Action Learning

History and Evolution

Edited by Yury Boshyk
and Robert L. Dilworth

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Edited By

Yury Boshyk
Chairman, Global Executive Learning Network, and the annual Global Forum on Executive Development and Business Driven Action Learning

and

Robert L. Dilworth
Associate Professor Emeritus, Virginia Commonwealth University

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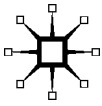

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Preface

Shortly before the final submission of the manuscripts for both volumes my co-editor, Robert L. (Lex) Dilworth, passed away on June, 6, 2009. My sense of loss is still beyond adequate expression. We made a wonderful and deeply intellectually enriching journey together, even though we knew that there was much still to do to trace and understand the history, evolution and applications of action learning worldwide, and the story of its principal pioneer, Reg Revans. We both started our examination from different perspectives: he from having worked with Reg Revans and I from a non-traditional (Organizational Development-influenced) approach, learned from over 20 years of practice in the business world. Nevertheless, in our mutual exploration of the history and evolution of action learning, he found a renewed respect for Reg Revans and traditional action learning, and I, a newfound respect for the theory and practice of traditional action learning and its founder.

Lex was an inspirational partner and mentor. He was always ready to help, to share his knowledge and experience: a true "partner in adversity". Many people around the world feel the same and are very grateful for his generosity, unstinting assistance and encouragement. One manifestation of this respect was a Special Tribute paid to Lex at the 14th annual Global Forum on Executive Development and Action Learning – a community of practice – of which he and his wife Doris were valued members. A special award in his honor – The Robert L. (Lex) Dilworth Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Field of Executive Development and Action Learning was launched. In this way we shall maintain his memory, his contributions, and his values and commitment. Volume two of our co-edited work – *Action Learning and Its Applications* – is dedicated to Lex. His long-time collaborator, Professor Verna J. Willis, co-author with Lex of a seminal book on action learning, has written a memorial and biography of Lex in that volume for which we would like to thank her. To Doris, we express our deeply felt sympathy for her loss, and we hope she realizes that she will always be a special and warmly welcomed member of the Global Forum community.

YURY BOSHYK

Acknowledgments

Many contributed to the development of this book, but no one more importantly than Reg Revans himself. His "voice" is evident throughout, and much of it is not based on third party recall. What is stated frequently comes from personal conversations and correspondence with Revans. A number of the authors knew him and spent considerable time with him. Dilworth met him in 1991, was captivated by his concepts and deep insights, and went on to become a colleague and friend. Yury Boshyk never met Reg but, after the intensity of research on this book, feels that he knows Revans first hand.

Other important contributors included David Botham, Albert Barker, Alan Mumford, Verna Willis, Mike Pedler, and Donna Vick, all of whom personally knew Revans and provided important perspectives. Albert Barker and David Botham each spent a great deal of time with Revans. Barker was especially close to Revans in seeing to his needs, particularly after his wife Norah died.

David Botham was Revans' choice to become the Director of the Revans Centre when it was dedicated in 1995. Donna Vick was the first Revans Scholar, receiving a full scholarship to pursue her doctorate at the Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research at the University of Salford, and Revans became her mentor. She then joined the faculty.

Others who supported the development of action learning in critical ways and are no longer with us also are reflected in this book, including Lord Butterfield of Stechford, Professor John Morris, Nelson Coghill, and Janet Craig – Revans' close collaborator, friend and personal archivist for many years, and others.

For assisance in the research, as well as some of the people already mentioned, we and David Bellon would like to thank Roger Talpaert, Dirk Deschoolmeester, Daniel Deveusser, Leopold Vansina, Dirk Symoens, Luc Drieghe, Roland Van Dierdonck, Kenneth Bertrams and Liliana Petrella. From the U.K., we would like to thank Albert Barker, David Botham, Catherine Guelbert, Jean Lawrence, Alan Mumford, Pat Wright, Ian Hall, Jan Hall, Chavi Chi-yun Chen, Pavlo Smoliy, David Pearce; in France, Claire Meneveau, Chantal Fleuret and Leonie Chouard; in Germany, Otmar Donnenberg, Wolfgang Braun, Klaus Bodel and Karl-Georg Degenhardt; in Sweden, Åke Reinholdsson, Pia Anderberg, and Lennart Rohlin; in the U.S., Verna Willis, Donna Vick,

Lucinda Gibson-Myers, Lars Cederholm, Isabel Rimanoczy, Noel Tichy, John Johns, and Donald Sadoway. Thanks also to our publisher Stephen Rutt and Paul Milner for their understanding. To Nadia and Doris for their insight and support.

Revans influenced many people in his lifetime, and had over six hundred active correspondents around the world. He generously contributed of his time, rarely receiving any kind of stipend. To him, the development of action learning was a calling, no less compelling than that of a theologian. He saw action learning as more than an approach or technique. To him, it was a vehicle that could help provide a healthy balance in society, create more positive relationships and a deeper sense of fulfillment between employers and employees, and help understanding and peace among and between nations. These views undoubtedly came from his strong Quaker roots.

