

Introduction to and benefits of action learning sets

Resource part one of three
Inclusive leadership programme

Leading change through action learning

Welcome

Welcome to the action learning resources.

You are here because you have completed one or both of the following courses:

- Humanistic leadership in-person workshop
- Creating inclusive organisations webinar.

We have designed three resources that will help you to embed the learning and insights gained from the above programmes.

Action learning sets

Leading change through action learning is powerful and effective. This work-based project is aimed at helping you to support change and have an impact on staff and students.

About the resources

- This resource has been designed for education and professional services staff and leaders who wish to lead change in their organisations by using action learning sets (ALSs)
- This is part one of a three-part series designed to offer practical steps for participants undertaking ALSs in their organisations.

Time allocation

- We anticipate that completing all three parts of this resource will take approximately two hours in total, possibly less or more depending on the following factors:
 - Your existing knowledge of this subject
 - The amount of additional reading and research you decide to undertake
 - The scale and size of the ALS interventions you intend to launch.

Leading change through action learning

Once you have reviewed these resources, you will be ready to implement a work-based project that will help you and your organisation to stimulate learning cultures and support you in embedding change that makes a difference to your organisation and its stakeholders.

In summary

The diagram below shows how participants from both the workshop and the webinar will complete the three-part ALS online resource then proceed to implement a project.



Guidance for Projects One and Two:

The 20 hours noted here for each project are a guide only. You may decide to shorten your ALS or you may decide to hold fewer meetings. The 20 hours is based on:

- Six two-hour ALS sessions equals 12 hours
- One hour of admin time per ALS session equals six hours
- Two hours of project management time equals two hours.

Total time equals twenty hours, however, this is purely a suggested example.

About project one

Participants who have completed the **'Developing myself: humanistic leadership'** workshop are asked to focus their action learning initiative on embedding change that has an impact on staff and students.

About project two

Those of you who have completed the 'Developing inclusive organisations' webinar are asked to focus your action learning initiative on identifying and addressing structural bias within the organisation.

What to expect in each part of the resources

Leading change through action learning

Part one

Introduction and benefits of action learning:

- will provide an introduction to ALSs and help you to understand the benefits of using them in leading change.

Part two

Structure, process and rules:

- will cover how an ALS should be structured, the process that should be applied and the rules that should be used to ensure that the ALS experience has the greatest impact possible.

Part three

Effective questions and listening skills:

- will help you to get to grips with basic coaching techniques that will enable you to explore challenges effectively during an ALS session.

Action learning sets – part three

Part three of this resource will help you to develop your questioning and listening skills, which are necessities in effective ALS sessions.

By the end of part three, you will be able to:

1. understand basic principles of coaching
2. recognise and use effective questions
3. sharpen your listening skills.

Action learning sets

– skills necessary for effecting action learning

There are a number of skills needed to implement effective and high-quality ALS sessions. Those skills include asking meaningful questions, active listening, sharing and developing ideas, keeping an open mind, reflection, critical thinking, offering feedback, measuring impact, adapting, the ability to bounce back after setbacks and many more.

This resource will provide you with guidance on two high-priority skills needed in action learning:

1. Questioning techniques
2. Listening skills.

Action learning sets

– consider this

When a person presents an issue in a conversation or meeting, people will often try to solve the issue by offering ideas and comments. In this way, the issue may be passed around the room as each person tries to help or suggest what they might do in the circumstance. Although this has its place, it can be frustrating if the suggestions are not a good fit or have been tried before with no success.

The experience can also feel chaotic, as the discussion can jump around or be dominated by a few people.

Action learning sets

– ask questions and explore the issue

In action learning, the discussion is led by members of the group asking open and supportive questions, and the problem is set firmly with the presenter of the problem.



The structure that underpins ALSs provides logic and process to the experience for all members. The focus is entirely on the person presenting the problem.



Powerful questions are used to draw out insight, a fact or an opportunity for greater exploration.

Action learning sets – powerful questions

Powerful questions:

- Open questions such as how, what, why, when, who, where and which
- Stimulate thinking, encouraging further reflection and exploration
- Empower the person being asked the question to develop solutions that are the right fit for them
- Non-judgemental and focused on seeking further learning and deeper understanding
- Guide but do not lead
- Use easily understood language and are not vague.

Action learning sets

– coaching approaches in ALSs



Coaching approaches sit perfectly alongside the principles and approaches of action learning.



Coaching is about focusing on the coachee, building trust, seeking to understand them, listening carefully to what they are saying, asking questions which guide thinking towards a solution that the coachee is responsible for developing and implementing.



Leaders and teams who adopt a coaching style naturally embed humanistic approaches within their organisations. This should lead the organisation to develop a culture that prioritises learning, development and empowerment. Action learning provides a framework for communication and problem-solving that supports this outcome.

Action learning sets

– using coaching questions in ALSs

For the reasons explained on the previous slides, the questions selected here are typical coaching questions and can be easily used in your ALS sessions.

Initially, you might follow these closely, but as you and your group become experienced in ALSs, you will form your own bank of questions that are right for you.

Action learning sets

– sample questions for use in ALSs

Questions that help to define and explore goals and intentions:	Questions that explore the current situation and reality:	Questions that explore options available:	Questions that help move towards actions and solutions:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are you trying to achieve? 2. What is the best outcome here? 3. Why is this important to you? 4. What does success look like? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is happening now? 2. What or who might block progress? 3. What assumptions are you making? 4. What are the effects of this on others? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What have you already tried and what was the outcome? 2. What haven't you tried yet? 3. What have you learnt from all this? 4. What do you think will happen and why? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are you going to do next? 2. Where could you get more information? 3. Who can you turn to for support? 4. How can we help you to make progress?

Action learning sets

– listening skills

So far, we've covered the importance of asking good questions. Equally important is the ability to use active listening skills. Active listening requires you to be fully present and focused on the speaker. This is harder than it sounds as it's easy for our attention to be distracted and our minds to wander, for example:

- Thoughts that tune in to our own tasks
- The person you are listening to has triggered a memory
- Perhaps you are trying to form a response.

These distractions can mean that we are no longer in active listening mode.

Action learning sets

– active listening



Use these techniques to help you to strengthen your active listening skills:



Be attentive and empathetic.



Look at the person talking to you, possibly visualise what is being said.



Do not talk. Give the speaker plenty of time to finish what they want to say without interruption.



Paraphrase what you've heard, this not only reassures the speaker but also helps them to hear their words so that they have an opportunity to clarify the meaning.



Ask good questions.

Next steps

- Review this resource in areas where you feel you want to increase your confidence.
- Alternatively, carry out some research of your own and/or find someone within your network who has experience in action learning. Speak to them about their experience.
- Move on to either:
 - work-based project one if you have completed the ‘Developing Yourself’ workshop
 - work-based project two if you have completed the ‘Developing Inclusive Organisations’ webinar

End of part two

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action learning**