

Action Learning

A Better Way To Communicate and Learn Together

Successful Adaptation & Survival
depends upon our rate of LEARNING exceeding
the rate of CHANGE around us

Action Learning aims to provide a real and pragmatic solution to today's climate of constantly turbulent and unpredictable change. It is an equally valuable approach for dealing with and solving complex problems that demand highly effective collaboration, creativity and resilience.

Most of us, at least at times, get stuck in a box of imprisoning patterns, assumptions and over-familiarity: our ability to really see the situations and problems we face becomes increasingly clouded over time, in the same way that a cataract slowly builds up, gradually restricting and narrowing our vision.

Action Learning offers a profound, creative and sometimes even exhilarating discipline to recover and sustain our capacity to look at things with greater sight. It helps us to create fresh insights about our experiences and the situations we face, and, from this, to uncover new possibilities for action that get us beyond a position of frustration and disempowerment to a happier more vitalised reality of increased influence and fulfilment.

The process for achieving this involves deliberate conscious learning from day-to-day *experience* and the real *problems* we are facing to bring about creative, relevant, and actionable solutions:

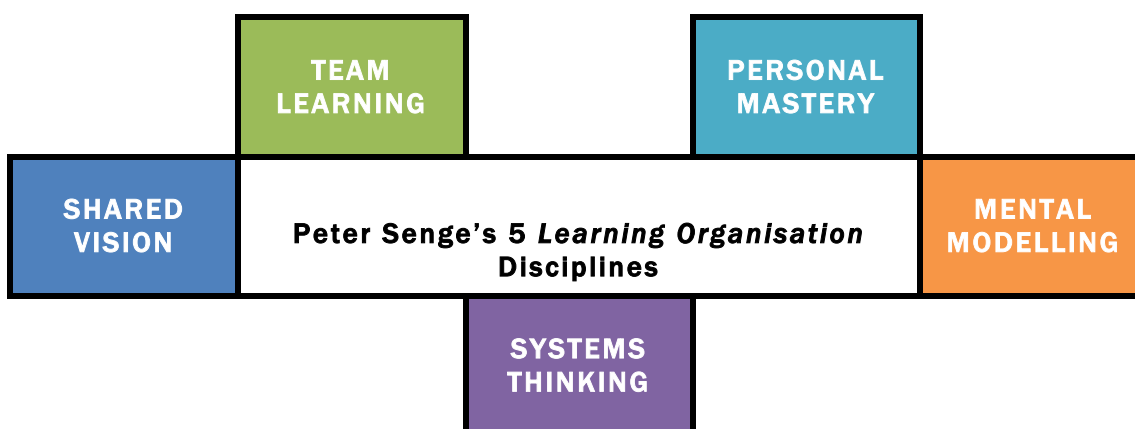
**Real People Solving Real Problems to Real Situations
and Consciously Learning as they go.**

How does *Action Learning* work?

- ❑ Action Learning Groups (ALGs) meet regularly in small groups of 3-6 people with (at least at first) a facilitator to develop and explore situations & problems most relevant to each of them
- ❑ Participants learn the techniques and disciplines of skilled dialogue and conscious experiential learning – and, over time, how to make this a regular, on-going habit
- ❑ Participants use themselves as their primary knowledge resource – gaining and getting continuous self and peer support
- ❑ People learn to take responsibility for their own situations, challenges and problems, getting sustained support and focused attention from their Action Learning peers
- ❑ All learning is drawn from – and then re-applied back into - the specific contexts participants are having to act upon: people focus on the situations they most want and need to affect positive change, feel increased empowerment & influence, and achieve greater success and fulfilment in.

What are the potential outcomes of *Action Learning*?

- ❑ People consistently enjoy this programme.
- ❑ People increase their sense of influence and control over their own lives and destinies and feel less sense of being overwhelmed and defeated by their problems - genuine empowerment.
- ❑ Individuals gain greater understanding and appreciation of their own strengths and preferred ways of working, and learn to balance these with a wider repertoire of responses.
- ❑ People identify their potential weaknesses and limitations - immediately and specifically linked to remedial action they can take make these less limiting.
- ❑ The damages of negative stress and a constantly-fire-fighting work culture are reduced and rebalanced.
- ❑ People learn ways to interrupt and change unproductive patterns of behaviour that may have become ingrained in established relationships.
- ❑ People develop a wider sense of both their own role and how it relates to others and also about the roles and different ways of thinking that others have bring.
- ❑ Teams become better at harnessing the strengths and diversity of their different members: learning to encourage, optimise, value and profit from higher diversity and difference.
- ❑ Collaborative working skills are developed, team working skills are enhanced, and co-creation is enabled and supported.
- ❑ For an in-house group, strong staff-management or cross-departmental understandings can be uncovered and developed.
- ❑ The organisation grows the people it needs, moves closer to achieving its goals and deals more successfully with change.
- ❑ People create and implement affordable and achievable solutions with minimal disruption to day-to-day activities and commitments.
- ❑ The organisation increases its capacity and capabilities for being more of a true *Learning Organisation* – constantly renewing and growing and adapting to changing aspirations and environmental conditions...



