

Action Learning for Frontline Humanitarians: a resource pack



ACTION LEARNING



ALNAP is a global network of NGOs, UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/ Crescent Movement, donors, academics, networks and consultants dedicated to learning how to improve the response to humanitarian crises.

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About the authors

This resource pack was written by Jennifer Doherty, Senior Research Officer at ALNAP and Amelie Sundberg, former Senior Research Officer at ALNAP, with contributions from Alice Obrecht, Head of Research and Impact at ALNAP.

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The views contained in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the ALNAP Members.

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Communications management by Maria Gili
Copyediting by Hannah Caddick and Anna Brown
Design and typesetting by Soapbox,
www.designbysoapbox.com

For feedback or questions about this resource, please email us at actionlearning@alnap.org

The purpose of this resource pack

The knowledge of frontline staff – those directly involved in programme implementation and monitoring – is fundamental to good humanitarian action. These individuals make decisions and solve problems every day in their work with crisis-affected populations. The interactions they have with communities produce important information on how to implement projects most effectively to meet local needs. Decisions stemming from this experiential knowledge can be as valuable as decisions reached through more formal, explicit evidence (Campbell and Knox-Clarke, 2019).

Maximising the potential of frontline learning, however, comes with challenges:

1. Individual frontline staff typically have little space to consider their own learning. Existing monitoring and evaluation processes tend to follow organisational or donor priorities – these do not give space for frontline staff to identify or solve problems for themselves during implementation.
2. The complex and fast-moving nature of humanitarian contexts means that planned projects may need to be adapted to meet the evolving needs of populations. Effective and timely changes are harder to achieve when the knowledge of staff who are closest to communities is not maximised and respected within an organisation.
3. The knowledge of individual frontline staff is often not shared regularly among peers or senior colleagues. This means that the experiences of implementing one project are not adequately used to improve the outcomes of other ongoing or future projects. Sharing and valuing that knowledge could lead to more effective projects and efficiency gains across the organisation.

Despite the central importance of this knowledge to effective programming, frontline learning has been consistently undersupported (ALNAP 2003; HLA/Tanner 2016). This resource pack *aims to strengthen frontline learning by introducing 'action learning' as a straightforward approach to sharing knowledge and solving problems in fast-paced environments*. The pack is for programme staff who are implementing projects, staff in monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) roles who are collecting data and evaluating projects, and for team leaders or managers who work with them. Individuals, project teams or cross-organisational and inter-agency groups can all use this approach.

This action learning approach is tailored to humanitarian aid workers. ALNAP [reviewed](#) decades of expert experience and hundreds of research articles to design the approach. This resource pack incorporates learning from a pilot of the approach involving 26 individuals from 12 organisations, including local and international organisations and staff. This pack provides a step-by-step guide to using action learning and adapting the approach to the needs of different individuals and organisations.

The action learning approach is a powerful tool for frontline staff to take control of their own learning – as one pilot participant explained:

“ ...you can use it [action learning] to achieve other people’s potential. That person is the one to come up with ideas. You can see what is hidden in them. It is like an “eye opener” for the person to be understood and to see what they can achieve...In action learning the facilitator is just there to “give you a push” to express yourself, to develop, to bring out the good things within yourself.”¹

What is in this resource pack?

SECTION 1

SECTION 2

SECTION 3

SECTION 4

A short introduction to action learning

This section is a *foundation* for the resource pack. It introduces the technique of action learning and outlines some of the benefits for frontline humanitarian actors. This section will help you to decide whether action learning is something you want to use to support learning and problem-solving.

The rest of the resource pack provides details of how to implement exercises and how to adapt action learning for your own personal and organisational context.

JUMP TO...

What is action learning?

Action learning is a simple approach to **learning by doing**. It focuses on problem-solving and learning about issues experienced by individuals **at the time they are happening**. In this way, learning happens when it is most needed: it can be used to create practical changes to projects and processes during implementation.

The action learning approach **empowers individuals** to find their own solutions and generate their own learning. It works by getting **peers to ask questions** to help an individual to think through challenges.

The approach is founded on **two assumptions**:

1. People learn best when they combine reflection with practical action. If we engage in a cycle of 'reflection – action – reflection – action', over time we'll figure out the best ways to solve our problems.
2. Instead of immediately trying to give the answer to a question, we should first ask more questions. This helps us to better understand the issue or the problem and can bring unexpected useful answers to the surface.

Action learning takes place in **small groups** of colleagues (five or six is a useful number). This format enables open discussion and consideration of important issues and challenges as they arise for individual humanitarian practitioners. The length of the discussion can vary based on the complexity of the issues and the time available. But **45 minutes** is a minimum amount of time recommended to spend on an action learning exercise. Longer sessions can last **up to two hours**.

Who is action learning for?

You don't need a background in learning to use this approach. Action learning is for anyone in any thematic area who is interested in improving their work while they're doing it, through reflection and discussion.

The resource pack is aimed mainly at frontline staff – those who implement or monitor projects in communities – and their managers. However, other colleagues may find the approach useful for stimulating learning discussions with staff across their organisations. For example, this pack was piloted by community health workers, MEAL coordinators and senior managers in different humanitarian organisations.

Section 3 discusses different ways that individuals, teams and organisations can use the approach to support their learning.

Why is action learning useful for frontline humanitarian staff?

Traditionally, the humanitarian sector has valued 'knowledge' in terms of information that is made 'explicit' in training materials or manuals issued by headquarters – not the 'tacit' knowledge of frontline staff that comes from seeing, doing and interacting. However, that tacit knowledge can be key to solving daily project challenges and ensuring the effective implementation of projects.

Often tacit knowledge doesn't get valued and applied in the best way because frontline staff are too busy to focus on learning. Action learning is an approach that can help you to maximise the potential of your frontline knowledge in various ways:

1. It provides a space for you to identify what is important based on what you see on a day-to-day basis. This may include things that don't seem important to staff who are more removed from the implementation of projects.
2. It can have an immediate impact upon humanitarian projects. That sort of impact does not occur when you only take stock after implementation – for example, during a formal evaluation process a year later.
3. It is quick. It contains simple steps that do not take a large amount of planning and resources. You can even use it on the spot when an issue or challenge occurs!

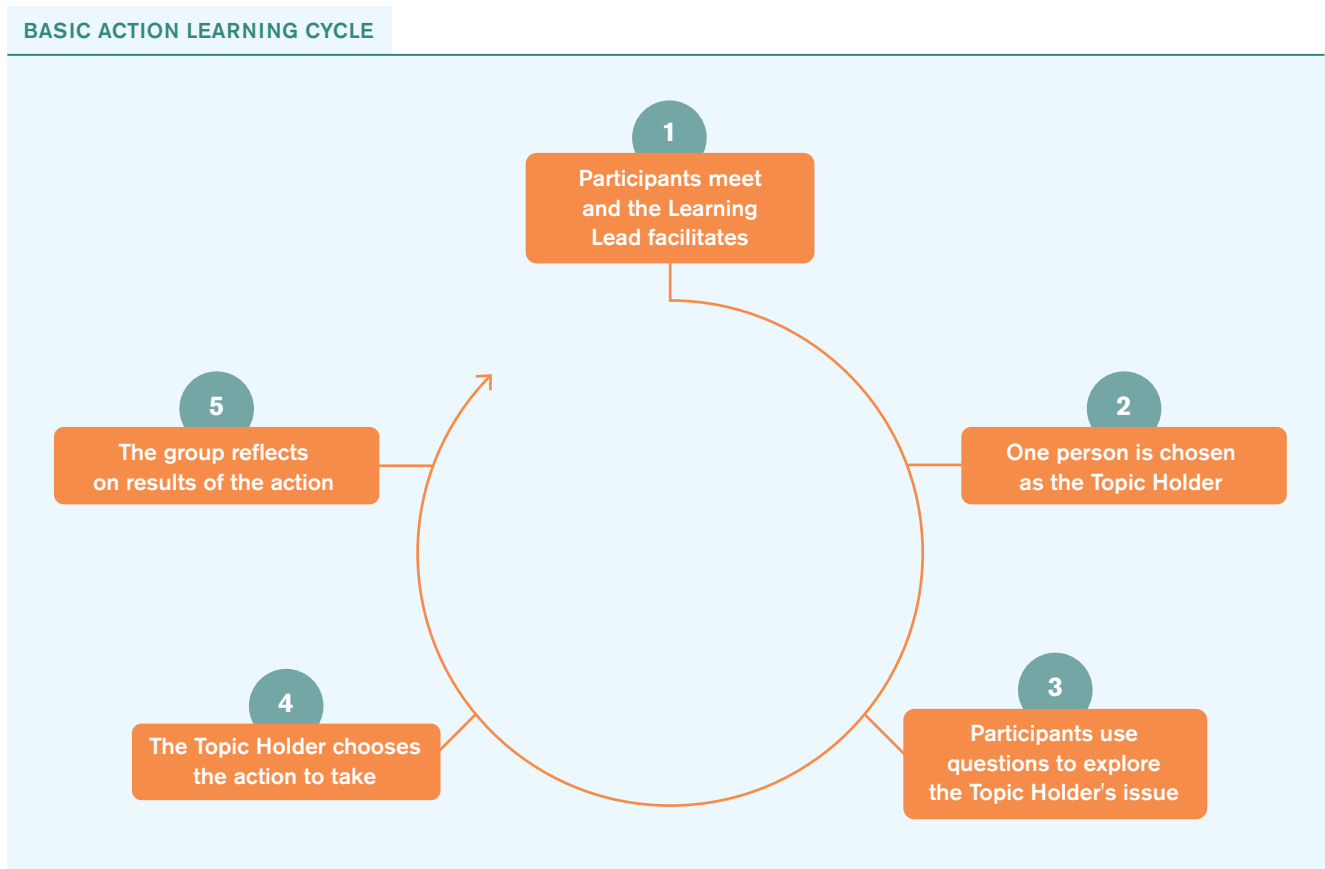
What can action learning help you to do?

