

**CapitalNurse
Early Careers Framework Preceptorship
and Beyond:**

Action Learning



CapitalNurse Early Careers: Preceptorship and Beyond: Action Learning

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What is Action Learning?

“There can be no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning” - Reg Revans

Action learning is an approach to learning that spreads solutions, ideas, and problems among small groups. Groups usually consist of five to eight people from different areas or organisations. This method is particularly useful with groups of people in similar roles who face the same challenges and can offer peer support to one another.

Sessions are managed by a facilitator and a set process is followed for each action learning set. The group determine the process and ground rules at the outset. Action learning meetings are usually held monthly and last between two and three hours.

Action learning provides a safe space for participants to share concerns, problems, and thoughts and promotes learning from each other. Participants develop supportive relationships and can offer guidance in resolving workplace issues.

‘Often more questions may be generated to be able to find deeper-rooted personalised individual learning via the process of $L = P + Q$ – Learning equals programmed knowledge (what we have been taught or learned through experience) plus questioning which involves the process of interrogating knowledge in the application to the workplace’ (Revans, 1979).

Action learning requires everyone taking responsibility for their learning, considering what this means to their situation and applying to their workplace.

Action Learning Set

This is the name given to a group of people who come together with the purpose of learning from and with each other. The term 'learning set' implies a group working closely together over a longer period as sets are usually held over months rather than weeks.

The focus of an action learning set is on everyone, their concern, and actions they can take. The group develop their own rules and process from the outset with confidentiality a keystone of action learning sets.

Action learning sets fall into different categories and may include:

- **Independent** where individuals decide to form an action learning group
- **Initiated by an organisation** where organisations or parts of an organization set up an action learning set for certain groups of staff
- **Facilitated** by an independent facilitator (may or may not be external)
- **Self-facilitated** by the group themselves. This often comes later after several sets have been facilitated and the group has an established process.

Benefits of Action Learning

There are benefits to the individual, the set, and the organisations:

- **Individuals** benefit from increased learning in a safe environment with the opportunity to explore their problems and potential solutions. They develop their communication, listening, and skills in building rapport with others through having the problem-solving process in a group and decision-making. From here, they gain self-confidence and enhanced self-awareness through reflection and improved motivation while demonstrating empathy with colleagues.
- **Learning Set** members benefit from a sense of belonging to a different group and the facility to share and solve problems within a group without feeling judged. They are on an equal footing with each other and develop an increased understanding of others within the set and improved awareness of the group process.

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- **Organisations** benefit from increased staff morale and commitment together with the opportunity to develop and improving services. Staff are more effective, capable of changing faster in response to demand and improve their skills. Although an investment in terms of time, the organisation will see rewards in the motivation and productivity that results from action learning sets.

Essential Components

For an action learning set to be successful, there needs to be commitment from each group member:

- Attend sessions and participate fully, listening to each other and sharing ideas.
- Action learning sets require dedicated, protected time with each session taking between two and three hours (depending on the number in the set). Each set member should be prepared to challenge and question others in the set, take responsibility for their own learning and willing to share updates with the other set members. Ground rules and a process need to be established at the outset to facilitate the group work, encourage learning, and promote confidentiality. Where possible, a skilled facilitator should manage the first sessions to establish group process. Small numbers encourage openness and honesty whilst promoting confidentiality.

Action Learning Facilitator

The role of the facilitator is to establish the action learning set process and ground rules. During each session, they should establish a psychologically safe environment for members, manage the process and timing, maintain focus, and develop set members' own personal skills, particularly in listening, questioning and reflection.

During each session, the facilitator may keep brief notes – these are intended to be a reminder of topics discussed and not full minutes. The notes help in preparing the subsequent session and refreshing set members' recall of previous topics.

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The Action Learning facilitator should be a skilled facilitator and understands the process of action learning. They need to have good communication and active listening skills with coaching skills to use appropriate questions and probe set members. The facilitator may need to deal with difficult situations calmly and be prepared to challenge and maintain focus when needed.

Their role is to:

- chair and manage the session and process
- keep time
- indicate when moving onto each stage
- encourage participation from all set members and promote inclusion
- set date and time for each session.

Action Learning Set Process

Each action learning set will begin with a 'check-in' and this is when the facilitator gives each set member an opportunity to update the meeting briefly on where they are with their previous problem. The session will then move on to the main process. The action learning set method uses a three-stage process which is repeated throughout the session, focusing on different problems.

