

## PRACTICE TOOLKIT

# What difference are we making?

How can practitioners and organisations capture and build on their successes, learn from their challenges and improve? **Action learning and action research** are distinct but related ways of:

- > identifying what works, promoting evidence-informed practice and generating practice-based evidence
- > drawing on the lived experience of people who use services, practitioners and other stakeholders
- > improving professional confidence and professional knowledge in the individuals and teams taking part
- > improving the learning of the organisation as a whole
- > identifying how services can work more effectively with reducing resources.

*This toolkit* provides a starting point for students, practitioners, managers and strategic leads considering either approach – whether in social care, health, education or elsewhere. It includes:

- Introduction
- Action Research and Action Learning case studies
- Origins of Action Research and Action Learning



### Action Research Tools

1. Planning an Action Research Project
2. Forms of evidence
3. Ethical considerations
4. Key considerations
5. Writing up and considering audience



### Action Learning Tools

1. Organisational readiness checklist
2. Parameters of an action learning set
3. Facilitator checklist
4. Example activities

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# PRACTICE TOOLKIT

## *What difference are we making?*

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### Introduction

*This toolkit* is aimed at practitioners and managers who are interested in promoting and supporting evidence-informed practice. Action learning and action research comprise two approaches open to people to dig down into issues affecting their own practice and their own organisation, with the specific aim of improving practice – that is, improving people’s experiences – through reflection, experiment and innovation.

It is this focus on action – the trialling and evaluation of new or different approaches – that unites action learning and action research and makes them relevant in rapidly changing fields such as health, education and social care. In his independent review of social work education, Croisedale-Appleby

(2014) proposes that, in addition to practitioner and professional, the social worker is a social scientist – furthering ‘the understanding of social work through evidence-gathering and through research’.

Supporting practitioners to engage in action research or action learning, organisations demonstrate the importance of reflection and research to professional practice. Involvement in either activity will enable practitioners to demonstrate a wide range of capabilities, as well as increasing co-production and service user involvement, strengthening relationships within teams and reducing stress by building professional confidence and identity.

In both cases, the umbrella of a ‘toolkit’ runs the risk of implying there is one right way to conduct either activity, or that there are principles to be unthinkingly applied. Cook (1998) notes researchers’ anxiety that they are not doing ‘proper’ action research as what they do differs from the models in textbooks. Therefore, rather than standing as prescriptive models, these tools are offered as springboards to experimentation – as well as offering leads for further reading and reflection.

You may or may not yet have a ‘general idea’ (Lewin, 1946) about which aspects of your practice might benefit from exploration in these ways, but these tools will suggest the questions to ask and the steps to take.

#### Action Research

- > May start, like conventional research, by identifying a question or problem, gathering evidence around this and drawing conclusions (which may well suggest questions for further research).
- > Where traditional research sees itself as uncovering truths, action research places the emphasis on ‘awareness raising and empowerment’ (Hart and Bond, 1995).
- > Where the traditional researcher is a detached observer, the action researcher is both a participant in, and a focus of, the study – expecting to revise their assumptions, practices and values.
- > Action research is powerful because it embodies and enacts conscious change.
- > The experience of different stakeholders is likely to be privileged over quantitative data.

#### Action Learning

- > Consists of small groups meeting regularly for a fixed period (an action learning set), often with a facilitator.
- > Each participant has time to focus in detail on an issue or opportunity in their own practice, while the others support them in reflecting and identifying ways forward, and subsequently evaluating the results.
- > Solution-giving by others is discouraged, because it blocks the individual’s process of reflection. Instead, opportunities are maximised for participants to learn for, and about, themselves.

For both approaches, this toolkit provides:

- some background
  - a selection of suggestive case studies
  - key considerations and methods.
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If used in tandem, action learning and action research complement one another. Individuals engaged in action research can use an action learning set to explore their own thinking in the research, how to interpret their data and how best to ensure that implications for practice are followed through. In the other direction, participants in an action learning set may well identify areas of practice that would benefit from a dedicated research project. If truths are socially constructed rather than simply uncovered, action learning and action research are an opportunity 'to co-construct and embed a desired reality built on participants' experiences and aspirations' (Berringer and Elliott, 2011).

