

Work based learning using action learning sets

I have spent the summer reflecting on the value of work-based learning and in particular the outcome achievement potential of action learning. Over the past three years, I have had the great fortune of facilitating an action learning set (ALS) with a group of consultant nurses and one therapy consultant and I have witnessed the benefits first hand. As an education leader, having the opportunity to work with such senior practitioners has given me insight into the changing National Health Service (NHS) and the demands currently placed on all practitioners but especially those leading services. I have benefitted immensely.

Introduced in the UK in 1999 in an attempt to retain experienced clinical leaders in practice, the role of nurse consultant has, more recently, been adopted widely across the globe (Wilkes et al 2015, Chan et al 2014). In the UK, the role encompasses the four dimensions of clinical practice, leadership, education and research (McSherry et al 2005). However, prior to commencement of the ALS and due to the pressures of service, the role of these consultants was dominated by a focus on clinical expertise and their leadership. For those of you who are less familiar with action learning, I will firstly define the term before then exploring its value in clinical practice and how my colleagues have benefitted from their engagement.

What is Action learning?

“Action learning is a continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with an intention of getting things done. Through action learning individuals learn with and from each other by working on real problems and reflecting on their own experiences. The process helps us to take an active stance towards life and helps to overcome a tendency to think, feel and be passive towards the pressures of life”. (McGill and Beaty 2001, p11).

Originally created by Professor Reg Revans in the 1940s to support organisational change (Revans 1997), action learning is a process in which a small group of individuals meet regularly to help each other learn from their experience. Based on the idea that people learn best when working on real-time problems in their own work situation (Raelin 1997), it is best undertaken in small groups and in an environment of mutually agreed confidentiality and respect.

Three of the consultants were new into post and grasped the ALS as an opportunity to support and be supported, to develop all four dimensions of their role and to further develop their strategic leadership within the organisation. The two more established consultants used the opportunity to refresh their role and refocus their direction. They all committed to meet monthly and I joined them quarterly. In this way, they retained some external facilitation but at the same time, gained their independence in steering the set in their desired direction.

Benefits of Action Learning

On evaluation, the consultants enthusiastically tracked their progress over the course of the set, identifying the importance of 1) structure and support 2) the set's impact on the wider dimensions of their role as well as their developing external influence and 3) the set in boosting their confidence to lead.

Structure and support: Given the professional isolation of the consultant role, all five consultants valued the regular meetings to support each other with their own identified goals. They set out their goals against each of the four dimensions to make sure that they addressed the wider requirements and shared these prior to each meeting. The ALS gave them the peer group that they sought and it obliged them to reflect on their progress.

Wider influence: From an initial position of 'seeking permission' to engage in publication and education as well as to reach out externally beyond the organisation, all five consultants independently moved to owning their responsibility to extend beyond their traditional boundaries and more importantly viewed these as key to their success. Altruistically, they saw the need to safeguard the role for the organisation rather than for their own selfish gain.

Empowerment to lead: The consultants recognised the difficulties in challenging others, particularly their medical colleagues. However, the ALS helped them to gain the inner strength to succeed illustrating the importance of self-leadership (Brown and Holroyd 2013). Additionally, they extended their role boundaries to lead strategic organisational initiatives.

It has been my privilege to learn myself from these experienced consultants and to see them grow and flourish. Action learning has been such a valuable tool to facilitate meaningful change and I would recommend it to you all.

References

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