

# Thriving in the Age of Change through Action Learning

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## Introduction

In today's world of unprecedented pace of change, organisations need to learn and adapt faster than the change that is happening in both their internal and external environments. If one looks at history, it is not difficult to see that it is littered with the remains of once formidable organisations that were unable to do just that. In order to survive this onslaught of change, fresh thinking and new learning are necessary to avoid the risk of responding to today's increasingly complex problems with solutions that used to bring success yesterday.

The research linking learning to business success is compelling. "Companies that learn fastest and adapt well to changing environments perform the best over time," says Edward Hess, a professor of business administration at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business. This calls for leadership to put focus on building learning organizations that will provide a competitive edge in an ever changing and globalized knowledge economy.

Dr Michael Marquadt (2011) defined a learning organization in his book *Building the Learning Organisation* as:

A company that learns effectively and collectively and continually transforms itself for better management and use of knowledge; empowers people within and outside the organization to learn as they work; utilises technology to maximize learning and production.

While there are different theories and models of Learning Organisation, Marquadt holds the opinion that without action learning, one cannot build a learning organization (Reese, 2018). Learning must occur continuously and from the bottom up in an organisation. This was what Marquardt saw in action learning theories, a method to learn while doing. Hence, action learning has the twin purpose of helping organisations to make progress on important and perplexing problems while at the same time equipping their members with learning agility to find out how to deal, in future, with other ill-defined problems.

## What is Action Learning?

Reg Revans is considered the father of action learning. Trained as a physicist at Cambridge University, he discovered the process by observing how scientists from different disciplines work together and learn from one another despite their individual subject matter expertise. He observed the importance of being open of our own shortcomings and learning from other's experiences. Since Reg Revans first introduced action learning in the coal mines of Wales and England in the 1940s, there have been multiple variations of the concept but at the core of all of them is the idea that action learning is based upon small groups of colleagues meeting over time to tackle real problems in order to get things done; reflecting and learning from their experience and from each other as they attempt to change things.

The World Institute for Action Learning (WIAL) operationalizes action learning through a standard approach that comprises a dynamic process with two ground rules and six components. It involves a group of four to eight people from diverse backgrounds working on a real problem at hand. The action learning methodology involves asking thought-provoking questions of one another that gets to the heart of the matter rather than expressing opinions and debating about solutions. Questions help to create opportunities for the group to learn from the unknown, navigate uncharted waters, challenge assumptions, and collaborate in the spirit of curiosity. In the process, the group co-creates solutions and support one another to develop essential leadership skills. Each action learning session is result-oriented because it must end with an agreed set of committed actions to be implemented by the group before meeting for the next session.

While other members of the group focus on solving the problem, one member, the action learning coach's primary role is to focus on helping the group to learn. The coach identifies learning opportunities and supports the group reflect on the problem solving process, group dynamics and learn from each other in a safe and neutral environment.

Hence, the action learning process empowers groups to solve an urgent problem they are facing without losing focus on the important task of learning.

### **Action Learning and Complex Problem Solving**

Across different cultures in human history, it was recognised that taking action was fundamental to the process of deep and effective learning. From Aristotle to Confucius to Kurt Lewin, many philosophers, educators, and practitioners have insisted that the purpose of learning is to achieve a practical outcome. Hence, one of the critical components of action learning is the requirement for the group to work a problem with urgency and complexity. Unless a problem has urgency, those tasked with solving it will devote limited energy or creativity to it. Without an urgent and complex problem, there will be a lack of significant learning and meaningful action.

The critical problems faced by organisations today are much more complicated and complex than problems encountered even five to ten years ago. The future is more unpredictable than ever before as a result of the exponential growth of human knowledge. According to research by Buckminster Fuller (1982) who created the "Knowledge Doubling Curve", he noticed that until the turn of the century, human knowledge doubled approximately every century; by the end of the Second World War that pace had increased to doubling once every 25 years. Today, evidence suggests that on an average, world knowledge doubles every 13 months. In fact, IBM (2016) predicted that with the "internet of things" enabled, human knowledge will be doubling every 12 hours and this is likely to happen during our lifetime.

Professor Reg Revans (2011) believed that, "in order for organisations to survive in the face of change, the rate of learning must be equal to or more than the rate and pace of change." Many organisations are going to struggle to survive unless they displace typical organisational dynamics and traditional models of management with something radically different to ensure that people can continuously keep up with the rate and scale of change.

Technological, socio-economic, geopolitical and demographic developments are major drivers of change causing major disruptions to business models today. Organisations are compelled to face with a huge amount of uncertainty and complexity that has arisen from rapidly changing trends and markets, disruptive new technologies, innovation from competitors, mergers and acquisitions, new channels to market, change of governments, etc.

In the process of evolving, organisations need to make problem solving a way of life to respond to internal and external challenges. It is no wonder that in a survey by World Economic Forum (2018), complex problem solving skills has remained as one of the top ten skills in demand. Rapid organizational change challenges leaders and members to clearly identify the types of problems that they need to solve and understand the environmental factors that will help them make sense of the level of complexity.

Problems can be based on existing knowledge or a lack of existing knowledge. Ronald Heifetz and Donald Laurie (1997) distinguish between problems that were more common to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (technical problems) and those that are (so far) more prevalent in the current century (adaptive problems).

1. Technical problems – Those in which the necessary knowledge to solve the problem already exists in a legitimized form or set of procedures. Solving these problems requires the efficient and rational acquisition and application of knowledge. Technical problems have a linear, logical way of being solved, with precedents within or outside the organization;
2. Adaptive problems – Those that may have no absolute answers or that require no technical expertise necessary to solve. In other words, adaptive problems are complex problems that surface in less recognizable forms. The nature of these problems often changes with circumstance and time, making them difficult to define and tackle.

