Action learning reviews

# What is an Action Learning Review (ALR)?

An Action Learning Review (ALR) is a simple process used by a team to capture the lessons learned from past successes and failures, with the goal of improving future performance. It is an opportunity for a team to reflect on a project, activity, event or task so that they can do better the next time. It can also be employed in the course of a project to learn while doing. ALRs should be carried out with an open spirit and no intent to blame.

The application of ALRs across an organisation can help drive organisational change. As well as turning unconscious learning into tacit, it helps to build trust among team members and to overcome fear of mistakes.

ALRs can be short, frequent group process checks, or more extended, in-depth explorations.

The questions that can be discussed are:

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| Phase | Question | Purpose |
| Action | * What was supposed to happen? * What actually happened? * What did you set out to achieve? * What training was provided? | These questions establish a common understanding of the work item under review. The facilitator should encourage and promote discussion around these questions. In particular, divergences from the plan should be explored. |
| Reflection | * What worked? * What could have gone better? * What helped, what hindered? * Why? | These questions generate reflection about the successes and failures during the course of the project, activity, event or task. The question ‘Why?’ generates understanding of the root causes of these successes and failures |
| Learning | * What did we learn? * Any new insights? * What was confirmed? * What new questions have emerged? * What other theories help us to deepen these learnings? |  |
| Planning | * So, what does this mean for practice? * What are we going to do differently? Stop doing? * What will we continue/start doing? * How will we not repeat the same mistakes? * What steps will we use to build these new insights into our practice? | These questions are intended to help identify specific actionable recommendations. The facilitator asks the team members for crisp and clear, achievable and future-oriented recommendations. |

It may help to divide your analysis into categories and apply the ALR in each one. For example if you are evaluating a project with 5 objectives, you can ask the above questions per objective. If you are evaluating a programme with a number of smaller projects within it, you can ask the above questions per project.

You may also want to add in more detailed questions, e.g.

• What did you set out to achieve?

• What was your plan to achieve this?

• How did this change as you progressed?

• What advice would you give yourself if you were to go back to where you were at the start of the project?

• What were the two or three key lessons you would share with others?

• What next for you in terms of this project?

• Can you think of a story that summarises your experience of work on this project?

• What should we have learned from this project a year from now?

• Are there any lessons for you personally?

For lessons learned, it can be highly valuable for staff members to think through how they would take forward the lessons learned from the workshop, turning this into **team and/or individual action plans.**

# How to use:

* ALRs can be conducted almost anywhere, and will vary in length. For example, a 15-minute ALR can be conducted after a one-day workshop, or a much longer meeting could be held to reflect on the strategy development process throughout a large organisation.
* ALRs should be carried out immediately, while the team is still available and memories are fresh. It is recommended that ALRs be incorporated at key points during a project, activity, event or task in the early planning stage, although they are often completed at the end.
* Participants of an ALR should include all members of the team. A facilitator could be appointed to help create an open environment, promote discussion and draw out lessons learned.

# Advice for running an ALR (tips and traps):

* Attendants are participants, not a passive audience. The facilitator should prepare leading questions and may have to ask it of several people. The questions can be asked on an individual or a team basis. The team mechanism is ideal, but if suggestions are slow coming, the facilitator could go around the room asking each individual to express one thing that worked and one thing that did not.
* If there are issues with either openness or time, it may be worthwhile to gather ideas first and then facilitate the discussion in the group environment.
* Ideally, an uninvolved note-taker should be asked to minute the session. This will enable better capture of the learning.
* The actionable recommendations should be as specific as possible. For example, an ALR following a workshop could have the following recommendation: ‘Make more time to understand the audience.’ A better recommendation would be ‘Make contact with the organising body representative and ask about the range of participants before planning the workshop’.

Action learning review template

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| 1. **Action** |
| What was supposed to happen? What actually happened? What did you set out to achieve? What training was provided? |
| 1. **Reflection** |
| What worked? What could have gone better?  What helped, what hindered? Why? |
| 1. **Learning** |
| What did we learn? Any new insights? What was confirmed? What new questions have emerged? |
| 1. **What opportunities exist in the short term for this?** |
| So what does this mean for practice? What are we going to do differently? Stop doing? What will we continue/start doing? How will we not repeat the same mistakes? What steps will we use to build these new insights into our practice?  Keep doing:  Start doing:  Stop doing: |