THE USE OF ACTION LEARNING AS A GROUP PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS IN SIBU MUNICIPAL COUNCIL

Hii Chang Kee

Kota Samarahan
1998
DEDICATION

For my parents, who taught and inspired me; for my wife, Irene, from whom I have learned so much; and for my daughter, Michelle, for whom I have the joy of teaching.
A few words of thanks are due to those who helped with the research. Firstly, I would like to thank the Sarawak State Government for sponsoring me in this M.Sc. (HRD) programme. For allowing me access to the organisation, resources and the research participants, I would like to thank Mr. Stephen Tsai Jit Jui, the Municipal Secretary of Sibu Municipal Council.

For very specific contributions, I would particularly like to thank the action research group members who were very dedicated and committed in completing this research. They are Zainab Hj. Marzali, Abu Bakar Hj. Sepawi, Simon ak. Dawit and Mohd. Yusri bin Jawawi together with all their respective action learning set members.

Special appreciation also goes to Dr. Gabriel Tonga Noweg, my supervisor for the research, for his invaluable guidance and my co-supervisor Mr. Hong Kian Sam, for his unfailing support.

This research is the result of many long hours’ work often taken at the expense of my family. My thanks therefore go to my parents, my wife, Irene and our daughter, Michelle who have been so understanding and patient.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to the many colleagues and friends who have given their support and encouragement in completing this research. There are many whose help I wish to acknowledge, many more than I can name. To all of them, I express my heartfelt appreciation for their help in one way or another.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION........................................................................................................... II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS......................................................................................... III 
TABLE OF CONTENTS........................................................................................... IV
LISTS OF TABLES.................................................................................................. IX
LISTS OF FIGURES............................................................................................... X
ABSTRACT............................................................................................................. XI
ABSTRAK............................................................................................................... XII

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.................................................................................... 1
  1.0 Introduction .................................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Purpose of The Research ............................................................................... 1
  1.2 Research Questions ..................................................................................... 1
  1.3 Background of the Problem ......................................................................... 1
  1.4 The Need for the Project ............................................................................. 2
  1.5 Research Methodology ................................................................................ 3
  1.6 Scope of the Research ................................................................................. 4
  1.7 Limitations of the Research ......................................................................... 4
  1.8 Assumptions .................................................................................................. 4
  1.9 Significance of the Research ......................................................................... 5
  1.10 Definition of Terms .................................................................................... 5
      1.10.1 Action Learning ................................................................................... 5
      1.10.2 Action Learning Sets .......................................................................... 5
      1.10.3 Action Research .................................................................................. 5
      1.10.4 Action Research Group ....................................................................... 5
      1.10.5 Committees and Task Forces .............................................................. 6
      1.10.6 Effective Group Problem Solving ....................................................... 6
      1.10.7 Group .................................................................................................. 7
      1.10.8 Problem ............................................................................................... 7
      1.10.9 Quality Control Circles ....................................................................... 7
      1.10.10 Sibu Municipal Council ..................................................................... 7
      1.10.11 Triangulation .................................................................................... 7
      1.10.12 Work Teams ..................................................................................... 8

