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Explaining Traditional Action Learning: Concepts and Beliefs

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Introduction

This chapter is designed to provide a thorough examination of traditional action learning, and the concepts and beliefs of its principal pioneer and founder, Reg Revans. As such, it is "pure" Revans – what he really believed and practiced. The chapter also shows how these roots of action learning have been adulterated, diluted and contradicted by later interpretations of how action learning should be practiced. Some profess alignment with what Revans believed, and then do something else that can be quite different.

Revans never intended for all applications of action learning to be carbon copies of his beliefs. That was not his intent, but he did hope that certain basic ingredients would be present, without regard to the design used. They include true empowerment of learners; minimum interference in the process by external expert facilitators; use of real problems that are of genuine difficulty and urgency; getting people out of their comfort zones by having them operate in unfamiliar settings and deal with unfamiliar problems; and reflecting throughout on these experiences and the assumptions behind their actions, including their implementation of solutions to the real problem addressed. Few of these precepts seem to carry much weight today in the way action learning is practiced. In some cases, the "learning coach" has been made the center of what happens. Revans believed, as most adult educators believe, that the learner is the center of the process. To him, action learning is democracy at work, letting the action learners largely self-govern what strategies and approaches they will use to diagnose what is happening and achieve a clear view of the problem.

Understanding action learning's principal pioneer

The "father" of action learning, Reg Revans, began as a physicist, before making his mark as an economist and educator. He was a revolutionary thinker, a person who could be abrasive and was, by nature, a maverick. He encountered much resistance along the way from those who were ensconced in traditional ways of viewing things and could see him as a threat. Revans would often say, "Unless your ideas are ridiculed by experts, they are worth nothing."

Revans never lacked the willingness to stand up for his beliefs, even if it could work against his professional success. Having been appointed as a Professor of Industrial Administration at what is now the University of Manchester in England, he ended up walking away. It seems to have been a mutual agreement. He did not want to stay and they did not encourage him to remain on the faculty. His ideas had clashed sharply with the ideas of more traditional academics. He was never driven by a desire for personal wealth. He lived an extremely Spartan existence, eating sparingly and spending little on himself, aside from book purchases. His eating habits could be a concern for family and friends. What he valued were ideas and making a difference. Action learning became his passion, and he viewed it as a promising avenue for opening up meaningful dialogue and promoting world peace. He was a Quaker, had a pacifist point of view, and abhorred world conflict and weapons of mass destruction. While he realized that he had special intellectual gifts, he was also a man of genuine humility, who believed in serving others rather than self. However, that does not mean he was short on ego. He had a healthy regard for his accomplishments and liked to have them recognized.

Revans lived to see his ideas widely adopted, but not without some continuing resistance. Certain of his precepts, especially those related to experiential learning, can receive particularly strong resistance because they seem so counter-intuitive (e.g., having learners tackle problem areas that they know little or nothing about, with the expectation that they will diagnose the problem, arrive at a solution, and have an uncommon learning experience in the process). As stated elsewhere in this book, the growth of action learning did not bring a great deal of acclaim to Revans, and some of his most basic and important precepts fell from view. One finds people citing him and his work, perceiving it as something significant, but without really having a clear idea of how he fits into the scheme of things. This book sets out to counter this shortfall and place Revans' beliefs in full view.

The world has, of course, moved on since Revans originally cited his beliefs more than a half century ago, and there can be expressions of action learning today that can represent an advance on Revans' thinking in some areas. For example, he did not consider simulations a form of action learning because they are not real problems. However, it now seems to be true that simulations, especially the highly sophisticated ones used in the military today, can be very real and can trigger the same kind of anxieties among the participants as crises in real life. This is true because they portray scenarios that could occur, and for which we must be prepared. Similarly powerful simulations can be used in the medical profession – dealing with possible life and death situations, and how to be ready to respond to them. Technology is changing, the way organizations are structured is changing, and the strong infusion of globalization alters the environment in which we live even further. But the fact remains that the very core precepts that Revans articulated are still valid, and we can learn from them, whether they are applied in totally real situations, or in simulations that can replicate life situations in almost every detail. The problem is that these core precepts are not always well-known. These core concepts and beliefs will now be outlined.

The commentary that follows will draw heavily on a number of private discussions between Revans and the author, as well as Revans' published and unpublished writing.

Basic precepts

Revans' experienced a clash of philosophies between his own beliefs and those who had a tendency to overcomplicate action learning as a process, as if no concept can be of value unless it is accompanied by a well-defined, even elaborate, framework. He would sometimes equate this with what he called the "MBA Mentality". Reg viewed action learning as "natural", flowing from the way people like to be treated and to relate to one another. It is fundamentally a straightforward and simple concept. He would even say that it represented a return to a childlike state – one where we are free to explore, be spontaneous, operate in a trusting environment, engage in open dialogue, and satisfy our curiosity. The importance of spontaneity was a theme he often emphasized. He considered spontaneity as a derivative of an environment devoid of pretense and bureaucratic encrustation, where even playfulness is allowed. There needs to be a significant degree of empowerment. Revans believed that this freedom to explore and reason is the foundation upon which action learning rests.

