ACTION LEARNING FOR MANAGERS
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Action Learning for Managers

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Acknowledgement

I acknowledge the contribution of many people in creating the ideas and materials that form this book. As a powerful approach to personal and organisational development, action learning has been developed over the years by many creative people to produce the methodology with which we work today.

Chief of these is Reg Revans, founder of the idea, who has contributed much to our ideas of what organisational learning might be. To his particular genius and persistence goes the main credit.

This book has its origins in work that I did with John Boutall and others for the National Health Service Training Directorate in 1992. Although the format and contents have been revised and refined several times since then, the aim has remained the same: to be a brief but friendly guide to Revans’ action learning.
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Introduction

Action learning is an approach to problem solving and learning in groups to bring about change in individuals, teams, organisations and systems. Through action learning people develop themselves and build the relationships that help any system to improve its existing operations and to innovate for the future. Action learning is perhaps the most significant form of personal and organisational development to emerge over the past 30 years.

As a way of working and living, action learning is an vital aspect of the learning organisation. Essentially a simple idea, it requires commitment and care to put into practice.

*Action Learning for Managers* is designed to:

- provide a practical introduction to action learning that is friendly, lively and encouraging
- help managers and professionals think through the issues they face and how action learning ideas might help them
- offer practice advice on how to promote action learning in your workplace
How to use this book

The guidance in this book is structured around nine key questions – What is action learning? How does action learning work? and so on. Each question forms the basis for a chapter with three elements:

- An explanation – a response to the title question
- A case example – to illustrate the explanation
- A resource – a questionnaire, checklist or handout to use in action learning activities
1 What is action learning?

In some ways this first question is the most difficult. Reg Revans never gave a one-sentence definition and always maintained that there is no single form or version of action learning. The idea is essentially simple, but, because it is concerned with profound knowledge of oneself and the world, it cannot be communicated as a formula or technique.

Given this proviso, it is possible to describe action learning as it is currently applied in many organisations today. Action learning is an approach to individual and organisational development. Working in small groups known as “sets”, people tackle important organisational issues or problems and learn from their attempts to change things.
Action learning has four main elements:

**Person**

**Problem**

**Set**

*Action* on the problem in the organisation... and *Learning* from this action
Revans makes the essential point that learning and action require each other:

“There is no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning”

Action learning brings people together to exchange, support and challenge each other in action and learning. So:

**first**, each person joins and takes part *voluntarily*. (You can’t be sent or send anyone else (though you might work hard at persuading people!));

**second**, each person must *own* an organisational task, problem or opportunity on which they want to act;

**third**, because we are much more likely to succeed with the help of friends, *sets* or groups of action learners meet to help each other think through the issues, create options, and above all ...  

**fourth**, take *action and learn* from the effects of that action.

There are many small group initiatives in and around organisations that may well be engaging in action and learning in this way. These include “self-help groups”, “support groups”, “learning sets”, “self-development groups”, “productivity improvement meetings”, “quality circles” and so on. It is not important what a group is called; the acid test is whether the people concerned are helping each other to