

DECREASING DUPLICATE DIRECTORY DISTRIBUTION: A CASE STUDY IN ACTION
LEARNING WITHIN THE TELECOMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

This paper constitutes an effort by one author to document an Action Learning case within the telecommunications industry. In order to provide anonymity on the part of the individual and organizational participants, certain names have been disguised, although material facts have not. However, because the industry in which the Action Learning set took place—telecommunications—is very large and comprised of a number of similarly structured enterprises, the author does acknowledge that this case involved one of several Regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs) in the U.S. This case suggests that one of the principles of Action Learning—that of “problem ownership” —can be problematic, in practice. The client’s estimated savings from decreasing instances wherein duplicate telephone directories were needlessly distributed to customers were reported to be in excess of \$1 million annually.

ACTION LEARNING: “IT’S DIFFICULT TO EXPLAIN”

Action learning was developed by Professor Reg W. Revans who has suggested: “Action Learning takes so long to describe, so much longer to find interesting, and so much longer still to get started because it is so simple” (Revans, 1991, p. 3). Revans is not alone in his assessment of the difficulty one encounters in describing Action Learning; as Weinstein (1995) related, even participants in Action Learning programs have some trouble succinctly and clearly explaining themselves:

“It’s difficult to explain,” said one young scientific research officer. “It seems very simple at the outset: a group of people who each have a real work project which they work on and learn from that, with the help and support of the other participants...but then it begins to get more complex.” (p. 30)

Another participant related:

I’d read quite a bit about action learning before coming on the programme, and it all seemed logical, pretty straightforward, almost commonsense. But “it” didn’t happen as I’d anticipated. As an engineer I’d expected to solve my “problems” in a “straight-line” approach—here’s the problem, here’s a solution—but it’s not like that. You begin to work on whether what you have identified as the problem really is the problem...and that’s when the real work of action learning begins. (p. 33)

Given the somewhat vague descriptions of Action Learning above, perhaps it is best to start from the beginning, and cover some of the major precepts of action learning systematically.

FORMAL DEFINITIONS OF ACTION LEARNING

Several authors have tried to create a definition of Action Learning that is more formal than participants’ sketches above (Anderson & Thorpe, 2004; Law & Chuah, 2004; Marsick & O’Neil, 1999; Smith & O’Neil, 2003a; Vick, 1997; Whetherley, 1995). Professor Revans (1981) articulated his own composite outline (albeit a somewhat lengthy one), “regarded by several pioneers of action learning as a clear definition of it” (p. 9), when he wrote:

Action learning is a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical, that requires its subject, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change sufficient to improve his observable behaviour henceforth in the problem field....The learning achieved is not so much an acquaintance with new factual knowledge nor technical art conveyed by some authority such as an expert or teacher (although fresh acquaintance is not ruled out), as it is the more appropriate use, by reinterpretation, of the subject's existing knowledge, including his recollections of past lived experiences. This reinterpretation is a social process, carried on among two or more learners who, by the apparent incongruity of their exchanges, frequently cause each other to examine afresh many ideas that they would otherwise have continued to take for granted, however false or misconceived. Action learning particularly obliges subjects to become aware of their own value systems, by demanding that the real problems tackled carry some risk of personal failure, so that the subjects can truly help each other to evaluate in what they may genuinely believe. Action learning demands real-time and hence observable activity on the subjects' parts, and thus tests whether the subjects are committed to what they can, in other conditions merely asservate. (pp. 9-10)

Dr. Mike Pedler, who was awarded the title of Revans Professional Fellow with the Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research at the University of Salford, in Salford, England (Awards, 1997) lamented the difficulty of writing a concise definition (for uses such as in brochures) in his book (1991), *Action Learning in Practice*. Nevertheless, he suggested an effort of his own:

Action Learning is an approach to the development of people in organisations which takes the task as the vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning. On the whole our education system has not been based on this principle. The method has been pioneered in work organisations and has three main components—people, who accept responsibility for taking action on a particular issue; problems, or the tasks people set themselves; and a set of six or so colleagues who support and challenge each other to make progress on problems. Action Learning implies both self-development and organisation development. Action on a problem changes both the problem and the person acting upon it. It proceeds particularly by questioning taken-for-granted knowledge. (pp. xxii-xxiii)

ACTION LEARNING AND “SETS”

As suggested above, an Action Learning set (Beaty, Bourner, & Frost, 1993; Davey, Powell, Cooper, & Powell, 2004; Passett, 1996) is a group of people who meet together to work with each other. Sets work on problems, not puzzles (Revans, 1978). A common example of a puzzle is the crossword puzzle, and it is useful for starkly contrasting the difference between problems and puzzles in Revans' view: the crossword puzzle—regardless of how challenging it may be—has a correct solution (Revans, 1991). There is another reason for this distinction:

Many technical troubles of industrial management are largely puzzles...The problem, on the other hand, has no existing solution, and even after it has been long and deliberately treated by different persons, all skilled and reasonable, it may still suggest to each of them some different course of subsequent action....But, in the treatment of a problem, none can be declared right or wrong; whether any particular upshot is acceptable or not, and to whom, depends (and must depend) upon the characteristics of the individual to whom that upshot has been known. While it may be a substantial *puzzle* to measure how many unemployed persons there will be in Britain next New Year's Eve, those who set out to do the measurement should be in significant agreement. But the managerial (political, governmental) *problem* as to what, if anything, to do about it will scarcely be an object of agreement. (pp. 11-12)

One thing that must be kept in mind is that although an overarching problem may bring

this assembly of set members together, the role of the set is to facilitate learning. Set members should be genuine “problem owners,” such that adequate commitment is garnered to participate in the first place (Revans, 1978, p. 16). Further, the solution of a problem is not a guaranteed result of Action Learning, even though this is the usual result. However, logically, it is virtually guaranteed that if set members (individuals, the organizations they represent, et al.) do not learn new ways to think about a firmly entrenched and seemingly insoluble problem they may face, they will not solve it. Nor will they seize opportunities (i.e., the other side of any problem is an opportunity).

Action Learning sets are often aided in their learning by a “set advisor” (Pedler, 1991; Weinstein, 1995). While in certain sets the set advisor (Casey, 1991; Reeves, 1995) is a working member of the group relative to his or her involvement with the project, under other arrangements the set advisor plays more of a facilitator role (Casey, 1991). Although a set advisor is not absolutely required for Action Learning to take place, Weinstein (1995) has advocated, “Without the set advisor pulling the set back from rushing into action, constantly asking them ‘what have you learnt?’, action learning becomes merely another action-focused programme where the experience and action are not fully explored and reflected on” (pp. 43-44).

ACTION LEARNING AND THE “LEARNING EQUATION”

An integral part of the basis for Action Learning is what Revans calls, the “learning equation” (Pedler, 1991; Revans, 1984; Weinstein, 1995). This equation, expressed: $L = P + Q$ suggests that *Learning* results from a combination of *Programmed knowledge* plus *Questioning*. In short, programmed knowledge is the knowledge of experts, knowledge in books, and “what we are told to do because that is how it has been done for decades” (Weinstein, 1995, p. 44). Because of its fundamental importance to Action Learning, the learning equation merits further discussion:

ACTION LEARNING AND “PROGRAMMED KNOWLEDGE”: THE “P”

Programmed knowledge (Law & Chuah, 2004; Smith & O'Neil, 2003b) is all we have come to know from the past; it is what experts acquire in their various fields of specialization (experts including authors, consultants, political officials, and corporate managers, etc.); it is what schools and universities teach. “Throughout life one is told by all manner of authorities what to do or say next, and one learns to obey” (Revans, 1986, p. 77). The limitation of programmed knowledge, however, is that the future may be very different from the past, especially in an era such as ours, of rapid change. Revans (1984) elaborated:

Thus, there is much still to be learned by many from their studies of the past. We call this *P*, the acquisition of *programmed knowledge*, entering into one’s mental filing cabinets some useful propositions known to, explained by and learned from others. We feel, all the same, that they are built on what lies behind us, and upon what *necessarily* lies behind us. Whether it is sufficient to guide us into what lies ahead is another question. (p. 212)

Programmed knowledge is thus the spawning ground of deeply held beliefs and assumptions, as well as other cultural manifestations such as ritual practices.

