Glossary

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Introduction

This glossary contains some of the more commonly used terminology and singular initiatives associated with the evolution of action learning. Rather than refer to "sets" as Revans did, we refer to teams in order to be clear. There was no known differentiation between sets and teams by Revans. It was simply his preferred way of referring to teams engaged in action learning.

Action. The centerpiece of action learning is action, in that the experience is to lead to action. As Reg Revans states, there is no learning without action and no action without learning. The action to be taken/project serves as the engine that drives the process, promoting learning and critical reflection.

Action Learning. Action learning is a process of reflecting on one's work and beliefs in a supportive/confrontational environment of one's peers for the purpose of gaining new insights and resolving real business and community problems in real time. (, Dilworth and Willis, 2003; Willis's definition, p. 11)

Action Learning Set or Team. A group of four to eight individuals, what Revans called a "set", selected to participate in an action learning experience. There is no assigned leader within the team. All members of the team enjoy equal status. Revans considered five to be the ideal team size. (Revans, R. (1983), p. 7–8)

Action Learning Team Process Questionnaire (ALTPQ). An instrument developed by John Bing of ITAP International and Lex Dilworth of Virginia Commonwealth University to monitor the internal action learning team group dynamics, as seen through the eyes of its members (i.e., their perceptions). It is administered on line, with member responses kept anonymous. Both quantitative (Likert scale based) and qualitative responses are involved. Results are reported back to team members as a profile of what is occurring in the team across a field of 32 indicators (e.g., equalization of work load within the team, quality of internal communications and team effectiveness). Positives and negatives related to the action learning experience are also plotted. Dealing with the group dynamics, using the ALTPQ as a reference point, becomes part of the learning experience for the team.

Action Reflection Learning (ARL). This is a form of action learning that places special emphasis on critical reflection and transformative learning, with a learning coach to help participants strike a better balance between work on their project and learning from doing that work. The Management Institute of Lund (Sweden) was a pioneer of this approach. "Different from Revans, MIL developed a focus on learning coaches, working with participants in a co-learner relationship, but taking accountability for assertively catalyzing learning in the process"(Yorks, L., Oneil, J., and Marsick, 2002), pp. 19–29)

Belgian Experiment. An action learning program conducted in Belgium in the 1960's with governmental sponsorship, involving a consortium of the five leading Belgian universities and major companies. Developed and orchestrated by Reg Revans, action learning's principal pioneer, it involved action learning teams of five senior corporate executives, each dealing with an unfamiliar problem of great complexity that was centered in an industry other than their own, as they shared with their set colleagues concerns and insights on the learning taking place, "learning from and with each other" (Revans, 1980, pp. 39–48).

Business Driven Action Learning. This is a term used to describe a results-focused orientation to individual leadership development and organizational learning and change. It can be summarized as emphasizing both business results and the integration of individual development, team effectiveness and organizational strategy. (Boshyk, 2002, PP. 36–52)

Traditional (also called Classic) Approach to action learning. It centers on the philosophy and teachings of Reg Revans, principal pioneer of action learning. Some of its most basic precepts are outlined in Dilworth 2010 as part of Explaining Traditional Action Learning: Its Basic Concepts and Beliefs. (See also Weinstein, K., pp. 3–18) 2002]

Coal Board and Collieries. Revans was for a time associated with the Coal Board in England, and as part of that involvement he elected to spend a great deal of time underground with the miners at the coalface. He studied the group dynamics, concluding that "small is dutiful" (similar to the "small is beautiful" terminology coined by E.M. Schumacher). Revans found that when small teams were empowered and allowed to become involved in planning their own work, that the teams were significantly more productive than teams managed in an autocratic way. The safety records were also considerably better. He proposed that a "staff college" be created where there could be open discussion of ideas between management and workers. In the end, Revans' proposal was not supported, largely in his view because the senior manages did want to dilute their control over the enterprise. Revans was influenced by the work of Likert re: use of small teams, what Revans came to call action learning sets.

Client. The person or persons who will be relating to the action learning team or individual members (depending on the action learning model being used) in refining the problem statement in the client organization and receiving the results of the action learning effort.