Verna Willis, in writing about spontaneity and self-organizing in action learning, states,

> It does not take high drama to show us spontaneity at work. We marvel when spontaneous gifts or praise are given, or when something suddenly crystallizes in our thinking. If we watch children at play with their impromptu "let's pretend" and their engagement in dialogue improvised to fit their scenarios, we can see naive, protypical effects of spontaneity. We witness a natural flow among the playmates that seems to fuel imaginative behavior and to satisfy deep longing to help each other make sense of the world around them, or alternatively, to create a world that might be. (Willis 2005, p. 162)

In addressing the naturalness of spontaneity and importance of action, rather than being so deliberate that the moment is lost, Revans says this:

> Theory is sometimes "preparatory action"; getting ready to do something. But many people in order to do something need to be confronted with the situation in which they have to do it. The billiard player needs to have his cue poised over the table to work out his next stroke, analyzing the situation with his arms and shoulder as he could not analyze with a pencil and paper; the batman thinks, in the moment of striking the ball, with his muscles and his bat, not in terms of abstract concepts and particle dynamics; the stone mason and the sculptor design the figure with their mallets and chisels as they go along; even the lawyer drawing up a complicated contract must allow the pen to "form his ideas for him", as it runs over the paper. And, at a much less specialized level, there are many people, old as well as young, who must hold audible conversations with themselves, to decide upon their next move. (1958, p. 65)

Revans refused to define action learning, preferring to describe it in terms of what it is not. He believed that to try and define it would artificially constrain it. He wanted to avoid giving simplistic cookbook or technique illustrations. He did not feel that action learning should be about puzzles, textbooks, lectures, case studies, fabricated issues or, as already mentioned, simulations. But Revans did come close to a definition of action learning in his book the *ABC of Action Learning*:

> Action learning is to make useful progress on the treatment of problems/opportunities where no "solution" can possibly exist

already because different managers, all honest, experienced, and wise, will advocate different courses of action in accordance with their different value systems, their past experiences and their different hopes for the future. (1983, p. 28)

Others have addressed the subtlety of action learning, among them Marvin Weisbord, who says this about action learning:

Few concepts have ever been so simple or so powerful. Yet this roadmap is not the kind you buy in Rand McNally. There are no visual keys for cities, airports or interchanges, no measuring scales in miles or kilometers. Indeed, our perceptions of the terrain keep changing as we involve more people and learn more about each situation. (2004, p. 203)

We will now turn to Revans' basic precepts of action learning.

Precept 1: When the velocity of change exceeds the velocity of learning, we are in trouble

Revans would often use a simple line graph tied to time to describe the accelerating speed of transport and information flows. He would start with Christopher Columbus, pointing out that it took him 45 days to make the Atlantic crossing to Wallops Island, his first landfall in the New World. He would compare that with a flight he took on a Concord between London and New York of only four hours.

The speed with which information is generated, distributed and analyzed has an even larger impact. He would make the point that, when the velocity of change exceeds the velocity of learning, you are in trouble – whether as an individual or as an organization. Therefore, the challenge is to accelerate the rate of learning to anticipate and match the rate of change. In other words, you achieve a state of dynamic equilibrium, or homeostasis, where the velocity of learning is in balance with, or even ahead of, the velocity of change. When it falls out of balance, you can experience disequilibrium, disorientation, organizational run-down, or personal failure because of inability to keep pace with the challenges being faced.

This balance between the velocity of change and the velocity of learning, which was so central to Revans' conception – as the impetus for moving away from traditional instructional methods and towards more experiential ones based on real problems – receives very limited attention in the literature related to action learning. That is a glaring omission.

We will now turn to Revans' formulation for accelerating the velocity of learning to keep pace with the velocity of change.

Precept 2: L = P + Q as a way to accelerate learning

Revans suggests that we need to turn the "normal" process of learning on its head. In his Learning Equation, the L stands for "Learning", the P for "Programmed Instruction" (the typical classroom or text book exercise) and Q for "Questioning Insight" (i.e., question-driven inquiry). It is the Q factor that makes action learning so different. That is where you begin. He believed that, in this age of global turbulence and rapid change, we need to shift much more emphasis to the Q and assign less to the P.

Rather than start with the P, as we have usually been programmed to do in both classrooms and our work life, action learning begins with the Q – the asking of questions – rather than immediately rushing to discuss possible solution sets. Why did Revans list the P before the Q in his equation? Revans told the author that it was done for a very simple reason. He was a mathematician and scientist, and the P always comes before Q in mathematical equations. He could not bring himself to reverse the two in written form for that reason, but he always emphasized that you must start with the Q and not the P.

Michael Marquardt, in addressing Revans' Learning Equation, apparently takes the sequencing of the P before the Q literally, seemingly not really understanding the full import of what Revans is suggesting:

> The action learning model starts with *programmed knowledge* (i.e., knowledge in current use, in books, in one's mind, in the organization's memory, lectures, case studies, etc.). To this base is added the process of *questioning*, which offers access to what is not yet known, and *reflection*, which involves recalling, thinking about, pulling apart, making sense, and trying to understand. Hence the formula L = P + Q + R, where L = learning, P = programmed knowledge, Q = questioning, and R = reflection. (1999, p. 29)

You cannot get farther removed from Revans' conception than this. Marquardt would have you start, based on his interpretation of the Learning Equation, at the opposite end from Revans. What Revans believed is that to start with P is a fundamentally flawed construct. You do not want to be mired in the past, but start with the here and now. Then, you look at the P, and you are likely to find that if you had started with the P it would have dragged you off course. That is the thrust of

what Revans tells us over and over again in his writings of more than 50 years. Revans is not arguing that you discard P. You will obviously need parts of it, and might even need to create new knowledge (P) when the questioning process (Q) reveals that there are gaps in the available knowledge, or it is flawed.

To dramatize this, Revans liked to cite a major problem that was addressed during his Belgian Project (discussed in Chapter 5). It involved a problem that had existed for a long time in one of the largest companies in Belgium. Task force after task force, and consultant group after consultant group, had failed to solve the problem. A person unfamiliar with the steel industry ended up getting to the root of the problem. The key was asking fresh questions of a number of people – the Q factor in Revans' Learning Equation. That is where he started. By contrast, the earlier failed efforts had all started with the P, focusing on the production processes, since that had been the source of most other problems in the past. In the end, the problem was found to relate to the manner in which the company determined compensation of its workers. The experts had been looking in all the wrong places.

