

Action Learning Sets

An Introduction



Today's Learning Objectives

What is Action Learning?

What problem does it solve?

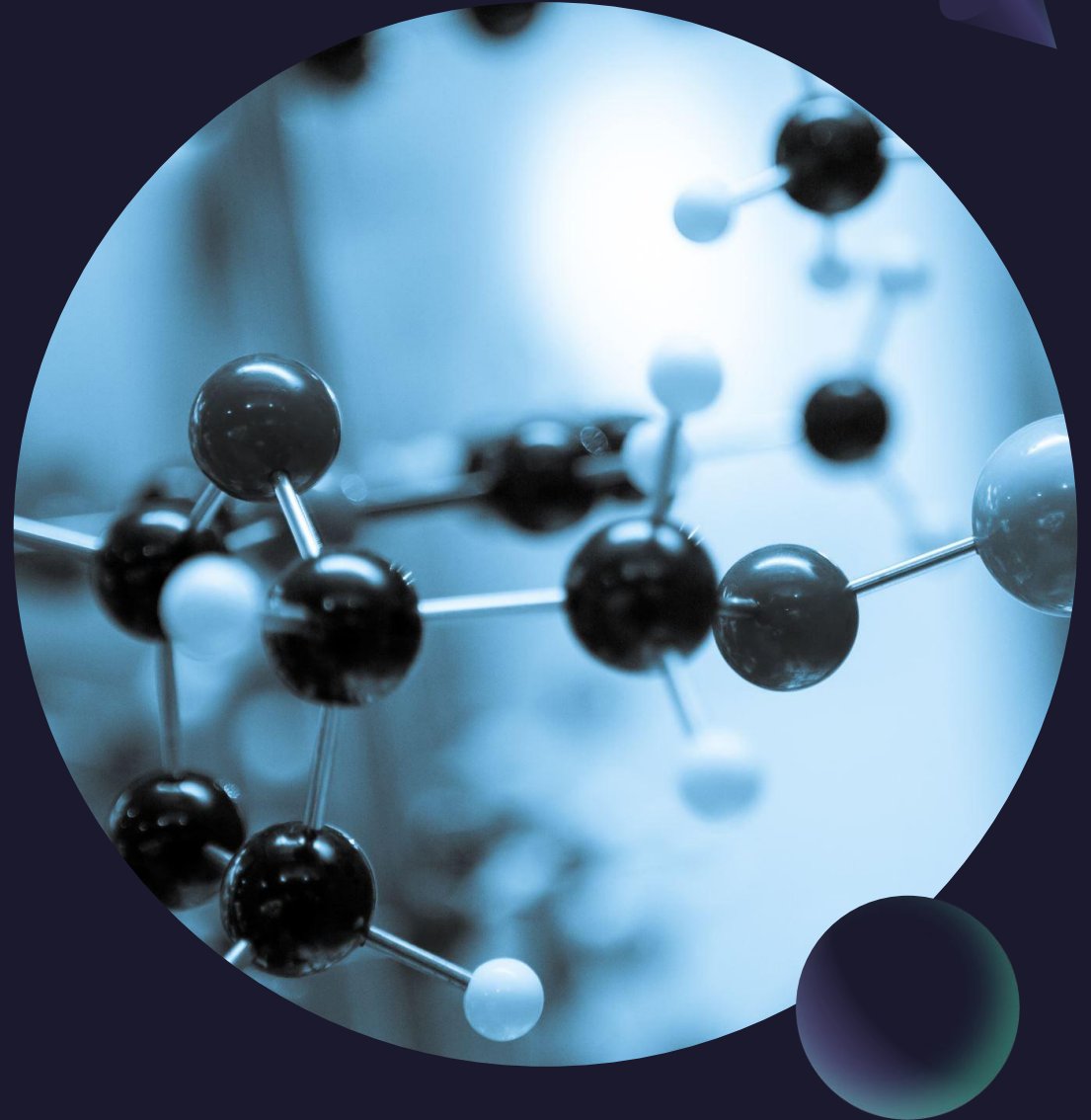
Who is it for?

How does it work?

What does it achieve?

Origins

Action learning sets were developed by British physicist and management consultant Reg Revans in the 1940s, originating from his observations of productive, collaborative problem-solving among scientists at Cambridge and later applied to improve management in the coal mining industry. Revans pioneered the method, focusing on peer-group learning through questioning, reflection, and taking action on real-time, complex organizational problems.



