DODS
TRAINING

ACTION LEARNING SETS

INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

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What is an Action Learning Set?

Action Learning is about 'learning by doing'. In a small, facilitated Action Learning Set that meets regularly, you think through workplace challenges, come up with plans, reflect and learn from your actions and work out how to face future challenges better. You also help other Set members work on their challenges and often learn useful lessons from them. Action Learning Sets help you develop real 'know-how' and the confidence to put it to work.

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What does Action Learning help with?

Real workplace challenges! Dods Action Learning Sets typically focus on leadership and policy development. Set members already know their work roles and have knowledge, tools and experience to draw on. But sometimes they struggle to figure out true priorities, or how to influence people, or how to tackle a new or changing work area. Set members also pick up valuable skills in listening, coaching and influencing.

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What's the theory behind Action Learning?

Evidence suggests we need to work through cycles of action, reflection and planning if we are to learn from experience and become more effective (eg David Kolb's Learning Cycle). However, circumstances and personal preferences can stop us doing this well. We end up repeatedly taking ineffective action, or get stuck in 'analysis paralysis'. Action Learning, an approach developed by Reg Revans, helps you work around these cycles of action and reflection more effectively so you can keep improving.

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What happens in an Action Learning Set?

Typically, Sets start with a brief check-in to share news, confirm ground rules and the agenda. Then there are five or six (depending on participant numbers) thinking sessions focused in turn on each individual and their project. You will be coached by your peers and in turn, coach your peers. You will learn how to ask compelling questions which move others to a new level of thinking, and challenge each other to uncover new and creative solutions which support stronger performance. The Set closes with a final session where you reflect on your learning as individuals and as a group and plan for the next Set meeting.

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Who is in the Action Learning Set?

Dods Action Learning Sets bring together fellow professionals facing similar challenges. Typically, groups explore challenges around leading teams and organisations to achieve public policy goals, and around developing and influencing public policy.

Your set will have a facilitator experienced both in Action Learning approaches and public policy leadership and development.

What about confidentiality?

Confidentiality is a fundamental requirement for Action Learning Set work. It is a clearly stated expectation which is reconfirmed at every session.

We also try to make sure that Set participants do not work in closely related teams or other contexts that may make it hard for them to share what they need to.

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What will I get from an Action Learning Set?

Everyone gains something different from their Action Learning Set. You can expect to:

- Create ideas and solutions for the leadership or policy problems you've been facing at work and strengthen your motivation to put them into action
- Understand yourself better, including hidden strengths and the assumptions and habits that might constrain your thoughts or actions
- Build your capacity to reflect and learn for yourself so you can keep improving
- Engage and motivate colleagues better and deepen your professional relationships, by listening better, coaching more and understanding your impact in a group

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What makes Action Learning Sets different?

Many training events share expert knowledge. Many peer learning groups share advice. Action Learning Sets avoid advice and help you use your expertise about yourself and your work to figure out solutions. Sets avoid advice because although we often ask for it, most of us don't really like being told what to do and struggle to use other people's ideas in practice. Action Learning helps you realise you can think well for yourself, without others' advice.

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What happens between Set meetings?

You will take forward the actions you have committed to during the session. These will include tasks directly related to your work challenge as well as practising a leadership skill or new way of working – for example holding coaching-style conversations with staff who are also working on the project or meeting with policy stakeholders in a different way. You will also keep a brief record of the impact of your actions, typically reflecting on the effect they have on you, your colleagues, and the progress of your challenge. This helps shape the focus of your next Set session.

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How often will sets meet, and for how long?

Sets usually meet between four and six times, roughly monthly. The length of each meeting depends on the number of participants but is typically around half a day.

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It's quite a big time commitment. Do I have to attend all meetings, for the whole time?

Ideally, yes. By repeatedly thinking, planning, acting and reflecting, you reach a deep understanding of your situation, your strengths and your foibles, you build a rich set of interpersonal skills, and you become better able to act well in the future.

You also have a vital role helping other Set members think through their problems. Your question may unlock their new way forward (and their challenge may provide the inspiration you need).

Another way of looking at it is to consider how much time you currently spend procrastinating, worrying or doing things in a way you know isn't ideal but without being able to see alternatives. Action learning can help you use your time more productively!

**Contact the Dods Training
team for more information**

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