

Learning to Solve Problems

For an organisation to survive its rate of learning must be at least equal to the rate of change in its external environment – Revan's Law.

January saw the death of a pioneering management thinker that few will have heard of, Reg Revans. Much of what he taught was sadly fated to be drowned out by the more easily marketable management fads to be found these days on the bookshelves of every major airport.

Professor Reg Revans developed the idea of “action learning”, a deceptively simple concept that was based on the idea that small groups of people facing similar difficult problems can learn to solve these problems by learning from each others failures and victories. Action learning can be defined as a process in which a group of people come together more or less regularly to help each other to learn from their experience.

Revens was convinced of the importance of learning and in a proposition now known as Revan's Law he stated that for an organisation to survive its rate of learning must be at least equal to the rate of change in its external environment.

Revens was famously sceptical about management experts and their attempts to import “pre-fabricated” knowledge into organisations. He referred to the management qualification MBA as “Moral Bankruptcy Assured”. He was also a firm believer in the “bottom-up” approach to learning, believing that the people in the field can teach management more about solving organisations problems. This belief was based on first hand study of a number of organisations including Britain's National Health Service where he found that patients recovered faster when doctors listened to the nurses.

Revens found that organisations could make significant progress when they admitted to ignorance. Organisations that created an environment that encouraged such honesty without fear of ridicule or reprisal were able to find solutions faster. He was also convinced that traditional classroom style teaching was not likely to provide the problem solving abilities companies needed, nor provide a framework for personal growth.

As Reg Revans used and described it, action learning it was mostly used across different organisations. That is, the participants typically came from different situations, where each of them was involved in different activities and faced individual problems.

The current practice more often now is to set up an action-learning program within one organisation. It is not unusual for a team to consist of people with a common task or problem. The process is distinguished by the following characteristics:

- Learning is centred-around the need to find a solution to a real problem.
- Learning is voluntary and learner driven.
- Individual development is as important as finding the solution to the problem.
- Action learning is a highly visible, social process, which may lead to organizational change.
- Action learning takes time.

There may or may not be a facilitator for the learning groups which are formed. Revans mostly avoided them. However, current practice normally includes one for the simple reason that a group of people facing a problem armed only with their ignorance is likely to “reinvent the wheel” if proper guidance is not available.

Revens believed that management was something pragmatic, concrete and rooted in experience. This is of course quite the opposite of the prevailing wheeling and dealing short-termist Anglo-Saxon approach to the management of organisations. Now that this approach is finally coming under scrutiny perhaps Professor Revan's views will finally find vindication.

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