

Centre for Social Work Supervision and Consultancy

What is Action Learning?

At the Centre for Social Work Supervision and Consultancy we use Action Learning as a way of accelerating learning. The method can be applied to any number of different workplaces (and personal) issues and challenges. In Action Learning groups or Work Discussion Groups as we tend to call them at the CSWC participants meet regularly with others in order to explore solutions to real problems and decide on the action they wish to take. We work with the following phases when facilitating Action Learning Sets:

1. Describing the problem as the participant sees it.
2. Receiving contributions from others in the form of questions, suggestions and feedback.
3. Reflecting on the discussion and deciding what action to take.
4. Reporting back on what happened when they took action
5. Reflecting on the problem-solving process and how well it is working

What sort of problems do members discuss in our Work Discussion Groups or Action Learning Sets?

We use Action Learning Sets in workplaces, to discuss work-related issues. Members may have a wide ranging agenda or they may work on quite specific issues, like the development of new skills or the progress of a particular project. Action learning Sets are used as part of our management and leadership development programmes. Members have a forum in which to work on implementing skills learned on the programme.

How do Action Learning Sets operate at the Centre for Social Work Supervision and Consultancy?

When we are working with Action Learning Sets we agree how time will be used; normally each member has a turn every meeting. Each is accountable to the Action Learning Set for taking action and reporting progress. At the start of the Action Learning Set, members establish a series of ground rules, which might include confidentiality, attendance and listening while others are speaking.

Depending on Action Learning Set size, meetings may be from half a day to one day duration. The life of the Action Learning Set can vary and some Action Learning Sets meet for a limited time: say once a month for 6 sessions. Others meet for a year or more, depending on the type of work they are doing. Often our Action Learning Sets are integrated into formal training programmes – we call

Centre for Social Work Supervision and Consultancy

these Work Discussion Groups but they operate on the classical model of Action Learning.

When facilitating Action Learning Sets we work with the notion that internal processes are important as well as the results of our actions and it isn't just actions outside the Set which are relevant to learning. Part of the discussion during Set meetings is about how well the Action Learning Set works together.

Our model is that **TAKING ACTION** is crucial and the only real learning comes from doing something and then reflecting on the outcome. Set members are encouraged to be supportive and challenging one another to think - and do - outside the box.

- Participants are learning all the time whatever their role in the Set: presenter, questioner, active listener or reflector.
- We believe that the Action Learning Set facilitator's role is to provide guidance on the theory and practice of Action Learning as the Set works – so members learn by being in the Action Learning Set.
- Our facilitators model skills and techniques, like insightful questioning, so that the Action Learning Set can see how they work in practice. The facilitator may also point out aspects of the way the Action Learning Set works and encourage members to reflect on their own behaviours during meetings. Everything is 'grist to the mill in action learning.

We believe that Action Learning is:

- Non-judgmental and values participants own particular mix of experience, abilities, skills and knowledge.
- At the same time it should be challenging, in asking participants to make commitments to the work place and themselves and to the Action Learning Set and in asking to examine how they do things or think about things.
- We believe that Action Learning Sets are a key feature of the 'Learning Organisation' in that they provide a structure in which skills, e.g. in communication, can be continuously reviewed and enhanced. They impart a culture of active learning within an organisation and encourage a culture of questioning and seeking new and better ways to do things.
- We believe and have the experience that the skills learned in the Action Learning Set are eminently transferable, since they are the skills of the 'learning manager'.

Leadership Syndicates

A variation on the classic Action Learning Set design is to introduce other methods for learning and action. This design can be incorporated into an ongoing Action Learning Set. Below is a description of the method.

Centre for Social Work Supervision and Consultancy

The aim of the leadership syndicates is to provide an opportunity to practice process skills. Each member will in turn act as leader, presenter or observer. These are the tasks in each role:-

Presenter

Present an issue or concern about any aspect of your work that focuses on issues arising in your leadership role. Try to be specific - not a general issue, but an event or sequence of events that has a storyline to it; current - not something that is resolved or in the past but that is posing a challenge to you now; and personal - it involves you in your own role in the organisation, not other people.

Leader

Invite the presenter to describe his/her issue or concern, then listen to the story unfolding, without adding your own views or reactions and not giving advice. Listen in particular for emotional and relationship aspects of the issue presented. Restrict any contributions to questions of clarification if you have really not understood something. Try to use open questions to open up the issue as widely as possible, so as to include areas the presenter may not previously have considered e.g. "Tell me about your relationships with your manager?" "How do you think other people feel about this?" or "Can you tell me some more about that?" When appropriate, reflect back - this is, summarise what you have heard, pausing for confirmation from the presenter that you have done this accurately. Use more probing systemic questions as the interview develops to explore other contextual levels and to ask about areas that the presenter has not mentioned. For example, this could be about other people they work with, other departments or external agencies. The observers will be watching for the quality of your listening, reflecting back and questioning skills.

NB: The leader is in charge of managing the time boundaries of the session.

Observers

Observe the developing relationship between the leader and presenter, looking for verbal and non-verbal behaviour to indicate this. Be ready to give feedback to the leader on the quality of listening, reflecting back and questioning skills.

Feedback should be as specific as possible, related to actual observable behaviour and with a positive frame e.g. "Try to do more of" rather than being negative or attacking.

Action Set Facilitator will be observers during the session and then provide input during the feedback process.

Reflecting Team methodology

This is another variation on the classic Action Learning Set design. In the Reflecting Team method (derived from Family Systems therapy) the participant presents their problem to the Action Learning Set. The rest of the Set constitute themselves as the

Centre for Social Work Supervision and Consultancy

reflecting team. After the presentation by the participant the reflecting team hypothesises on the presentation as to what might be happening. The presenter listens to the discussion of the Reflecting Team but does not participate in the discussion and reflects on how this is adding to their ideas as to how to tackle the problem and also understand the dynamic processes. The Action Learning Set then joins with the presenter to hear what ideas the presenter now has following hearing the Reflecting Teams discussion and moves into an action planning phase.

We find that a variation in the design can help the Set remain a dynamic group and gives participants an opportunity to learn in different ways.