

## IFAL-UK – looking to the future



IFAL-UK was set up in 1977 by a group dedicated to continuing the work of Reg Revans in relation to Action Learning. It has functioned as a network of practitioners for almost thirty years and has fostered links with Action Learning communities all over the world.

IFAL-UK must change and adapt to secure its future. At the time of writing, membership is falling and income is stagnant at best. Without remedial action the future of IFAL-UK is bleak.

### WE NEED YOUR HELP

We need you, the members, to be more actively involved either by offering to sit on the executive committee, by suggesting ideas for activities or by helping us to help you.

We have been trying to organise events such as conferences, seminars etc. in the last couple of years but cannot do so as the numbers able to give of their time is becoming more and more limited. Without such events, IFAL-UK does not have a sufficiently high profile to attract new members and income is reduced also.

As a result, the Executive Committee will be offering their resignations en-bloc at the AGM which will take place on October 10<sup>th</sup> next. Some executive members may be willing to stand again but we will require an influx of new committee members if the organisation is to have a viable future with an ability to attract new members.

I look forward to seeing you at the AGM and your active participation in IFAL's future.

**Sean Cunningham**  
Chair, IFAL-UK



## Action learning seminar in Dublin on October 12th 2006

The Department of Social And Family Affairs in Dublin have had an active involvement in Action Learning for more than 6 years. It has been offered to managers over this period as an alternative to more traditional forms of management development.

Initially we engaged a consultant who advised us of the general principles of Action Learning and assisted in the training of the facilitators for the programme. Since that initial programme, the expertise we have built up has enabled us to run the programme ourselves without any outside assistance.

We are now involved in Action Learning which follows the same methods as set out in our previous programmes. Unfortunately, it has not been as popular with our managers as previous programmes have been.



in our fifth programme of Action Learning. It has followed the same methodology as the previous programmes. It has proven to be less popular than previous programmes.

As a result, we are bringing together a number of experts in the field of Action Learning with a view to assessing the usefulness of alternative approaches to Action Learning. This seminar, which takes place in Dublin on Thursday October 12th, involves a number of long-standing members of IFAL UK who will present details of their approach to Action Learning and demonstrate the method to a group. We also hope to interest other Irish Government Departments in following the Action Learning approach and, as a result, put together sets involving cross-Departmental groups.

I hope to be able to provide details of how the seminar went as well as a number of photos of participants in a future edition of this bulletin.

**Sean Cunningham**  
**Chair**  
**IFAL-UK**

## Action learning in Roche Pharma Development

In 2000 Roche Pharma introduced, with London Business School, Insights for Pharma a four-day 360° development program designed to develop Pharma senior managers' leadership skills. One of the divisions which supported the programme, Pharma Development (PD), identified from research carried out in early 2002 that, whilst the majority of their participants found the workshops personally satisfying, many reported finding it difficult applying their learning in the workplace. PD management decided to introduce a voluntary own job action learning, called Peer Group Learning (PGL) to provide local support for those Insights participants wishing to develop their leadership competencies in their working environment.

The programme was introduced at Pharma Development's three main sites in the US, UK and Switzerland, in November 2002 with 49 of the 95 Insights alumni deciding to participate. These were formed into nine sets facilitated by the local Human Resources community who were trained and supported by external specialists in each country. A review was conducted in May 2003 after all sets had met six times. This found that participants both enjoyed the experience and felt it had helped them to achieve their development goals with more than 50% having begun a second phase of development. They valued the discipline imposed by the PGL meetings, the facilitation, the opportunity to share experiences and to learn with and from each other. Eighty-six percent reported the overall value of the PGL process as good or excellent. Management accepted the report's recommendation that PGL should continue as an integral part of Insights.



PGL was offered to all Insights participants until the Insights program ended in November 2004. A final review in early 2005 found that a further hundred people had participated in PGL sets and that the process was alive and well. Six sets were operational in the US, eight in Switzerland two of which were 'virtual' and four sets in the UK. There was also clear evidence of secondary activity on all three sites with participants using the process in their own work areas indicating that the learning style suits the Roche culture of individual empowerment. Participants again reported they enjoyed the experience and it had helped them to achieve their development goals.

