Action Learning Sets and Building a Collaborative Research Culture

ENHANCING POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH CULTURES

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University of Salford

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• How does Action Learning compare with other approaches to building a collaborative (research) culture among those on professional doctorates?
• How does Action Learning fit with the aims and objectives of professional doctorates to make a contribution to professional practice as well as academic knowledge?
Context

• DBAs
• 40 currently at various stages of their final Professional Research Project – supervised research
• 40 working through the modules
• Most based outside of the UK
• Action Learning is introduced at the Induction
• Quarterly module workshops – Action Learning Set meetings at the workshops and between the workshops
What is Action Learning

• **Reg Revans** is widely recognised as the father of Action Learning.

• **Learning (L) = Programmed Knowledge (P) + Insightful Questions (Q)**

• “there is no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning”

• Action learning is a form of experiential learning, i.e. learning from direct experience

• It is based upon the concept of learning by reflection (or reviewing) of an experience.
Action Learning Sets

- Action Learning Sets are small groups
- Designed to address complicated issues by meeting regularly and working collectively
- Structured process
- Group processes designed to support
  - critical reflection,
  - challenge thinking and
  - encourage action
- “there is no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning”
- Create a collaborative learning environment where members learn separately, together
- It is a social vehicle
Action Learning Sets: the ground rules

- the set must be a safe space
- open-mindedness is key
- honesty with oneself and others
- respect for others and their viewpoint
- take responsibility for our own action
- become mentors to each other
- do not try to solve other’s problems
- discussions are always confidential
- learn with and through the set
How we use it

• Introduce from Day 1
• Faculty staff act as facilitators initially
• Year 2 before really ‘get it’
• Professional Research Module – self run
• Work best when membership voluntary
• Sets within and across cohorts
• Virtual meetings
• Not always purist
But what do our DBAs think?

- Cohort One – still meet although now on work problems

“I think I would have thrown in the towel if it hadn’t been for the set”

“I thought this is just a peer support group. But it isn’t. The process and rules make it very different.”

“I’m not convinced. But I met someone who had finished and they said stick with it – it really does work.”
“The experience I had with the action learning sets during the DBA program was valuable addition of knowledge that enabled me as a potential researcher to stand arguments and face situations of practical cases and issues such as evaluating critically a certain policies or regulations at work place””

“Through reflection and various structured methods of action learning, I gained a deeper understanding of the issues we are facing at our societies and businesses. This was achieved with an open mind, and with the ability to communicate and express thoughts with the colleagues”
The diversity of cultures, backgrounds and experiences of the group’s colleagues made the environment of study very productive through sharing perceptions of the nature of the issues, and various approaches to problems solving. The results of discussions were tangible.

Some of the benefits of Action Learning include:
Learning best practice
Evolving fresh ideas
Forming effective plans for execution
So….

- How does Action Learning compare with other approaches to building a collaborative (research) culture among those on professional doctorates?
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Action Learning

- Powerful questions
- Active listening
- Sharing and learning
- Reflection
- Action
- Group and individual development

Start: Present your challenge, problem, issue or your question.

Mark learning, draw conclusions, define learning from experience. Integrate new knowledge into your practice.

Set members question you constructively to challenge views and understanding, perceptions, assumptions. Others share knowledge invited by presenter of issue.

Insight? New understanding, ideas on taking action?

Bring results back to set-what worked/didn’t? Why?

Test out taking action in the workspace.