ACTION LEARNING AND “QUESTIONING”: THE “Q”

One might expect that the corollary to Revans' programmed knowledge, if it had been explained by Thomas Kuhn, in his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, would be the "paradigm" (1996, p. 144). These characteristics of programmed knowledge are also acknowledged in a Revans Centre Newsletter, *LINK-Up With Action Learning*, where Vick (1997) wrote: "Action learning is a way to defy existing assumptions by summoning our courage to accept the possibility that different perspectives may be needed—perspectives which may lead to truth" (p. 1). This defiance of assumptions (or even ignorance about assumptions) and acceptance of different perspectives fuels the engine of Action Learning. Stated more gently than outright defiance, one could say: questioning assumptions. A paradoxical twist regarding the role of expertise, assumptions, and paradigms flavors both the work of Kuhn and Revans. Kuhn (1996) wrote:

Any new interpretation of nature, whether a discovery or a theory, emerges first in the mind of one or a few individuals. It is they who first learn to see science and the world differently, and their ability to make the transition is facilitated by two circumstances that are not common to most members of their profession. Invariably their attention has been intensely concentrated upon the crisis-provoking problems; usually, in addition, they are men so young or so new to the crisis-ridden field that practice has committed them less deeply than most of their contemporaries to the world view and rules determined by the old paradigm. (p. 144)

According to Revans (1986), in his article, *Action Learning and the Cowboys* (apparently written in response to those who had earlier labeled his ideas as maverick views):

Much other learning comes, neither from example nor command, but from one's own experience...by making mistakes, discovering that something does not quite work out as one had been led to believe, dreaming it, misunderstanding instructions from some superior, and, occasionally, deliberately asking quite fresh questions—like Newton, suggesting that the force pulling the apple to the ground might also hold the moon close to Earth. Knowledge, ideas, attitudes, skills, new perceptions of what seems to be going are always turning up; what is found out, moreover, generally tells one something fresh about oneself....Learning of this nature comes from questioning insight, and is denoted by Q. (p. 77)

Finally, articulated in a different way, but similar in spirit nonetheless, is the role of the "non-expert" (Revans, 1978, , 1981; Weinstein, 1995, p. 115; Whetherley, 1995) as crucial to questioning assumptions in Action Learning according to participants. Comments from several such participants who were quoted in Weinstein's book (1995), *Action Learning: A Journey in Discovery and Development*, provided some insights in this regard:

I was amazed at how the non-experts in a given field can help you by asking intelligent questions—often very simple ones...their lack of familiarity with my issue caused me to explain it from basics, and made me often think more laterally. (p. 115)

A participant in a mixed-company set recalled, "It was interesting. There was no one else in my set from finance (I'm in banking)—I was with someone from the NHS, computing, retail and telecommunications. I was able to help them spot what, to me, were glaring problems or gaps, and I had ideas on how things could be done differently....They did the same for me." (p. 115)

"Although one other member of the set was also from Personnel, I found the non-experts more helpful because it was in explaining to them what seemed so obvious that I often saw the flaws, or they would see something that I had missed because I was too close...as was the other 'expert'." (p. 115)

In mixed-company programmes, there is an added dimension of comparing how various organizations tackle different issues—or even the same issue—differently. For one participant this latter experience was, as he put it, “an eye-opener. I had always assumed that the way things were done in my company was the best and the only way. Now I see this was not necessarily so.” (pp. 146-147)

ACTION LEARNING AND “LEARNING”: THE “L”

According to Revans (1986), “In a simplistic fashion, we may say that learning is the sum of programmed instruction and of questioning insight” (p.77). Weinstein (1995) elaborated:

Learning results from the combination of the two, i.e. all the knowledge we accumulate through reading or going on courses and listening to lectures (the knowledge of the experts) and **Q** (asking questions about that programmed knowledge and the circumstances you find yourself in). (p. 44)

ACTION LEARNING AND CHANGE

Action Learning is all about change. Indeed, the rate of change which humankind now faces raises some serious issues about adaptation on both an individual and societal basis. According to Revans (1983): “It is change which gives the present time its distinctive character; most of what we now have to deal with changes more in a year than, in the past, it would have changed in a century” (p. 39). Alvin Toffler (1971), author of *Future Shock*, the popular book he introduced as being “about what happens to people when they are overwhelmed by change” (p.1), would seem to agree:

If the last 50,000 years of man’s existence were divided into lifetimes of approximately sixty-two years each, there have been about 800 such lifetimes. Of these 800, fully 650 were spent in caves. Only during the last seventy lifetimes has it been possible to communicate effectively from one lifetime to another...Only during the last six lifetimes did masses of men ever see a printed word. Only during the last four has it been possible to measure time with any precision....And the overwhelming majority of all the material goods we use in daily life today have been developed within the present, the 800th lifetime. (p. 14)

Insofar as Action Learning’s relationship with change is concerned, Revans (1983) also suggested, “If conditions change more rapidly than you can learn (or adapt) you will be in trouble, as are all organisms facing change” (p.40). He added, however: “When the rate of learning is as fast as (or faster than) the rate of change, the organism is likely to adapt, to survive and even to grow” (Revans, 1983, p. 40). These precepts have also expressed symbolically in another of Revans’ equations, where **L > C**, learning must be greater than change (Weinstein, 1995, pp. 44-45). Revans (1984) has also illustrated how the rate of change experienced during this century impacts Action Learning (see figure 1, below):

Suggesting in a purely diagrammatic form the rate of change during the 20th Century, of many influences, scientific, social and economic, upon almost every aspect of human existence. When the morrow becomes more and more uncertain, those obliged to take decisions need, not only more knowledge necessarily drawn from the past, but also an ability to question both its relevance to the future and their own uncertainties about the significance of present. Learning demands not only more programmed knowledge, but also more questioning insight; $L = P + Q$, the learning equation. (p. 211)

Insert Figure 1 about here

A FEW OF ACTION LEARNING'S APPLICATIONS TO DATE

The earliest Action Learning program began in 1952 when a consortium of mining managers was formed under a the National Coal Board in England (Revans, 1986) . This was followed by a project in which ten large London-area hospitals exchanged ideas about each other's troubles and what could be done to improve their conditions (Revans, 1981). Revans was also invited by Lord Weinstock of the General Electric Company to set up an Action Learning program there (Pedler, 1991; Revans, 1981, , 1986).

Since some of these early programs, Action Learning has been employed around the world in a variety of settings and contexts including companies, industries and countries (Heller, 2003; Mumford, 2002; Smith & O'Neil, 2003b; Taylor, Jones, & Boles, 2004). Digital Equipment, General Motors, GTE, Ameritech, AT&T, Corning, Cigna, Whirlpool, Dow Chemical and Prudential Insurance have used Action Learning (Froiland, 1994; Pedler, 1991); countries that have imported Action Learning include the U.S., Belgium, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, Saudia Arabia, Norway, Sweden, Egypt, Nigeria, Singapore, China and others (Pedler, 1991; Revans, 1981).