Alan Mumford, in an address to the EFMD Annual Conference on the subject of Action Learning, also makes some adjustments to Revans' Learning Equation:

> There has been an argument in the Action Learning world as to whether "Q" on its own can be effective. Revans' equation implies not, though his occasional diatribes about the content of "P" suggests a low importance for it. In my view "P" and "Q" must go together for effective learning, but I think the original Revans' equation does not satisfactorily express it. My revised version, using the same definitions, is: $Q+P+Q=L$. The significance here is…that we must start with "Q". That is the process through which appropriate "P" is determined. In some cases in the action learning literature, clearly inappropriate "P" has been provided at the beginning of the process. (1994)

Mumford has it right on several points here, including the need to start with the "Q". His modification of the Learning Equation also makes some sense, in that it lists the "Q" twice, as coming first and then after the "P", dramatizing the point that Questioning Insight ("Q") occurs throughout the process. When he states that Revans inferred "P" to be of a low significance, he is less on the mark. Revans did not throw the "P" out with the bath water. He realized its significance – after all, he

was a scientist at heart. What he did debunk was assigning "P" the first priority of importance. That violated his conception.

To summarize this point, there are at least two good reasons for starting with Questioning Insight/Inquiry ("Q").

1. When we start with questions rather than solutions, we can find that the available "P" does not fit with what we need. If we had started by looking at the "P" first, such as documentation related to earlier solutions to similar problems, we would not necessarily have discovered this lack of fit. All of the "P" has one thing in common; it relates to the past. Therefore, in a fast-changing world it can lead you off course in terms of the current realities; and

2. We can also discover, as a result of starting with the "Q" factor, that no "P" exists for what we need to know. It might have to be created.

The "Q" factor can help us determine what "P" – or, at least, what part of it – is either valid or invalid. You can find that most of the available "P" is off-center with what is needed. Revans suggested a place to start, in terms of basic questions that can help you begin progressively to understand all the dimensions of the problem. He called it "System Alpha". There are three basic lead questions from which many others can then be derived:

1. What is happening?
2. What ought to be happening?
3. How do we make it happen?

The first two questions can lead to a gap analysis. In determining how to arrive at where you want to be, you then examine what it takes to close – or, at least, narrow – the gap. That, in turn, then opens up solution avenues and helps identify possible solution sets.

You will hear arguments that action learning is somehow "soft" in terms of analysis. That is not true. The questioning process can be highly disciplined. System Alpha leads to what Revans calls "System Beta". It is the logical follow-on, once you have run the causes of the problem to earth through the questioning process. System Beta includes:

• fact-finding and assumption-testing procedures to check and double-check what is being learned

- field research, data collection and interpretation, and other discovery methods
- survey and/or observation, trial hypothesis or theory, experiment (test), audit (evaluation), and review
- Ratification or rejection of results.

Here, you see evidence of Revans' grounding in the Scientific Discipline and Physics. While he wanted the learners to explore and demonstrate spontaneity, that did not mean being illogical in what they presented, in the end, as findings and recommendations. He looked for rigor. He also recognized that action learning is both an art and a science.

Finally, Revans believed that the action learning process could lead to what he called "System Gamma", where we come to better understand ourselves and the organizations in which we work:

> The learning process of the manager, and the corresponding change in the system he is trying to influence, is thus a symbiosis – here called System Gamma. It is suggested by the interaction between the managerial reporting channels and the manager's practical experience. The key element in this symbiosis is the ability of the manager to listen, and to change his behavior upon understanding what is said.
>
> This demands personal maturity and the resignation of defensive attitudes thrown up around the fortress of the self-image. (1982a, p. 347)

Revans' expressed views, in this case, edges us in the direction of what is known today as "organization development" (OD) in terms of strategies for changing mindsets and organizational behavior. Some have even termed action learning the premier OD strategy.

The symbiosis that Revans relates to his System Gamma occurs through the process of reflection, which also flows out of Questioning Insight ("Q") but, in this case, self-questioning. Revans was interested in deep self-questioning, what Jack Mezirow of Columbia University would refer to as both critical reflection and transformative learning. It involves more than asking the question "Why?" It entails looking for the "why" behind the "why", and then the "why" behind that "why". This means driving deep enough through self-inquiry that underlying assumptions, some even acquired in early childhood, that determine the way we think and problem solve can be brought to light and examined. Some of these assumptions that we develop in the course of a

lifetime can be buried in our subconscious. Having been brought to the surface for examination through the process of critical reflection, the assumptions that are now clearly dysfunctional can be jettisoned or modified. It also allows us to develop new and more functional assumptions to govern our thought processes. Revans saw the action learning and reflection process as an instrument for unlocking such changes and, for that reason, he saw it as a way to promote collaboration among the world's people and even help bring about world peace.

When you consider Revans' System Alpha, Beta and Gamma formulations with regard to action learning, you can see once again a hint of the scientist in him, including the terminology and discussion of Alpha, Beta and Gamma systems. When the author asked him how he came up with the Gamma designation in one instance, he responded that he did it for no particular reason. However, the similarity here is striking between his scientific leanings and this action learning typology.

Reflection and the questioning self-inquiry that drives it occur throughout the action learning process, from start to finish. Some reflection occurs as action is occurring, and some occurs at the end as we look back and reflect on what has occurred. Donald A. Schön, in his book *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, says:

> We may reflect *on* action, thinking back on what we have done in order to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome. We may do so after the fact, in tranquility, or we may pause in the midst of action to make what Hannah Arendt calls a "stop-and-think". (1987, p. 26)

Reg believed, as Donald Schön does, that reflection occurs across the entire spectrum. It is not a discrete phase. The learning that is harvested comes from the process of reflection, with the actions and the real problem/project serving as the catalyst. This stands in stark contrast to the conception of Marquardt, in his aforementioned interpretation of the learning equation ($L=P+Q+R$ (for reflection), as he states it. Here, he takes great license with Revans' learning equation in adding the R. That was not a part of Revans' Learning Equation, and for good reason. Whereas Marquardt lists the reflective component as the "caboose" in the process – the tail-end element – Revans saw it as a factor throughout the process. This is very similar to the way Donald Schön viewed the process of reflection, even though not speaking in an action learning context.

