

National Leadership and Innovation Centre for Nursing and Midwifery

Action Learning A Guide for Facilitators and Participants

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Introduction to Action Learning	4
I.	Introduction	4
II	Framework for Action Learning	5
	Content of action Learning Meeting discussions	6
III.	The Benefits of Action Learning	6
	Benefits for Action Learning Set members	7
	Benefits for Facilitators	7
	Benefits for Organisations	7
IV.	What makes for an effective Action Learning Set?	7
2.	People and Processes	9
I.	Roles of Facilitator, Set Members and Presenter	9
	The Facilitator Role	9
	Core Facilitator Skills	10
	The Presenter Role	12
	The Action Learning Set Members Role	13
	Action Learning Set – Ground Rules and ways of working	14
II.	The first Action Learning Set Meeting – step by step guide	14
III.	Ongoing Action Learning Set meetings	15
	Tips for building sustainability	15
	Appendix 1: Tools and Techniques for Action Learning Set Facilitators	17
	• <i>Useful questions</i>	18
	• <i>'Six honest men' (R. Kipling)</i>	19
	• <i>Critical incidences</i>	20
	• <i>Brainstorming</i>	20
	• <i>Key people in my life</i>	20
	• <i>Lifelines</i>	20
	• <i>Mapping my time and priorities</i>	22
	• <i>Taking a different view</i>	23
	Appendix 2: Useful Templates for Facilitators of Action Learning Sets	24
	• <i>Preparing for your Action Learning Set Meeting</i>	24
	• <i>Thinking about your role as a Facilitator</i>	25
	• <i>Action Learning Set members review</i>	27
	• <i>Facilitator review</i>	28
	Appendix 3: Frequently asked questions about participating in an Action Learning Set	30
	Appendix 4: Some additional Do's and Don'ts of Action Learning Sets	32
	Appendix 5: Giving Feedback	34
	References	36

1 - INTRODUCTION

I. INTRODUCTION

‘There is no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning’ (Revans, 1998).



Learning through experience is one of the most prevalent ways in which people learn, especially when we are young. As we move through formal education and on into the world of work, other forms of learning begin to dominate, such as learning through theory and through observation. Action Learning is a way of learning that is based on people addressing very real issues or on-the-job concerns in the company of a small group of their peers. This group is often referred to as an Action Learning Set (ALS). The ALS helps its members to think about problems/issues in more depth, but the real learning comes when action follows this thinking.

Weinstein, K (1999) said Action Learning is *‘a way of learning from our actions, and what happens to us and around us, by taking time to question, understand and reflect, so that we gain insight and consider how to act in the future.’*

Action Learning is a flexible, adaptable approach that can work as a tool for personal and for organisation development, as a way of solving problems, improving quality, exploring possibilities and inventing new ways of doing things. It is particularly good for dealing with the sorts of awkward issues which can keep us awake at night, issues which are “messy”, that is, where there is no obvious or easy way of addressing them because the issues themselves are politically complicated, culturally embedded, or even unprecedented.

It is based on a relatively simple but powerful approach that we learn best when we have time to pay attention to what is happening, sense things, time to explore and reflect on these things, generate options and approaches to how we might address them, and then actually addressing them and noticing what happens next (Table 1).

Action Learning is a particularly effective approach to helping people and organisations cope with change and uncertainty. It builds on people’s existing experience and understanding and, through a combination of support and challenge, empowers learners to do things differently at a pace and in a way that feels right.

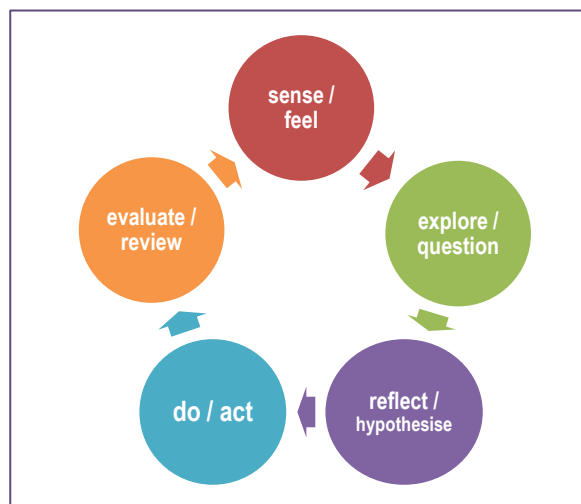


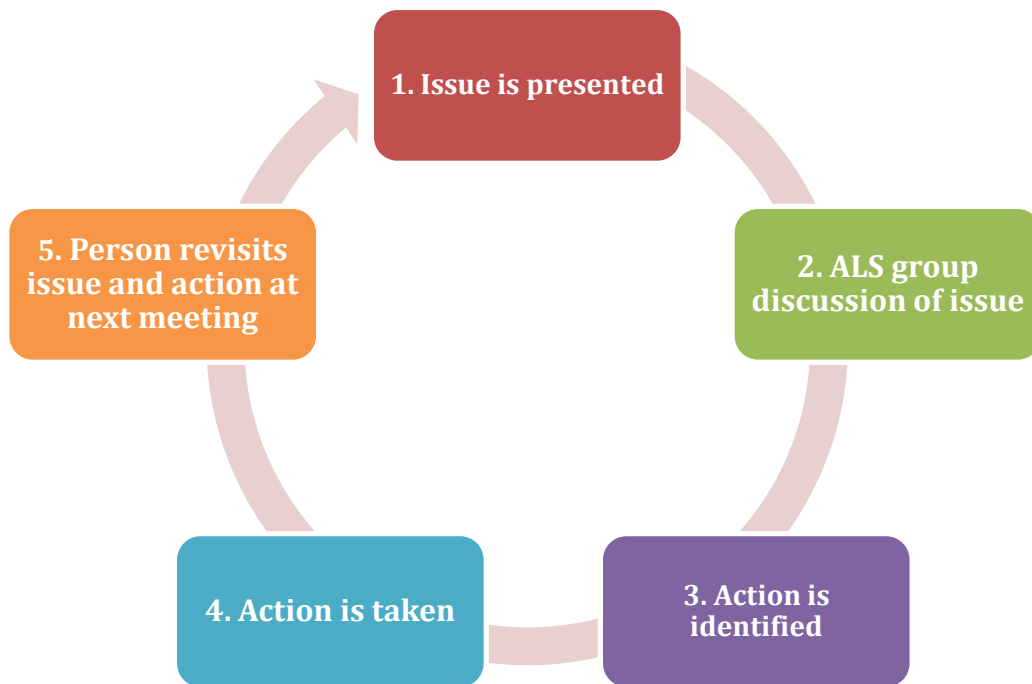
Table 1: Approach to Action Learning

This guide is not an exhaustive description of the process of Action Learning, but it is intended to give you a sufficient sense of Action Learning to enable you to make an informed choice about what you are getting into, should you decide to get involved either as a participant or as a facilitator

II. FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION LEARNING

What happens at an ALS meetings is, in many ways, quite simple. One ALS member at a time has an opportunity to focus on a problem, something he or she is currently grappling with and presents this problem to the group for discussion. Following the group discussion, the person then identifies what action they want to take, and they implement that action after the meeting. At a subsequent meeting of the ALS, they revisit the issue and recount what happened when they went to implement the action they identified.

The following framework outlines the 5 key steps involved in action learning:



By sharing the problem with a group of peers who are also dealing with possibly equally difficult issues, participants can frame and re-frame their understanding of work-related problems, and see the role that they play in these issues (both consciously and unconsciously). ALS members often note how good it feels to be able to “hand over” the responsibility for resolving issues to the group for a time and hear how others might approach the issue. The feedback and group interaction is a vital part of the process and is especially noted for helping ALS members to improve their judgement and reduce their stress levels.

Those who present issues at ALS meetings are asked to ‘contract’ with the ALS for some agreed action to be taken between meetings – these contracts are quite explicit as members are asked to review their actions and ‘account for themselves’ at future meetings. This accountability helps ensure action and helps the individual move from good intention to actual implementation. The reporting back to the ALS on action which has been taken can also prompt further probing and questioning and invite additional action if the matter has not yet been fully resolved.

