Action Learning

Learning Guide
Action learning

Introduction

This Learning Guide was written by Colin Bertie, a tutor and accredited coach at Ashridge. It is one of a series produced by the Learning Resource Centre. Each guide sets out to give you a quick summary of the main theories on a particular topic backed up by a practical commentary based on Ashridge's long experience of consulting on and teaching management issues. We hope that it whets your appetite for more information. The guide points you in the direction of other sources such as key books, articles, videos and web sites.

Where to start

Begin by reading through the overview and browse the development activities which give a number of practical ideas and tips for implementing action learning. If you have a little more time, have a look at some of the recommended resources and take a look at the book summaries of the Action learning handbook and Learning with colleagues. The various videos take different approaches: choose one which best matches your interests. For more details, try the books, some of which are available for purchase in the Ashridge LRC Bookshop.
Resources

The following resources are recommended by Ashridge and where possible we have included links to suppliers or the resource itself. All the resources are available in the Learning Resource Centre (LRC) at Ashridge.

Videos

*Coaching to Improve Performance* (1993), Performance Consultants, parts 1 and 2:20 mins each.

David Whitaker, David Hemery and Sir John Whitmore discuss the benefits of applying their sports coaching model to a business context. Part One introduces these ideas, and includes a powerful demonstration of the difference between telling and coaching (using the 'GROW' model). In Part Two, David Whitaker visits a British building society, and uses his coaching skills to help real people (whom he does not know) to improve their performance in their jobs (with which he is not familiar).


The *Helping Hand* shows managers that understanding the need for coaching, and then learning how to coach, is an essential part of their jobs. The programme shows how, with the right teaching, the manager is able to improve people’s performance and motivation and that coaching is an invaluable tool for helping individuals and the business develop together.


This video examines the whole listening process - not just the words spoken but also the tone of voice and body language used. Practical advice on retaining ideas, note taking and checking understanding.

This programme explores the problems of giving people feedback in ways which help them grow and develop without making them defensive and resentful. Objective and impartial feedback is likely to give an individual food for thought and should concentrate on informing that person of the effects of their behaviour rather than making comments about their personality.


This video shows the impact of body language in situations such as presentations and interviews. It also demonstrates how to use positive, congruent body language to communicate clearly and confidently as well as the skills to check out any inconsistency between what people say and what their body language reveals.

Coaching for Results (1994), BBC, 25 mins + self study and resources videos.

Looks at coaching from the perspective of the coach as well as the person being coached. It shows how questioning and active listening - core skills of coaching - can be applied throughout the organisation. Through the format of drama (which is a little bit wooden!), documentary interviews and a real-life coaching session, this package reinforces some key principles essential for coaching: maintaining the employee’s self-image, attacking problems not people, and seeking the employee’s input.

Emotional Intelligence, Video Arts, 72 mins.

Dr Daniel Goleman has made groundbreaking discoveries on the emotional mind, believing it can play a key role in determining people's success in their careers. In this video of a live lecture, he explains why emotion is another measure of intelligence, redefining what it means to be smart. He provides the tools for people to improve their emotional reactions and understand the emotions of those around them.
Journal articles


Raelin, Joseph (1997) *Action learning and action science: are they different?* Organizational Dynamics, Summer, Vol 25, Iss 1, p21-34.

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4120/is_200503/ai_n13634821


**Information files**

There are Information files in the Learning Resource Centre at Ashridge, containing a number of newspaper and journal articles on the following subject areas:

- Coaching
- Action learning
- Feedback
- Facilitation
- Learning organisation
- NLP

**Books**

Ashridge shelf reference: **AKG (BRE)**

The ultimate source of information for everyone working outside the traditional office. Alice Bredin, the leading expert on the virtual office, known to millions from her nationally syndicated columns and radio commentaries, has written the first comprehensive handbook to starting, managing, and thriving in a virtual office. Written for both the telecommuter and the entrepreneur, here is advice on working in all types of virtual offices, including the home office, satellite work centre, time-shared workspace, and mobile office. A goldmine of expert, how-to information on remaining productive outside the traditional workplace.
Ashridge shelf reference: JPSB (COR)

This revision of Gerald Corey's best-selling text introduces students to the major theories of counselling (psychoanalytic, Adlerian, existential, person-centred, Gestalt, reality, behavior, cognitive-behaviour, family systems, feminist and, NEW to this edition, post-modern approaches) and demonstrates how each theory can be applied to a single case ("Stan"). Reviewed by 27 of the field’s leading experts, Corey's Seventh Edition covers the major concepts of counselling theories, shows students how to apply those theories in practice, and helps them learn to integrate the theories into an individualised counselling style.

Ashridge shelf reference: JMCD (DEH)

The content and role of working have changed in significant ways as a result of new technologies and broader social and organisational changes. Work serves a range of purposes for individuals including recognition, influence, self-expression and self-fulfilment. *Learning with Colleagues* relates to personal development, enabling individuals to enter into a deeper relationship with colleagues to learn from them and with them. The book will be an important stimulus to creating a workplace learning environment.

De Haan, Erik; Burger, Yvonne (2005), *Coaching with colleagues: An action guide for one-to-one learning*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke.
Ashridge shelf reference: JMCD (DEH)

A rigorous yet accessible guide to coaching approaches and coaching practices, this book is rooted in a long and varied therapeutical tradition. At the same time it translates insights from that tradition into clear models for practical application in modern coaching practice. The authors refer to well-known coaching approaches in business and devote attention to internal coaching practices.
Ashridge shelf reference: JMC (DES)

Examines the idea that words possess a ‘magical’ quality that has been lost to the modern world, a notion expressed by Freud in his quote “words were originally magic”. This text demonstrates ways in which words and numbers can be used in solution-focused therapy.

Ashridge shelf reference: JMC (GRE)

The book examines the challenges that the furious pace of change in today’s world have brought, and provides every manager with strategies to facilitate a successful, dynamic, creative, effective workforce. Backed by sound, up-to-the minute psychological theory this book is also highly practical and is packed with validated tools and techniques for enhancing life experience and work performance.

Jackson, Paul Z; McKergow, Mark (2002), *The Solutions Focus: The simple way to positive change*, Nicholas Brealey: London
Ashridge shelf reference: JMN (JAC)

This book is the first to introduce to the organisational and business world a tried and tested set of ideas, skills and techniques from other people-centred professions. The authors show how to identify what is working in a team or an organisation, and how to amplify it to make useful changes; how to focus on what is possible rather than what is intractable, and how to be solution focused rather than solution forced. The solution-focused approach sidesteps the search for the cause of the trouble and instead heads straight for the solution. The SIMPLE way of working allows bespoke solutions to be invented each time, according to what actually fits the organisation.