**Precept 3: The problem or issue to be addressed by
the action learning set/team is always real**

1. The problem is never fabricated. Pursuing artificial problem solving does not mobilize the full energies of those involved. There is no inherent risk present or authentic sense of urgency;
2. The problem needs to be real, somewhat urgent, and even daunting. Revans frequently stated that the best problems to tackle were the insoluble ones. It shows his faith in the action learning process;
3. Puzzles and case studies are not appropriate to his idea of action learning. Puzzles and case studies may stimulate your intellect but can be tangential to reality, and case studies are rooted in the past, not in the present;
4. The *real* problem is the "learning engine" – that is, what drives the energies of the group.

"Realness" is, of course, relative. The problem to be pursued can be real and yet, at the same time, rather mundane and free of risk. That was clearly not what Revans had in mind. He saw the stress of a difficult challenge – even one that could bring the enterprise to its knees if not solved – as what he was looking for. The stress and the realization that something truly important is being undertaken is what "powers" the learning experience and makes it much different that the ordinary "training" event.

The selection of truly difficult and complex problems can be more the exception than the rule. Allowing the employees to operate in ways that permit freedom and empowerment to problem-solve can be threatening to top management and human resource (HR) professionals. They can view it as an erosion of their authority and influence – even job-threatening. If you are a manager responsible for the unsolved problem to be addressed, you can be less than enthusiastic about having a team of employees, who you might view as novices, solve a problem that you had unsuccessfully struggled with. These counter-forces, rooted in human psychology, end up putting tight wraps around many action learning initiatives. The rule of the day can be: "Keep it safe and controlled. We want no rocking of the boat."

**Precept 4: There are three basic forms of an action
learning set/team**

Revans' choice of words was "set" but, in modern day parlance, "team" is the better term to use, and we do so throughout this book, except when

using quotes that employ the term. This avoids confusion and the inference that a set is somehow distinctive from a team, which it is not.

There are three forms of action learning team. Two of them are used often and one is not commonly used. Everyone in the team can pursue a joint problem, or individual members can pursue their own designated problem – either one they determine for themselves or have assigned to them. The third form was used by Revans as part of a major program in Belgium (discussed in Chapter 5). Here is an overview of the three forms:

One common joint problem: Everyone in the action learning team is dealing with one common joint problem. Because this is true, they must pool their knowledge and talents to diagnose the problem (System Alpha), and then develop the research, analysis, solution alternatives and recommendations (System Beta). Revans liked this joint form of problem-solving because it created a situation where the participants were "partners in adversity". The action learning team either sinks or swims together. This particular model is usually characterized by a strong bonding effect among team members. They have been brought together to take on a major problem, and they quickly come to understand that the only way they can deliver the result or meet the goal is through team effort and mutual collaboration.

The teamwork integral to this model can be a hurdle for some team members –at least, initially. They can state that they have never worked in a team before and do not like being in a team environment: the fact that most usually become adept at working in teams through the process represents a major learning yield in and of itself. It also promotes leadership development, because working in teams is of key significance to running successful organizations and businesses.

Everyone brings one (EBO): In this form, every team member brings his or her own problem to the table. This can be an effective learning approach, but it also has some notable downsides, which advocates tend to overlook:

- Problems brought to the team by its members tend to be highly uneven in their difficulty. Since individual team members want to be successful, there is an inclination to make safe picks – nothing that creates personal risks, interferes with a regular work routine, or raises eyebrows in any way;
- Members of the action learning team might listen politely to the problems and updates presented by other team members, but they are not usually vested in them. They are someone else's concern. Therefore,

the bonding effect among team members tends to be significantly less than that associated with a common joint problem team;

- Rather than let the team dialogue flow naturally, as occurs with a common joint problem team, the EBO-driven team has to ensure that each team member has "air time" to discuss their problem. The usual individual update reports alone can consume the time. While the team itself can impose time discipline, so all have a chance to be heard, it is also dealt with through the interventions of a learning coach. There is less spontaneity in this kind of team environment. The meetings can become orchestrated by design or tightly regulated by the learning coach.

The Belgian model: In the 1960s, Revans guided a major action learning experiment in Belgium. This program was intended to help improve the country's economic performance. It involved a consortium of the five universities in Belgium and a number of its principal industries. Senior executives in about half of the cases were exchanged between industries. A number of action learning teams were established, usually with five members each. Each individual team member was assigned an individual problem of considerable magnitude. On the surface, it would seem to be a regular EBO-type team. However, there was an interesting variation on this model. In the case of Belgium, each member of the team had a problem from an industry far removed from his own expertise. An executive from one of the largest banks in Belgium, for example, ended up being assigned a problem in Belgium's largest steel company. He ended up identifying the primary causal factor, something no one in the company, or its external consultants, had considered. I will explain the reason for assigning people to solve problems beyond their expertise in addressing Precept 6.

There was also another interesting aspect of the modeling that Revans used in Belgium. The senior executive in the problem identification and solution team would, after the nature of the problem had been well established, help "seed" a common joint action learning team in the client organization to implement the solutions. Therefore, two kinds of action learning teams were used in each case, one to identify the problem and the other to help implement a solution.

The size of an action learning team is usually limited to four to six individuals in order to facilitate intra-team communication. When you get much beyond that number, communication can become snarled and cliques can form within the team. The author knows of no one who practices action learning who prescribes any team size consisting

of more than eight members. Revans believed, from his own experience, that teams of five were ideal.

