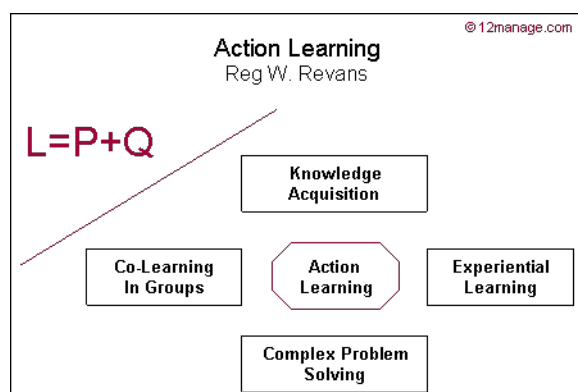# What is Action Learning?

What is action learning?

Action learning is an experiential learning method in which participants learn by doing and then reflecting on what they have done.

There are several varieties of action learning. In most varieties, the participants work on real tasks in small teams (learning sets). As they do so they learn leadership, teamwork, facilitation and additional skills of value to the organisation.

Revans (1998) describes learning as having two components. One part, common in training and education, consists of programmed instruction, where a teacher or instructor provides information to the learner. The other component consists of the understanding that arises when learners use questioning to help each other explore the situations they face; this second component can be referred to as action learning.

$$L = P + Q$$
Learning consists of programmed instruction and questioning

Other forms of action learning, guided by the same principles, are becoming popular in a variety of organisation types. It can be characterised as a project being chosen that is of value to an organisation and requires the application of relevant skills and knowledge. A facilitator guides the learning set as they work through the group project. Variations are possible by modifying any of the following:

- The nature and scope of the project
- The amount of facilitation that takes place
- The way in which reflection is encouraged
- The presence or absence of coaching for participants
- And, the provision of training external to the action learning set.

In practice, each application of action learning is usually a little different, fine-tuned to suit the particular organisation and its aims.
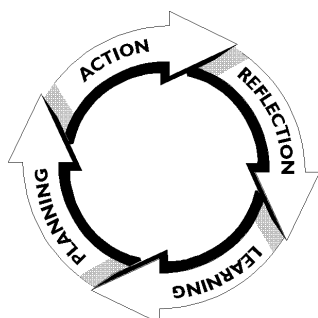
See these YouTube clips for further explanation:

Reg Revans:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLLiUXaQa5Y

Action Learning background and virtual action learning:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2Yrc7gQTps

What is Action Learning?

Why would you choose action learning?

Action learning has the potential to achieve three key sets of outcomes.

- *Skills relevant for organisational flexibility can be enhanced and broadened.* Learning-set members develop facilitation, problem-solving and communication skills. They do so by working as a team on real tasks that require these skills.
- *Important organisational tasks and outcomes can be achieved.* Tasks chosen are beneficial to the organisation, often consisting of projects for which a project team would normally be set up. The projects are sufficiently complex that the team has to engage in collaborative problem solving to achieve an outcome.
- *The participants can begin to seed the organisation with more innovative and flexible people that in turn can lead to cultural change.* There can be a shift in the organisational culture towards a more team-based and collaborative ways of working.

Action learning is effective because it satisfies many of the principles of effective adult development. For example, in action learning programs:

- There is better learning transfer to the job because skills are learned by doing real tasks within the actual organisation, with real consequences.
- Teams are given genuine responsibility. They build critical reflection into their work, monitoring progress towards their goal. The tasks therefore tend to be done well, and teams develop understanding as well as skills.
- The teams can be self-managed within negotiated resource constraints and outcomes. The skills learned are therefore relevant for team leadership.

How do you set up an action learning program?

A typical action learning program would pursue the following process:

1. The existence of support from the top of the organisation is secured
2. The aims of the program are defined
3. The action learning projects chosen are selected as they are considered to be worthwhile and complex enough to be a suitable vehicle for learning the desired skills and attitudes identified for the organisation.
4. The action learning teams are formed ideally of volunteers who together constitute a diverse team.
5. The early team meetings are facilitated in such a way that teams quickly become effective at self management.
6. Teams are encouraged to build regular reflection and review into their work and to consult appropriately with other stakeholders within the organisation.
7. Teams complete their tasks, documenting their learning as they do so.
8. At the end of the program teams report on their experience. This consolidates the learning for participants and the organisation.

What is Action Learning?

What does action learning look like?

Firstly, the action learning program should be moulded to fit the project for which it is being applied. The look and feel of action learning can be described in two parts; the feedback loop model, and the learning set process.

