Tapping Into the Power of Learning Part 2A: Action Learning

In July and August 1996, Jennifer Bowerman, Marilyn Herasymowych, and Henry Senko attended the *International Action Learning Seminar* in Salford, England. This is the first of two collaboratively written newsletters that summarize what we experienced during that seminar.

"Action Learning is a method for individual and organizational development. Working in small groups, people tackle important organizational issues or problems and learn from their attempts to change things."
— Mike Pedler, **Action Learning for Managers** (1996)

Action learning is a process of inquiry. It begins by bringing together a group of people who are interested in solving complex problems. This group is called an action learning set. According to Pedler, a researcher in the field of action learning, each member of the group:

- Joins voluntarily

- Has his or her own problem to understand and to solve

- Wants to help others in the action learning set to understand their problems and to take action

- Is willing to take action in solving his or her own problem

- Is willing to learn from the consequences of that action

During the action learning set meetings, the members attempt to help the problem owner to understand his or her problem in more depth. They do this by asking *fresh questions* — questions that help the problem owner to come to new insights about the problem.

According to Pedler, there are distinct processes operating in effective action learning sets:

- Members **share** their perspectives of the problem being tackled.

- Members agree on a set of **ground rules** that allow the set to function effectively. Members monitor and modify the ground rules as needed, in order to increase the effectiveness of the set.

- Members **support** and **challenge** each other in understanding the problem, generating actions, and understanding the learning that occurs.

- Members **question** each other's current understanding of the problem, question their own perceptions, and discover insights that result from posing *fresh questions*.

- The set **develops** over time.

Pedler states that "the set forms, matures, and learns to work creatively and productively."

- The set **reviews** how well both the set and its members are operating.

Action learning sets have several other features:
- The members of the set do not need to have any expertise in the problem area. One of the reasons that members can ask fresh questions is precisely because they do not know much about the problem area, and therefore can often see the problem in a new light.

- The set focuses on three aspects: real problems, how effective the set and its members are in the learning process of inquiry on the problem, and the actions that are taken to solve the problem.

- Set advisors act as coaches and mentors to help the action learning sets to facilitate the action learning process.

- The members of the set are mature individuals who are open to diverse and disparate perspectives, are willing to deal openly with conflict and challenge, and are flexible in their ability to work with others and with diverse ideas.

Action learning was developed by Reg Revans as a way to educate managers to deal effectively with organizational change. Reg Revans is now 90 years old, extremely spry, and articulate. Revans believes that organizations and individuals cannot flourish unless their rate of learning is equal to, or greater than, the rate of change that they are experiencing. According to Revans, we are currently experiencing a rate of change that is outstripping our ability to learn. This means that we need more effective ways of learning in order to match and surpass the rate of change. Revans' answer lies in action learning.

No one has sole responsibility for organizational problems today. All too often, these problems are seen as belonging to top managers, who struggle with them alone, trapped in their own perceptions and analyses of the situations that they face. These managers, with their overflowing agendas and heavy involvement in day-to-day operations, experience high stress, yet have no way to use personal support and learning processes to ease the pressure. Action learning effectively counters such loneliness at the top.

On the up side, action learning:
- Encourages more people to explore and resolve the problems that they face

- Helps to break down the barriers to change by bringing together people from across the organization, and giving these people a voice

- Builds relationships as people work together in action learning sets to assist and support each other

On the down side, action learning:
- Is not easy, which can lead to an erosion of organizational commitment

- Requires action learning sets to meet once a month over a number of years, which can lead to a belief that action learning is expensive

- Produces long-term results rather than a *quick fix*, which can lead to a belief that action learning is not effective

- Demands a degree of openness and trust, and a willingness to test actions in the workplace, which can be seen as too risky

In short, action learning requires vision, leadership, resource commitment, and a desire to learn from your successes as well as from your mistakes. To many organizations and their managers, this can be a scary proposition. However, as we approach the 21st Century, those who ignore action learning do so at their own peril.

"Because Action Learning is both profound and simple, it is never in danger, as mere techniques are, of being here today and gone tomorrow. We always need to re-invent our own ways of putting the basic ideas into practice. This inventing element is what maintains the life in Action Learning."
— Mike Pedler, **Action Learning for Managers** (1996)