In terms of practise, especially in academia, the "everyone bring one" (EBO) model seems to be the usual preference. For example, George Washington University (Marquardt's program) uses the EBO approach. The Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research (created in 1995 at the University of Salford in England under David Botham's leadership) uses the EBO model. That is rather interesting, because Revans, for whom the Centre is named, had an obvious preference for one common joint problem. He would often refer to "partners in adversity", calling attention to the difficulty of the task, and that all team members were in it together, a case of sink or swim. This tends to be much less true in an EBO team. Two universities that went with the "one common joint problem" model, dealing with problems of great complexity, were Virginia Commonwealth University (Robert L. Dilworth) and Georgia State University (Verna J. Willis).

Precept 5: The familiar versus the unfamiliar

Revans suggests that there are two kinds of problem and two kinds of setting/environment that we encounter in our lives. Figure 1.1 presents the way he depicted it. It is sometimes referred to as the "Four Square" Model. The examples listed in each quadrant are all from Revans' work and will be explained.

Familiar problem and/or setting: This is what we commonly experience in our own work environment. It can be the natural team of which we are a part in the workplace. In Japan, it can take the form of a "quality circle", such as a small team working to improve quality on an assembly line. Revans often cited this example, sometimes referring to these situations as "questioning circles".

Unfamiliar problem and/or setting: Revans believed that much could be learned when operating in an unfamiliar setting and dealing with an unfamiliar problem. That carries us beyond our "comfort zone" and requires that we ask "fresh questions", because the old questions and assumptions we commonly call upon are unlikely to be fully applicable. It would be like a dentist trying to ask his or her usual questions in dealing with a problem related to shipbuilding or complex informational systems.

The framework shown in Figure 1.1 displays the four combinations/variants involved, together with examples. What follows is an explanation of each quadrant.
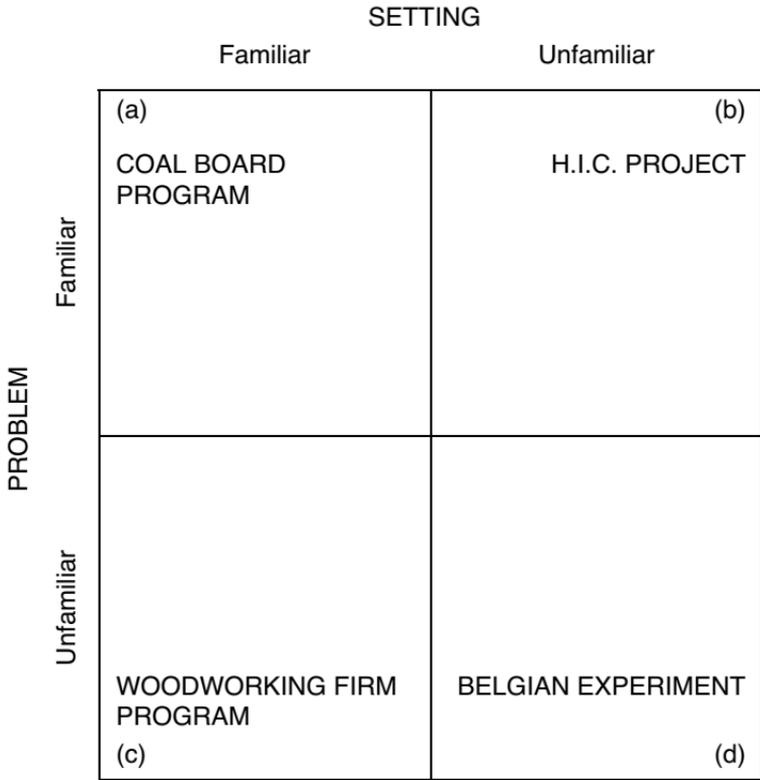
SETTING

	Familiar	Unfamiliar
Familiar (PROBLEM)	(a) COAL BOARD PROGRAM	(b) H.I.C. PROJECT
Unfamiliar (PROBLEM)	WOODWORKING FIRM PROGRAM (c)	BELGIAN EXPERIMENT (d)

Figure 1.1   The 'Four Square' Model

Quadrant (a)

The familiar problem and familiar setting: This is where we can find ourselves in most work situations.

   The National Coal Board example given in that quadrant relates to work that Revans did in the collieries (coal mines) in England. He spent a significant amount of time working with teams of miners underground at the coalface. He found that, when the miners were allowed to design their own work methods and determine priorities, as opposed to being driven by dictates from management, production was greatly elevated. This reinforced Revans' beliefs about the value of action learning as a modality for solving problems and improving performance. It led him to coin the term "small is dutiful". He was, in effect, espousing the same basic principle articulated by E.F. Schumacher (1972). Essentially, small work teams, empowered to act, could score major advances over larger teams that were more tightly controlled and managed. The safety record in the mines was also significantly improved.

The importance of smallness in terms of team size was critical to Revans, hence his view that action learning teams should be limited to five or six members. In an article, Revans addresses the importance of organizational size:

> It has been known from the earliest times that the management of enterprises employing large numbers of men may demand the solution of problems quite unknown in the management of smaller groups. If the magnitude of managerial problems could be measured, as temperature or distance is measured, on a linear scale, the management problems of the industrial unit employing a thousand men would turn out to be greater than ten times those of a unit employing a hundred, and much greater than a hundred times those of a unit employing ten...Nor for all our telephones and speaker systems, have we gone much farther than Aristotle, who said, "The largest unit of men capable of effective action was a crowd that could be addressed by the voice of one man". (1956, p. 303)

The philosophy of Schumacher and Revans was well ahead of its time. Today, we find it in the emphasis large organizations place on operating as if they were smaller than they actually are, becoming "flatter", with fewer hierarchical layers, and using small teams (increasingly represented by action learning teams) to deal with complex problem-solving, promote leadership development, become closer to the customer, and increase competitive advantage.

