

A guide to an Action Learning Sets by ALS Facilitator Val Theadom

1 What does Action Learning offer?

- The opportunity to learn from good practice, develop new ideas and solutions.
- Problem solving time which gives the opportunity for personal learning and development and insight into how others achieve different solutions.
- Support and challenge from peers.
- Development of individual listening and diagnostic skills.
- Practice and receipt of feedback from peers on their leadership and management skills.
- Challenge assumptions and deepen fundamental understanding of what might be done differently.
- A safe environment to explore strengths and weaknesses.
- Insight, through the group process, into the way individuals relate in a small group, which, in turn, increases understanding of work relationships.
- A group of people who are, for a period of time, mentors for each other.

2 When is Action Learning useful?

- To test out new ways of working.
- To face major challenges.
- To map out ways to deal with a new situation.
- To support organisational development and organisational change.
- To create reflection time for learning.
- When a job or role is changing.

3 What happens when an Action Learning Set meets?

A group of six to eight people working at comparable levels of responsibility meet regularly for a contracted number of meetings, usually five or six.

The action learning set process is as follows:

Arriving round

Every member reports briefly on what has been happening to them

- What has been going on for you since we last met?
- If you presented last time, what action did you take, and any impact?

Bidding Round

Members decide who is going to present something to the group on the day.

- To each member: if I were to present today, I would present on....' and whether they would like to present.
- The group agrees who will present.
- The facilitator ensures that it is not the same presenters at each meeting.

Presenting

The presenter describe their situation/problem/challenge/dilemma/proposal

- The facilitator encourages the presenter to speak for as long as they want.
- People listen without interruption.
- Allow silence as valuable reflection time for presenter.

Questions

Members ask questions designed to assist the presenter to come to a deeper or different understanding and so to be open to new solutions, attitudes and behaviour changes.

- Members ask any clarifying questions first, followed by open questions.
- The facilitator focusses on the presenter, are they comfortable, is it covering the areas they want, is it helping the presenter to formulate actions?
- The facilitator manages timekeeping.

Action

Members assist the presenter to review options and decide on action.

- The presenter identifies the actions.

Note: At a future set meeting, the presenter reports on the action taken.

Reflections

Members reflect back to the presenter on what they have heard and talk about their own individual learning.

- The facilitator and each member offer reflections to the presenter.
- Each person shares their own learning.
- The presenter listens to each person and speaks last.
- The facilitator invites the presenter to reflect on the experience or what they are taking away from the session.

Process Review

Periodically the set reflect on their group process, how they work together and how they could improve their effectiveness.

4 The Set Members are agreeing to the following:

4.1 Contracting Together

- An agreed number of meetings eg 4-6 meetings, then a review.
- Always being present at the meetings.
- Within the session, explain to other members if not intending to return to any future sets.

4.2 Absolute Confidentiality

This means that members agree not to discuss anything that occurs in the set with:

- Anyone outside of the set.
- Anyone in the set, outside of the set meetings.
- The presenter, except at the presenter's instigation.
- The presenter is entirely free to ask for further help and with whom she/he wants.
- If people are happy for their individual membership of the set to be publicly acknowledged.

4.3 Presenters Space and Content

- The presenter can bring a work situation/problem/opportunity/idea to the set.
- The presenter gets as much time as they need to present.
- People listen without interruption and with their whole attention.
- People listen in a non-judgement way.
- People allow silence as a valuable reflection time for the presenter.
- Questions are designed for the presenter (ie that they think will be useful to the presenter)
- The presenter can choose whether or not to answer questions that are put to them.
- Once the facilitator signals the process is at an end, conversation on that topic closes.

4.4 'I' Language

- Set members are assisting the presenter to hear their own story differently.

- Enabling the presenter to use 'I' language means that the presenter is more in touch with the problem, situation and acknowledges both the feelings it generates and their own responsibility.
- Most of us work on assumptions and offer our own view of the world as general truths. We generalise our personal experience (eg 'I know that is how things work')

4.5 Clarifying Questions

- Once the presenter has completed their introduction, set members can ask clarifying questions to get further information which they might need to assist the presenter to explore further.
- Set members might sometimes need to ask further clarifying questions as the session develops.

4.6 Open Questions

- Group members may not give advice or tell stories of their own experience.
- They can only ask open questions. Open questions encourage reflection and are intended to help the individual explore their own thoughts, feelings and experiences.
- They are useful because they offer the presenter the freedom as to the way in which she or he answers.
- An open question imposes minimal structure and direction on the answer.
- When asking questions, it is helpful to continually ask yourselves – am I asking this question in the most open way possible?
- A good open question enables the presenter to listen to themselves talking. They provide an opportunity for the presenter to reflect on their own viewpoint and check on the perceptions or assumptions.

Typical Questions

What result do you want?	What is your biggest difficulty or problem?	How do you feel about this situation?
What could you do differently?	Why can't you do it?	What judgements are you making about this situation/other person?
What learning are you taking from this session?	What are you trying to achieve?	What can you do about it?
What should make the situation better?	How does the situation affect you?	What's the worst thing that might happen?
What's the most extreme measure you could take?	What's the best possible outcome?	When will you start?
What options are open to you now?	What could you start to do differently?	What action are you going to take?
Who could help you?	How important is this to you?	

4.7 Reflections

Once the set has concluded the questions and the presenter has formulated actions, members reflect on the session. Each person speaks once to offer reflections to the presenter and to share their own learning. The presenter just listens and speaks at the end. The facilitator may ask them:

- What are you taking away from this process?
- What action are you going to take?
- What would you like to hear back from set members?

4.8 Process Review

Periodically, the set will review the process; the facilitator will:

- Invite the set to review the 'process' of the session either after each presenter has completed a presentation or at the end of an agreed set.
- The review includes the opportunity to give each other feedback on the quality of questions and/or observations on behaviour and contributions.
- Invites frank feedback from set members on their own performance as facilitator, to further develop their own self awareness and skills.