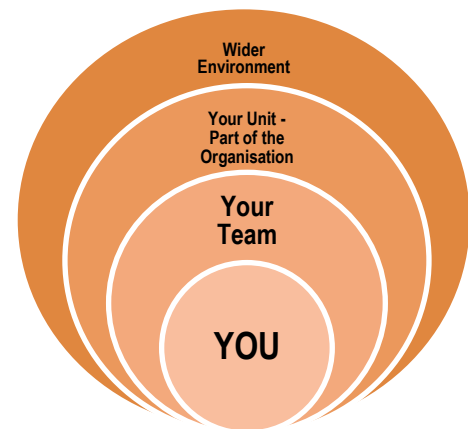
The Action Learning process is a cyclical one, with each meeting consists of a number of members taking the opportunity to present issues and have them discussed. The ALS meetings begin and last typically for a half- or full-day (depending on how large the ALS is and on people’s availability). The meetings, by-and-large, consist of the ALS members acting as consultants and ‘sounding boards’ to each other for the duration of the meeting.

THE CONTENT OF ACTION LEARNING MEETING DISCUSSIONS

So, what is discussed at the meetings? ALS members typically use the meetings to work on difficult or awkward work-related problems.

The issues or problems which people discuss in ALS meetings can arise from within individuals themselves (for example, issues relating to their career, their work-life balance or to their resilience), or they can emerge from outside e.g. the team, unit, division or even further afield. The ALS members help each other by exploring underlying issues, checking perceptions, questioning assumptions, trying to make problems more approachable if not manageable, and by creating, exploring and clarifying alternatives for action.

The diagram to the right is a useful map as to where problems can originate. It also shows that people work in a particular structure, and so the diagram helps to illustrate why problems can be so complex and, therefore, why they may need to be addressed at several levels.



In practice, anything can be discussed in an ALS meeting as long as it meets a number of general ground rules:

- **It is work related and/or is affecting your ability to work**
- **It affects you, and you have some level of ownership/responsibility for it**
- **You can begin to address it within the timescale of the Action Learning programme**
- **The ALS members feel comfortable in helping you deal with it.**

An important part of participating in Action Learning programmes is the simple but profound feeling of being heard, of having a group of peers listen to you with respect, without judgement and with a good degree of empathy, and usually having them validate and support you in trying to do your work.

All Action Learning is an attempt to strike the right balance between **programmed or expert knowledge**, that is, knowledge which comes from elsewhere, and **insightful questioning** – designed to elicit the knowledge, however tacit, that we already have within. There is a bias in ALS discussions towards questioning as it is assumed that, if members are asked the right questions, they can always go out and find whatever expert knowledge they might need to augment their learning. Learning to ask powerful questions is a key ‘take-away’ skill that people derive from participation in Action Learning.

III. THE BENEFITS OF ACTION LEARNING

There are many benefits to using Action Learning as an approach to personal and/or management development. Action Learning has been described as being like ‘free consultancy’ and ‘peer counselling’.

There is a focus on understanding and managing the particular problem or subject in question, and also to understanding one’s own style or approach and its role in the problem. In other words, there may be a problem-solving agenda which is intended to benefit the organisation, and there is usually a personal development benefit too for the individual ALS members. Fundamentally, like all development, Action Learning is about encouraging change. Here are some key benefits that can be gained from Action Learning:

BENEFITS OF ACTION LEARNING SETS

- **Stimulate learning and creativity**
- **Enable sharing of experiences across boundaries**
- **Offer support in challenging times**
- **Help identify new ways of looking at things**
- **Help solve problems**
- **Can motivate individual action**
- **Give an opportunity for critical reflection and review**
- **Help with the follow-through on planned change**

BENEFITS FOR ACTION LEARNING SET MEMBERS

- Broadening of perspective through being able to learn from others' experiences of dealing with similarly-complex issues.
- An opportunity to become involved in a network of peers which can provide life-long support.
- Insight into the causes of conflict and difficulty at work and resolution of difficulties at work.
- Time to think about the important but non-urgent things that are often neglected in work.
- Time-out and a change of pace to allow you to reflect, and be refreshed by other perspectives.
- Insight into your own coping strategies and those of your peers.
- Enhanced communication and problem-solving skills including listening and questioning skills.
- Support and feedback from peers.
- Support when facing major challenges and when trying to transform the way things are done
- Enabled to think proactively and deal with issues from a problem solving perspective.
- Adopt solution focused techniques in dealing with problems.

BENEFITS FOR FACILITATORS

- An Action Learning focus can change the way people lead in that it encourages questions; open, probing, and challenging questions, rather than just giving advice.
- Gain valuable insight into the causes of conflict and difficulty at work.
- Enhanced communication and problem-solving skills including listening and questioning skills.
- Insights into group dynamics, personal values and assumptions about 'what makes people tick'.
- Skills in consulting and coaching people to resolve their own dilemmas and problems.

BENEFITS FOR ORGANISATIONS

- Action Learning facilitates participants to both reflect on work-based issues and, through discussion with other participants, to formulate actions and decisions that they then implement back on-the-job. In this way, problems are addressed, performance can improve, and people are generally happier in their work.

Action Learning is typically very highly evaluated by those who take part. A recent Action Learning programme for nurse and midwife leaders showed that the participants rated it very favourably as a way of solving practice problems through group discussion:

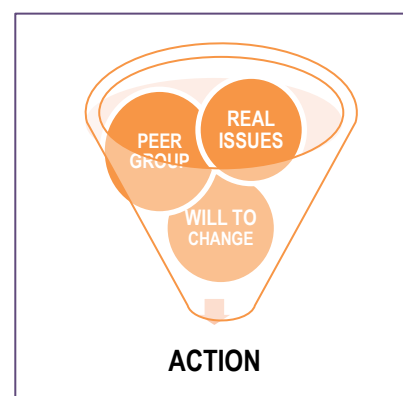
"Action learning was seen as beneficial in providing opportunities for participants to share experiences of practice problems and find possible solutions to them through group processes. Particular strengths of the intervention were its focus on sharing ideas and concerns about practice and its action orientation in group discussions."

McNamara et al (2014)

IV. WHAT MAKES FOR AN EFFECTIVE ACTION LEARNING SET?

There are a number of elements or components that are necessary for an effective ALS:

Real issues: Action Learning is based on grappling with real-life practice-related problems, especially those which are open-ended in nature and do not have a right or wrong answer.



Group learning: Action Learning is collaborative and occurs with and from a group of others who are also engaging in real problems and situations.

Will to change: learning occurs when people are genuinely interested in changing and take responsibility for solving their own problems.

Action-based: members of the group are concerned with implementing action; they are not simply seeking theoretical solutions to problems.

Group Composition: The ALS is usually made up of anything between 5 and 8 members. Above this, it can be difficult to ensure that everyone gets heard. In addition,

- Action Learning works best when the ALS members are peers, that is, at the same general level within the organisation. In order to facilitate open participation, membership must be voluntary, and ALS members should not be in a line management relationship.
- Thought needs to be given to the membership mix. Ideally the composition of the group (in terms of diversity of skills, style and experience) would reflect the purpose for which the Action Learning programme was established – for example, if it is a programme designed generally to facilitate leadership development, it is useful to have a variety of different potential leaders in each ALS.

Organisational Support: in order for people to participate in Action Learning, they usually need to have the support of their line manager. All members, no matter how senior, can be supported by having clarity of focus and mission so that they can align their learning with the strategy and direction of the organisation overall.

Convenience: it makes sense to arrange the ALS meetings at a time and a place that is most convenient for members.

Finally, of course, it is the people who make the Action Learning Set effective: the ALS members and the ALS facilitator.

2 – PEOPLE AND PROCESSES

I. ROLES OF FACILITATOR, PRESENTER and SET MEMBERS

A. THE FACILITATOR ROLE:

Typically, Action Learning Sets are facilitated by external facilitators, that is, people who are external to the part of the organisation from which the ALS is drawn. The role of the facilitator:

- coordinating (ensuring meetings are scheduled, ALS members are informed, rooms are booked, etc.)
- advising on process and group dynamics,
- coaching and helping the ALS members to become more enquiry-oriented than advocacy-oriented (powerful questions are essential to good exploration and learning);
- guiding the ALS in their exploration of subjects,
- helping the ALS work effectively through ensuring the right balance of support and challenge, task-orientation and people- or relationship-orientation and
- reviewing the process at the end of each meeting (see Appendix 2 for templates).