The Concept

“The central idea of this approach to human development is that of a set or small group of **COMRADES IN ADVERSITY** striving to learn with and from each other as they confess failures and expand victories.”

Reg Revans, 1980



Revans was convinced that for an organisation to survive its rate of learning must be at least equal to the rate of change in its external environment – this became known as Revans' Law.



Action learning uses open dialogue between group participants to help them think deeply and critically about their work, to plan for and take action.



Action learning is suited to situations where there are no simple or technical solutions, where the precedents might be few, and the way forward daunting and uncertain.

What is Action Learning?

Action Learning in Practice



Action Learning seeks to replace instruction with a facilitated approach to learning which enables individuals personal growth rather than a simple acquisition of knowledge.



Small groups of people with a common aim or purpose create a time and space to learn from each others' failures and victories.



Practical people learn from each other, create their own resources, identify their own problems and form their own solutions.

What problems does action learning solve?



Complex, Unstructured Challenges:

It provides a framework for tackling "wicked" problems that are difficult to define and have no immediate, obvious solutions.



Ineffective Traditional Training:

Unlike passive learning, it engages adults through practical, experience-based, and iterative, problem-solving.



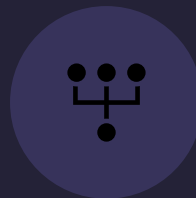
Siloed Working and Lack of Collaboration:

It breaks down organizational silos by creating teams that work together, share knowledge, and support each other.



Need for Rapid Leadership Growth:

It accelerates leadership development by forcing participants to take responsibility, reflect on outcomes, and make decisions.



Lack of Action and Accountability:

It ensures that solutions are actually implemented and reviewed, rather than just theorized, fostering accountability.

Key beneficiaries and applications

Leaders and Managers

To develop coaching skills and solve complex organizational problems.

Teams and Departments

To improve performance, build trust, and bridge gaps between management and staff.

Organisations

Used by businesses, non-profits, government agencies, and healthcare to foster innovation and resilience.

Individuals in Transition

To support personal development and prepare for new, more senior roles.

Strengthening Interagency Working (Public/Voluntary)

Action learning sets are used to break down silos between voluntary organizations and statutory bodies (e.g., health or children's services).

Example: The "What Works" initiative in Ireland used ALS for staff working with children and young people across different community and government organizations, helping them act differently and collaborate better.

Outcome: Improved trust and communication, helping to move work on that was previously stuck.

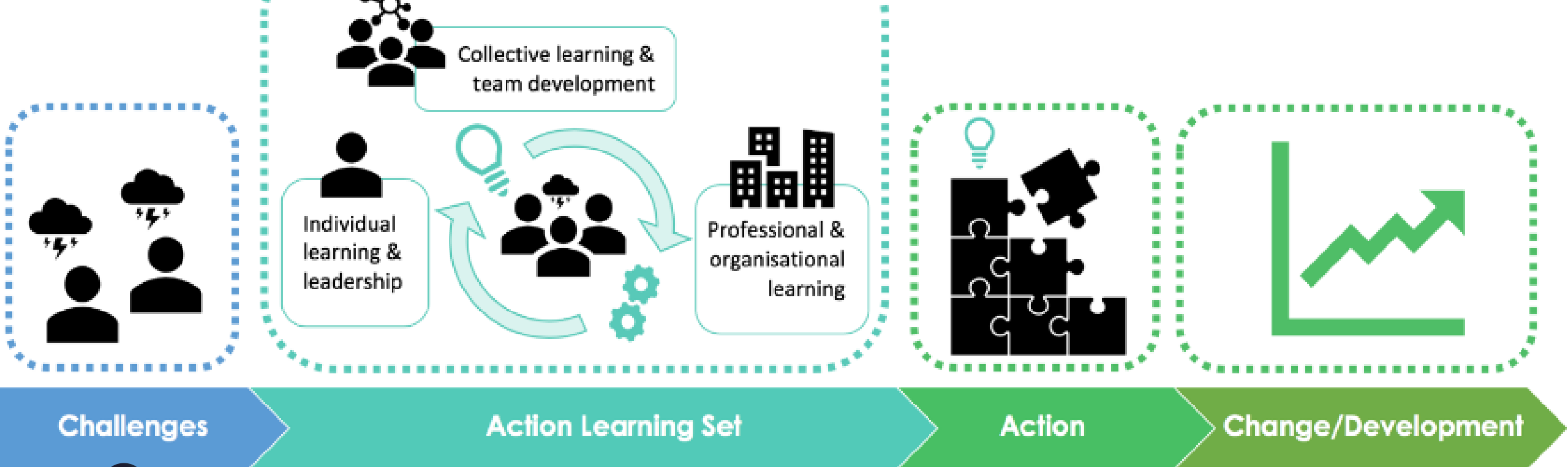
Components of Action Learning

The person

The problem or challenge

The set of colleagues or peers

Taking action on the problem
and learning from the action.