The process includes:

1. **Stage one** – the first person, known as 'the presenter', has up to five minutes to explain their problem or concern. During this time, the other members remain quiet, supportive, and non-judgemental. They must not interrupt the presenter and should listen carefully.
2. **Stage two** – the other set members may now ask questions – these are called 'inquiring questions' designed to acquire more information, clarification, and detail. The purpose is for the set members to improve their understanding of the presenter's issue. The questions should be open questions and use of Kipling's Men (Who, What, Where, When, How and Why) are most useful at this stage. During this part of the process, set members should not be offering solutions,

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ideas or sharing their own experiences. They should be non-judgemental and simply question to gain more information.

3. **Stage Three** – this is the stage for set members to offer ideas in turn. They may share experiences, include contacts, and offer suggestions. The presenter will stay quiet, listen, and take notes. Finally, they are given time to reflect on what the information given, to consider actions they may take forward. Any decisions should be captured by the facilitator in the notes for the next session.

The process then begins again with the second 'presenter'. The time of each process is determined when the action learning set is established. It will depend on the number of set members and the time allocated for each set. This is an example of a 30-minute process:

- **Stage one** – 5 minutes for introduction from presenter
- **Stage two** – 5minutes for questions and further exploration
- **Stage three** – 15 minutes for sharing information, reflections and a further 5 minutes for the presenter to reflect and consider actions,

At the end of the session, time is allocated to review what has gone well and what could have been better. Finally, the facilitator offers a few minutes for each set member to 'check out' by sharing one thing they have taken from the session.

A sample form for establishing the process is included in [Appendix One](#).

Setting up an Action Learning Set

The first step in setting up an action learning set is to determine who should be invited to participate in the set. Although groups may be up to 12 people, most find that between six and eight is an optimum number. The number of members will also depend on how much time is available for each set meeting.

The next stage is to decide on the facilitator and then book a date, time, and space.

During the first session, the facilitator will go through what action learning is about and introduce the methodology. They will discuss the process with the set and determine

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timings to suit the group. A sample form for establishing the process is included in Appendix One.

Usually, facilitators will encourage set members to establish ground rules and may suggest certain ground rules, for example, confidentiality. Time will be given for each member to introduce themselves and find out a little about their fellow set members. This is an important part of the process in developing trust.

The set will need to decide how often meetings will be held, where (physical or virtual environment), how long each set will be and schedule dates and times which are convenient for all set members.

The first meeting will focus very much on establishing the set and should include time for two or three presenters. Subsequent meetings should focus on the process and allow time for all members to participate.

Action learning sets can be continued as long they are found to be beneficial to members or for a set period, for example, six or twelve months.

Evaluating Action Learning Programmes

The evaluation of action learning programmes helps to modify future programmes and can be done in different ways.

One way is for each set member to self-assess certain skills and behaviours at the outset of the programme, mid-way and again at the end. This self-assessment focuses on the skills and behaviours used within the action learning set. A sample self-assessment form is included in Appendix Two.

A second way is a more formal evaluation of the action learning programme at the end. This will be actioned by the facilitator or organiser.

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Further Information

- YouTube video about Action Learning:
 - 3-minute introduction - [What is Action Learning?](#)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bJ9RXkYPSU>
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITImOnCxDYY>
- NHS England – Action Learning Handbook - [learning-handbook-action-learning-sets.pdf \(england.nhs.uk\)](#)
- Facilitating AL – A Practitioners Guide, Mike Pedlar, and Christine Abbott
- Humble Inquiry by Edgar Schein
- Helping by Edgar Schein
- Time to Think – Listening to ignite the human mind, by Nancy Kline
- [North West Cross Institutional Action Learning for Women](#)

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References

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Appendix One: Sample Form for Process

Action	Timing	Detail
Check-in		Each member checks in with brief update from previous session
Process		
Stage One		Presentation
Stage Two		Inquiring questions
Stage Three		Reflection, sharing ideas and action
Review		Summary and review of what has gone well and what could be improved
Check-out		Each member checks out with one learning point from session

Ground Rules for Set

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Appendix Two: Self-assessment

Please rate your skills and behaviours on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being low and 10 being high. The first action learning set should be assessed before beginning the program, followed by a midway assessment and a final assessment.

	Before	Midway	Endpoint
Understanding my own behaviour in a group			
Awareness of others' behaviours			
Awareness of how much I talk			
Being aware of how much I interrupt others			
My ability to question and challenge			
My ability to listen actively			
My ability to remain objective and non-judgemental			
My ability to stay open-minded			
Being aware of how I support others			
Explaining my points of view			
Sharing my reflections and own experience			
Sensing the feelings of others and knowing how to react			
Telling others how I feel			
My ability to encourage others to participate			
My ability to stay positive			
My interpersonal skills in general			