Both approaches are likely to throw up questions about what works well elsewhere and evidence from other

areas, and hence lead people to seek the views of people engaged with services and other stakeholders. Both contribute to the development and strengthening of communities of practice, especially when practitioners are encouraged by their organisations to share their work – such as via conferences, journals and online. Both increase engagement and motivation by individual practitioners' potential as agents of change.

**When is which activity appropriate?**

When the nature of the problem is not yet clear, action learning comes into its own – allowing each participant to uncover and address their own development needs (and noting the implications of these for the organisation). Action learning also serves as an ongoing complement to

supervision for new and experienced practitioners alike, focusing entirely on critically reflective practice, an aspect of supervision sometimes subordinated to performance management.

When a more or less systematic investigation or evaluation of a specific issue is required, such as when the views of different stakeholders need to be sought, the evidence-base compiled and explored, and concrete recommendations made for change, an action research project may be appropriate.

Some example uses are provided below – with those more likely to be best addressed by action research on the left, by action learning on the right, and by either or both in the middle. This is intended as suggestive rather than prescriptive.



**Action Research**

- > To systematically investigate the effectiveness of (eg) multi-agency working in a specific context.
- > When a particular policy, practice or problem requires a systematic investigation.
- > To evaluate the impact on service users and other stakeholders of a particular policy or process.
- > To trial and evaluate a new process.
- > When data from a range of sources is required to understand a problem or opportunity.



**Action Learning**

- > As a support to newly qualified practitioners.
- > As an ongoing support to more experienced practitioners.
- > To help individuals understand their responses to change.
- > When it is not yet clear what the problem is.
- > To explore (eg) multi-agency working from the perspective of different individuals.





# Action Research Case Studies

www.ripfa.org.uk

## Case Study 1

A child protection social worker initiated research to challenge colleagues' attitude of blame towards non-abusing mothers of children who had been abused. Her information-gathering included working with an established group of four mothers of children who had been abused.

The women gave many insights into their situation – from the 'emotional earthquake' involved to the dearth of information, support or understanding.

When it emerged that the women were interested in helping to **transform practice** as well as describe their experiences, the project became action research.

Outputs of the research included a booklet, *For Mothers By Mothers*, links with students and practice educators, and collective user involvement in child protection studies.

A paper about this project (Bond et al, 1998) discusses the methodology, addresses the challenges the group faced writing up such transformational experiences and demonstrates how the project was an extension of good social work practice.

## Case Study 2

A new role to support social work students, the Practice Learning Manager (PLM), was to be evaluated. As the aim of the *role* was to ensure the centrality of user and carer feedback in social work education, it needed to be central to the *evaluation* too, so **Appreciative inquiry (Ai)** was adopted as the methodology.

Ai proceeds with representatives of each group of stakeholders (in this case students, practitioners, people engaged with services) interviewing members of each other group. All participate in examining and interpreting the results in an ongoing process.

For Ai, as in action research more broadly, process is as important as outcome and Ai models good practice **by promoting participation, mutually respectful relationships and capacity**.

Ai does not exclude discussion of problems and failures but directs these discussions towards positive change, by asking all stakeholders what is working well now and how things would work in a 'perfect world'.

The research demonstrated both the importance of the PLM in promoting reflective practice and the suitability of Ai as a research methodology.

In order to address sponsors' concerns a traditional researcher was employed to check the results of the Ai investigation. The researcher's conclusions corroborated those of the Ai investigators, while the Ai proved more effective at capturing the **frontline insights** of the service user and practitioner researchers (based on Bellinger and Elliott, 2011).



# Action Research Case Studies

[www.ripfa.org.uk](http://www.ripfa.org.uk)

## Case Study 3

A hospital sought to address the dissatisfaction expressed by carers of in-patients with eating disorders, for whom the family therapy on offer was unhelpful. Carer conferences and on-ward workshops revealed that, instead, carers wanted training in **listening skills and motivational communication**.

New research into anorexia nervosa was pointing to the importance of **emotional literacy** within families for its treatment. This led to a series of workshops for carers on communication and coaching skills, followed by DVDs and telephone coaching – forerunners of a project called ECHO currently being tested.

