



Action Learning Sets

Introduction

Action Learning Sets are based on action learning principles that have their roots in the work of well-known thinkers such as Revans, Argyris, Schön and others. These argue that true learning only happens when we develop the ability to question self, others and the process. Put simply, action learning is 'learning by doing', learning from your own experience.

The action learning method we use is therefore similar to Kolb's Learning Cycle (the experiential learning model) with the added value that it includes peer group support. Clergy and lay leaders are traditionally good at task achievement. Action learning seeks to ensure there is balance between task, personal development, and team development, for all three have to be addressed for learning to fully take place.

How the Learning Happens

The learning takes place in Action Learning 'Sets', or groups, with approximately six participants and a Facilitator. Groups will usually form about a specific project (such as the 'working with change' course) or people in similar situations (such as Curates, Training Incumbents or Deanery Leaders). Each member of the group has an allocated 25 minutes in which they are the Presenter and will share and explore an issue, dilemma or piece of work related to the *raison d'être* of that group.

The other members then offer feedback through care-full questions that enable the Presenter to subsequently work through their issue more effectively. The key is to assist the Presenter to gain greater understanding of the issue, to develop further insight, to discover other options, and to move towards meaningful actions. It is important that this is a confidential environment in which real issues are shared and that participants make themselves vulnerable. This will open participants to new learnings, fresh possibilities, and outcomes.

Learning Outcomes

The purpose of the group is therefore to:

- offer opportunity for the Presenter to share the issue or dilemma or piece of work in a non-judgmental and supportive environment;
- be a reflective opportunity;
- provide other points of view and lines of enquiry through insightful questions;
- offer support in the deanery leadership role through group support, encouragement, learning and self-directed actions,
- assist the Presenter to determine specific actions as a result of reflection and feedback.

Group members' responsibility

An important feature of this approach is that the Presenter takes responsibility for their own learning, rather than being 'taught' by a teacher. The old adage of 'you will only get out what you put in' holds very true for this style of learning and development. The effectiveness of the group depends upon the quality of the trust and openness between members. This will take time to build, and so initially the issues shared might be those with less personal risk attached.

The Group

Action Learning Set meets regularly over a period of time. A normal outline of a meeting is:

1. The Facilitator welcomes the participants and outlines the session. Each person is provided with a block of post-it notes.
2. Each Presenter is given a total time of four minutes to describe their issue or dilemma or piece of work. As the Presenter shares, each group member writes up to three questions on separate post-it sheets, or they listen and write afterwards – the choice is offered to the Presenter beforehand.
3. Each person will take turns reading out a single question to Presenter and then hand the question to them.
4. The Presenter receives each question and chooses whether to reflect out loud there and then, or whether not to comment and move on to the next question.
5. Following the receipt of all questions (18 Minutes) the Presenter is given three minutes to decide on three actions they will address and these are written on a flipchart. This takes the form of three 'I will...' statements.
6. The Facilitator brings the time to a close and moves to the next Presenter.

Our Ground Rules

For most effective learning there needs to be real openness and honesty between participants. Therefore, a number of 'ground rules' are important:

- Non-judgmental
- Respectful
- Challenge is OK
- New perspectives sought
- Be natural (but we all take responsibility for what we say, or choose not to say)
- No advice (we ask open questions, not advice dressed up as questions such as "have you thought about...")
- Avoid "You think *you've* got problems....." stories
- Confidentiality maintained. Only the Presenters can raise their issue once their 25 minutes is over.
- Permission to be tentative or silent as Presenter
- No interruptions (so please put mobile phones away)
- Respect turns

- Avoid absence if possible, start & finish on time
- Inform the group facilitator about unavoidable absence/delay

This may be summarized in the **RECIPE** acronym:

Responsibility for oneself.

Experience-led i.e. the issues presented are real issues.

Confidentiality – the only thing taken out of the set is the learning.

I language is used

Process is addressed, as well as content. Attention to feelings, relationships, feedback.

Equality of opportunity to participate.