The Mining Association example used here was, according to Revans, his first reference to what came to be called action learning. He was referring to an article he wrote,in which he states that this occurred in 1945 and was contained in a report on the future of the British coal mining industry issued by the Mining Association of Great Britain (1982b, p. 64). In the article, Revans had proposed the establishment of a staff college for the industry, "at which field managers would be encouraged to learn with and from each other using the group review to find solutions to their immediate problems".

Learning from and with each other was a theme often repeated by Revans throughout his life.

Quadrant (b)

Familiar problem in an unfamiliar setting: For the purposes of example, the Hospital Internal Communication Project (HIC) is listed. This study had medical staff from one hospital go to another hospital

setting. The problem might be similar, but they were operating in a different corporate culture. The study, led by Revans, involved the 10 largest hospitals in London (1982a, pp. 245–79). Each had some common problems – namely, a very high turnover rate for nurses (as high as 67 percent), high mortality rates, long hospital stays, and demoralized staffs.

Professionals from one hospital were sent from their own hospital to one with which they were unfamiliar. They found the environment quite different, even though they were both related to hospitals. When medical professionals were sent from hospital A to hospital B, they could also find that they were operating in a different part of the hospital and specialty area than they were accustomed in their own hospital.

The author identifies with this, because he had several action learning teams work with two large hospitals in the Manchester area of England scheduled for merger in 1994. Revans was personally involved with this action learning project. In this case, only two of 32 participants, across five action learning teams, had any background in health care or administration of hospitals. However, they discovered that the cultures at the two hospitals were quite different, and that consolidating the management structures would not be easily achieved. I doubt that employees at the two hospitals could see the magnitude of the problem they faced. It took outsiders to signal that they were facing more of a challenge than they had anticipated. This might well have been what participants encountered during the HIC Project, despite the fact that they were going from one hospital setting to another. The corporate culture would have tended to be somewhat different from the one they were familiar with in their own hospital. Statistics were maintained on what happened at the hospitals in the experimental group during the HIC Project, as compared with hospitals in what constituted a control group not subject to the action learning intervention. It became clear that some positive results emerged. Turnover of nurses went down, the mortality rate went down, length of hospital stays was reduced, staff morale improved, and staff attrition dropped (it had been as high as 67 percent among nurses). While they were not major improvements for the most part, they were clearly gains. What drove these advances? It was found that the problem stemmed from lack of effective communication. Physicians did not talk to nurses, physicians did not talk to one another, and physicians and nurses did not adequately communicate with patients or their family members. When the communication blockages were identified and sorted out, things started to improve.

Revans was a physicist, and much of what he did can be traced back to his grounding in that science. He saw the connection in the case of hospitals, and it is reflected in an article he wrote:

> Physics is essentially the study of the ultimate structure of the observable world; as such it is interested in continuous fields and discrete entities, or at what can be represented as continuous fields and discrete entities. It has also become intensely interested in the nature and validity of human observation. To some extent these ideas have a parallel in the study of social institutions, in which individual persons, considered as discrete entities, come under the influence of social forces to which they respond. In the hospital the individuals may be surgeons or nurses, or patients; the forces may be the professional etiquette of the surgeon, the collective wage contract with the porter, the traditional myth of bedside routine enveloping the student nurse, the financial control exercised by the hospital budgets, and so forth. (1990, p. 108)

In this expression by Revans, we can also see similarities with what the renowned social scientist Kurt Lewin had to say when, in 1948, he wrote about his Topological Map, using the family unit to show the kind of interactions between the various actors involved in the process. (Lewin 2004, p. 79);

Quadrant (c)

Unfamiliar problem in a familiar setting: The example provided on the woodworking firm is covered in Revans (1983, p. 20). It concerned five directors of a large woodworking firm that was threatened with closure due to its uncompetitive factory costs. "Each director worked part time on a major problem in some other department…thereby starting the examination and treatment of unfamiliar problems in familiar settings – since all stayed in their own firm." Revans reports that the collective effort of all five directors, each working with an unfamiliar problem, led to a reduction of factory costs by 30 percent, enabled the main flow line to be reduced by two thirds its previous length, and preserved a thousand jobs that had been under notice only twelve months before.

Quadrant (d)

Unfamiliar problem in an unfamiliar setting: The example used here is the Belgian experiment, discussed earlier. Each of the executives was operating in an environment they were entirely unfamiliar with,

and dealing with a problem they knew nothing about. In addition, the executives were working with the individuals in the action learning team that they had not worked with closely before. It was new ground for them, even though they were all well-seasoned businessmen.

The importance of placing people in unfamiliar environments to stimulate learning, get people out of their usual "sandbox", and inspire fresh questions is one of the lost dimensions of Revans. It receives little or no emphasis, and yet it was fundamental to Revans, an important driver of the outcomes he sought.

There is an incongruity, a dilemma of sorts, resident in the use of people unfamiliar with a problem. By definition, they will not have the necessary expertise to implement what they recommend. They will be limited, essentially, to diagnosis. To Revans, this was acceptable, because, for him, the bigger fish to fry was the coming to grips with what was generating the problem, as well as some thoughts on how to fix it. That was best done by using people who could distinguish between the forest and the trees. Those who had the expertise – who had not solved the problem to begin with – would tend to be bound up in paradigms and expert terminology that essentially blocked them from seeing what was really happening. Unbounded by past knowledge of the problem or area of expertise, those unfamiliar with it could view things through fresh eyes and ask "fresh questions" that the experts would have been unlikely to ask. That can create breakthroughs.