*For a detailed review of this program please see Action Learning: Research and Practice; Vol. 2, No. 2, September 2005, pp. 1-9*

**George Boulden**  
**ALA International**

# Action Learning

## What is action learning?

Action learning is an approach to manager development that is based on real managers solving their very real management problems in the company of a group (usually of about eight members) of their peers. It is designed to encourage resolution of 'on the job' difficulties and is based on learning from your own experience and that of the other members of the group. The programme consists of a series of day-long facilitated group meetings.

## Who is it for?

Action learning is particularly good for managers who need to focus on their own jobs and on their own work, rather than on 'ideal world' or on 'perfect management' type issues. It is good for helping managers to think through what is really happening on the ground for them and their staff, and in the process, develop a network which can provide ongoing challenge and support to allow for continued growth and personal development. The action learning process is based on participants bringing their on-the-job difficulties to the group to try to resolve them. The meetings are facilitated to ensure that the group works in a way that is most conducive to helping the individual to find a way through whatever difficulty is in question. By sharing the problem with a group of peers, managers can receive both support and challenge and allow for the exchange of experience and ideas on new or different ways of doing the job.

## What are the benefits?

The sort of outcomes you can expect from participating in an action learning programme are:

- ✓ Objective views and possible resolution of problems and difficulties at work
- ✓ Identification of personal/professional development needs and strategies
- ✓ Insight into the causes of conflict and difficulty at work
- ✓ Time to think about the important but non urgent things that are often neglected at work
- ✓ Time out and a change of pace to allow you to reflect
- ✓ Insight into your own coping strategies and those of your peers
- ✓ Insight into small group dynamics and enhanced communication skills
- ✓ Learning about your own values and assumptions about 'what makes people tick'
- ✓ Skills in consulting and helping people resolve their own dilemmas and problems

## What actually happens?

The groups meet regularly with a facilitator and become an action learning set. At each meeting:

- ❖ Set members decide among themselves who is going to present their subject in more detail at that meeting, depending on the time available, more than one person may present;
- ❖ the presenter talks for as long as is agreed and describes the problem/challenge the set members ask questions designed to help the presenter come to a deeper understanding of the issue.
- ❖ the set assists the presenter in reviewing options and deciding on action
- ❖ the set reflects on the group process; and (at a future set meeting) the presenter reports on the actions taken

## Typical action learning group meetings content

Many managers encounter difficult problems with several causes and no easy or obvious solution. Typical of the problems which people bring to action learning groups are ones which involve:

- interpersonal conflict
- managing change and uncertainty
- difficult relationships with customers, other managers or staff
- motivation difficulties because of the constant time pressure balancing strategic and operation demands

development needs. The meetings are a really good place for getting help from other people with similar problems and issues – things that can seem too confused or too awkward to express in normal circumstances.

*I've attended a number of courses over my many years in this Department and I can honestly say that the most beneficial to me personally has been action learning. The work I am involved with has meant that I've worked mostly on my own and so meeting up with colleagues to discuss and solve mutual problems and difficulties was very helpful...'*

The nature, content and detail of all action learning meetings is absolutely confidential and members must commit to this as a pre-requisite to their participation in this programme.

Individual group members also frequently use the action learning group to help them to identify and address personal and professional

**Sean Cunningham**  
**Staff Development Unit**  
**Department of Social & Family Affairs**  
**Dublin**

*(reprinted from 'training matters' June 2006  
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## The next Newsletter will be published in January 2007

Please send contributions directly to Pam Wright (preferably on e-mail) to: [p.wright@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:p.wright@lancaster.ac.uk)

**OR** on a disc plus hard copy, to  
Pam Wright, IFAL Administrator,  
Dept of Management Learning,  
Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YT

**DATE FOR COPY 14th December 2006**



# Notice Board

## IFAL-UK AGM

10<sup>th</sup> October 2006  
14.00hrs

Friends House,  
173 Euston Rd  
London NW1 2BJ

Contact Pam Wright on  
[p.wright@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:p.wright@lancaster.ac.uk) for a booking form

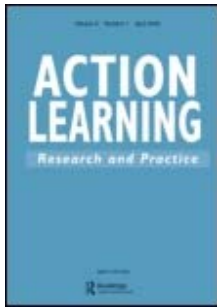
### An opportunity to join an action learning set.

