

# Action Learning unplugged

**Emily Cosgrove** provides a case study of how Action Learning has improved engagement at Mencap

**W**orking in the care sector is tough. Chief executive of the Care Quality Commission, David Behan recognises the rising pressure on care services with tight budgets and real financial pressures that will continue into 2015/16 and beyond<sup>1</sup>. *Panorama* has highlighted some of the impact of these rising pressures over the past few years in a series of programmes that have exposed the many changes needed to provide a consistently decent level of care for those most vulnerable in our society. Maintaining an engaged workforce who face this environment every day is a serious challenge!

Mencap is the leading UK charity for people with a learning disability. It was against the backdrop of this context that in mid-2012 Jan Tregelles, then director of Personal Support, now CEO, recognised the importance of offering a high level of individual and continued support for Mencap's area operational managers (AOMs). AOMs, described by the organisation as the gatekeepers of quality, are at the forefront of maintaining the highest standard quality of care for the people with learning disabilities that they support.

In November 2012, Tregelles launched a 12-month programme 'Action Learning Unplugged' to provide sustained, real support for this challenging role. Two years on and the programme has had real, significant impact on the individual participants, their teams and the wider organisation.

## Programme approach

The programme was made up of eight action learning sets (ALSs), each consisting of up to eight AOMs. To ensure each set provided diversity, participants were carefully selected to

represent a wide geographical spread from across the whole of England and Wales within each group. The mix in each set proved successful in providing a rich variety of experience and approach to the role.

Each set met for a full day, every six weeks, a total of nine times for the duration of the programme and was externally facilitated. Participation was impressively high with AOMs regularly travelling for hours at the start and end of each day and/or including an overnight stay. Attendance was maintained at just over 77 per cent average throughout the course of the programme.

Evaluation was carried out through:

- A thematic feedback report following each round
- Mid-point and final evaluations through online questionnaires
- A final celebration event where focus groups provided feedback on their experiences and recommendations for the future.

## Background to programme

The vision for the programme was to provide support for AOMs in a real and practical way, offering space and time to discuss and explore live or ongoing issues in an honest and open way with colleagues in the same role, facing the same challenges. Using the principles of Action Learning (AL), combined with focus given to some specific organisational input, the main objectives for the Action Learning programme were to:

- Provide the opportunity to share challenges and issues with colleagues in a professional yet informal and confidential environment
- Support individual development and effectiveness in the role of AOM
- Provide a forum for peer support

- Provide the opportunity for continued learning and development in the role of AOM.

The programme offered a real opportunity to raise AOM's engagement with the organisation and with their peers working across England and Wales. The programme objectives clearly fit with all three dimensions of employee engagement, as identified by the CIPD:

- Intellectual – thinking hard about the job and how to do it better
- Affective – feeling positively about doing a good job
- Social – actively taking opportunities to discuss work-related improvements with others at work.

*“When setting up the ALS programme at Mencap it was derived from a need of wanting to do something that felt ‘real’ to our middle managers, as opposed to a fixed development programme that is then hard to apply to their world and context. We felt the ALS solution hit all three levels of engagement (intellectual, affective and social).*”