The Formula

- Identify the challenge or problem
- Process it through the Action Learning Set
- Take action and reflect
- Learn from the action

Problems not Puzzles

Is it real for you and for others?

Is it a genuine no right answer situation that is a problem rather than a puzzle?

If you can create some movement on this issue will you feel better?

Compare Puzzle and Problem

PUZZLE

I have a colleague who keeps referring people to me for Garda vetting despite me telling her that the work they are doing is not relevant work and they should not be vetted.

Am I correct in my understanding that this **UNSPECIFIED ROLE is not relevant work?**

PROBLEM

I have a colleague who frequently attempts to undermine me by questioning my judgement in relation to key aspects of my work.

What can I do to address this issue because it is making me very uncomfortable and causing me to doubt myself?



Periodic Meetings

1

Action
Learning Set 1
Week 0

2

Action
Learning Set 2
Week 6

3

Action
Learning Set 3
Week 12

4

Action
Learning Set 4
Week 18

5

Action
Learning Set 5
Week 24

6

Action
Learning Set 6
Week 30

Meeting Structure



Action Learning Sets usually consist of between six to eight members. This is just enough people to ensure that everyone will have at least one opportunity to present a problem to the group.



Too many people will mean that too much time passes before everybody has had the opportunity to present their problem.



Too few will mean there is not enough breadth of perspective or input to effectively support people with their problems.



Meeting Procedures

1. Check in and catch up
2. Set the agenda
3. Present the problem
4. Agree smart actions
5. Reflect



Waterford
Volunteer Centre
Ionad d'Obair Dheonach Port Láirge



No Statement Without a Question

In action learning, the principle "**No Statement without a question**" is a foundational ground rule, designed to ensure that team members focus on inquiry, exploration, and learning rather than rushing to provide solutions or advice.

THERE ARE NO SMART ANSWERS, ONLY SMART QUESTIONS

Promoting Growth Through Enquiry



DEFINITION

ALL STATEMENTS, OPINIONS, OR ADVICE MUST ONLY BE MADE IN RESPONSE TO A DIRECT QUESTION FROM ANOTHER TEAM MEMBER.



PURPOSE

FORCES TEAM MEMBERS TO LISTEN.
ENSURES THAT DIALOGUE REMAINS EXPLORATORY RATHER THAN ARGUMENTATIVE.
FOSTERS A CULTURE OF INQUIRY OVER A CULTURE OF "TELLING".



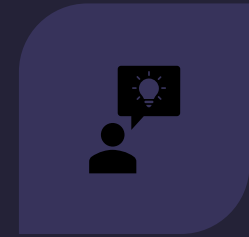
PREVENTING PREMATURE SOLUTIONS

PREVENTS PARTICIPANTS FROM JUMPING IMMEDIATELY TO SOLUTIONS.
ALLOWS TIME TO FULLY UNDERSTAND THE ROOT CAUSE OF COMPLEX, "UNSOLVABLE" PROBLEMS.



ROLE OF THE COACH

AN ACTION LEARNING COACH INTERVENES TO ENFORCE THIS RULE.
ENSURES THAT QUESTIONS ARE GENUINELY CURIOUS AND NOT JUST DISGUISED ADVICE.



IMPACT

DEVELOP HIGHER LEVELS OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE.
DEVELOP BETTER LISTENING SKILLS.
ARRIVE AT MORE INNOVATIVE SUSTAINABLE, AND COLLABORATIVE SOLUTIONS.



Example of the Rule in Action

Incorrect

Statement/Advice

"I think you should hire a new manager."