The following examples of the results of action learning demonstrate its potential. They were shared by the individuals who helped to pilot this pack.

ACTION LEARNING CAN HELP YOU TO	EXAMPLE	QUOTE
<p>Stimulate learning, reflection and active problem-solving in your team</p> <p>By creating time in a meeting to ask your team about their challenges and give them space to think through their situation, you can stimulate effective teamwork and new ideas.</p>	<p>Sameera used action learning in a meeting with her team and discovered that they were having challenges with the collection of feedback from affected populations. By asking more questions to understand the issue and giving a space to the whole team to think about solutions, they came up with the idea of creating feedback forms to better understand, track and resolve the issues raised by affected populations.</p>	<p>“ When they started sharing their issues, problems and challenges, I really discovered that there were some things that I wasn't aware of. When we started, when we chose the problem, when we began to explore the challenges and they started talking about their solutions, I was really surprised that they really had great ideas. Before they didn't have the 'floor', they didn't have the chance to talk. When they did, they came up with ideas I have never heard about. So it was a really great exercise!”²</p>
<p>Learn from colleagues' success to improve your own work</p> <p>By providing a regular space for individuals to share what has gone well in their work, peers can learn from each other's positive experiences and identify how to create success in their own work. Peers can ask probing questions to understand better what their colleague did – something that isn't possible with best practice manuals.</p>	<p>During an online action learning session, MEAL staff working in different regional offices of an INGO learned how one colleague had created a time-saving system for analysing monitoring information. The new technique generated clear information that could be easily adjusted when new information came in. The other staff – all based in different countries – would not have benefited from this without sharing success stories in an action learning session.</p>	<p>“ There is always a problem. So it's great when you find more ideas. For example, [one participant] had a suggestion about having a toolkit where you do the analysis initially and then you press, 'refresh', and all of the other analysis is done automatically. I'm doing this right now. And it was all because of the session, because of this person's idea and because we applied what that person was suggesting.”³</p>
<p>Co-create solutions to collective problems with people outside your organisation</p> <p>By using action learning techniques with people outside your organisation, you can pool different ideas, experiences and perspectives to find the right solutions.</p>	<p>Community health facilitators used action learning with crisis-affected communities in West Africa to tackle the problem of malnutrition among children. By providing space and a structure for community members to discuss matters, a new solution was found to create a more nutritious supplement using locally available resources. This experience also underscored the value of listening to community knowledge.</p>	<p>“ The difference is that I allowed them to freely explore, to freely express themselves and I freely allowed them to make decisions for themselves. Sometimes we make assumptions because sometimes when you look at somebody, you assume that person wouldn't have anything good to bring, especially when there's nothing good about their situations. From our own mentality we may assume that. (But I tell you): When you apply this methodology of action learning, especially the collaborative exercise, it is really helpful. I must emphasise that I believe that everybody on this earth has his or her own potential but sometimes we don't use the right methods, the appropriate methodology to get to it.”⁴</p>
<p>Support regular sharing of information between formal MEAL practices</p> <p>By doing short action learning sessions throughout the project cycle, you can share useful information about implementation and progress more regularly rather than only during mid-term reviews and end-of-project evaluations. This allows learning to happen when information can make a difference to ongoing projects.</p>	<p>Patrick started using action learning with his team and found it to be practical and timely.</p>	<p>“ [The team had] moved from [a] traditional way of conducting learning in our humanitarian programmes where we organise a session once or twice a year. Now, given the clear guidelines contained in action learning, I am able to organise a quick session for any learning issue while in the field. This helps promote getting quick remedy for the issues.”⁵</p>

The key elements of action learning

This diagram gives a simple outline of the action learning approach. More details of exactly how you can implement the different steps are provided in the [exercises in Section 2](#).



The basic process of action learning can be described in five steps.

Step 1

A group of frontline staff come together to conduct the action learning exercise. One person is chosen at the beginning as the Learning Lead. Their role is to facilitate the process.

Step 2

Each action learning exercise focuses on just one person and the issue, challenge or success story that they have chosen. That person is the Topic Holder. You could agree which person will be the Topic Holder before the meeting – this can be useful if you meet regularly and want to give everyone a turn. Or you could hold a ‘bidding round’ to choose a topic, as described in the detailed exercises. The Topic Holder will then share their issue with the group.

Step 3

The participants ask the Topic Holder questions to help them reflect on the issue more deeply and to consider it from different perspectives. These questions should help the Topic Holder to think about the factors of the issue, how they feel about it and what they (or other people) could do to alter or to learn from the situation.

Note: In traditional action learning the participants **only ask questions, they never offer solutions**. This is to help the Topic Holder to develop their own problem-solving and reflection skills. This may not always be the best approach for your group or the specific topic. You will see some variations in the exercises that allow participants to offer solutions too.

Why are questions so important?

Often people try to solve problems by suggesting ideas, comments and solutions to the person with the problem. By asking more questions first, rather than rushing to discuss solutions, we can stimulate the person with the problem to think about aspects of their situation that they haven't considered. This is often very effective in generating relevant or innovative solutions. It also helps individuals to feel empowered by finding their own solutions to the issue and choosing their next steps.

Step 4

At the end of the action learning exercise, the Topic Holder should choose an action that they will take to address their issue or, in the case of a success story, how they could replicate that success in the future. By telling the group, the other participants can hold the Topic Holder accountable for implementing the agreed action after the meeting.

Treat your action like your own experiment

Instead of senior staff delegating actions, the Topic Holder chooses their own action to take at the end of the meeting. You can think of it like an experiment – you don't know if it will work until you try! Once you have tried out the action, you can reflect with the group to decide if it worked, helped you to progress, or created new challenges to tackle. Not every action will solve your issue but reflecting on the outcomes can help you to move in the right direction.

Step 5

At the next meeting, the group should reflect on the effect of implementing the actions from the last meeting. It is possible that the problem will have been solved and the group can move on to a new topic with a new Topic Holder.

If not, the group may need to ask more questions and consider whether a new action is necessary to make further progress.

This simple cycle should give you a good idea of the basic steps of action learning. But you may be wondering exactly how to implement the different stages.

[Section 2](#) will give you detailed instructions for three different exercises.

You may also be wondering how you can fit additional meetings into your busy schedule and commit to keeping a cycle going over more than one session!

[Section 3 has ideas for adapting action learning](#) to the time and resources available to you and your organisation. You can fit these exercises into your existing meetings or you can conduct a one-off exercise that doesn't involve a regular time commitment. You can also adapt the steps to fit your available time. For example, if the group doesn't have time to come together to reflect on learning after the action was implemented, the Topic Holder could speak with one other colleague or a manager. They could even do some solo reflection by thinking back to some of the questions asked and actions discussed in the first meeting.

Three different action learning roles

You will have noticed in the description above that there are three different roles that people play in an action learning meeting:

1. A **Learning Lead** who organises the meeting and facilitates the whole session.
2. A **Topic Holder** who shares their issue, challenge or success story for discussion.
3. Four or five **participants** who ask useful questions to the Topic Holder to help find solutions or draw out useful lessons.

