

Action Learning Sets

1. Overview

Action Learning Sets consist of a peer group (generally <10 people) working together to overcome problems with no clear resolution. They involve active listening and analysis skills, and encourage participants to reach their own solutions in a supportive learning environment. Learning groups meet fairly regularly depending on demand (generally on a monthly/ bimonthly basis), working together for a period of several months, until members feel confident with their progress.

The initial meeting generally introduces the set members and the reasons behind the action learning set. Subsequent meetings then focus on addressing participant issues, with each member presenting their problem to the group and encouraging feedback. There are two ways for this to proceed:

- i. Participants respond to the problem with open questions rather than personal anecdotes, so that an individual can lead themselves to their own solution. This helps the set to stay on point but does limit the responses.
- ii. Participants use their personal experiences and open questions to approach the issue. This method may be preferable for the Science Council's purposes as it allows members to draw upon their considerable knowledge base and encourages further discussion.

At the end of each set the outcomes are summarised, and progress is noted at the beginning of the next session.

Action learning sets therefore provide a unique opportunity for problem resolution and education in the area of discussion. This is particularly useful in garnering support and ensuring progress for diversity work. Using action learning sets allows problems to be looked at from different angles, with set members leading an individual to consider the issue more dynamically and on a broader basis.

Members could use the action learning sets internally, encouraging those not normally involved in diversity work to take a more active role, adding validity to the scheme (i.e. that it's not just been developed by a diversity team to tick boxes and the organisation is genuinely invested in creating equality), and can ensure that any issues are overcome in a way that is specific to the organisation.

Action learning could also occur using a cross-organisation set to discuss running similar schemes (e.g. mentoring). These could be used to overcome issues in newly established schemes, discuss how to increase uptake or engagement with the initiative, or develop new ideas on how to take the work forward. The mix of organisations and experience levels would provide multiple perspectives on the issue, and could lead to a broader and more realistic resolution. Moreover, having a set meeting time for the learning group, and knowing all members have to engage with it, can help to catalyse action in individual diversity work and maintain enthusiasm for the schemes.

2. Examples of Use

Equality Challenge Unit: *Mainstreaming Diversity Report*. Four Scottish HEIs collaborated to mainstream their diversity work. Part of this collaboration included the use of action learning sets, both

between university groups and within them. The report describes how the learning sets were used and the outcomes for each university. A particularly relevant finding was that using ALS catalysed diversity mainstreaming within each institution.

<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/mainstreaming-equality-at-the-heart-of-he/>

Equality and Human Rights Commission: *Tackling Hate Crime Report*. A summary of EHRC commissioned research into tackling hate crime towards trans and disabled people. Action learning sets, involving participants affected by hate crime, were used to establish key issues and to identify ways to overcome them. The report highlights the benefits of using action learning to deliver fast results from inter-professional collaboration.

http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/fairerbritain/empowering_people_to_tackle_hate_crime.doc

3. Resources

Ashridge: *Action Learning Guide*. Introduction to using action learning sets.

<https://www.ashridge.org.uk/Media-Library/Ashridge/PDFs/Publications/ActionLearning.pdf>

NHS: *Introducing Learning Sets*. Background information on learning sets and how they differ from traditional learning groups.

http://www.libraryservices.nhs.uk/document_uploads/Staff_Development/nlh_sdg_introducing_learning_sets_200808.pdf

Bond: *Guidance Notes*. Guidelines and principles behind running a successful action learning set and how to carry the set forwards. <http://www.bond.org.uk/data/files/resources/463/No-5.1-Action-Learning-Sets.pdf>

Helen Sanderson Associates: *An Introduction... to Action Learning Sets*. Fairly extensive guide based on the history and use of action learning sets in a thinking environment.

<http://www.helensandersonassociates.co.uk/media/16434/action%20learning%20sets.pdf>

South West Council: *Contract*. Example contract to establish parameters of the action learning set.

http://southwest-ra.gov.uk/media/RIEP/Overall%20Improvement/Action_Learning_Set_contract.pdf