Chapter 9

Teacher Learning and Effective Professional Development: How One School Implemented, Modified, Stretched, and Extended the Principles of Action Learning

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ABSTRACT

Action Learning has been and is regularly implemented within Australian schools as a platform for teacher professional development and professional learning. The following chapter reports on a decade-long association between one Australian government primary school, an Academic Partner and the process of Action Learning. Initially, Action Learning was implemented in 2005 in the form of a small-scale, more traditional Action Learning project; In 2009, Action Learning was then modified and stretched to involve the whole school’s teaching, support and executive staff; In 2013, the principles of Action Learning were extended as the school executive and teaching staff began to take ownership over their own learning. This case study demonstrates that Action Learning can be implemented on a school-wide basis for the effective professional development of the whole school’s teaching and executive staff. Recommendations are made for similar schools who are considering extending Action Learning across the whole school.

INTRODUCTION

Action Learning is a process of learning that enables organisations to adapt to change (Revans, 2011). Action Learning has been accepted within educational and schooling contexts as a form of teacher professional development and professional learning. In Australia, Action Learning has been utilised both frequently and effectively as a platform for improving teacher knowledge, skills and understanding. The case study presented within this chapter highlights how the principles of Action Learning can be implemented, modified, stretched and extended as a way of enabling the effective professional development
and improved learning of the whole school’s staff. The objectives of this chapter are to: emphasise that the aim of Action Learning is teacher learning, highlight Action Learning as a platform for effective professional development and discuss how Action Learning may be implemented and extended within other similar schools for the effective professional development of the whole school’s staff.

BACKGROUND

Action Learning

The purpose of Action Learning is learning: a type of learning, which enables organisations to adapt during times of change. In *The ABC of Action Learning*, Revans (1983: 2011) highlights how important it is for organisations to be able to adapt in times of rapid change. An adaptation, he emphasises, which can only occur through learning: a type of learning he describes as:

*Being able to do tomorrow that which might have been unnecessary today, or to be able to do today what was unnecessary last week.* (Revans, 2011, p.1).

Revans (2011) argues that this type of learning (L) is a combination of programmed knowledge (P) and questioning insight (Q): thus ‘The Learning Equation’, \[ L = P + Q. \] Revans (2011) highlights that for this type of learning, and thus adaptation, to occur questioning insight must compliment programmed knowledge. Questioning insight or the quest for insight, is the ability to ask fresh questions, “to pose increasingly insightful questions from an origin of ignorance, risk and confusion” (Revans, 2011, p.11). Furthermore Revans (2011) explains that action learning aims to: make useful progress on real-world problems; enable managers to learn how to best approach challenges that currently exist without solution, and to encourage teachers and those in management to engineer the conditions in which managers are able to learn from and with each other. Therefore Action Learning becomes a process by which real-life problems are studied and resolved through learning and action.

Action Learning programmes are by very nature, flexible and adjustable (Brook, Pedler & Burgoyne, 2012; Revans, 2011). This is because the design of the programme responds to the individual needs of organisations. Revans (2011, p.17) emphasises this when he says, “the study of real life problems or opportunities by real managers in real time admits to a wide range of programme designs”. As such, he intentionally omits logistical details. However, he does provide the essential logistics, of which some include:

- The participation of individuals or teams,
- A focus on posing questions to problems which currently defy solution,
- A set involving four to six fellows or group members who meet together regularly to discuss their progress and setbacks,
- Induction exercises, and
- Four programme phases (diagnosis, six sequential phases \{analysis, development, procurement, construction or assembly, application and review\}, intermediate invigoration and therapeutic).

To add to this Revans (2011) presents twenty assumptions of Action Learning, those of particular importance to this chapter are that: