

One of Reg Revans's first memories is of being dressed in black and taken to a memorial service for Florence Nightingale. It was 1910 and Revans was three years old.

His mother's interest in Nightingale arose from her voluntary work at the family's local hospital in Portsmouth. His father worked as His Majesty's principal surveyor of mercantile shipping and was heavily involved in the official inquiry into the sinking of Titanic.

They lived by the docks, and Revans can recall a procession of poverty-stricken sailors coming barefoot to his home to report on their experiences aboard the ill-fated liner. Like the Ancient Mariner, Revans fixes a keen eye on his audience as he condemns the folly of Titanic's management: "The captain, the company - everyone - had ignored what the sailors were telling them: that they were putting the whole ship at risk in their desire to break the cross-Atlantic record."

Revans asked his father which lesson was the most important to be learnt from the tragedy, and his father took a few days to think it over. What he eventually told his young son stayed with him for the rest of his long life: we must learn to distinguish between "cleverness" and "wisdom". Even now, Revans insists on asking "why" questions that seek understanding, rather than "what" questions that seek basic knowledge.

At the age of 11, Revans was entered for Christ's Hospital school. But he was so appalled by the traditional frock-coated uniform of the school that he deliberately flunked the entrance exam, writing only his name on the test paper. This stubbornness has stayed with Revans all of his life. He is the archetypal iconoclast,

Sage of reason

making himself unpopular with bureaucracies and hierarchies.

According to Professor Albert Barker, a close friend and collaborator, "Reg has never been an organisation man" His view, for example, that business schools are "the massage parlours of the 20th century" has not enamoured him to certain parts of the academic world.

After his secondary education at Battersea Grammar School, Revans went on to study physics at University College, London, where he took his finals after only two years and won the prize for best student. In 1929 he was awarded a research fellowship at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and worked on his doctorate. He won a double-blue in athletics – his Cambridge long-jump record stood for 30 years – and he went on to represent his country at the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam, an event that he remembers with uncharacteristic pride. Did he enjoy the 2000 games in Sydney on TV? "I never look at the evil box in the corner," he says with a grin.

After a spell studying in the US, he returned to Cambridge in 1932 to work on his own research under the "father of nuclear physics", Professor Ernest Rutherford, at the Cavendish Laboratories. This gave Revans the impetus to develop his ideas on action learning. Each week Rutherford would gather together his research team – which consisted of more than a dozen future Nobel laureates – and encourage them to question their own knowledge and to collaborate on developing fresh ideas.

In 1935, Revans left the scientific world to become director of education at Essex County Council. While there, a colleague asked him to look at the worrying level of staff turnover among nurses in hospitals.

Why did so many leave after training? His investigations threw up a stark reason for dissatisfaction among newly qualified nurses: the culture in which they worked did nothing to encourage them.

Revans recalls with some anger how student nurses aged 18 to 20 were referred to as "ignorant young sluts" by their "superiors". The result of his research was a hard-hitting paper written in 1938 that called for a prototype version of action learning. He envisaged continuing trouble unless senior managers "understand that they will only know

'It's only when you are being scoffed at by self-appointed experts that you can be sure you are offering something of any true worth'

their problems if they understand what the workers are thinking".

The war interrupted Revans's work in education. He became head of emergency services for the East End. In Blitz-torn London of 1940, this was a real baptism of fire in crisis management. As the incendiary bombs dropped all around, there was no time for considered planning. Revans remembered some Aristotle that he had been taught at school: "That which we must learn to do, we learn by doing." (He also regards *The Bible* as a vital text on action learning.)

At the end of the war, he was selected to work on the restructuring of the coal

industry, which went into public ownership in 1946. He was responsible for planning recruitment, education and training, but began his task in typical Revans style by working for several weeks at the coalface in Durham.

He championed a staff training college to be run by the colliery managers. Outside "experts" were, and still are, anathema. "We do not need to sit at the feet of gurus," says the man regarded by many as a guru. He wrote one of his landmark papers, *Small is Dutiful*, at this time, which showed how smaller work units could be much more productive than larger ones. The pits that tried out his methods reported a 30 per cent increase in productivity.

This was a time of great creativity at the National Coal Board (NCB). Among others working there who later made their names as management thinkers were Eric Trist, originator of "socio-technical systems" and E M Schumacher, author of the 1970s book *Small is Beautiful*. This is a clear homage to Revans, who said in 1946 that "large organisations cannot readily learn". For all this, Revans is no "sizeist" – he also wrote *The Myths of Decentralisation*.

It was at the NCB in the early 1950s that Revans developed his first action learning programme, "A consortium of pitmen". According to Albert Barker, Professor Naoto Sasaki had this project in mind when he acknowledged the debt he owed to Revans in his seminal work on quality circles in Japan.