Carers have been at the heart of this project throughout, participating in the current RCT and involved as coaches on the programme.

The project demonstrates the benefits of co-production and recorded positive outcomes for the carers themselves and the people they care for. It is not just the carers' expertise as carers that has proved invaluable, but their whole wealth of life experience (based on Robens, 2013).

## Case Study 4

In 1969 the UK government set up Community Development Projects (CDPs) to address entrenched poverty and deprivation in areas of greatest need. These used an action research framework of fact-finding (through surveys), experiment and evaluation, based on collaboration between central and local government, research academics and community workers.

By 1972 central government withdrew from the projects. Having become more autonomous, the CDPs shifted in perspective – where poverty was seen not as a matter of individual failure but as the result of **structural inequalities** due to differences in class and power, pioneering grassroots community work as a response.

CPDs influenced subsequent community development work, such as the work of the Health Education Council, which emphasised the social and economic basis of ill-health.

However, in the late 80s the HEC was disbanded and replaced by the Health Education Authority, marking a return to a medicalised, 'individual pathology' approach to health.

The changing orientation of the CDP projects demonstrates the different faces of action research and its potential to transform existing practices and influence or challenge policy (based on Hart and Bond, 1995).

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**What aspect of your practice  
does your gut tell you could  
benefit from investigation  
and experiment?**

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# Action Learning Case Studies

www.ripfa.org.uk

## Case Study 1

An action learning set of six NQSWs in an English local authority met eight times over ten months, facilitated by an experienced social worker.

Initially, members were reluctant to open up until one member, Sally, told the group about the experience of stress in her relationship with her team manager. The group used the **five step method** (Tool 4) to explore the relationship in context.

Because of Sally's **heightened emotions** in relation to this manager, the facilitator used questions to encourage more '**objective**', rational thinking.

Sally realised she hadn't told the manager how she was feeling and resolved to raise her feelings of stress, have a three-way meeting with the manager and her trusted supervisor, and **behave more assertively** (such as learning to say 'no') regarding her workload.

The set helped Sally overcome a resistance in her team to talk about emotions and have an honest discussion. She subsequently described a **pronounced change** in her attitude and motivation towards her work. Following Sally's disclosure, other members found it much easier to bring problems to the group.

## Case Study 2

A county-wide transformation programme involving health, local authorities and emergency services established three **multi-agency action learning sets**.

One set looked at the care of stroke patients, from first call to discharge and rehabilitation at home. The group agreed that the service was inadequate but, at first, they didn't know what was wrong or how to address it.

In the initial meetings little progress was made and **unequal power relations** between participants based on their roles hampered progress.

Between meetings two and three a paramedic and a consultant from the set met at a hospital while dealing with a stroke patient. They talked about each other's experiences and agreed to spend time shadowing each other – an approach the rest of the set took up.

The set discussed their professional defensiveness and their **preconceptions** about each other's roles, coming to see these as caricatures. They began to understand more about each other's priorities.

The set initiated a new focus on **patient/client experience**, soliciting stories about the transitions between services. This has led to a number of practical projects aimed at improving the patient/client journey.

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**What are the challenges and opportunities of introducing action learning in your workplace?**

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(Adapted from Abbott and Taylor, 2013)



# Action Research Case Studies

[www.ripfa.org.uk](http://www.ripfa.org.uk)

## Case Study 3

Jo, a mature NQSW with prior experience as a health care assistant, was to join an action learning set of other NQSWs. Because of her previous experience in health of working in a set of mixed roles and levels of experience, she convinced her manager, Steve, to expand the remit to include experienced practitioners.

The set began with four volunteers and the experienced social workers initially found it very hard not to give solutions to problems – to be seen to have the answers. Steve facilitated the use of the **thinking, feeling and willing model** (Tool 4) to explore the issue presented. Jo brought in a lemon and presented it to anyone who offered a solution.

The group became more adept at critical questioning, challenging assumptions and exploring the politics of each case. While offering each other strong support, the team based this in **challenge** rather than collusion. The set has helped members of the team reduce stress and make time for professional development.