The facilitator is there to ensure that the presenter is supported and helped, by ensuring the appropriate balance of support for the presenter (if it seems s/he needs it) with challenge to the presenter (if it seems no new perspective or learning is emerging).

The facilitator is also there to ensure that the ALS works well – in this regard, there are task-related things that the facilitator must attend to, as well as process-related issues. A summary of the task-related aspects and process/relationship aspects of facilitating an ALS is captured in the following diagram.



The facilitator should act when appropriate to prevent digression, to ensure that questions are formulated in a non-leading way, and to keep things to time. This may involve, from time to time, pointing out helpful and unhelpful ways in which the group might interact (for example, pointing out that the group seems to get a bit lost if they stray out beyond their area of control/influence). The facilitator also ensures, in as far as possible, that the ALS meetings afford a 'safe space' for people to learn – this means that it has to be safe enough for people to admit to their own ignorance or area for development or feeling lost, without being judged or ignored.

The facilitator may intervene with a question or statement, such as “Can you put that in another way?” or “That feels like a bit you are trying to give advice...” or “I’m wondering if we have lost sight of some aspects of this issue” (e.g. the presenter’s own way of being/doing things, or the presenter’s team relationships, or other demands/pressures which might be playing a role in the wider environment – see diagram on page 4). The facilitator might also encourage the group to ensure that they are giving each other time and space and treating each other with respect, etc. Many of the interventions the facilitator uses, especially in the early days of the ALS, may be about encouraging open questioning and avoiding giving advice.

In these ways, the facilitator sets the tone for the meeting. S/he can also demonstrate the actions of being a good member (listening, attending to others, redirecting if necessary, empathising, etc.). The facilitator can interject at any time - these interjections will taper off as the ALS members become familiar with the process.

In the early days of an ALS, the facilitator can also demonstrate “helpful” behaviours. This includes not giving advice but instead asking questions, reflecting back, challenging and supporting where appropriate. He or she sometimes holds up a mirror to the ALS members to let them see how they are working and what are processes that help or hinder. An ALS facilitator can also, where appropriate, make it OK to express emotions by expressing his or her own, thereby giving permission to others to do so.

CORE FACILITATOR SKILLS:

Facilitation is about making it as easy as possible for people (ALS members) to learn, through ensuring that there is appropriate attention to the task at hand (Action Learning) and the processes/relationships that are needed to achieve this task. In Action Learning Sets, the primary role of the facilitator is to **‘hold the process’** and ensure that focus remains on the learning about real issues.

Many of the core skills for facilitating ALS meetings have already been described in this document. It is likely that you already have many of these skills and that you will be building on your own acquired wisdom and understanding about adult learning, communication, and interpersonal relationships.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS	<p>ALS facilitators should, in general, be good with people. They do not have to be extroverts, but they should be able to meet people, form relatively easy relationships from the outset, be comfortable around people and have an understanding of the normal complexity of human beings.</p> <p>Facilitators should be able to tolerate and even meet with compassion what ALS members themselves may find difficult at times, including occasional tension, emotion, rigidity, uncertainty, and blinkered thinking.</p>
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ALS facilitators should be good communicators – in particular, they should be good at listening and good at questioning. The skill of **active listening** is relatively simple to understand but can be a challenge to implement. It requires giving complete attention to the other person as they speak, noticing what they're not saying, paying attention to their body language as well as their words, and – most critically – not thinking or analysing while they are speaking but waiting till they have finished before making sense of what they say.

Listening can be improved even further when it is accompanied by **reflecting back** key words, which can really reinforce the message of what someone is saying (for example, someone may be talking about an event which he or she found challenging or distressing, and simply repeating back “distressing” can help them appreciate the impact the event had). Reflecting back can also help us check for understanding (“so, what you’re saying is that...”). **Summarising** is another skill that is useful, especially when trying to bring a particular piece of work to a close.

Questioning and enquiry are core to engaging people in further thought and help to deepen clarity and understanding. Facilitation includes encouraging people to reflect, to develop insight, to become more curious, and to test assumptions may not even have been in awareness. In general, closed questions are used to clarify and narrow the discussion, and open questions are used to broaden a discussion and explore something from different perspectives. Some examples of good questions for Action Learning are given below – these questions can come from both facilitators and ALS members. As a facilitator, you may find your role will include educating ALS members about good and bad questioning practices. The kinds of ‘bad’ questions that you need to be especially vigilant about are leading questions, which are often really just advice dressed up as enquiry (e.g. “did you try talking with your manager before implementing that plan?” or “do you think, in hindsight, it would have been useful to...?”).

Some examples of good questions to ask include:

Clarifying/Focussing questions	Probing/enquiring questions	Action-orientated questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happened? • How do you see it? • What makes you say that? • What else could explain the situation? • Can you say more about how you felt? • What will happen if you do nothing? • Who will be affected if you are successful? • Who might help you? • What obstacles or barriers do you envisage? • How risky is this? • What’s your role here? • What the most important (or most difficult) aspect of this for you? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What’s the difference between things now and things as you want them to be? • Can you explain more about that? • Who benefits from things as they are now? • Who else matters to this process? • Can you give an example? • What happened...and...? • Who are ‘they’? • How do you feel? • What assumptions are you making about? • What have you tried so far? • What would tell you if things were getting worse or better? • How do you know that? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If all decisions rested on you, what would you do? • If the budget wasn’t a factor, what would you do? • What are your options for action now? • What other possibilities exist? • What happens if you do nothing? • Where could you find out more about this? • Who else might have an interest, could get in your way or could help you? • What are you going to do for yourself between now and when we next meet? • What’s the first step you can take?

<p>GIVING FEEDBACK</p>	<p>It can be useful to have some feedback-giving skills so that you can be a mirror to the ALS and give individual members, and the group as a whole, a sense of how they behave. You might want to flag to the ALS at the outset that giving feedback is one type of intervention that can happen at ALS meetings, and there may even be a ground-rule about always checking with someone before giving feedback (“would you like some feedback right now?”).</p> <p>Some pointers to giving feedback are included in Appendix 5.</p>
<p>SUPPORTING AND CHALLENGING SKILLS</p>	<p>Supporting and challenging are other skills which you may have to approach the ALS members so that they can do it for each other. Getting the balance right between these two is key to creating the right climate for learning to flourish. At times, you will need to add support and, at other times, you will need to add challenge.</p> <p>Some things you can do to engage support and challenge are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage ALS members to build on others’ interventions – this can really deepen understanding by gently pushing people to go beyond what they have already explored. • Preface your question, especially if you’re not sure if the presenter is ready for the challenge, with something like “I hope you don’t find this too challenging, but I’m wondering if...” • Challenge can be offered through inviting the presenter to consider the issue from the perspective of other stakeholders. • Challenge can also come from inviting people to put themselves back in the centre of their consideration of the situation, to think about what part they play(ed) in bringing this situation about and how the situation is impacting on them directly or indirectly. • Support can be expressed directly (“That really sounds like it must have been difficult for you”), and through empathy (“I’m getting a sense myself of how stressful that feels”). • Support can also be offered non-verbally through appropriate body language (facing the person but not head-on, making good eye contact, nodding, smiling, conveying emotion through facial expression, etc.). • Support can also come from knowing that others care about us – as a facilitator, you might have to remind the ALS to think really about how to help the presenter rather than focusing on the team norms and practices or on the organisation’s culture (“so, what would be helpful to Xxx right now?” or “let’s move back to thinking about XXXX is in this situation right now...”). <p>Support is also demonstrated by tolerance and acceptance of others’ emotions – as an ALS facilitator, you may need to approach this and even to educate ALS members about how they can let people be emotional without needing to ‘fix’ or ‘rescue’ them.</p> 

B. THE PRESENTER ROLE:

The role of the person presenting (Presenter) their issue/problem is to:

- describe the issue / tell 'the story' of what is going on, and how it feels now
- clarify anything that other Set members need clarified
- take/answer only questions that are comfortable for them
- decides on action they will take and what they are prepared to commit to
- report on ensuing events and what happened at next ALS meeting
- participate in the review of the ALS meeting and process

C. THE ACTION LEARNING SET MEMBERS ROLE:

The role of the Action Learning Set Member is to:

- listen attentively and attend to what is said and to what is not said
- empathise, support, and gently challenges when it is appropriate to do so
- ask questions encourage, explore and probe. Examples of 'Useful Questions' are in Appendix 1.
- feed their thoughts and feelings back honestly and sensitively
- never judge, diagnose, advise, or impose their values or views on the Presenter or others within the ALS.
- participate in the review of the ALS meeting and process

ACTION LEARNING SET – GROUND RULES AND WAYS OF WORKING

In addition to the previous discussion, there are other conventions or ways of working which are standard in Action Learning. These are not optional, and it is important that ALS members are aware of them.