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ......................................................................... 9
  2.0 Introduction .................................................................................................... 9
  2.1 Action Learning ............................................................................................ 9
      2.1.1 Background .......................................................................................... 9
      2.1.2 Definitions ............................................................................................ 9
      2.1.3 The Learning Process and Cycles ....................................................... 10
          2.1.3.1 L = P + Q .................................................................................... 10
          2.1.3.2 Learning From Experience ......................................................... 11
      2.1.4 Essential Elements of an Action Learning Programme ......................... 13
          2.1.4.1 Learning Sets ............................................................................. 13
          2.1.4.2 The Project or Problem ............................................................... 13
          2.1.4.3 The Processes ............................................................................. 15
          2.1.4.4 Set Advisor/Facilitator ............................................................... 15
          2.1.4.5 The Duration of the Programme ............................................... 16
          2.1.4.6 The Client .................................................................................. 17
  2.2 Problem Solving .......................................................................................... 17
      2.2.1 Definition ............................................................................................ 17
      2.2.2 Problem Solving Process .................................................................... 18
      2.2.3 The Significance of Groups in Problem Solving ................................. 20
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 49
4.1 Processes involved in the action research .................................................................. 49
4.2 Mini-Cycle One: Preliminaries .............................................................................. 50
  4.2.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 50
  4.2.2 Entry to the Organisation ................................................................................... 51
  4.2.3 Formation of the action research group ............................................................. 51
  4.2.4 Action Research Group meeting 1 .................................................................... 52
  4.2.5 Action Research Group Meeting 2 ................................................................... 54
  4.2.6 Action Learning Workshop .............................................................................. 56
  4.2.7 Action Research Group Meeting 3 ................................................................... 59
  4.2.8 Reflection ......................................................................................................... 61
4.3 Mini-Cycle 2: Identification of Work-Based Problems ........................................... 61
  4.3.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 61
  4.3.2 Action Research Group Meeting 4 ................................................................... 62
  4.3.3 Action Research Group Meeting 5 ................................................................... 69
  4.3.4 Reflection ......................................................................................................... 70
4.4 Mini-Cycle 3: Identification of Causes and Solutions ............................................. 71
  4.4.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 71
  4.4.2 Action Research Group Meeting 6 ................................................................... 72
  4.4.3 Action Research Group Meeting 7 ................................................................... 82
  4.4.4 Reflection ......................................................................................................... 89
4.5 Mini-Cycle 4: Action Plan and Overall Evaluation of Project .................................. 90
  4.5.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 90
  4.5.2 Action Research Group Meeting 8 ................................................................... 91
  4.5.3 Action Research Group Meeting 9 ................................................................... 93
  4.5.4 Reflection Session of All the Action Learning Set members ............................. 96
  4.5.5 Action Research Group Meeting 10 ................................................................ 98
  4.5.6 Action Research Group Meeting 11 ................................................................ 102
  4.5.7 Interviews with Action Learning Set Members ................................................ 106
  4.5.8 Action Research Group Meeting 12 ................................................................ 110
  4.5.9 Overall Reflection Session with the Top Management ...................................... 120
  4.5.10 Reflection ....................................................................................................... 124
4.6 Achievements and Outcomes ................................................................................ 124
  4.6.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 124
  4.6.2 Action Learning As A Group Problem Solving Process ................................... 124
    4.6.2.1 Evaluation by the Action Research Group and the researcher's observation 125
    4.6.2.2 Interviews with Action Learning Set Members ............................................ 126
    4.6.2.3 Evaluation by the Top Management .......................................................... 126
    4.6.3 Effectiveness of Action Learning as Group Problem Solving Process 127
    4.6.3.1 Questionnaires ......................................................................................... 127
    4.6.3.2 Researcher's Observation and Interview with Action Learning Set Members .................................................................................................................................. 127
  4.6.4 Learning of the Participants ............................................................................ 129
    4.6.4.1 Understanding of Action Learning Principles ............................................ 129
    4.6.4.2 Application of Action Learning in Group Problem Solving ...................... 131
  4.6.5 Novel Features Introduced by Action Learning to Group Problem Solving in SMC's Context .......................................................... 132
    4.6.5.1 Evaluation by the Action Research Group ................................................ 132
    4.6.5.2 The Researcher's Observations ................................................................. 132
    4.6.5.3 Interview with Action Learning Set members ............................................ 133
  4.6.6 Conclusions ....................................................................................................... 134
4.7 Reflection of the Action Research Project .................................................................. 134
CHAPTER FIVE: OVERVIEW, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION... 139

