

# • Motion pictures

When Reg Revans died in January he left a great legacy. But how far are his principles of action learning being applied in practice?

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**REG REVANS WAS ONE OF THE GREAT UNSUNG HEROES OF** modern management. His influence stretches from the NHS to Japanese car factories, from the British coal industry to the entire Belgian economy. As the father of action learning, he is owed a debt by all those whose development includes discussion of their own workplace problems.

But there is evidence that while action learning is gaining in popularity, people's understanding of it varies considerably and departs from some of the basic principles Revans advocated. In fact, surveying and classifying the proliferating variety of "action approaches" to research and development has become something of an academic cottage industry in recent years, with writers going to some lengths to try to define it.

This contrasts with Revans's own refusal to define action learning once and for all, stressing instead "what action learning is not" (*see panel, right*). Despite this lack of definition, we launched a research project last year to find out how closely practitioners are sticking to what might be termed the classical principles of Revans's concept, in which "comrades in adversity" come together in groups to question, challenge, reflect and learn from each other's mistakes and successes, rather than relying on "experts". Our interest is not in definitions, but in

## WHAT IS ACTION LEARNING?

Although the idea of action learning is essentially simple, it cannot be communicated as a formula or technique because it is concerned with profound knowledge of oneself and the world. Even so, it is possible to describe the idea as it is currently applied in many settings as follows: "Action learning is a method for individual and organisational development. Working in small groups, people tackle important organisational issues or problems and learn from their attempts to change things."

Action learning has four elements:

1. Each person joins in and takes part voluntarily.
2. Each participant must own a managerial or organisational problem on which they want to act.
3. Sets or groups of action learners meet to help each other think through the issues and create options.
4. They take action and learn from the effects of that action. One of the main premises of action learning is that, in Revans's words: "There is no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning."

Many organisations hold small group meetings whose activities resemble action learning. Self-help groups, support groups, productivity improvement meetings, quality circles and so on may all be doing action learning. The name doesn't matter; the acid test is whether people in that group are there to get support, and are encouraged to take action on their organisational problems and learn from this.



the practice of action learning. There has been little research into this.

We do know from other studies that the take-up of action learning is uneven. For example, surveys have shown that business schools are making only modest use of it, still preferring to teach about management rather than help people learn how to do it (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). We hope our research will map out the field in more detail.

Revans pioneered the concept and coined the term "action learning" while working for the National Coal Board in the 1950s. The ideas were taken up enthusiastically by the health service, among others, early on. But it is only in the past decade that many organisations have latched on to the approach.

Early findings from the first 78 people to respond to our survey show that 42 per cent began using action learning less than five years ago; 32 per cent between five and 10 years ago; and 26 per cent before that.

Encouragingly, 71 per cent say that, at present, they are using action learning more now than when they started, with 12 per cent saying they are using it less. As for the future, 67 per cent anticipate using action learning more, 3 per cent less, and 27 per cent about the same (cryptically, 3 per cent didn't answer).

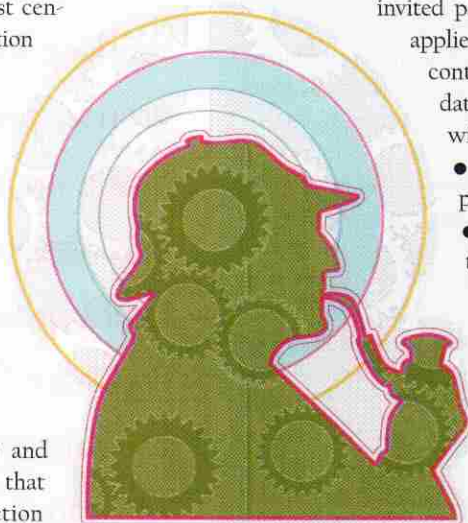
This is good news for those who support action learning, although the research so far has concentrated on what we term the "action learning community of practice". This first sample of 78 people does not include results from private-sector organisations and large consultancies. This is the start of a two-year research project and we will eventually ensure that there is a cross-section from all types of organisation. To date, 35 per cent are from small or medium-sized consultancies, 35 per cent from the NHS, 18 per cent from higher education, 8 per cent from local authorities, 4 per cent from the voluntary sector and one person who has retired.

