providing space to reflect on the formal and experiential learning of the programme: https://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Ernst-Young-case-study.pdf

- A programme using Action Learning to support a cohort of managers in the same roles across the country in improvement projects that they were leading: https://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/delivering-projects-co-operative-teams-work-better/

Further Reading

Introductory Material

What is Action Learning? Short Video from School of Social Entrepreneurs.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAJ0z_IdZXE

Interview with Reg Revans, the founder of Action Learning. Covers some core principles.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bJ9RXkYPSU

Action Learning Associates: Introduction to Action Learning Video – longer webinar.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AgevSzZYYc&feature=youtu.be

Evaluating Action Learning

http://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Evaluating-AL-ALA-white-paper1.pdf

Background Reading

International Foundation for Action Learning: https://ifal.org.uk/

Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential Learning.* Englewood Cliffs.

Pedler, M., (Ed.). 1991. *Action learning in practice* (2nd ed.). Aldershot: Gower Publishing Ltd.

Pedler, M., Burgoyne, J. & Brook, C. (2005) What has action learning learned to become? *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 2(1), 49–68.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242538375_What_has_action_learning_learned_to_become/link/0deec51d09bb1e4d10000000/download

Revans, R. (2011) *ABC of Action Learning.* Farnham: Gower Publishing, Ltd