Ashridge shelf reference: JMC (McL)

In *Performance Coaching*, Dr Angus McLeod brings together the fundamentals of ALL the best practice in coaching and builds up from there. Unlike so many of the
coaching books already on the market, this book is for coaches, not clients. Fast, accessible and clearly written, *Performance Coaching* is comprehensive and rich in real examples of real executives achieving real success in real-life situations.

Ashridge shelf reference: JMCD (PED)

*Action Learning in Practice* provides an analysis of the theory, practice and implementation of action learning. There are contributions from many of the leading exponents of the approach, including its ‘inventor’, Professor Reg Revans. Part One of the book takes us through the basic principles which underpin action learning. By offering a number of different perspectives, the book provides a useful introduction for those who are new to the process, as well as a refreshing review of current thinking for ‘old hands’. Part Two extends this approach by offering some case studies of action learning in practice. Part Three helps us consider some of the practical issues of putting in place an action learning process. Part four evaluates the process.

Ashridge shelf reference: JMCD (REV)

*The ABC of Action Learning* by Reg Revans is a new edition of his classic *Action Learning*. As a member of the management team at the National Coal Board after the war (and as Britain’s first professor of industrial administration) he began to explore his ideas of action learning. Action learning is based on the learning principles of adult learning behaviours and argues that managers learn best from each other and from reflecting on how well they are addressing real problems, especially when they are able to question the assumptions on which their actions are based.

Ashridge shelf reference: JMC (ROG)

*Coaching Skills* helps readers to acquire the skills that are essential for becoming an outstanding coach. The book addresses key issues such as: creating the trust that encourages a client to learn; keeping yourself and your own agenda out of the way without diminishing your presence; and managing your own anxiety, especially if you are inexperienced. This practical and readable book is enlivened by many case
studies to accompany the theory. Based on many years' experience of what coaches actually struggle with in practice, it is a must for the growing band of executive and life coaches, as well as managers who want to learn how to adapt coaching as an approach to leadership.


Ashridge shelf reference: JMC (SCH)


Ashridge shelf reference: JMCD (SHA)

Solution-Focused Groupwork is an innovative and highly practical guide for all professionals who use groups to help people. John Sharry provides a clear, step-by-step introduction for the newcomer, while for more experienced practitioners he presents ideas and techniques which can be readily integrated into existing practice. The author: examines the therapeutic factors which characterize solution focused groupwork and which contribute to its effectiveness; uses carefully selected case studies and examples to take the reader through the various stages in the therapeutic process, from beginning to end; provides creative exercises for use in practice and guidance on evaluating the outcomes of group work and how to tackle the difficulties which can arise; Solution-Focused Groupwork is ideal for individual study and for use on courses in a wide range of fields.


Ashridge shelf reference: JMCD (WEI)

As children, we learn by doing something - by testing it out. However, as we grow older, we tend to read and listen, until we know about something - not necessarily how, when and what if. Action learning involves working on real problems, focusing on learning and implementing solutions. With its emphasis on working as a group, who share, communicate, listen, question and encourage, the book offers a means of motivating people to take on the responsibility to tackle work issues together, to have the courage and confidence to take risks.
Ashridge shelf reference: JMC (WHI)

Adopted by many of the world’s major companies, this easy to use title argues persuasively for using effective questions rather than instructions or commands to raise awareness and responsibility.

**Useful websites**

Action Learning Bibliography

A resource list which supports the regular public programme "areol" (action research and evaluation on line) offered twice a year beginning in mid-February and mid-July.

Fairy Tales – A book of Fairy Tales
http://oaks.nvg.org/re1ra3.html

Gordon Law
http://www.ta-psychotherapy.co.uk/supervision.htm

International Foundation for Action Learning.
www.ifal.org.uk

Kendy Rossi, Tricia Lustig & Mark McKergow (2003),
http://www.thesolutionsfocus.com/article4.cfm

Metaphors
http://umbc7.umbc.edu/~lharris/metalist.htm
Overview

Introduction

Imagine being with a dedicated set of peers in a quiet, safe and confidential place. For almost an hour they focus on a complex problem you bring that is troubling you and about which you are passionate to solve. They refrain from offering you solutions to their view of your problem. Instead they mostly ask you a variety of good questions. This allows you to explore your problem and possibly begin to see it in a different light or perhaps even re-define it.

Through reflection, you see more clearly both the broader context of your problem and the depth to which the problem runs – including how you experience it and what part if any, you play in maintaining the problem. Throughout your time, you are controlling all aspects of the helping process – from how your time is used, including breaks, to decisions about what is most useful to you at any particular stage. These new insights open up some further options for you. As a result, the choices seem clearer regarding possible actions you could take that would move you towards a solution.

At the end of your hour, where would this leave you? Thinking new thoughts? Feeling new feelings? Deciding to behave with new behaviours? As a result of the help you have received, would you, after a short break, be more ‘available’ to the others – your group of peers – to help them with their issues?

You have just experienced one ‘round’ of an Action Learning group (often called a ‘set’ in the Action Learning world). Depending on the time available, there may be as many as four rounds with different group members in any one set meeting.
The aims of this learning guide are threefold, to:

- INTRODUCE you to Action Learning
- INFLUENCE you to try it out, so that you will ....
- INVEST in an ongoing Action Learning set, with all the associated benefits.

**What is “Action Learning”?**

In one sense, Action Learning is so simple it takes a long time to explain it. Given this, Pedler’s definition is the best the author has found so far:

“Action Learning is an approach to the development of people in organisations which takes the task as the vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning. ….. The method has been pioneered in work organisations and has three main components: (a) people, who accept the responsibility for taking action on a particular issue; (b) problems, or tasks that people set themselves; and (c) a set of six or so colleagues who support and challenge each other to make progress on problems. Action Learning implies both self-development and organisational development. Action on a problem changes both the problem and the person acting upon it. It proceeds particularly by questioning taken-for-granted knowledge” (Pedler 1991: xxii-xxiii)

Every set will be unique because of the individual differences between the set members, their wider contexts and the specific challenges they face.

According to William Schutz, the eminent psychiatrist and originator of the FIRO-B personality questionnaire widely used at Ashridge, “people need people” (Schutz 1966:1). Ancient wisdom supports this: “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labour” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 NASB). We also see this need expressed time and time again in Action Learning sets across all industry sectors and ethnic groups. People really DO need people in order for them to function at their best.

