ACTION LEARNING

ALNAP

Action Learning and Tacit Knowledge

A mapping of approaches for humanitarian action

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UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/
Crescent Movement, donors, academics
and consultants dedicated to learning how
to improve response to humanitarian crises.

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Contents

1. Introduction

Learning is critical to good humanitarian action – particularly for those who are directly involved in delivering a humanitarian response. Yet many efforts to strengthen learning in the humanitarian sector fail to support the specific learning needs of frontline staff.

The purpose of this mapping is to identify a range of approaches that support practitioners to engage in 'on the job' reflection and learning. The broader aim of this mapping is to inform the development of a resource pack to support learning processes at field level in humanitarian responses.

The mapping exercise outlined in this paper highlights a range of potential approaches that can be applied to support national and international humanitarian field staff to strengthen their learning processes without placing additional burdens on their time. It also includes a review of approaches to sharing the less explicit and more experience-based knowledge that field staff often develop through their work.

The paper is structured as follows:

- Section 2 provides a brief background to the problem statements. regarding response-level learning that informed the mapping questions and protocol.
- Section 3 introduces the mapping questions and provides a brief methodology.
- Section 4 presents high level findings of the mapping and introduces action learning and tacit knowledge sharing.
- Section 5 presents a selection of action learning approaches.
- Section 5 presents a selection of tacit knowledge transfer mechanisms.

2. Why is sharing and supporting learning in a humanitarian response so difficult?

Finding ways to better support learning for field-level staff is not a new topic: in 2003, ALNAP carried out a sector-wide review of field-level learning, noting that 'how field workers learn and are assisted in their learning and development is of central importance to the effectiveness of their agencies and the sector as a whole' (ALNAP, 2003: 39). The review found that agencies tended to undervalue the contributions of their field staff – particularly local and national staff – treating them more as commodities than as sources of knowledge to invest in. A lack of incentives and space for learning, particularly for sharing more informal, experience-based knowledge, threaten the quality of humanitarian response, which depends so directly on the decisions and actions of field staff. The review found that, across many agencies, 'organisational capacity for learning and the location of responsibilities for supporting learning, particularly at field level, are often not clear to personnel let alone to outsiders' and that these capacities were generally under-resourced (ALNAP, 2003: 77).

Since 2003, several initiatives in the sector, including the Emergency Capacity Building Project and the Humanitarian Leadership Academy, have focused on strengthening organisational capacities for learning and supporting field-level learning. In addition to these initiatives, many large humanitarian agencies have dedicated new global staff and strategies for improving learning. Yet ALNAP's recent research on monitoring and on creating more flexible humanitarian organisations has highlighted that field-level learning is still significantly under-supported. The mismatch between large, bureaucratic approaches to knowledge management and the learning needs of field staff continues to be an issue (Obrecht, 2017; Sundberg, 2019). Why, despite the investments made in organisational learning over the past decade, does sharing field-level learning continue to be such a challenge, and why do so many staff feel they are not adequately supported by their employers to learn?

2.1 Tacit learning: underutilised and undervalued

One reason why field-level learning remains under-supported is because of the predominance of tacit knowledge in field-level decision-making and the informality of the mechanisms best used to support the sharing of this kind of knowledge. Much of the work on humanitarian evidence and learning focuses on *explicit* knowledge – that which can be expressed and passed on through written or verbal communication. This kind of knowledge can be put into the form of propositions and facts, such as: 'There are 5,322 households in need of shelter assistance.' The humanitarian sector tends to prioritise this type of knowledge over *tacit* knowledge – that is knowledge which arises from experience and is not easily codified or transferred through a set of instructions or rules (Polyani, 1953; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). The use of tacit knowledge can feel like an intuitive process; people who possess tacit knowledge of or in a given subject are often unable to explain exactly why they made a decision that turns out to be the right one. Identifying financial investments in dynamic markets, navigating a safe route through a conflict zone or understanding what cultural norms dictate for a certain situation may all be examples of the application of tacit knowledge.

The literature on tacit knowledge reflects its important for people who work in crisis or emergency situations, for example urgent care doctors and fire fighters (Brummell et al., 2016). Tacit knowledge is more likely to be present in naturalistic decision-making approaches, which prior ALNAP research has found to be equally good as decision-making approaches that rely on explicit evidence and information (Campbell and Knox-Clarke, 2019). In humanitarian operations, important tacit knowledge that individuals have built up in a particular sector or response context is lost when those individuals leave the organisation or the country. Local and national staff in particular are likely to possess a high degree of tacit knowledge regarding their communities, culture and politics, all of which affect the effectiveness of a response (Tanner/HLA, 2017).

Despite its importance, the nature of tacit knowledge leads to a two-fold problem regarding how it is used and how it is valued. Tacit knowledge is inherently difficult to capture and use because it relates to a person's intuitive capacity and this cannot be articulated in a set of rules, instructions or lessons learned. In the broader fields of knowledge management and organisational performance, the difficulty in capturing and sharing tacit knowledge is widely recognised (Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000; Ambrosini and Bowman, 2001; Swap et al., 2001; Gourlay, 2004; Karkoulian et al., 2008). In the humanitarian sector, tacit knowledge is commonly shared through socialisation between certain staff members and in informal conversations. But these interactions occur infrequently, their results are not captured to support the anchoring of this learning, and they are often dependent on personal relationships (ALNAP 2003). Moreover, these informal interactions are often dependent on personal relationships and not systematically generated.

The second and related problem is that, due to its informality, tacit knowledge is easily undervalued. This is because it is not codified, can become invisible and relegated as a less legitimate form of knowledge, even when it may lead to better decisions and outcomes than the use of explicit forms of knowledge. Recent ALNAP research on monitoring in humanitarian action found that much of the tacit knowledge in a humanitarian response is not used effectively, as more formal mechanisms for information collection and use are privileged (Sundberg, 2019). And ALNAP's work on decision-making finds that naturalistic decision-making approaches that make more use of tacit knowledge have been overlooked in the designing of decision-making guidance (Campbell and Knox-Clarke, 2019).

2.2 Generating new learning in humanitarian response: an area of ongoing challenge

Project implementation presents continuous problems and challenges – as well as opportunities for innovation and improvement (Elrha, 2017). Although learning within a response has long been recognised as important to the quality of humanitarian programming, country teams and field staff remain underserved, often asked to use tools and approaches that meet broader organisational or donor requirements rather than their own learning needs (ALNAP, 2003; Sundberg, 2019).

Systems and activities for 'learning' are often placed within traditional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes. This has two knock-on effects. First, the M&E systems used by organisations still focus primarily on reporting results to donors and humanitarian agency headquarters. These systems focus on producing formal and tangible documentation, rather than information that can be easily used to address the actual learning needs of project staff. Second, approaches to support learning are often delegated to M&E staff and when learning is perceived as the responsibility of one department it is difficult to mainstream a culture that encourages learning across project and support teams (Dillon and Sundberg, 2019; Sundberg, 2019).

Several organisations are increasing the number of learning and reflection events that seek to capitalise on staff experiences, such as periodic learning workshops, debriefings, handovers and real-time reviews. Although a step in the right direction, limited time and resources mean these activities are not fast or regular. There is also little alignment between learning moments and objectives are often headquarters focused. For example, learning workshops mostly occur once a project activity has been completed and insights cannot be utilised to improve an existing project during implementation. Real-time reviews can be isolated events at the start of an emergency that do not revisit the problem statement to see if action taken did in fact improve the project. Handover notes are typically only required from international staff and debriefings take

place with headquarter HR staff, rather than across or between teams in country offices. As such, the learning that happens does not give ample room for *actioning* the learning within a response – and thus for improving service delivery.

Developing the ability of staff to learn during a response is increasingly fundamental. Work over the past decade has highlighted the importance of being able to adapt humanitarian programmes in response to new information or changes in context, and has also emphasised the value of learning from feedback provided by crisis-affected people. In order to generate and utilise learning more routinely in humanitarian action, field staff need to be empowered to learn. This means using knowledge generation and management approaches that are sufficiently light touch to be used in field staff's day to day work, and which are designed specifically for them, rather than around HQ or donor priorities.

3. Conducting the mapping exercise

3.1 Focus of the mapping

The mapping exercise sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the evidence of impact of approaches to practitioner-led learning on service delivery (efficiency, service outcomes, client satisfaction)?
   - Which of these approaches have been successful within the humanitarian and development sectors?
2. What are the primary approaches to action learning or practitioner-led learning that have been used in policy and service delivery contexts?
3. What are some examples of the effectiveness of using these approaches?
4. What are the key implications for using these approaches successfully in emergency/humanitarian contexts?
5. What is the evidence for effective approaches for sharing tacit knowledge?
   - What examples are there of these approaches in international development, humanitarian or emergency contexts?

3.2 Method

We approached the mapping via two routes. A literature survey was carried out, pulling up to 100 returns on multiple search engines with the search strings described in Table 1. The returns were then reviewed using exclusion criteria (Box 1) to address relevance and quality. For RQ1, the initial round of review pulled 840 articles, of which 247 passed the quality assessment for full review. For RQ5, the initial round of review pulled 660, of which 140 were reviewed.

The second approach, used for RQ2, 3 and 4 was a review of an existing compendium of methods for facilitating action learning, undertaken by the Centre for Action Learning in the UK, and a review of the use of action learning approaches in the development sector, undertaken by INTRAC.

Through both the literature review and the review of existing action learning practice, an initial set of approaches to practitioner-led learning and tacit knowledge sharing were presented to the ALNAP Secretariat and then refined based on the scoping criteria developed in consultation with field staff for the development of the resource packs.