SOME BACKGROUND NOTES ON THE ORIGINS OF RBOCS

The divestiture of AT&T was the direct result of a court-ordered breakup of the organization's regulated monopoly, which was completed in 1984. RBOC's (Regional Bell Operating Companies)—also known as Baby Bells—were spun off from AT&T as separate operating companies, whereas they had previously operated under “Ma Bell's” corporate umbrella. Given their lineage, it may become easier to see how RBOCs to this day share many structural—and one might presume—cultural commonalties (Schein, 1992; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Relative to its cultural legacy, observations by Robbins (1990) may shed some light:

A symbol of AT&T's historic culture is the print of Angus McDonald, a nineteenth-century Bell System lineman, fighting to keep telephone lines open during a blizzard. A longtime feature of AT&T office decor, the print symbolizes the company's commitment to service. AT&T's culture developed around an incredibly strong service ethic. Employees did what they felt was best for its customers, regardless of what the customers actually wanted. Managers, too, were molded to excel in a regulated, monopolistic environment....It attracted to its management ranks many who had a high sense of mission and who needed a structural environment and security. Ma Bell took care of its people. (pp. 516-517).

One might also consider AT&T's tremendous predivestiture size. As Hamburg (1985) observed in his book, *Making Millions in Telecommunications*: “At the time of the divestiture, AT&T Communications serviced approximately 80 million residence customers and 7 million business customers” (p. 81). Now, RBOCs service regional portions of AT&T's former customer base, plus new markets that have emerged since that time, with each commanding significant revenues as powerful entities unto themselves. Yet, as this case demonstrated, despite their relative size and power, RBOCs are not free from problems. This is, of course, good insofar as an opportunity to practice Action Learning was concerned.

THE CLIENT

“The client is the person who ultimately owns the problem under investigation—the person who will finally be held responsible for the resolution of the project on which the participants work” (Garratt, 1991, p. 56). In this case, the client was the director of distribution, an individual who was responsible for providing telephone directories to all business and residential customers throughout the region of the United States serviced by the RBOC under which his organization operated. Telephone directory distribution was divided into two phases: 1) a massive annual disbursement when new directories are published and old ones are replaced for every customer; and 2) an “interim” phase during the year when, for instance, a new customer from out-of-town established phone service. To provide some semblance of scale, the number of directories involved was substantial, amounting to approximately fifty-million throughout an annual distribution cycle.

The client’s organization was the directory advertising and publishing subsidiary of a parent telephone company. Another separate organization contracted with the client to physically distribute the phone directories to customers (under an agreement which appeared to support a very close working relationship). Beyond this, another subsidiary of the telephone company was a printing and graphics company that produced directories in accordance with the orders placed by the client.

THE PROJECT SET

The project set should be comprised of “a group of comrades in adversity who will give, and expect as a reciprocal, personal support and honest, constructive criticism as to the rights and duties of each set member” (Garratt, 1991, p. 56). Set members in this case were a mixed group from several organizations: managers from the client organization were always present; an official telephone company liaison was also present in many meetings; and the contracted distribution company was represented; the author of this paper served as the set advisor. Meetings were regular, spaced out at about every two to three weeks over a period of several months. Besides the regular set members, during the course of the project a variety of others associated with related processes were invited to participate. In some instances, these persons served as SMEs (Subject Matter Experts) in relation to certain issues that arose. As an example, at one point questions were raised about what would be entailed in changing the computer screens which were displayed to telephone service representatives. An individual familiar with the computer programming group was subsequently asked to join in the discussion.

Set members were remarkably well qualified, so it seemed to this author, and all seemed to maintain positive relations with one another. However, especially as the project seemed to extend longer than what many had hoped it would, resistance was felt as some set members expressed a lack of genuine ownership to the effect: “I sympathize with your [the client’s] problem, but in the end, it’s not really my problem.” This stance on the part of those who voiced resistance is contrary to set-membership selection ideals; that is, members must be fully invested as problem owners.

In this case, the client was at the mercy of a variety of persons and procedures that required the input and problem solving commitment of several parties. For example, if telephone company customer service representatives were going to change their behavior, then their training, compensation, and work procedures would have to change. Since the client couldn’t force any such changes on those service representatives (or *their* employer), what other choice did he have but to ask telephone company management and other separate units to participate in

the problem solving?