Each of these roles is equally important in an action learning session. Within your group, you may take turns playing each of these roles in different sessions.

Does action learning sound like it might work for you? Then read on!

The rest of the pack will help you to:

- Understand how to facilitate action learning exercises as a Learning Lead.
- Know how to bring useful issues and challenges to your peers as a Topic Holder.
- Learn how to engage in action learning as an effective participant by asking your peers useful questions.
- Choose between three action learning exercises to solve challenges and share knowledge.
- Consider ways that you can adapt action learning to suit your needs and your organisation.
- Prepare for sessions and keep a record of learning using simple documents.

Action learning in practice: a step-by-step guide

Now you know the basics of action learning and how it can help you and your team to learn, you are ready to understand the steps of implementing action learning in more detail.

This section contains information to help you play the three different roles needed for an action learning meeting (Learning Lead, Topic Holder and Participants). It contains three different action learning exercises. There is also a helpful grid that explains the differences between the three exercises and the situations in which they can be most helpful.

You can use these resources **online** if you want, but they can also be **printed** for easy use in an action learning session.

JUMP TO...

Guide for Learning Leads

- The Learning Lead is the person who makes action learning happen! They organise the sessions and make sure the exercises are done correctly.
- There is only one Learning Lead for each exercise, but you can change Learning Leads between different exercises and topics. The important thing is to have someone who understands the responsibilities and can facilitate well.
- The Learning Lead should read this section before the action learning session to help them prepare to facilitate the session.
- The Learning Lead should also read the guidance for Topic Holders and participants to make sure you can keep everyone else in the meeting on track.
- The Learning Lead should read the exercise they will be using in the session.

Responsibilities of the Learning Lead:

- Arrange the meeting and make sure all participants know where and when it takes place.
- Consider sending some documents to the group ahead of the meeting (e.g. Guide for Learning Lead, Guide for Participants, Topic Holder's Brief). Or you could print these out and bring to the meeting.
- Help the group to agree collective ground rules at the beginning of the meeting and encourage everyone to follow them throughout the meeting.
- Guide the participants to follow the different steps of the chosen exercise.
- Make sure the group is considering actionable topics and asking useful questions.
- Keep the meeting to time by politely moving the participants on to the next point if necessary.
- Support a constructive and inclusive atmosphere for all participants.
- Keep notes of the important issues and suggestions that were shared and the actions that were agreed.
- Encourage the Topic Holder to complete their agreed action after the meeting.

Some of these points are self-explanatory, but some require more explanation...

Help the group to set ground rules

Whichever action learning exercise is used, one thing that is common is the need to set ground rules.

Action learning approaches require a high level of trust. Establishing ground rules is critical to creating trust and a supportive learning environment.

The Learning Lead should ask the group to suggest and jointly agree some ground rules for the session that everyone will agree to adopt and follow.

Examples include:

- **Confidentiality** – matters discussed in the session are not to be taken outside.
- Everyone should be **engaged** and **listen actively** to each other.
- Everyone should avoid judgement; it is safe to admit to **needs, weaknesses and mistakes**.
- **Punctuality** – the activity should start and finish on time.
- Participants should ensure that everyone is **included** and able to **participate equally** in the discussion.

These rules exist so that all participants can help to create a supportive environment for sharing and learning. Your job as Learning Lead is to remind participants that everyone is responsible for making one another feel safe, listened to and respected – it is not your responsibility alone!

You can learn more about the importance of ground rules for creating inclusive and comfortable spaces in different contexts in [Section 3](#).

Learning Leads must try not to:

- Give answers to questions or solutions to problems.
- Contribute lots of ideas, theories, concepts and information.
- Dominate the meeting.
- Allow participants to deviate from the steps of the exercise.

One of the biggest challenges in being the Learning Lead is that their role is to guide the discussion – not to provide their own ideas and solutions. That can be tricky for people who have a lot of ideas. But it's important that the Learning Lead focuses energy on guiding the participants and keeping things running well. If the Learning Lead acts like one of the participants in the meeting, it's very easy for the whole exercise to get off track and for learning opportunities to be missed. Another potential drawback is that a Learning Lead's input may end up being prioritised over that of other participants due to the power they hold in guiding the discussion – this is a problem because everyone's contributions must be seen as equally important.

Can the Learning Lead ever ask questions or offer solutions?

In rare cases, it might be necessary during the action learning session for the Learning Lead to ask their own questions (or offer potential solutions in the Collaborative exercise). This may be useful if the Learning Lead has unique expertise and experience of a topic that has not been covered by other participants or when they are directly involved in the issue being discussed. In typical action learning sessions, this would not be allowed. But in a humanitarian environment, frontline staff are dealing with issues that can affect the lives of crisis-affected communities. There could be serious consequences if the person in the room with the most effective idea keeps silent.

On these rare occasions, the Learning Lead could add a question or a potential solution into the conversation if no other participant has covered that particular important point already. Or they could offer to follow up with the Topic Holder outside the meeting. But remember, joining in the discussion as a Learning Lead should be the exception rather than the rule!

Guide for Topic Holders

- Participants should try to read this section before the action learning session to help them prepare a useful topic. You may not have agreed prior to the meeting who will be the Topic Holder. In this situation, everyone in the group needs to be aware of what is expected of the Topic Holder in case they need to present a topic.
- Reading in advance will not always be possible, so the Learning Lead must also be aware of the content of this guidance and be able to encourage participants to pick suitable topics.
- The Learning Lead may want to print this guidance and share it with the group before or during the meeting.

Picking an actionable topic

At the start of each session, all participants will have the opportunity to raise a topic that they want to discuss in the session. This is a question, challenge or problem that the participant would like the others' help to solve, or it could be a story of successful lessons learned that they would like to share with the group.

Here are examples of the type of **challenges** or **problems** shared by frontline staff who piloted this pack:

- “ As the MEAL team, we collect a lot of information. But we find it hard to get programme staff to engage in the findings because they're busy implementing other projects. How do we share this learning with them to improve projects?”
- “ We have been distributing food in a community but still the children are suffering from malnutrition. How can we change this situation?”

Here are examples of the type of **success stories** shared by frontline staff who piloted this pack:

- “ We had problems engaging men in the health services we provide to communities. But we created health sessions just for men and tried to make them feel “special”, which led to more men accessing services.”
- “ We get so much monitoring and evaluation data for different projects, but it takes a long time to analyse the data for the many reports we have to produce. I realised that a lot of the information required in reports was the same across different projects, so I created a spreadsheet with formulae that could analyse everything we needed. I just have to “refresh” the page when new data comes in and it gives me the information I need for the reports. It really saves time.”

Criteria for a 'learning topic'

1. The participant must be able to take an action that influences the topic.

Example: 'Hunger is a huge challenge in Somalia' is an important topic but it is too huge in scale for individuals to have much influence over it and won't be solved in a few hours of discussion. However, 'How can my team get more efficient at transporting food packages to remote communities?' is a useful topic. The Topic Holder has a potential role and influence within the situation.

2. The topic must be 'owned' by the participant who presents it. They must be speaking from personal experience of the topic.

Example: The topic presented is potentially actionable, but the Topic Holder is not directly involved in the problem: 'I am a MEAL manager and I have noticed that the shelter team are struggling to negotiate sustainable property access with local landowners.' Although this describes a problem within the organisation, it is not one that this Topic Holder can easily influence from their position in another team.

In comparison, the Topic Holder would be able to influence the problem in this scenario: 'I am an education in emergencies coordinator, and I have noticed that attendance is low at our morning sessions for children. What could I do to attract more children to our centre?'

3. If the topic is a question, challenge or problem, it must be possible to address it within the time and donor constraints of the project.

Example: Perhaps you have received complaints from the local community that they did not all receive the shelter assistance provided. However, there is no more money left in the project, which is closing. It would be important to review lessons learned on budgeting, procurement and communicating with communities as part of the project MEAL. But it is not so useful to do this for an action learning session because there is no time or authority to take any action regarding further delivery of the shelter kits.

Instead, you could present a related issue: 'I am worried that relations with the community have deteriorated and I want to learn how to improve these so we are in a good position for the next project taking place there.' This is an issue that you could still influence by using action learning to explore community trust-building strategies.

You can use the [Topic Holder's Brief in Section 4](#) to think through a topic to bring to the meeting.

Owning your topic and your action

As the Topic Holder, all the discussion in the meeting will be directed towards you. You own the topic that you bring. You are also responsible for choosing and implementing the action you commit to at the end of the meeting.

