



Check it out!
www.mhainstitute.ca

Tapping Into the Power of Learning Part 2B: 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 second of two collaboratively written newsletters that summarize what we experienced during that seminar.

“The belief underlying action learning is that our daily activities provide us with endless opportunities to learn. Nowhere is this more true than at work — in organizations where so many of us spend at least a third of our waking hours.”

— Krystyna Weinstein, **Action Learning: A Journey in Discovery and Development** (1995)

The Salford Experience

For two weeks, our task was to assist managers from a Manchester Hospital Trust, consisting of two

hospitals, to understand, and to take action on, organizational change problems. The class of 35 participants consisted of a mixture of students and professors from Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States, who accepted the challenge of working in action learning sets with managers from the Hospital Trust.

Our experience in action learning started with meeting Reg Revans, the principal pioneer of action learning. His theories were shaped, in part, by early memories of his father, who investigated the Titanic disaster. Revans' father saw the Titanic disaster as an example of the difference between cleverness and wisdom. According to Revans, it is wisdom, “the need to be doubtful about one's own qualifications and ability to deal with the here and now,” that can be described as the ultimate goal of action learning.

The Problem

In spite of reduced revenues and new health-funding formulas, the

Hospital Trust was committed to maintaining:

- Present services and activity levels, while preparing for a proposed amalgamation of services at one of the two hospitals
- High-profile services in areas such as medical teaching and a heart-lung transplant program

The 35 seminar participants were formed into five action learning sets. Each set contained a mixture of cultures, genders, learning styles, one or two managers from the Hospital Trust, and a set advisor. Each set was given a specific aspect of the problem listed above. The goal for each set was not to develop solutions; rather, it was to pose fresh questions that led to the managers developing new and different perspectives about their problem.

During the two weeks, three distinct moments stand out as exceptional examples of action learning: a conversation with Reg Revans, set

meetings with the managers, and the final presentation to the managers and the Chairman of the Hospital Trust Board.

A Conversation with Reg Revans

One evening, a group of us were sitting on the front lawn of our residence at Salford University. We were in casual conversation when Revans appeared and joined our group. What an extraordinary opportunity to talk one-on-one with this visionary!

Revans started his career as an astrophysicist, working in the now-famous Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge, England, under the guidance of J. J. Thompson, the father of the electron. Revans studied with many Nobel laureates, including Baron Ernest Rutherford, the man who discovered the structure of the atom.

Revans told us that what made the Cavendish Laboratory so unique was Rutherford's openness to collaborative inquiry. Scientists from diverse fields shared their findings, their doubts, and their questions with each other. They challenged each other's theories and research — all in the search for more understanding about the atom. As he talked, we began to see that the process by which the discoveries were made in the Laboratory was just as fascinating as the discoveries themselves.

The scientists at the Cavendish Laboratory were working with enormously difficult and complex problems that were steeped in contradictions and conflict with the known physics of the time. This difficulty created turmoil in the scientific community. Collaborative inquiry gave the community the

opportunity for creative juices to flow, which, in turn, created the science we have today. This experience holds all of the processes of action learning (**InfoMine**, Vol. 3, No. 5). As we listened, we realized that Revans' experience at the Cavendish Laboratory was a real example of the power of action learning. The Cavendish Laboratory was the *learning crucible* in which Revans forged his concept of action learning.

Set Meetings with Managers

This same collaborative inquiry happened during our set meetings with the Hospital Trust managers. For one set, the manager and his assistant were not available to attend all of the set meetings. To deal with this absence, the set decided to map the member's perceptions of what they saw as the problem. Then, the set met with the manager and his assistant to share the perceptions with them.

What was profound was the enormous amount of inquiry and insight that this process of sharing gave to the manager, his assistant, and the set members. By the end of the meeting, the manager and his assistant were seeing the problem quite differently. Even more profound was the fact that the manager and his assistant came up with their own possible solutions. The process of collaborative inquiry had generated enough insight in the minds of the manager and his assistant to allow them to generate their own solutions.

Final Presentation

On the last day of the seminar, the five sets presented their findings to the managers and the Chairman of the Hospital Trust Board. These managers had opened their hospitals and their organizational change problems to a group of strangers, in order to discover new ways of

thinking about these problems.

One of the sets was allowed to interview 22 staff members in order to find out what they thought about staff morale. This interview process yielded interesting results, one of which was that not all staff members were experiencing low morale; some were actually experiencing high morale. Through the process of collaborative inquiry with the sets, these staff members were able to give the sets information on what was occurring to keep morale high. When compared to the information on what was occurring to keep morale low, the manager was able to see the problem differently.

The experience of working in such a courageous organization, one that was so willing to ask for help, also opened our minds to other views and perspectives. This is the gift of action learning — the opportunity to increase the capacity for effective action.

“Action learning creates an opportunity to become conscious of what we do, how we think, and what we believe. In so doing, it eventually encourages a climate of learning within an organization.”
— Krystyna Weinstein, **Action Learning: A Journey in Discovery and Development** (1995)

MHA Institute Inc.
Unit 248, Suite 205
259 Midpark Way SE
Calgary, Alberta T2X 1M2 Canada

Phone: (403) 257-4597
Fax: (403) 257-4649
E-mail: info@mhainstitute.ca
Web: www.mhainstitute.ca