Confidentiality

- What happens in the Action Learning Set must remain confidential to the ALS members and the facilitator. In general, the ground rule is that ALS members do not discuss the content of ALS meetings outside of the ALS meetings. The exception is where:
 - a presenter asks for help/advice/support from another ALS member between ALS meetings;
 - the presenter initiates the discussion – i.e. if you bump into each other it is not OK to for you to ask how the other person is getting on. It is OK to discuss an issue if the presenter starts talking about it.

Presenter's Space

- The ALS meeting is designed to give each presenter a safe place to talk about challenges and associated feelings, admit need and ask for help.
- The space belongs to the presenter. Other ALS members should not tell their own stories, even if very similar, or give advice (unless it is specifically requested). This can be a real challenge, especially if an ALS member can see a possible solution with great clarity and the presenter appears to have a blind spot.

Enquiry and Questioning

- Open-ended questions work best, e.g. questions beginning with who, what, why, where, when and how, or such as "can you tell us more about...?" ALS members should listen carefully to each other's questions and, if it is helpful, should ask something that follows on from the previous train of questioning.
- The role of the ALS members is to ask enquiring questions that are designed to help the presenter and not to argue a point or demonstrate their own cleverness. Of course, questions of clarification are the exception in that they are designed to help the listener in the first instance. ALS members should guard against being competitive with each other in their questioning.

Contract and Attendance

- ALS members make a 'contract' with the other ALS members to agree to these conventions and to turn up to every meeting unless it is absolutely impossible. The contract is for a fixed period of time decided by the group. At the end of that period, the ALS will review whether it wishes to continue to meet.
- Inevitably, there will be a small number of absences. It can be useful to discuss in advance how absences should be handled – this can include (i) how they should be notified, and (ii) the minimum number of people required to make a meeting viable.
- If a member decides to leave the ALS, they are asked come to a meeting and talk about that decision because it affects everybody.

Equality of Opportunity

- In any group, there will be people who are quieter and who may appear to have less need of support. ALS work, however, because there is an understanding that all participants are learners and that there is an expectation that everyone would present in more or less equal measure.

Appropriate Content

- Action Learning is intended to enable people to perform better in their current and future roles. Any issue that is relevant to a person's ability to perform is, therefore, appropriate for presentation. The exception to this is where an ALS may decide that it cannot offer the support or challenge that is needed – such cases are extremely rare¹.

II. THE FIRST ALS MEETING - A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

The following is an outline of what happens at Action Learning meetings, including an outline of a typical 50-minute ALS discussion process with indicative timings.

1. The ALS members decide among themselves the order in which they will present their issue/problem) and the time allocated to each person.
2. The presenter talks about their problem or issue, using free association and with possible occasional prodding from the facilitator. The presenter can tell the story in whatever way she or he likes, with encouragement to talk about the feelings associated with their story. The ALS members listen (and sometimes take notes of whatever comes into their mind as they listen), in particular focusing on what may lie behind or beneath the story and on their own feelings and associations. They do not interrupt the presenter at this stage. *(10 minutes)*.
3. The ALS members explore and ask questions designed to help the presenter come to a deeper understanding of the issue. They do not give advice, tell anecdotes, pass judgment or talk about how it compares to their own situation. They assist the presenter by considering the issue and reviewing options. It can be useful for the ALS members to re-state the problem, as they heard it, to ensure their understanding and to help the presenter hear how the problem feels to others.

It is important to note that the presenter generally stays silent while the members are speaking but is given an opportunity to return to anything she or he found significant (preferably without defence or correction). Questions of clarification may also be taken at this point (as long as they are not leading questions designed to suggest a 'solution').

(20 minutes)

4. The presenter uses the post-discussion time as she or he wishes – they may pick up on certain points, may ask for more detail on others, may speculate about what might happen next, etc. The presenter then summarises the ALS's discussion of his/her issue and identifies the action she or he is going to take. (At a future ALS meeting, the presenter will report on the action they took since this ALS meeting.)

(10 minutes)

5. The ALS reflects on the group process.

(10 minutes)

6. The ALS may take a break or may continue with the meeting, moving to another presenter, and the above process (steps 2 to 5) are repeated for this second presenter.

This process generally takes about 90 minutes for each presentation. The time required can vary, of course, depending on the number of ALS members and the complexity of the issue. It is possible to run shorter (e.g.

¹ For example, if a ALS member wanted to talk about an active and highly destructive addiction that was affecting their performance, the ALS might decide that it could amount to unhelpful collusion if they were to talk about it, and they could find it difficult to maintain confidentiality in this instance too.

30- or 60-minute) or longer (120-minute) presentations. There are no hard-and-fast rules as to how long a presentation should be.

A factor which may have a bearing on how much time is needed per presentation is how 'urgent' or 'acute' things feel for a particular group. For example, an ALS of six newly-appointed managers to a new service might all have pressing issues and problems and so they might agree that they each get a 30-minute opportunity at each meeting of the ALS to talk about what they have been dealing with since the last meeting.

There are no absolute rules defining how long an ALS should meet for (for example, a half-day or a day) or how much time should elapse between meetings. Clearly, factors such as availability and need will play a part in determining the length and frequency of meetings. Typically ALS meetings take place on a monthly basis.

If you are facilitating an ALS meeting for the first time, further guidance is given in Appendix 2.

III. ONGOING ACTION LEARNING SET MEETINGS

At each subsequent ALS meeting, the norm is that there would be an opportunity for the ALS members to reconnect with each other and to settle back in the Action Learning ways of working. This reconnection can be achieved by inviting people to arrive slightly earlier and to have breakfast or lunch together (if a half-day meeting) or, if that is not possible, by setting aside 15-20 minutes at the beginning of the meeting to allow everyone to say how they are / have been since the last meeting. The facilitator might want to remind people of the ground-rules that they agreed at the first meeting.

Time should also be set aside at the beginning of the meeting to hear back from those who resolved to take action on an issue which they presented at the last meeting. This hearing back is an important part of the support and challenge that underpin Action Learning.

TIPS FOR BUILDING SUSTAINABILITY

In the normal course of time, people's enthusiasm can wax and wane, so it is not unusual for there to be something of a diminution in excitement and commitment from members after the ALS has become established. This is part of the 'forming-storming-norming-performing' cycle of group development that was described by Tuckman (1965) forty years ago and which still holds true today.

What can a Facilitator and/or ALS members do to try to ensure sustainability? Here are some tips:

- Planned, well-organised and predictable meetings will make it easier for people to make the effort that is required to attend. Arrange the first meeting and then let the ALS decide on the schedule, location, venue, timing, etc. of future meetings.
- The default assumption is that all ALS members make a conscious commitment to attend, and they will honour this commitment. If someone cannot attend a meeting for whatever reason, they should not be made to feel guilty about this – guilt is not a good foundation for learning and guilt can be an impediment to reconnecting.
- From time to time, it can be a good idea for the facilitator to check in with the ALS members, as a group, as to how they are finding the Action Learning meetings – this can be done informally as well as formally. The facilitator can also ask the ALS members if there is anything about his/her facilitation style that they would like to be different. It is a good idea for there to be a formal check-in somewhere around half-way into the programme (assuming the programme has a pre-defined duration) and, of course, all initiatives such as this should be formally evaluated at the end.