So what are the benefits of Action Learning?
What are some of the benefits of Action learning?

At the individual level, de Haan (2003) lists the following advantages of action learning:

- Reflecting based on practical situations
- Practising ‘slow thinking’ and the postponement of judgement, providing an opportunity for new connections and answers to arise
- Giving and receiving personal feedback
- Learning from the parallel patterns between behaviour within and the action learning sessions
- Safety and mutual support, which enables more comprehensive knowledge to be created.

… to which could be added:

- Making good use of a committed group of ‘listening ears’ and ‘questioning minds’ with a wide variety of experience, background and style
- Being part of a maturing group, increasingly ‘available’ to each other through reflection and review of the process at every major stage.
- ‘Normalising’ of behaviours, i.e. creating a sense that ‘I’m just like others’ and ‘Others are just like me’.

Organisational benefits of Action Learning sets include:

- Skills development
- Personal and team growth
- Enhanced self-confidence to deliver
- Greater self-awareness (see Learning Guide on Emotional Intelligence)
- New ways of solving problems
- A clearer understanding of how learning occurs
- Support, challenge and motivation of staff
- Manage change
- Develop partnerships
- Reduce stress.

(Adapted from [http://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/resources/nacvs.html](http://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/resources/nacvs.html))
… to which could be added:

- A safe and inexpensive place to test out ideas
- Another layer of accountability between members of each group and the delivery benefits that supports.

**How to set up and run an Action Learning set**

We begin with an overview of the main components of an Action learning set and the relationships between these components:

[NOTE: The following material has been successfully used by the author for both (a) the initial setting up and running of a set and (b) reviewing at the beginning of each set meeting as a reminder of the ‘context of Action Learning’ – at least in the early days of the life of the set].

**Fig 1. Road Map of the Action Learning Territory**

**Issue/Problem:** The best issues to work on as an Action Learning set are often complex, of an irregular ‘shape’ (maybe not easily recognisable or explainable), messy (not neat and solvable as a ‘puzzle’ may be), and possibly have some sort of sense of an ‘ongoing, repeating pattern’ about them.
It will be important to work on an issue just like this, especially at the beginning of the life of the set. This will allow the Action Learning process to be seen at its best and thus help to grow the group’s ‘confidence’ in using Action Learning as a powerful tool. The author has found almost a ‘rule of thumb’ that when the issue is less like that described above, and more like a simple puzzle (Revans, 1998:28), then the harder the rest of the group have to work to be helpful to the issue-bringer. This might suggest that Action Learning is less appropriate with regard to this specific issue.

Two helpful guidelines when it comes to choosing an issue are as follows:

**Firstly, ask yourself:**

- Is the challenge important, significant, complex and real?
- Who, if anybody, needs to approve of my choice of issue?
- Am I certain I will be able to take action on the dilemma?
- What is the time frame for making progress on the issue?
- How would I feel if I were not able to resolve the problem?
- Can I explain what is in my head and heart to other people?
- Am I willing to be challenged on this area of my work, life or personality?
- Would it be most useful to work on a familiar or unfamiliar issue?
- What is troubling me or exciting me about work?

(http://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/resources/nacvs.html)

Secondly, from Reg Revans (1998:40,41), the originator of Action Learning, ask yourself:

- Who knows about (understands) the problem being tackled?
- Who cares (genuinely wants something done) about the problem?
- Who can (has enough power to) get something useful done about it?

The issue-bringer comes to the set prepared to share their issue and have the group work on it with them. They will have a unique, personal perspective on the issue and, as they are intimately involved, are often passionate about seeing it solved.
Weinstein lists several helpful behaviours by the issue-bringer:

- Prepare for meetings
- Structure your time
- Be clear about what you would like – or would like the set – to focus on
- Learn to ask for what you want
- Learn how to get an empathetic response
- Learn how to receive
- Learn how to generate action points. (1995:110)

... to which we can add:

Provide the minimum amount of context for the group to be helpful to you (this saves valuable time)

- Explain what has already been tried and with what degree of success
- If possible, what you see as the options at the moment.

Set-members (that is, other than issue-bringer), operate as coaches to the issue-bringer. They aim to use all the best coaching skills (see below and the Development Section) to assist the issue-bringer to move towards a solution. An important point to emphasise is: they are responsible TO the issue-bringer, not responsible FOR the issue bringer or their issue. They are there to work with the issue-bringer to help the issue-bringer to solve his/her issue.

They may well have their own perspective on the issue, which they should refrain from sharing UNLESS when offered, the issue-bringer agrees, and only then offering after other useful coaching avenues have been explored. This is to offset the potential but real, danger of seeing the issue-bringer’s issue from their own perspective, with their solutions, associated feelings, thoughts, behaviours, etc. Their aim is to both suspend judgement and the offering of advice/solutions/etc, until they have explored the issue-bringer’s context, perspective and ‘wants’ fully.

Beaty et al (1993:359) have identified helpful behaviours for action learning set members:

- Questioning skills to help people to find their own solutions to their problems.
• **Active listening skills** to communicate to people that they were being understood; to help them work out their own solutions but not give solutions; to help them clarify their situation, the facts, their thoughts, and their feelings; to hear without judging or evaluating.

• **The ability to give and receive feedback** to help people learn and develop; to increase their self-esteem and to make them feel valued.

• **An understanding of group process** to appreciate the difference between task and process and between helpful and sabotaging behaviours.

• **Creative problem solving skills** to provide a range of tools to help the set when they were ‘stuck’.

• **The skill of reflection** to plan for future action and to help derive the learning from action.

• **Understanding the process of learning** to enable people to appreciate the variety of ways in which people can learn.

… to this we would add:

• **Agreeing a form of contract** with the issue-bringer regarding the way you will all work together. This would include the degree of confidentiality, time available and how it could be used, what would they like to have as an outcome of the session, any particular way they would want to work, i.e. method used (see later under Development Activities), areas not to explore, etc. To allow mutual trust to grow, it is vital that confidentiality is maintained throughout and beyond the life of the set.

• **Aiming to maintain a respectful and honest approach** to each other at all times.

• **Using a blend of open and closed coaching questions.**

• **Checking in with the issue-bringer** regularly to see if what they are doing at present is still the most useful thing to be doing.

• **Using where necessary, a blend of summarising, reflecting on and reframing.**

For more on coaching, see the Development Activities below and the Ashridge Coaching Learning Guide.

The arrows, their thickness and type, relate to the relationships, the strength of this relationship and their importance or potential danger to the process.
respectively.

