



# Bright Horizons for action learning

In the first of a series of three articles on action learning, **Richard Hale** shows how it has developed since its inception 50 years ago

**P**rofessor Reg Revans was a thought leader and a man of action at a time when the field of management development was emerging. His key proposition was conceptually a simple one: managers and leaders learn effectively with and from others by tackling real work-based challenges and by posing insightful questions to each other. He was critical of the growing army of management gurus, academics and consultants claiming to know the answers and concerned to show their 'cleverness'.

He was responsible for developing the education and training strategy for the newly nationalised mining industry in 1945, which was the largest organisation in the world with one million employees. He advocated developing managers by encouraging them to visit each other's place of work and inviting them to look at the problems faced by others with fresh eyes. He said the mines were no place for a manager who could write an essay on ventilation but couldn't suggest what to do when the fan broke down, or might know about working methods but be incapable of dealing with a dispute that could stop production.

He was delighted in 1975 to be invited to work with General Electric Company in the UK, where organisational success in certain GEC engineering businesses was attributed to the action learning approach he set up. He noted: "One of the most

successful industrialists in Britain, Sir Arnold Weinstock offered his corporation, the GEC, as a candidate for self-diagnosis and autotherapy. We were for the first time in many years entering the arena by the front door."<sup>1</sup>

He acknowledged the challenge of convincing senior people in organisations that their own people were capable of identifying, defining and treating the familiar problems and the "armies of troubles that lay concealed beneath the board room horizons".

Over the past 70 years, many organisations and individuals have developed their interpretation and practices drawing on the philosophy of action learning proposed by Revans. It was noted by Alan Mumford that a succession of management development methods have arrived over the years, including case studies, role-plays, business games, outdoor training and e-learning, but none of these have been derived from, or subjected to, analysis through a theory of learning, whereas action learning has<sup>2</sup>.

He suggested that, had these other methods been subjected to theoretical examination, claims of their value would have been more muted: "How responsible is it to provide a method on the basis that you believe in it, and can quote evidence of how it has worked in the past, without really knowing how it works and why it works? Would architects or engineers carry out their design methods without a fundamental

## References

- 1 Revans R "The General Electrical Company Programme" four pages handwritten, The Revans Collection, University of Salford, item RWR2/8/13
- 2 Mumford A "The case method – does learning theory matter?" *Development and Learning in Organizations* vol 19, no 4 (2005)

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3 Hale R, Margerison C "Adding value with work-based learning questions" *Training Journal* (July 2004)

4 Revans R *ABC of Action Learning* Gower (2011)

5 Vince R "Power and Emotion in Organizational Learning" *Human Relations* vol 54, no 10 (2001)

6 Hale R I "Developing impact and influence" *Training Journal* (March 2006)

understanding of the theories that show how and why structures will stand up?"

This echoes Revans' sentiments when he said that education in the coal industry must demonstrate the reasons practices are adopted rather than merely how they are performed.

### The action learning question approach

Some ten years ago I worked on the development of the action learning question approach to support the integration of action learning into modern organisations. The aim was to go back to the basic principles advocated by Revans.

L&D is based on the formulation of work-based questions, drawn from strategies or problems that organisations and key stakeholders face. Action learning set members work collaboratively, supporting each other in tackling their ALQ, and they meet in learning sets with non-directive support from an action learning facilitator. 'Theory follows the action', ie research is conducted into how other people or organisations have tackled similar problems. There are no predetermined outcome statements, lectures or case studies but learners can be recognised at undergraduate or postgraduate level if they provide evidence of two things – their actions and their learning.

Early success of this approach was reported in *TJ* eight years ago<sup>3</sup> and, since then, hundreds of managers and leaders have achieved qualifications by using action learning-based questions. Here I focus on the recent experience of Bright Horizons Family Solutions, which has adopted this approach and developed a group of ALFs to support its leadership and strategic vision. This is helping it to become one of the most effective learning organisations I have seen.

### Bright Horizons Family Solutions

Bright Horizons Family Solutions is a provider of childcare and early years education services, working across the UK and Ireland and employing 4,000 staff. It operates 130 early care and

education centres for employers and working families, while its Foundation for Children supports families in crisis or suffering domestic abuse.

The organisation has seen increased demand for services in a competitive market and in conditions of recession. Furthermore, against the Great Place to Work metrics, it has shown a trend of improvement over the past six years in the UK – it has been the fourth best place to work in Scotland for two years in a row and has won awards for leadership excellence and diversity. In 2012, it received the RoSPA Gold Award for Occupational Health and Safety. Its Ofsted inspection performance shows 'outstanding' regulatory performance in all 17 judgments, including leadership effectiveness – well above the sector average.

The UK managing director, Carole Edmond was committed to integrating her personal leadership journey with the development of a new philosophy and culture of leadership. Initially she engaged her senior team in helping to formulate the new philosophy, which became known as Learning and Leading with Heart.

Nine senior people then opted into the action learning facilitator accreditation process in order to develop their own capability in parallel with launching multi-site action learning projects at all levels. These ALFs formed a learning set themselves and supported each other in planning the extension of the leadership philosophy throughout the business.