The questions being asked by the other participants will help you to think through your issue, challenge or success story. They may provide you with new useful ideas. But you should still feel confident that you are in control of what happens with your topic and what you will do after the meeting.

Guide for Active Participants

- Participants should try to read this section before the action learning session to help them prepare to ask useful questions.
- All participants are active participants. As a participant, you should be engaged in the discussion even if you don't ask a question every time.
- Reading in advance will not always be possible, so the Learning Lead must also be aware of the content of this guidance and be able to encourage participants to ask suitable questions.
- The Learning Lead may want to print this guidance and share it with the group before or during the meeting.

Asking useful questions

The most important role of action learning participants is to ask questions to help the Topic Holder think through their issue effectively. Instead of rushing to offer solutions, participants' questions can prompt the Topic Holder to think about the issue in greater depth – or to find a new perspective that can help them to reach a solution they wouldn't have found on their own.

What kinds of questions?

Three main types of questions are used in action learning to help people to think about their problem in a different or new way. These are **thinking**, **feeling** or **willing** questions.

Below is a list of example questions as a starting point. These lists are by no means exhaustive; you can be creative and come up with questions that suit your specific action learning session. The questions are mainly written in the present tense, which will help with ongoing issues and challenges. If you are using action learning to explore factors in success stories that happened in the past, then you can use similar questions but in the past tense.

'Thinking' questions

These types of questions look to explore and uncover facts, data, information, assumptions and stories. You can consider them as 'detective' questions.

When coming up with your own 'thinking' questions, remember that they are seeking more detail about the facts of the problem situation.

- What have you done so far to tackle this issue?
- What are aid recipients saying to you?
- Are there different communication and cultural factors involved?

- How much time are you spending on this problem? How much time do you have for the project?
- Who else is involved? Who are the stakeholders in this problem?
- What makes this problem important?
- Whose help do you need? What power and interest do they have in the problem?
- Who has decision-making power over this situation?

‘Feeling’ questions

The questions and problems we face in our work will often have a motivational or ‘feeling’ component to them. ‘Feeling’ questions help people to reflect. They encourage empathetic approaches to the issue by asking about emotions and challenging the assumptions that a Topic Holder might have. When coming up with your own ‘feeling’ questions, remember that they are seeking more detail about the person’s feelings about the situation.

- Why is this challenge important to you?
- How do you feel about the questions you have been asked in this group?
- What other reasons could there be to explain why they did that?
- Would you be surprised if others felt the same/differently?
- How did you feel when you heard that?
- If I were in this situation, I would be angry – how about you?
- What is stopping you from...?
- How is this affecting your team?

‘Willing’ questions

These types of questions are about looking ahead and planning. The idea is to reflect, take stock, find direction and set goals. You can consider them ‘proactive’ questions. When coming up with your own ‘willing’ questions, remember that they are action-oriented.

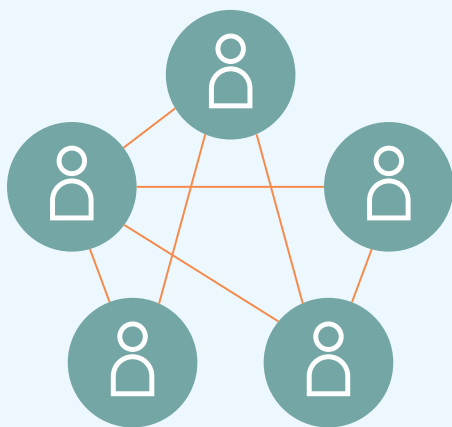
- What help, or support, might you need?
- How will you get that support?
- What could we do more of or less of?
- How will you decide what action to take?
- What steps can you see? What will you do next?

- Can you describe how things will be in one month?
- What alternatives are there?
- What would be the best-case scenario? What would 'good' look like?

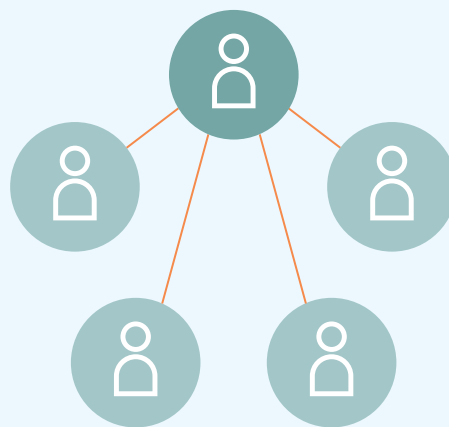
Direct your question to the Topic Holder

When discussing issues or trying to solve problems, people tend to direct dialogue towards multiple different people in the group – in effect passing the issue around. In an action learning session, you must direct all your questions at the Topic Holder, rather than to other participants. In this way, conversation flows in only one direction for each issue. You can see this difference shown in the figure below. An action learning meeting can address multiple issues but there is always only one Topic Holder for each issue.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE



A. Typical meeting/focus group discussion



B. Action learning session




Three action learning exercises and their uses

Now you know the basics of action learning and the different roles involved, you can learn more about the different exercises and how to use them. The step-by-step instructions can help Learning Leads to guide the sessions and participants to follow the exercise – you can print them out so you have them close to hand!

The three types of action learning exercise included in this pack are:

- Classic
- Collaborative
- Positive

All exercises work best with a group of **five or six people** and require **at least 45 minutes**. Each approach has slightly different characteristics and a different purpose. Use the grid below to help you to decide which exercise is best for your action learning meeting. This will depend on who your participants are and what they want to get out of the meeting. For example, colleagues may just want the space to think through an issue for themselves, or they may be truly stuck and need suggestions from other people, or they may have some positive learning to share with colleagues.

EXERCISE TYPE	MAIN CHARACTERISTICS	PURPOSE
Classic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Topic Holder presents an <i>issue/challenge</i> to address ▪ The issue/challenge is ongoing ▪ Participants ask <i>questions</i> of the Topic Holder to help <i>solve the challenge</i>. They do not offer potential solutions ▪ Topic Holder chooses an action from their <i>own ideas</i> as a result of the discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stimulates learning ▪ Solves problems that need action now, enabling corrections to programmes during implementation ▪ Empowers individual staff to think and find their own solutions, thereby building confidence and agency
Collaborative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Topic Holder presents an <i>issue/challenge</i> to address ▪ The issue/challenge is <i>ongoing</i> ▪ Participants ask <i>questions</i> of the Topic Holder to help <i>solve the challenge</i>. They also <i>provide potential solutions</i> ▪ Topic Holder chooses an action from their <i>own ideas</i> or <i>the ideas of colleagues</i> as a result of the discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stimulates learning ▪ Solves problems that need action now, enabling corrections to programmes during implementation ▪ Finds the solution when the Topic Holder is stuck and needs new ideas ▪ Stimulates teamwork and addresses shared problems
Positive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Topic Holder has a <i>success story</i> where a project went well or they overcame a challenge ▪ The success happened in the past but is <i>relevant to their colleagues' ongoing or future work</i> ▪ Participants ask <i>questions</i> of the Topic Holder to help <i>identify learning</i> ▪ Participants consider <i>relevant learning</i> from the success story, which <i>they could use in the future</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shares learning from the past to use in ongoing or future projects ▪ Identifies factors that made things work ▪ Facilitates handover processes when someone is leaving the team or organisation

Exercise 1: Classic action learning session

Use this exercise to:

- Stimulate learning.
- Solve problems that need action now.
- Empower individual staff to think and find their own solutions.

Roles: Learning Lead, Topic Holder and Participants.

Resources: 5 to 6 people.

Optional: Pen, paper, flip chart, or white board.

Time: At least 45 minutes.

Note-taking forms: Topic Holder's Brief; Classic and Collaborative Learning Journal; Learning Cycles Logbook.

How to run this session

Step 1 Introduction

The Learning Lead welcomes everyone to the group. The Learning Lead explains the objective of the session and the process and goals of action learning, including the specific aim of the Classic exercise. They should ask everyone to introduce themselves and encourage people to feel comfortable with each other.

Step 2 Set the ground rules

The Learning Lead facilitates the group's creation of a list of ground rules. It is important that the group jointly comes up with and agrees on these. See the [Guide for Learning Leads](#) if you need help with setting ground rules.

Step 3 Present the learning topics

The Learning Lead asks everyone to briefly share their learning topic – a question, problem or challenge. Each introduction of a learning topic should last a **maximum** of five minutes. The Learning Lead should remind everyone of how to pick a useful topic by referring to the [Guide for Active Participants](#).