- It is equally good for the facilitator to ask the ALS members if they are still happy with the ground-rules or if they want to drop or add any. The group can also be asked to rate itself on its adherence to the ground-rules (each person gives a score out of 10 and the scores can be used to generate discussion as to why people have given the scores they gave).
- People will continue to participate at a high level when the meetings are relevant and engaging. Like most development initiatives, Action Learning is most effective and relevant when it is meeting people's needs. It can be a useful exercise for all ALS members to reflect on their own needs from time to time during the programme: are the needs that they identified at the outset still current? Are other needs emerging? If other needs are emerging, can they be met within an Action Learning programme?
- Keeping it real – real people, real problems, real time. Action Learning requires honesty, emotional intelligence, an interest in change and a willingness to take risks. If these are not present, it is likely that the learning will be limited.
- Tuckman (1965) suggests that one of the ways in a group can be facilitated to move from norming (when people have resolved differences and learned to be comfortable with each other) to performing (when people are able to really focus and achieve things together) is to delegate more to the group. In this instance, the facilitator could step back a little and invite ALS members to conduct reviews, to be the 'questions coach', to watch out for advice-giving, even to facilitate a full presentation round.

Appendix 1: Tools and Techniques for Action Learning Set Facilitators

SOME EXERCISES TO HELP PEOPLE IDENTIFY ISSUES AND IDEAS

Introduction:

Each of the tools and techniques is presented in terms of their background, their aims or purpose, when and why a particular technique might be useful in an ALS and key points for you to consider as a facilitator. The group member who is actively offering an issue for discussion will be described as the presenter while the other participants at that point in time are described as ALS or group members. The use of the tools and techniques that are presented is optional. It is possible to have a very productive ALS using few if any, tools and techniques. As a facilitator, you should consider which tool will be most useful in bringing about the presenter's desired outcome.

As with any new tool or technique, a reflective learning approach can be very helpful as you develop your skills as a facilitator of action learning. Therefore you are encouraged to reflect on whether, and in what ways, the use of a particular tool/technique added to the learning that took place as an issue was explored and the extent to which you as a facilitator managed the group processes within the set. The following tools/techniques are discussed in the remainder of this toolkit.

1. Useful questions
2. 'Six honest men' (*R. Kipling, 1902*)
3. Critical incidences
4. Brainstorming
5. Key people in my life
6. Lifelines
7. Mapping my time and priorities
8. Taking a different view

'Useful Questions'

Background	Questioning is absolutely central to effective action learning. This technique is a simple one that captures questions but leaves the presenter with the power to choose which questions are more useful to them in terms of helping them narrow their issue down or, indeed, see it from a different perspective.
Procedure	<p>As the person presenting the issue describes the situation, the ALS members will have questions. These questions are captured on a flipchart. Once all the questions are written down, the facilitator asks the presenter to identify which question is the most useful/challenging. Once the most pertinent question is identified by the presenter, the ALS member who asked the question is invited to restate it, and the presenter chooses how to respond.</p> <p>The following are some general, useful questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What... • How.... • Where ... • When..... • Who... • How else could you describe this issue? • How can the ALS best support you with this issue? • What have you learned so far in presenting this issue? • What is the most important aspect of this issue for you just now? • What I think you said is... XYZ... is that the central issue for you just now? • Can I just check I have understood what the key issue is for you...? • What makes this an issue for you right now? • Have you contributed to the problem? • What question has been most challenging for you so far? • What would be the most challenging question we could ask you just now? • What question are you avoiding asking yourself? • What have you considered/ tried so far? • What options are there for you in managing this issue? • What other options are there? • What else? • What single thing that you could do would make the most difference to this situation?
Reflection and Action	This can be repeated on several occasions, with the presenter choosing a number of 'useful questions'. Having reflected on these questions, the presenter can decide what actions they now wish to take.

‘Six honest serving men’ (Rudyard Kipling)

Background	<p><i>I keep six honest serving-men (They taught me all I knew); Their names are What and Why and When and How and Where and Who. I send them over land and sea, I send them east and west; But after they have worked for me, I give them all a rest.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Rudyard Kipling (1902)</p> <p>Asking clarification questions such as ‘Who, What, Where, When, How and Why’ can be helpful if ALS members are finding it difficult to see all aspects of an issue or are focussed only on one element.</p>
Procedure	<p>The presenter describes their issue from 6 perspectives of ‘What, Why, When, Where, Who and How’. The ALS members then ask further clarifying questions to help the presenter gain a deeper understanding of their issue.</p> <div data-bbox="922 824 1337 1279" data-label="Diagram"> <pre> graph TD Issue((Issue)) --- What((What?)) Issue --- Why((Why?)) Issue --- Where((Where?)) Issue --- Who((Who?)) Issue --- When((When?)) Issue --- How((How?)) </pre> </div>
Reflection and Action	<p>Once the presenter has fully described the issue they can decide on what aspect to focus their attention and energy.</p>

Critical Incidents

Background	Participants review their diaries over the last week or two for anything that presented them with any difficulty.
Procedure	<p>They use this issue to ask for their group's help and advice in relation to how they might have handled the situation differently or better. The group can also work in pairs or small groups to do this exercise too.</p> <p>If nobody has a particularly 'critical' incident to talk about, another way to do this exercise is to have everybody write on a piece of paper the most significant incident they had in the last two weeks – one of these pieces of paper is picked at random as the basis for deciding which group member should present.</p>
Reflection and Action	Having the opportunity to reflect on 'critical incidents' ALS members can decide if they need to change or take action and what that would entail.

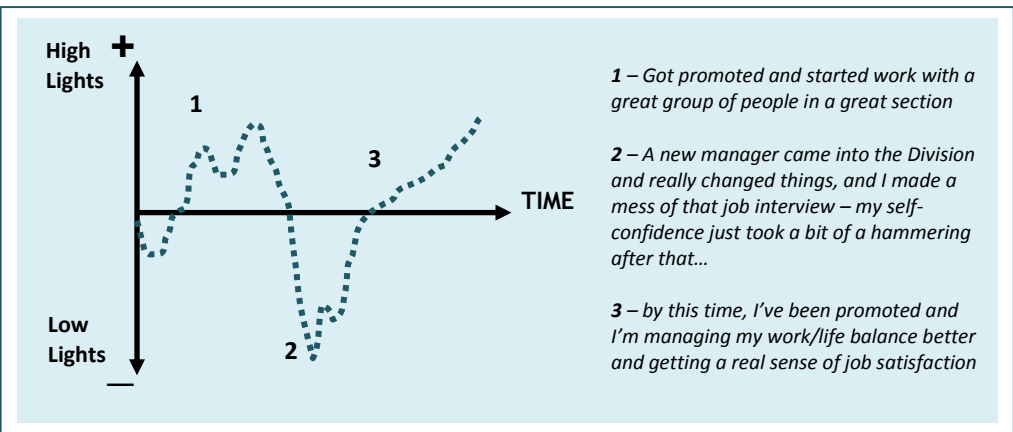
Brainstorming

Background	Brainstorming can be helpful when ALS members are finding it difficult to think of alternative courses of action that might be taken to address an issue. It is also a great way of injecting a bit of energy and of generating new ideas.
Procedure	<p>All members of the group are invited to identify ideas/options, with encouragement to generate as many ideas as possible.</p> <p>The facilitator also encourages creative, 'crazy' solutions, making the process as enjoyable as possible.</p> <p>Push the ALS members to freewheel with their ideas, building on and developing ("and if we did that, we could probably also get XX") rather than deriding others' ideas ("no, that wouldn't work because..."). They are especially encouraged to avoid censoring themselves ("I couldn't say that – that would sound stupid" or "I can't suggest that because they tried that before in XX (rival) service").</p> <p>Capture all of the ideas on a flipchart and post them on the walls. The presenter identifies criteria by which suggestions can be evaluated (for example, resource implications, current capacity, easiness, etc.).</p> <p>The ALS members can offer suggestions, but the presenter is the only person who can decide which criteria are important to them. It can be helpful to flipchart this step too. The ideas generated are then evaluated against these criteria.</p>
Reflection and Action	The presenter identifies what actions he or she may take as a result of the brainstorming activity.