Organisations in today's age of change are more likely to be faced with adaptive problems because of the impact caused by the major drivers of change. When responding to adaptive problems, there is a need for group members to let go of old mental sets, challenge existing assumptions, generate fresh ideas, experiment with alternatives, and consider diverse perspectives, before collectively making decision. Solving adaptive problems may also require group members to constantly learn new skills and develop new knowledge to meet the changing demands. More often than not, it is a situation where what you know is less relevant than what you may learn, and knowing the answer to questions is less critical than having the ability to ask the right questions in the first place.

For organisations to thrive amidst the challenges and disruptions in the age of change, traditional problem solving approaches are not likely to work because they were designed to cope with predictable circumstances. In order to solve adaptive problems, a new approach is required. Action Learning is one such approach that is designed to enable organizations to deal with this uncertainty.

### **Action Learning and Adult Learning**

Dr Michael Marquardt, president of WIAL says: “The rapidly changing environment and unpredictable global challenges require organisations and individuals to act and learn at

the same time. Learning cannot be accomplished effectively in a classroom environment in isolation. It has to be interleaved with real time work involving burning issues and people responsible for finding sustainable solutions to problems.” He adds that leaders and their people find it challenging to sit in classrooms with lectures and case studies, when they would rather spend their time and energy on real issues confronting them at the workplace.

Action learning can become a powerful tool, which increases relevant and long-lasting learning in relatively short periods of time (Revens, 1980, 1982; Marsick, 1992). While the process may seem deceptively simple, the reason why action learning is effective for learning is because it embodies principles on adult learning.

There are a number of principles that influence how adults learn in general. Knowles (1970, 1984) identified five principles that characterize adult education or andragogy; namely, 1) the adult learner is self-directing, 2) adult’s growing reservoir of experience make them rich resources for learning, 3) their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his/her social roles, 4) adults’ orientation towards learning shifts from one of subject-centredness to one of problem-centredness, and 5) the more potent motivators to learn for adults are internal such as self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-actualisation.

If we relate these principles to Marquadt’s (2004) approach to action learning which is built around six components below, we will recognise that action learning utilizes these principles of adult learning and offers a compelling learning opportunity for individuals, teams, and organizations.

**1. A problem or challenge of importance to the group**

People learn only when they want to do so, and not when others or the organization they work for want them to. Hence, effective learning has to be self-directed, voluntary, intentional and purposeful. We feel motivated to learn when we are faced with challenges we would like to overcome and hence this is the reason why an action learning group has to work on a real problem that they are determined to resolve.

**2. A group of 4-8 members, ideally from diverse backgrounds**

A major obstacle to learning is when we are held back by our existing mental set formed by previous experience or what is known as programmed knowledge. An effective way for someone to realize when their mental set may not longer be valid in a new situation and may need reviewing is to hear the perspectives from other people facing similar problems. It is much easier to recognise and adapt your ideas when you have other people around you with whom you can talk, making it a social learning experience. Support must come from people with diverse backgrounds so as to stimulate the review process. Our motivation to learn is higher when we receive helpful and relevant feedback from colleagues who we respect and value in the course of performing our social role as a group member.

**3. A process that emphasis questions and reflection**

Learning is not only the assimilation of knowledge, but also the recognition of what we already known. Revan stressed that Learning is a result of Programmed

knowledge plus Questioning insight ( $L=P+Q$ ). Questioning will then help to generate new insights on what is not yet known. People learn best when they are able to question the basic assumptions on which their actions are based. Therefore review and reassessment of our programmed knowledge is necessary and we generate new learning when coupled with questions.

**4. The power to take action on the strategies developed;**

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 pressing problems to which no one knows the solution. Problem-centredness and the benefits that accompany problem resolution ensures that learning is always for a purpose

**5. A commitment to learning at the individual, team and organizational levels;**

Learning is typically episodic rather than continuous. Learning takes place in short bursts of relatively intense activity that demands the learner's focus. We are usually focus on looking for learning with immediate application, rather than sometime in the future. It usually ends when the immediate purpose of learning (the resolution of problem) has been achieved. People then resort to learning again at a much slower pace of learning before the next such intensive episode occurs, again triggered by another problem which requires resolution. Hence, a mutual commitment by the group invest time to move from the tendency for immediate learning to longer-term learning will help the group to be better equipped when solving problems in the future.

**6. An action learning coach who focuses on and ensures that time and energy are devoted to capturing the learning and improving the skill level of the group.**

Learning and the revision of our mental sets are made easier in a safe atmosphere. The safe atmosphere comes about from the skillful preparation and understanding on the part of the coach and from the support of co-learners. The role of the coach of this process is not to teach, but to design and enable conditions out of which people can help each other to understand their own past personal experience. 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. Experience shows that unless there is a person dedicated to learning, the tendency is for a group to devote all or most of its time and energies on what they consider to be urgent (the problem).

Action learning is such a powerful learning tool because its six components interweave and incorporate so many of the principles of adult learning. Action learning stimulates learning at the individual, team and organizational levels. This will assist organizations to build their capacity to learn and respond to complex and dynamic organization issues more effectively.

## **Conclusion**

Thriving in the age of change requires members of an organisation to be equipped with the ability to solve complex problems and also the agility to learn-on-the-go and learn how to learn. Organisations that have not yet learned to learn are lagging behind in the competitive environment in which most organisations today exist and their very long-

term survival is questionable. When properly implemented and supported, action learning not only enables organizations to creatively solve complex problems that have previously seem insolvable, it can also simultaneously help organisations to develop their leaders, build high performance teams, and become learning organisations.

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