After the NCB, where he had become disillusioned with the onward march of bureaucrats and administrators who were deaf to the views of their employees, Revans went on to become the first professor of business administration at the

At 93, Reg Revans, the father of action learning, is still keen to challenge the experts on accepted notions of knowledge. Since the 1940s he has maintained that employees' experiences and ideas provide the best solutions to problems. As Mike Levy discovers, Revans's achievements will influence modern training practice for many years to come

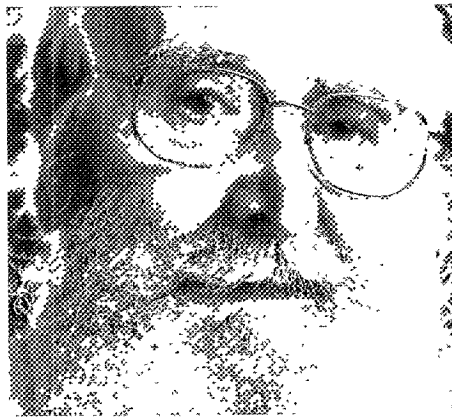
University of Manchester. He stayed there until 1965. Revans's vision was of practical business people learning from each other, creating their own resources, identifying their own problems and forming their own solutions. Needless to say, this was not how many academics saw it.

Revans's next big challenge was Belgium. He headed the Inter-University Project, which had the task of moving the small kingdom up from the bottom of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development league, where it had languished for several years. Traditional measures had been tried but had failed. Under Revans's stewardship, five Belgian universities and 23 of the country's largest business organisations worked together to find a solution to the national malaise.

This collective approach succeeded in putting Belgium's industrial productivity growth rate, at 102 per cent, ahead of the US, Germany and Japan between 1971 and 1981. Revans was subsequently awarded the nation's top honour by the king of Belgium. It was in Belgium that Revans met Arnold (later Lord) Weinstock, who had taken over the General Electric Company, and Sir Peter Parker, then chairman of British Rail. Both were impressed by his ideas.

"Reg has always been ready to challenge authority for its own sake. In all his writings he keeps returning to the social dimensions of enterprise," Parker says. "He taught us all that we must 'dare to share' problems and, even more importantly, dare to listen to our employees," he adds. "You could say that Reg is an idealist, but everything he says is rooted in hard-headed terms. It's all very practical. At its heart is the need to take responsibility as a community for problems – not to hand them over to consultants and experts."

During his years in Belgium, Revans also led the Hospital Internal Communications Project (HIC). Between 1965 and 1968 more than 10 London hospitals were involved in this project, which used a form of action learning. Informal groups tried to understand how each other operated and then decided which issues to tackle and how to approach them. Help with evaluation and analysis came from the King's Fund, headed by Janet Craig, a lifelong friend of Revans's.



What action learning means

Based on the relatively simple principle that learning is about recognising not what we know but what we don't know, action learning involves participants meeting in small groups, usually consisting of four to six people, with or without a facilitator. According to Revans, they become "comrades in adversity". Groups members ask each other questions about how they see the problems being considered – the idea is that each participant acts as a mirror to help the group recognise what it doesn't know. The learning should be self-managed, is usually project-based and focuses on finding a solution internally, rather than seeking external help.

"He was marvellous in getting senior managers to listen to nurses – they hadn't bothered to do it before," Craig recalls. Morale was boosted as a result, indicated by lower levels of absenteeism, accidents and staff turnover. There was a significant reduction in costs per patient and waiting lists shortened.

A study by the University of Michigan showed that, in wards where an HIC-type project was implemented, patients recovered more quickly. Staff morale was higher, and that meant better care.

From the 1970s to the mid-1990s, Revans was a passionate advocate of action learning. He travelled the world and was, according to those who saw him at the height of his oratorical powers, a magnetic, almost evangelical, speaker.

In 1995, on the initiative of David Botham with John Morrison, Bryan Allison, Mike Pedler and others at the University of Salford, the Revans Centre was set up. It houses Revans's huge archive and offers courses and research opportunities in action learning.

By summer 2000, the Revans Centre had more than 200 advanced students. It has collaborated closely with universities in Richmond and Atlanta in the US and Ballarat in Australia. A new University of Action Learning has also recently opened in the US, aiming to provide courses via the Internet. And International Management Centres are multinational champions of action learning.

Professor Lex Dilworth, co-ordinator of the HR development programme at Virginia Commonwealth University, uses action learning to teach his management students about problem-solving. It is not always an easy or secure process, but, in Dilworth's words, "they become partners in adversity and there's often incredible team bonding where no one is leader".

Ian Cunningham (see Learning centre, page 41), who chairs the Strategic Developments International consultancy, developed "self-managed learning" out of action learning when he was head of Roffey Park Management Institute a decade ago. "Action learning had become too project-based and not necessarily linked to the business. So we used the concept of learning contracts to provide this link," he explains.

Revans commands considerable status as an original and influential thinker. Cunningham criticises academics who add their own versions of action learning as a way of spicing up their MBA courses (which, according to Revans, stands for "moral bankruptcy assured"). "Revans invented the term 'action learning' and he has the right to say what it means," he says.

To Cunningham, the root of Revans's work is that you start with real-life issues, "So many trainers and consultants start with a solution and then look for the problems. Reg taught us that this is the wrong way round."

Dilworth sums it up: "I have no doubt that the impact of what Reg Revans is saying is only just beginning." 