5.0 Introduction ................................................................................ 139
5.1 Overview of the Research .............................................................. 139
  5.1.1 Purpose of The Research ......................................................... 139
  5.1.2 Research Questions ................................................................. 139
  5.1.3 Background of the Research ..................................................... 139
  5.1.4 Research Methodology .............................................................. 140
  5.1.5 Scope of the Research ............................................................... 144
  5.1.6 Limitations of the Research ...................................................... 144
  5.1.7 Assumptions ........................................................................... 144
  5.1.8 Significance of the Research .................................................... 145
5.2 Conclusions of the Research .......................................................... 145
  5.2.1 Action Learning As A Group Problem Solving Process .......... 145
  5.2.2 The Effectiveness of Action Learning As A Group Problem Solving Process ......................................................... 145
  5.2.3 The Learning and Improvement of the Group Members ........ 146
  5.2.4 Novel Features Introduced by Action Learning Approach to Group Problem Solving in SMC’s Context ......................... 146
5.3 Reflection of the Action Research Process ..................................... 147
  5.3.1 Identification of the Thematic Concern ................................... 147
  5.3.2 Importance of Collaboration .................................................... 147
  5.3.3 Playing Roles of Both Researcher and Facilitator ................. 147
  5.3.4 Action Research Against Conventional Research ................. 147
  5.3.5 Organisational Improvement .................................................... 148
  5.3.6 The Next Steps ................................................................. 148
5.4 Recommendations .................................................................... 148
  5.4.1 Application of Action Learning in Group Problem Solving Process in SMC ................................................................. 148
  5.4.2 Suggestion for Future Research .............................................. 149

BIBLIOGRAPHY ...................................................................... 150

APPENDIXES ...................................................................... 153
  Appendix A Extracts From Minutes of SMC Section Heads Meetings ... 153
  Appendix B Problems Highlighted by Various Sections during the TQM Workshop 1995 ................................................................. 154
  Appendix C Letter Requesting Entry to the Organisation for Action Research ................................................................. 156
  Appendix D Letter of Approval for the Proposed Action Research .... 157
  Appendix E Letter of Invitation to the Proposed Action Research Group Members ................................................................. 158
  Appendix F Proposed Action Plan of the Action Research ................ 159
  Appendix G Actual Revised Action Plan of the Action Research ........ 167
  Appendix H Questionnaires on the Effectiveness of Group Problem Solving ................................................................. 178
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix I</td>
<td>Questionnaires on The Learning of the Action Learning Set Members from the Action Learning Projects</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix J</td>
<td>Statistical Results Showing the Effectiveness of Group Problem Solving Using Action Learning Approach from the Perspective of the Action Learning Set Members</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix K</td>
<td>Statistical Results Showing the Learning of the Action Learning Set Members from the Action Learning Projects</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix L</td>
<td>Summaries of Problem Solving Projects Using Action Learning Approach by the Respective Action Learning Sets</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LISTS OF TABLES