Peter Senge's 5 Learning Organisation Disciplines

SHARED VISION

... building and holding a sense of genuine commitment in a group by unearthing the collective and compelling images of the future we seek to create, and the principles, values and practices by which we hope to get there.

Knowing why what we want to do is necessary and has worth outside and meaning beyond our own self-interest.

TEAM LEARNING

... using dialogue, the capacity of a team to suspend assumptions and genuinely 'think together', to transform conversational and collective thinking skills, so that groups of people can reliably develop intelligence and ability greater than the sum of their individual members' talents.

Discovering and expanding our meanings through the act of listening in to each other.

SYSTEMS THINKING

... a way of thinking about, and a language for describing and understanding, the forces and interrelationships that shape the behaviour of our system.

This discipline helps us see how to change systems more effectively, to use all of the disciplines together as an ensemble, and to act in tune with the larger processes of our natural and economic ecosystems.

MENTAL MODELS

... learning to unveil our internal assumptions and beliefs about the world, to bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny; being able to expose and communicate the assumptions inside our thinking and make our thinking open and porous to influence from others.

PERSONAL MASTERY

... learning to expand our personal capacity to create the results we most desire; continually clarifying & deepening our personal vision, focusing our energies, developing resilience and seeing a wider reality.

Knowing what 'playing to our strengths' means, and how to optimise and counterbalance our natural style and preference to best match the demands of the situation.

A Practitioner's Guide to Action Learning – Communication in Clean Space

**Purpose: to create spontaneous thinking
that leads to new insight & fresh possibilities for action**

- to uncover and widen perspectives & understanding
 - leading to fresh thinking about situations that matter to you
 - leading to new actions to try out to progress things

Action => the things we do

Learning => deliberately choosing what we do based on conclusions drawn from previous experience

The Clean Space Process:

Before you start agree how much Clean Space time each person will have and who will keep this each time.

1st. Say whatever you want to say. Be as selfish as you can be about what you want to bring to the table. No interruptions.

2nd. Once you have said all you want to say, respond to Action Learning Questions. If you like, direct the areas you want to focus on by signposting the questions you are trying to find answers to. Again, be completely selfish about how you want to respond to any question you get. The rest of the group seek to bring you moments of spontaneity – questions that open you up to fresh new thinking and understandings. Use “Why...?” questions sparingly. Resist saying anything except Action Learning questions during this phase.

3rd. (optional and only if time – usually at least 15minutes of clean space time per person) You ask whatever you want to from the others in the group. Allow a minimum of 10% of Clean Space time for this, but shift into this sooner if the person who has the Clean Space is repeatedly saying “I don’t know...” to questions. If you have no questions you want to ask people, use this time to draw together the thinking and ideas you are going away with.

Helpful Capabilities for Action Learning

- | | |
|---|---|
| ● Being fully present | ● Being supremely selfish about what you want to bring and get to your own clean space time |
| ● Alert, neutral, open listening | ● Bringing what we don't know to the table |
| ● Asking SMART Open Questions ¹ | ● Wondering and not-knowing out loud |
| ● Being utterly selfless and tuned in to what the clean space holder is trying to get when it is anyone else's clean space time | ● Being open to surprise |

¹ Based on Dorothy Leeds' SMART Questions model (as in S -uccessful M -anagers A -sk R -eally T -errific Questions)

CONTINUOUS LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Learning from experience has to be a deliberate and conscious process.

It does not just happen 'naturally'. To be successful we must be continually adapting, improving and re-creating our understanding and responses to the situations we face:

merely learning to cope is a recipe for complacency.

When Change is greater than our rate of Learning we are in trouble. When our Learning is greater than the rate of Change we are experiencing, we have much more control and choice about the best ways to progress closer towards what we want (and further away from what we don't want).

And, as well as being more successful and resilient, we can better manage the stress of uncertainty and lack of confidence by continually growing our sense of control and having choice over our own destinies.

Thus, we must be expert at constantly keeping our Learning greater – or at least equal to – the Change and uncertainty around us.