The next question is: what are they doing? The early findings are highly provisional, but they throw up some interesting points.

Respondents were asked to identify up to four out of seven statements that were most central to their view of, and practice in, action learning. The results included:

- personal change and development (85 per cent);
- action on real problems at work (83 per cent);
- reflection on action (78 per cent);
- organisational change and development (49 per cent);
- working in a set of six or so peers (35 per cent);
- questioning (32 per cent);
- facilitation (12 per cent).

The emphasis on personal change and development is striking and suggests that this may be the focus of much action



## THE RESEARCH

We have completed telephone interviews with 30 higher education practitioners. This is a key focus, partly because the Foundation for Management Education is part-funding the research, but also because this is where some of the main enthusiasts for action learning are found, despite the recorded lack of interest from business schools.

We are now in a second stage of the research: a paper-based survey of 150 practitioners of action learning – commissioners, designers, facilitators and participants. This is a simple "tick box" survey that invites respondents to say how they've been involved in action learning, to agree on statements central to their views and to identify features of their practice.

We gathered our respondents to date by calling for information through the International Foundation for Action Learning, the Association of Management Education and Development and members of the Revans Institute for Action Learning and Research, as well as through the media, especially *People Management*, *Management Learning* and *The Training Journal*. We realise this favours some areas, such as higher education, and under-represents others. But these people are all part of what we are terming an action learning community of practice.

The research asks: where is action learning being used, for what, and in what forms? How is it developing? What issues are faced by those using it? Has it become a broad term for all methods where the learner is more, rather than less, active and participatory? And how has the "model" changed? Are there new forms we do not know about? Is it being used for collective as well as individual learning – for instance, by being aligned to organisational purposes?

learning practice. Also interesting is the relatively low "score" for questioning, given Revans's espousal of learning through questioning – although contrasting evidence is seen in the next section.

Lastly, the low response to facilitation throws up more questions. Does this indicate an increasing move towards self-managed sets – in line with Revans's principle of "teaching little and learning a lot" – or does it reflect the uncertain status of the facilitator in action learning, again given Revans's well-known reservations? Data from the next section suggests the latter, so this could be one area where practice is different from reality.

We listed 14 features of action learning and invited participants to tick as many as applied. The results reveal interesting contradictions and the following data supplied by our respondents will need investigation.

- "We work in sets of six or so people" (91 per cent).
- "There is real action taken in the workplace" (87 per cent). There must be real action taken, although there will be argument about what that action should look like, otherwise there can be no action learning.
- "Participants were helped through questioning, rather »

### FURTHER INFORMATION

To complete the survey, visit [www.henleymc.ac.uk/quest/actionlearningpractices.pdf](http://www.henleymc.ac.uk/quest/actionlearningpractices.pdf). Respondents will get an electronic report of the results.

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J Pfeffer and C T Fong, *The End of Business Schools? Less Success Than Meets the Eye*. Academy of Management: Learning and Education (2002)

See also "Learning centre", 10 October 2002



## THE FATHER OF ACTION LEARNING

Reg Revans was something of a renaissance man. In his nearly 96 years of life he was at various times an astrophysicist, Olympic athlete, educational administrator, university professor and international guru.

He was born in May 1907 in Portsmouth, where his father was a marine surveyor. As a boy he saw his father receive a visit from seamen's representatives after the wreck of the Titanic – the ship that was described by experts as unsinkable.

In later life this story was emblematic of his faith in the ability of all of us, supported by a few trusted colleagues, to learn from our own actions and not to delegate this responsibility to experts.

In the late 1920s he was a doctoral student in astrophysics at Cambridge and Michigan, then a fellow of Emmanuel College working at the Cavendish Laboratories. He moved into education to become assistant education officer for Essex and then director of education for the Coal Board in 1945.