Table 1: Literature review search strings and exclusion criteria

Question 1: What is the evidence of impact of approaches to practitioner-led learning (efficiency, service outcomes, client satisfaction) on service delivery?		
Google Scholar	**ALNAP HELP library**	**Web of Science** **For all results: Filter for disciplines: EXCLUDE: Computer science; all Physical sciences; Mathematics**
Practitioner led AND learning		ALL=("practitioner-led" and learning)
Action learning AND evaluation	Action learning	ALL=("action learning" AND evaluation)
Action learning AND service AND effective	Practitioner-led	ALL=("action learning" AND service AND (impact OR effective))
Action learning AND service OR humanitarian OR emergency AND performance		ALL=("Action learning" AND (humanitarian OR emergency) AND (performance OR impact OR effectiveness))
Practitioner learning AND emergency OR humanitarian AND effective OR impact OR performance		ALL=("Practitioner learning" AND (humanitarian OR emergency) AND (performance OR impact OR effectiveness))

Question 5: What is the evidence for approaches that are effective at sharing tacit knowledge?		
Google Scholar	**ALNAP HELP library**	**Web of Science** **For all results: Filter for disciplines: EXCLUDE: Computer science; all Physical sciences; Mathematics**
Tacit knowledge transfer AND evaluation OR service OR effective OR performance	Tacit knowledge	TI=("Tacit" AND transfer) NOT SU="Computer Science"
Implicit knowledge transfer AND evaluation OR service OR effective OR performance	Implicit knowledge	ALL=("knowledge transfer" AND tacit AND (performance OR effective OR service delivery OR success)) NOT SU="Computer Science"
Knowledge management AND tacit OR implicit	Knowledge transfer	ALL=("tacit knowledge" AND (performance OR effective OR "service delivery" or success)) NOT SU="Computer Science"
Tacit AND Explicit AND knowledge		ALL=("implicit knowledge" AND (performance OR effective OR "service delivery" or success)) NOT SU="Computer Science"
Effective AND Tacit knowledge OR Implicit knowledge		ALL=("implicit knowledge" AND "transfer") NOT SU="Computer Science"

Box 1: Document inclusion/exclusion criteria

Relevance
- Result must be relevant to the research question, either by addressing factors that contribute to 'effective' or 'good' tacit knowledge sharing/action learning/context to context evidence transfer, or by addressing the relationship between tacit knowledge sharing/action learning/context to context evidence transfer and one of the outcomes of interest: improved organisational performance, personal performance in the workplace, or service delivery (which can be defined in many ways, for example efficiency or client satisfaction).
- It must include either original empirical research or consist of a review of empirical research. Articles that only offer a theoretical framework without empirical evidence to support their effectiveness should be flagged in the database, but not included in the initial detailed review.
- For Google Scholar/ALNAP HELP, return must be a: research paper; conference/meeting proceedings; research blog; position paper. All else (e.g. Wikipedia sites, project websites, etc.) are excluded.

Quality
- Article should include a methodology section that gives at minimum the following information: (1) the research questions and/or hypotheses; (2) an explanation of how data was collected and analysed; (3) operationalised definitions of the key concepts (i.e. what were the independent and dependent variables); and (4) statement of any limitations in the data or methodology.

4. Results of the mapping

4.1 Findings from the literature survey

Action learning

Despite using a wide range of search string terminologies, much of the literature pulled for RQ1 referred to action learning methods or approaches. The literature was used to complement the review of specific action learning approaches used by the Centre for Action Learning and INTRAC. On the basis of this review, eight methods for action learning were identified as being of most potential relevance for humanitarian settings. These methods are detailed in the mapping contents of Section 5. An overview to action learning is provided below.

Gaps in empirical evidence on tacit knowledge sharing

At the outset of the mapping exercise, the authors had expected to find examples of practices for sharing tacit knowledge that had been shown to be effective (even if through limited qualitative research methods).

However, in the literature there was limited concrete evidence connecting the activities undertaken to share tacit knowledge with tangible outcome measures of tacit knowledge transfer, or of more effective performance as a result.

Most methods reviewed focused on translating tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. There were few which sought to retain the tacit nature of knowledge rather than seeking to codify it into more explicit forms of knowledge. Many of the approaches to tacit knowledge discussed in the literature remain theoretical or abstract, and are not easily transferred to a humanitarian setting. Section 6 describes briefly a set of approaches that could apply to humanitarian settings, although further adaptation of these would be necessary.

4.2 What is action learning?

Action learning is a structured reflection and action process that involves people working in small groups combined with skilled questioning (INTRAC, 2012: 1). The key idea behind action learning is that there is no learning without action, and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning. Action learning offers participants the time and space to learn from and with each other, to act on real 'here-and-now' problems and to

reflect on what they have learned and what they intend to do next. The problems people work on in action learning must be significant: there should be some sort of 'penalty for failure'. In other words, the problems worked upon have to matter to the individual as well as to the organisation.

There is no single definition of action learning: Reg Revans, the creator of the approach, never set out a definitive once-and-for-all definition. However, action learning may be said to include the following core elements of practice:

- Action is the basis for learning. This means action in the workplace on the problem or question.
- Since action is required for learning, the type of problem or question needs to be one for which there is no straightforward answer, or potentially no right answer.
- Participants ('set' members) must have ownership over the problem on which they are working and the freedom to take action on it and to report back to others in the set on their progress.
- The problem should be sponsored by and aimed toward organisational as well personal development.
- Working in a group of peers (who Revans called 'comrades in adversity') allows set members to support and challenge each other.
- The use of questions and generation of critical insights through trying to see the issue in different ways is emphasised over access to 'programmed instruction' that comes from written evidence or expert knowledge.

Programmed knowledge vs questioning insight

Action learning distinguishes between 'programmed knowledge' and 'questioning insight' as two distinct fuels for learning. Programmed knowledge is what we use when tackling an issue for which there is an existing right answer – one that can be found in (for example) a procedure, a manual, a database, a book. Programmed knowledge refers to knowledge gained through previous instruction, discussion with experts or the use of written materials. It is important for answering questions for which there is already an existing answer or solution.

Programmed knowledge has value but is limited when it comes to addressing more complex problems that arise for practitioners as they deliver a service or work in an organisation. In action learning, there is a shift in emphasis – from assuming that what we take as knowledge is unquestionably universally applicable and 'true' to identifying the right questions to ask and turning these questions into events, actors and outcomes in order to produce insight. Action learning exercises focus on generating and supporting high-quality questions, or what Revans referred to as 'questioning insight' for reflective action. The central exercise for participants is thinking through what they are trying to make happen and what stops them from making it happen. In this way, they become concerned with making actionable knowledge in the workplace.

When to use action learning: puzzles and problems

Many activities we do require us to use programmed knowledge. For example:

- dedicated systems and processes for core activities and professional techniques and methods – e.g. PRINCE2 project management
- statutory procedures – e.g. health and safety responsibilities
- organisational and management procedures – e.g. recruitment procedures, budget setting.

Revans called these issues 'puzzles' – like a crossword puzzle or a trivia quiz – where there is one right answer and you just need to find it; others have called them 'tame problems'. Action learning is more suited for addressing what Revans called 'problems', sometimes called 'wicked problems', for which no right answer can exist. To solve these problems, we have to create our own solutions using questioning insight.

Problems considered in action learning have many of the following characteristics:

- Things are uncertain, ambiguous.
- Apparent solutions to one part of the problem tend to make other parts worse, and/or...
- Apparent solutions in one part of the organisation cause difficulties elsewhere, and/or...
- We need innovative and creative solutions – unlike puzzles, problems cannot be solved simply by getting better at what we already do.
- Several diverse parties ('stakeholders') are involved – different individuals, teams, groups, units, agencies, interest groups, clients/ users, suppliers, neighbours. Each of these stakeholder groups has their own legitimate way of seeing the world, traditions, perspectives on the problem, interests, aspirations, hopes, fears, purposes and priorities concerning the problem.
- Usually there is some form of risk in the situation and they each have varying amounts and forms of power to make things happen, or to stop things from happening.
- There is social fragmentation and disconnection between these stakeholder groups. That is, they do not appreciate each other's positions. Collective action is therefore difficult and is often replaced by dysfunctional suspicion, hostility and/or conflict.

As this list shows, every wicked problem is unique: no two have the same combination of people and characteristics that make up the situation or context. In this way, the kinds of problems that are best addressed in action learning are always context-specific – that is, they depend on the situation. With wicked problems, a solution that worked 'somewhere else' is unlikely to work perfectly in a different context. A solution that is appropriate for a particular situation needs to be found, rather than adopting one that was suitable elsewhere (although it may be possible to adapt it by asking 'Will it fit here? What might happen if we try this, to whom and with

what consequences? Is this what we actually want? If not, how can we act differently – but wisely?').

Policy-makers and planners often do not seem to appreciate the uniqueness of wicked problems. Often, a pilot scheme is implemented somewhere to solve a particular problem and then, if successful, the solution is 'rolled out' throughout the organisation, or sector or community. What was a good, appropriate solution in one context has been turned into an inappropriate standard piece of programmed knowledge that will not work in another. It is not possible to solve a wicked problem by treating it as a tame one and using programmed knowledge alone; questioning insight is needed for each specific context.

Components of action learning

Although approaches to action learning may vary, it usually involves small groups of people who each have a problem to tackle and who meet in a group of around six people (often referred to as a 'set') roughly every four to six weeks over a period of several months. Participants each talk about their problem and commit to taking action before the next meeting. Traditional – or 'core' – action learning, comprises seven main components, all of which interact.

The individual(s)

As traditionally practised, action learning typically focuses on individuals – the 'learning unit' – and how they can be helped to tune into and work with situational or contextual issues. This has meant there has tended to be little difference between action learning programmes configured for individuals ('stranger sets'), and team or whole-organisation learning.

Individual members are required to show commitment to:

- tackling the issue, challenge or problem (that is, taking action and reflecting on that action)
- attending all the set meetings
- supporting and challenging the other members
- developing the group as a whole.

The problem, issue or question

Conventionally, each member brings their own issue or challenge to work on. Sometimes, however, the issue may be one with which the whole set is concerned, in which case the set may tackle it collectively or particular members may each work on a different aspect. Whether the problem is individual or collective, it is important that it is real and matters to the individual(s) – that is, it must be part of their work, affect their life in some significant way and be something that they want to tackle. Sometimes people are 'sent' on an action learning programme (e.g. by their line manager) and given an problem to solve. This may be fine, but it is important that the participant is actually concerned about the problem. Although the term 'action learning' is sometimes used in conjunction with simulated problems, such as case studies or other participative exercises,

these lack the 'blood and guts, muck and bullets' feel that are a significant feature of a real issue that must be resolved.

