Chapter 1

Defining action learning: what is it and what is it for?

The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice, and because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change, until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds.

(Ronald Laing)

There are plenty of useful definitions of Action Learning (McGill and Beaty, 1992; Pedler, 1996; Raelin, 2000) but at the core of all of them is the idea that action learning is:

- a method for individual and organization development
- based upon small groups of colleagues meeting over time to tackle real problems or issues in order to get things done; reflecting and learning with and from their experience and from each other as they attempt to change things.

This may seem deceptively simple but it embodies ideas about adult learning and organizational change which are both complex and central to what action learning is about.

ADULT LEARNING

From the world of adult learning come the notions that:

- People learn only when they want to do so, and not when others want them to. In other words, effective learning is self-directed, voluntary, intentional and purposeful. It is an active, not a passive process.
- A great deal of learning is episodic rather than continuous. Learning takes place in short bursts of relatively intensive activity, absorbing the learner's attention. It usually comes to an end when the immediate purpose of learning (the resolving of a problem) has been achieved. People then resort again to a much slower pace of learning before the next such intensive episode occurs, again triggered by a problem which requires resolution.
- We feel the urge to learn when we are faced with difficulties we would like to overcome. We all face work and life problems which provide us with the motivation to learn.

- A major block to learning can be a predisposing mental set formed by previous experience. Everyone needs to realize when their mental set may no longer be valid and may need revising. People learn best when they are able to question the basic assumptions on which their actions are based. Therefore review and reassessment of all experience (knowledge and skills, but also feelings and self-image) is necessary.
- Learning is not only the assimilation of knowledge, but also the recognition of what is already known.
- Recognition and revision requires that people should have support from other people with similar problems. Some of these supporting people must come from different settings to help to stimulate the review process. Most of us are open to learning when we receive helpful and accurate feedback from colleagues who are respected, valued and trusted.
- Learning and the revision of our mental sets is made easier in a safe atmosphere. This security develops from skilful preparation and understanding on the part of the facilitator or set adviser and from the support of co-learners.
- Learning only becomes possible when someone both recognizes the need for change and sees the effects of their actions in working on a real problem. We learn best with and from other people, when addressing together pressing problems to which no-one knows the solution. Learning is always for a purpose – resolving a problem or living in a more satisfying way.
- The role of the facilitator of this process is not to teach, but to design, shape and enable conditions out of which people can help each other to understand their own past personal experience and the resulting mental sets. It is about creating a setting in which we feel secure, and so able to review our mental sets, recognize the need for change and see the impact of our actions on real problems.

This all has a number of practical implications:

1 Most people do not approach any problem situation in an academic fashion. They are not so much concerned with a subject or area as with sorting out their current headache.
2 This means that very few of us undertake the pursuit of learning in any 'systematic' way. Instead, learning is limited to the task or problem in hand. Most people, most of the time, use only those parts of any topic or subject which help them to resolve their immediate problem.
3 Learners do not start with the simple and move to the more difficult. Instead they tackle their problems head on. We can cope with complexity and difficulty from the outset provided we can see they are directly relevant to the learning process.
4 It is much easier to recognize and adapt your ideas when you have other people around you, facing similar problems, with whom you can talk.
5 We are looking for an immediate pay-off. Learning we can apply now, rather than in the future.
6 The result of all this is that there is relatively little interest on the part of most learners in general principles. Few people try to draw general conclusions from particular instances. Once the immediate problem has been resolved the tendency is to store how to cope with that specific situation, rather than to generate longer-term and more general learning from it. So learners need help and support (time, structure) which will help them to develop their learning beyond the most immediate and particular.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

From the organizational change standpoint it is clear that the values, assumptions and beliefs underlying action learning have much in common with organization development (OD). The continuing major text on this field (French and Bell, 1999) identifies a number of assumptions about how organizations work:

- The basic building-blocks of an organization are groups. Therefore the basic units of change are also groups, rather than individuals.
- An important change goal is the reduction of inappropriate conflict between different parts of an organization and the development of more collaborative working.
- Decision-making in successful organizations tends to be located where the information sources are, rather than in a particular role or level of hierarchy.
- Organizations, parts of organizations and individuals continuously manage themselves against goals or objectives.
- One goal of a healthy organization is to develop generally open communication, mutual trust and confidence between and across levels.
- 'People support what they help create.' People affected by a change must be allowed active participation and a sense of ownership in the planning and conduct of the change.

These values can be summed up as trust and respect for the individual, the legitimacy of feelings, open communication, decentralized decision-making, participation and contribution by all organization members, collaboration and co-operation, appropriate uses of power and authentic interpersonal relations.

THE GOALS AND PURPOSES OF ACTION LEARNING

With its roots in adult learning and organizational change it is evident that the goals of action learning are to:

- benefit organizations by addressing perplexing problems that have previously seemed insoluble
- help organizations to use the potential of their staff better
- help individuals to learn with and from others by discussing the difficulties each member of the action learning set experiences while working on an important organizational problem
- benefit individuals by learning how to survive and operate successfully in a complex and confusing world.

Action learning has three mutually reinforcing purposes:

1 To make useful progress on a problem or opportunity in an organization; to make things happen.
2 To help the individual themselves to find out how to deal, in future, with other such ill-defined problems; to help them to learn how to learn.
3 To help those responsible for the development of people in the organization to see their role afresh; that is to help people create the conditions in which they can learn with and from each other in pursuit of a common task. In a practical sense this is the building of a learning organization.

> It is what we think we know already that prevents us from learning.
>
> (Claude Bernard)