Firstly, the arrows are two-way depicting the mutual impact on one another. For example, the coaches do have an impact at several levels on the issue-bringer and vice-versa.

Secondly, given the passion involved, the strongest relationship will almost certainly be between the issue-bringer and their issue. The coaches’ work will be to use this strong relationship to ask helpful questions from viewing the issue through the issue-bringer’s eyes. The strength of the relationship between all the members of the set would be expected to grow as the set matures through spending useful time together.

Thirdly, the solid arrows represent helpful relationships. The broken arrows represent an area of possible danger to the process, namely the limitations by one or more coaches holding onto the ‘yes, we had one of those, and this is how we solved it’ mentality. We ALWAYS aim to view the issue through the eyes of the issue-bringer. While the wealth of experience within the group is often a big plus, it can lead to less helpful behaviours. The author has found that this is almost always a topic to be explored during the review phase both at the end of each ‘round’ and at the end of the set meeting. This is especially true when the set is made up of people from one organisation.

F(?) This stands for facilitation. There should always be a facilitation element to the process of Action Learning. That is, keeping an eye of the process, noticing and feeding back key aspects to the group at or before the review stages. These aspects may have either a positive or a negative effect. It is important to explore the most important of these.

The question mark represents the decision as to whether there should be a facilitator or not. As has been said, there should always be facilitation, but should there always be an ‘external’ dedicated facilitator? The author believes it is important to have a facilitator during the early days of the life of the set so that the set can concentrate more on coaching and being coached, but then handing over the facilitation to the set. In other words, the dedicated facilitator should be looking to do themselves out of a job over the first few set meetings. Then the set can decide at any particular time, to either have one of the set take the role of facilitator (say) for a particular ‘round’ or
distribute the role across the coaches. The basic role of the dedicated Action Learning facilitator is that of ‘coach to the coaches’.

One of the Development Activities below (A6) looks at how the set can become more comfortable with facilitating on its own. For more on facilitation see the Ashridge Facilitation Learning Guide and Casey et al (1992).

We use the following diagram to represent the ‘typical shape’ of a ‘round’.

**Fig 2. The ‘shape’ of a round/session**

Here again is the issue, presented clearly by the issue-bringer including what they will find most useful from the others. This initial stage is often called the ‘contracting stage’.

**Section A:**

This section is all about **divergence**. We open out the issue, asking questions about context, who is involved, what has happened before, etc. Once the issue has been expressed, it is often helpful to ask: What specifically is it about the issue that is of concern? This helps the coaches to be clear on which aspect of the issue does the issue-bringer wish the coaches to focus on.

**Section B:**

This section is all about **consolidation**. This is all about clarifying and testing possible hypotheses, and may involve reordering, re-conceptualising, re-framing, or reconsidering the issue. Do the coaches understand what the issue is? Here we may
ask them to say what they think the issue is and allow the issue-bringer to add further clarity as necessary. If stuck, and it is seen as appropriate, then some creative methods for looking at the issue from another angle could be introduced. For example one used by the author regularly is, "If this issue was a metaphor (or fairy-tale), then what metaphor (or fairy-tale) would it be, and what would your role in the metaphor (or fairy-tale) be?" This gives the set another language and 'frame' to use that often yields new insights, especially for the issue-bringer. (See also, Web resources on Metaphors, Fairy Tales and Gordon Law, 'Empty Chair' (see Friedman, 1989 and Corey, 2001).

**Section C:**

This section is all about convergence. We narrow down to (say) the two alternative outcomes X or Y. Popular outcomes for the time together could be new insights, additional options, actions to be taken, increased confidence, seeing where the real problem lies, etc. There should always be a sense of 'what next?' about this time. What will the issue-bringer take away and do after the set meeting?

At the end of this member’s time, the group conducts a review of how the session went. This may of course be done by the ‘external’ dedicated facilitator. The aim here is to explore set learning opportunities that will make the next time set meets the even more effective. We expect, over time, individual, set and organisational learning to occur. Helpful questions for this part of the process include:

**To the issue-bringer:**

What was the most useful part of this time?
What was the least useful part of this time?
What would you like us the coaches, to change next time we work with you?

**To the coaches:**

What were we most pleased about in the way that we worked together?
What were we least pleased about in the way we worked together?
What should we change if anything about the way we work together?
Do we have any less helpful tendencies which came out in this time? (common answers to this question include – asking lots of closed questions, offering advice too early, ineffective time management, etc)

Next time the set meets, the issue-bringer will 'check in' with the group at the beginning, saying what has happened and exploring what help, if any they now want from the group.

**Potential pitfalls in Action Learning**

Before we leave this section and move onto the Development Activities, it may be useful to explore possible pitfalls to be avoided when enjoying the Action Learning process. These include:

- “Volunteered” members – this is where a person does not decide for themselves whether or not to join a set. At one extreme, there can be a ‘remedial’ feel about this, which can severely undermine the foundations of the Action Learning set.
- Inappropriate problem or project – this would be inappropriate for all the reasons mentioned above.
- Lack of organisational support – if this is seen as a ‘waste of time’ or a ‘jolly holiday’, then it could seriously affect the credibility of the outcomes of a set meeting, and the consistency of attendance.
- Lack of time – it is far better to work effectively on a couple of issues, than to try and cram in more to a limited time. This is why it is important to spend time at the beginning of the meeting agreeing the use of time.
- Poor mix of members – the general rule here is to try and have people of the same or similar seniority. There should be no ‘reporting relationships’ in the room as this potentially generates conflicts of interest. For example, could a boss use information from an Action Learning set offered in confidence, in a performance appraisal interview with another set member?
- Lack of commitment by members – commitment and trust are important qualities that need to be present in order to secure the ongoing life and growth of the set.
- Poor problem framing and problem solving – is the real problem an inability to engage by coming to a decision? Or a poor understanding of the nature and scope of the problem, or both?
• Lack of commitment to Learning – an openness and willingness to learn is a core aspect of the successful Action Learning set.

• Insufficient commitment to action – where this occurs, the coaches may need to follow through with the issue-bringer at a future set meeting to explore why there is has not been enough commitment. This may be the ‘real’ issue.

• Poor facilitation – this is usually countered by good open and honest reviews at the end of each ‘round’ and at the end of a set meeting.

• Too much or too little structure – as a guide, a good question to ask at the set review stage is: “what is the minimum amount of structure that the set is comfortable with?” This may also vary with the life of the set.

• Too much dependence on the experience of the group – instead of relying upon the wealth of experience in the group to offer solutions, using it to inform the quality of the questions being asked.

• Ceasing to learn from each round and set meeting – basically failing to review and incorporate the review outcomes into the next rounds and set meetings.