THE “PROBLEM”

Even though the client’s responsibility was conceptually straightforward, it was the organizational structure itself that in this case became a gargantuan stumbling block, which at times appeared impenetrable and immovable. The parent telephone company was comprised of a collection of companies, all ultimately operating under the umbrella of the holding company (that is, the RBOC). In this case the organizational structure created a complex set of interrelated problems. The client’s overall problem showed symptoms that in part had to do with how orders for phone directories from telephone customers were processed. In short, it was handing out far more phone directories than it had in prior years. Experience in making projections, based on factors such as population growth rates, showed that the increase was far beyond “normal,” according to the client. The initial question was, “Why?”

Another related issue was the fact that directory orders were taken by telephone company service representatives who were largely evaluated on the basis of their expediency. In other words, they took orders for phone service (a part of the service includes phone books) and entered these into a computer; handling orders quickly was a top priority. As a consequence, a few complications for the client resulted: 1) getting the order “right” was not tied to representatives’ compensation; 2) various computer screens that were displayed to the representatives during the process were designed by a different computer service subsidiary; 3) training for the representatives was a wholly separate issue.

One issue was even somewhat strange and difficult to fathom, at least by this author’s reckoning: the client’s organization needed information from the telephone service provider as to whom it was selling its services, i.e., specific customers, and other data such as whether or not the service was for a second line (which might not need another directory, e.g., when it was used as a fax or modem line). This information was needed in order to distribute directories correctly and eliminate unwanted duplicate sets of phone books at the customer’s location. It should also be noted that on a nationwide basis, second line service connections had soared in recent years and the trend impacted the client. Unfortunately, due to the regulatory environment, if the telephone service provider gives out its customer list and account activity data to the client’s organization (even though both were owned by the same holding company), it could be forced to give the information to a competitor as well.

Even the notion, getting the order “right,” became complicated from the client’s vantage point. If a telephone service order addressed a customer who was merely moving locally—from an apartment to a house, for instance—that customer might not need another directory, or a set of telephone directories. In larger cities, a set of directories may amount to several yellow and white pages books, each with a printing and distribution cost of a few dollars each. When a customer who didn’t need these books receives them anyway, \$20 to \$30 may simply go down the drain. If this scenario was repeated thousands of times across a region that has millions of customers, the waste amounted to a significant sum. In organizational theory terms, the client was part of a large group of organizations under a highly decentralized structure which resulted in separate budgets, information resources, and accountabilities, thereby impacting the personal and managerial agendas of each operating unit.

A challenging manifestation was created in the wake of this structure: an accountability linkage was directly tied to the profit objectives of the ultimate holding company, resulting in an

“It’s Not *My* Problem” mentality. That is, among the various organizational unit managers and employees (with respect to their relationships with other organizational units) the problems they each had were their own—they were accountable to the holding company.

THE OUTCOME

First, through a long process, a number of data sources were used to compile what seemed to be a fairly accurate assessment as to the extent of the delivery of duplicate orders. Some of the information that was cross examined came from customer surveys, inventory counts, and both descriptive and inferential statistical data analyses (available to the client). Although it had been strongly suspected all along, confirming evidence finally showed that directory order increases were directly correlated to wildly successful second line sales, and the client finally had exact numerical findings to go by (note that the extent of that success had previously been information that the telephone service provider didn’t want to share).

One aspect of the aforementioned suspicion ultimately became useful in the solution: while the client—for budgetary reasons—wanted to reduce the number of directories being distributed, a question raised (before the above confirming evidence was found) was, “Isn’t the real goal to serve the customer, so that just the right number of directories is received—not too many, and not too few?” Meanwhile, the telephone service provider organization had been on a “quality mission” which had impacted a number of its strategies. Its management had implemented numerous customer service programs, which had included training and other employee development efforts. However, it did not initially want to entertain the costs of making changes in the service representatives’ normal procedures. Further, several such changes were needed, including:

- 1) To keep representatives from automatically punching “send,” thereby ordering another set of (usually unwanted) phone books on their computerized order screens, significant and expensive computer programming changes would be required (recall that this would involve yet another computer services organization). As it became evident, the representatives’ behavior in generating unnecessary directory orders had become problematic for the client, such as in second line sales and customer moves within the same geographic area.
- 2) Training service representatives on new systems and procedures would be required.
- 3) Performance issues related to how representatives were evaluated would have to be examined and addressed, such that they would want to cooperate. (It was far faster to press “send,” as mentioned in item 1, above.)
- 4) More accurate data would need to be gathered, where possible, as to what customers’ usage plans for their phones actually were.