## Case Study 4

Three action learning sets in a northern English local authority – one each of NQSWs, experienced social workers and team managers – were unhappy with their supervision, describing it as a ‘tick box exercise’ about performance management rather than real issues.

Of the three sets, only the team managers’ was unsuccessful due to the work culture of conflict and competition, where managers were unwilling to challenge one another. NQSWs and experienced practitioners got a great deal out of the sets, growing in strength as ‘**comrades in adversity**’ and having many ‘Eureka’ moments about their own practice, due to the successful combination of peer support and peer challenge.

Though action learning sets continue unofficially the authority has opted instead for a solution-focused model of change management, using coaching and experts (external project managers and consultants) whose effect has been to preserve the status quo – a risk-avoidant, oppressive culture of blame.

(Adapted from Abbott and Taylor, 2013)



# Origins of Action Research

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## Origins of action research

Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), widely recognised as the founder of action research, was a very influential social psychologist who thought that ‘democracy must be learned anew in each generation’ (Allport, 1948, cited in Hart and Bond, 1995). To this end, action research at once seeks to understand and to change the present social system.

For Lewin, as for many subsequent action researchers, the basic model is a spiral of ‘planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action’ (Lewin, 1946, cited in Hart and Bond, 1995). Lewin himself used ‘change experiments’ on this model to explore social problems such as authoritarianism and anti-semitism, and saw the power of the group as central in changing attitudes and behaviour.

The action research cycle, or spiral, is ubiquitous in literature and is mirrored in, for example, Kolb’s ‘Learning Cycle’ (see Nosowska and Series, 2013) and the Evidence Informed Practice Model developed by Sheffield City Council (2008). It also forms the basis of Research in Practice for Adults’ and Research in Practice’s Change Projects – see [www.ripfa.org.uk/events-and-online-learning/change-projects](http://www.ripfa.org.uk/events-and-online-learning/change-projects)

## Varieties of action research

Hart and Bond (1995) map out four ‘ideal types’ of action research, acknowledging that any one project may involve elements from more than one type. They note that the table also serves to describe the development of action research, from Lewin’s approach of ‘rational social management’, which left the status quo around the research intact, to approaches of critical or participative action learning aimed at ‘structural change’.

Consensus model of society Rational social management		Conflict model of society Structural change	
Experimental	Organisational	Professionalising	Empowering
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Researcher-focused</li> <li>&gt; Fixed membership</li> <li>&gt; Problem emerges from theory/policy</li> <li>&gt; Problem to be solved in terms of research aims</li> <li>&gt; Success defined in social science terms</li> <li>&gt; Research components dominant</li> <li>&gt; Experimenter/respondents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Manager-focused</li> <li>&gt; Selected membership</li> <li>&gt; Problem defined by most powerful group</li> <li>&gt; Problem to be solved in terms of management aims</li> <li>&gt; Success defined by sponsors</li> <li>&gt; Action and research in tension; research dominant</li> <li>&gt; Consultant/researcher, respondent/participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Practitioner-focused</li> <li>&gt; Shifting membership</li> <li>&gt; Problem defined by professional group</li> <li>&gt; Problem to be resolved in interests of professionalisation</li> <li>&gt; Success contested, professionally determined</li> <li>&gt; Research and action in tension; action dominant</li> <li>&gt; Practitioner or researcher/collaborators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; User/practitioner focused</li> <li>&gt; Fluid membership</li> <li>&gt; Problem defined by less powerful group(s)</li> <li>&gt; Problem explored as part of process of change and construction of meaning</li> <li>&gt; Competing definitions of success accepted and expected</li> <li>&gt; Action components dominant</li> <li>&gt; Practitioner researcher/co-researchers/co-change agents</li> </ul>

(Adapted from Hart and Bond, 1995)





# Origins of Action Learning

[www.ripfa.org.uk](http://www.ripfa.org.uk)

*‘The ethos of action learning [originated by Reg Revans, 1907-2003] is very much centred on the problem-holder and others to question rather than become the experts in others’ problems. This is not only helpful but fundamentally supports social workers to*

*become ‘change agents’ for service users who have become disenfranchised with professionals entering their lives and telling them where they are going wrong and what to do next.’*

(Abbott and Taylor, 2013)

## Revans’ influences

### The Titanic investigation (involved Revans’ father, a naval architect).

Disaster could have been averted if the authorities had listened to sailors’ warning of risks.