Critical Reflection. This involves a purposeful effort to reflect on one's experiences in depth in order to reveal the underlying assumptions that govern our lives and perceptions of the world. This goes beyond mere reflection. As Gregory Bateson has indicated, it is "Level Three Learning". "You look for the why behind the why". Edger Schien has referred to it as "Triple Loop Learning". You end up both exposing and "unfreezing" underlying assumptions, some of them carried with us indiscriminately since early childhood, and testing them against the realities that we now face. In action learning, critical reflection can occur both individually and in collective dialogue within the action learning set.

Everyone Bring One (EBO) Model. This is an action learning team in which each member brings a different problem to the table, usually from that member's workplace.

Four Squares. A model used by Revans to demonstrate that problems we confront in our lives are either familiar or unfamiliar, and they occur in a familiar or unfamiliar setting. He designed a simple display with four quadrants to show the four alternative situations (e.g., familiar problem in an unfamiliar setting). Revans argues that the greatest learning occurs when we find ourselves confronting an unfamiliar problem in an unfamiliar setting. He viewed that as the personification of a learning organization. Revans believed that when we find ourselves confronting the unfamiliar, we are then inclined to ask fresh questions and challenge our long-held assumptions.

Future Search Conferences. This modality was pioneered by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, Co-Founders and Directors of the Future Search Network. It has been used extensively around the world in dealing with difficult problems, with the goal of arriving at Common Ground as a foundation for action. A Future Search Conference usually involves bringing a diverse group of 64 to 72 participants together to address a major issue. (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000)

The large group is subdivided into Regular Stakeholder Groups of roughly eight, composed of functional groups (e.g., business people, press, clergy, government officials, people from financial institutions, human resource professionals). During the Future Search Conference, which usually lasts about 16 hours over three days, participants will be further assigned to Mixed Stakeholder Groups, each containing members from the Regular Stakeholder Groups. Each mixed group in effect becomes a microcosm of the whole.

Weisbord considers this a form of action learning. However, as is true of the GE Work-Outs, which are similarly short in duration, the time for reflection can be limited.

GE Work-Out/Change Acceleration Program (CAP). This is an organization development (OD) strategy that was inaugurated throughout General Electric (GE), beginning in 1989. It was driven by the belief that the values emphasized at GE's corporate university at Crotonville, New York, were being lost when managers returned to their workplace. (Ashkenas et al., 2002; Ulrich et al., 2002) The Work-Out was an effort, considered highly successful by the company, to embed these values in the everyday work life of GE. It is considered by GE to be a form of action learning. In its typical form, a group (e.g., 32) is brought together and then subdivided into teams of eight. Covering as few as three days, both the overall group and the teams are a part of the process as it unfolds. Teams are empowered to present recommendations to top management in face-to-face meetings, with an expectation of immediate decisions.

Hospital Internal Communications (HIC) Project. In the 1960's Revans became involved with what came to be called the Hospital Internal Communication (HIC) Project/Study. It involved the ten largest hospitals in London. The impetus for the initiative was the fact that the hospitals were experiencing staff morale problems, patient morbidity rates that were considered excessive, hospital stays that were too long, and attrition rates that were exceptionally high (as much

as 67 percent for nurses). Small groups were sent from one hospital to another, where they observed familiar problems but in an unfamiliar setting. The groups did not operate as action learning teams. Nonetheless, each small group (it might only be three) would discuss their findings, and then the overall group would meet to discuss what needed to be done across the hospitals. It led to a number of initiatives. Results showed, when compared with nonparticipating hospitals (a quasi control group), that patient morbidity rates had gone down, staff turnover reduced, hospital stays shortened, and staff morale improved. The overall conclusion drawn was that lack of effective intercommunication between doctors and patients, nurses and doctors, and between all parties, had been ineffective, and that when intercommunication improved, positive results began to become evident. (Revans, 1980, pp. 29–38).

Hybrid Set. This is a term used when members of multiple teams are mixed together to form hybrid sets for the purpose of broadening the exchange of views on learning that is taking place. By bringing a cross-section of teams together, the intense project orientation tends to be temporarily diffused, elevating the likelihood that reflection on learning can occur.

Joint Project Model. This is an action learning team where all members are dealing with a common problem, usually one of great complexity. Revans would refer to such an experience as "partners in adversity", since all team members were confronting a common and vexing challenge.