At one point, underwriting the costs of changes such as these was considered the problem, and burden of the client. After all, *he* was the one sending out more phone books than planned for in *his* budget—it was therefore *his* problem. At that time a message was sent to the telephone service provider organization, to the effect, “The customer doesn’t know about all these separate subsidiaries and issues; rather, as far as he or she is concerned, it’s ‘the phone

company' that can't get its orders right." Thus, in the customer's eyes, it was 'the phone company' that looked inept while it was simultaneously heralding its customer service and quality efforts, publicly.

That message was received; and although the changes did require several months to implement, the client's problem was rendered under control. Estimated savings for the client company were reported to be in excess of \$1 million, *annually*. Experience in this case suggested that in practice, the notion of problem ownership can be problematic. Indeed, the outcome in this particular case demonstrated that reallocating the ownership of the problem became the impetus for the solution itself to prevail.

CONCLUSION

One word of advice to future sets might summarize the critical action in Action Learning: *persist*. Hopefully, the results reported above will inspire those who are in doubt (or are unfamiliar with) the usefulness of Action Learning. In this Action Learning case, a complex problem in an organization "struggling within itself" was effectively addressed. While the Action Learning literature addresses issues of risk and problem ownership somewhat definitively—stressing the underlying importance of genuine and sustained commitment—the real point is that risk and ownership are infinitely variable. In essence, one can own a problem to some extent, while another *owns* a problem. In practice, ownership even seemed to shift among set members on their good days versus their lesser days, much like the weather outside over the course of the set meetings themselves. This case does not purport to offer a final solution to offer to the dilemma of problem ownership. However, future Action Learners and researchers may benefit from further evaluating the notion of problem ownership within sets.

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Figure 1, Revans' Learning Equation

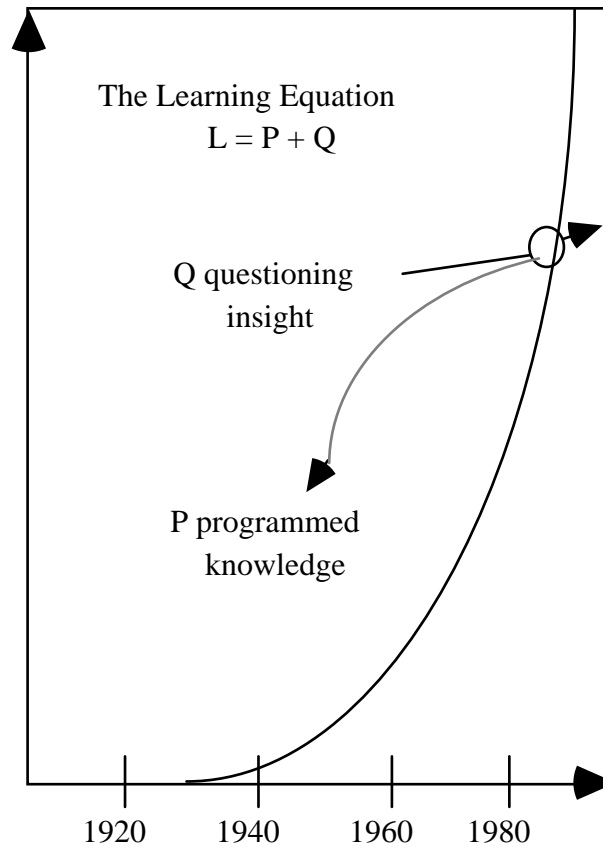


Figure redrawn here accompanied Revans' quote above and was also taken from Revans' article: *'Meadium': On the Learning equation in 1984*, in *Management Education and Development*, 15 (3), 211.