Welcome to the Guide for Action Learning Sets! This guide describes the process of action learning; provides guidance on picking a leadership challenge; and provides help (including sample agendas and questions) for leaders embarking on an action learning process.

**Background: Action Learning and the leadership laboratory**

Action learning supports learning with and from peers in a team, or “set.” An action learning “set” is a peer group engaged in dialog, reflection, and action.

Action learning is a non-traditional, group-oriented, problem-based approach to learning. Action learning is not a new idea. It is a well-tried way of accelerating people’s learning so that they can handle complex situations more effectively. Many excellent organizations in both the public and private sector (GE, Motorola, Xerox, US Postal Service) have used action learning. Action learning not only focuses participants’ mental energy on accomplishing important projects, but also provides a leadership development laboratory where people practice thinking critically, integrate their own work with a broader program, and achieve measurable impacts.

Action learning is not for all organizational problems; it is, however, appropriate for a wide range of problems, and is especially effective in the following circumstances:

- When issues are complex, usually in an organizational setting;
- When there is no obvious solution (e.g., there is no expert with the answer);
- When there are several viable approaches/solutions and people disagree about choices;
- When conditions are unstable, changing, or unpredictable;
- When senior managers are willing to be open to experimentation
- When people are willing to take a risk and take action.

The process of action learning creates conditions where competent non-experts come together to solve problems in such a way that everyone learns explicitly from the experience. Action learning has many elements that will be familiar to you and that mirror the Quality Improvement approach we are using. The components of this process include a complex problem, a group of diverse people, a facilitator, and the process of asking pertinent questions to yield new perspectives.

We are enabled with and through others to be aware of what we have learned. Individual reflection is feasible, but the insights gained by shared reflection are potentially richer and more challenging to the learner. The learning here is a product of the relationship and interaction between the individual and others... The individual and others sharing and collaborating together create a learning that is common to all, greater than the sum of individual learning.

Action Learning Goals
The ultimate goal of action learning is to help change leaders become more wise and effective by practicing leadership actions and behaviors. Specifically, you will:

- Make progress on a change leadership challenge you face
- Reflect and develop self-awareness as a change leader
- Engage with colleagues who will challenge and support you
- Apply content from the MCH Workforce Development Center to your own leadership
- Gain courage and support from a group of friends on a common journey

Defining your Change Leadership Challenge
Just as you have done with the charter for your team project, you will benefit from spending some time defining and describing your change leadership challenge. Your challenge may focus primarily on something personal that you want to work on; it may focus on your part of the
larger team project; it may focus on something related to your project but outside the current frame (maybe a future challenge, or a side challenge that relates in some way). In all these cases, you are leading change. By practicing skills of dialog, reflection, and action in your action learning set, you will improve as a change leader. You may decide to use action learning processes in other contexts!

“Framing” Guidance

Your change leadership challenge should be yours: something you care about and that you can influence. Ideally your challenge will be...

**Complex, a “wicked” problem**

Action learning is best for tackling complex, unique, ambiguous challenges that are in the messy “swamp” of reality, rather than on the “high ground” where problems and solutions are known and clear-cut. In other words, you want an ADAPTIVE challenge rather than a TECHNICAL challenge. Work on something that can be improved—but not necessarily resolved.

**Meaningful to you personally**

It should be something that matters to you and that you are committed to making progress on. Choose to work where you have personal energy to work.

**Meaningful to your organization/team**

Your challenge should be aligned with your responsibilities and what your organization/team expects and wants of you, so that you can work hard on it without feeling “off-task.” Choose to work where you need to work for the group.

**Actionable within the time frame**

The challenge should be something you can act on during the next three months. Don’t expect to resolve a problem, but you should be able to cycle through the three steps: learn, act, reflect.

**Something you are accountable for**

Your challenge should be something you can control. You should own the work and the outcome.