During this round of sharing no one should ask any questions or make any interruptions. Only if the person sharing is going over time should the Learning Lead politely ask them to conclude quickly.

Step 4 Choose which learning topic to start with

Once everyone has finished sharing and **before doing anything else (discussing or asking questions)**, the group needs to decide whether there is enough time to discuss all the topics, how much time to allocate to each of these topics, or whether to focus on just one topic in the time available.

Each of the topics is valuable because a participant has identified it as important. So, how should you fairly prioritise which topics to discuss?

The Learning Lead can help the group to *jointly* choose a learning topic by prompting them to think about the following questions:

- Which topic is more ‘urgent’? What will be the consequences of addressing a topic later? Could you rank topics in order of urgency or time sensitivity?
- How complex is the topic and how much time do you have? If you don’t even know what the problem or question really is, you will probably need more time. So, if you agreed to meet in this session for only 45 minutes, you may need to save this complex topic for a different session.

Example: If one problem is related to responding to a sudden influx of refugees and another is related to a longer-term challenge – such as a relationship with an external partner – you might choose to start with the first and address the second problem in the next session.

Step 5 Clarify the problem

This involves a short round of questioning. Group members ask questions so that **they understand enough about the topic to be able to pose helpful questions to the Topic Holder**. The Topic Holder responds as best they can to each question.

This step is to make sure that everyone in the group is clear about what the problem is, as explained by the Topic Holder. Consider this a short, fact-checking exercise. The Learning Lead should politely stop people from asking questions about how the issue might be addressed.

It can be useful for the Topic Holder to restate the issue in one sentence at the end of this process, to make sure that everyone is clear before moving on.

Step 6 Explore the issue

This step involves a longer round of questions to the Topic Holder. It is aimed at enabling the Topic Holder to think through the issue, or their role in relation to the issue, more deeply or broadly.

Each person can contribute questions but not necessarily in turn; a person who has asked a question can ask a follow-up question or questions, if it is looking like a useful inquiry to pursue with the Topic Holder. The Topic Holder may want to write down some of the questions so they can keep track.

The Learning Lead should watch whether the line of questioning seems useful to the Topic Holder. If one questioner is dominating the session, the Learning Lead may encourage others to participate with different areas of questioning. Not everyone contributes questions in every session – they contribute to the learning by their attentive listening.

If necessary, the Learning Lead can remind the participants of the range of useful questions they can ask, including thinking, feeling and willing questions. The Learning Lead can suggest they look at a copy of the [Guide for Active Participants](#) for some example questions. They can use these for inspiration and tailor them to the topic being discussed.

During this stage, the Topic Holder is free to respond to any questions that they find useful. If the Topic Holder would prefer not to respond, they can simply thank the questioner and write it down for future reflection.

Step 7 Consider possible actions

At this stage, the Learning Lead invites participants to pose more questions that will help the Topic Holder to decide on actions to take after the meeting.

Participants **do not** provide suggestions for actions. Instead, the Learning Lead should encourage participants to ask questions that help the Topic Holder to think about possible actions and how to implement them. Participants should focus on **willing** questions for this section.

The best actions are often SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timebound). As the Topic Holder suggests different actions to take, participants can help them to consider if the actions meet the SMART criteria. This will help the Topic Holder to develop actions that are practical to implement.

Step 8 Reflect and choose actions

The Learning Lead invites participants to reflect on and share what they have learned about themselves and/or the issue during the session. They can share their own experience, but they can't tell the Topic Holder what action to take.

Each group member speaks once and in turn, while the Topic Holder listens to their reflections. Participants can also offer to share ideas outside the group session, but the Topic Holder decides if that would be useful to them.

The Topic Holder is the last person to speak. They conclude by telling the group what action they will take to progress with the issue after the meeting.

Step 9 Evaluation

The Learning Lead invites participants to look back at the discussion and to identify what went well and what would make the next meeting even better. It can be useful to make a note of the key learning as a record for the group or to share key points with other colleagues. But remember not to share anything confidential! The Topic Holder, participants and the Learning Lead can each use the forms in [Section 4](#) to take notes or this task could be given to one volunteer.

Some variations

You could use the steps for this Classic action learning exercise in a single meeting, or you may have a series of meetings that use the same exercise to address different learning topics.

If you are holding regular meetings with the same group of people, you can also consider the following points:

- Devote some time at the beginning to reflect on progress since the last session. What actions from the last session did the Topic Holder do to address their topic? How did that action affect the issue? If necessary,

the group can conduct a short exploration exercise to help the previous Topic Holder to choose a new action to take – i.e. repeating steps 6, 7 and 8.

- Consider the topics that were shared at the previous session but were not discussed. The group can decide if they want to focus on one of those previously raised issues or if there are new topics they want to bring to the group. Make sure that you choose someone who has not recently been the Topic Holder so everyone gets an opportunity to address their topic throughout the course of the meetings.
- Break down big topics into sub-topics. If the group has a complex issue that is shared by several participants, such as implementing a new programme, you could divide this up and allocate parts to different Topic Holders. You could then explore a different part of the topic in different sessions and make complex issues and problems more manageable to solve.

Exercise 2: Collaborative action learning session

Use this exercise to:

- Stimulate learning.
- Solve problems that need action now.
- Find the solution when the Topic Holder is stuck and needs new ideas.
- Stimulate teamwork and address shared problems.

Roles: Learning Lead, Topic Holder and Participants.

Resources: 5 to 6 people.

Optional: Pen, paper, flip chart, or white board.

Time: At least 45 minutes.

Note-taking forms: Topic Holder's Brief; Classic and Collaborative Learning Journal; Learning Cycles Logbook.

How to run this session

Step 1 Introduction

The Learning Lead welcomes everyone to the group. The Learning Lead explains the objective of the session and the process and goals of action learning, including the specific aim of the Collaborative exercise. They should ask everyone to introduce themselves and encourage people to feel comfortable with each other.

Step 2 Set the ground rules

The Learning Lead facilitates the group's creation of a list of ground rules. It is important that the group jointly comes up with and agrees on these. See the [Guide for Learning Leads](#) if you need help with setting ground rules.

Step 3 Present the learning topics

The Learning Lead asks everyone to briefly share their learning topic – a question, problem or challenge. Each introduction of a learning topic should last a **maximum** of five minutes. The Learning Lead should remind everyone of how to pick a useful topic by referring to the [Guide for Active Participants](#).

During this round of sharing no one should ask any questions or make any interruptions. Only if the person sharing is going over time should the Learning Lead politely ask them to conclude quickly.

Step 4 Choose which learning topic to start with

Once everyone has finished sharing and **before doing anything else (discussing or asking questions)**, the group needs to decide whether there is enough time to discuss all the topics, how much time to allocate to each of these, or whether to focus on just one topic in the time available.

Each of the topics is valuable because a participant has identified it as important. So, how should you fairly prioritise which topics to discuss?

The Learning Lead can help the group to *jointly* choose a learning topic by prompting them to think about the following questions:

- Which topic is more ‘urgent’? What will be the consequences of addressing a topic later? Could you rank topics in order of urgency or time sensitivity?
- How complex is the topic and how much time do you have? If you don’t even know what the problem or question really is, you will probably need more time. So, if you agreed to meet in this session for only 45 minutes, you may need to save this complex topic for a different session.

Example: If one problem is related to responding to a sudden influx of refugees and another is related to a longer-term challenge – such as a relationship with an external partner – you might choose to start with the first and address the second problem in the next session.

Step 5 Clarify the problem

This involves a short round of questioning. Group members ask questions so that **they understand enough about the topic to be able to pose helpful questions to the Topic Holder**. The Topic Holder responds as best they can to each question.

This step aims to make sure that everyone in the group is clear about what the problem is, as explained by the Topic Holder. Consider this a short, fact-checking exercise. The Learning Lead should politely stop people from asking questions about how the issue might be addressed.

It can be useful for the Topic Holder to restate the issue in one sentence at the end of this process, to make sure that everyone is clear before moving on.

Step 6 Explore the issue

This step involves a longer round of posing questions to the Topic Holder. It is aimed at enabling the Topic Holder to think through the issue, or their role in relation to the issue, more deeply or broadly.

Each person can contribute questions but not necessarily in turn. A person who has asked a question can ask a follow-up question or questions if it is looking like a useful inquiry to pursue with the Topic Holder. The Topic Holder may want to write down some of the questions so they can keep track.