(Adapted and expanded from McNamara (2000))
Development activities

The main approach to the following activities is: do it .... **experiment with it**, until you make it your own and then **get feedback**.

Apart from the first activity, all are whole activities which will serve you well as you conduct your Action Learning 'rounds' with different issue bringers. By practising them all at different times, you will grow in your portfolio of appropriate ways of approaching Action Learning and the coaching that lies at the core of it.

First we look at a key skill for all members, especially as they operate as coaches to the issue bringer: namely, listening. Through practising this skill, you will grow in the number of different aspects you will notice when listening to others. This exercise could be done within the Action Learning set or individually in the work or home setting.

Secondly, we look at three coaching frameworks, all of which are useful within the Action Learning set-up. The first two, content free questions and the G.R.O.W. model, have for some years now, been used very widely in many areas of coaching. The third, namely Solution-Focused Coaching is increasingly being recognised as having a significant contribution to make across a wide range of coaching situations. With its emphasis on brevity and client resources, it does seem particularly suitable for Action Learning 'rounds' with experienced managers who, though succeeding in many areas, may be stuck in others.

Thirdly, we look at five methods of conducting Action Learning 'rounds' taken from and used with permission, by de Haan (2005).

Lastly, we look at an ongoing exercise which will assist the set to become both competent and confident in facilitating during the set meeting.
A(ctivity)1: Erik de Haan’s Action Learning Methodology

De Haan, (2001:46) looks at five consulting methods and relates his fourteen methods to each of these areas. We will look at seven of his fourteen methods. In his book, he further refines these choices (2001:48). By looking down this page, the set members can begin to see which consulting approach may be the most useful, and therefore, out of the seven methods offered here, chose which one to use.

Consulting – i.e. the method of consultation participants want to choose: more supervisory and evaluative (De Haan (2001) sees this as suggesting Peer Supervision, rather than Action Learning) or more facilitative and supportive?
  • Ten and Five Step Methods, Dominant Ideas, Learning from Success

Exploring – i.e. the way in which participants are to reflect on the issue. Is it the intention to explore the case in depth with respect to the person of the issue bringer, or is it to look at the context: for example, the organisation of the issue bringer or other people involved?
  • U-Method, Gossip Method

Processing – i.e. the way in which the issue is introduced into this group. Is the group to concentrate on detached reflection, or will it choose also to look at and learn from what is happening here and now within it? (see Chapter 11 of De Haan (2001) for more on this)
  • U-Method, Clinic Method

Concentrating – i.e. the focus of treatment of the issue. Does the consultation concern one specific situation, such as one specific, difficult conversation? Or is it concerned with a less concentrated issue, such as a series of situations, a project, or an organisational concern?
  • Gossip Method, Clinic Method

Transforming – i.e. the degree to which participants are to explore the issue via observation, reflection, mirroring, or with the aid of other techniques which transform the issue with the help of analogies or metaphors. A more creative discussion also addresses the participants’ other senses and talents. For example, they may be
asked to produce a drawing, tell stories, or act out a role in the presentation of the issue contributed to the group.

**Ten and Five Step Method, U-Method**

According to de Haan (2001:47), the choice of each criterion should be based partly on the issue raised, and partly on the way in which the group wants to work. From his experience, he sees the Ten Step, Five Step and U-Methods as the most widely applicable.

1. **THE TEN-STEP METHOD**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>INTRODUCTION OF THE ISSUE</th>
<th>5 min.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>The issue bringer introduces and explains his/her problem briefly.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>FORMULATION AND DRAWING UP A LIST OF QUESTIONS</th>
<th>15 min.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Each group member formulates up to three questions. All questions are collected on a flip-chart sheet.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>RATING THE QUESTIONS</th>
<th>5 min.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>The issue bringer rates each question as warm (W), neutral (N) or cold (C), depending on the degree to which the question approaches the essence of his/her problem. The ratings are added to the questions on the flip-chart.</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS</th>
<th>15 min.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>The issue bringer gives a concise answer to all questions posed and noted down, independent of their associated ratings.</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>FORMULATION AND ANSWERING OF ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS</th>
<th>15 min.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>Group members may ask additional questions which are answered immediately by the issue bringer. These questions need not be noted on the flip-chart.</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>DEFINITION OF PROBLEM BY GROUP MEMBERS</th>
<th>10 min.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>Each group member independently formulates the issue bringer’s problem for him/herself: ‘My problem is ……’ All problem definitions are collected on the flip chart.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>RATING OF PROBLEM DEFINITIONS</th>
<th>5 min.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 7</td>
<td>The issue bringer rates each problem definition as warm (W),</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>
neutral (N) or cold (C).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 8</th>
<th>PROBLEM DEFINITION BY ISSUE BRINGER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The issue bringer now formulates his/her problem, as concisely as possible; “My problem is…” (add to flop-chart).</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 min.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 9</th>
<th>UNDERLYING FACTORS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group members discuss which factors (including those within the issue bringer himself) are causing the problem to continue.</td>
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<td>15 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 10</th>
<th>EVALUATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Issue bringer and group members look back at the consultation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>what did the issue bringer gain from it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>how did the group members tackle their role?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 min.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| Time needed | 100 min. |
## 2. THE FIVE-STEP METHOD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Step 1 | **INTRODUCTION OF THE ISSUE**  
The issue bringer introduces his/her problem and explains it briefly. | 5 min. |
| Step 2 | **EXPLORATION OF THE PROBLEM**  
Group members explore the issue by asking questions. In particular, they use an appropriate conversational style (open questions, summaries, listening reactions, silences). | 15 min. |
| Step 3 | **DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM**  
Each group member independently formulates one or more problem definitions: “My problem is …”  
The issue bringer, having heard these, re-formulates their issue. | 15 min. |
| Step 4 | **CONSULTATION**  
A second round of questioning where group members help the issue bringer to look at ways of dealing with the issue, asking for example:  
What are your options?  
Which barriers to a resolution can you see?  
What would you like to explore further right now?  
The group members also try to help by trying to uncover factors that seem to stand in the way of the solution. They refrain from giving direct advice. | 15 min. |
| Step 5 | **EVALUATION**  
The issue bringer evaluates the consultation process: experiences, the effects of group members’ contributions, etc. | 10 min. |

