A Note on Action Learning Sets

Introduction

Action Learning Sets are a great way to develop capacity and confidence in people engaged with issues that are complex with no obvious solution. It could be engagement with some program or service research and development work, or looking at a culture or organizational change. The knottier the better. Any problem with a yes or no answer or with a set of action steps that could be put in a template will not merit for being part of an Action Learning Set.

Action Learning Sets are very simple in concept and extremely powerful in the thinking and actions that they leverage. They are a facilitated small group exchanges, ideally between 6-10 people. Being an effective Action Learning Set member requires some discipline, understanding the two roles a Set Member plays and commitment. The benefits to individuals are enormous. Past participants have spoken of the huge gains in their professional and personal development. For example, the boost to confidence of being part of a group that expects something of them, the power of momentum and action in emboldening what they do and in tackling procrastination and playing small.

The principle of an Action Learning Set is simple. It is believed that everyone has insight into the issue they confront, they already have inklings about possible solutions, strategies and actions that need to be taken. Being in a group where they are asked questions about the issue and questions about possible actions spurs both the need to dig deeper and a self-relience. The questioning process challenges the individual to re-frame and re-articulate the issue they face, to look at it from different angles, to perhaps break off a piece to think about in an alternative way or to shift the focus of emphasis to that which really matters.

In no Action Learning Set is advice given, actions or certain ways of seeing an issue prescribed. Action Learning Sets are all about stimulating deep

reflection, developing and testing actions, modifying and refining the problem solving process in light of actions taken.

Some more detail

Each set member takes a turn as the *Problem Holder*. In this role each Set member describes and explores their issue. They are deeply and actively listened to by the other Set members. As they feel themselves heard the *Problem Holder* may start to re-explore the issue for themselves, surfacing other thoughts or interpretations they have held but were not aware of or did not make space for. After a sufficient time the group members then begin to ask very open questions. Their discipline is not to offer advice, tell the *Problem Holder* what to do or say what they would do in the other's shoes. This is harder than it sounds. Questions should come from a place of deep curiosity and openness and not be judgement or direction disguised as a question.

The *Problem Holder* listens, just listens, from a place of openness and curiosity. They do not engage in censoring the question, in defending what they have said or trying to answer the questions, but they sit open to what is being said. The questions and inquiries will push the *Problem Holder* to reflect, perhaps to re-state their problem or to focus on another aspect of it and perhaps led them to articulate some type of solution.

The diversity of the group means all issues are engaged with from various perspectives.

After time spent describing and reflecting the *Problem Holder's* will formulate some actions they want to take before the next meeting.

The Action Learning set meets several times, usually once a month.

Between meetings each member undertakes actions and brings the result of their actions back to the group. Through this cycle of exploration, questioning, call to action, taking action, reflection and analysis the Set members move position, understanding more about the issues they face and ways to re-frame or resolve what they are working on.

It is a process of framing, re-framing, questioning assumptions and perspectives and trying on new perspectives. It is a process of experimentation and testing. Being a member of a Set and accountable to a Set means individuals often go deeper into an issue and take more risks and actions than they would do alone. For many, Action Learning is a powerful tool and profound experience.