The Learning Lead should watch whether the line of questioning seems useful to the Topic Holder. If one questioner is dominating the session, the Learning Lead may encourage others to participate with different areas of questioning.

Not everyone contributes questions in every session – they contribute to the learning by their attentive listening.

If necessary, the Learning Lead can remind the participants of the range of useful questions they can ask, including thinking, feeling and willing questions. The Learning Lead can suggest that they look at a copy of the [Guide for Active Participants](#) for some example questions. They can use these for inspiration and tailor them to the topic being discussed.

During this stage, the Topic Holder is free to respond to any questions that they find useful. If the Topic Holder would prefer not to respond, they simply thank the questioner and write it down for future reflection.

Step 7 Propose possible actions

At this stage, the Learning Lead invites participants to propose potential solutions to the issue that the Topic Holder has presented. **Unlike the Classic exercise, participants suggest actions that the Topic Holder could take.**

When several possible actions have been suggested, the Learning Lead should encourage the Topic Holder to weigh up the pros and cons of the different suggestions. Participants can help the Topic Holder to think through these different factors, including a consideration of which solutions sound useful and which sound feasible.

The best actions are often SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timebound). As the participants and the Topic Holder suggest different actions, the Learning Lead should help them to consider if the actions meet the SMART criteria. This will help the Topic Holder to develop actions that are practical to implement.

Step 8 Reflect and choose actions

The Learning Lead invites participants to reflect on and share what they have learned about themselves and/or the issue during the session, and participants can indicate which action they think would be the most useful to address the issue.

Each group member speaks once and in turn, while the Topic Holder listens to their reflections. Participants can also offer to share ideas outside the group session, but the Topic Holder decides if that would be useful.

The Topic Holder is the last person to speak. They conclude by telling the group what action they will take to progress with their issue after the meeting. This can be one of the actions proposed by another participant or it could be a new action thought up by the Topic Holder as a result of the discussion.

Step 9 Evaluation

The Learning Lead invites participants to look back at the discussion and to identify what went well and what would make the next meeting even better. It can be useful to make a note of the key learning as a record for the group or to share key points with other colleagues. But remember not to share anything confidential! The Topic Holder, participants and the Learning Lead can each use the forms in [Section 4](#) to take notes, or this task could be given to one volunteer.

Some variations

You could use the Collaborative action learning exercise as a one-off in a single meeting, or you may have a series of meetings that use the same exercise to address different learning topics.

If you are holding regular meetings with the same group of people, you can also consider the following points:

- Devote some time at the beginning to reflect on progress since the last session. What actions from the last session did the Topic Holder do to address their topic? How did that action affect the issue? If necessary, the group can conduct a short exploration exercise to help the previous Topic Holder to choose a new action to take – i.e. repeating steps 6, 7 and 8.
- Consider the topics that were shared at the previous session that were not discussed. The group can decide if they want to focus on one of those previously raised issues or if there are new topics they want to bring to the group. Make sure that you choose someone who has not recently been the Topic Holder so that everyone gets an opportunity to address their topic throughout the course of the meetings.
- Break down big topics into sub-topics. If the group has a complex issue that is shared by several participants, such as implementing a new programme, you could divide that up and allocate parts to different Topic Holders. You could then explore a different part of the topic in different sessions and make complex issues and problems more manageable to solve.

Exercise 3: Positive action learning session

Use this exercise to:

- Share learning from the past to use in ongoing or future projects.
- Identify factors that made something work.
- Hand over knowledge when someone is leaving the team or organisation.

Roles: Learning Lead, Topic Holder and Participants.

Resources: 5 to 6 people, pen, paper, flip chart or white board.

Time: At least 45 minutes.

Note-taking forms: Topic Holder's Brief; Positive Learning Journal; Learning Cycles Logbook.

How to run this session

Step 1 Introduction

The Learning Lead welcomes everyone to the group. The Learning Lead explains the objective of the session and the process and goals of action learning, including the specific aim of the Positive exercise. They should ask everyone to introduce themselves and encourage people to feel comfortable with each other.

Step 2 Set the ground rules

The Learning Lead facilitates the group's creation of a list of ground rules. It is important that the group jointly comes up with and agrees on these. See the [Guide for Learning Leads](#) if you need help with setting ground rules.

Step 3 Present the success stories

The Learning Lead asks everyone to briefly share their story of success – a situation where something went well or they overcame a challenge. Each summary of a success story should last a **maximum** of five minutes. The Learning Lead should remind everyone of how to pick a useful topic by referring to the [Guide for Active Participants](#).

During this round of sharing no one should ask any questions or make any interruptions. Only if the person sharing is going over time, should the Learning Lead politely ask them to conclude quickly.

Step 4 Choose which success story topic to start with

Once everyone has finished sharing and **before doing anything else (discussing or asking questions)**, the group needs to decide whether

there is enough time to discuss all the stories, how much time to allocate to each of these, or whether to focus on just one story in the time available.

Each of the stories is valuable because a participant has identified it as important. So, how should you fairly prioritise which stories to discuss?

The Learning Lead can help the group to *jointly* choose a success story by prompting participants to think about the following questions:

- Which story offers lessons for success that are most timely? What will be the consequences for ongoing projects of learning about this success? Could you rank the success stories in order of urgency or time sensitivity?
- How complex were the factors of success in the stories? How much time do you have to talk about these?

Step 5 Clarify the story

This involves a short round of questioning. Group members ask questions so that **they understand enough about the story to be able to pose helpful questions to the Topic Holder**. The Topic Holder responds as best they can to each question.

This step aims to make sure that everyone in the group is clear about what the success story is, as explained by the Topic Holder. Consider this a short, fact-checking exercise. The Learning Lead should politely stop people from asking questions about how different factors contributed to creating the success.

It can be useful for the Topic Holder to restate the main success in the story using one sentence at the end of this process, to make sure everyone is clear before moving on.

Step 6 Explore success drivers

During this step, group participants are invited to write down individually what factors, in their view, made the success possible. Drawing on contributions from the group, the Learning Lead notes these factors and places them under two headings:

1. The actions of the Topic Holder.
2. The context or environment in which the success happened.

The Learning Lead writes these down on a flip chart, white board, piece of paper or other presentation method, such as in the chat screen or a projected on-screen document.

Step 7 Explore more deeply

Members of the group ask further questions about the selected story. Preferably, these should be open questions that help to explore the success factors.

If necessary, the Learning Lead can remind the participants of the range of useful questions they can ask, including thinking, feeling and willing questions. The Learning Lead can suggest that they look at a copy of the [Guide for Active Participants](#) for some example questions. They can use them for inspiration

and tailor them to the topic being discussed. Unlike the Classic and Collaborative exercises, questions asked in this exercise predominantly focus on the past.

The Topic Holder can write down each question to keep track. Once the participants are finished with their questions, the Topic Holder can use them to consider the most significant success factors and to formulate a response about this.

The Topic Holder shares this response with the wider group and explains why they identified those factors as most significant.

Step 8 Distil discoveries

The Learning Lead facilitates a conversation among participants during which they crystallise and share their own learning from the Topic Holder's success story. This includes how they will draw on it to tackle their own situations and enhance their own practice.

Step 9 Evaluation

The Learning Lead invites participants to look back at the discussion and to identify what went well and what would make the next round even better. It can be useful to make a note of the key learning as a record for the group or to share important points with other colleagues. But remember not to share anything confidential! The Topic Holder, participants and the Learning Lead can each use the forms in [Section 4](#) to take notes or this task could be given to one volunteer.

Some variations

You could use the Positive action learning exercise as a one-off in a single meeting, or you may have a series of meetings that use the same exercise to address different learning topics. Sometimes you will have a 'bidding round' where everyone shares a success story topic and the group chooses who will be the Topic Holder. In some cases, you may have identified one staff member from whom the rest of the group want to learn – for example, when someone is leaving the organisation. Here are some variations to consider, including two ways the Positive action learning method can help to retain knowledge in the organisation when frontline staff leave:

- A member of staff who is leaving often has a one-to-one handover with their manager or their replacement to share their learning. This means that other peers in the organisation do not get the opportunity to gain from their knowledge. Instead, you could organise an action learning session with multiple team members to share that knowledge more widely in the organisation.
- Sometimes there is not enough time for handovers to take place before someone leaves. To avoid the loss of knowledge, consider holding Positive action learning exercises at regular periods with staff. This can help frontline staff to learn from each other's successes on a regular basis throughout their time of working together instead of at the end.