**Time required 60 min.**
### 3. THE GOSSIP METHOD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>INTRODUCTION OF THE ISSUE OR ACCOUNT OF EXPERIENCE</strong>&lt;br&gt;The issue bringer introduces his/her problem and explains it briefly or gives an account of an experience (a project in which they are active, observations about the relationship with a customer, etc.)</td>
<td>5 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>EXPLORING</strong>&lt;br&gt;Group members explore the issue or experience by asking questions (preferably open questions) and using deeper levels of intervention as much as possible.</td>
<td>15 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>GOSSIPING</strong>&lt;br&gt;- The issue bringer takes a seat outside the circle, preferably turned away from the group, and does not take part in the ensuing conversation. They listen attentively and take notes about aspects that stand out or touch a chord.&lt;br&gt;- Group members gossip about the issue bringer’s problem and its possible background, causes and solutions. They use the different levels of intervention and ask themselves how the issue bringer sees things. What guides their behaviour? What is the issue bringer taking for granted?&lt;br&gt;- Group members ultimately arrive at a number of statements indicating what alternatives and what scope might arise if the issue bringer were to use different assumptions or take different things for granted.</td>
<td>15 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 4</strong></td>
<td><strong>ISSUE BRINGER’S REACTIONS</strong>&lt;br&gt;The issue bringer returns to the group and tells the others about their experiences as an “observer” of the gossip phase. What touched a chord? What aspects stood out? Do they accept or reject the statements arrived at by the other participants?</td>
<td>15 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 5</strong></td>
<td><strong>EVALUATION</strong>&lt;br&gt;The issue bringer and group members together evaluate the consultation:&lt;br&gt;What did the issue bringer gain from it?&lt;br&gt;How did the group members tackle their role?</td>
<td>10 min.</td>
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</table>
4. THE DOMINANT-IDEAS METHOD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>INTRODUCTION OF THE ISSUE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The issue bringer introduces and briefly explains their problem.</td>
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<td>5 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>IDENTIFYING DOMINANT IDEAS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>By asking questions and listening intensively, group members attempt to identify which dominant ideas (views, ideals, standards, values, etc) play a role in the formation of the issue bringer's ideas. Possible questions include:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What are the basic assumptions behind the story?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• How does the issue bringer define their own role in the situation and that of others?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• What images or metaphors does the issue bringer use? (Pay particular attention to his/her choice of words)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• To what extent does the issue bringer use implicit idealisations?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• What does the issue bringer judge as 'good' and 'bad'?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Is the description based on facts or interpretations?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• To what extent do preconceptions or stereotypes play a role?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the issue bringer speak in terms of guilt or innocence?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Does the issue bringer highlight only negative aspects, or positive ones as well?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the issue bringer look at similarities or differences?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Are situations static or dynamic?</td>
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<td>20 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th>DRAWING UP A LIST OF DOMINANT IDEAS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The group members draw up a list of the dominant ideas identified and summarise them on a flip-chart. The issue bringer listens but does not react.</td>
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<td>10 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 4</th>
<th>ISSUE BRINGER'S REACTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The issue bringer reacts to the list of dominant ideas and says which of them they recognise as playing a role in the problem. These dominant ideas are circled on the flip-chart.</td>
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<td>10 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 5</th>
<th>CONSIDERING ALTERNATIVE IDEAS</th>
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<td>20 min.</td>
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</table>
Helped by the group members, the issue bringer now attempts to find alternatives to each of the recognised dominant ideas. These alternative ideas are also written on the flip-chart. The issue bringer then explores, still with the help from the group members, the extent to which using these alternative ideas sheds light on the problem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 4</th>
<th>EVALUATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issue bringer and group members evaluate the consultation process, in terms of both content and procedure.</td>
<td>10 min.</td>
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</table>

| Time needed | 75 min. |
5. THE CLINIC METHOD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>INTRODUCTION TO THE SITUATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The issue bringer briefly explains the situation he/she wants to rehearse and indicates the main problem areas.</td>
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<td>5 min.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>DEMONSTRATION</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>By using two or more chairs, the problem bringer demonstrates how the anticipated or experienced conversation evolves. In one chair, the issue bringer plays him/herself; in the other chair(s) they demonstrate the reactions of the conversation partners. By constantly changing chairs and acting out the various roles as naturally as possible, they give the other group members a clear picture of the way the conversation evolves.</td>
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<td>10 min.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th>TRYING OUT ALTERNATIVES</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Once the situation and the problem areas are sufficiently clear, the issue bringer takes the chairs of the other conversation partner(s) for the remaining period. They enter their shoes and acts out their reactions. The other group members now get the opportunity to play the role of the issue bringer and to introduce alternative approaches they see. Various group members are given the opportunity to demonstrate their alternative, creating as wide a variety of approaches as possible.</td>
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<td>20 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 4</th>
<th>EVALUATING ALTERNATIVES</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The issue bringer indicates which alternatives do or do not appeal.</td>
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<td>5 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 5</th>
<th>TRYING OUT THE CHOSEN ALTERNATIVES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The issue bringer tries out the alternative that most appeals to them, with another group member playing the counterpart. The counterpart’s response may be exaggerated slightly, if that is helpful.</td>
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<td>10 min.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 6</th>
<th>EVALUATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The issue bringer evaluates the exercise. The group members provide feedback on behaviour and reactions observed.</td>
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<td>10 min.</td>
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| Time needed | 60 min. |

6. The U METHOD
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Introduction to the situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The issue bringer describes a situation in connection with the issue and outlines incidents, anecdotes, examples.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 7</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What has the issue bringer gained? How did each member tackle his own role?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 min.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Exploration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group members explore (by asking questions) and consider with the issue bringer, what is characteristic of the description, what is striking about it?</td>
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<td>15 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 6</th>
<th>Re-description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How might the (original) situation appear on the basis of new assumptions and new behaviour? The group constructs a possible scenario of the new situation.</td>
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<td>10 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th>Underlying assumptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The group attempts to investigate what the possible underlying assumptions of the leading figures in the situation. This list is written on the flip-chart.</td>
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<td>15 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 5</th>
<th>Corresponding behaviour</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The group explores which characteristic behaviour or corresponding actions fit in with the new assumption.</td>
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<td>10 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 4</th>
<th>Tenable assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The group investigates whether these assumptions are 'tenable', or whether a different, new assumption is more 'appropriate'. If they find a new assumption, they write it on the flip-chart.</td>
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<td>10 min.</td>
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| Time required | 80 min. |
7. Learning from success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>INTRODUCTION OF SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The issue bringer describes their successful experiences, preferably in detail - not only the success itself but also the context. The other participants listen and write down what factors, in their view, made the success possible.</td>
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<td>15 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>DRAWING UP A LIST OF SUCCESS FACTORS AND CONTEXT FEATURES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Success factors are listed on a flip-chart sheet, possibly divided into initiatives and actions on the part of the issue bringer (on the left) and context features (on the right). The issue bringer considers, corrects and adds to the list.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>15 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th>DEEPER EXPLORATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A round of asking questions and listening carefully. From the additional information supplied by the issue bringer, and a combination of the success factors, the group attempts to distil ‘discoveries’: previously unnoticed success factors. The new (more fundamental?) success factors are listed on a second sheet.</td>
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<td>15 min.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 4</th>
<th>EVALUATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answer jointly the question: ‘What do we learn from this?’</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 min.</td>
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Time required 55 min.