Some take a strong opposing position, believing that the action learning team must implement what they recommend – and they will not budge from that position. Here is what Alan Mumford has to say on the subject, in referring to this continuing area of debate (Note: When Mumford talks about "location", he is referring to which of the four quadrants is involved, such as "Unfamiliar problem" and "Unfamiliar setting"):

> This concerns the associated issues of the location for the action learn-ing project or problem, and the likelihood of implementation … The Belgian projects were all unfamiliar tasks in unfamiliar environments, and this has been an acceptable, and in some cases, desired form of Action Learning since. There is a paradox here, because of course Revans' original work in, for example, the Coal Board and Health Service were of familiar projects in familiar settings. Implementation becomes an issue where individuals are essentially carrying out consultancy assignments. Where learners recommend actions to others rather than being responsible for eventual implementation

themselves. Mumford argues that the Action Learning experience is fundamentally different. (1998, pp.: 376–7)

Mumford misses two subtleties here. The Belgian project, while involving business executives operating outside their expertise to diagnose a problem, also dealt with implementation. As the diagnosis came together, a team within the client organization in the enterprise owning the problem was formed to deal with implementation. The Fellow, Revans' term for those in the diagnosis team, began working with and seeding that team. Revans understood issues of "buy in" and worked to have a "circle of welcome" in the client organization to deal with the transition from problem diagnosis to solution implementation. He also had a clear design for who should be on the implementation team when formed. *Revans wanted three types of people represented – **those who care** (want the solution arrived at to work), **those who can** (have the power to make things happen), and **those who know** (have the expertise).*

On the "Health Service" (which is actually the Hospital Internal Communications (HIC) Project that involved exchange of medical professionals among the 10 major hospitals in the 1960s), Mumford mislabels it, in referring to a familiar setting. It was familiar to the medical professionals as a hospital setting, but it was not their hospital setting. It was a different corporate culture. That is why Revans engineered the exchanges!

So, how does one resolve this apparent dilemma? In a sense, you cannot have it both ways – having those without expertise diagnose a problem and then expecting them to have the expertise to implement the solutions. In logic, there are two ways to deal with the horns of a dilemma. You either break one of the horns, or you escape between the horns. You do not want to break or discount either horn in this case. The solution seems to lie in escaping between the horns, because you need diagnosis (that is really Priority Number 1, because if you cannot diagnose the problem, you cannot treat it) and you also need implementation. The answer is probably in having a receptive host – as was true with the various projects in Belgium – ready to deal with the implementation once the diagnosis is made. Anyone who has had experience working with action learning teams that are dealing with an unfamiliar problem, an unfamiliar setting, and even unfamiliar colleagues, understands the energy that is released, and it can lead to breakthroughs that could not otherwise have been realized. The author has experience with over 30 action learning teams operating in the

unfamiliar–unfamiliar mode, and can attest to the fact that Revans had it right.

A case of an at least oblique connection with Revans' emphasis on the unfamiliar and the need to get people out of their normal venues is cited in O'Neil and Marsick (2007). They make reference to programs inaugurated by the Management in the Lund (MiL) Institute in Sweden:

> A hallmark of MiL's approach has been experiences that jolt people outside of their typical ways of understanding the world. Arts, sports, outdoor treks, or adventure training can be central to MiL's programs, as are journeys to other countries where the unexpected is turned into fertile territory for the questioning of one's values, beliefs and ways of working. (*ibid.*, p. 4)

The University of Michigan action learning initiatives, led by Noel Tichy, have for years included programs featuring travel to foreign countries as a way of opening up new thinking.

Revans would not have been entirely comfortable with these approaches, because to him they were "fabrications", and he wanted it to be entirely real. He would single out "adventure training", for example, as what he did *not* have in mind. To him it was in the same category as games, puzzles and simulations. However, it can serve to remove a person from his or her comfort zone.

Precept 6: No designated leader

There are differences of view about leadership of action learning teams. Revans was clear on the subject. He believed all mantles of authority should be left at the door when entering an action learning "set". He was entirely egalitarian in this regard. He viewed the team as an assembly of equals, with no team member enjoying any special authority over the others.

The leadership dimension is one that gets contested. It often ends up centering on how intrusive the role of the team advisor/learning coach should be. In its most pronounced expression, the facilitator can almost be tantamount to the leader of the team. Revans minced no words about the role of the facilitator. He felt that the facilitator (the term he preferred) had a definite role in "jump-starting" the process but that, as the work of the team went forward, the team members themselves were their own best facilitators, and the external facilitator should stand back unless asked to participate. Nothing irritated Revans more than

excessive and controlling forms of facilitation. He would refer to facilitators in such situations as "silly taters".

The Revans viewpoint on use of "learning coaches" is at sharp odds with the approach used in the Action Reflection Learning (ARL) school of thought and the World Institute of Action Learning (WIAL), Marquardt's consultancy. Revans saw no need for "expert facilitators". The ARL model, on the other hand, calls for expert facilitation. The ARL approach grew out of the work of the MiL Institute, Sweden, beginning in 1977, and a group called the Leadership in International Management (LiM), which included Victoria Marsick in the early years. It also espouses the ARL principles. How does the Revans' approach to facilitation differ from the ARL model? Here is the way the difference can be described by those practicing the ARL approach:

> Expert facilitation is not recommended by others for different reasons. Revans's advocates decry coaches who, by inserting their own expertise into the process, can "steal the learning" of participants. In our experience, learning coaches help hold the space for learning. But they are more successful in their role when they resist taking on expert facilitation roles that participants themselves should take. The more that participants do it on their own, in this argument, the more likely that participants will fully internalize the learning and be better able to transfer that learning back on their jobs. Raelin points out that "ignorance (of subject matter expertise) implies a need to ask difficult questions that participants might find useful in framing the problem". (O'Neil and Marsick 2007, pp. 74–5)

There are several interesting things one can glean from this quotation, beginning with what Raelin suggests. What is saying, in effect, is that the participants need a "crutch" from subject matter experts (i.e., expert facilitators) in order to frame the problem properly. In other words, you need someone who holds the "P" to help you over those hard bumps at the outset. That is a backwards remove from the point where Revans begins. Reference is made to learning coaches holding the space for learning. In other words, "We can't trust them to do that on their own." What this translates to in practise is a learning coach "protecting" this "learning space" by frequently intervening and doing "push backs" to keep the teams "on track". *If* (and, as pointed out, it is not always true) the team is pursuing a truly challenging problem, such interference by a learning coach can be seen as meddlesome, disruptive, and even infuriating to team members. The author has seen facilitators/learning

coaches ejected by the team on three occasions. In terms of robbing participants of the learning experience by expert facilitation, Revans would absolutely support that view, and he spoke on it many times.

