Occupational therapy personnel, especially those newly qualified, value the opportunity to reflect and learn from experience with their peers (RCOT membership survey 2016).

In the context of a fast-paced working environment, professional learning should become embedded as an integral part of the work routine (Grove 2014). To this end, the use of action learning sets supports practice-based, reflective learning to aid continuing professional development.

The Action Learning Process:

Action Learning is a powerful problem-solving technique used for leadership development and sustains the principles of ‘collective leadership’ through reflective, supportive practice.

Practical Guide – Running an Action Learning Set

You will need:

- A nominated Facilitator
- A group of participants (maximum 8-10 people)
- Time: The group needs to agree how much time to allocate to each member from the total time available.

(E.g. In a 10-4.30 day a group of ten participants can usually expect to have about 25-30 minutes each. Alternatively, if you are running a regular lunchtime action learning set, the group could allocate two participants per session and rotate through the group).

Session Plan

Briefing (5 mins)

Facilitator defines a running order: The first participant starts by outlining concisely and briefly the basic issue they wish to discuss. This issue must be something that they are personally involved in and have some responsibility for changing/solving/improving.

Open Debate (20 mins)

The participants then ask questions to identify any pertinent facts they feel might be useful, these will often be closed questions. The participants will then follow this with questions to probe, clarify and expand the issue; these are likely to be ‘open’ questions.

Participants need to avoid:

- Questions that are really a solution in disguise for example “why don’t you do xxx”.
- Telling anecdotes of ‘when this happened to me’ or ‘how someone else dealt with this situation’. The purpose is to empower the issue-owner to be the architect of the next actions and ultimately the solution to the issue being discussed.

There is no requirement on any participant following the line of questions of any other participant and indeed a wider perspective may be gained by approaching the issue ‘from left field’.

The questioning process is likely to help the issue-owner identify any knowledge gaps, question assumptions or provide alternate interpretations.

Closing (5 mins)

In the last few minutes of the allotted time the issue owner should be encouraged to identify three actions that will move the issue forward (not necessarily solve the whole issue!) and these actions should be achievable in the next three to four weeks.

Simple one-step actions are preferable to complex multi-step ones. The actions should be written down and the issue owner agrees to undertake the actions in a reasonable time scale.

The process is repeated for each Action Learning Set member.
Participants may update members of progress either by email or at a subsequent Action Learning Set meeting if one is agreed.
Questions

The following range of questions is a suggestive and not exhaustive list to help you and your group on the Action Learning Set.

To focus on practice-based challenges

• What’s important about this issue and why?

• Does the issue present a clinical risk in the workplace?

• Does the issue bring conflict to your professional values? Why?

• Does the issue bring conflict to your personal values? Why?

• What are the steps you need to take to make improvements in the situation?

• What skills do you have which can be applied to tackling this issue?

• Is there something which is providing a barrier to this?

• Is this issue a priority? How long has it been around?

• Can you create a safety net of support around you? What does this look like?

• Do you need the support of a particular colleague to help resolve the situation?

• What would increase your confidence to move towards a successful resolution of this situation?

• If there were no limits or existing protocols what would you do?
To aid Understanding

- What are you trying to achieve?
- What is the difference between how you see things now and how you would like them to be?
- How will things change if you are successful?
- Who might be willing to help you?
- What obstacles do you anticipate?

To explore options

- What if?
- How would they react?
- How do you feel about?
- What do you think about?
- What are the pros and cons of your behaviour?
- What would happen if you did nothing?

To get below the surface

- Can you explain? What exactly? How do you know? Can you give an example?
- How do you feel about that? What assumptions are you making?
- What do you think will happen and why?
- What are the consequences of doing that?
- What was the high point/low point for you?
- What have you learned from all this?

To stimulate learning

- What is challenging for you about this issue?
- What opportunities are there for you in the situation?
- What would success look like?
- That obviously excites you: why?
- What metaphor could you use to describe the situation?
- What is important, what is urgent and what is the priority?
- What have you tried? Why did/didn’t it work?
- Who else have you involved in this issue?
- Who can you turn to for advice and support?

Powerful Questions

- What are the effects of this on others?
- Is there another way of working?
- What skills do you need to develop to cope with this?
- How can you improve the situation?

To stimulate action

- What are you going to do next?
- What are your options for action now?
- Where could you get more information?
- Who else could you seek help from?
- What are you going to do for yourself before the next meeting?
- How can we help you to make progress?

Capturing the Action Learning Set as CPD evidence

If you capture the action plans and outcomes from active participation in an action learning set, it can provide useful CPD activity linked to the HCPC requirements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HCPC Standard</th>
<th>Examples of Action learning set as CPD evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Maintain a continuous, up-to-date and accurate record of their CPD activities;</td>
<td>• An e-mail invitation to the meeting, an outline session, an action plan from the session, with a subsequent update can be recorded and stored in your CPD portfolio.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Demonstrate that their CPD activities are a mixture of learning activities relevant to current or future practice;</td>
<td>• Participation in an action learning set demonstrates you are taking personal responsibility for your learning beyond ‘traditional’ methods e.g. attending courses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Seek to ensure that their CPD has contributed to the quality of their practice and service delivery;</td>
<td>• Discussing an issue relating to practice and / or service delivery in the action learning set will lead to an action plan for you to implement into your practice. In your evidence, you could add a reflection on what you have achieved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Seek to ensure that their CPD benefits the service user;</td>
<td>• Service user is anyone who uses or is affected by your services, for example, patients, carers, families, students, staff members or colleagues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Upon request, present a written profile (which must be their own work and supported by evidence) explaining how they have met the Standards for CPD.</td>
<td>• Capturing the information in your portfolio as you go along with help should you be called to produce your portfolio in the renewal period.</td>
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</table>