A2: Three levels of listening

This exercise can be done either inside or outside of the Action Learning set. The goal is to raise the listener’s awareness of aspects of the issue-bringer’s story at several levels. The full exercise needs three or more people with a story to tell, who then rotate around the different roles.
Three Types of Active Listening:

**Thinking:**  listening to what thoughts, assumptions and judgements lie behind the words

**Feelings:**  listening to the feelings behind the words either now or at the time being spoken of

**Intentions:**  listening to what the speaker intends to do or their commitment to any intended actions

Fig 3. Types of Listening Exercise
A3: Coaching approaches: Roger’s content free questions
(Adapted from Rogers 2004:66-68)

Rogers offers this set of questions as ‘content free’ and the author has adapted and added to these for further clarity. The capital letters in most questions are there to assist the coach while asking their question, to know where to place the emphasis.

Q1. What's the issue?
Q2. What makes it an issue NOW?
Q3. Who OWNS this issue/problem?
Q4. How IMPORTANT is it on a 1-10 scale? Where 1 is least important and 10 is most important.
Q5. How much ENERGY do you have for a solution on a 1-10 scale? Where 1 is least energy and 10 is most energy.
Q6. What have you ALREADY TRIED?
Q7. Imagine this problem has been solved. How would you EXPERIENCE it? (see? hear? feel?)
Q8. What's STANDING IN THE WAY of that ideal outcome?
Q9. What's your OWN RESPONSIBILITY for what's happening?
Q10. What EARLY SIGNS are there that things might be getting better? When's it not there, not so bad, not so persistent?
Q11. Imagine you're at your MOST RESOURCEFUL. What do you say to yourself about this issue?
Q12. What are the OPTIONS for action here?
Q13. What CRITERIA will you use to judge the options?
Q14. Which OPTION seems the BEST one against those criteria?
Q15. So, what's the NEXT first small STEP?
Q16. WHEN WILL YOU TAKE IT?

A4: GROW Model
(Whitmore, J (2002))

This is probably one of the best known and most widely used approaches to coaching. It still provides a useful framework for coaching within the Action Learning set.

GROW: Goal, Reality, Options, Will

G GOAL  Setting goals for the learning project in general, or for this particular coaching session:

- What exactly do you want to achieve (short/long term)?
- Is any part of it measurable?
- How will you know if you reach your goal?
- By when do you want to achieve it?
- How much of this is within your own control?
- Is the goal positive, desirable, challenging, achievable for you?
- How would you rate your achievements so far, in this respect?
- Do you want to break down the overall goal into more manageable sub-goals?

R REALITY  Testing and raising awareness of the situation right now:

- Why haven't you reached this goal already?
- What actions have you already taken (if any) to try to reach this goal?
- What have you learnt from that?
- Who else do you need in order for you to reach this goal?
- Who else will be affected if you reach this goal? Will there be 'winners' and 'losers'?
- Do you know anybody else who seems to be successful in achieving this sort of goal? If so, what can you learn from them?
What constraints inside yourself are holding you back from this goal?
What constraints outside yourself are holding you back from this goal?
How might you overcome these?
What is really stopping you?
What might you do to sabotage your own efforts to reach this goal?

O OPTIONS Finding alternative strategies, solutions, answers:
What could you do as the next step (or perhaps the first step) to meeting your goal?
What else could you do? And what else? (keep repeating this!)
If time was not a factor - what could you do?
If resources were not a factor - what could you do?
If there was no 'history' and no 'politics' - what could you do?
What would happen if you did nothing?
Is there anybody whom you admire or respect who does this really well?
What do they do which you could try?

W WILL Testing your commitment to your goal, making concrete, realistic plans to reach it:
Where does this goal fit in your personal priorities in your life at present?
Do you have other priorities which will take your energy and motivation?
Which of all the options will you choose? (Maybe several).
How will that help you to achieve your goal?
Who else needs to know about your plan? How will you inform them?
What obstacles do you expect to meet? How will you overcome them?
how would you score your own level of commitment to achieving this goal, on a scale of 0 to 10? (0 being "absolutely not!" and 10 being "totally committed")
If your commitment score is less than 8 - will you actually get started? Would it not be better to drop the idea and find something which you really want? Do you need to feel guilty if you drop it? Should you break it down into smaller steps?

In using this model, the order is not as important as a fully rounded coaching conversation. This will normally mean that all four areas (letters) are covered. In following this advice, the author finds the following sentence useful to remember:

“Out of all the OPTIONS, to WILLINGLY work towards REALISTIC GOALS.”
A5: Solution Focused Coaching

One of the more recent exciting developments within Action Learning is the use of Solution-Focused Coaching. As such, the author has provided a fuller introduction to help ‘set the scene’. For those new to this approach, it may be useful to read through this introduction before you use it.

This approach is derived from Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (see de Shazer, 1994, and Iveson, 2002 for more details). It is important to make clear to readers that Solution-Focused Coaching does not in any way imply pathology! The Solution-Focused approach is very powerful and is applicable across a wide range of fields, including education and management development (and of course, psychotherapy!).

At a number of levels, it corresponds very well with Action Learning:

- It is brief, and therefore suitable for the 40 to 60 minute rounds of Action Learning.
- It focuses on resources, strengths, exceptions to the problem and coping strategies, and therefore is very suitable for the leader working on real work-related, issues. Managers and leaders DO seem more willing to speak about strengths, resources and successes.
- It is outcome focused and therefore very suitable for exploring the enhancement of performance in the workplace.
- Like Action Learning it often looks for solutions in unusual places. For example, the idea that we choose not to focus on the problem because “a detailed understanding of the ‘problem’ is usually of little help in arriving at a solution.” (Rossi, K et al., 2003).
- Both see the issue-bringer as the expert. This means that the solution is only a solution if it addresses the problem from the issue-bringer’s perspective, using the issue-bringer’s resources and about which the issue-bringer is motivated to take action.