- If you hold regular meetings, consider beginning the meeting with different success stories that were shared at the previous session but were not discussed. The group can decide if they want to focus on one of those previously raised stories or if there are new stories they want to bring to the group. Make sure that you choose someone who has not recently been the Topic Holder so everyone gets an opportunity to share their success story throughout the course of the meetings.

Making action learning work for you

Now you know all about the action learning approach, the different roles and the exercises you can use. But perhaps you're not sure how to fit this approach into your work – or whether it will work within your specific organisation and context.

This section talks through some options for adapting the approach to different situations to make it more practical. But remember – this list of options will not cover every situation. Please be creative with your own approach to integrating action learning approaches. You know your organisation and context best, so make action learning work for you!

JUMP TO...

Different ways to use action learning in your work

Action learning is a straightforward and light-touch approach to learning that is not resource- or time-intensive. Many frontline staff may find it easy to apply. But for some, finding the time to implement action learning regularly with peers may prove a challenge. It may be hard to get managers to agree to make time for learning, or it may be difficult to implement a participatory session when hierarchical structures exist. This section provides advice on how you can take the core elements of action learning – using questions for reflection and combining learning with action – and **make them work for the time, space and working environment available to you.**

Use action learning as an individual

Perhaps you are interested in the approach, but nobody in your organisation is motivated to practise action learning with you. For frontline staff, being able to convince colleagues and senior staff to create more time for your learning can be hard. Have you wasted your time reading this guide? No! You can use action learning to change your own approach to learning.

Ask yourself questions

While action learning processes traditionally rely on dialogue with others, you can ask yourself more questions to think through your own problems or to understand the success factors behind something positive that you achieved. Use some of the example questions in the [Guide for Active Participants](#) to structure your thinking. You can also use the forms in [Section 4](#) to help you keep track of your reflections. The Topic Holder's Brief and the Positive Learning Journal are particularly useful for reflecting by yourself.

Ask your peers questions during conversation

If a colleague mentions a problem in their work, ask them more about it using the different question types you have learned. Or if someone mentions that they succeeded at something that you also want to achieve, ask them how they did it. For example, you can ask them what changes they made or who else was important to overcoming the challenge. Learning from your peers doesn't have to be formal. You can change the way you interact to be more questioning and reflective.

Ask your staff more questions

If you are a manager, you can take a very simple step towards encouraging empowered reflection among your staff by using action learning questions. If a member of your team comes to you with a challenge in their work, instead of offering solutions, you can help them to reflect on the situation themselves by asking them more about it. For example, you can ask: What have you tried to do? Who else might be facing the same challenge? What is a small step you could take towards making a change?

Integrate action learning into existing meetings

Action learning in other sectors usually requires a small group of peers who meet regularly just to do action learning exercises. For frontline staff, you may already find it hard to have essential meetings with your colleagues. How can you add even more meetings – especially those that focus on learning rather than implementing?

If this is a challenge in your organisation, we suggest that you integrate action learning exercises into existing meetings. The integration approach will allow you and your colleagues to access many of the benefits of action learning without sacrificing a lot of time. The frontline staff who piloted this resource pack integrated action learning into existing meetings in the following ways:

Team meetings: Many managers meet regularly with their teams to focus on project implementation to make sure things are on track. Sometimes these meetings focus on solving challenges. Often the senior staff lead the meetings, identify the challenges and suggest the solutions. By using an action learning exercise, staff at all levels can raise an issue, reflect on the topic and play an active role in finding solutions to challenges. You could run a quick round of Classic or Collaborative action learning to stimulate reflection within the team during these meetings. You don't have to include an exercise in every meeting; perhaps try to run an action learning exercise in team meetings once a month.

Project MEAL milestones: One of the big benefits of action learning is that you can generate learning more continuously between MEAL milestones. But you can still experiment with using action learning exercises at those key points in the project cycle. Often review meetings involve presentations by staff and limited reflective discussion by other team members. By using an action learning exercise in these meetings, more staff will have the opportunity to contribute learning that can then be implemented in the next stage of the project as improvements or captured in reports and learning documents, for integration into future similar projects. You could use Classic or Collaborative action learning exercises to identify and solve problems during project implementation or even to think about potential issues that may arise during a project kick-off meeting. You could also use a Positive exercise to draw out positive lessons learned during monitoring and evaluation meetings. Or you could compile the (non-confidential) learning from your other action learning meetings and share it here.

Organisational reflection events: Some organisations use periodic learning events to bring multiple different staff together from different offices in a country or even different countries around the world. Frontline staff don't always have the chance to share learning in these environments if senior staff dominate the discussions. But these can be useful opportunities for frontline staff to learn from each other by asking questions and having interactive discussions. Senior staff can also learn from the valuable tacit knowledge held by frontline staff. You could integrate a Positive action learning exercise into the agenda to encourage staff to share their learning about what has worked well in different contexts. By using the questioning approach, participants can draw out learning from the Topic Holder that is most important for them to understand for their own projects in their own contexts. Or you could compile the (non-confidential) learning from your other action learning meetings and share it here.

External discussions: Action learning is not just a tool to be used within teams and organisations. Within the humanitarian sector, staff in different organisations can share similar problems or they may have learning that could help others to perform effectively. This knowledge is not just held by frontline staff – communities are also key to effective humanitarian action. Crisis-affected individuals may see challenges that frontline staff haven't noticed, or they may have solutions that humanitarian organisations haven't considered. You could use action learning exercises in cross-organisational working groups of communities of practice to share learning and solve problems. You could also try conducting an exercise during discussions with communities to encourage co-ownership of challenges and co-creation of solutions. Action learning does not require lots of time, resources or training – so the approach can be applied in lots of environments without forward planning.

Consider power dynamics, inclusion and cultural practices

Action learning is most likely to produce useful reflections and new ideas when everyone in the group feels respected and knows that their ideas and their challenges will be valued. Typically, frontline staff are not listened to as much as the more senior people within the organisation. As such, it may take some time for participants to develop a willingness to be open and talk freely.

Creating the sense of openness and mutual respect may be even more challenging in contexts where there is a strong tradition of hierarchy or patriarchy. Some people may feel excluded due to their gender, age or ethnicity. It can also be difficult when some staff have physical disabilities that could make it harder for them to follow and engage in group discussions. There are things that the Learning Lead can do to help the situation. For example, you could implement the following options:

- Spend more time setting ground rules that focus on inclusion and respect. Make sure everyone understands the rules that have been agreed and gently bring the group back to focusing on those mutual agreements if they are not being followed.
- Explore options to divide groups. It may be useful to have groups for different genders or levels of organisational seniority to help reduce power dynamics. This could be something you try at the beginning and then bring people together when they are more used to the action learning process.
- Ask participants to write down their topics or questions first, or get them to discuss these with one other person before raising them with the group. This can give people more time to think and articulate what they want to say before sharing with more people.
- Consider in advance whether people with different physical abilities can participate equally in the group. If not, what do you need to change? For example, you may need to change the way you sit to allow someone who lip-reads to see everyone else clearly.

You should also consider culture when you choose **which exercises are appropriate**. In some contexts where modesty was important, it was hard for piloting participants to speak about their own success during the Positive exercise. Instead, it may be useful for a Learning Lead to ask participants to speak about a time they saw someone else overcome a challenge and to explore those success factors.

Alternatively, it may be frowned upon to admit that you have any challenges in your work at all, which makes the Classic and Collaborative exercises harder to use. In this case, the Learning Lead may need to work on creating a culture of trust and sharing in the group to break down some of those barriers to enable learning. The Learning Lead could try discussing some of their own challenges to encourage others to do the same.

Ultimately, you know your own culture, your colleagues and your organisation best. You should feel empowered to adapt the approach in ways that will effectively and equally include your peers and colleagues. If you're unsure what action to take, **ask your colleagues and listen to their suggestions about changes that would make them feel more comfortable to participate**.

Organise remote action learning

Sometimes the people you work with and want to learn from are not all in the same location. You can still conduct an action learning exercise with this group by using an online platform for your discussions. For example, you could use Zoom, Skype, Google Meet or other platforms to meet virtually. Indeed, the piloting of this pack all took place remotely!

These platforms enable you to bring people together from different places with a variety of experiences and ideas. Remote sessions can also take place when security situations or other restrictions on movement make physical gatherings between colleagues difficult.