The ALFs supported each other in defining their terms of reference, forming plans of action and reviewing progress as further learning sets were launched. They were required to reflect on their learning and write this up in the form of reports, which both added to the organisational body of knowledge and were assessed for individuals at postgraduate level. The culture of questioning was reinforced along the lines suggested by Revans, who proposed diagnostic questions such as *what is the organisation trying to do? What is preventing it?* and therapeutic questions such as *who else might know what could be done? Who might care enough? Who has the power to help?*

### Examples of ALF questions

- How can I promote effective use of the online portal to support virtual action learning?
- How can I use action learning to embed a culture in which keeping children safe is everyone's responsibility?
- How can I use the feedback and data we receive

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from our customers and employees to have an impact on organisational design?

- How can I use action learning to engage staff and customers in supporting quality?

### **ALFs in their own words**

“As a business, we introduced an action research and action learning approach to help us become an organisation that turns learning into knowledge, skills and abilities to solve our work challenges, deliver business benefit and achieve our strategy.

“We have established in Bright Horizons what we call the principles of Learning and Leading with Heart: as leaders in our field, we are committed to continuous learning and improvement. We challenge ourselves to ask questions, seek solutions and embrace new ideas. We value reflective practices and create the opportunity to help other functions.

“The action learning approach enables us to work in an empowering and collaborative way, working cross-functionally and maximising the wealth of experience and knowledge in our organisation.

“The ALF accreditation programme has enabled us to build a team of skilled facilitators acting as advocates and enablers of this action learning approach – the senior team are role-modelling the change we want to see.

“Personally, I wanted to build my knowledge and skills as an ALF. I was keen to be part of the senior team who play a crucial role in ‘marketing’ the approach to the business. I believe that, in today’s environment, an action learning approach has a key role to play in engaging the workforce and creating ownership for learning.

“My own ALF question has been around engaging action learners virtually and helping them to see the benefits of using our online portal. I have been helping them to see it as an integral way of working and not an ‘add-on’ to their working day. The key challenge for me in terms of facilitating style is about finding the balance between directing and facilitating in a supportive way. It calls for the ability to question, listen, challenge and reflect. It demands patience



## “The action learning approach enables us to work in an empowering and collaborative way”

and a sense of timing – judging how and when to move the action learning set on and when to step back and look at the group as a whole.” **Helen Mitchell, L&D manager**

“We need to move beyond trying to teach our people. We need to give them a chance to learn. We recognise everyone has potential and brings something different to the table – knowledge and experience is valued, with models and the academic piece coming after.

“The ALF accreditation programme enables us to develop the capability to learn and tackle real-life business challenges and to move from just discussion to action and learning.

“It has given me the opportunity to think differently about how I learn while, at the same time, tackling real business issues. It is different from the taught, case study approach in which qualifications are delivered by ‘experts’. It turns the old model of learning on its head. I think businesses today cannot try to deal with issues as they have done in the past – business challenges today require people to be much more agile, flexible, fluid and dynamic. Having the ‘expert consultant’ come in and tell you what you should be doing doesn’t really work – you need the buy-in of the organisation and the people.

“I definitely was out of my comfort zone many times on the ALF accreditation programme. However, if you trust in the process and are open to learning, it is very rewarding. There is no one right answer to business challenges – they are all different – and ALFs enable groups of people to learn and find the answers that are right for them in a collaborative way. I have realised that ALFs need the ability to listen, to be inclusive and committed to making a difference without being judgmental.” **Sharon Williams, director of HR**

### Role of the ALF

The following three ‘modes’ of facilitation provided the conceptual framework for the development of ALFs at Bright Horizons and are based on interpretation of the three roles

Revans had referred to and their interpretation by Pedler<sup>4</sup>.

### Mobiliser

- Generates commitment for the action learning process from within or outside the organisation
- Influences key sponsors and supporters to back the action learning initiative
- Enables others to see how action learning relates to organisational strategies and systems
- Manages political and organisational barriers in order to pave the way for success.



### Learning set adviser

- Supports learning set members in their meetings, particularly in the early stages
- Raises set members’ awareness of their group and learning processes
- Role-models action learning behaviours such as insightful questioning, agreeing actions and reflection
- Helps the learning set work independently of the set adviser.



### Learning catalyst

- Builds the capacity of the organisation to learn from its experience and to improve performance
- Helps ensure individual learning generates organisational learning
- Links learning to organisational strategies
- Supports the expansion of learning across the organisation and over time.



### ALF checklist

- “Go in through the front door” – have you got support from the top?
- Identify fields of knowledge that bring people together as ‘communities’, which may span across formal organisation structures
- Collaborate with learners to help them scope their questions and evaluate the impact of their actions
- Decide which ALF mode you should be in at any given time (mobiliser, set adviser, learning catalyst)
- Recognise the importance of politics, emotions, power dynamics and harness this in a positive way, applying impact and influence<sup>5,6</sup>.

The author gratefully acknowledges Salford University for access to the Revans Collection. **TJ**

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