Learning > (or at least =) Change

Learning equips us to deal with 'problems' that fall across four dimensions:

unfamiliar problem familiar setting	unfamiliar problem unfamiliar setting
familiar problem familiar setting	familiar problem unfamiliar setting

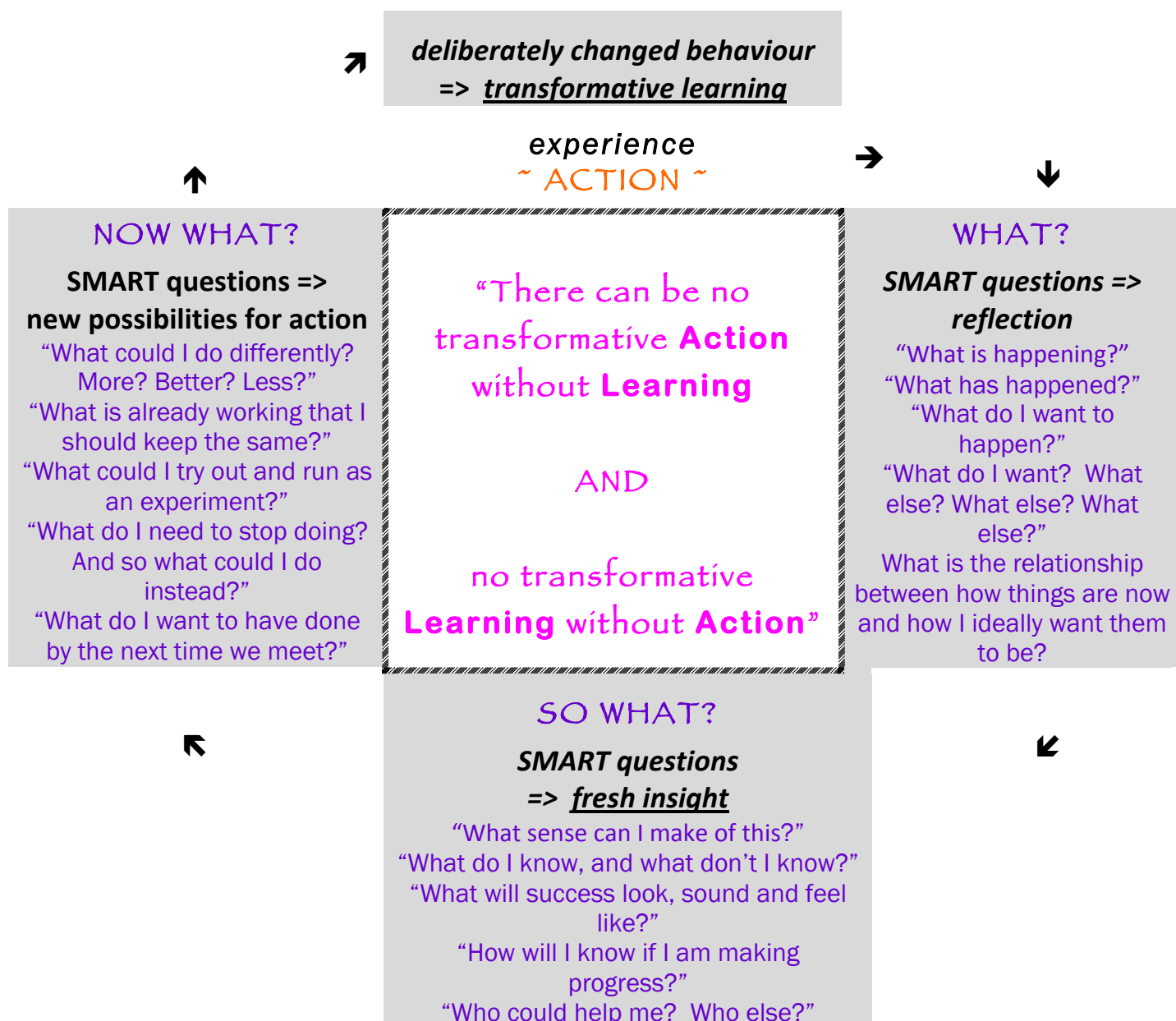
Four possible *Action Learning* Problem types

A 'problem' is defined as any situation that has no one right answer, but can be solved by any of a range of possible solutions.

The wider and deeper and fuller the understanding about the problem, the greater will be the range and 'rightness' of possible solutions that can be uncovered, considered and acted upon.

The Experiential Learning Cycle

To learn from our situations and what we are doing in them we have to step away from action and ask questions right around the experiential cycle: ~



As well as helping to support and nurture effective positive change and transformation for its individual participants, *Action Learning* provides a reliable framework to practice, with increasing ease and expertise, the essential capabilities for whole system learning and transformation...