Moreover, because the individual (or group) has to commit to take action in connection with the problem (see also the following section 'Action and learning') it is also important that the problem is within their sphere of influence. So, for example an intern or junior finance assistant should not take on the problem of preparing a staffing budget for the whole department for the next 12 months – this would be way beyond what they could reasonably be expected to do.

Action and learning

Although a statement of the obvious, it is important to note that action learning involves taking action and learning from it! At each set meeting the individual reflects on action taken since the previous meeting and commits to taking another action before the next one, which they then carry out. There is a clear cycle of agreeing an action, doing it and reporting back, each time stepping up the degree of difficulty. Explaining to others allows for challenge. Returning again to the example of the junior finance assistance, they could not reasonably be expected to prepare and gain approval for the staffing budget – re-emphasising why this is would be an inappropriate problem for this individual to tackle. **It is critical to recognise the significance of this**. In action learning the person (or group) is expected to tackle a real problem in their organisation, to implement any proposed solutions and to see those through. Although it may involve writing a report and making recommendations, this is not what it is about and would not be considered 'action' in this context; action learning would require the recommendations to be put into effect.

The set and its meetings

An action learning set is normally made up of about six people. Fewer than four people would be insufficiently diverse and lack the basic processes of supporting and challenging; and given that most people require at least an hour to talk about their issue and progress with it, eight is about the maximum number that can be accommodated even in a day-long meeting. With 5–7 people, each meeting usually lasts a day (although where this is felt to be impractical meetings may be reduced to at least four hours with, perhaps, some members taking more airtime than others).

Typically, the set meets regularly every four to six weeks. Membership should be constant: members commit to attending and do not send substitutes or stand-ins. Often there is an agreed life-span – of 6 or 12 months. At each meeting, as well as talking about their own problem, each member is committed to helping others by listening, supporting, asking questions, challenging and perhaps giving information. Giving advice as such tends not to be seen as particularly helpful.

How an action learning group works

The group will typically follow a process much like the following:

1. **Check in**: each set member provides an update on the situation since last set meeting, including progress on any actions. This stage allows each participant and their fellow set members to share in their immediate news from the workplace. It helps the set to re-engage with each other and to reform the group identity. It can also be a useful way to test the mood of the room, particularly within an organisation that is going through change.

2. **Agenda setting**: the set agrees who will present a problem within this meeting. In most cases this will be a simple matter of confirming the process and the order in which members will present their issues. This is also the point at which the ground rules are reaffirmed or modified. Sometimes, if a set member has an issue that is urgent and complex, the set may agree a change to the rule of equal 'airtime' in order to focus on one individual.

3. **Presentation of issue/problem**: each member presents either progress on the problem(s) they presented at a previous set meeting or a new problem. It is important that participants consider how they will present their problem or challenge to the set. Typically a document or template is used to help participants structure their thinking ahead of time.

4. **Questioning**: the group ask open questions of the presenter to clarify their understanding of the problem and to stimulate new insight. Set members support the problem holder to think differently about their challenge or issue by asking critically reflective questions. The problem holder will be supported to arrive at some specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) action that they will commit to trying out before the next set meeting. Presenter reflects on process before agreeing SMART actions. The set reflects on performance and learning, paying attention to the pre-determined individual and group development goals.

5. **Review**: a period of review and refection at the end of the set meeting. This review will cover the process and what has been learned, both as a group and as individuals.

Local cultural practices and norms

The five components outlined thus far all exist within varied patterns of behaviours, norms, languages, practices – often referred to as 'culture'. This culture will be part of the context within which people are tackling their problems. In a sense, culture is part of the problem, but it is so important that it is worth mentioning separately.

The facilitator

Revans recognised the need for someone to introduce action learning to any organisation or system. This facilitator function was envisaged this as a short-term role carried out by a sympathetic manager – someone senior in any given system or organisation, with some personal experience of

action – learning rather than any outside professional. Many action learning facilitators try to observe Revans' guidance in this respect, especially those who propose the self-managed action learning approach, described later in this paper.

The facilitator:

- runs introductory sessions about the purpose and nature of action learning
- informs and negotiates with sponsors and participants about the structure and format of the set and its meetings
- fixes dates for meetings
- welcomes participants, at the first meeting but also in the run up to that meeting
- creates and maintains conditions in the set for the participants to share their problems and issues, and to support and challenge each other
- may give some inputs on various aspects of questioning, reflection, choosing priorities, building on strengths, creating solutions
- helps participants primarily by using and modelling various questioning techniques to enable members to make progress with their issues, challenges and problems.
- encourages participants to use those same questioning techniques themselves
- looks after logistics – venue, timing, refreshments, etc.
- reviews each meeting
- establishes an evaluation process
- may also set up and facilitate virtual action learning between the set meetings
- keeps in touch with members between the set meetings.

Is a facilitator necessary?

In his account of action learning, Revans makes clear that the emphasis should be on sets becoming self-managed and self-directed. This is to ensure true ownership over the learning process and the identification of solutions.

In most common practice, however, a facilitator experienced with action learning approaches is useful and recommended for the first few meetings. Most people in organisations are not used to reflecting, thinking, asking questions, acknowledging they don't know what to do, listening to colleagues and being listened to. The facilitator will know of processes that can help with this and, just as importantly, will also help to create conditions in which these fairly simple processes can be allowed to take place.

The hope is that members will appreciate these processes and will, after a time, use them themselves, not only in the action learning meetings but also in other situations. If an action learning set continues over more than say a year or so then it may well be possible for the members to run it themselves, without the need for a facilitator as such.

4.3 What is tacit knowledge transfer?

The literature defines and interprets tacit knowledge differently, making it difficult to bring together a coherent body of evidence on good practice for sharing tacit knowledge. Broadly, tacit knowledge can be understood as knowledge that is not fully articulated or recognised by the person who holds it. The most significant debate in the literature is on how – and indeed whether – tacit knowledge can be shared without losing its defining quality of being unarticulated. Some authors argue that for knowledge to be truly tacit, it can never be externalised or articulated to another person, and therefore always remains 'ineffable'. Other authors have linked tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge as part of an ongoing internal and external process of learning. The most notable of these models is the socialisation, externalisation, internalisation and combination or 'SECI' model, proposed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1996; see Figure 1).

The supposedly inexpressible nature of tacit knowledge makes it difficult to study empirically or to develop approaches for sharing it from one individual to another. To facilitate research into this area, it can be helpful to distinguish between different levels of tacit knowledge:

- deeply ingrained tacit skills that cannot be shared
- tacit skills that can be imperfectly articulated if prompted (typically through socialised learning)
- tacit skills that could be fully articulated if prompted (and therefore codified)
- explicit skills.

Recognising these different levels helps us to accept that, although an aspect of tacit knowledge always remains non-transferable from person to person, there are also some areas of tacit knowledge that *can* be shared through intentional approaches to learning.

Figure 1: The SECI model
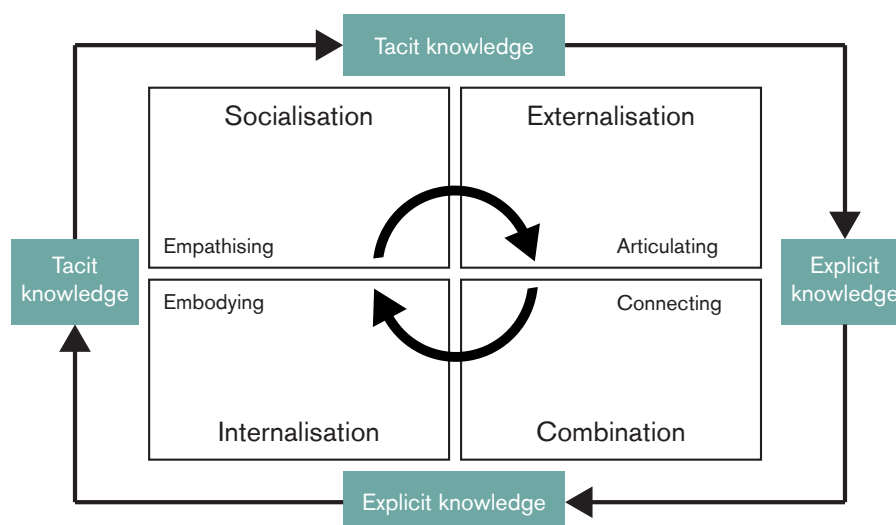
Approaches to drawing out tacit knowledge largely fall within two types: those which seek to 'convert' tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge and those which seek to retain the tacit or experiential nature of this knowledge to the greatest extent possible. This is captured in the SECI model (see Figure 1). Introduced by Nonaka and Takeuchi in their studies of Japanese workplaces in the 1990s, the SECI model depicts four stages of knowledge conversion and sharing in an organisation: socialisation, externalisation, internalisation and combination. Tacit knowledge becomes explicit knowledge through externalisation, which is then re-internalised as tacit knowledge after being used in combination with other content (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1996).

Some approaches to tacit knowledge sharing aim to turn tacit knowledge into fully articulated operating procedures (the 'Articulate' and 'Connect' boxes in Figure 1). Even when doing this, however, standard research practices must be adapted: 'Research instruments such as surveys and structured interviews are likely to be inappropriate insofar as individuals cannot be asked to state what they cannot readily articulate' (Ambrosini and Bowman, 2001: 815).

The second type of tacit knowledge sharing focuses on highly informal and socialised forms of knowledge sharing. For tacit knowledge to be shared without being converted into explicit forms of information (which may be reductive and over simplified), methods must remain within the internalisation and socialisation categories of the SECI model.

Of those articles that were appropriate, the authors grouped them into three categories according to their approaches to tacit knowledge transfer:
- Creating collective learning units within an organisation.
- Mentorship.
- Structured observation and reflection methods.

These are described in detail in Section 6.

5. Approaches to action learning

This section outlines eight approaches to action learning:
- conventional
- critically reflective
- network
- self-managed
- service improvement
- socially driven
- positive
- virtual.

Although these approaches can be used in combination with one another, and several overlap, they have been developed to emphasise and support different aspects of what an action learning set can achieve.

5.1 Conventional action learning

What is it?
Conventional action learning is essentially the standard basic approach to action learning, as described above in 4.2.

