

## **Learning Support Groups**

Sometimes called 'Action Learning Sets', LSG's are a safe but challenging group where members help each other to explore problems and issues impacting upon their work situations. They are normally set up outside line and formal business relationships.

Small groups, normally 6 - 8 people, meet periodically to openly discuss their own issues and problems. Normally facilitated, at least in the early stages, groups decide their own agendas. Discussion is open within the group, but confidential to those outside so that a strong level of trust develops between members.

LSG's are not a panacea, but support other processes of development to create a strong learning environment. Other processes include:

- boss / subordinate relationship
- peer relationships
- Training and Development activities
- Coaching and Mentoring
- networking

Where the chemistry is right between a number of motivated individuals who are keen to develop themselves and also to support each other, the process is very powerful by helping members to:

- examine problems and issues realistically and with an open mind
- gain insight into options not previously considered
- stretch and motivate themselves
- gain confidence in their own abilities
- gain better defined goals
- get a real 'buzz' from contributing to other's development and success

## **Facilitators**

To get a group up and running, a facilitator is required. Although not a leader, the facilitator will often be the key to success or failure in the early stages and it is, therefore, a demanding role.

Their overall task is to create a climate of learning and they will bring expertise associated with the process and not the content.

Initially they may need to kick-start the process and should seek to transfer to the group their skills in challenge and support, so that the group achieves self-sufficiency.

It is important to ensure that the group does not become too 'cosy' or prescriptive, and that it maintains both challenge and support so that genuine learning takes place both for the individual and the group as a whole.

The ground rules and processes adopted by groups will vary from one to another, so the facilitators role will also vary depending on the contracts formed within each group. Generally the role will be:

- to nurture the 'chemistry' of the group
- to ensure that appropriate ground rules, including confidentiality, are established and maintained
- seek to maintain a balance of support and challenge, and to promote learning and self development
- encourage effective arrangements for meetings and achieve commitment to them
- observe and comment on group dynamics, and to encourage the group to examine these and learn from the process
- if the facilitator and group wishes it, to be an integral member of the group
- to transfer skills by demonstrating appropriate techniques in questioning, challenging and support

Facilitators themselves will need ongoing help and support. This may be achieved by establishing a facilitators LSG, itself facilitated by an outside person. This will give the opportunity to examine problems, identify different perspectives of the LSG and facilitation process, and to build self confidence.

Facilitation is clearly a demanding task, which can only be effectively achieved by someone with appropriate skills and experience, including in a training / mentoring / coaching role.

### **How does an LSG operate?**

The group meets periodically, say every four to six weeks in the presence of the facilitator. The group decides its own agenda, and how members best prefer to work. For guidance, the process of a typical group might be:

- Each member raises an issue that they wish to discuss with the group. This may vary widely from a specific task problem to issues around managing relationships. It could include domestic or personal circumstances that impact in some way upon work or concerns regarding career progress.
- The individual explains the problem, together with their initial thoughts and concerns.
- The other group members will seek to help the person identify possible / realistic solutions by a process of questioning, challenge and support. It is **not** the group role to offer solutions, that is for the individual. However, group members might share their own experiences.
- The real benefits come from the questioning of perceived assumptions and obstacles, and viewing issues and objectives from new and different perspectives.
- The individual summarises their conclusions and proposed actions. Realistically, not everyone will find solutions through the session. They should, however, be able to move forward in some way so that they can plan further action or new approaches to follow.
- Members each report on progress at the next meeting - at which they may discuss issues further or raise a new matter for discussion.

### **What makes an LSG succeed?**

Trust - openness - confidence - challenge - support - commitment - learning