

## THE MISSING LINK IN L&D: WHY ACTION-LEARNING DESERVES A COMEBACK



Isobelle Keith looks at the learning intervention that time forgot

The learning and development profession faces many challenges. Learning transfer from traditional training hovers at a dismal 12% (Collins 2023), and despite the billions spent on leadership development, the results don't always bear out (Haslam et al 2024). Add to that the pace of technological change and the rapid advancement of AI and it's clear that workplace learning needs a revolution.

“There can be no learning without action, and no action without learning”

As with most of life's challenges, we don't have to travel too far back to find someone who's already solved it. Step in Reg Revans, the founding father of 'action-learning' – the learning intervention that time forgot.

The philosophy behind action-learning

Born in 1907, Revans was a polymath – an astrophysicist, Olympic long jumper, author, and management consultant. Revans believed that for organisations to survive, their

rate of learning must be at least equal to the pace of change in the external world. This became known as Revans Law. This feels particularly poignant given the rate of change we're experiencing today.

Revans was critical of self-proclaimed experts and gurus. The philosophy at the heart of action-learning is that effective learning comes from real-life challenges, rather than classrooms and abstract concepts.

### Lessons from the Cavendish Laboratory

This philosophy stemmed from Revans' early career as a research physicist in the Cavendish Laboratory at the University of Cambridge. The laboratory was home to the leading scientific lights of the day, among them, several Nobel Prize winners. It was here that some of the world's biggest scientific breakthroughs took place, including the discovery of the neutron.

Revans paid close attention to what underpinned the success of the laboratory. He observed that scientific breakthroughs emerged from enquiry within peer groups. There was something about the use of insightful questioning that was critical for learning.

### From theory to practice

Revans later formalised this approach and developed his action-learning methodology. He went on to apply this in many organisations, including the UK National Coal Board in his role as Director of Education.

When pit managers faced problems, Revans encouraged them to get together in peer groups rather than bringing in experts. They would discuss the challenge and ask insightful questions to generate action and learning. Revans was able to link his action-learning approach to improved performance of the mines.

Unlike the coal industry itself, Revans' ideas took an upward trajectory. He went on to implement action-learning in the UK NHS and in Belgium. He was credited with increasing Belgium's industrial productivity growth rate above the US and Japan, and received the nation's top honour from the King of Belgium.

### The structure of action-learning sets

Action-learning is simple yet profound. The concept is straightforward to describe and initiate; peer groups get together in what is known as an 'action-learning set'; one person has uninterrupted time to share their challenge. Group members take turns asking insightful questions and the presenter of the challenge responds and reflects.



After the questioning, the presenter commits to action and each set member shares their reflections and takeaways. At the next action-learning set, the presenter gives an update on their challenge and how their action worked out for them.

The action-learning process can be adapted in different ways. For example, some sets incorporate time for the group to discuss the challenge while the presenter temporarily withdraws from the set and observes.

What remains consistent in action-learning is a structured process and a coaching mindset. Peers lend their curiosity to the problem at hand and avoid discussion, advice or telling. This mindset embodies the ethos and work of Nancy Kline (1999) who reminds us that the brain that contains the problem usually contains the solution – often the best one.

### Benefits beyond the surface

The effects of action-learning can be profound. Action-learning sets offer a transformative space for high-quality thinking and the sharing of alternative approaches. They also accelerate the development of critical human skills such as active listening, coaching and self-reflection.

Organisations adopting action-learning, such as Oxfam, Heineken and EY, report a whole host of additional benefits such as improved cross-functional working, greater ownership, emotional intelligence and progress against objectives.

Action-learning is low-cost and self-sustaining. An action-learning set can self-facilitate. External facilitation was something that Revans himself was critical of; this makes action-learning a suitable option for all organisations, including those with small or non-existent L&D budgets.

### Embedding learning

As for learning transfer, as the name suggests, action-learning is firmly rooted in action. Revans was of the view that “there can be no learning without action, and no action without learning”. Learning transfer is firmly embedded in the action-learning process. This makes demonstrating a return on investment relatively straightforward as action-learning sets directly work on real individual and organisational challenges.

While action-learning is not a panacea, it certainly responds to many of the rallying cries of experts in the L&D profession today, chiefly that learning ought to be linked to organisational needs, oriented around people’s challenges (Shackleton Jones 2019) and delivering real returns.



A call to action for the L&D community

So why aren't we talking more about action-learning? Why doesn't it have the same elevated position as mentoring, coaching and traditional training? Is it time? Is it skills? Is it the ability to innovate? Or is it, as I suspect, that we have simply forgotten.

Action-learning has been buried in the ashes of time for too long. It needs to play a far more central role in our L&D practice. It's time for an action-learning revolution.

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