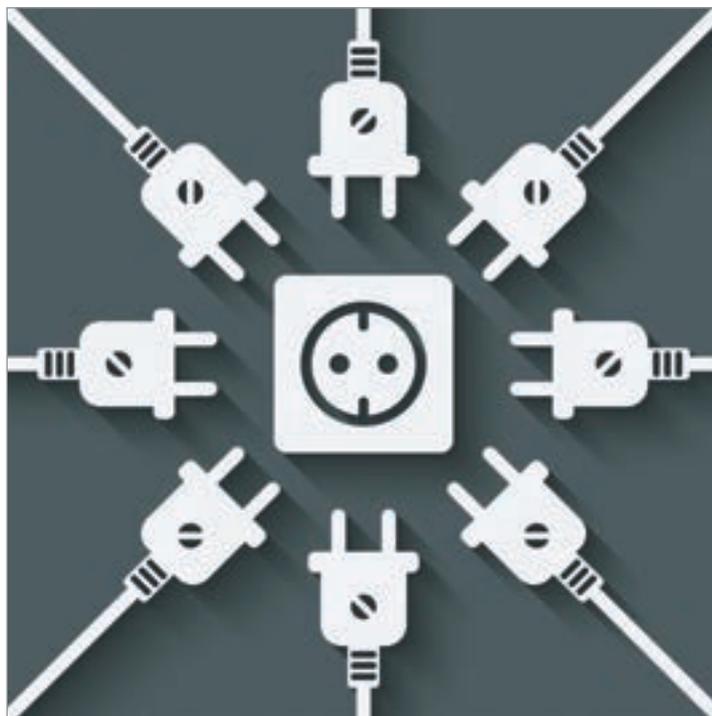
*“The programme was a mixture of complete free space where a traditional ALS format was followed, as well as some input from an organisational perspective to ensure key themes and development areas were being covered. This mixed format worked well.” Sara Sheard, head of organisational development*

Through sharing stories arising from the programme, we can begin to understand some of the essential ingredients that enabled Action Learning to be a powerful vehicle for employee engagement at Mencap.

### Beginnings

In the very first meeting of each set, the morning was given to contracting, setting and agreeing group ground rules and getting to know each other. Spending ample time on personal profiles, which were then presented to the group by each member, provided the opportunity to share ‘more of me’ than usually disclosed to work colleagues.

The intention behind this exercise was to build a shared experience, trust within the group, encourage individuals to share more vulnerability and consequentially to gain high engagement and buy-in to the programme itself. Often, these sessions included much laughter, tears, truly moving and personal stories and by the end of the day a real sense of connectedness and collaboration. By tapping into people's emotions,



engagement in the process and the content of the conversations was high.

### Reflection for improvement

Throughout the duration of the programme, the nature of the process followed at each set meeting was such that the focus of conversation was firmly rooted in the job and role of AOM. Similar to Kolb's learning cycle<sup>2</sup>, each conversation (whether an individual ‘presentation’ or a more generic topic) observed and reflected on the concrete experience of AOMs, drew out the learning from that reflection and considered new or different approaches and applications for future improvements, intellectual engagement – thinking hard about the job and how to do it better.

Some examples of ‘presentations’ and themes that emerged over the year included:

- Managing a team in crisis
- Maintaining motivation in a high-performing team
- Building relationships
- Challenge of recruitment
- Local v centralised admin resource
- Improving the usability of quality processes.

Working together in an ongoing group, exploring issues together and focusing on solutions and suggestions for improvement, provided rich learnings on many different levels.

### References

- 1 Care Quality Commission 2013/14 report, ‘The State of Health Care and Adult Social Care in England 2013-14’
- 2 D. A Kolb and R. Fry (1975) Toward an applied theory of experiential learning. In C. Cooper (ed.), *Theories of Group Process*, London: John Wiley



- A safe environment for individuals to explore new ways of thinking and doing
- The benefit of hearing others' experience, sharing good practice and taking away 'real', practical solutions
- Sharing themes and feedback across the sets through the feedback report circulated at the end of each round.

**Leadership development**

Every set meeting was facilitated with specific attention given by the facilitator to developing the core skills of high quality listening, insightful questioning and offering effective feedback. Holding set members accountable for, and raising awareness to, the quality of these skills throughout each set meeting was an opportunity for ongoing and 'real time' development. It was interesting to observe, over the course of the programme, a clear shift from the facilitator holding this position, to individual set members doing this for each other. This move towards independence and the ability to self-facilitate, illustrated a growing maturity in individual skill sets.