### Quakers: clearness committee collective problem-resolution.

A trusted committee listens to someone’s problem without offering solutions, helping to unlock the problem-holder’s own resources.

### Research scientist

Revans and his fellow researchers developed the precise, deliberate questioning of colleagues, reflecting on the limits of their knowledge.

## Revans’ Coal Board work (education and training):

Building the capacity to learn from your and your colleagues’ experiences at the coal face is of as much, or greater, value than the advice of experts: learning instead from mutual enquiry.

## Revans pioneers action learning

## Background: Revans’ formulae

### Revans’ ecological formula

$$L \geq C$$

The rate of learning (L) must be greater than or equal to the rate of change (C) if an organisation is to survive.

### Revans’ formula for learning

$$L = P + Q$$

Learning combines programmed knowledge (P) – what can be gained from books or experts – and questioning insight (Q). Too much P inhibits Q, which needs to be developed in its own right.



# Action Research Tool 1

## Planning an Action Research Project

How do you find a focus for action research? It may be a “gut feeling’ that a particular area of practice could be improved in some way’ (Gomm and Davis, 2000). Winter suggests you go with what is most ‘interesting’, but then to interrogate that ‘interest’ – which is likely to involve emotions, memories, anxieties, ambitions, etc – to dig down from the familiar to the genuine uncertainties ‘where time spent may be more quickly rewarded with genuine progress’ (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996).

Use these questions to explore a potential topic:

What is happening already?

What is the rationale for what happens already?

What am I trying to change, and why (identifying outcomes)?

What are the possibilities?

Who is affected?

With whom must I negotiate?

Whose help and what resources will I need?

[Add your additional questions here]

[Add your additional questions here]



# Action Research Tool 2

## Forms of evidence

Select methods of collecting appropriate evidence for your project from the following, or add your own.

Under **Details**, record 'how?', 'by whom?', 'when?', etc.

Under **Evaluation**, record how you will relate the evidence to your research outcomes from Tool 1.

Under **Actions**, list any steps you or others need to take, and by when.

Form of evidence	Details	Evaluation	Actions
Detailed diary/field notes: subjective impressions, meetings attended, lessons learned.			
Observation notes of meetings, perhaps using previously prepared checklists, etc.			
Interviews with any relevant people (exploring the subtle nuances).			
Written accounts of meetings which have been validated/amended by other participants in the meeting.			
Collection of documents relating to a situation.			
Questionnaires/interview schedules (closed and/or open questions).			
Recordings of interviews (allowing for the effect on the interview that recording can have).			
Triangulation: matching up two or more of the above, in order to overcome the limitations of any one form of evidence.			
[Add your additional forms of evidence here]			
[Add your additional forms of evidence here]			

Sheffield City Council has developed an Evidence Informed Practice model containing useful links and hints (available at [www.sheffield.gov.uk/caresupport/professionals-providers/eip/eipmodel.html](http://www.sheffield.gov.uk/caresupport/professionals-providers/eip/eipmodel.html)).



# Action Research Tool 3

## Ethical considerations

1. How will you obtain the informed consent of all parties involved with or affected by the research?

2. Have you considered potential harm/risks associated with the research and how you will monitor these?

3. Have all the relevant people, committees and authorities been consulted and approved the project? This may include your organisation's Research Governance Lead and the relevant Research Ethics Committee.

4. Will all participants be able to influence the work? Will the wishes of those who don't wish to participate be respected?

5. How will you keep the work visible and open to suggestions from others while it is in progress (in line with 8 and 9 below)?

6. How will you ensure permission is obtained for:

- making observations
- using documents intended for other purposes?

7. How will you negotiate with others the presentation of their work or points of view within the project?

8. What steps will you take to ensure confidentiality?

9. How will you ensure that storage and use of data accords with information governance regulations (see [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/29/contents/](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/29/contents/))?