Examples of typical challenges addressed
- How do we merge two hospital sites?
- How should we develop a new programme for at-risk youth?

How long does it take?
Set meetings lasting between three hours and one day can happen at regular intervals of up to six weeks. Conventional action learning sets have been known to carry on meeting for years. This self-organising or evolutionary form of action learning is closest to what Revans envisioned in his theory and practice.

How to do it
In conventional action learning, facilitators are normally used, particularly during the initial stages. However, the intention is for sets to become self-managed without an external facilitator as soon as possible.

In the most traditional approaches to action learning, the set takes a disciplined approach whereby, following a short period of induction, it takes control of the process on a self-managing basis.

An initial set meeting would normally involve each person describing their work problem, question or issue to the rest of the set. Some sets work on an agreed collective problem. A useful starting point is to ask the person describing their issue to begin with a question, such as 'How do I...?' Ground rules are normally agreed at the first group meeting. These are rules that everyone in the set creates and to which they all subscribe: they are not created or imposed by the facilitator. Examples might include 'each meeting starts with bids for time' and 'all discussions are confidential'.

For facilitation methods used in action learning, see the Resource Packs produced by ALNAP.

> 'We found the approach to action learning we'd been originally trained in was very facilitator driven, "first you do this, then you do that". This was okay at the start but over time we wanted to develop our own approach. The "gold standard" encourages the set to take charge and find their own way'—Project Worker China

Practical considerations

As with most forms of action learning, the conditions must be right for it to work effectively. In essence:

- Usually set work happens in a small room – although sets may happen outdoors, such as in a park, or in an alternative indoor space, such as an art gallery. In environments such as these latter two examples, confidentiality considerations are especially important.
- Usually a facilitator starts the process off, but this role has a limited duration, where the job they undertake is typically concerned only with the induction process.
- The action learning programme must be sponsored and supported by the most senior managers in the organisation; following on from this, time and resources must be allocated if the set(s) is to be successful and to undertake action learning effectively.
- The facilitator must make clear that the process is driven by questioning; expertise and experience is drawn from the set.

Further Reading

Pedler M. and Abbott C. (2013) *Action Learning Facilitation: A Practitioner's Guide*. Basingstoke: McGraw Hill

Willis V. (2004) Inspecting cases against Revans' 'gold standard' of action learning. *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 1(1) 11-27

Practice example: Using conventional action learning with development NGOs in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan
By Charles Buxton, INTRAC

The capacity-building organisation INTRAC used conventional action learning approaches in its three-year programme 'Strengthening NGOs to Support the Self-Help Movement in Central Asia' to develop project- and organisation-management skills. The sets were organised by NGO facilitators in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and each round of meetings took approximately six months. Each set was made up of five to six participants from a similar number of organisations. Participants could choose their own problem (described as a 'project' or 'challenge') and the facilitators encouraged them to focus on problems that had emerged as priorities for their particular NGO – for example team development, community development or monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

The formation of the action learning sets was critical to their success. Participants were chosen to fit into one of three categories, with a similar project orientation or level of responsibility: (1) NGO manager level; (2) project manager level; (3) social or community worker level. In reality, the participants came from a wide variety of backgrounds – from the capital city and the provinces; from big and successful NGOs and smaller, struggling ones; from organisations working with rural development, children's services, refugees, gender issues and human rights. The number of female and male participants was roughly equal.

Several factors contributed to the success of the action learning sets. The local facilitators were trained in AL methodology at a Training of Trainers and this approach meant the facilitators were able to offer support in local languages. Second was the identification of a good balance between self-discipline and flexibility in how the sets were run. On the one hand, set members had to follow strict rules of conduct that are common to action learning sessions, and which differ from normal meetings or focus group discussions– in particular, adhering to a time limit when presenting their problems, which they did so in rotation, and when describing progress, and each having only one main period 'on air'. On the other hand, set members were encouraged to be creative and to ask 'open questions' during the reflection and learning stages of the session.

At the beginning of the project, being creative and asking open questions was a real challenge for participants. It took time for them to overcome their nerves when presenting their own problem and for them to find enough mental and emotional space to focus on other participants' problems. Having mastered this, set members then wanted to immediately offer advice, but instead the facilitators showed them how to ask questions that would throw further light on the problem and help the problem owner to find their own solution.

Examples of these questions are given in figure 2 for each stage in the action learning session.

Figure 2: Action learning cycle with guiding questions

The Action Learning Cycle

Guiding Questions

ACTION

What significant things happened? Describe the events. Who was involved, what did they do? What picture emerges? How did I/we feel?

REFLECTION

Why did it happen, what caused it? What helped, what hindered? What did we expect? What assumptions did we make? What really struck us? Do we know of any other experiences or thinking that might help us look at this experience differently?

PLANNING

So what does this mean for practice? What do we want? What do we want to do, to happen? How? What are we going to do differently? What do we have to let go of or stop doing? How will we not repeat the same mistake? What steps will we use to build these new insights into our practice?

LEARNING

What would we have done differently? What did we learn, what new insights? What was confirmed? What new questions have emerged? What other theories help us to deepen these learnings? What guidance do we get for the future?

From Barefoot Collective (2009) Barefoot Guide to Working with Organisations and Social Change, page 110. The Barefoot Guide can be freely downloaded from www.barefootguide.org

In a programme of six meetings organised at monthly intervals, action learning participants usually required two meetings to define their challenge and aimed by the end of the sixth meeting to have 'solved the problem'. The content of individual presentations followed the action learning cycle very closely: description of what they had done since the last meeting, reflection (answering questions from set members), analysis and the presentation of a brief plan of action for the next period.

The sets had two facilitators: one to lead the group and the other to support when needed. From the start, INTRAC realised the importance of choosing a venue with a different 'ambience' from the workplace – for example a small hotel or guest house with a quiet meeting room. NGO staff were given permission to attend up to six meetings, sometimes involving significant travel, and it was important to be as respectful of their time as possible. A set that tries to tackle five to six complex workplace challenges could easily take 5-6 hours, but the facilitators insisted on meetings lasting half a day maximum. The facilitators took notes and reviewed progress together but did not make reports to the NGO management.

Examples of sets and the impact they achieved

Improving management and teamwork. A senior manager in a large NGO faced problems with staff motivation in her team. Questioning by fellow participants in the action learning set led her to pay greater attention to staff members' individual and personal development, which was in contrast to her original plan to conduct a formal review of job descriptions. As a result of the greater attention given to individual needs and performance, team members began to feel more valued. Not only had the participant, in her own words, 'accomplished a kind of revolution' in respect to the problem she had identified at the start, she also took on more management tasks, for some time standing in for her organisation's executive director, and did this confidently and successfully.

Tackling violence against women. In the district where one set member lived and worked, violence against women was common, taking the form of beatings by parents, husbands and other relatives. After discussions in the group, she launched a series of training sessions and began raising awareness on women's rights, working closely with local self-government and law enforcement bodies, the media and religious leaders. This work had positive results. In the course of community meetings and workshops with rural women, it became clear that they had significantly improved their knowledge of women's rights and gender issues. Husbands had started to take the views of their wives into account and more open discussions had helped improve relations between wives and their in-laws. Careful work with religious leaders had brought them into the campaign against domestic violence.

Challenges

The action learning sets faced two important challenges. First, action learning can be challenging for some participants because it is not a form of learning that they are used to: it differs significantly from traditional ways of learning because it is based on experience, not theory, and it encourages participants to question their assumptions about development work and relationships. Second, NGOs are very

often in competition with each other and the openness of action learning discussions can be seen as a risk. In the INTRAC project some NGO leaders expressed concern that organisational 'secrets' might be exposed during the sets and had to be persuaded to allow their staff to attend.

Another significant issue was identifying the appropriate topics, or projects, to be addressed in the action learning sets. On the basis of this experience, INTRAC developed some important recommendations during the course of the programme regarding which problems should be addressed. First, problems should not constitute a simple task that the participant would have to carry out as part of their usual daily or weekly duties: the challenge had to have something 'extra'. Second, the problem should not be so technical that discussing it with other group members would be impossible (e.g. an engineering or financial task). Third, the problem should not be too global in nature – that is, its possible solution too dependent on contributions from members other than the participant themselves. The facilitators had to help narrow down the problem definition for individual projects until they were achievable within a period of five to six months.

5.2 Critically reflective action learning

What is it?

Critically reflective action learning is a development of conventional action learning. It argues that learning and organisational development can be advanced only when the power and emotional dimensions of learning are the main focus of the learning process.

Conventional action learning relies on assumptions of equality, openness and honesty. Critically reflective action learning, in contrast, recognises that imbalances of power, status and social/cultural capital exist in all human interactions. It argues that, for learning to take place, these imbalances need to be acknowledged more explicitly and seeks to do this in exercises that require participants to consider directly their own power in relation to others. Essentially, critical reflection involves questioning the assumptions and beliefs on which various understandings are based, especially in terms of issues involving, for example, gender, race, power, politics or particular vested interests.

For example, in one critically reflective action learning set, a participant brought a problem they were having with moving forward in an internal change project at a large organisation. This participant was part of a cross-department team assembled to deliver the change project over the coming year and while, she had been successful in similar previous projects, she was struggling with this newly created team. In the action learning sets, the critically reflective exercises prompted the participant to reflect on the

racial and gender composition of the new team: she was the only minority woman in the team and brought with her certain assumptions as to how she would come across to the other team members, who were primarily white and male. This reflection led to new insights as to how she could approach her role within the team.

Advocates of critically reflective action learning have criticised conventional action learning as tending to ignore power relations in organisations and to 'gloss over' the role of politics and emotion in how individuals and groups operate in an organisational context. In this way, conventional action learning is accused of insufficiently developing the habits of critical thinking needed by managers and professionals. Critically reflective action learning is an alternative that works to reveal the primacy of politics and power in the 'mobilisation of bias' in decision-making and action.

Examples of typical challenges addressed

- How can I be a better manager/project lead/practitioner?
- How do I best manage a project which crosses a number of different organisational boundaries, many of which are external to my own?

How long does it take?

As with conventional action learning, critically reflective action learning could form a programme lasting anything up to 12 months with sets of circa six participants meeting monthly.