However, remote sessions also present challenges of internet connectivity, audio-visuals and creating bonds between members of the group. These are some things to think about when doing remote action learning:

- If possible, keep your cameras on to support a connection between individuals and to make sure everyone is engaged in the meeting. However, this is not always possible when internet connectivity or speed is low.
- The Learning Lead will need to play a strong facilitation role in online action learning meetings. When people are not sitting together in a room, it can be more difficult to know when people want to speak, whether they are engaged in the session and how they are feeling about the topic. You will have to keep track of who has spoken and encourage people to share their inputs.
- Limited connectivity can cause people to drop in and out of the meeting or sounds can become distorted. To help everyone understand the discussion during these potential interruptions, the Learning Lead and the Topic Holder may need to repeat what has been said or summarise key points for participants who have missed parts of the discussion.

- It may be necessary to ask people to type their questions or suggestions in the 'chat' function if there are problems with the audio.
- Consider specific inclusion issues with online platforms. For example, videos might help people to lip-read or you could enable a real-time transcript for people to read the discussion. However, for people with visual challenges, having clear audio will be important.
- Remote participation may hinder connections among the group. To encourage trust and openness, you may have to dedicate additional time for participants to introduce themselves and allow some time for people to get to know each other before the exercise

Simple templates to help you capture action learning

This section provides four templates that will help you to prepare for action learning sessions, take notes during an action learning session, or document the outcomes of a series of meetings.

The templates are deliberately short so as to put more emphasis on the reflective discussions and actions rather than on documentation. However, some notes can be helpful for personal reminders or for sharing key points from action learning with other colleagues. Remember not to share confidential information!

You can print these and complete them as needed as a participant. Or if you're organising an action learning session, you may want to print them out or send them to your colleagues in advance.

JUMP TO...

TOPIC HOLDER'S BRIEF

Use this template before going to an action learning meeting to help you focus on a suitable topic, opportunity or issue on which you wish to act. Going through these questions can help you to think more about the details of your learning topic and can help you to identify if it is the right type of topic for the action learning exercise you will be doing.

To be completed before the session

DESCRIBE YOUR LEARNING TOPIC (PROBLEM, OPPORTUNITY, SUCCESS STORY OR ISSUE) IN ONE SENTENCE

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

To you:

To others:

WHO ELSE WOULD LIKE TO SEE PROGRESS ON THIS TOPIC?

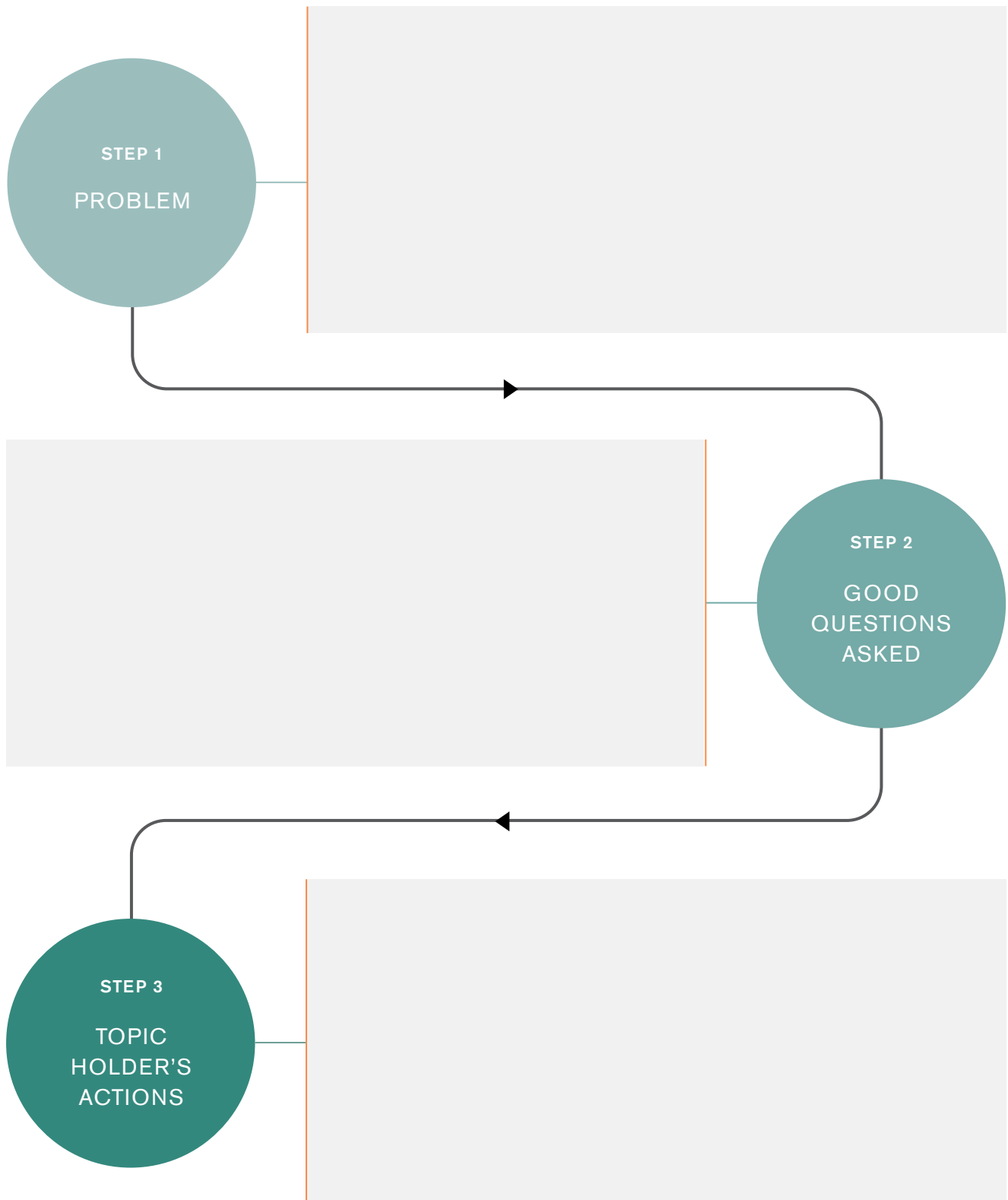
IF A PROBLEM, WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS IF IT IS REDUCED OR RESOLVED?

For you:

For others:

HOW WILL YOU RECOGNISE PROGRESS?

Use this journal to record the action learning session if you used either the Classic or Collaborative exercises. You can keep track of the issues discussed, the useful points raised and the next steps that were agreed. You could even use this journal to think through a problem on your own and ask yourself questions.



Use this journal to record an action learning session if the Positive exercise was used. You can record the learning topic, the important success factors, and key learning you could apply in the future. You can even use this journal to think through your own success stories to work out why things went well and how you can replicate that success in your future work.

LEARNING TOPIC

Describe in 2–3 sentences the achievement, or strength, that you will be using to draw out learning.

SUCCESS FACTORS

Factors related to what the topic holder did.

Factors related to context/environment.

KEY LEARNINGS

What is unique about the topic holder's approach or perspective that enables success?

What lessons can we apply to similar situations or challenges in the future?

A simple logbook can be kept to keep track of topics discussed as well as actions agreed upon and progress towards learning. The logbook can either be filled in by the learning lead on behalf of the group, or by each individual who attends the meeting. This logbook is useful when several action learning sessions are held as part of a series of meetings.

Learning cycle

DATE	PLACE
TYPE OF EXERCISE	
PEOPLE PRESENT	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•••••••	
PROBLEMS PRESENTED	
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1234	
ACTIONS AGREED	
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1234	
ANY OTHER KEY TAKEAWAYS	

Endnotes

- 1 End of pilot interview with frontline national staff working in the health sector in Nigeria.
- 2 End of pilot interview with frontline staff working on MEAL in Syria.
- 3 End of pilot interview with frontline staff working on MEAL in Syria.
- 4 End of pilot interview with a frontline national staff member working on health in Nigeria.
- 5 End of pilot interview with a frontline national staff member working on MEAL in Somalia.

Related resources

References in this document

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Tanner, L. (2016) 'Knowledge landscape report'. London: Humanitarian Leadership Academy. (www.alnap.org/help-library/draft-landscape-report)

For more information about using action learning in your organisation:

Contact ALNAP at: actionlearning@alnap.org

Contact action learning training providers, such as Action Learning Associates or the Centre for Action Learning

Related ALNAP publications

- Action Learning & Tacit Knowledge: a mapping of approaches for humanitarian action
- Back to the Drawing Board: how to improve monitoring of outcomes
- Beyond the Numbers: how qualitative approaches can improve monitoring of humanitarian action
- Breaking the Mould: alternative approaches to monitoring and evaluation



ALNAP

Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom
alnap@alnap.org