Correct

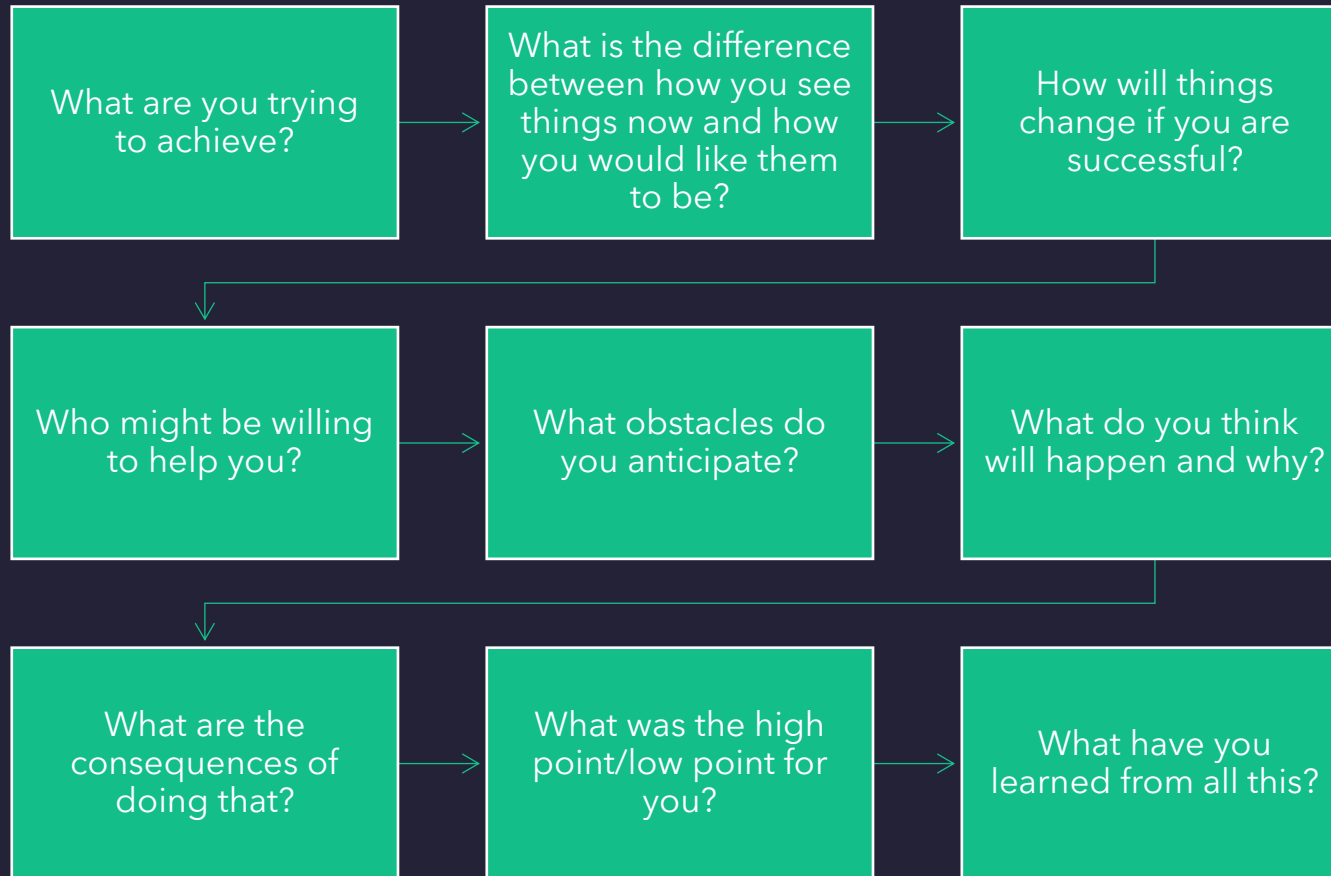
Question

"What options have you considered regarding team structure?"

-> *Presenter responds ->*

Follow-up question

"How might that option impact your budget?"



Smart Questions

Key Impacts of Action Learning



Improved
Leadership and
Problem-Solving



Capacity Building
and Innovation



Reduced Isolation
and Enhanced
Support



Shift in Culture



Practical, Applied
Learning



Summation

Action Learning Sets (ALS) have a profound, transformative impact on voluntary organisations by fostering a culture of collaborative problem-solving, enhancing leadership capabilities, and providing a structured, supportive environment to tackle complex, "wicked" challenges.

By moving away from traditional training to a model of "learning by doing," ALS helps people develop practical solutions while strengthening personal resilience.