How to do it

The following four activities may be said to constitute critical reflection for action learning:

1. thinking in a manner such as to challenge our key beliefs, values and practices in order to assess the impact of these on our everyday managing and organising
2. recognising that our assumptions are socially and personally created in specific contexts
3. considering alternative ways of thinking about an issue or problem to challenge our predominant ways of knowing and acting
4. questioning previously unexamined patterns of behaviour and action.

'This is a powerful approach. I was required to reflect critically on my development as a field worker, as well as the challenge I brought to the set. I was challenged with questions about the assumptions I was making for example as a female black worker in a predominantly white male environment. It was demanding but liberating, allowing me the freedom to explore myself and my situation in a safe environment.'—Case worker, UK

Example exercise in critically reflective action learning: Testing a proposed action with standpoints

Step 1: Introduction of the problem

The problem holder introduces their challenge or question and briefly explains it, along with any related action they are proposing to undertake.

Step 2: Thought showering

The facilitator asks other participants to list different stakeholders who could have an opinion on this action. These stakeholders may be specific individuals but may also be general roles or perspectives. These are the standpoints from which criticism of any course of action could come. For example: manager, chief executive, main supplier, customer, local politician, environmental campaigner; or feminist, Marxist, rights based.

Step 3: Voice cards

The facilitator writes each stakeholder 'voice' on a card and places these face down on the table.

Step 4: Drawing cards

Each participant except the problem holder draws random cards in turn and speaks from these positions about the proposed course of action. So, a participant drawing the 'local politician' card would assume the mindset of a local politician and offer a critique of the proposed course of action from this perspective.

Step 5: Evaluation

When all voices have been heard, the facilitator asks the problem holder about what they have heard:
• Is there anything new here?
• How will what you have heard affect what you might do next?

Practical considerations
▪ It is important to hold meetings in a neutral location.
▪ The facilitator needs to be chosen carefully: they should be able to demonstrate experience of managing critical action learning sets or similar types of discussion that raise issues of bias and power dynamics in the workplace. They may also need to have knowledge of the organisational context (for example, the humanitarian aid sector).
▪ The active support and participation of senior management is essential.
▪ Set members should be open to and prepared for being questioned about their assumptions on particular issues and problems in the workplace.

Further Reading

Rigg C. and Trehan K. (2004) 'Reflections on working with critical action learning' *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 1(2): 149-165

Abbott C., Brook C., Burgoyne J. and Pedler M. (2014) *Critically reflective action learning report for skills for care*

Vince R. (2004) 'Action learning and organizational learning: power, politics and emotion in organizations' *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 1(1): 63-78

5.3 Network action learning

What is it?

In the network action learning approach, members of different organisations come together to form an action learning set or members of the same organisation from different departments work together on projects associated with the supply chain or the service delivery chain.

Examples of typical challenges addressed

- How do we improve governance in a post-conflict society?
- How do we improve case work documentation?
- How can we make inter-departmental/agency communications more effective?

How is this distinct from core action learning techniques?

Network action learning is distinct from conventional action learning in that it focuses on larger, more complex issues or problems that require multi-organisational collaboration. Typically, senior management are actively involved and, in a single action learning set, individual participants are drawn from multiple organisations.

How long does it take?

The duration of network action learning is largely determined by the nature of the problem or problems under consideration, but it can last several years. Sets of up to 10 participants will typically meet for up to six hours on a regular basis (usually every six weeks) over a defined period.

Practical considerations

- Several organisational sites are used for set meetings. Sets are often multidisciplinary and their members from a mixture of organisations. Some virtual action learning may take place if organisations are widely geographically dispersed.
- High levels of external facilitative support are a feature of network action learning, but sets can become self-organising over time.
- A significant number of staff need to be released for the programme to work and as in many cases several organisations may be involved, representatives will need to liaise and agree the programme of work.

- A programme director is needed to ensure that the process works effectively, especially given the need for collaboration and cooperation across sites and the fact that a number of sets are operating simultaneously.
- The 'right' kind of organisational culture is required for network action learning: senior leaders who act as sponsors of these programmes must trust their people and trust the process.

Further Reading

Donnenberg, O. (2012). 'Network Action Learning in an Austrian Hospital'. In Pedler, M. *Action Learning in Practice*.

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Paludan MP and Popplewell R, (2013). 'Turning voice into action. A discussion of three Action Research studies conducted by Danish Children & Youth Network and their learning outcomes'. *Praxis note* 65. Oxford: INTRAC.

Scharmer O. (2009) *Theory U: learning from the future as it emerges*. Berrett-Koehler

Skovgaard Mortensen, D. (2012) *Brug af evidensbaserede metoder – erfaringsopsampling og inspiration for faglige netwvaerk og deres medlemsorganisationer*. www.ngoforum.dk

5.4 Self-managed action learning

What is it?

While most action learning sets begin with some form of external facilitation, self-managed action learning is entirely self-facilitated. Key values that underpin self-managed action learning include empowerment, a commitment to learning, and facilitative management which is replacing management by command and control in a large of situations.

Examples of typical challenges addressed

- Managing large organisational change, for example, implementing a large-scale IT project.
- Supporting new academics to become effective teachers and module coordinators.
- Merging two separate voluntary sector organisations with similar aims and a similar client base.

How is this distinct from core action learning techniques?

Conventional action learning is almost always facilitated. The self-managed approach enables managers to facilitate their own action learning sets and in so doing develop the skills of facilitative management.

Self-managed action learning is problem focused, as with conventional action learning approaches, but additionally allows managers to develop facilitation skills as the facilitation role is rotated around the set. Unlike some other forms of action learning, self-managed action learning actually strengthens the classical principle of self-determined set management.

How long does it take?

Self-managed action learning commonly takes between six and 12 months, with sets of six participants meeting regularly. The duration of the meetings and the intervals between them are determined by the set but monthly, day-long sets are common with this approach.

How to do it

Usually, a training programme for participants takes place ahead of the set's launch so that participants can develop the necessary skills and behaviours. However, there are also action learning guides that managers can use to learn how to set up, manage and facilitate an action learning programme.[1]

Set members may be given workbooks that explain the role of the facilitator and offer guidance on how each set meeting should normally operate. This guidance may include information about agenda setting, creating ground-rules, questioning techniques and creative problem-solving activities.

'We found that self-managed action learning was empowering for managers, because it enabled them to bring their management skills to managing the process of the set. It demystified the process, for example it avoided the use of terms like 'facilitation' that has acquired a lot of "baggage". All the research carried out to date identifies behaviour and attitude change and an ability to deal with situations differently.'—Learning and Development Manager, Health Service, Ireland

Practical considerations

- Support materials should be made available for use at set meetings. These materials would include tips on how set members can get the most out of the meetings.
- Sets need to know that they can call upon external help if they are unable to resolve some issues by themselves.
- For quality control purposes it can be useful to work with an action learning set process advisor. The main role of the set process advisor is to help embed the process of self-management. For the first two set meetings, it helps for a process advisor to attend the whole meeting to get to know set members and observe the process of facilitation. This role stops sets from feeling abandoned and helps to surface the learning

1 See: https://www.intrac.org/resources/action-learning-sets-guide-small-diaspora-ngos/ ; www.centreforactionlearning.com

from the set (otherwise the set may become too problem-focused and insufficiently concerned with learning and reflection).

▪ A considerable time commitment is expected from those who are facilitating to develop the necessary self-management skills and for monthly full-day meetings.

▪ In self-managed action learning, sets can sometimes feel abandoned, so a support mechanism may need to be built in. Those set members that are responsible for managing the set should also ensure there is a closure process.

Key source

O'Hara, S., Bourner, T. & Webber, T. (2004) 'The practice of self-managed action learning'. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*. 1 (1). 29-42.

5.5 Service improvement action learning

What is it?

Service improvement action learning is carried out by service providers and practitioners with the aim of improving a project, programme or service. Those who participate must have the decision-making power to make changes identified through the action learning process.

Examples of typical challenges addressed

▪ Increasing the uptake up of sexually transmitted disease screening for teenagers.

▪ Developing an outreach health programme for people living on the streets by choice.

▪ Process re-engineering for setting up emergency health centres.

Service improvement action learning can also be used for smaller daily or weekly improvements as a method at the end of staff meetings, or shifts, or as part of a handover.

How is this distinct from core action learning techniques?

This approach is project based, whereby the participants investigate an organisational challenge, designing a change, and implementing and evaluating a change in practice. It is driven by organisational output, with less emphasis on personal learning.

How long does it take?

Service improvement action learning is highly adaptable to different time frames. For larger improvements, an action learning programme may take six months from the initial exploration of the idea to its implementation, and up to 12 months to see initial results. In these cases, participants are drawn for a number of specialities or functions,

each typically bringing their own service or business improvement challenge, and meet monthly, in sets of six, for up to six hours at a time.

When used for smaller improvements, service improvement action learning can be used sporadically and indefinitely. Sessions of 15–30 minutes may be held at the end of a shift or a workday, with a follow-up evaluation session for 15–30 minutes a few weeks later.

Example exercise: 'End of shift' service improvement action learning

One example of the flexibility of service improvement action learning is its use in 'end of shift' reflections to identify and implement improvements over time. Over a 15-minute period at the end of a working day or working week, a group of staff can hold a standing meeting during which they identify service delivery improvements using the following steps:

Step 1: Introduction of the problem

Identify a member of staff who will be the problem holder for the meeting. This member of staff explains briefly the problem.

Step 2: Exploration of the problem

Set members explore the problem by asking questions. In particular, they ask open questions and summarise what they understand from the problem holder, being careful to listen to reactions and silences.

Step 3: Consultation

If the set allows for advice to be given, each set member can now formulate one or more possible solutions for the problem holder. Having heard these possible solutions, the problem holder reflects on each in turn. There is then a second round of exploration, during which set members ask questions to help the problem holder to consider ways of dealing with the problem, for example:
• What are your options?
• Which barriers can you see?
• What could your next steps be?

Step 4: Evaluation and actions

The problem holder evaluates the process and states what their next action will be on the problem.