Note that the best challenges are both internal (meaningful and useful to you personally) and external (noticeable and useful to your team/community). To check your frame, ask “Whose work will be required for my leadership challenge?” Ideally there will be internal work for you, and external work that involves others.
Action Learning Challenge examples

- A division chief intends to strengthen the culture on the team and expand collaboration inside and across units, in order to move forward after difficult budget cuts.

- A state bureau director intends to forge better partnerships and more streamlined business arrangements with several large city health departments. The current system seems to result in inefficiencies and mistrust.

- A funder intends to foster systematic thought and innovative solutions for health equity and access to care among a broad group of stakeholders with conflicting incentives.

- A family representative intends to influence healthcare decision-makers to bring youth voices into policy discussions.

- A leader intends to better understand the scope and implications of the organization’s new work in social marketing. It isn’t clear yet who the key stakeholders are, how to develop an aligned strategy that fits with other initiatives, or how to manage messages.

- A state leader from outside public health seeks public and private sector health leaders who can commit to one or two priority goals together and build towards collective impact.

These examples have in common a specific focus area and an emphasis on leading change.

For comparison, these ideas are not good choices for a leadership challenge:

- Purchasing a new data tool (a transaction rather than a transformation)
- Doing a literature review (learning but no action)
- Writing a new policy manual (a task)
- “Improving my leadership” (too general)
Purpose and process of a Set

The purpose of the set is to support the learning of the members. Structure your set around each member’s work on their challenge.

- Understand and diagnose the challenge
- Invent and choose leadership responses to it
- Implement those responses
- Reflect on what happened and what you have learned
- Repeat

David Kolb draws the model this way:

You want to develop practical wisdom and skill through action, and benefit from reflection with other practitioners (sometimes we rely too much on academic knowledge). It is important to go beyond methods that you already know; you would learn little from “just another project.” Rather, deliberately shape your goals and approach with the help of your set. The underlying idea is to articulate a new approach, try it out, reflect on the results and then repeat.

- Make explicit and visible your current approaches to the challenge, by explaining them to your setmates and facilitator (we probably don’t need detailed technical background, just the leadership context). This will put your current ways of approaching the situation “on the table” where your team can see and question them.

Articulating these things is useful in itself. In the process, you may come to understand the challenge in a different way. For instance, as you talk you may discover that you have been acting more as a manager than a leader. You may discover that you are not using your own best insights about how to lead (“knowing-doing gap”).
• **Reflect on whether your approaches are wise and fruitful.** Having articulated your goals and approaches, you might find inconsistencies. Are you really following the best ideas that you have already?

• **Consider new insights.** Some insights will likely come from the questions of others in the set—our fellow travelers may have insight, perspective, and experience that is revealed in the questions they ask. For instance, questions from set members helped a leader understand why leadership strategies learned in an academic medical center might not be getting good results elsewhere. Some insights will come from speakers or from readings from the Center, or the recommendations of colleagues. Be open.

• **Try new approaches that you craft with the help of your set.** This is a clear benefit of action learning: having developed new options with the help of peers, you can take action and see what happens.

• **Report back about what you learn from your action—about yourself, the challenge, the methods used.** You might learn about nuances to your new strategy. You might learn more about the nature of the challenge. You might learn about yourself as a leader. The action learning set provides a venue for reflecting on your leadership actions. You thought, you planned, you acted. What did you learn? And what happens next?

• **Repeat the cycle.**

### Getting started as a Set

During the retreat, you will have a short time to meet and solidify as a set. Here are some suggestions for how to use your face-to-face start-up time.

1) Get to know each other: create bonds and a group identity  
2) Reflect together, start the dialog  
3) Become familiar with each other’s challenges and context

The first step is important. The best sets work on a foundation of mutual trust and understanding. Time spent at the beginning getting to know each other will turn out to be very useful later in the process when you start into dialog about complex and personal issues.