AOMs also reported a positive ripple effect from being involved in the programme. Many

of them began addressing their individual and team conversations, as well as meetings, with an Action Learning approach. Since the inception of the 'Unplugged' programme this approach has continued to ripple across Mencap and is now becoming part of the fabric of how the organisations works.

**Sharing thinking across sets and with the organisation**

Once sets were established and the programme was under way, there was a clear desire to share thinking and themes across the sets. One of the most powerful outcomes in terms of engagement of the Action Learning participants was this sharing of themes. Sets requested that the facilitator would offer up their thinking to other sets to see if there was wider input or feedback which could be offered to the organisation on specific themes.

The most significant example of this across the whole programme came from group discussions regarding quality processes. There was wide agreement across all sets that this could work in a more effective and efficient way for all levels of managers and ultimately the organisation as

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a whole. The feedback and suggestions provided by sets, and the continued dialogue, effected a fundamental change in the quality process and systems of the organisation. This clearly demonstrates social engagement – actively taking opportunities to discuss work-related improvements with others at work.

*“One of the biggest values of the programme for the organisation was the feedback loop we created, so that the facilitator at a theme level was feeding back what AOMs felt and the organisation was then able to respond and inform thinking based on this. This really helped from an engagement point of view, the AOMs feeling valued and listened to.” Sara Sheard, head of organisational development*

In terms of affective engagement – feeling positively about doing a good job – the feedback from both mid-point and final evaluation questionnaires strongly suggests the programme helped AOMs engage in this way. Some examples include:

*“The programme has enabled me to have a more positive perspective on (my) role”*

*“I genuinely believe that the ALS has changed my career for the better, I feel I have a much clearer idea of my talents and skills”*

### How to make an AL programme grow employee engagement

1. Tap into people’s emotions right from the very start of the programme.
2. Share good practice – at a very practical level.
3. Actively encourage connection between group members at a very human level – finding out what’s going on outside of work for individuals, as well as in.
4. Share relevant work stories of what’s going well and what’s really not going well.
5. Invest in the simple but rarely available ‘time to think’ with peers in the same role.
6. Use a skilled and objective facilitator.
7. Listen to the feedback, ideas and suggestions that emerge. Then be bold enough to continue the conversation and make the change! This does not mean every suggestion or idea must be acted upon, but really consider and evaluate them and communicate the outcome so that people feel heard.

### Future of AL at Mencap

A celebration event was held at the end of the ‘Unplugged’ programme to bring all the learning sets together along with Jan Tregelles, the leadership team and AOMs’ line managers. This event was to celebrate commitment to the programme and draw from individual and organisational learnings as well as mark the end of the formal programme.

Creative thinking was encouraged by asking all attendees of the event to consider the questions:

- What’s next for Mencap Action Learning, and,
- How to sustain the conversation between AOMs and the organisation?

The session provided rich discussion and specific exploration of the theme ‘being listened to and speaking up honestly’. Many of the groups discussed how to continue as a set and how to cascade the offering more directly to service managers, support workers and across other parts of the organisation.

The desire to continue the conversation between AOMs and the organisation was clear from every perspective. The culture shift that occurred over the duration of the programme highlighted the high value placed on honest, solutions-focused conversations and the actions coming out of those.

Engagement in the approach that the ‘Unplugged’ programme offered, and the organisation as a whole is also highlighted through AOMs extending this approach to their way of working. Individuals have described:

- Structuring team meetings and days to provide an opportunity to share challenges and find solutions for all members of the team
- Giving more thinking time to service managers in one-to-one conversations
- Taking more of a coaching approach and leading in a non-directive way to encourage development and growth in team members
- Changing the culture of ‘how we manage people’ and developing service managers and support workers to do the same
- Structuring appraisal meetings to offer thinking time and agree actions.

The programme contributed to a real culture shift in Mencap and began paving a new pathway for managers and leaders to work in a different way, providing more engagement with their role, their colleagues and the organisation. **TJ**

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