Feedback loop model – also known as double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978)

The 'feedback loop model' describes the structure that needs to be in place to enable effective action learning programs to occur.
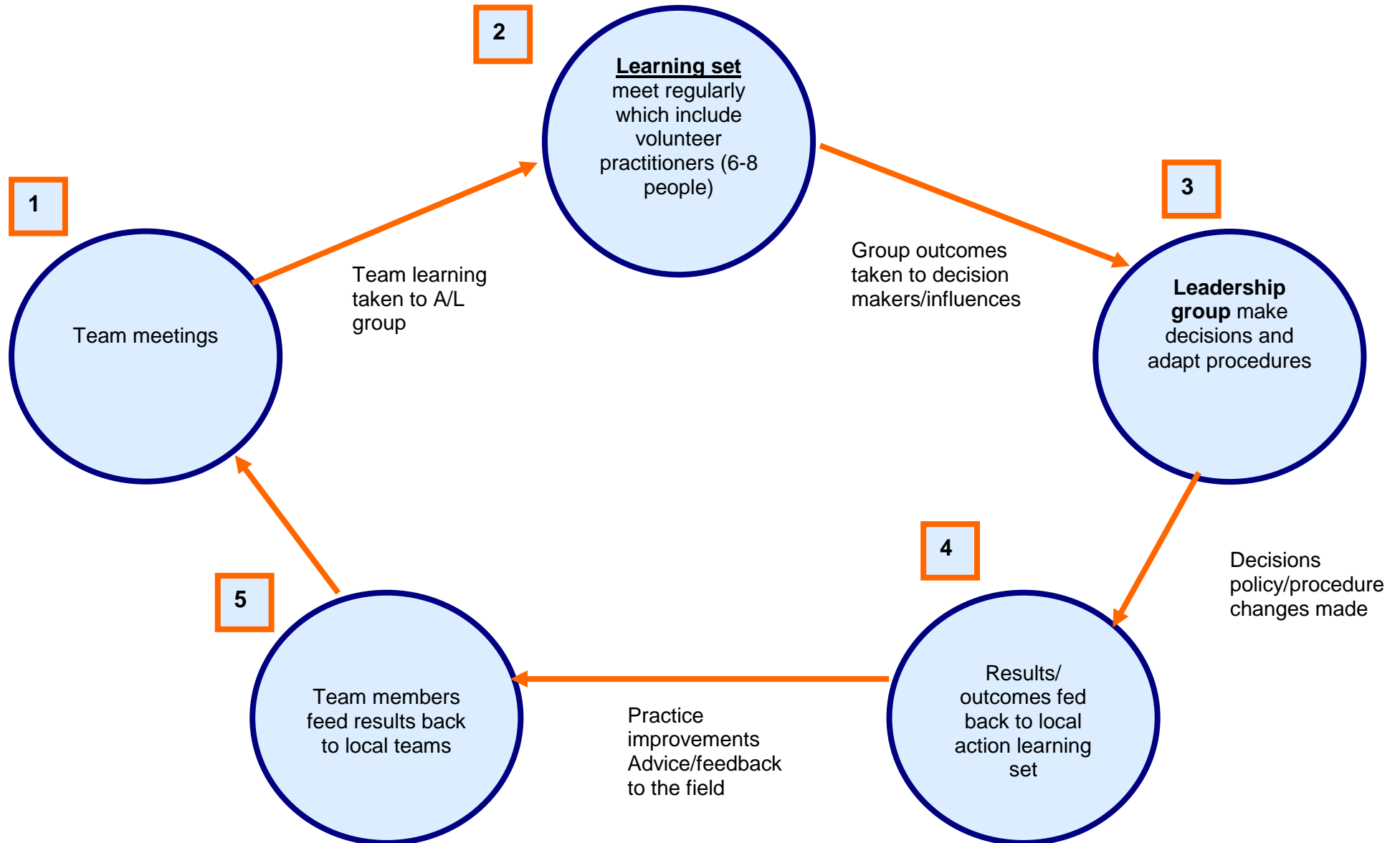
The rationale for a feedback loop model is:
- Consistency of practice
- Providing a forum for staff to input into policy and practice
- Capturing emerging practice
- Developing new approaches to practice
- Documentation and management of emerging practice
- Alignment of practice with policy, systems, procedures and learning
- Allows staff to demonstrate best practice.

See diagram on next page.

What is Action Learning?

FEEDBACK LOOP MODEL

2

Learning set
meet regularly
which include
volunteer
practitioners (6-8
people)

1

Team meetings

Team learning
taken to A/L
group

Group outcomes
taken to decision
makers/influences

3

**Leadership
group** make
decisions and
adapt procedures

4

Decisions
policy/procedure
changes made

Results/
outcomes fed
back to local
action learning
set

5

Team members
feed results back
to local teams

Practice
improvements
Advice/feedback
to the field

What is Action Learning?