**Set Members:** Set members are not experts with the answers. The power of a relatively naïve set versus a group of subject matter experts should not be underestimated. In the action learning literature, there is a story about an action learning set that invited the pizza delivery man into their meeting for a few hours by promising him a large tip. His naïve, basic questions
helped the team to challenge their basic assumptions and led to an innovative solution (Marquardt, 2004). All set members should be prepared to

- **Commit** to your own challenge
- **Tolerate ambiguity** and silence
- **Be curious**, wonder. Ask honest, deep questions and be OK “not knowing the answers”
- Be willing to **take risks**, in a measured way
- **Complete cycles**: action, learning and reflection

Plan to share/rotate these responsibilities for each session:

- **Timekeeper**: Plan and facilitate the use of time for each session. Ensure presenters get equal “airtime” when describing their issue.
- **Presenter**: Present your understanding of your leadership challenge. This might include the evidence or measures of the problem, who is involved, and potential causes.
- **Listeners** (everyone): Listen for understanding, clarify with questions, uncover assumptions, support and challenge the presenter’s thinking about their challenge.
- **Scribe** or note taker: use available media to take notes as needed to support the process. This can be the “problem presenter” or a listener.

**Facilitator role**: A facilitator from the Center will assist the set and support you in learning the process and running the set meetings. Coaches are not there to provide solutions, teach, or control the process but to create the conditions for learning and working together effectively.

The facilitator will help you focus on reflection and inquiry. Sets operate in a self-directed way by driving their own learning and deciding their own goals and meeting schedules and agenda items. Facilitators will be in the listening and questioning mode and intervene only to help the set engage in the learning process to make the most of the program and group experience. Facilitators will join in some or all of the set’s regular calls: listen, ask questions and be sure the set is learning well together, and will be available to meet individually as requested.

**Set meetings and conference calls**

Sets should schedule conference calls through September 2014. If you wish to continue, the center will continue to support you after that point.

It will take creativity and commitment to craft meetings that allow deep reflection on one another’s leadership. This is an art rather than a hard and fast technique. We suggest that you **establish a regular time** to gain and sustain momentum. We suggest you plan to meet about **two hours a month**.

- **Give each set member time to share their challenge description**. You might initially limit each “presenter” to 15-20 minutes each so that you can get around “the circle,” or schedule a longer call if necessary.
• **Return to each set member in subsequent calls.** Engage each other in reflective dialog about how you are going about your challenge goals and approaches, what you plan to do or have done, and what you are planning to do next.

Decide how many “presenters” per call. Some sets like each member to present some in each call. Others have extended discussions of one or two set members on any given call. Whatever your strategy, be sure each set member gets equitable “floor” time.
A sample set meeting:

1. Decide who is presenting today, who is watching the clock and moderating. *Optional: get a short update from previous session’s presenter*

2. Presenter shares their goals and presents what needs to be presented. Include what you have *done and learned* since your last presentation.

3. Set members listen carefully to the statements, questions and emotions of presenter, reflecting back what they are hearing as appropriate. Set members ask the presenter questions to support and challenge their thinking (see Appendix for sample questions). Offer insights or relevant experience if asked, but do not offer “advice.”

4. Presenters, close with specific *actions* you are planning to take and when you will report on results.

5. “Check in” at the end of the call: How is leadership being expressed within this set? What key learning points stand out from today’s call? What questions were most helpful? How can the next set meeting be more effective?
REPORTING: How will you report on your activities and learnings?

Individual Leadership Challenge Updates
We want to understand how your thinking and action on your Challenge are evolving; writing it out is one way to consolidate your learning.

The Center will ask you to revise your Challenge and post it on your share site for members of your set and your facilitator to review.

1. **Challenge**: What is your current understanding of your leadership challenge? How has your understanding of the challenge changed?
2. **Assets**: What assets do you have to build on?
3. **Strategies**: In what ways has your action learning set changed your understanding of the leadership strategies or actions that you should take to address the challenge? What actions have you taken on the challenge? What did you learn from taking them – about yourself, the challenge, your methods, or other areas?