Key People in my Life

Background	Participants 'map out' the key people that can influence their success or failure in work (inside the organisation and outside, up and down from them in the hierarchy). This can help people to identify relationships that might require additional attention and then use the group as a sounding board to help them identify strategies for bringing about any improvement that is needed.
Procedure	ALS members identify and map a full range of people who are influential in the work environment. It can be helpful to identify how strong the linkages are between the ALS member and the people, or groups of people, on the map. This can highlight relationships or networks that can be developed and in so doing increase the ALS members networks.
Reflection and Action	Action Learning Set members can reflect on the key people in their environment and decide how to maintain and build relationships and networks.

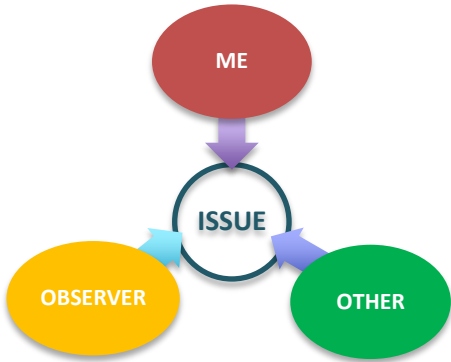
Lifelines

Background	This is an exercise that is best at the beginning or relatively early in the life of the Action Learning group and involves everyone completing the graph of their life ('life' can be restricted to career, if preferred – this makes it less personal but also, for some people, much less threatening) and choosing to disclose three events or times in their life/career that were of special significance.
Procedure	<p>The basic graph template that people are asked to use is as follows (heavy line in diagram below). The dashed line and numbered points represent a sample completed graph:</p> 
Reflection and Action	Action Learning Set members can reflect on their own 'lifeline' and identify if there are discernible patterns associated with their 'high' or 'low' experiences. They can choose to present these to the ALS and can decide what actions they now wish to take.

Mapping my time and priorities

Background	<p>The Healthcare environment is often busy and pressurized with ALS members juggling between competing demands on their time and energy. Often we hear of that there are 'not enough hours in the day' with important work is not being given the attention it deserves.</p>
Procedure	<p>Participants complete a simple pie chart of where their time goes in relation to generic categories of work based on a 'typical' week (if they have their diaries handy, it's even easier).</p> <p>They can review their usage of time across the different categories against the importance of that activity. If there is a mismatch between how time is spent and how time should be spent, this should prompt some questions which they can ask the group to help with.</p> <div data-bbox="724 568 1362 963"> <p>Time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Meetings ■ Administration ■ Planning ■ Quality Improvement </div>
Reflection and Action	<p>For example, if managers are not getting to spend any time thinking more strategically about their service or their use of resources because they are constantly being pulled into operational issues, this could be the subject of an ALS discussion.</p>

Taking a different view

Background	<p>Our view of the world depends on where we stand. If we stand in a different place, the same issue may be recognisably the same issue, but we will see it from a different angle. This exercise is about inviting people to take a different position, to step outside their own view of the world and see it from a different perspective. It is particularly useful in helping people to explore different perspectives on difficult interpersonal issues or problems.</p>
Procedure	<p>The facilitator talks the person through each of the three perspectives (see diagram below), giving time to explore each step:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Starting from your own position, notice how you are feeling and what you think as you look at the other person. What words or thoughts go through your head? What feelings are you aware of? Encourage the other ALS members to use open question techniques to explore the person's self-perception of the situation. 2. Step into other person's position. Step into their shoes, notice how they hold themselves, imagine their thoughts and feelings. 'Become' the other person. What response do you think that person might want to make? ALS members again ask questions addressing them to this 'other person', exploring thoughts, feelings, perceptions of this other person in this situation. 3. Step into observer position, and look at the interplay between these two people. What do you see (or not see)? What interpretation might be put on it? Again, ALS members are also encouraged to ask open questions, e.g. <i>'What do you feel is going on between those two people?'</i> 4. Then the person is invited to return to his or her own position, and re-view the situation with the insight of these other positions. They are encouraged to reflect on how they feel now, on what they might have learned from taking the other positions, on what they might want to change as a result. 5. They are then asked to take up the position of the other person again: if this change was implemented, how would you feel? 6. And finally, the person returns to being themselves and is again invited to notice what they may have learned from this.  <pre> graph TD ME([ME]) --> ISSUE((ISSUE)) OBSERVER([OBSERVER]) --> ISSUE OTHER([OTHER]) --> ISSUE </pre>
Reflection and Action	<p>After these steps, it can be helpful for the ALS members to share observations on what they saw and heard: for example, the language used, any mannerisms adopted in certain positions and emotions evident during the process. Finally, the presenter is invited to identify an action they might take to address the issue.</p>

Appendix 2: Useful Templates for Facilitators of Action Learning Sets

Preparing for your Action Learning Set Meeting:

Consider the following when preparing for your Action Learning Set meeting and plan accordingly

1. Think about the number of Action Learning Sets (ALS) you need to establish. You may be setting up one ALS, in other instances you may be setting up a number of ALS e.g. to support a development programme. ALS meeting can be time-consuming so consider this when planning more than one. Think about how long will each meeting be. Will all meetings take place in the same location, how far do ALS members have to travel? What are the advantages of off-site meetings?
2. Who are the participants in your ALS, do they belong to the same group, are they from same grade and background, are they coming from different locations? How will the mix of participants potentially affect the ALS and its dynamics? What issues are likely to arise?
3. Is this ALS a standalone set or is it connected in some way with an organisation(s), profession, or group? Are there external stakeholders enabling the ALS process e.g. giving participants time to attend the ALS meeting? Do they have expectations or an interest in terms of outcomes? What will be essential for you managing this external relationship?
4. The environment is always important so how do you create the right kind of 'physical space' that encourages engagement and learning?
5. What's the best way to create a 'culture and climate' within the ALS set which values diversity, where there is curiosity and enquiry through questioning, where feedback is given and received constructively, and trust and respect underpin the ALS set? What's your role in ensuring the right atmosphere is created?
6. In between meeting what do you expect will happen? Are ALS members expected to complete specific actions? Will they be meeting themselves? What will they need to prepare in advance of the next meeting? Are you available to the ALS members (individually or as a group) between ALS meeting?

Thinking about your role as the Facilitator

Your role and skills as the Facilitator are critical to the optimal functioning of the ALS. In the early stages, ALS member will look to you as their role model and leader so how you engage and behave can set the expectations and tone for the group.

It can be helpful to take time to reflect on your core competencies, what are you bringing to the ALS, what is important to you, what are your motivations for taking on this role and how this role and activity fit with your values?

Your experience:

Think about your experience of being an ALS facilitator (or indeed any facilitation you may have done).

- How would you describe your experience of being a facilitator?
- What have you learned so far and what can you bring to this role?
- Have you other relevant skills or knowledge that may be useful e.g. coaching, mentoring?
- How self-aware are you? Are you aware of your own styles and preferences e.g. personality type; learning preferences? How aware are you of your emotional intelligence and what does this mean for you in your interactions with the ALS?

Your development:

Being a facilitator of the ALS will inevitably bring its own learning, rewards and challenges for you.

- What would support or help you in this role?
- What might the challenges be for you?
- How would you like own personal and professional development to evolve?
- How will your own leadership practice develop as a result of being an ALS facilitator?

Action Learning Set Facilitators skills and behaviours:



Action Learning Set Review for ALS Members and Facilitator:

At the end of the meeting, it can be very helpful for ALS member and the Facilitator to review and record the key points, questions, or insights that arose during the ALS meeting. This review provides everyone with the opportunity to focus and identify what specific actions they intend to take. These reviews can be kept and revisited at later meetings either to demonstrate the extent of progress that has been made or to consider alternatives actions if an ALS member finds themselves in a position where the same issue recurs, and they are it difficult to make progress.

The following templates can be used:

1. **Action Learning Set Member Review** *(to be completed by each participant at the end of the set meeting).*
2. **Facilitator Review** *(to be completed by the facilitator at the end of the set meeting)*

Action Learning Set Member Review

(to be completed by each participant at the end of the set meeting).

Date:

Location:

ALS Facilitator:

Key learning	The 3 key things I have learned about my issue, and myself, today are: 1. 2. 3.
Actions	The most important actions I now plan to take are: 1. My ideal outcome: 2. My ideal outcome: 3. My ideal outcome:
Supports and resources	For me to progress further, I will need to access or develop the following supports <i>e.g. people, information, expertise, finance, etc.</i> The best way for me to access or develop these supports is:

Facilitator Review

(to be completed by the facilitator at the end of the set meeting)

Date:

Location:

ALS Meeting No.