# Action Research Tool 4

## Key considerations

Richard Winter has been writing about practitioner action research for nearly 30 years. He proposes six principles of action research (right), presented here to provoke insight, suggest ways forward and to indicate what is distinctive about an action research approach.

1. Reflexive critique
2. Dialectic critique
3. Risking disturbance
4. Collaboration
5. Creating plural structure
6. Theory and practice internalised

### Winter's principles of action research

### Key questions

#### Reflexive critique

Judgements are contingent upon the available evidence and are subject to revision; research needs to be explicit about its underlying assumptions, to open them up for scrutiny and alternative interpretations.

#### For each form of evidence collected, ask:

- Q. What are the underlying assumptions?
- Q. Are labels or categories being applied unquestioningly?
- Q. What alternative interpretations are possible?

#### Dialectic critique

Reality, for dialectics, is composed of changing relationships which are both inter-dependent and contradictory.

An example of internal contradictions in social care is that of personalisation's origins in the disability rights movement and its consumerist take-up in the name of market forces (Beresford et al, 2013).

#### In the phenomenon under examination, ask:

- Q. What are the relationships between the phenomenon and its context (the unity of the phenomenon)?
- Q. What are the relationships internal to the phenomenon (its internal contradictions)?
- Q. At what points are those contradictions subject to change?

#### Risking disturbance

Action research gives no grounds for the researcher to exempt their own assumptions from scrutiny and refutation. The action researcher seeks to transcend their starting points in light of what emerges.

- Q. To what extent are you willing to let the research transform you and your assumptions, as well as the situation?
- Q. To what extent do you acknowledge yourself as part of the situation undergoing change, rather than an external observer, consultant or unchanging catalyst?



## Winter's principles of action research

### Collaboration

Action research's strength doesn't come from the pre-existing authority of the researcher, but from the fact that it incorporates the viewpoints of all affected parties. None are deemed of higher status than others; none is excluded from challenge by the others; none has the final word on what the other viewpoints mean.

### Creating plural structures

The first audience of an action research report are all of the people involved or affected in the immediate situation. Ongoing disputes over interpretations do not need to be resolved once and for all; instead, more and better questions are raised.

### Theory and practice internalised

In action research, theory and practice are not separated but are intertwined aspects of change.

## Key questions

### *Considering the different viewpoints represented:*

Q. What contradictions are there between – and within – each viewpoint (including my own)?

Q. What challenges do these contradictions hold for my personal starting point and assumptions?

Q. By considering the range of perspectives involved, what insights are afforded that could be transferred to analogous situations elsewhere?

Q. What feasible, practical proposals can be tried and tested as a result of this project?

Q. How will you ensure participants in the research will be able to comment on the research as it progresses?

Q. How will you move the research from a merely descriptive collection of viewpoints to an understanding of the underlying structures of the phenomenon under scrutiny?

Examples may include:

- > by raising understanding between parties
- > by suggesting a range of practical ways forward
- > by revealing aspects that ring true for readers beyond the immediate situation.

*As your project progresses, document the ways in which theory questions practice, and, in turn, practice questions theory*



# Action Research Tool 5

## Writing up and considering audience

As an aid to planning a written report of your research, reflect on each of Winter's suggestions below:

Suggestions	Reflections
A narrative format can reflect the sequence of practice and reflection that is the basis of action research (AR).	
A reflexive account of different perspectives and contested interpretations expresses both AR's collaborative basis and its open-ended outcomes.	
The style, tone and vocabulary of traditional research may be inappropriate for AR to the extent that they: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; express the expert role</li><li>&gt; withdraw from personal involvement</li><li>&gt; favour abstraction over concrete detail.</li></ul>	

According to Winter (1996) the key audience for action research falls into three groups:



What steps will you take to reach each of these audiences (including yourself)?

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# Action Learning Tool 1

## Organisational readiness checklist

The initiator of an action learning set, or *accoucheur*, has the job of identifying whether conditions within the organisation are favourable, or if other developments are required beforehand.