It was here that he did much of the early work on developing action learning, working alongside E F Schumacher (author of *Small is Beautiful*) and Eric Trist, whose theories about socio-technical systems have also had an important influence on organisation development. Revans then became the first professor of industrial management at the University of Manchester but left to develop the inter-university action learning programme in Belgium.

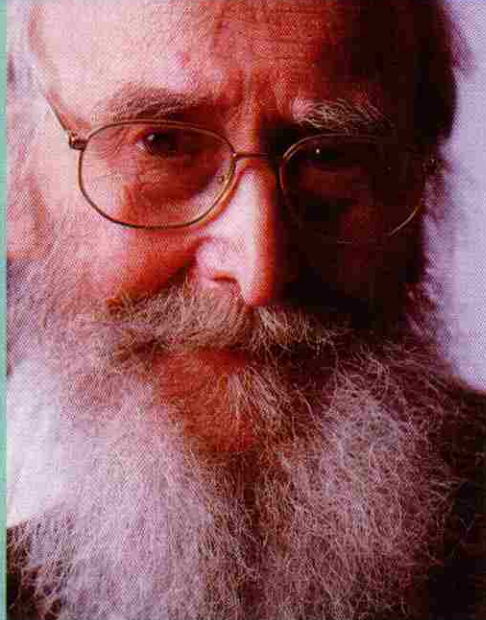
On his return to the UK at the age of 68, he continued his global mission to spread the word of action learning. During the 1970s and 1980s he travelled round the world several times and wrote his most important books: *Developing Effective Managers* (1971); *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning* (1982) and *ABC of Action Learning* (1983).

There are many stories about Revans. He said that he would go anywhere anytime to talk with people about action learning "for the price of his bus fare". He travelled light and from Manchester Airport would often walk the six miles home to Altrincham. (He said: "It gives me time to think".) A long-jump contestant in the 1928 Olympic Games, his athleticism stayed with him until his early 90s.

Revans left a great legacy that is yet to be fully realised. He was not one of the best-known gurus of management education or organisation development, not least because of his scorn for experts and his championing of ordinary people. When you spoke to him, he would not try to dictate a "model", but was more likely to tell you about a group of people in Salford who were trying to change their lives, and how they needed to speak to the people of Southampton or Soweto. This was how they would learn and get encouragement to act. As you left him, he would say: "There is much to be done" and then ask: "What are you going to do about it?"

He died in Wem, Shropshire on 8 January 2003.

See also "Sage of reason", *PM* 28 December 2000



MATT GREENSLADE

than being taught or told what to do" (86 per cent).

- "Each person worked on an individual problem" (82 per cent).
- "Problems were chosen by the individual concerned – not the organisation" (71 per cent). But 12 per cent said that problems were identified and chosen by the organisation, and 36 per cent mentioned joint negotiation.
- "We used a facilitator in set activities" (81 per cent).
- "We developed ground rules as part of the process" (69 per cent).
- "We were participating in action learning linked to a qualification" (49 per cent).

The evidence emerging from these two sets of data is contradictory in places. This may, in part, result from the use of simple questionnaires to enquire about complex issues. It seems, for instance, from the second set of responses that questioning and the use of a facilitator are more central to practice than in the previous responses.

Two other points: the emphasis on personal issues chosen by the individuals suggests there has been a drift away from Revans's classical principles. There are two aspects to this: one is the principle of addressing organisational problems, and negotiating them with an organisational sponsor; the second is the loss of the idea of working on collective problems. Revans placed emphasis on tackling collective issues in some of his NHS work.

Lastly, the large number working for qualifications needs some explanation. In part, this may reflect an over-representation of respondents from the Revans Institute,

who are all enrolled on research degrees by action learning. Even so, this finding requires further investigation in light of Revans's low opinion of qualification programmes – most famously in his interpretation of MBA as "Moral Bankruptcy Assured".

As part of our research we are seeking to identify an action learning community of practice and trying to contact as many interested people as possible. We intend to share our findings with them so that we can best consider how action learning can be used and developed.

In fact, true to Revans's memory, we will question, share experience and relate it to the real world. **PM**

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