



Case Study: Strand B: Resilience Training: Action learning

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Setting the scene

One strand of the Courage Project was to develop, pilot and evaluate resilience training (i.e. training that would develop skills in managing stressful and challenging circumstances) as part of personal and professional development of PGRs at the University of East Anglia, University of Suffolk and Norwich Bioscience Institutes. This case study shares the Courage Project Action Learning training programme.

Action taken

Action Learning is a form of peer support, where experiences are shared among a group (the Action Learning Set). An individual presents an experience, issue, challenge or difficulty that they are facing (related to research studies). The Action Learning Set provides a confidential, structured and reflective exploration of the challenges of doctoral studies. The set meets regularly, with a different person presenting an issue as the 'issue owner' each time.

Skills that are developed as part of Action Learning include:

- Active listening
- Reflecting back
- Open questioning
- Challenging
- Emotional intelligence

- Giving productive and effective feedback
- Strategies for stress management

Skilled facilitators are integral to the effectiveness of this process. The facilitators were all staff members of the university and were professionally trained with previous experience of group facilitation and with ongoing training provided and support after the sets. The facilitators were trained over 3 sessions, including an introduction to action learning, group facilitation skills workshop and a 1 day action learning workshop.

PGRs from across UEA were invited to attend the 1 day action learning workshop. This workshop (and the training for the facilitators) was facilitated by an external facilitator with extensive experience of action learning sets. The workshop included an introduction to action learning and a chance to explore the opportunities and challenges that action learning sets. There was practical discussion throughout and a chance to be part of and experience what it is like to be part of an action learning set. At the end of the workshop, all attendees were invited to be part of future action learning sets. All PGRs were awarded credit towards Personal and Professional Development training pathways for attendance.

Key impacts/ outcomes

Feedback collected after the workshop was resoundingly positive and described a range of benefits from the participants, including a understanding of what action learning involves, having a space to talk, share experiences and difficulties helped participants to feel that they were 'not alone', learnt new strategies for solving problems, active listening and giving impartial guidance.

“Non-judgmental and supportive environment, developing empathetic and supportive listening skills.”

The workshop was identified as helping individuals to pay attention to and were “encouraged [me] to allocate more time to care about” their wellbeing and mental health:

“Sharing problems can give insight from other points of view and help to solve problems through attentive ways learnt from other people’s experiences”

There were some challenges faced by the participants, including recognising that...

“It can be difficult to talk about problems with strangers, but I found this workshop very rewarding”

Some of the specific skills required for action learning sets were also recognised as some of the challenges faced during the workshop, including not giving advice and asking open questions.

The timing of the workshop along the research process is also important.

“As I just started, I don’t think that I have any challenges for the moment, but listening to other students made me feel aware of what I can face in the near future.”

“If I had had this in year 1 I think it would have been very useful to join an action learning group to meet throughout the PhD journey on a regular basis.”

Often the issues raised during the sets focused around the supervisory relationship. The facilitators need to be well prepared to manage the sets discussions around this.

Effective and appropriate training of the facilitators is integral, this required time and resource to provide training and development of the facilitators before the PGRs were involved. Moreover, support for the facilitators after the action learning sets is important as the issues raised in the sets can be highly emotive and challenging to discuss. During this process, we trained 5 facilitators, meaning that the workload can be spread further across the staff members. The wellbeing of all parties involved should be assured.

Confidentiality must be established and assured to all who are involved. Action Learning is not a therapy and should not be treated as a therapeutic practice. The facilitators and attendees should be provided with key signposting information if it is identified that further, professional support is needed.

Action Learning has been well received by the PGRs who took part in the workshop and has led to the majority of the attendees agreeing to be part of future Action Learning Sets that will meet regularly with the trained facilitators.