For example, “I originally understood the problem to be x, y, and z, and thought my actions should be a and b. But as a result of trying action a, reflecting with my set, and studying the systems literature, I came to see the problem in a different light ... I now believe the greatest challenges are o and p, requiring leadership actions c, d and e.”
Sample Questions for Set Members

Ask about What Is Working (Appreciative Inquiry)
  • What is going well?
  • What do you appreciate most about the people you are working with?
  • What are your assets?

Ask about Individual Leadership
  • What do you want?
  • Why is this challenge important to you? What are you most excited about?
  • Do you have similar experiences in your past?
  • What feedback have you received that may be relevant here?
  • What is helping you? What is holding you back?
  • What attitudes and self-beliefs would help you be successful?

Ask about support from networks
  • Do you want to hear a story about what may be a similar situation?
  • Who would be a helpful advisor or consult on this?
  • What do you need? Who can assist you? Where is your personal support?

Ask about Center Content
  • What from Center readings and seminars are relevant to this challenge?
  • How might these influence your leadership goals, strategies, or actions?

Ask about Stakeholders, Networks, and your State Team
  • Whose opinions should you consider in addressing this challenge?
  • What agreements do you need to proceed, or to be successful?
  • Who has to own the shared vision for any solution to work?
  • Who else knows about this? Who else cares about it?
  • How does this connect to your team project?

Ask about Systems
  • How did you (or your organization) get here anyway?
  • What mental models of the key actors contribute to this problem?
  • What previous solutions have been tried, and what stopped them?
  • What systems do I need to understand to solve this problem?
  • Are there any ways your organization/you inadvertently contribute to this problem?

Ask questions to reveal Inferences and Assumptions
  • What are three main facts around the issue?
  • What conclusions have you drawn from those facts?
• Tell us more about how you have arrived at that conclusion.

• How else could those facts be understood or interpreted?
• [Not sure you agree?] I might interpret the situation this way... how would you respond to that way of seeing it? Am I missing something? Do you see gaps in my reasoning? (advocacy with inquiry)

Ask about what happened: After-Action Review questions
• What happened?
• Why did it happen?
• What went especially well?
• What did you set out to do?
• How do you feel?
• What did you learn? (about yourself? the Challenge? your leadership approaches?)
• How will this action make a difference? Is there a follow-up step needed?
• What do you plan to do next?

End of call questions
• In summary, what key learning points from today’s call might be relevant to your leadership? Go around the circle. To share and reinforce learning, each set member might post these points in your on-line discussion area on SharePoint.
• How can we make set meetings more effective?
• How is leadership being expressed in our set?
Best Practices: Listen

Presenters
When set members ask you questions, LISTEN:
don’t craft your response yet, listen to the end.

You don’t have to answer questions. You can simply say
“OK, I hear that” or “Wow, good question.”

Set Members
Listen carefully to reasoning, premises, conclusions; ask for clarification.

Listen for “change” language that you can support.

Everyone
Turn off screens, or conduct Set calls away from screens,
to avoid multi-tasking or interruptions.

Avoid being combative, arguing, interrupting.

Key References
Community of Practice. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.


Appendix: More Questions for Sets

Finding “the Problem”
- What has gone wrong? What isn’t working properly? What is?
- What should be happening – that isn’t?
- What shouldn’t be happening that is?
- What are the specific symptoms and indicators?
- Where is it? Is it only there or is it elsewhere too?
- When is it? Is it only then or is it at other times too?
- What does it include? What does it exclude?
- What all is affected by this problem? Who all is affected by it?
- How big is it? How bad is it?
- What is it costing your organization? Is it worth fixing?
- How urgent is it? Can you wait it out?
- What will happen if you do nothing?
- What will happen if you do the wrong thing?

Envisioning a Solved State
- What would things look like if they were going right?
- What would be happening – that isn’t?
- What wouldn’t be happening that is?
- What do you want you don’t have? What are you trying to achieve?
- What do you have you don’t want? What are you trying to eliminate?
- What do you not have that you don’t want? What are you trying to avoid?
- What do you have that you want to keep? What are you trying to preserve?
- What results are you after?
- What will serve as evidence of success? Failure?
- How will you know the problem is solved?
- What is the “should be”? Who says?

