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CHAPTER 20

Essentials of Action Learning¹

Reg W. Revans, 1978
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Editorial Introduction

This paper remains remarkably fresh and clearly indicates many of the constraints that must be overcome if one is to have effective competency-oriented education--“education” being a term which, it may be important to remind ourselves, means “developing” or “drawing out”, not “putting in.” The needs (however problematic) to move from “teaching” to “facilitating growth,” to individualise developmental programmes in relation to people’s motives, and to resist the temptation to think that all should master fundamental bodies of knowledge could not be more clear. Reading between the lines, it could not be more apparent why “action learning” has so often been corrupted into its opposite and why authentic versions have invariably been rejected by institutions of higher education.

The assumptions of action learning

Action learning makes the following assumptions:

1. The logical structure (paradigm) of the learning process is assimilated to that of the conscious (quasi-rational) decision and both are assimilated to the scientific method.
2. In consequence, there can be no learning unless the subject receives inputs about its own outputs, or feedback about its performance; to learn anything the subject must see the effects of using the new knowledge. Hence the principle of insufficient mandate “without authority to change one’s ideas about the world one cannot change the world itself”; the distinctions made between research, action, and learning are false.
3. Subjects learn only of their own volition and never at the will of others (unless this is accommodated into the subject’s volition for the time being as a bribe, prize, or incentive) they are not taught by others, but learn “within themselves,” largely by the reorganisation or extension of what they already know.
4. The volition to learn is most readily engendered by the lure of success (in managerial terms, the desire to seize some opportunity) or by the dread of calamity (in the same terms, to solve some problem). Such opportunities and such problems must be “real,” in the sense that they engage the personal value systems of the learners, offering real rewards for success and real penalties for failure. Learning exercises (so called) that do not engage personal value systems may actually prevent subjects from perceiving what

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their own value systems may be, and those who do not know what they finally believe in can never take real decisions about real problems in real time. Such learning exercises (so called) lack authenticity and encourage self-deception.

5. During the efforts to seize such opportunities or to solve such problems subjects may need to be conscious of what they are doing, in the sense of being able to describe their behaviour in words or symbols, what they believe themselves to be doing (such as in defining their objectives) may appear very differently to external observers, and a comparison between two or more different sets of impressions may (by invoking item 2 above) already start the learning process before any visible trial action is taken.
6. In action learning programmes these external observers are *without exception* other action learners, and the action learning set (that is, the cardinal element of action learning) provides that subjects learn with and from each other during the nascent interchanges that both precede and follow trial action in the field of the opportunity or of the problem.
7. The role of the professional teacher in action learning is thus confined to providing (or helping to provide) the conditions in which subjects can learn with and from each other. The learning of the subject derives, on the one hand, from the criticism, advice, and support of the other and equal subjects in the set, and, on the other hand, from the outcome of the real-time action taken upon the real world of the problem or opportunity (except that, from time to time, the teacher may be able to supply the demand of the subjects as they arise from their operational endeavours).
8. Action learning has no syllabus, no texts, and no experts; it will make use of any existing idea (howsoever absurd) since it seeks one goal only: "Can we do what we set out to do, and by what evidence do we know whether we have done it?" In achieving this the utility (validity) of our ideas are automatically tested, precisely as they are in the application of the scientific method.

Implications for Applying Action Learning

Action learning must be specifically adapted for the chosen field of its application, and the following conditions must be observed:

1. Professional practitioners as a class are characterised by their obligation to take responsibility for anticipating and influencing the future; they are supposed to plan ahead and so work in conditions of ignorance, risk, and confusion.
2. Practitioners must, on this account, develop an ability to identify what are likely to be the most fertile questions to ask when nobody around them knows (or can be expected to know) what to do; there is a little evidence to suggest that too great a loyalty to some particular branch of knowledge (or expertise) may inhibit this freedom to choose fresh and unfamiliar lines of enquiry.
3. Since we do not know how to develop the general capacity to identify what may be useful questions in conditions of ignorance, risk, and confusion, we can only proceed empirically, namely, by putting professional practitioners into such conditions to attack real opportunities or problems and to observe the outcome.
4. Such a line of support demands that we accept working under the same conditions as those from whom we expect that support. This leads to our having to adopt certain organisational forms into which our learning processes are to fit; they are described as "the learning community, the project, the set, the induction programme" and so forth; it also means the allocation of specific roles to a variety of participants, such as the steering committee, the sponsors, the clients, the fellows, (perhaps, the coordinators), the set advisers, and, above all, the initiators.
5. Within these conditions imposed by the treatment of real-world tasks, there is some

freedom of design in the project or exercise to develop the general capacity to pose fertile questions in conditions of ignorance, risk, and confusion. Since this is an empirical essay set to particular practitioners to tackle some task about which nobody knows what to do (at least at the outset), there are four options open to the designer:

- (a) a familiar task tackled in a familiar setting (of which the most evident example is the practitioner's own job);
 - (b) a familiar task tackled in an unfamiliar setting (the Hospitals Internal Communications Project exploited this option in exchanging teams to visit each others' places of work);
 - (c) an unfamiliar task in a familiar setting (action learning programmes internal to the same enterprise, such as within GEC, enable those normally employed in one function, say, production, to tackle the opportunities or problems in another, say, personnel or marketing);
 - (d) an unfamiliar task in an unfamiliar setting. The original Inter-university Programme in Belgium was of this nature and continues with minor variations to be so. One variation is that each practitioner works on two tasks in two unfamiliar settings with two fellow colleagues; each fellow is *primo* on his/her "own" project task and *secondo* on the other.
6. Previous experience(which is always being added to) suggests that the fellows (participant-managers) in action learning programmes may be helped by brief preparatory (induction)seminars intended to convey:
- (a) a brief vocabulary of debate thought useful in action learning sets; this emphasises six concepts--decision, information, risk, learning, system, and value;
 - (b) the distinction between diagnosis and therapy in the treatment of tasks; these become the distinction between the design and the negotiation of the decisions or strategy; elementary diagnostic (design) questions are:
 - What are we trying to do?
 - What is stopping us from doing it?
 - What might we be able to do about it?
 Elementary therapeutic (negotiation) questions are:
 - Who knows about this task?
 - Who cares about this task?
 - Who can do anything about this task?
 - (c) the concept of the sequential development of the project, in order to permit the most economical use of the time available to the practitioners in tackling their tasks. there are, it seems, six identifiable stages--analysis, development, procurement (forming the diagnostic phase), assembly, application, and review (forming the therapeutic phase);
7. Action learning programmes are not, in general, intended to tackle puzzles, namely, questions to which an answer may be said to exist even if that answer is difficult to find. Action learning is intended to help to develop the ability to tackle problems or opportunities, for which different persons, all of whom are experienced, intelligent, and motivated, might well advocate different courses of action, all reasonable; it is in the set discussions of such differences that the participants are more clearly aware of their own value systems and of their own obliquities of perception (option 5b) may help with complex puzzles;
8. Action learning sets are not supposed to be psychotherapeutic sessions, dedicated to self-understanding by self-disclosure (although they are bound to contribute to this), nor are they clinics run partly by the participants, partly by a set adviser, to explain to the practitioners their responses to each other in terms of such-and-such models of individual

and group psychology (although they are bound to make each more aware of the impact he/she has upon others . . . at least upon those particular others); there are, it seems, so many models of inter-personal behaviour that it would confuse most sets, if their members were to become aware of how many possible such models are mentioned in the literature. It is preferable for the exchanges between the participants to be confined strictly to the progress of the projects in hand, for which the six questions of 6(b) above provide all the operational discipline necessary for clear thought.