Table 1  Action Research Group Members................................................................. 39
Table 2  Main Points of Briefing Session ................................................................. 53
Table 3  List of Action Learning Sets ....................................................................... 54
Table 4  Proposed Time Table for Action Learning Workshop ................................. 56
Table 5  Revised Time Table for Action Learning Workshop ...................................... 57
Table 6  Work-Based Problems Identified by Zainab’s Action Learning Set ............... 63
Table 7  Work-Based Problems Identified by Abu’s Action Learning Set .................... 64
Table 8  Work-Based Problems Identified by Simon’s Action Learning Set ............... 67
Table 9  Causes Identified by Abu’s Action Learning Set ........................................... 73
Table 10 Causes Identified by Yusri’s Action Learning Set ........................................ 76
Table 11 Causes Identified by Zainab’s Action Learning Set ...................................... 77
Table 12 Causes Identified by Simon’s Action Learning Set ...................................... 79
Table 13 Solutions Identified by Yusri’s Action Learning Set ................................... 82
Table 14 Solutions Identified by Abu’s Action Learning Set ...................................... 83
Table 15 Solutions Identified by Simon’s Action Learning Set ................................... 85
Table 16 Solutions Identified by Zainab’s Action Learning Set .................................. 88
Table 17 Items of Possible Learnings as Outlined in the Questionnaires .................... 98
Table 18 Action Plan of Simon’s Action Learning Set ................................................. 111
Table 19 Action Plan of Abu’s Action Learning Set .................................................... 115
Table 20 Action Plan of Zainab’s Action Learning Set .............................................. 117
Table 21 Action Plan of Yusri’s Action Learning Set ................................................. 119
Table 22 Common Processes in All the Action Research Mini-Cycles ........................... 141
LISTS OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Kolb's Learning Cycle .................................................................................... 11
Figure 2. Pedler's Learning Process ............................................................................. 12
Figure 3. Problem Solving Cycle .................................................................................. 19
Figure 4. Six-Step Problem Solving Model ................................................................. 20
Figure 5. Action Research Spiral .................................................................................. 32
Figure 6. Action Research Cycles ............................................................................... 33
Figure 7. The Set Up of the Action Research Project .................................................. 40
Figure 8. Action Research Cycle in this Research ....................................................... 42
Figure 9. Diagrammatic Representation of Mini-Cycles within the Main Action Research Cycle ..................................................................................................... 43
Figure 10. The first action research mini-cycle ............................................................. 50
Figure 11. The Second Action Research Mini-Cycle .................................................... 61
Figure 12. The Third Action Research Mini-Cycle ....................................................... 71
Figure 13. The Fourth Action Research Mini-Cycle .................................................... 90
Figure 14. The first and second action research mini-cycles ...................................... 142
Figure 15. The third and fourth action research mini-cycles ...................................... 143
ABSTRACT

Group problem solving takes various forms in Sibu Municipal Council. The common ones are committees, task forces, quality control circles and work teams. Despite very strong top management commitment to promote group problem solving, the employees have not been very receptive of the practice. This became a thematic concern of the organisation. The study attempted to explore the use of action learning as group problem solving process in Sibu Municipal Council using an action research approach. An action research group was formed with the researcher as the facilitator. Each research member established his or her own action learning set to embark on group problem solving projects on real organisational issues. The action learning sets served as research settings for data collection. The observations were brought to the research group for continuous cycles of planning and reflection. The findings showed that action learning could be used as a group problem solving process effectively. By involving themselves in the action learning projects, the participants gained better understanding of action learning and learned to apply it in the group problem solving process. The study also identified various novel features that action learning introduced to group problem solving process in the context of Sibu Municipal Council. The study benefited the organisation where the researcher in collaboration with the members of the organisation succeeded in improving organisational practices and enhanced personal development.
ABSTRAK

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter lays the foundation for the research, the purpose of which had been defined and supported by the research questions. This is followed by the methodology, the scope and limitations of the research, the assumptions made and the significance of the research.

1.1 Purpose of The Research

Action learning is a process which brings people together to find solutions to problems and, in doing so, develops both the individuals and the organisations. Alternatively, action learning is a process, which develops people and organisations using important issues confronting the organisation as a vehicle for doing so (Inglis, 1994). The purpose of the research is, "Exploring the Use of Action Learning as a Group Problem Solving Process in Sibu Municipal Council (SMC)."

1.2 Research Questions

In view of the purpose of this research as stated earlier, the main research question which formed the basis of this research was, “Can an action learning approach be introduced as an effective group problem solving process in Sibu Municipal Council?” The corollary research questions were:

1. Can action learning be used as a group problem solving process in SMC?
2. Is action learning effective as a group problem solving process in SMC?
3. Did the research participants perceive themselves to have improved in:
   (a) the understanding of action learning? and
   (b) the use of action learning in group problem solving process?
4. What novel features, if any, did the action learning approach introduced to group problem solving in Sibu Municipal Council's context?