For each statement score the organisation from 1 (not much like us) to 5 (very like us):

(Pedler M, 2008)

In this organisation...	Score	What can be done to raise this score?
... people are rewarded for asking good questions	1 2 3 4 5	
... people often come up with new ideas	1 2 3 4 5	
... there is fairly free flow of communication	1 2 3 4 5	
... conflict is surfaced and dealt with rather than suppressed	1 2 3 4 5	
... we are encouraged to learn new skills	1 2 3 4 5	
... we take time out to reflect on experiences	1 2 3 4 5	
... there is ready access for staff to books and journals, and support with information gathering	1 2 3 4 5	
... people help, encourage and constructively criticise each other	1 2 3 4 5	
... we are flexible in our working patterns and used to working on several jobs at once	1 2 3 4 5	
... senior people never pull rank and always encourage others to speak their minds	1 2 3 4 5	

Now total up your score. If you scored:

... between 10 and 20	Action learning probably won't work very well until things open up a bit more.
... between 21 and 40	Yes – action learning should work well to help you achieve your purpose.
... over 40	You don't seem to need action learning! Or perhaps action learning would help develop your critical and questioning faculties?





# Action Learning Tool 2

## Parameters of an action learning set

Parameter	Notes	Actions
<p><b>Reasons for adopting action learning:</b> What do you hope to achieve by embarking on this journey? How will you know when you have done so?</p>		
<p><b>Number of people:</b> Recommended to be between four and eight people (enough to provide diversity of viewpoints but few enough to allow a decent amount of time to focus on each participant). Allow 20-45 minutes per person.</p>		
<p><b>Facilitator – required or not? Internal or external?</b> The facilitator should be working to make the group self-sufficient, and so may gradually share more of the role. See <i>Skills for Care's Action Learning for Social Workers</i> for information about available support.</p>		
<p><b>Space:</b> The location should be neutral space where people won't be interrupted. Virtual Action Learning Sets are increasingly common (see Pedler and Abbott, 2013).</p>		
<p><b>Length of meetings:</b> Will be affected by number of participants, among other constraints.</p>		
<p><b>Frequency of meetings:</b> Should allow enough time for people to try new things in between sessions.</p>		
<p><b>Number of meetings:</b> Decide beforehand how many meetings will happen before the group decides whether to wind up or to carry on for another period.</p>		



# Action Learning Tool 3

## Facilitator checklist

Training for action learning facilitators is available from a number of providers, some certified by ILM. The Centre for Action Learning Facilitation ([www.c-alf.org](http://www.c-alf.org)) offers an internationally recognised Level 5 certificate. Whether trained or not, facilitators will benefit from being part of their own (actual or virtual) action learning set. The following statements can serve as checklists for each aspect of the facilitator role (see Pedler and Abbott, 2013).

Accoucheur (designer or initiator of action learning)	In-group facilitation	Organisational learning
<p>I have completed Tool 2 and discovered organisational readiness.</p> <p>Notes: .....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p>I will promote a balance of high support and high challenge among set members (see Tool 4).</p> <p>Notes: .....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p>The action learning set agrees a strategy for sharing its learning with colleagues, management and other action learning sets, for example by holding conferences at periodic intervals.</p> <p>Notes: .....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p>Participants are fully briefed and can make an informed decision about committing themselves to the set.</p> <p>Notes: .....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p>The set will agree (and periodically revisit) ground rules to do with, for example, confidentiality.</p> <p>Notes: .....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p>The possibilities for a 'middle ground framework' (Pedler and Abbott, 2013) – dialogue between the set and senior management – will be explored.</p> <p>Notes: .....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p>Participants' sponsors are clear about the possible benefits of action learning.</p> <p>Notes: .....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p>Timekeeping is essential to ensure each participant has a full opportunity to describe their problem.</p> <p>Notes: .....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p>The success of the set will be measured against the initial success criteria.</p> <p>Notes: .....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p>Success criteria have been agreed for the action learning set.</p> <p>Notes: .....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p>I will help the group distinguish between problems and puzzles.</p> <p>Notes: .....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	
	<p>I will model active listening and discourage the giving of advice.</p> <p>Notes: .....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	



