

Reg Revans - The Father of Action Learning

Whilst Professor Reg Revans was always quick to point out he didn't invent Action Learning, frequently by drawing attention to examples of it in the old testament, there are few who would not attribute its growth to him.

Born in 1907 and active in the University of Salford research institute that bears his name until shortly before his death at the age of 95 - Reg's influence has spread across the world.

Tributes to his work range from the award of Belgium's Chevalier, Order of Leopold, to recognition in Eastern management textbooks of his influence on Japanese management techniques.

A Cambridge research fellow and a British Olympic athlete (holder of the Cambridge University long jump record for 33 years) it's not hard to see why Reg would have linked learning and activity.

Deputy Chief Education Officer for Essex at the age of 28, and later Director of Education for the National Coal Board, it is possible to see the organizational management origins of action learning in the 1940s.

Reg reminds us there is nothing new in management - everything is the reinterpretation of past experience. This is at the heart of Action Learning, and it is this simple idea that accounts for the longevity of action learning as a learning tool.

So almost all that is written in this short newsletter draws on the work and the writing of this great man.

The core principle is people working together in small groups to share their knowledge, skills, and experience in the pursuit of problem solving and personal learning.

The best and most enduring form of learning comes from personal involvement in real problem solving, and from awareness of one's own behaviour in that process brought out through disclosure and feedback in a supportive but challenging environment.

That's the kind of development that enables transfer of learning.

The Place of the Project in Action Learning

A basic tenet of Action Learning is that people learn best when they engage in some purposeful activity which becomes the vehicle for their learning and development process.

This is usually a project associated with some aspect of the individual's working life aimed at improving the effectiveness of their role, their department, or their organization.

We choose to work on real issues that need to be moved forward because simulated problems do not carry the same level of personal involvement in the real world setting. It is the struggle to overcome real world barriers that leads to insightful learning about the world and, more importantly, to knowledge about our self.

This is because 'knowing' is not the same as 'doing'. We can learn the theory of how things are done in the classroom or training room, but it is the activity of having to tackle each stage of problem solving in a real world environment that helps us consolidate that learning in a way we are unlikely to forget.

An Action Learning Set provides the right environment for this kind of learning about learning because the same people meet regularly over a period of time, thus forming friendships and bonds which encourage an atmosphere of trust.

In this kind of atmosphere we can challenge our behaviour and our thinking in a non threatening and supportive way that leads us all to new learning, and to the solution of our particular problem.