1.3 Background of the Problem

Problem solving has been very individualistic in Sibu Municipal Council especially among the support groups, who were mostly supervisors, clerks and field workers. Memo writing seems to be a common form of communicating problems and solutions. Problem solving is seldom carried out in a group setting
among the support groups. Even if problems are brought to a group, the process of problem solving has not been systematic and structured.

Efforts had been made to increase employee participation in group problem solving. Such efforts included the implementation of Quality Control Circles and Work Teams. It started with much enthusiasm since 1994 when in-house workshops were conducted to train the employees. Top management expressed full support and commitment to the implementation. Quality control circles and work teams were formed to work on several problem-solving projects. Everyone was excited. However, the initial hoopla tailed off after a while. Only the circle from the Public Library Section managed to persevere until the completion of one project. Unfortunately, it stopped there. Until today, group problem solving is still dragging on in the old scenario, being ad-hoc, unstructured and ineffective.

A great number of work-related problems existed. Some of the major ones as identified in the 1995 SMC in-house TQM Workshop included loose surveillance of contractors, poor counter service, illegal hawkers and vandalism of public infrastructure. The management had been trying hard to solve them through their subordinates who were the front-liners dealing directly with the issues. The Management believed that participative problem solving not only increased the motivation and commitment of the subordinates, but also strengthened the acceptance of the solutions for subsequent implementation. However, effective group problem solving among the subordinates was yet to be seen. Most of the non-routine and complex decisions were still being done individually, especially at the supervisory level.

This had raised much concern among the top management as such continued scenario would affect the quality and productivity of the decisions, which in turn, would affect the overall performance of the organisation. After all, problem solving and decision making should not be the exclusive responsibilities of the top management but the business of everybody in the organisation.

1.4 The Need for the Project

The Municipal Secretary and Section Heads had on several occasions expressed their concern over the practice of group problem solving in the council (see SMC Section Heads Meeting Minutes SH20/95, SH9/96[iv], SH29/96[5][v] in Appendix A). They hoped to see that group problem solving could be incorporated in the work culture of the council. Not only for the sake of solving problem, but the people involved learned and changed through the process. The management assured full support for any effort or attempt to enhance such group problem solving in the organisation.

As mentioned previously, the in-house TQM Workshop in 1995 had identified a list of work related problems for the participants to work on in groups when they returned to the workplace (see Appendix B). However, nothing much had happened after that. Not many group problem-solving projects were started. The participants were neither motivated nor committed to embark on group problem solving.

The quality and productivity auditing team from MAMPU (Malaysian Administration and Modernisation Planning Unit) had repetitively urged the
council to look into the possibility of reviving and sustaining the problem solving groups in order to enhance the quality and productivity of the council. They advised strongly on the significance of structured problem solving groups, in particular quality control circles and work teams in improving the quality and productivity of the council. The more recent reminder came during their assessment panel visit to SMC for the 1997 Sarawak State Civil Service Quality Award.

The management meeting had also expressed concern over the passiveness of the employees to engage in group problem solving. The management had again directed all the section heads to encourage group problem solving in their respective sections (see SMC Section Heads Meeting Minute SH29/96[5][v] in Appendix A).

As such, to solve work-related problems in an effective manner and to sustain the interest and commitment in doing so had become the thematic concern of Sibu Municipal Council. This concern did not emphasise on the form and structure of group problem solving but rather its effectiveness and sustainability in bringing about changes and improvements to the organisation.

The management generally recognised a few factors leading to the unsuccessful implementation of quality control circles and work teams in SMC. Firstly, the staffs were not able to see the benefits from doing so besides the improvement in terms of solutions to the problems. They were not motivated. Furthermore, the pressure from the management actually dampened their motivation to engage in group problem solving projects.

Literature review on action learning had thrown some light on the above issues. The researcher recommended that an action research be conducted to explore the effectiveness of action learning as a group problem solving process in Sibu Municipal Council. At least, action learning provides a possible arena for personal and group development apart from the organisational improvement. The processes and group dynamics involved are also different from those of quality control circles and work teams. The possibility of action learning being an effective approach in group problem solving leaded to the initiation of this action research project.