The learning set process – *circle "2" in diagram above*
When group members meet they would generally follow a 5-step structured process.
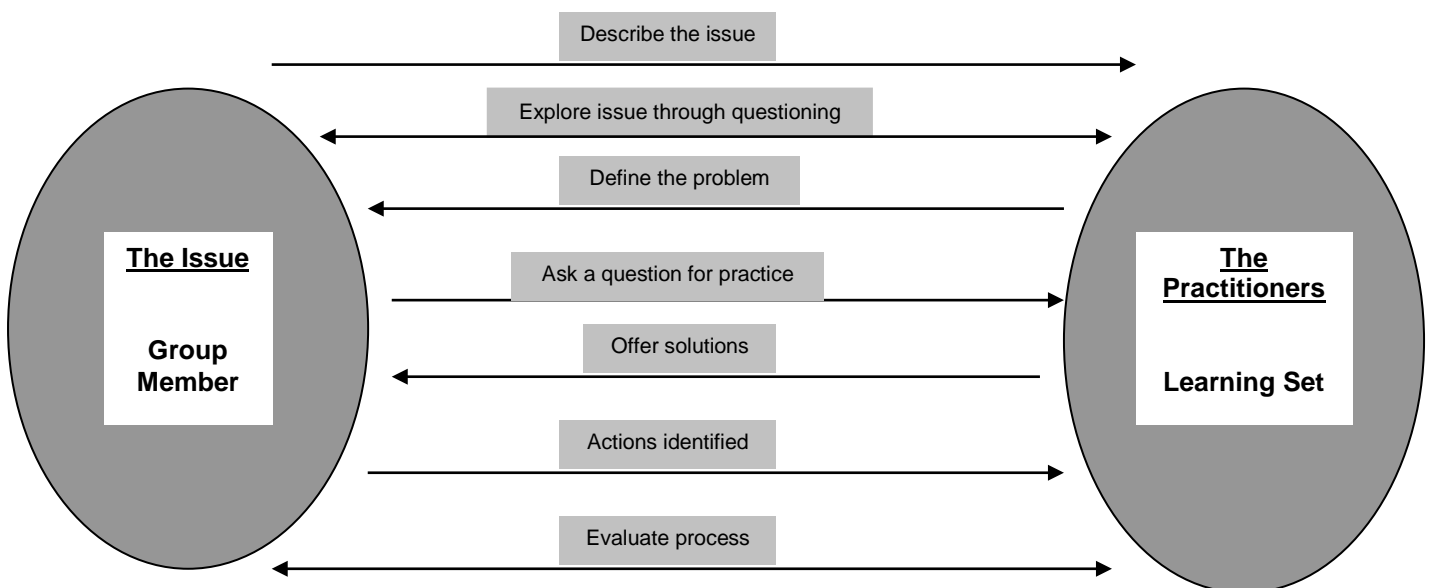
Finding an Issue:
Group members discuss their experience of implementation identifying issues (or potential issues) they have encountered.
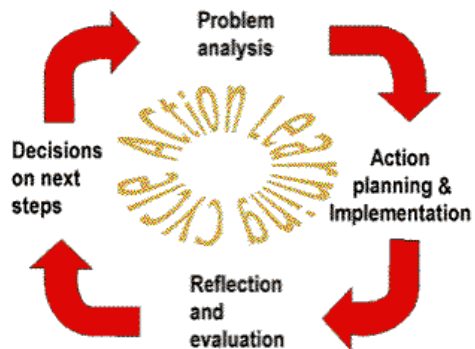
Selecting an Issue:
Once all issues have been identified, group members prioritise the issues; and agreeing which is the most important and which should be dealt with first.

1. **Step One – brief introduction:** The group member who identified 'Issue 1' is given five-minutes to describe the issue in more detail.
2. **Step Two – Exploration of the Issue:** Group members ask questions in order to explore further the issue and its implications for practice.
3. **Step Three – Definition of the Problem:** Group members seek to define the problem by making specific statements (of which there could be a number). The individual group member would prioritise these statements into a list; and create a question to ask the learning set (related to practice).
4. **Step Four – Consultation:** Group members offer solutions, answers and/or advice to the problem. This should lead the individual member to identify 'actions' to be implemented. These should be specific and achievable.
5. **Step Five – Evaluation:** All members have the opportunity to reflect on the overall process; including the individual member, the group as a whole, and the facilitator.

This process is described as 'double-loop learning' since the learning process occurs through the exploration and exchange of ideas between practitioners (as opposed to single-loop learning of more traditional classroom-based training where an 'expert' imparts information to the 'learner').

The Issue / Group Member		The Practitioners / Learning Set
	Describe the issue →	
	← Explore issue through questioning →	
	← Define the problem	
	Ask a question for practice →	
	← Offer solutions	
	Actions identified →	
	← Evaluate process →	

What is Action Learning?

See these YouTube clips for further explanation:

See these YouTube clips for further explanation:

Action Learning – 5-step demonstration:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skQJo3Vpqvc

Action Research:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qg83f72_6Gw

References

Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1978) *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective,* Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley.

O'Toole, S., Ferres, N. & Connell, J. 2011. People Development An Inside View: Developing individuals, Leaders and Organisations. Tilde University Press

Revans, R.W. 1998. The ABC of action learning: empowering managers to act and to learn from action, 3rd edition, London: Lemos & Crane