We are an action learning set made up of members from Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire who originally came together as a result of an AHMED initiative. Recently one of our members has had to withdraw from the set due to other commitments and life changes. This means we have four members and would like to increase our numbers. Currently our monthly meetings alternate between Taplow, Redbourn, St Albans and Henlow. Would you be interested in joining us? For further information please contact one of us:

Sonja Antell 01628 622747  
email [Sonja.antell@act-consultancy.com](mailto:Sonja.antell@act-consultancy.com)  
Fiona Holden 01582 792127



## Books....books....books



***Action Learning: Research and Practice, Vol 2, No 2, September 2005 pp. 127-244***

In this issue there are three papers: on practitioner-based research; on teacher education; and on an organisational science approach to work. Together with four articles on action learning applications and several book reviews they make up an interesting and wide-ranging issue. Not all articles have been reviewed but what follows should afford some of the issue's flavour.

Based upon Revans's 'general theory of human action' the editor, Mike Pedler, hopes to incline the journal towards the question: what is the theory of action embodied in action learning? This issue is almost a year old, so that subsequent issues will have shown the proof of that particular pudding in the pie. Drawing heavily on Revans, Pedler makes a case for the idea of 'practice' as a device to bring together learning and working. Practice can be used to link the individual with world challenges (the greater good?): 'MY practice .... OUR practice ...THE practice'. He dismisses 'competence' as because competence does not imply action, which will come as a surprise to competency trainers and assessors for whom performance is integral. Perhaps he has omitted the distinction between competence and a competency of a manager for instance, for whom competency woolly and immeasurable.

Tom Bourner and Penny Simpson of University of Brighton Business School assert that 'the new professional doctorates based on action learning offer a way of integrating evidence-based practice with practice-based evidence'. They offer a (very) brief history of the university's notion of scholarship, research and knowledge from the Greeks, Middle Ages, The Enlightenment and the Humboldtian notion of academic specialisation. They give the example of a PhD at the Revans Centre as untraditional and practitioner-centred. Action Learning is a way of bringing together evidence-based practice with practice-based evidence, just about as empirical as you can get. The lengthy but lively and revealing Q. and A. at the end of the paper is not least about the notion that a PhD should be also be assessed on the writer's personal growth. One may wonder what new sets of competencies supervisors and assessors would have to acquire in order to bring such an unmeasurable phenomenon into academic practice.

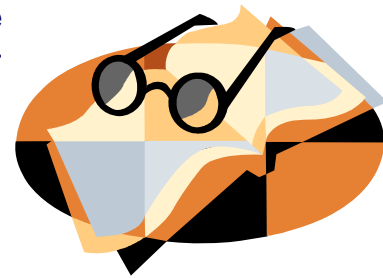
Charles Magerison makes a case for work-based (is there any other?) action learning as an applied organisation science process. His refreshingly plain and careful English usefully distils Revans's principles and practice, one of which I pick out from this article as 'the upward expression of doubt (in contrast to the downward expression of certainty)'. Combing strategic survival in terms of investment thinking with his helpful 'problems: solutions matrix'. The author swings from work applications to a history of

*(Continued on page 8)*

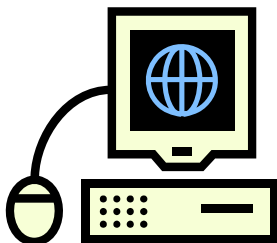
thinking on knowledge and learning which links Revans with Francis Bacon and others who writing invokes upwards scepticism.

There are several interesting 'Accounts of practice', including action learning in John Lewis, a veterinary surgery and a short but intimate examination of a set which met for a year. As to the last account, anyone who has acted as set adviser can identify closely with the doings of this set. I think many of us who do this work have felt compelled to write about significant set experiences but never got round to it as Krystyna Weinstein has, and delightfully so.