1.5 Research Methodology

Action research was used as the research method. Action research involves problematic situations where the action researcher in collaboration with the communities in that problematic setting tries to improve it through continuous reflection in cyclical processes. All the respective sectors learn and understand better on the issues involved by ‘doing’ so.

The action research method explored the use of action learning as a group problem solving process in Sibu Municipal Council. The method consisted of a spiral of cycles of planning, action, observation, reflection, and evaluation leading to possible modification of the original plan and further action. The detailed methodology of the research is presented in Chapter 3.
1.6 Scope of the Research

This research explored the application of action learning in the group problem solving process in certain selected working units in Sibu Municipal Council. The results of this research therefore apply only to those particular working units, at that particular time and at that specific location. The research further aimed to generate guidelines on the application of action learning as group problem solving process that might be further tested in other working units in Sibu Municipal Council or even other local authorities in Sarawak.

1.7 Limitations of the Research

Limitations of the research were:
1. The actual conduct of the research was limited to seventeen weeks only from 8/12/97 - 05/04/98, as scheduled by the university.
2. Flexibility to the time schedule was limited as the research setting was in Sibu (the researcher's workplace). Direct contact with the research group was limited to six working weeks only as scheduled by the university (see Appendix F and G). The other eleven weeks were spent in UNIMAS, Kuching to attend lectures. Limited indirect contact was made through telephone, fax and electronic mail.
3. In view of the short and limited span of research, this research was limited to only one main action research cycle ending with action plan recommendations. Implementation of findings would be carried out only after the research proper.

1.8 Assumptions

Among the assumptions made in the research were:
1. Sibu Municipal Council fully supported the research undertaken.
2. The employees involved in the research were readily available and released by the department for conducting the research.
3. The employees involved in the research rendered their fullest support and willingness to the research including giving honest and genuine feedback.
4. The employees involved had the full access to the relevant information, facilities, and equipment for the purpose of the research.
5. Research group members had sufficient training on problem solving and decision making from previous training in quality control circles and work teams and a recent in-house Problem Solving and Decision Making workshop conducted by John Watkins & Associates in October 1997.
1.9 Significance of the Research

The research was significant because there had been no attempt in the Sarawak State Public Service to try an action learning approach in group problem solving. It could induce a paradigm shift in the traditional manner of group problem solving, if proved successful.

1.10 Definition of Terms

1.10.1 Action Learning

A continuous process of improving work-based situations. In doing so, the capabilities of the people managing those situations are enhanced when they engage themselves in continuous reflecting and questioning in order to gain insights and consider how to act in the future. This implies both organisational development and self-development through learning by doing.

1.10.2 Action Learning Sets

Action learning sets are groups of people, providing a forum for action learning, in which members can learn through sharing experience, through questioning and through identifying what needs to be learnt or addressed as they work on a real problem.

1.10.3 Action Research

Action research involves problematic situations where the action researcher in collaboration with the communities in that problematic setting tries to improve it through continuous reflection in cyclical processes. All the respective sectors learn and understand better on the issues involved by ‘doing’ so.

1.10.4 Action Research Group

Action Research Groups are groups of people in a problematic situation, where the action researcher in collaboration with them tries to improve the situation through continuous reflection in cyclical processes. All the respective sectors learn and understand better on the issues involved by doing so.
1.10.5 Committees and Task Forces

Committees and task forces are temporary formal groups formed to accomplish a specific task. Once the task is completed, the group is disbanded.

1.10.6 Effective Group Problem Solving

For the purpose of this research, the following measures of group problem solving effectiveness were used.

