



EVOLUTION OF ACTION LEARNING AT MENCAP

Emily Cosgrove provides a case study on how Action Learning is impacting at the major charity for people with learning disability

In today's hyper-connected, always on, multi-generational and increasingly diverse work context, the imperative to create opportunities for our people to connect through human conversation, has never been higher.

Four years ago Mencap, the leading UK charity for people with a learning disability, ran a 12-month Action Learning (AL) programme¹ that was successful in boosting the engagement of their Area Operational Managers (AOMs). It also contributed to a culture shift in the organisation; paving a new pathway for managers to work in a different way by fostering higher engagement with their role, their colleagues and the organisation.

"AL offered me a different support network as well as challenges from different peers and a great opportunity to learn from others by having an insight into how they achieved different solutions and time to reflect. AL also offered us an opportunity to speak out as a collective and address ongoing problems."

Helena Plunkett, AOM Sheffield, Mencap

Building on this success, Mencap was keen for AL to play a wider role across the organisation. Continuing structured sets at the same time as building a flexible and blended approach using key principles of AL, opportunities were created to enable growth and development around key areas including:

- ▶ collaboration
- ▶ leadership development
- ▶ ways of working
- ▶ connection between the exec team and top 80 leaders.

Classic AL happens in small sets of peers meeting regularly over time to tackle real problems as opposed to theoretical classroom learning. It is underpinned by a belief that:

- ▶ talented professionals are often better placed to succeed in their roles if they have sufficient quality time to reflect on what they do
- ▶ very often the best people to offer advice and guidance, or to stimulate valuable reflection, are peers
- ▶ working on issues that are real to both the individual and their organisation is a powerful source of learning when combined with supported reflection
- ▶ the successes and failures of others provide rich opportunities for learning
- ▶ to make change happen, you must first accept responsibility.

Sharing examples from across the organisation, as well as personal reflections from participants, this article highlights how the powerful AL approach has evolved to impact a wide range of populations as well as the culture of the charity.

Collaboration

In 2014, a programme was launched to encourage cross-directorate working; enhancing collaboration, growing connectedness and strengthening a 'one Mencap' perspective.

A select number of senior managers each joined an AL set of up to eight colleagues from across different parts of the organisation. The sets met every six weeks, with the first meeting held over a full day (to help establish trust and connection) and



Focus was given to understanding how to create safe thinking environments, build trust and promote reflective learning

the following eight meetings lasting a half-day. All were run with a blend of internal and external facilitation which provided objectivity, contextual understanding and helped to build trust and confidentiality between peers and across the organisation.

Some of the themes and learnings from this programme included:

- ▶ understanding and navigating organisational networks
- ▶ influencing through targeted conversations
- ▶ greater narrative across the organisation – sharing stories from different teams/regions
- ▶ sharing of strengths and challenges for different functions or teams
- ▶ leveraging cross-team relationships and removing the tangible perception of organisational silos.

"AL provided an opportunity to really understand how people within different departments operated ... getting to know people rather than knowing of them. While our roles as managers differed, we learnt that the problems we faced were often essentially the same and supported each other to see things from different perspectives and think through resolutions."

Fiona Haworth, Finance Business Partner, Mencap →

Leadership development

In June 2015, Mencap launched its new leadership framework: Our Leadership Way. To help embed key leadership behaviours and attitudes across all 80 of the top leaders in the organisation, Leadership Learning Sets (LLS) were established. These sets have offered an environment for active dialogue, where leaders can explore challenges in an honest and open way with colleagues.

“Leadership is an essential part of any manager’s toolkit and one of the key areas that gets missed is sharpening this tool. The leadership learning sets have provided me with the time and space needed to develop my leadership skills and, most importantly, the opportunity to do this with my peers and colleagues.”

Dominic Picillo, Head of Mencap Business Support

“Through the honesty of sharing our challenges, I’ve developed strong connections with my LLS colleagues and the unexpected bonus is that I’m now part of a team of knowledgeable and insightful allies.”

Susan Kernachan, Head of Property

Ways of working

Mencap has also used an AL approach with specific populations; AOMs, Regional Operations Managers (ROMs) and teams to help promote closer, more collaborative and reflective peer learning as well as to support specific projects.

Following the success of the AOM programme, Nick Burton (ROM for South & West Yorkshire) initiated the roll out of an AL way of working to the 28 Service Managers in the region. His four AOMs, facilitated the monthly Service Manager meeting in a new way, based on their own experiences of being active members of a set over the previous 12 months. The initiative was positioned as a ‘way to engage and learn from each other as well as drive positive change locally and inform thinking nationally’.

“The [Service Manager] sets built on the concept of opening up to one another and building trust using tools the AOMs themselves had used in their own sets. This worked well to engage the interest of the participants and reaction was very positive. Sets grew more challenging as the dynamics evolved and the real



business of understanding AL, and making it work, got underway.”

Nick Burton, ROM South & West Yorkshire, Mencap

All ROMs also attended a day together as a peer group to explore the principles of AL and how these could enhance the everyday ways of working across their large geographical regions. Many now describe holding their monthly team meetings in more collaborative, inclusive ways such as giving time for everyone to reconnect in a structured way at the start, open agendas, and all ROMs now actively support their AOMs to run their own AL-style groups.

Connection between the exec team and the top 80 leaders

As part of the most recent LLS programme, Mencap piloted an idea connecting each one of the eight executive team members to a separate learning set. There was no line-report crossover between members of the set and the exec member, and a meeting took place to discuss, clarify and agree how the relationship might work.

Each set and the exec stayed in touch between meetings with a light touch connection, helping to build more of a general connective leadership conversation.

“Checking in with my leadership learning set has helped me to stay in touch with parts of the organisation that I may have become more distant from. Several members of the set were part of a wider team that was going through significant change and so hearing honestly about the impact on those people and the rest of the set has helped me to think about the human impact of change and how we manage it.”

Kate McLeod, CFO, Mencap

Challenges

One of the ongoing challenges for AL sets within the organisation is the tension between mandatory participation, and gaining deep commitment from all participants. Although the majority of set members in Mencap recognise the value of being part of an ongoing group, the fact that they did not initially sign up voluntarily has impacted on ongoing commitment.

A further challenge for any organisation keen to use this powerful approach is gathering and make the most of feedback shared by the sets. In facilitated programmes, Mencap commissioned highlight reports to extract themes and feedback, and used these to inform change within the organisation. Without facilitators, identifying ownership of this key information sharing role is essential to capture significant points and inform key decisions.

Conclusion

We know that healthy and productive organisations create a climate in which people can be more honest and human in their approach to dialogue. We also know that wise people share an optimism that most problems can be solved.

By creating space for people to think together, engage in quality dialogue, share and learn from their experiences and try new or different ways of working, Mencap is weaving an ethos of more human and honest workplace connections into the fabric of the organisation. Through evolving its use of AL, it continues to provide a compelling way to grow this climate and a framework in which to cultivate a wise approach.

This evolution has required a commitment and willingness to invest in its people and to work in a way which demands vulnerability and courage at all levels of the organisation. As a result, Mencap has strengthened connections between its people, enhanced key leadership behaviours and authenticity, enhanced organisational learning, and deepened engagement. **TJ**

Emily Cosgrove is co-founder of The Conversation Space. To find out more, visit <http://theconversationspace.com>

Reference

- 1 Emily Cosgrove, ‘AL unplugged’, *TJ*, February 2015