Learning Coach. Also referred to as an advisor, facilitator, or mentor. The role varies in relation to the application of action learning involved, but the learning coach usually helps guide the action learning process, to include assistance in determining the appropriate project and arriving at team composition. The learning coach role can range from omnipresence in team meetings (e.g., Action Reflection Learning) to interruptive involvement based on need and invitation of the team membership. Reg Revans believed in minimal facilitation and intervention of the learning coach, believing that the team members themselves were the best facilitators, and that managing the team dynamics was part of the learning yield.

Learning Equation. Revans suggests that learning equals programmed knowledge, what he refers to as P, plus questioning insight, or the Q factor L = P + Q). He espouses the belief that while both the P and the Q are necessary for learning to occur, the P (formal and accrued learning) needs to be preceded by the Q and its free-ranging address of what is happening and needs to occur. In other words, the Q drives the P. (Revans, 1983, p. 28)

Nile Project. This was a project, spawned by the Belgian Experiment, described elsewhere in the glossary. It involved thirteen Egyptian companies and used a very similar methodology. (Revans, 1982, pp. 372–425)

Programmed Knowledge. This encompasses all the forms of formal/instrumental learning we are commonly exposed to, including lectures, textbooks, case studies, simulations and puzzles. Revans states that all forms of programmed knowledge travel out of what has occurred in the past, and therefore represent imperfect formulations in dealing with problems that we either are facing now or might expect to face in the future.

Questioning Insight (Q). The Q factor hinges on asking the right questions. Revans indicates that we need an added infusion of the Q factor in dealing with the fast paced times in which we live, since our capacity to learn is now often outstripped by the velocity of the change forces around us. Through questioning insight we are able to test the adequacy of the available P and determine if it is flawed or a bad match with what we need. In some cases, we will find it necessary to discount existing P and create new P. If we had started with the existing P rather than Q, we might have been inclined to accept P that would have led us in the wrong direction.

"Structure d'acceuil". A term used by Revans to describe an internal "client group" inside a company or organization that either assists an outside action learner or action learning team (set) to help examine an issue and then implement recommendations for change, and/or to take on the responsibility themselves for implementing the recommended changes. Revans (1980, p. 45)

System Alpha. This is the first of three interlinked systems of thought and action in Revan's concept of action learning. It features iterative, evolving analysis of a real problem situation in an organizational context. During the process, unexpected roots and ramifications are discovered. Novel attacks on problems can be mounted when action learners continually ask themselves the questions: What is happening? What ought to be happening? How can it be made to happen? The same questions will apply at different points throughout the inquiry. These questions are pivotal in arriving at an initial problem statement and tracking the migration of the problem over time as new insights are gained. (Revans, 1982, pp. 333–48)

System Beta. This system resembles the use of the scientific method in the physical and life sciences. Revans calls it "intelligent trial and error" Beta elaborates on what is derived from System Alpha, applying fact finding and assumption-testing procedures to check what is being learned. System Beta includes 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 are all necessary Beta processes. System Beta uses whatever is revealed to pursue new avenues of inquiry that might yield a better solution. (Revans, 1982, pp. 336–45)

System Gamma. This system, grounded in critical reflection, is embedded in all the action learning processes. Revans called it "symbiotic" with Alpha and Beta. It demands an honest search for understanding of the realities and value systems of self and others, since it is these realities and values that guide what people say and do. Revans insists that greater self-knowledge leads to greater interpersonal competence and more sensitive organizational skills. System Gamma, with the transformational change opportunities it offers, is at the very core of action learning and the energy source for its powerful effects. (Revans, 1982, pp. 345–48)

Transformative Learning. We are transformed to the extent we are able to either modify or jettison assumptions that are revealed as no longer having meaning, replacing them with new and more fully differentiated points of view and frames of reference. (Mezirow et al., 2000)). Learning in and of itself contains the seeds of transformation. When we learn, we are transformed.

Virtual Organization/Virtuality. Action learning in a virtual mode involves doing most, if not all, of the set business/interaction by teleconference, email or other electronic means, as opposed to face-to-face interaction. This provides special challenges to a modality predicated on intimate, direct, and regular face-to-face contact where all the senses are engaged. The challenge is further magnified when dealing cross-culturally with global teams. This is relatively unexplored ground with respect to action learning.

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