In view of the journal's title, it is important to distinguish the verb 'practise' from the noun 'practice'. This word is twice spelt incorrectly: on the inside cover and on page 177. This not a quite a quibble, because this reviewer, as a university lecturer, has despaired at the lack of care given by students – hopefully close readers of this journal – to the spelling of these words.



**Chris Yates.**  
**Treasurer/Secretary, IFAL**  
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### Websites to visit



See Creativity Works at [www.creativityworks.net](http://www.creativityworks.net):  
sign up for the free newsletter; see cartoon of the  
month and get details of inspirational workshops



[www.trainingzone.co.uk](http://www.trainingzone.co.uk)

**See the Training Zone for news and features and  
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## IFAL LIBRARY



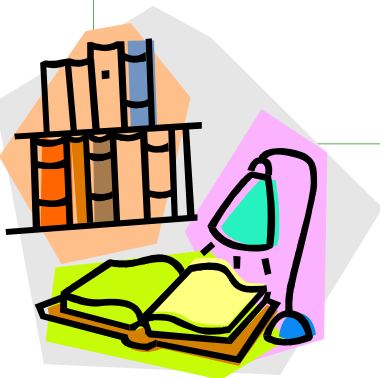
The IFAL library is a unique collection of over 1000 articles and books on Action Learning. For minimal charge, the Lancaster office will supply hard copies of the complete list of items and a short list of particularly important practice-related publications (£5) and copies of articles (£1.25). We believe that this is a valuable resource for practitioners, researchers and others interested in Action Learning.

Please send copies of any articles or reports on action learning you have written for inclusion in the library.

### IFAL Librarian

*Copies and details of publications or requests for a listing of publications and/or copies of articles should be addressed to:*

*Pam Wright IFAL Administrator,  
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Lancaster, LA1 4YX,  
email [p.wright@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:p.wright@lancaster.ac.uk)*





**THE INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR ACTION LEARNING**

**THE WORK OF THE CHARITY AND THE BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP**

The International Foundation for Action Learning is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity, set up to promote action learning. This is a process for improving management in which people learn together by direct involvement in the identification, analysis and treatment of their own real problems and opportunities. It is a form of learning by doing.

Action learning is used in many industries, businesses and services in this and other countries. Examples are:

1. managing director groups;
2. helping the unemployed to start their own business;
3. developing skilled managers as they take on new responsibilities;
4. improving productivity in retailing and manufacturing companies;
5. bringing about operational change in large organisations;
6. improving services in health and education.

Action learning has demonstrated that it can help individuals and organisations to adapt in a fast changing world

Since 1977 when it was set up ALT/IFAL has become well-known and respected as a source of information and support for those who practice or are interested in action learning. IFAL encourages the use of action learning by:

1. Information - On request, responding to requests and promoting discussion by phone or letter.

2. Library - IFAL has a substantial library (over 1000 items) of writings about action learning, many of which are not available elsewhere. Copies of items may usually be purchased for the cost of photocopying and distribution. Some of the most useful are unpublished discussion papers.

3. Newsletter - A regular newsletter provides the opportunity for members to share their ideas and experience, it is used to spread news and views about the process of action learning and its development. It includes book reviews and reports of conferences, and promotes discussion through correspondence and articles.

4. Meetings/Conferences/Workshops - IFAL arranges meetings around the country for the purposes of exchanging information and to highlight problems in the application and use of action learning. Conferences are held regularly and occasional regional meetings provide a local forum for debate and learning.

The design of these meetings is always participative following the principle of action learning that people learn best from people who are also learning.

5. Network of individuals and organisations - Through its international membership, IFAL constructs a network of people who can support one another in their diverse experiences of action learning throughout the world in private, public and voluntary sectors.

In summary: IFAL exists to identify and encourage a network of enthusiasts who will support and develop the work of action learning worldwide. It is an educational charity and in order to do its work properly it appeals for financial and practical support from those who believe in the value of action learning

**IFAL'S REGISTERED CHARITY NUMBER IS: 273242**