The Learning Environment and Preparation: *(appropriate location and room set-up; refreshments, flip charts and pens, documentation, name tags, sign-in sheet, etc.)*

What worked well:

What I will do differently for the next meeting:

Action Learning Set processes: *(adherence to ground rules; individual and set engagement levels; air-time or each participant; quality of questions and questioning techniques; safe environment maintained etc.)*

What worked well:

What I will do differently for the next meeting:

Facilitator Review

(to be completed by the facilitator at the end of the set meeting)

Date:

Location:

ALS Meeting No.

ALS Outcomes: *(individual and set needs met; feedback received from ALS members; each person has identified follow-up actions, next meeting organised, etc.*

What worked well:

What I will do differently for the next meeting:

Summary Reflection:

What Action Learning tools and techniques did you use during the meeting and why?

What worked well for you in this meeting?

What did I find most challenging?

What would you change?

Appendix 3: FREQUENTLY-ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATING IN AN ACTION LEARNING SET

Who is Action Learning aimed at or for?

Action Learning is a process of learning-by-doing that consists, usually, of groups of peers (people at a roughly similar level in an organisation or across organisations) who work together to help each other solve problems or implement change. So it can be used by any group of people as long as they are seeking to implement change.

Why might I go for Action Learning instead of any other form of training and development?

Action Learning is not, of course, the answer to everything but it has benefits that are not always derived from other approaches to education, training or development. The benefits are that it is based on real work issues rather than textbook issues or historical case studies. It is based on peer-assisted group learning and so can offer a level of both support and challenge that is higher than is offered in most other approaches to development. It typically deals with 'messy' issues, ones that don't have a textbook answer to them, the sorts of issues that can keep you awake at night because they don't have a rational or easy solution to them (they might include a level of organisational politics, or they might not have any precedent, or there might be several 'answers' and judgement is needed in choosing the best one at any given time/for any given context).

How does Action Learning work?

Action Learning is based on the idea that adults learn best when they have an opportunity to take action and then to reflect upon and make sense of that action. Action Learning takes place as follows: (i) small groups of about 6 or 8 members called Action Learning Sets (ALS) are formed – the members act as both learners in their own right and as consultants to the other members of the group. These ALS meets to discuss problems or issues that individual members raise, based on their own real-life work settings, and to help these individual members decide upon appropriate responses to these issues (i.e. actions to be taken). The individuals then take those actions (ii) and, next time the ALS meets, use the ALS to help them debrief and extract as much Learning as possible from these actions. The members of the ALS negotiate with each other for 'group time' and they decide their own agenda. The ALS typically starts with a facilitator but can progress to become self-facilitating in time.

What could I expect if I were to take part in an ALS?

If you become a participant in an Action Learning programme, it is very likely that you will join a group of people, usually with about six or seven others plus yourself, and you will work with this group or ALS on issues that you and the other members of the group choose to work on. The ALS meetings are usually facilitated, especially in the early days of their working together.

So you can expect to get the help of the other members of the ALS on real-life issues that you are working on, and you can expect to act as a kind of consultant to the other members of the ALS on the issues that they are working on. You can expect to do a lot of talking and reflecting during the ALS meetings, and to take some action between the ALS meetings, action which is then reviewed at subsequent meetings.

How are the members of the ALS chosen?

To an extent, this depends on whether the ALS is created within a profession, Division or across several parts of the organisation, and whether or not there is a particular focus of the programme (for example, quality improvement). ALS membership is voluntary. In general, Action Learning will not be effective unless the group feels safe for the members to learn, take risks, admit to a need for help, and be able to bring other perspectives on board. One of the biggest contributing factors to feeling safe is being able to trust the other members in the

group. Often this trust takes a little while to build up but is considerably helped if the members are peers (i.e. in general, come from the same level within the organisation, even though, their work might be very different), are not competing for power or position (e.g. are not in the running for the same job in a year's time!), are self-selected and voluntary participants, and where there is no unresolved 'history' between them that is likely to interfere with their ability to learn. The norm is for the groups to be established on these bases and then allowing group members to decide whether they want to participate in that group based on the proposed membership.

What amount of time would I have to commit?

Roughly speaking, the ALS meets for as long as the meetings are useful. It usually takes a few meetings of the group just for the members to feel comfortable with each other and to get to really know each other and, so, at a minimum, you can probably expect to attend four meetings of the group (the meetings are typically of a half-day or day's duration though, again, there is no absolute or fixed duration of a meeting). The time taken to implement action between meetings is very much dictated by the nature of the action that is agreed.

When is the best time to get involved in an ALS?

There is no absolute good or bad time to get involved in an Action Learning group except to say that, in general, the best time to get involved is when you feel you have something to learn and that you would like to work with a group of peers who could both support and challenge you to learn. Action Learning groups have been formed comprising of people who are relatively new to role and of people who are very experienced but who may still wish to work with a group of peers because they could do with a 'sounding board'. Others have found that the best time to get involved is when they encounter a problematic or messy issue that cannot really be resolved by simple 'text-book' approaches.

Where does Action Learning take place?

Action Learning can take place anywhere – it is a pretty 'low-tech' process (the only 'equipment' that is needed is a flip-chart and a comfortable working environment) and so can be accommodated in most places. When it is located in-house, it is best to try to find a meeting venue away from the immediate work and demands just to minimise the likelihood of disruption to any member.

I'm thinking of getting involved as an ALS facilitator – what is involved?

The exact degree of involvement will depend, to an extent, on how the programme is set up within your Organisation/ Division. At a minimum, your involvement will include committing to the facilitation of one (or more if you agree) Action Learning Sets over an agreed period of time/number of meetings. This is the main commitment required of facilitators. There may be some further commitment too, such as scheduling meetings/sending reminders of meetings and communicating with ALS members regarding attendance.

What's in it for me to become a facilitator of an ALS?

If you get involved in facilitating Action Learning, it is likely that you will have lots of opportunities to develop and skills in facilitating, using the techniques involved in Action Learning. These skills include listening, questioning/enquiry, reflecting back, summarising, and keeping a group focused on a particular task and time-frame. Facilitating also helps to deepen your understanding of people, interpersonal relations and organisations.

Appendix 4: SOME ADDITIONAL DOs and DON'Ts OF ACTION LEARNING SETS

DOs



MIX OF PARTICIPANTS

There are no absolute rules when it comes to the mix of participants within an ALS. In general, the ALS tends to work best when they are composed of people who are approximate peers. If the levels of responsibility of participants in an ALS are very divergent, there is a chance that neither may be able to give the other sufficient insights. People of much lower organisational status may feel inhibited, and people in more senior positions may be dismissive of the views of those from more junior positions. The ALS *can* work if they are made up of people with very differing grades or levels, as long as everyone is clear that this is the case, and there is an openness to listen and to take risks.

In general, some degree of diversity is useful. Otherwise, there can be a bias towards staying in the comfort zone and difficulty in seeing things differently to how they have always been seen.

FOCUS

What helps an ALS keep its focus is the task or issue that each member is addressing and the action they take to address that task or issue. Even if the focus of the ALS members is self-awareness or personal development, participants need to identify concrete actions for themselves.

GROUND RULES/WAYS OF WORKING

An ALS needs ground rules to work well. Agreeing ground rules is a good way of getting agreement on behaviour from the start. Establishing ground rules is a way of identifying what behaviour is acceptable to members of the ALS, from the very outset. Ground rules make it much less likely that ALS members will be disappointed or frustrated by the behaviour of other members of the ALS. Here are few topics on which ALS typically adopt ground rules:

- Confidentiality.
- Times and venues for ALS meetings, and time-keeping.
- Getting “apologies” to the ALS in the event of unavoidable lateness or absence.
- Distribution of time at meetings.
- Interpersonal relations – respect, openness, tolerance, etc.

CLARIFY THE CONFIDENTIALITY AND THE BREADTH OF ALLOWABLE SUBJECT-MATTER

The nature, content and detail of all ALS meetings is absolutely confidential, and members must commit to this as a pre-requisite to participation. As ALS members can have different interpretations of what this might mean, it can be useful at the outset to clarify what is understood by confidentiality.

