

The Power of Action Learning

by Tim Pearson

Would you like to increase your productivity, profits and/or wealth by 30 percent or more?

If so, you'd be interested in Reginald Revans (1907-2003), a British industrialist and professor. He developed a highly effective learning technique that got him kicked out of Britain's University of Manchester because it didn't require any professors.

The technique is simple, low cost and powerfully effective. It works for nuclear physicists and coal miners (and doctors and nurses and just about everyone else):

There are five basic steps:

First, write down a real problem or opportunity that you face.

Second, list in bullet fashion, the actions you will take to deal with this real-world problem or opportunity – then share the list with a small group of trusted colleagues or friends (by email or even more effectively, in-person) and ask for their comments and ideas.

Third, TAKE ACTION.

Fourth, then write down what you've learned from the experience and share those insights with the same group – and ask for their feedback again.

Fifth, repeat until solved.

That's it. Simple. Almost too simple for people to take seriously. But it works.

Here's the origin of his idea: In the 1920's Reginald Revans was working at Cambridge University's Cavendish Laboratories with five Nobel Prize winners. The group was trying to split the atom. The individual scientists tended to look at problems from their own disciplines and would get stuck. So the lab leader, physicist Lord Rutherford, asked the scientists to meet weekly, ask questions and share perspectives. Revans recalls, "Even though they had won Nobel Prizes, they were willing to acknowledge that things could be going on elsewhere. They asked questions." The scientists' collaborative humility impressed Revans.

During the war-time bombing of London, Revans started applying his technique of collaborative learning in hospitals and in repairing bomb damage in neighborhoods. The incessant bombing forced people to be innovative and to be open to collaboration.

After World War II, Revans further worked out his ideas about collaborative learning on the job with the managers and coal miners of the British National Coal Board. He spent two years underground learning with and from the teams. The result: the coal pits that tried his technique posted a 30 percent increase in productivity.

Revans writes, "When doctors listen to nurses, patients recover more quickly; if mining engineers pay more attention to their men than their machinery, the pits are more efficient. As in athletics and nuclear research, it is neither books nor seminars from

which managers learn much, but from here-and-now exchanges about the operational job in hand.”

After his time in the 1960's with the National Coal Board, Revans became Britain's first professor of industrial administration at the University of Manchester. The city of Manchester was just establishing a new school of business. Revans proposed active learning in the workplace, with peers learning from peers. However, his philosophy of workplace learning didn't sit well with those who dreamt of the money to be made from the school's MBA program. So Revans went into 10 years of exile in Belgium.

Brussels, Belgium had just been selected as capital of the Common Market and the Belgians decided that they needed to develop an even greater international perspective. Five Belgian universities participated in Revan's program of Action Learning and corporations exchanged top managers to work on each other's problems.

The outside perspectives provided fresh insights. In one case, a Belgian steel company was paired with an executive from outside the steel industry who saw that the Belgian steel firm was losing significant market share. The outside executive then noticed that the steel executives were compensated by tons of steel produced and not by the quality of their steel. Meanwhile, steel companies in other countries were focusing on producing high quality steel. The outside executive then proposed revising the steel company's compensation structure to focus on quality – a proposal that was adopted and immediately shifted the firm's competitive position.

Revan writes, “I wasn't there to teach anyone anything. We got people talking to each other, asking questions. People from the airline business talked to people from the chemical companies. People shared knowledge and experience.”

Several interesting statistics from that period: 22 of Belgium's largest companies participated in Revan's program – companies that accounted for 52% of Belgium's capital base. Belgian industrial productivity in the 1970's grew by 102 percent. Britain's industrial productivity during the same period was 28 percent.

Revens went on to write Action Learning (1980) and ABC of Action Learning (1988), drawing on his experiences, but neither became best-sellers. Why? Revans looks at the world from the bottom-up rather than top-down; from the coal-face rather than from the corner office. The focus is on questions and learning what one doesn't know, rather than on answers and passing on the solutions of the past.

As another British writer, David Cornwell writes: “Sometimes...we have to do a thing to find out the reason for it. Sometimes our actions are questions, not answers.”

That's what makes action learning ideal for people, organizations and Alaska as we face the challenges of the 21st century. Yesterday's actions don't fit today's challenges.

So, question will you ask?

And what action will you take to deepen your learning?

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