How to do it

The service improvement action learning approach is structured and disciplined, often supported by additional information that the participants

collect and bring to each action learning set meeting. This may involve set members undertaking some basic action research, which they may not have the background or training to do. In this case, this additional information may need to be offered as 'expert input' – either as a face-to-face session with a person experienced with research methodology or by having a designated member of staff who carries out small action research activities to support the participants in their learning.

> 'We were struggling to find ways in which we could increase the uptake of screening for teenage girls in an area of urban deprivation. The service improvement action learning programme helped me to explore the challenge from new perspectives and supported a thorough examination of the data. The standing back and objective exploration really helped me focus on the problem in a frantic world of work. We have now implemented a new way of engaging with this population and in the first-year uptake has improved by 500%.'— Health service manager, UK

Practical considerations

- The action learning sets may be virtual, especially in global organisations.
- External support can be useful, but not necessary, in administering the programme and in facilitating the learning.
- High levels of internal support for implementing actions and trying out improvements is required.

Key source

Pedler M. and Abbott C. (2008) 'Lean and learning: action learning for service improvement' *Leadership in Health Services* 21(2): 87 – 98

Practice example: Improving services for people with disabilities in Ghana
By Charles Buxton, INTRAC

Not-for-profit Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) used service improvement action learning methods to work with a local organisation in Ghana to improve services for people with physical impairments.

In Ghana, the main actor was the Women's Wing of the Ashanti regional branch of the Ghana Society of Physically Disabled (GSPD). The action learning set activities took place over a period of only six months and benefitted from the wide contacts and national reputation of the GSPD (including a membership of over 8,500 people). The participants brought together in service improvement action learning usually come from different departments and sections within a single agency. In this case, however, the GSPD's action

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learning programme involved service staff, beneficiaries and partners.

The action learning set focused on a narrow, identified problem: the prevalence of traffic accidents involving people with disabilities. The set was formed of 11 participants from the Women's Wing, who met once a month to discuss the issue, to explore challenges faces by individual members of the set and to identify opportunities for action around them.

In an action learning set of this kind, participants are all working on aspects of the service offered by the host NGO. As such, the discussion procedure is different to that of a set in which participants come from different NGOs, each with their own challenge. In service improvement action learning, although the facilitator may ask each person separately to describe their experience or actions since the last meeting, the discussions may have a more collective character, since the challenge is a shared one. The action learning technique used by GSPD was flexible and effective: several different initiatives and actions were generated during the process, and went on to be carried out by set members in the Ashanti region.

Impact achieved

As a result of the lobbying activities undertaken by the Women's Wing of GSDP in the course of the action learning process, there was greater media coverage of the issue of road accidents involving people with disabilities (for example, free airtime on three radio stations). This media coverage led in turn to an important meeting with Ghana's Road Safety Campaign Coordinator, during which evidence of the challenge and ways to reduce accidents were discussed. The Public Drivers Union were also prompted to develop plans to reduce accidents of this kind in Ashanti region.

Challenges

First, project organisers noted exclusion and discrimination made it difficult to involve people with disabilities in campaigns for better services. Second, VSO noted that people in target NGOs and communities are usually 'on the move' and find it hard to find time to reflect. The action learning process can be slow and some organisations may not see it as an effective way of working. Moreover, if they do agree to launch an action learning initiative, this is often viewed as a parallel project rather than something to be integrated into their main strategy or organisational development process. Third, some people resist the idea of joint learning, perhaps afraid of criticism or worried about letting out sensitive information about their work or views. VSO and PSO concluded that 'resistance should be met as an old friend', expected from the start.

5.6 Socially driven action learning

What is it?

Socially driven action learning is an approach used by communities to engage in the exploration of social challenges while at the same time enhancing their leadership development. Integrating aspects of the project-based learning into with traditional action learning, socially driven action learning is used to create experience-based learning systems for communities in which social action is desired. Depending on how it is applied, this approach to action learning can be used as a form of participatory planning with vulnerable populations or as a collaborative method used across multiple organisations trying to address a complex social problem.

Examples of typical challenges addressed

- How can we address homelessness?
- How do we stimulate employment for people with learning disabilities?
- Addressing drug and alcohol abuse in communities.

How is this distinct from core action learning techniques?

This approach is project-based, with participants investigating a community challenge and sharing the challenge of design and implementation, although they are often not able to take action themselves.

How long does it take?

With this approach, sets typically meet for four hours, once monthly, over a six-month period. However, the journey from initial exploration of the idea to implementation can take up to two years. The first consideration is ownership across multiple stakeholders, given that people affected by the issue or in need of services are by their very nature often difficult to find and engage with. For humanitarian actors with stronger links to crisis-affected people, the process may take place over a shorter frame of time.

How to do it

Socially driven action learning has a variety of activities and patterns

1. Large group events to map out the challenge and its surrounding environment – usually a one-day event followed by a midterm group event and closing event
2. Face to face action learning sets formed to address the topics that have emerged from the mapping – typically a set will consist of a range of stakeholders

One method commonly used is tacit or latent solution-finding.

'We wanted to address the challenge of homelessness a year after the tsunami. Attempts had succeeded to some degree but not the impact agencies had wanted. This programme of bring together everyone

and importantly those affected and creating an open space where all had an equal voice was the key to ensure the services provided met the needs of those using them. The relationships created enabled some real surprises to emerge as to needs and solutions and helped focus on feelings as well as the practical stuff.'—Action learning volunteer team

Practical considerations

- The 'right' community culture is required for socially driven action learning: community leaders who act as sponsors of socially driven action learning programmes must trust participants and the process.
- The active support and participation of all stakeholders is essential.
- Community-wide support is needed: thus, engaging internal 'stakeholders'.
- Capture and knowledge sharing is important as is finding ways of making this accessible to all.

Key source

Abbott C. and Taylor P. (2013) *Action learning in social work.* Maidenhead: Sage

5.7 Positive action learning

What is it?

Rather than dwelling on the problems and deficiencies of the present, as is often done in conventional action learning, set members take an appreciative enquiry stance, which requires a more 'positive' focus. Data may also be gathered outside the set using appreciative inquiry interview techniques. In positive action learning, there is greater potential to involve much larger groups than there is in classical or conventional action learning.

What is this useful for?

Positive action learning aims to shift focus away from problems (the traditional action learning approach) towards a more appreciative perspective. This approach, which was developed following on from Cooperrider's Appreciative Inquiry,[2] requires a small set of between six and nine managers and/or frontline staff working together, with expert facilitation.

By building effective networks and focusing on what is done well, managers and professionals can use positive action learning to share act upon best practice across the organisation. Positive action learning is also seen as a way to articulate a desired culture and a future state in order to bring about strategic change.

2 David L. Cooperrider, Jr. Sorensen, Peter F., Therese F. Yaeger, Diana Whitney (eds.) (2005) *Appreciative Inquiry: Foundations in Positive Organization Development.*

Examples of typical challenges addressed:
- Creating a culture of innovation.
- Applying lessons from prior experience to new projects.
- Exploring the impact of a new way of working, or a policy or procedure.

How long does it take?

The positive action learning approach allows for some flexibility: it could be applied in sets of circa 6–10 participants who meet monthly, or it could be as short as one meeting or an approach that is then developed for one-to-one supervision.

How to do it

There are a number of ways to conduct this method of action learning, depending on the group composition and purpose. Here we outline two.

Appreciative interviewing

The first step in this process is to hold an appreciative interview. Each set member is asked to consider and then write down responses to the following:

1. Identify an example known to you of an especially good work practice.
2. What happened that made it so? (write a sentence).
3. How did the good work practice happen and why? (write a paragraph).
4. What are the implications of this good work practice for others in the organisation? (write one bullet point).

Once set members are aware of the process, they work in pairs to practise conducting appreciative interviews, using these questions as a guide. The aim of the appreciate interviewing is to encourage set members to appreciate what works well and the value attached to it. The set can find others to interview in parts of the organisation they do not usually visit.

Learning from success

This exercise is useful in a set of front line workers as they explore and share good practice to resolve a challenge.

The first step is for a set member (the presenter) to introduce a successful experience and the context to that success. The other set members are invited to note what factors, in their view, made the success possible.

The second step is for the facilitator to note the success factors identified by the set under two headings: (1) the actions of the presenter; and (2) the context or environment in which the success happened.

The third step is for set members to explore the issue more deeply by asking questions and listening carefully. From the additional information supplied by the presenter, and the success factors identified by the set, all members now attempt to distil 'discoveries' – previously unnoticed success factors. The new (arguably more fundamental) success factors are listed on a second sheet.

The final step is to jointly answer the question: 'What do we learn from this and what action could we take?'

'I took a problem to an action learning set about a case that involved engaging with two agencies to offer services to one of my clients. It wasn't complex, and I couldn't understand why I wasn't getting the results I expected. My supervisor was putting pressure on me to close the case. The facilitator suggested I talk about a similar case that had gone really well. (At first, I couldn't see how that would help.) The set were asked to focus on what I had done and what the context had been when they asked questions. It was embarrassing to talk about a success story as, it really, is our daily work and I am just not used to talking about these things. The set then made a list of all the success factors and the obvious difference between this previous case and the one I was currently dealing with became apparent. One of the agencies was new to the organisation and the reason I had been successful before was the strong relationship with the agencies involved. So – my action was to spend time with this agency and build relationship with them rather than assuming, as I had done previously, that they understood our processes. It was simple but it worked. As a result of the exercise, the organisation revised its induction for new suppliers as a result.'—Frontline social worker

Practical considerations
- When used to address bigger strategic goals, set members are encouraged to work outside the traditional confines of the action learning set – for example, in going out and conducting appreciative interviews across the organisation.
- Set facilitators need to understand appreciative enquiry as well as the process of action learning.
- Set members in the first example of appreciative interviewing may need guidance and support in interviewing techniques.

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5.8 Virtual action learning: synchronous and asynchronous

What is it?
In common with conventional action learning, virtual action learning requires a small group of between six and nine managers and/or frontline staff working together. However rather than being in one room, participants are working separately, virtually – sometimes in different countries and time

zones. When organisations are made up of dispersed structures and remote working arrangements, teams are often less able meet in a physical space for a variety of practical and financial reasons. Virtual action learning can overcome this by bringing groups together in a virtual space.

