

ACTION LEARNING

This video presents an overview of how action learning was used in BREP and some helpful tips for establishing self-managed action learning sets.

Hi, I'm Gen and I've been working with small to medium-sized businesses in Tasmania to help reduce their consumption of resources and minimize waste streams.

This video is part of a series from the Business Resource Efficiency Program, delivered by Business Action Learning Tasmania in partnership with the Tasmanian government.

It is a key action from Climate Action 21, the Tasmanian Government's climate change action plan.

Each video shares successful strategies and other lessons we've learnt from BREP.

Action learning, or learning by doing, is an approach to individual and organisational learning well recognised around the world.

Working in small groups known as 'sets', people tackle wicked problems or opportunities and learn with and from each other in their attempts to improve things.

The underpinning principle of action learning is questioning.

Reg Revans, who coined the term action learning, held the theory that learning is comprised of two parts: "programmed learning", which is the skills and knowledge we gain from existing theory and practicing standard processes, and "insightful questions", which help us develop new theories and discover new ways of doing things.

The Business Resource Efficiency Program used action learning to help businesses explore opportunities to reduce their emissions intensity; adopt innovative practices; manage climate risks; and take advantage of opportunities arising from a changing climate.

11 small to medium-sized businesses participated in BREP, forming three action learning sets.

Each business underwent a comprehensive waste audit of their operations to identify problems and opportunities to work on with action learning.

During an initial workshop series, set members helped each other to explore and clearly define their problem or opportunity, brainstorm ideas and develop potential solutions, and then establish a plan for implementation.

Over the following six months, the sets met monthly, and each set member reported back and shared the lessons learnt from the outcomes of their actions.

The other set members would ask questions to help draw out more learning and explore the obstacles each individual was experiencing when trying to complete their actions.

In this way, set members developed their awareness and understanding of the drivers and barriers to increasing resource efficiency – not only in their own businesses but also in the other businesses.

They were motivated and supported by the set to try new things and continue their pursuit of resource efficiency.

And they found opportunities to collaborate with each other and people in their extended networks.

So, how could you use action learning to increase your resource efficiency?

Action learning is very simple in theory but requires a great deal of discipline and a relatively structured process to work effectively.

Often, a facilitator is used to get the set going but ultimately action learning should be self-managed by the set.

Business Action Learning Tasmania has a team of qualified action learning facilitators and some great tools to get you started, but here are some basic steps you can follow to establish a self-managed action learning set.

We think action learning works best with a group of between 4 and 6 people, with a maximum of 8.

Each set member brings a problem or opportunity that they are seeking to resolve through action learning with the set.

There are a few things to consider when looking for members to join your set:

Trust – for everyone to feel comfortable sharing information about their businesses, you need to consider personal and professional conflicts of interest that may arise. In the case of BREP, we made sure that set members were not in competing businesses and we asked all set members to sign a confidentiality agreement as a condition of participation.

Diversity – innovation comes from applying fresh eyes and new perspectives to a situation. It's tempting to invite your friends to join your set – and this is great for developing trust – but if you want to optimize the opportunities for innovation, make sure these are people who will challenge your thinking and provide a completely different point of view.

Be aware of experts – this may seem counter-intuitive, you should certainly consult experts and capitalize on existing knowledge along the way, but having an expert as a member of your set may make you feel pressured to just follow their advice, and this limits your opportunities to explore and learn through experimentation.

Equality – this last element is related to the previous point but also considers the perceived status of set members. In action learning, the skills, knowledge and experience of each set member is equally valuable.

A CEO, a frontline worker, a small business owner, an apprentice, a Startup founder...

...everyone is equal in an action learning set.

Before starting regular set meetings, it is helpful to have a clear definition of your problem or opportunity.

It is also helpful to learn a little more about your set members, their skills, experience and work history.

You don't need to have a workshop series like BREP to do this, however you may want to dedicate your first meeting to getting to know your fellow set members and creating a clear definition of the problem or opportunity you are each working on.

We've provided templates on our webpage to help you with these activities.

Since BREP concluded in December 2019, the world has experienced an unprecedented global pandemic and the

way we think about meetings has changed dramatically.

Virtual meetings are now much more widely accepted and there are a range of online platforms available that are free or very low cost.

Whether you decide to meet in person or online, the structure of action learning set meetings remains the same.

Each set member has an allocated amount of time to talk about their project. Typically 20-30 minutes. Within their allocated time there are three distinct sections.

First, the set member reports back on actions that they committed to at the last meeting, with particular focus on what they have learnt.

The set then ask questions to explore the outcomes of their actions – whether it was successful or not – to bring out further learning for the individual and the set.

If the set member could not complete their actions, the set may ask questions to get to the root causes of inaction.

The set then helps the set member to work out what to do next.

Towards the end of their allocated time, the set member will commit to the next steps, to be completed before the next meeting, based on the lessons learnt.

The three step process is repeated for each set member.

In this way, the set are taken through a continuing cycle of action and reflection.

Remember, questioning is key here. The set should refrain from telling the set member what to do. In fact, except for during their allocated time, it is good discipline for set members to only make statements in response to a direct question.

At the end of each set meeting, the set should reflect on how the meeting went and what might be done differently next time to make it better.

As you can imagine, keeping to time is a big part of running effective action learning set meetings. So, you might want to establish some Ground Rules around this before you start.

Action learning is a cycle and as such, it doesn't necessarily have an obvious end point. A project may reach a natural conclusion, but learning can be ongoing and ever-changing.

At the very beginning, when the set is established, it's a good idea to commit to a specific period for the set to operate and agree on a date to stop and reflect on the outcomes achieved.

At this point, the set may decide to continue or conclude the set. Some set members may want to introduce a new problem or opportunity, some may want to continue with their current project, and some may wish to withdraw.

In any case, reviewing the program is important to celebrate the achievements and share the learning with a wider cohort, where possible.

The BREP Review Forum was held in December 2019. Each set member presented a short slide presentation, which included the objectives of their project, how they measured success and the targets they set for themselves, the outcomes of their project measured against these targets, the key issues they encountered, the lessons learnt and what they intend to do next.

Each of these presentations has been captured in case studies, which are available on our website.

This video presents an overview of how action learning was used in BREP and provides some helpful tips for establishing self-managed action learning sets.

For more ideas and practical information about improving resource efficiency, watch one of our other videos or visit the Tasmanian Climate Change Office website at climatechange.tas.gov.au

or the BALT website at businessactionlearningtas.com.au.

the end