There are no taboo issues unless the ALS explicitly agrees that some things are ‘off the agenda’ for whatever reason. Below are examples of the sorts of issues that people often use ALS meetings to explore:

- Work-related issues – specific problems (e.g. developing a new service or people-related issues such as difficulty in managing a particular person above or below).
- Career development and preparation for advancement opportunities (impediments to achievement or promotion, challenges, deciding on a longer-term personal development agenda, etc.).
- Personal development issues / life balancing issues (e.g. stress caused by juggling work and family commitments, seeking feedback on interpersonal or management style, etc.).
- General problems associated with working in large/busy organisations (e.g. feelings of being passed over for promotion, general barriers to promotion, inadequate recognition, of assertiveness, etc.).
- Dealing with ‘unfinished business’, for example, reviewing a critical incident or event which has not been fully processed from a learning or psychological point of view.
- Ethical dilemmas in work (such as respecting client privacy or employee rights).

DON'Ts



ALS MEMBERS 'WITH A HISTORY.'

Try not to recruit people to an Action Learning Set who have a history of personal animosity. The pitfall of having people with a 'history between them' in the same ALS is that they are not likely to feel safe in each other's company, and they can impact on other members' participation. In practice, if ALS members join voluntarily, people who have a history of bitterness are unlikely to join the same ALS.

TIMING AND LOCATION

A common problem with ALS meetings is that not enough time is created for them. If an ALS is to work well, it needs sufficient time. A small ALS (4 or 5 people) can do useful work in a half day or three hours. If the number of ALS members reaches more than six, then a full day is probably better. An ALS meeting usually take place in work-time, there is sometimes pressure from the employing organisation to reduce the length of the ALS meetings or to increase the number of people attending. Both of these reduce the amount of "air-time" of individuals within the ALS and result in superficiality.

Gaps of more than four weeks between meetings will put the ALS under pressure. It is best if the ALS meets rather more frequently (every four weeks or so) and even more frequently in its early stages.

Deciding to hold ALS meetings on-site can create problems. At the office, there is always the likelihood that ALS members will be called away – something for which they are indispensable always seems to occur on ALS meeting days! One of the roles of the ALS facilitator is to ensure that all the "boundaries" – such as those of having a convenient place for all to meet, a reasonable journey for everyone attending, a comfortable room, agreed starting and finishing times, coffee and tea breaks, etc. – are clear and fixed. Meeting at a venue away from the office creates an important "boundary".

COMMITMENT AND 'AIR-TIME.'

It is unlikely that everyone will get an opportunity to present at each meeting. Watch for those who are always too accommodating as this may be avoiding "working". This will probably lead to that ALS member feeling less committed in the longer run as well as not losing out on the benefits of action learning itself. One of the strengths of Action Learning is the equal commitment of all – we are more committed if we know we will get the attention we give others.

To be able to work well together, to know each other, to have trust, implies that attendance at ALS meetings has to be a priority. It is as important as any other vital work task. Non-attendance sends strong messages of how much people value the experience and the others in the ALS. It diminishes the learning opportunities because there is a likelihood that those who do attend begin to feel the whole process is becoming devalued.

DEGENERATION OF ACTION LEARNING SETS

As time passes, ALS meetings can become too much like group therapy/talking shops, and the action falls away. Obviously, this means that Action Learning is diminished. This may not be a problem (check it out before deciding if it is or not!) as, sometimes, mature the ALS can become closer to Reflection Learning Set than an ALS, where members find the real value comes from the opportunity to take time out and away from the usual chaos just to think, observe, listen, notice, remain silent even. For many managers, in particular, these elements alone can be a real luxury. As long as ALS members are learning, they and their organisations are benefitting. However, it is probably not fair to continue calling them an ALS as the focus is no longer action.

If Action Learning Sets have degenerated into "just cozy chats", they need either a serious injection of challenge or to be brought to a close.

Another form of degeneration is when ALS become like "think tanks" or expert groups. Giving someone the answer to their problem can deprive them of the opportunity to win their own victories. Having others solve our problems for us can produce a form of learned helplessness. Learning how to solve our own problems – even with the support of others – raises self-confidence and the ability to handle future problems.

Appendix 5: GIVING FEEDBACK

When giving feedback to an ALS member who is presenting a story/problem/issue, bear in mind that they are possibly being ‘activated’ by the simple telling of the story, and so it is important to go very gently with feedback at this time.

If someone is telling their story without saying anything about the emotional impact (but looking like he or she is being affected by it), it can be useful and supportive for them to hear that it is clear to those at the meeting that this was stressful or emotional (“you look like you’re a bit upset now – you’re looking at the floor a lot, rather than making eye contact with us”). Of course, if we are going to say something like “you look like...” to someone, we should always be able to say what it is that is giving us that impression – it can be really useful for people to have their attention drawn to something concrete in terms of body language or facial expression or tone of voice, as this is something they can then begin to attend to themselves, if they want to, now that they are aware of it.

Some pointers to giving feedback:

- **Check that the person wants it** (ask them if they’re happy enough for you to offer it there and then)
- Even if the person appears strong, feedback needs to be **given sensitively**.
- Be clear about **why you’re saying** what you’re saying – is this something that you believe would be genuinely helpful for them to know? Can you back up what you’re saying? The more **concrete** we can be, in general, the more useful the feedback is.
- **Use unambiguous words**. Unfortunately, language is full of ambiguity and words can mean different things to different people. Imagine you have been told “You are a really great communicator and you’re so professional too!”. Nice sentiment, but what do you take from it in terms of the specific things that you’re doing well to make the person think you’re a good communicator (speak well? Good listener? Great questions? Beautiful speaking voice? etc.) and that you’re professional (Knowledgeable? Punctual? Articulate? Great use of supportive technology? Business-like? etc.).
- Feedback needs to be given **in small doses** – try to give feedback (positive or negative) one issue at a time as this is probably as much as anyone can attend to.
- Feedback given **closer in time** is usually better than given much later. In general, give feedback to the person at the same meeting rather than waiting until the next one.
- If your feedback is based on **intuition alone**, be very careful and very clear that this is the case. Remember, even if your gut feel for things is usually right, there is still a good chance your intuition could be wrong here.
- Most of us are a bit wary of feedback as we don’t know in advance what we’re about to hear, and we’re afraid it could hurt. So, there is a general rule-of-thumb that feedback is best couched in a **positive-negative-positive ‘sandwich’**. We start by affirming something they have done or said, then we offer the feedback sensitively, and then we re-affirm something about the person.
- If someone is resisting your feedback, even if it has followed all the guidance above, it is often best to leave things be rather than to insist that they take it on board. **Resistance is often deep-seated** and pushing against it can be unwise. The question is not whether someone *should* hear what you are saying, but *can* they hear what you are saying.
- **If giving feedback to the group overall**, begin by asking the group to ‘assess’ itself – start with some open questions (“how do you think we’re doing as an ALS?”, or “how do you think we’re adhering to our ground-rules?”). Then invite the group to focus in on some specific issues, such as “how are we doing in our communication practices?” or “are we getting the balance right in terms of support and challenge?”. If the group doesn’t identify the issue that you want to bring to their attention in this self-assessment, it will still be easier to add your thoughts to theirs, rather than to just give your thoughts alone.

If you are the recipient of feedback, here are a few pointers for you:

- Receive it as an **intention to help** you – listen for this intention. If you don’t want it, you can say no or stop it.

- Try not to be **defensive** – remember, it's just another person's view. If you feel hurt by someone's feedback, you can respond in the moment (if you have sufficient presence of mind) but you can also take a few minutes and respond when you are more able. You can even defer the response to a future meeting.
- If you feel it's unnecessarily judgemental, just **notice and name** that. You don't have to do anything more.
- If you're not sure of your capacity for receiving other people's feedback (it can be difficult in a group setting) you can always seek to '**corral**' the amount of feedback you seek by asking for feedback just on those aspects of your behaviour that you're interested in exploring. For example, you might ask ALS members to give you feedback just on your communication – how was your tone or voice? Your pace? Did you say anything that was incomprehensible or offensive?

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