Measures of outcome effectiveness
1) Acceptance of the solution by members
   The extend to which...
   a) Members accept the group decision
   b) Members are willing to implement this decision
2) Satisfaction of the members with the group
   a) The overall discussion of the group regardless of whether or not members’ ideas were adopted
   b) The decision reached by the group
   c) The amount of each member’s own participation
   d) The way differences were handled within the group
   e) Whether members are willing to be part of the same group in future decisions

Measures of process effectiveness
1) Member effort
   a) Attention
      The extend to which...
      i) The group discussed issues relevant to the problem
      ii) Members were able to follow the discussion in the group
      iii) Group members paid attention to the contributions of the other members
      iv) The group was motivated to arrive at a good decision through collective efforts
      v) The group was restless to arrive at a decision as soon as possible (reversed)
   b) Participation
      The extend to which...
      i) Group members participated in the group discussion
      ii) All the members had a more or less equal share in the decision making process
      iii) Group members interacted with each other
      iv) Each individual could present his or her ideas in the group
      v) One member dominated the discussion (reversed)
      vi) A few members participated more than the rest (reversed)
      vii) One member did most of the discussion leading (reversed)
2) Task performance strategy
   The extend to which the group engaged in…
   a) Discussing differences collectively and arriving at a general agreement
   b) Voting to resolve differences (reversed)
   c) Averaging differences in ranking (reversed)
   d) Bargaining (reversed)
   e) Persuading (reversed)

1.10.7 Group

   Two or more individuals who influence each other through social interaction.

1.10.8 Problem

   A problem is a difference between an actual situation and a desired situation.

1.10.9 Quality Control Circles

   Quality control circles are small groups of workers from the same working unit who meet regularly to identify, select and analyse work-related problems. The group then put forward suggested solutions to the management for consideration and decision. Subsequently, they implement the decisions of the management.

1.10.10 Sibu Municipal Council

   Sibu Municipal Council is one of the 26 local authorities in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. It has jurisdiction over an area of 129.5 sq. km. with a population of about 200,000. It was incorporated under the Local Authority Ordinance, 1948, which had been repealed recently by the Local Authority Ordinance, 1996.

1.10.11 Triangulation

   The search for consistency of findings from different observers, observing instruments methods of observations, times, places and research situations.
1.10.12 Work Teams

Small groups of workers, five to seven, formed by the organisational structure or ad-hocly at the discretion of the management, to solve a work related problem. The members of a Work Team are usually those employees who possess special knowledge and expertise relevant to the problem under scrutiny.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter will present an overview of the theoretical framework of the research. Definitions, issues, ideas and approaches related to the research problem are cited and integrated to arrive at the operational definitions and approaches of this research. Past researches and studies are furnished as a base for generation of the conceptual framework for the research.

2.1 Action Learning

2.1.1 Background

Action learning is generally associated with Reg Revans. Professor Revans developed action learning in response to post-war problems, particularly in the health services and the coal industries. It was developed to respond to those management needs by establishing programmes which encouraged colleagues to meet and work together, in groups, for the purpose of solving organisational problems (Cunningham, 1993). The first programme he ran with an explicit action learning title was for a consortium of companies and universities in Belgium, public knowledge about which first came available through conference and then in 1971 through his book, "Developing Effective Managers" (Mumford, 1997).

2.1.2 Definitions

Revans’s original definitions talked about ‘manager’s’ learning; but the approach he has propounded is applicable and available to everyone and anyone (Weinstein, 1995). There are various definitions of action learning by different authors. Inglis (1994) defined action learning as,

A process which brings people together to find solutions to problems and, in doing so, develops both the individuals and the organisations. Alternatively, action learning is a process, which develops people and organisations using important issues confronting the organisation as a vehicle for doing so.

In action learning these two aspects are always present – the growth and development of people and the organisation and the simultaneous finding of solutions to problems (p.3).

McGill and Beaty (1992) sees action learning as “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” (p.17). Whereas, Weinstein (1995) defined action learning as,
A “process” underpinned by a belief in individual potential: a way of learning from our actions (and from what happens to us and around us) by taking the time to question and reflect on this in order to gain insights and consider how to act in future.