According to O’Connell (2003:10), within a solution-focused approach, there are several axioms which act as useful guidelines. These are:

- If it isn't broken, don't fix it
- Small change can lead to bigger changes
If it's working, keep doing it
If it's not working, stop doing it, and do something different.

Sharry (2001:17), in one of the central texts on Solution-Focused Group Work, offers the following seven Solution-Focused principles:

1) Focusing on change and possibilities
2) Creating goals and preferred futures
3) Building on strengths, skills and resources
4) Looking for 'what's right' and 'what's working'
5) Being respectfully curious
6) Creating co-operation and collaboration
7) Use humour and creativity.

For more information on areas where group work has been successfully combined with Solution-Focused methods to produce significant outcomes, see Hoskisson (2003) and West (2005).

Below, is a flow of solution-focused coaching session (adapted from figure 2 in Iveson, 2002). From this, it can be seen that there are two ‘flows’: one is from the top of the diagram to the bottom, and the other is from the top left hand side to the middle right hand side. The second of these flows represents a certain solution-focused ‘logic’. The place to start exploring, after the person has outlined their hopes for the session, is with the issue-bringer’s view of a preferred future. If they have a clear grasp of what this might look like, then this is the area to be worked on. If not, then the coaches move on to exceptions, and then, if that doesn’t prove beneficial, to coping strategies.

There then follows a suggested set of questions under each of the headings in the flow of solution-focused coaching session diagram.

Fig 5. Flow of solution-focused coaching session
(adapted from Iveson, 2002)
HOPES

What are your best hopes for this session?

What needs to happen for you to think at the end that this has been worthwhile?

EXPLORATION OF PREFERRED FUTURE:

i.e. Miracle Question:

Suppose you went to bed tonight and a miracle happened. You have no idea how it occurred, it just did. When you wake up in the morning the issue that you have raised with us here has gone. What will you notice that tells you that the miracle has occurred? What else? (repeat question five times) Who else will notice? What will they notice? (repeat question five times) Who else will notice? What will they notice? (repeat question five times) etc.
If the set see it as more appropriate, the Miracle Question could be replaced by questions around “At your best” or “After we wave a magic wand”, etc.

If the exploration of a preferred future does not prove helpful, then explore …

**EXCEPTIONS**: times when the problem is not present, less acute, less frequent or lasts a shorter time.

- When is the issue not present? … not as bad? … not so frequent? … not lasting so long?
- What is happening at these times? What can you start to use more often?
- When are the times that it seems to be less intense? When are the times that you feel better?
- When are the times that it bothers you least?
- When do you resist the urge to …?

If the exploration of exceptions does not prove useful, then explore …

**COPING STRATEGIES**: perseverance, not giving up hope, etc:

- What’s helped you survive?
- How come you have not given up hope?
- What do you think your colleagues most admire about the way that you have been struggling with this?
- What is it about you that allows you to cope?
- Clearly that’s all likely to be very difficult, so how do you manage?

Whatever route you have used to get to this point, now it is good to explore those times when the preferred future is happening now, even in the smallest way.

**TIMES WHEN A PREFERRED FUTURE ALREADY HAPPENS:**

- What parts of this preferred future are already happening?
- How could you do more of these parts?
- How can you begin to add the parts that are not yet happening?
This is where scales can be used, e.g. with the need to increase (say) confidence –
On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is no confidence, and 10 is as much confidence as
you could imagine yourself having, where would you place yourself now? On the
same scale, how much confidence would you need to go ahead with …?

So what is it that you are doing that means that you are at ... and not at 0?

So if you are on 3, what will you be doing differently that will tell you that you are on
4? What will others see?

Where on that scale represents “good enough” for you, the point that you would
settle for? How will you know that you are there?

On a scale of 0 to 10 where would you rate your desire for change? What’s keeping
you at that level and not allowing you to slip back down the scale? What else? (x5)
What would be happening when it is one point higher?

How does the issue-bringer move from here towards their preferred future? They
take a first small step …

**NEXT SMALL STEP TOWARDS THE GOAL**

Given your goal(s), what is the first small step you will take towards it?

This is where scales an be used, e.g. on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 as no energy, and
ten with as much energy as you can imagine for yourself – you have placed yourself
at …. What’s the first small step that will move you up the scale by half or one point?
So, given what you have said, what are the first small steps with regard to …?
Of the options you have given, where are you going to start?

Whatever route you have used to get to this point, it is now time to give the issue-
bringer feedback. This is a classic part of the Solution Focused Brief Therapy model
and it often does a lot of good in a coaching situation.

**COMPLIMENTS:** what you as coaches have noticed as you have asked the
questions and listened, at many levels, to the answers.
For example: “Listening to what you have said, I have been struck by ..... I wonder if .... (say) you have been too hard on yourself? You seem more … than you were last time we met, is that right?” Etc.

**A6: Facilitator roles – individual and distributed responsibility**

This exercise is one that can (and should) be done in parallel with the Action Learning set ‘rounds’. It enables both the set as a whole, and individuals within the set, to grow in their competence and confidence in facilitating the set.

Below are a number of aspects of the facilitator’s role, which when taken together, cover most of the facilitator’s role. The set can decide whether an individual facilitates the next ‘round’ or the coaches co-facilitate by taking the dual roles of co-facilitator-coach.

The individual keeps the list below in front of him/her as a prompt for what he/she should be looking out for in order that the ‘round’ goes well. The facilitator does not have to do any or all of these. However, he/she may feel at a particular time, the need to intervene in the process to see that it is effective. For example, asking the question: “Now that we are nearly half way through the time allocated, would it be helpful for someone to summarise …..?”

In the case of the coaches co-facilitating, then each of these items are placed on separate cards and distributed equally amongst all the coaches. Each coach now places their cards in front of them so that they can be prompted to keep an eye on these areas and, as above, intervene as they deem necessary. In the next round, the coaches choose different cards. In this way, facilitation skill and ability grows with time.

At the end of each round, and certainly at the end of each set meeting, this is one area that is reviewed and suggestions are noted and incorporated into the next set meeting.
Components of Facilitator’s Role

- Summarising
- Time keeping - ‘equal’ airtime
- Quality of questions (open and closed)
- Checking process
- Watch out for:
  * assumptions/beliefs/values
  *(too) much telling/advising/ etc without invitation?
  * parallel processes
  * more of the same
- Reframing
- Agreement/ contract
- Reviewing
- Checking with issue-bringer
- Giving and receiving feedback
- Action plan(s)
- Balance of:
  o -task/process
  o -project/learning
  o -actions/self-development
  o -support/challenge
- Decision