

Action Learning

"Action learning is an approach to the development of people in organisations which takes the task as a vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning. On the whole our education system has not been based upon this principle. The method has been pioneered in work organisations and has three main components.

- People who accept responsibility for taking action on a particular issue.
- The rate of learning must be faster than the rate of change.
- You cannot change the system until you change yourself.

It involves participants in a process where each person takes a turn and reflects on,

- What they have been doing lately, and any patterns that are present and the challenges they face.
- Their learning about how they might approach things differently.
- Things they might find particularly difficult to face or deal with.
- Successes they have had and things they are particularly proud of.

The other participants help them to achieve clarity of thought and clear intention, through a process of questioning, and being challenging yet supportive. Typically for example the following might be explored.

By what values am I guided?
And what is blocking their fulfilment?
What can I do against such a blockage?

People experience insight through this process as for many of us our behaviour contradicts our intentions. Often in senior positions it's difficult to express our doubts and uncertainties and we do not take time to reflect. Others will also notice habits and patterns of behaviour we may adopt.

From a group of CEOs in the public sector here are a few realisations,

"I developed quite a good attitude in myself, listening to other people rather than trying to jump in and solve or give the answers.

Which is what I had always tended to do in the environment I was in. I hadn't got the time to bother to listen to the other guy. We had to take action and the best action to take was my action because I hadn't got the time to think about anybody else's.

I hadn't realised how little I actually listen to people who were trying their very best to contribute. I always felt I had listened a hell of a lot to people coming here asking questions and so on. Yet, because I was asking the questions of the bits that I wanted to know I wasn't really giving them an opportunity to contribute. In other words: Answer the question please; I don't want your views on anything else, I just want the question answered. And I think that was the big benefit to me and I think we all tumbled to that at various stages; and once we had tumbled if we asked a question and they went off onto something else, we tended not to say: "Oh, the hell, I don't want to know about that." We let it go. And I think we all found that at different times".

"I think perhaps I would very much like to learn how to deal with those problems identified; how to solve them as well as realising I've got them. I'm not sure I actually found that out at the end of the day. If you like, I'm still struggling with the problem".

"I think one of the values of taking five or six total strangers with no business relationship whatsoever has a lot of merit because you can actually talk fairly openly. We came quite close on a couple of times to falling out.

You get a lot of pretty clear observations as long as you're prepared to open yourself up.

Certainly it did me some good to be in a situation where I wasn't God. You know, your facing problems with people who would actually disagree with you and you would have to accept they have every right to a different view. Whereas there is a danger in a line management situation, that you assume when people disagree with you it's because they are wrong. I don't mean it quite as strongly as that but you can always solve it by rank if you are not careful".