# Action Learning Tool 4

## Example activities

### Thinking, feeling and willing (Pedler and Abbott, 2013)

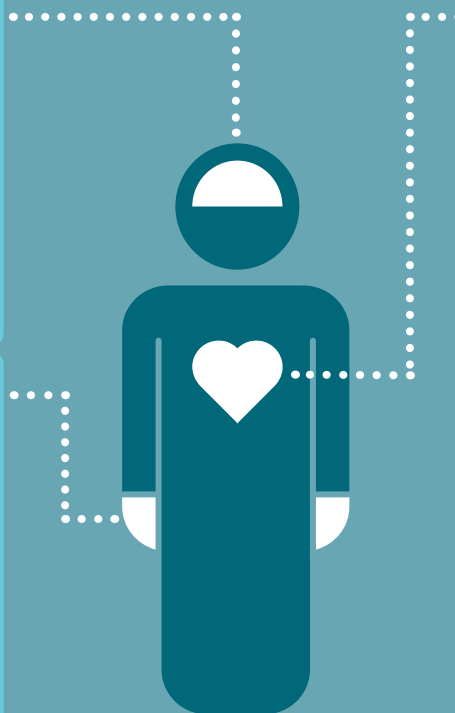
These three central processes of human action can be focused on individually to identify sticking points. The facilitator may model questions focusing on each process – for example:

#### Thinking (information, assumptions, alternatives)

- > What are people who use services saying?
- > Who else is involved?
- > Who has specialist knowledge?
- > How do you interpret the evidence?

#### Willing (intentions, movement and action)

- > Can you describe how things will be in one, five and ten years' time?
- > How will you decide what action to take?
- > What will you do next?
- > What alternatives are there?



#### Feeling (sensations, moods, emotions)

- > Why is this so important to you?
- > What does your intuition tell you about the issue?
- > Who else cares about this situation?
- > How would you like to feel about this?

#### Five-step method (Abbott and Taylor, 2013)

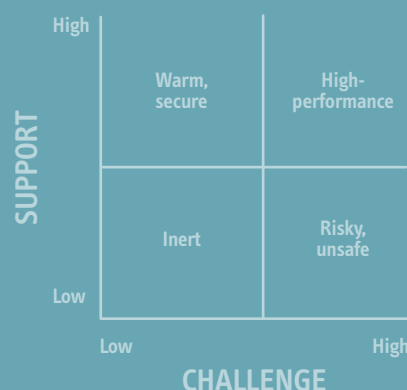
1. A participant presents a problem.
2. Other set members ask a round of questions.
3. Each set member proposes a definition of the problem.
4. The problem-holder revises their own definition of the problem.
5. The problem-holder restates the problem to the set (returning to step 1).

### Balancing support and challenge

As seen in the case studies, action learning's strength is to combine strong support with powerful challenge. This exercise helps a group to examine how it can strive for the 'High-performance' zone on the right-hand table and avoid the pitfalls of the other zones.

1. Draw the chart to the right on flipchart paper, labelling only the axes, not the zones in the chart.
2. Ask each person to mark the point on the chart that best describes the balance of support and challenge in how the group is working over a particular period.

3. Discuss the data – is the group too comfortable, too risky, or simply immobile?
4. What actions should the set take in light of this?



#### Action learning helps strengthen performance by:

1. equipping participants to increase their rate of learning in the face of change
2. developing and strengthening individuals' and groups' capacity for questioning insight.

(Abbott and Taylor, 2013)

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## Useful links

- > **CARN**  
(Collaborative Action Research Network)  
[www.esri.mmu.ac.uk/carnnew](http://www.esri.mmu.ac.uk/carnnew)
- > **C-ALF**  
(Centre for Action Learning Facilitation)  
[www.c-alf.org](http://www.c-alf.org)
- > **Research ethics: Social Care**  
[www.scie.org.uk/research/ethics-committee](http://www.scie.org.uk/research/ethics-committee)
- > **Research ethics: Education**  
[www.bera.ac.uk](http://www.bera.ac.uk)
- > **Research ethics: Health**  
[www.nres.nhs.uk](http://www.nres.nhs.uk)
- > **Skills for Care: Action Learning for Social Workers**  
[www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Social-work/Action-Learning-facilitation/Action-Learning-for-social-workers.aspx](http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Social-work/Action-Learning-facilitation/Action-Learning-for-social-workers.aspx)

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