Connecting to Build Consensus and Support
- Who knows about the problem? Who cares about it? Who can do something about it?
- Who needs to be involved? When?
- What is the best way to involve them?
- Who might support or oppose our definition of the problem? Why?
- Who might support or oppose our view of the solved state? Why?
- Who might support or oppose our solution? Why?
- Whose support do you need to make this thing work?
- What’s in it for them? What’s at risk for them?
- Who has to commit to what in order for this to work?
Troubleshooting the Problem
Should you bother looking for cause(s)? Were things okay before?
Did the problem pop up suddenly – or sneak up on us gradually?
When did things go wrong? What went wrong?
What changed right about then or slightly before?
Does this change account for the problem?
Can whatever changed be corrected?
If not, is there a viable way to work around it?
What do the solutions that are being proposed tell us about the perceived causes?

Designing a Solution
What frame of reference is appropriate?
What kind or class of problem is it?
What are you calling it? How do you have it labeled?
What is the structure of this problem?
What factors or elements make it up?
How do these factors relate to one another?
What means-end relationships exist?
Are you dealing with some kind of mathematical structure?
Are you dealing with some kind of production or state-change process?
Is the structure psychological or sociological, are you dealing with people and politics?
Is the structure one of events occurring over time?
Do you have a model of this structure?
How might you show all this in a picture or diagram?
Where in the structure of the problem are the factors I’m trying to affect?
Which factors affect or drive those?
Which of these factors are truly driving the problem?

Identifying the Means of Change
What means are available for affecting the factors you’ve targeted?
Training for people?
A procedural or methods modification?
Process redesign?
An equipment change?
A systems change?
Staffing changes?
Resource allocation?

Settling On A Course of Action
What are your options?
What are their costs? What are their benefits?
What are their side effects?
How do you decide? How long do you have to decide?
Do you have ego involved?
Reconciling Restraints and Constraints
- What are your restraints and constraints?
- What are all the things you must do?
- What are all the things you can’t do?
- Who says? Are the restraints real or imagined?
- What are you assuming? What are you overlooking?
- Can you get there from here?
- What has to give? Resources? Results? Time? Money?

Prepare Plans and Schedules
- What kind of time frame are you talking about?
- Who does what when?
- What could go wrong?
- How will you know if things are going okay or getting fouled up?
- What’s your backup or contingency plan?
- Do you even need one?
- How do you monitor progress?

Assess Its Effects and Consequences
- What happened? How did it go?
- Did it work?
- Have any new problems been created?
- Do they offset the gains from solving the original one?
- Are you better off or worse off than before?
- What did you spend? What did you gain?
- Was it worth it?
- What did you learn?

Adjust Future Actions
- What didn’t work? Why?
- What could be made to work better? How?
- Should your plans be revised? In what ways?
Change Leadership Challenge: Identification

**Challenge:** A short description of a change leadership challenge you are willing to discuss openly with colleagues and take action on over the next three months.

**Background:** Why is this challenge important to you? What is the history? How does it connect to the broader work of your team?

**Goals:** What do you hope to achieve? What do you hope to learn?

**First Steps:** What are your initial ideas? Where might you start to make progress on this?
Guide for Action Learning Sets

Change Leadership Challenge: Exploration

This list of questions is to help stimulate your thinking about your challenge. Some may be more relevant for your situation than others—let your needs be the guide.

What feelings does the mention of this challenge topic evoke in you?

What personal or professional experiences have strongly influenced your perspectives on this challenge area?

What are your “modes of knowing” about this topic? (data, reading, stories, researched it, worked it, lived it...)

What hard data do you have about the topic; what do you lack?

How does your challenge involve other stakeholders? What is your relationship with those stakeholders at this point?

How does your perspective differ from that of the public? Your colleagues? Why?

What will be the key facilitators and barriers to achieving your learning goals?