Virtual action learning may be **synchronous**, meaning that all set members are in the virtual space at the same time (e.g. a video conference call), or **asynchronous**, where they do not meet together at the same time, but instead meet at different times in a virtual space through the use of text, voice and visual software, systems and apps.

Examples of typical questions addressed

▪ How to develop independent, self-motivated learning and self-leadership behaviours?
▪ What can we do to address the common challenges we are facing?
▪ How can we build more effective and productive working relationships across our dispersed team?
▪ What are we learning about our practice that we can use to develop our organisation?

How is this distinct from core action learning techniques?

The main difference between virtual action learning approaches and conventional action learning is that the virtual approaches do not rely on face-to-face methods where participants are required to be in the same room together. This allows people and teams to meet as an action learning set from dispersed geographic locations. For asynchronous virtual action learning, the slower pace of the process also allows participants greater time for reflection and preparation and to notice the questions being asked, to think, and to write down.

How long does it take?

From inception to completion the process may take up to six months as time may be needed to ensure members make significant progress on individual or collective group problems. This takes into consideration the time needed to ensure participants understand the processes and have appropriate access to the technology used (and the option to meet face-to-face to build relationships), and to allow individual and group development goals to be explored before the first virtual set meeting.

Synchronous action learning sets

Sets may wish to meet for a finite period of between four and six monthly meetings (or more). However, as long as the set periodically reviews its progress to ensure it is still meeting the individuals' and group's demands, there need not be any limit placed on the length of the programme.

Meeting in virtual space usually requires higher levels of concentration, focus and attention from its participants, and therefore virtual action learning set meetings tend to be shorter than meetings held in a physical space. The duration of a set will depend on how many people have selected

to present a problem for the attention of the group and meetings may therefore last between one hour and three hours (with breaks). As well as time for the presenting and exploration of problems sufficient time also needs to allow for a 'check-in' at the start of the meeting and a closing final review.

Asynchronous action learning sets

Sets may wish to agree a designated time period in which problems will be submitted and then responded to by all members. As set members are not present at the same time, this period may be anything from three days to two or more weeks, depending on what the set have agreed is realistic and achievable. The set may decide a process whereby problems are submitted in series or in parallel. Submitting in series would involve each set member taking turns to submit a problem and waiting for responses before the next members submits theirs. Submitting in parallel would not involve any turn-taking; instead, all members to submit a problem and all would respond to other submissions within the same time frame.

As the periods for submitting and responding are longer than a more conventional face-to-face approach, sets tend to meet for longer periods of time. The duration of the whole action learning process may be for a finite period of up to six months or for much longer; there is no need for a time limit needs, provided the set continues to meet individual and group needs.

How to do it

Both synchronous and asynchronous sets employ exercises and questions that are similar to those used in conventional action learning – although the questions and steps may need to be adapted more significantly for asynchronous learning.

> 'Being a field worker, I didn't think I would be able to take part in an action learning programme as I thought it would need to be face to face, and at first was sceptical about virtual action learning. Being able to work with other field workers live in different countries was a real benefit, getting a sense of what was real for them, we were able to support each other in often adverse conditions. We used the "[eavesdrop] method" and the quality of active listening seemed to be enhanced by the virtual environment'—Field worker

> 'Our internet connections are really poor so rather than synchronous action learning we chose this [asynchronous] method. It suited me; as a reflective person I find group work quite challenging, with this method it allowed for deeper and considered responses. As a group we needed to have real discipline to make it work. The questions I received really helped me address a tricky problem of bringing a team together in stressful circumstance, but what surprised me was how much I learned from others problems about myself and working in the field' – Field worker

Practical considerations

For synchronous:

▪ High levels of confusion can arise when more than one person speaks at once. It is therefore helpful to establish explicit rules of engagement to make up for the loss of visual and body language cues, to ensure set members talk after one another.

For asynchronous:

▪ Set members and facilitators need to pay close attention to the administration of the set, to agreed timescales and deadlines.
▪ Sets may take longer to conclude as communications are not immediate and may take place over several days or even weeks.

For both types:

▪ The set may benefit from a blended approach, where there are opportunities for participants to meet in person. This is especially useful at the very start of the programme, as it can help to develop stronger relationships and therefore make participation within the virtual space more effective.
▪ Ground rules need to ensure they address the challenges of engaging within a virtual space.

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6. Approaches to tacit knowledge transfer

6.1 Collective learning units

What are they?

Collective learning units are grounded in the theory of a situated learning system, where tacit knowledge is shared and created through contextual, and often unintended, experiential learning, with real experiences in the interactions and relationships between people (Yardley et al., 2012). Crucial to these methods is social interaction at the wider team level and the formation of an organisational memory that sits outside any individual person, whereby the expertise of some goes to many.

Learning bridges

Learning bridges are shared memory systems between two reciprocal parties (a community of practice, most commonly in the form of an apprentice-type relationship). Learning bridges bring people together in a participative context, creating collaborating communities of practice – expert and student – within a situated learning system that continually share knowledge and experience. The different communities of practice develop a relationship using 'boundary objects' as knowledge bridges to form connections, transfer experience and further ensure the continuity of practice. For example, Aytekin and Rızvanoğlu (2019) reported on a process of tacit knowledge sharing for craft design that used digital media as a tool for synchronous, continuous knowledge sharing. The boundary objects in this process were visual designs, which functioned to support the connection between different practices (Wenger, 2010), as one kind of learning bridge between an expert and a student.

Transactive memory system

Transactive memory system is an abstract concept involving the coordination of specialised expert knowledge within a team, where members are reliant on one another in 'a cognitively interdependent manner' (Ryan and O'Connor, 2013: 1616). Transactive memory system is founded on the idea of individuals as the 'external memory' of specialised knowledge for other individuals in the team. It demands credibility and coordination through a differentiated structure of expert knowledge, trust in

the reliability of member's expertise and an effective knowledge processing system (Lewis, 2003). Transactive memory systems are based on the tenet that within the group, members have different areas of expertise, knowledge and understanding that can be stored and retrieved through transactions (Nevo and Ward, 2005).

How long does it take?

Collective learning units have no assigned time limit: they should be considered long-lasting, structural components of an organisation's learning system. Given that for both learning bridges and transactive memory systems the quality of social interaction is imperative for success, relationships should be built and sustained over time to strengthen trust and communication between group members.

Who is involved?

Learning bridges require the involvement of an expert and a student (essentially a teacher–apprentice relationship), with facilitation to ensure active, high quality interaction between them (Aytekin and Rızvanoğlu, 2019). Each separate group (experts and students) are treated as different communities of practice.

Transactive memory system is most effective when people work in regular, small teams to strengthen trust and understanding of different members' areas of knowledge. It requires the involvement of a range of people, each with different areas of expertise, within the same domain.

How does it work?

Learning bridges

Boundary objects connect separate groups who have varying degrees of competence and experience, giving the groups something of mutual interest to interact over and a way to translate and communicate differentiated understandings of the knowledge that is to be learnt. As well as boundary objects, which can be tools or documents, discourses as a common language or shared processes and procedures, Wenger describes two other types of bridges that can connect different communities of practice and bridge interaction. These are (1) people who act as brokers between communities bringing components of one practice into another, and (2) a range of interactions among people from different communities of practice. To maintain the tacit nature of the knowledge shared, these interactions should be used as a way to maintain open communication and a continual cycle of interaction between groups, rather than to explicitly externalise the knowledge that the expert group holds.

Technology can also be used to support the transfer of tacit knowledge via learning bridges. In the case studied by Aytekin and Rızvanoğlu (2019), communities of practice used Facebook to improve interaction opportunities and reduce the cultural, institutional and geographical obstacles. Such digital platforms are particularly effective as they allow for a continuous experience. Participants can share knowledge via interactive

features in visual and text-based synchronous and/or asynchronous communication (ibid.), using chat functions, status updates, the ability to like and share information as a community, and live feed streaming. As this communication increases, the common understanding and experience sharing improves between groups, situated learning gains momentum and, after a certain point, tacit-to-tacit knowledge is transferred.

Transactive memory system

Ryan and O'Connor (2013) studied the use of transactive memory system for learning, remembering and communicating knowledge. Informal communication is used to allow team members to learn about one another's expertise of a common experience or task. There is no tangible output or evidence of the transactive memory system; it exists only in the knowledge of the interacting group. The transactive memory system can be viewed as a shared mental model in which there are transactions – that is, communications between members – to absorb, store and recover knowledge from one another's memories (Hollingshead and Brandon, 2003). Transactive memory system is a three-factor process, whereby information is submitted to a shared memory at encoding stage, resides in the memory during storage and is returned to the group at retrieval (Wegner, 1987).

Within the transactive memory system, different members hold differentiated domains of knowledge, understood and recognised by all other members of the group. This knowledge can then be easily identified and accessed by all group members given a common awareness of specialisation and coordination of knowledge. The quality of social interaction is critical in creating and sharing tacit knowledge within teams, thus it is advised that transactive memory system teams are self-managed, rotating the informal role of the facilitator between them (Ryan and O'Connor, 2013).

What is needed for this to succeed?

Learning bridges

- Boundary objects in the form of artefacts, people or range of interactions.
- Understanding of interaction, collaboration, meaningful learning. and support for learning in different environments (Kumpulainen et al., 2010).
- Open, continuous lines of communication.
- Facilitator.
- Proximity between communities of practice (can be technological)
- Optional: Technological resources as enablers.

Transactive memory system

- Good quality social interactions to create strong shared team mental models; face-to-face interaction is best for communicating tacit knowledge.

- Strong sense of familiarity among group members and commitment to high levels of communication, both in terms of quantity and quality (Lewis and Herndon, 2011); informal communication is best.
- Well-developed team-level expertise directories; long-tenured teams working in a specific field will have a greater substantiated transactive memory system.
- Further supporting factors for a higher transactive memory system in work groups are: task characteristics of interdependence, cooperative goal interdependence and support for innovation (Aytekin and Rızvanoğlu, 2019).

6.2 Tacit knowledge transfer through mentorship

What is it?

