

Working well together

The dialogue which occurs between set members within an action learning set is different from a usual social or even a work based conversation. As such it is helpful to be explicit about the values and rules which will ensure that all set members can participate fully.

Guidelines for working together

The following guidelines are intended to help set members to feel confident and to work openly and effectively within the set.

- Maintain **confidentiality** – the detail of what happens in the set and any personal information is confidential. Decisions and plans can be communicated and acted on outside the set.
- **Listen** actively to everyone
- Accept **responsibility** for your own learning and development
- **Share time equally** in the set
- **Bring issues with the set to set** meetings rather than complain to outsiders
- **Be respectful of difference** – difference can be enriching

We may develop additional agreements to support our work in this specific set.

Roles and responsibilities in a set

Set advisor

Action learning sets can be self-facilitated or have an external set advisor.

The role and responsibilities of the set advisor include:

- Helping to establish the climate for learning and development
- Managing the timetable and agenda for the meetings
- Enabling the group to focus on learning and development
- Demonstrating the skills of action learning
- Helping the set members to develop skills for self- facilitation

In addition the set advisor may also be able to identify and signpost set members to information and resources which are beyond the immediate experience in the set.

The set advisor is does not act as a teacher or trainer in the action learning set model.

Set members

Within the action learning framework set members take two significant and different roles;

Peer supporters and learning facilitators

Presenters of issues and problems

Both are active and skilful roles.

Peer supporters

The core task for supporters is to help the presenter by asking questions which offer the potential for insight and new perspectives on the issue or problem being presented.

Presenters

Presenting an issue in order to get the maximum value from the action learning set requires some skill and planning.

Log sheets are a useful way to reflect and highlight issues which could be explored further.

Because this is a formal dialogue with peers there are some skills to develop in order to make the most of it.

action learning skills

In particular it is helpful to know -

How to ask for what you want – help the set to help you.

For example – ‘I would like your questions to focus on generating new ideas on how else I can approach this’

How to get an empathetic response – sharing feelings enables set members to really understand the impact and significance of your issue.

For example – ‘I feel a bit overwhelmed by the enormity of what I have to do’

Take control of the process – having asked for what you want – then be assertive if the questioning or discussion goes too far away from this need to be useful to you.

For example – ‘While that is an interesting question/comment – what I really need now is to focus on ...’

How to receive feedback and support – listening openly and without responding with ‘yes – but...’. Sometimes it is helpful just to hear perhaps write ideas which may not have an immediate or comfortable resonance.

For example – ‘I notice I am resisting that – let me make a note and reflect on it further’

What is effective presenting – how to describe your issues and how to use limited time most effectively

Example of a framework for a 30 minute slot

Stage 1. Presenter talks about

Actions and insights as a result of last meeting

What they want from this meeting

This usually takes **5-10 minutes**

Stage 2. Set members use insightful questioning to help the presenter to identify options, new ideas, other perspectives etc on their issues

This usually takes **15 – 20 minutes**

Stage 3. Presenter reflects on the questions and any insights or ideas gained and forms a plan of action to take before the next learning set meeting

This usually takes **5 minutes**

action learning skills

There are many techniques and tools which the presenter can use to gain ideas and insights in their time slot (see below). What is essential in all of them is that the presenter actively states what they most need from set members.

Examples of ways to use the time slot as a presenter

Use the flipchart to present and illustrate your issues

Ask the set to brainstorm possible ways to deal with your issue or question

Ask the set to stay quiet as you present – not asking questions – but giving you the space to think out loud. When you have finished talking you then ask set members for any observations they have. Don't debate the suggestions – just hear them and evaluate them in respect of your issue.

Ask for specific suggestions for dealing with a situation where you feel bereft of suggestions – again don't debate them – hear them – take what, if anything, is useful and ignore what is not

Ask the set to discuss your issue for x minutes while you observe.

Asking questions

As a set member, you will find that simple questions are often the most powerful in terms of results. Set members can be very effective just using these questions, for example:

Core questions

- What do you want?
- How will you get there?
- What's the first step?
- What could get in the way?
- What do you need?
- When will you start?
- What's a realistic timescale?
- What will you learn from that?
- What works (or worked) for you?
- How could you change that?
- What's the positive opposite of that for you?
- What would that give you?
- What does it look like from (the other person's) position?
- Who can support/assist you?

Notice that questions are generally **short** and they are also **open** (i.e. they require more than yes or no for an answer).

It is important to allow the Presenter sufficient time to answer each question. Also when asking challenging questions, use your tone of voice and body language so that the Presenter still feels encouraged and accepted.

Remember... as a Set member you are asking questions which **move the Presenter on with their issue**, (in terms of deepening their understanding or helping them to explore it) not questions to satisfy your own curiosity or to get further into the details of the problem.

The kinds of questions which do this best are the ones which encourage the Presenter to reflect and to start to ask themselves questions.

action learning skills

Helpful types of questions in action learning

OPEN	Can't be answered with a yes or no but encourages the presenter to open up a dialogue; creates an open space	How did you tackle that?
REFLECTIVE	Reflects back something which has been expressed to enable presenter to consider the impact. Encourages new insights.	You looked very energised when you said that – I wonder what that might say about the project now?
CLARIFYING	Helps listener check the meaning of what they have heard; allows presenter to hear what others have heard. Can add insights for presenters	Is what you are saying?
COMPARATIVE	A form of closed question which encourages presenter to reflect	What might make you choose option A over option B?
PRECISION	Useful to flesh out details and help presenter understand the issue in more depth	How exactly did that happen? Everyone? Always?

Unhelpful questions

Because the intention of action learning is to support and facilitate the development of the presenter there are some sorts of questions which may be acceptable in 'social situations which are less useful in this context.

LEADING	Where the questioner already knows what answer they expect and leads the presenter to give this response	Don't you think that the best way to do this is?
MULTIPLE	A series of questions, one after the other, presenter answers only one. Often indicates an anxiety or confusion in the questioner – and serves to transfer this to the presenter	When did you first know that, what did you do at that stage, what did they say and how did you get them to agree?

action learning skills

The following groups of questions may help you to identify some useful ways to support and challenge presenters.

Project focused questions

Here the intention is to help the presenter reflect on aspects of their project and to identify ways forward based on new understanding.

- What problems does that raise?
- How is that a problem?
- What is/isn't happening now?
- What do you want to be different?
- How would you like X to respond?
- How does Y need to change?
- How will that help?
- Who else can you involve?

Feeling focused questions

Here the intention is to help the presenter reflect on and anticipate the emotional impact of what they are doing.

- How are feeling about this?
- What worries you about it?
- What excites you most?
- What's your fantasy about this?
- How honest are you being with yourself?
- How realistic are you being with yourself?
- What do you know that you'll realise a year from now?

Questions about the set processes

Here the intention is to enable the presenter to get what she or he needs from the set and to give set members feedback to improve their effectiveness

- What else would you find helpful?
- How can we help you?
- Are we addressing the question/issue?
- Are we being helpful?
- What have we learned?
- What went well?
- What could we do better?

There are also some useful questions for times when you don't know where to go next in order to help the presenter:

- Where do we go from here?
- What would you like now?
- What would help?