There are two other important elements to action learning: it involves a group of people who work together on their “doing” and their “learning”; and it requires regular and rigorous meetings of the group, to allow space and time for this process of questioning and reflection (p.9).

Mike Pedler in his “Action Learning in Practice” (1991) offered this view of action learning:

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. The method... has three components – people, who accept the responsibility for taking action on a particular issue; problems, or the task that 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).

In general, all definitions point towards action learning as a continuous process of improving work-based situations. In doing so, the capabilities of the people managing those situations are enhanced when they engage themselves in continuous reflecting and questioning in order to gain insights and consider how to act in the future. This implies both organisational development and self-development through learning by doing.

2.1.3 The Learning Process and Cycles

2.1.3.1 \( L = P + Q \)

Revans’ learning formula has been widely used in action learning literature (Pedler, 1991; Inglis, 1994; Weinstein, 1995 and Mumford, 1997). He perceived learning to be based on the interaction and combination of “Programmed Knowledge” (P) which is the Input of knowledge and skills, and “Questioning Insight” (Q) which is the process of exploring such knowledge in practice. This allowed him to formulate the famous equation of:

\[ L = P + Q. \]

Revans viewed that conventional learning has placed too much dependence on P taught by accredited experts, rather than Q, initiated by people questioning their own direct experience. Weinstein (1995) stressed the importance of Q in the equation,

...for it means we test out each situation we find ourselves in, to try and understand it better, and see if the P we know is relevant or whether we are facing a new situation where past knowledge and life encounters are not going to be of much help (p.44).
In general, action learning demonstrates that learning is more likely to occur as a result of reflecting on real life experience than from adding more theoretical knowledge. To maximise learning, action learning focuses on "Questioning Insight" (Q), obtained by stepping out of one's familiar frames of reference and allowing new ones to come in, and utilises "P" as a last resort.

In connection with that, Revans also proposed that for any organism to survive, its rate of learning (L) must be equal to, or greater than, the rate of change (C) in its environment. Thus, \( L \geq C \) (Garratt, 1987). This is especially essential for today's fast changing environment. The faster the change, the more rapidly P will be outdated. That leaves us with Q. The better our questions, the more opportunity of accelerating learning. (Weinstein, 1995)

In addition to the above, Inglis (1994) stressed that, action learning requires action to be taken, not merely recommended. Implementation is part of the action learning project. He proposed an extension of Revans' formula, which is, \( L = P + Q + I \), where I = implementation.

2.1.3.2 Learning From Experience

The argument today is that, knowing how we learn from experience, we should be able to become more proactive and plan to learn methodologically from the experiences that we are about to have. David Kolb was among the first to develop a theory to explain the nature of experiential learning, identifying four stages in the learning cycle as follows:

1. We start by having a here-and-now experience.
2. We think about that experience, bringing in more data and recollections of previous similar or related experiences – in effect, we mull it over.
3. We continue to think about the experience, but now we are making generalisations and fitting the results into our personal view of reality.
4. We test out our conclusions by using a modified approach the next time a similar set of circumstances arises

The learning cycle is represented diagrammatically as in Figure 1.

![Kolb's Learning Cycle Diagram](image)

Figure 1. Kolb's Learning Cycle.

McGill and Beaty (1992) concurred on the importance of the experiential learning cycle in action learning as a method for professional and personal development. The stages of reflection and generalisation are undertaken with the help of the set. The presenter also designs their next action at the end of their time and then undertakes this action in the testing stage and experiences the results in order to bring this to further reflection and generalisation in the next set meeting. The cycle continues until the issue is resolved and the learning complete for the time being.

A corresponding view of this process has been captured by Pedler (1986) that observing, reflecting on experience leads to making sense of that experience in a new way, leading to understanding. Understanding can lead to insights which allow for new plans, new strategies for action and new modes of behaviour. These plans lead to experience which can be as expected or have consequences quite different from those expected. This leads on through another evaluative cycle with reflection and learning occurring at each stage (see Figure.2).

Figure 2: Pedler's Learning Process.