Marquardt has stated that the learning coach has "absolute authority" over the action learning team. There is only one obvious reason for dictating absolute control: you obviously do not trust the action learning process to work without somewhat tight orchestration of what happens by an external facilitator. In Revans' view, you take care to set up the process properly at the front end – "jump-starting" the process – and then step back and let the process work. As is true of ARL, Marquardt places the learning coach at the center of things. Revans has the learner at the centre. That is a huge difference in perspective.

What can be intriguing is how practitioners can talk about the need for empowerment in the action learning process, and even quote Revans, and then move forward with an authoritative and controlling model.

The author once went with Revans to a U.S. Department of Defense college for high-level executives in the Washington area. The faculty sat in a circle with us. They were about to launch a leadership curriculum using action learning and were looking for insights that we could provide, even though they already had one action learning program up and running. Their plan called for spending two full weeks orienting the executives on leadership before getting them started on projects. That seemed like overkill to Revans. That was not jump-starting an action learning program. It was rolling out a large quantity of "P" to senior executives who held some of the most challenging leadership positions in the U.S. Department of Defense. They did not need a basic course in leadership! Revans told them to eliminate most of that front end, letting executives get right into the issues they were to examine and "learn from and with each other". In other words, he said throw the real problem at them and let them have at it. Up-front hand-holding and teaching executives how to do what they already know when they had been doing that daily in extremely challenging leadership environments simply did not pass the common sense test with Revans.

Precept 7: Action needs to be balanced by reflection

While action is important, it needs to be balanced with critical reflection. *The true learning comes from the reflective component.*

Revans said this about reflection:

> It may well be that the set that most forcibly expresses the Aristotelian idea of which action learning is a modern example; the set has

been deliberately contrived so that managerial reflection can play upon the action of yesterday and anticipate the action of tomorrow, reminding its members that when tomorrow arrives, with its call to do something, that very doing must itself remember not only yesterday's reflection, but that reflection as it must be modified by the here- and-now dispositions of the moment making up the present – dispositions that could have been but imperfectly imagined during yesterday's set exchanges. (1983, p. 52)

The act of reflection is a skill, and it does not come easily in the Western culture, with its focus on action and immediate problem-solving. The exigencies of the moment can displace any inclination to step back and reflect on what is occurring or has occurred. To drive deeper and more critical reflection is an even more difficult skill to master, yet that is the realm where strategic thought resides. This leads to an argument that the ARL advocates would make – you need the expert facilitator to tweak the process regularly and promote reflection. However, inherent in that argument is the supposition that it takes frequent interventions by an expert facilitator to move people to reflect. As much importance as he assigned to reflection, Revans did not believe that.

Mumford, who is also on the side of expert facilitation, advocates some collateral techniques that others of us have found useful. One involves use of a "learning log" to capture reflection. Mumford also advocates what he calls "Type 2 Learning", which encourages the learner to reflect on what has occurred in the recent past (retrospective) and how it can influence the immediate future (a prospective view). However, as we have pointed out before (Dilworth, 2005), there is more than one way to induce critical reflection.

Conclusion

If there is "magic" in action learning, here are some of the key ingredients as expressed by Revans in his writings and public utterances:

1. *Asking fresh questions*: This becomes a natural occurrence when people are separated from what they know – and free to explore without the constant interference of external facilitators;
2. *Unfreezing underlying assumptions*: Since there are few old assumptions that seem applicable (when you are on unfamiliar ground), the person turns to fresh questions and, out of that, discovers that some of the assumptions long held to be true do not hold up well under

examination. Therefore, you end up constructing some new assumptions and testing them;

3. ***Creating new connections and mental models*:** This becomes possible when you move beyond the constraints imposed by assumptions and ways of thinking that are not relevant to the task at hand; and

4. ***Rebalancing "P" and "Q"*:** One outcome of the process is a new framework for "P" that is held to be valid. Some "P" is jettisoned, other "P" is created, and some "P" is either modified or validated. What drives this are the new forms of questions that emerge, and they evolve as the action learning process progresses.

In addressing a conference on Educating Cities in Gothenburg, Sweden, with Paolo Freire, the Brazilian educator, and others when he was 85-years-old, Revans said what, in essence, represents a good encapsulation of what he believed and what he held dear:

I have struggled to explain that true understanding comes only after valid action verifies what one has been taught. The most simple fact, how one is able to mouth what one has just been told, is not evidence that one can start building on it whether or not for helping others. For, in trying to use what I have "learned", I must first know myself. And after arguing for decades with the experts, I see our need to recognize, more openly and more honestly, not ignorance alone, but also our pretentiousness. The Book of Genesis told the world and many independent sources warned as well, that rings of artful dodgers marketing their formulae for Paradise will bring Mankind to final devastation. Those now seriously worried about the trouble into which major towns are moving should see themselves as "comrades in adversity"; like the crews on any sinking vessels. It is among themselves, with and from each other, that they must settle what to do. We may well call this "citizen self-education", since all must educate themselves. (1992)

What has been outlined here are the philosophy, concepts and beliefs as expressed by Reginald W. Revans, action learning's principal pioneer.

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