



NCVO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Action Learning Sets for Volunteer Managers

What is action learning?

Action learning is a simple and powerful tool for personal, professional and organisational development. It involves working on real issues, focusing on learning and implementing solutions. It is learning by doing.

How does it work?

Action learning occurs in a group called a 'set' – a space where peers work in a supportive and collaborative way around issues that each are facing in their work. The set is facilitated and generally meets monthly. During the sessions, each person comes up with actions to take forward and these are followed up at the next session.

Sophie Bayley, Training Co-ordinator for Voscur, a Council for Voluntary Service based in Bristol and Jenny Idle from Volunteering Bristol spoke to NCVO about how they have worked together to set up action learning sets for volunteer managers.

Why action learning for volunteer managers?

The aim of the sets is to give volunteer managers support and confidence by offering them different perspectives on workplace issues from their peers.

“Volunteer managers are often isolated in their roles and action learning means they can get peer support as well as gaining valuable skills and ideas to help them be more effective in their roles”. **Jenny Idle – Volunteering Bristol**

Volunteering Bristol is funded by BASIS 2, a Big Lottery programme for infrastructure organisations, from May 2009-November 2011 to support volunteer managers through:

- one-to-one organisational support;
- low cost volunteer management courses including recruitment and retention of volunteers, supervision skills, volunteers and the law and improving diversity in your volunteer workforce;
- a forum for volunteer managers;
- action learning sets.

How do the action learning sets run?

The sessions are priced at £15 per day to make it accessible to organisations. Voscur and Volunteering Bristol choose an economical central location with a café so that attendees can buy their lunch or choose to bring their own.

Voscur and Volunteering Bristol use their membership networks, events and other training sessions to publicise the sets and invite candidates to apply via an application form.

A set runs for six sessions over six months, involving the same participants. Dates are agreed at the first session and run at a time that suits the people attending.

Voscur chooses to take a structured approach to action learning to ensure that the groups are focused and productive:

“I try to make sure sessions are well structured and facilitated to create a positive environment for volunteer managers. I offer a space for discussion on a relevant topic, handouts and ‘set time’ for each participant. During set time the speaker presents their issue and the group asks open questions. From this, the speaker identifies actions and solutions. The participants realise they can effect change on a personal and organisational level”. **Sophie Bayley - Voscur**

What difference has these sets made?

Voscur and Volunteering Bristol collect a variety of feedback from participants from all sets through evaluation forms, discussions and post evaluation interviews.

“The insight I have gained from attending action learning has fundamentally changed my approach to work. There are very few other opportunities in the voluntary sector to receive this kind of sustained support from people who understand the challenges of the role.” **Volunteer Manager 2010**

The feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly positive. Participants reported they are:

- more confident in developing ongoing support for volunteers;
- providing a better volunteering environment for volunteers leading to more committed volunteers;
- more effective at maintaining and creating boundaries;
- developing more effective policies and documents to support volunteering.

Quotes from participants

“I have more confidence in developing inductions and ongoing support for volunteers”

“I am a more effective volunteer manager; hopefully this will result in less turnover of volunteers and a better quality of service to service users.”

“My expectations have been exceeded. The group very quickly became a tightly knit supportive unit; the facilitation has been great”

“The set has helped me to focus and manage my boundaries and expectations more effectively”

What is the key to the success of this initiative?

- People attend and commit to the group over a period of 6 months, this ensures trust is built between the group participants;
- The facilitator is qualified in action learning and had a wide range experience of delivering action learning;

- Actions are reported on at each session, so people take responsibility of their own learning and actions;
- Other courses are available to complement action learning. This meant that the action learning set did not have to cover all of the material contained in other courses and participants could be referred elsewhere;
- People get to know each other through the opening discussions, by meeting over a longer period and talking about their work issues.

What have been the main challenges?

- Recruiting participants and getting support from their organisations. For part-time staff it can be a challenge to commit six whole days. The action learning sets required extra marketing to gather enough participants.
- Helping people to understand what action learning is. For someone who has not taken part in action learning before, it takes time to develop the skills required (such as asking open questions) and to understand the non-directive approach.
- It won't be suitable for all styles of learning. For people who learn through doing, action learning is a great tool.

Advice to others

- Make sure your action learning set is carried out with a trained facilitator;
- Market it well, with lots of lead in time and use existing action learning set participants to sell it to other people;
- Create a relaxed, welcoming and comfortable environment where people have a chance to get to know each other;
- Allow people to work out the actions themselves by asking open questions.

For information on Voscur's work with action learning

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For more information on Volunteering Bristol's BASIS 2 project

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