In sum, there are many people who have contributed to this book and to the development of action learning, but the major acknowledgement goes to Reg and his lifetime of service to action learning and humanitarian endeavors. He stands as our guiding light. Thanks also to our publisher Stephen Rutt and Paul Miner for their understanding and to the team at Newgen for their excellent editorial and typesetting services.

Contributors

Albert Barker (prof.albertbarker@tiscali.co.uk) studied philosophy before joining a U.S. multinational. He then became Chairman/CEO of a small engineering group, growing concerned about management and education standards. He also worked in the voluntary sector, on corporate rescues, and later led a research project in thermodynamics. He traveled the world working at board level with household-name multinationals. A Fellow of the British Institute of Management, in the 1980s concerns about management training brought him into contact with Reg Revans. They soon became close friends, researching, writing and working together until Revans' death in 2003. Latterly – and after Revans ceased writing himself – Albert helped with correspondence and represented Revans at various conferences. Albert Barker's interests are Applied Economics and Cybernetics. He contributes to an international economics journal, assisting on its editorial board. He practices, researches and writes about action learning.

David Bellon (david.bellon1@telenet.be) is passionate about supply chain organizations and has been working in the logistics industry since 1994 in various management roles, presently with DHL. Holding an MBA from Flanders Business School with the Kellogg School of Management in Chicago, he has been specializing in Lean and Six Sigma methodologies and all aspects related to Change Management in organizations. Through a leadership development program involving business driven action learning, he came to know Yury Boshyk. Based in Brussels, he was requested to do research on the Belgian Experiment led by Reg Revans in the 1960s. This led to interviews with former participants in that experiment, as well as research using archival materials related to Reginald Revans' ten-year stay in Belgium. David is also owner of Take (Training and Knowledge Expansion), a private consulting firm providing services on Business Performance Improvements and related concepts within various types of organizations and companies.

Yury Boshyk (yury@gel-net.com) is Chairman of the Global Executive Learning Network, a worldwide association of professionals involved for many years in assisting multinationals and organizations in the design and implementation of executive and management programs especially

involving business driven action learning. The Network also researches, analyzes and publishes on global trends that affect companies and countries. Since 1996, Yury has been helping organize an annual Global Forum on Executive Development and Business Driven Action Learning, a worldwide "community of practice", and is presently its chairman. He lectures widely and works in cooperation with a number of institutions. His most recent article was on "Developing Global Executives: Today and Tomorrow" in *The 2009 Pfeiffer Annual: Leadership Development*. He is the editor of several books on action learning: *Business Driven Action Learning: Global best practices* (2000) and *Action Learning Worldwide: Experiences of leadership and organizational development* (2002), both published by Palgrave Macmillan and St Martin's Press. In 2010, two books on action learning, which he co-edited with Robert L. Dilworth, will be released by Palgrave Macmillan*: Action Learning: History and Evolution*, and *Action Learning and its Applications*. Formerly, he was Professor of Strategy, Geopolitics and the International Business Environment at IMD in Lausanne, Switzerland and the Theseus Institute in France. He completed his doctorate at the University of Oxford, and his Master's Degree at the London School of Economics.

David Botham (revansinstitute@binternet.com) is renowned for his work in the field of action learning. He was the first Director of the Revans' Centre for Action Learning and Research at the University of Salford when the Centre was dedicated on 2 December, 1995. A long-time associate of Revans, the "father of action learning", Botham had been Revans' personal choice to head the Centre. Botham has had a widely diversified career, spending time in both the "hard" and "soft" sciences. He established the first Further Education School of Art and Design based on action learning principles, at Central Manchester College for Further Education. Professor Botham is well known in the Health Service in the UK for developing and implementing many action learning programs for the Service and its top leaders and managers. Botham became interested in behavioral science while he worked for Her Majesty's Prisons in England from 1973–1990, counseling violent and hardened criminals. His interests and expertise in the behavioral sciences eventually led him into the field of management. Botham has done work around the world to expand knowledge of action learning, including the United States, Sweden, South Africa and Romania.

Robert L. (Lex) Dilworth was a retired U.S. Army brigadier general, with more than 31 years active service. He served as the 54th Adjutant General of the Army (TAG), a position dating back to 1775. He was also

an Associate Professor Emeritus at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Since 1991, when he became a colleague, collaborator and friend of Reg Revans, Lex has spent much of his time writing, researching and lecturing on the subject of action learning. This has included work in the UK, Australia and Romania. His book, with Verna Willis of Georgia State University, *Action Learning: Images and pathways*, was published in 2003. In 2008, his book, with Shlomo Maital of the Technion Institute of Management in Israel, *Fogs of War and Peace: A midstream analysis of World War III*, was published by Praeger Security International. Dilworth earned his doctorate at Columbia University and has Master's degrees from Columbia University, University of Oklahoma, and the United States Army's Command and General Staff College. He has also attended advanced management programs at Harvard, University, University of Michigan, and Northwestern University. He was a graduate of the Industrial College of the Armed forces.