The mentorship approach to tacit knowledge transfer encompasses knowledge sharing and accumulation through socialisation and experiential learning. It depends on the existence of a strong, highly compatible dyadic relationship between a mentor and protégé through which tacit knowledge is transferred over time. Mentorship is an active process of knowledge transfer that supports the professional development and empowerment of the tacit knowledge receiver (Karkoulian et al., 2008; Agyemang and Boateng, 2018).

How long does it take?

Mentorship is a long-term process of observation, experience and knowledge transfer. It requires dedication of weeks, months or even years from those involved, dependant on the quantity and tacit nature of the knowledge to be transferred, the strength of relationship, quality of communication and duration of time spent learning over any given period. Dyer and Nobeoka (2000) reported an average transfer time of tacit knowledge, and completion of mentorship, to be 18 months, with the quickest completed in 8 months. The more highly tacit the knowledge, the longer it will take to transfer.

Who is involved?

Tacit knowledge transfer through mentorship requires the involvement of an experienced and inexperienced employee with a shared commitment to a mentor–protégé style relationship. Although there will evidently be a disparity in knowledge between those involved, the knowledge gap must not be too significant – that is, the knowledge receiver should already understand or be familiar with the subject matter.

How does it work?

Identification of mentor and protégé

An expert and novice with incentives to embark on the relationship should be identified and assigned to one another. Incentives may include professional development on the part of the novice or the ability to delegate or expand organisational capacity on the part of the expert. Both must have a clear understanding and acceptance of the function and purpose of the relationship. The method is often most effective where the mentor is a figure who is trusted and valued by those less experienced (Swap et al., 2001) and where the protégé has yet to develop their own strong ideas on how to do things and is therefore are open to learning new ways of thinking (Karkoulian et al., 2008; Blumenberg et al., 2009).

Establishment of a relationship

For the mentorship approach to be successful, there must be a high level of proximity between the mentor and the protégé: interactions should be regular, uninhibited and face-to-face. Mentorships may be formal and highly structured, or they may be informal. Karkoulian et al. (2008) reported that knowledge transfer was most effective when mentoring was informal as knowledge was inclined to be accepted, shared and used by the mentee. A more informal approach may be suitable where an employee is more willingly involved in the mentor relationship and there are fewer strict processes and practices enforced by the organisation.

Interaction and experiential learning

Through continual interaction and socialisation, tacit knowledge is imparted by observation and accumulated understanding. The protégé takes part in active learning once they have become accustomed to a situation, decision-making process or task by having directly gained experience of it by observing and shadowing their mentor. This helps the protégé to identify patterns and behaviours, gradually developing expertise (Swap et al.. 2001). The close proximity of the mentor and the protégé means the learner gains access to not only know-how, but also a network of other influential people within the organisation (ibid.).

Additional approaches and activities within mentorship;

▪ Dyer and Nobeoka (2000) reported on 'interfirm employee transfers' wherein this method of mentorship can is adapted to transfer different aspects of training and expertise to diverse parts of the organisation. In contrast to the typical approach to mentorship, it is possible for both individuals in the learning pair to be 'experts' or highly knowledgeable in their own domains. This facilitates learning on both sides, giving each the opportunity to transfer and receive understanding. If the organisation is large enough, this could even be achieved at scale, with several mentors working beyond their original domain of expertise in different parts of the organisation.

- Situation or task simulation can be adopted as an activity within the mentorship to allow the inexperienced learner to try out different strategies and reflect on them, based on their accumulated learning and experiences (Karkoulian et al., 2008).

What is needed for this to succeed?
- Strong, high-quality relationship between mentor and protégé.
- Consistent communication between mentor and protégé.
- Willingness of mentor to share know-how.
- A protégé focus on how the expert works rather than what the expert does.
- Organisational support for the time required to help build mentor relationships (Karkoulian et al., 2008).
- A general shared understanding between the expert and novice of contextual information relating to the mentorship subject matter or domain (Chia-Wu et al., 2010).

6.3 Structured observation and reflection

What is it?
The structured observation and reflection approach to tacit knowledge transfer is a process of observation and questioning based on the socialisation aspect of the SECI model of knowledge sharing (Nonaka et al. 1994) where tacit-to-tacit knowledge is shared by accumulated experience. Knowledge is collected through in-depth interviews between an expert and a protégé. The interviews are based on the description of a task and tap into the situational thinking of the expert in order to identify the often indescribable factors that make that person excel (Baxter, 2015). Structured observation and reflection incorporates cognitive task analysis to gain information about cognitive strategies such as situational assessments, critical cue or factor identification and perceptual distinctions where knowledge is non-procedural and highly strategic (Militello and Hutton, 1998).

How long does it take?
Structured observation and reflection sessions take no more than a couple of hours at a time but the approach is most effective when practised continually. Results are greatest when sessions are repeated in quick succession to accumulate experience in the protégé and propel surface-level learning to adaptive learning.

Who is involved?
Structured observation and reflection is an approach that requires the participation of: an expert (the tacit knowledge holder); the person(s) to whom the knowledge is to be transferred; and a knowledge transfer coach, who can be either an external consultant or someone from a different part of the organisation. To ensure the successful transfer of knowledge, the

tacit knowledge holder and receiver in the expert–protégé pair should only be separated by up to a couple of levels of expertise in understanding of the relevant subject matter. For example, knowledge transfer is effective when sharing is from an expert to a person who is competent or proficient, but that same knowledge cannot be shared from an expert to novice as the knowledge becomes too advanced and strategic to be communicated successfully (Baxter, 2015).

How does it work?

An approach to structured observation and reflection has been modified from the Accelerated Expertise Development Cycle (Baxter, 2015):

Identification of expertise and goal

Those involved must identify clearly: (1) what knowledge is to be captured; (2) why it is of importance; and (3) what is to be done with the knowledge once it has been transferred.

Observation and questioning: cognitive task analysis

Cognitive task analysis is a reflective, informal process of observation and questioning between the expert, protégé and knowledge coach to identify cognitive skills that allow someone to perform effectively in their role (Militello and Hutton, 2010).

The expert is told to focus on a real-life situation in which they have experienced a dilemma that has no obvious right or wrong answer. The protégé and knowledge coach ask the expert questions about how they approached the situation, selected a choice of action, avoided problems and resolved conflicts to gain perspective on the expert's thinking and decision-making process. A task diagram (Militello and Hutton, 2010) may be mapped as an aid to make the interviews more focused. This should be done by the expert who, on reflection, identifies the most difficult cognitive elements of the situation.

- Involvement of the knowledge coach in questioning provides an alternative view; they can ask questions to which the protégé may already presume they know the answer, having most likely worked alongside the expert. As such, it is imperative that the knowledge coach comes without a deep understanding of the subject matter, or those involved in the transfer of tacit knowledge.
- During this period of observation and questioning, the knowledge coach should also be mapping out the answers on a flip chart as a visual aid for the expert and protégé.
- Where a task is more functional, it is possible for an expert to demonstrate that function, welcoming questions, experiences and ideas based on how they think about the task as opposed to how to do it (Boiral, 2002).

Creation of concept maps and checklist

Concept mapping of real experiences should then be undertaken by the knowledge coach based on the verbal communication between the expert and protégé, focusing on how to think instead of what to do. It is also possible to creative a cognitive checklist for the protégé that they can use to identify the expert's thought process in a given situation – that is, the perceived goals, challenges, cues and factors in making the decision and lessons learned from expertise. The protégé can then refer to this checklist in later practice when reflecting on how the expert approached a problem.

Continual practice

The process of observation and reflection should continue between the expert–protégé, until the protégé feels they are able to confidently apply the knowledge in their own unique situations. Along with the repetition of sessions there are several other ways in which to ensure continual practice and transfer of tacit knowledge:

- Five-minute protégé situational tests – brief, weekly sessions with a small group of protégé's to test their knowledge and understanding gained through the cognitive task analysis by placing the protégé in a hypothetical situation and comparing their course of action with the action taken by an expert.
- Group meetings.
- Informal learning by an online community of practice.

What is needed for this to succeed?

- Employees' experience and their willingness to experiment (Huang and Shih, 2009).
- One expert to one or two protégés.
- A clearly defined, shared goal.
- Motivation on the part of the expert to share their knowledge.
- Motivation on the part of protégé to understand thinking processes and behaviours of expert.
- Similar cognitive abilities of the expert and protégé – no more than one or two levels of expertise apart.

7. Conclusion and next steps

Field-level learning is a critical part of good humanitarian action yet is underserved and overlooked in the ways that most humanitarian organisations approach knowledge management. This mapping sought to answer two overarching research questions.

1. What is the evidence of impact of approaches to practitioner-led learning on service delivery (efficiency, service outcomes, client satisfaction)?

   ▪ Which of these approaches have been successful within the humanitarian and development sectors?

In the literature on practitioner-led learning, the primary method identified is action learning – the structured use of question-based exercises combined with cycles of action designed to test emerging hypotheses and insights. Action learning has been applied for decades across a variety of service contexts, including the development aid sector. While not all action learning methods are appropriate for the humanitarian sector, some exercises could be incredibly useful for several learning objectives for field staff. Detailed evidence of the approach's effectiveness is low and therefore its application would need to be paired with a robust framework to understand the degree to which it is supporting and improving field-level learning.

2. What is the evidence for approaches that are effective at sharing tacit knowledge?

   ▪ What examples are there of these approaches in international development, humanitarian or emergency contexts?

The practical development of theories regarding tacit knowledge sharing is weak – this reflects the nature of tacit knowledge but is also in part due to poor concept definition in the academic literature. Several approaches to tacit knowledge sharing, including communities of practice and mentorship, are already widely practiced in the humanitarian sector. Therefore supporting tacit knowledge sharing across field staff may be more a matter of finding ways to formalise and legitimise these practices.

7.1 Looking ahead

Building on this mapping exercise, ALNAP is developing a pilot Resource Pack for Strengthening Field-Level Learning, containing clear user guides and exercises drawn from action learning and tacit knowledge theory. The aim of the Resource Pack will be to empower and strengthen field staff's ability to generate their own learning within context and to share their experience-based, less tangible but hugely valuable knowledge with one another. The hope is that this in turn will contribute to improved decision-making and, ultimately, higher quality humanitarian responses.

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