

What Is Action Learning?

Action learning describes a developmental approach, used in a group setting but affecting the individual and organizational levels of experience, that seeks to apply and generate theory from real (not simulated) work situations. In Reg Revans' original conceptualization, learning results from the independent contributions of programmed instruction (designated P) and spontaneous questioning (designated Q). P constitutes information and skill derived from material already formulated, digested, and presented, typically through coursework. Q is knowledge and skill gained by apposite questioning, investigation, and experimentation.

For Revans, Q was the component that produces most behavioral change since it results from interpretations of experience and knowledge accessible to the learner. These interpretations are bolstered by feedback from mutual learners who participate in a debriefing of the learner's workplace experiences. Hence, actions taken are subject to inquiry about their effectiveness, including a review of how one's theories were applied to practice. Participants learn as they work by taking time to reflect with peers who offer insights into their workplace problems.

In a typical action learning program, a series of presentations constituting programmed instruction might be given on a designated theory or theoretical topic. In con-

junction with these presentations, students might be asked to apply their prior and new knowledge to a real project that is sanctioned by organizational sponsors and that has potential value, not only to the participant but also to the organizational unit to which the project is attached. Throughout the program, students continue to work on the projects with assistance from other participants as well as from qualified facilitators or advisors who help them make sense of their project experiences in light of relevant theory.

This feedback feature principally occurs in learning teams or "sets" typically composed of five to seven participants. During the learning team sessions, the students discuss not only the practical dilemmas arising from actions in their work settings, but also the application or misapplication of concepts and theories to these actions. Further, the group develops a social culture in its own right, which presents participants with lessons regarding group dynamics. Team members also provide encouragement to one another.

Not all organizational problems are solved or are even meant to be solved in action learning. Rather, the experience is designed to confront learners with the constraints of organizational realities, leading oftentimes to the discovery of alternative and creative means to accomplish their objectives.