

## What did Reg Revans encourage us to do?

'Doubt ascending speeds wisdom from above' Reg Revans

Here are extracts from a speech given by Reg Revans, IMCA President Emeritus at the opening of the Revans Action Learning Workshop, IMCA Buckingham on 18 December, 1987.

### Learning from science

I intend now to answer a question implicit in today's assemblage: 'If IMCA is intelligent enough to see that action learning is worth further development, starting with some ideas first due to Reg Revans, from where, in the early days, did he get them?' I found myself a research student at Cambridge; along with Lord Bowden, I worked in the Cavendish with a lot of Nobel prize-winners - about a dozen; while we were there, Bowden with the first architect of the atom, Lord Rutherford, and I with the genius who identified the electron and so laid the foundation of modern science, Sir J J Thomson; James Chadwick discovered the neutron and so opened the doors of all nuclear technology. What I learnt was not so much about atomic physics, as the need to ask silly questions when you have lost your way; when you are like the majority of us all and do not know what next to do, it is useless to pretend that you have the answer somewhere at hand - as do most people with letters after their names. Every week there was a seminar at the Cavendish, and to speak at it one had to confirm that one's researches were not going as hoped; one became skilled in describing one's very ignorance and, more than that, in trading it with others equally ready to confess their own. Over the next half-century, I have tried to practise what the Cavendish taught me; to trade my confusion with that of others, seeking to interpret my own doubt by keeping away from experts with prefabricated answers and questions they do not understand, and trying to see why somebody else is no less confused than myself. To have seen a dozen Nobel Laureates helping each other to ask totally fresh questions explained what action learning is. At 80 I no longer judge others by what they already know, but by the questions they put to me.

One of my daughters once asked me what the dark was made of; she brought some small friends home from school and we went into the subject together, finishing with a little rhyme:

O teacher kind, please help me find out what the dark is made of!  
It worries me that I can't see what I am so afraid of.

How stupid can you get? I hear the experts ask. How confident can we be about what we think we know already? Are there still questions for us to ask? If so, how do we find them? Do we really share each other's doubts? ... It was what I watched for many years within the Cavendish, the exchange of doubt, confusion and ignorance among true comrades in adversity - each one struggling, like my little daughter, to find out what the dark was made of - and, no doubt, is still made of today. But, since all our individual darkneses are different, we must beware of experts telling us "professionally" what any one of them might be.

### Learning from organizations

We now come to action learning. When I was asked, towards the end of the second world war, by the coal-owners to write an education plan for their industry, then the world's largest employer, I went through all of these previous steps and saw that I needed to trade my ignorance with the miners themselves. From that plan, published in October 1945, came action learning ... at least in theory, something for the experts to find amusing. One thing led to another. Lord Bowden made me a professor at Manchester College of Technology in 1955. Soon, I was to meet another local genius, later Lord Platt, President of the Royal College of Physicians: as Dean of the Faculty of Medicine he was worried about the high wastage of student nurses from the university hospital and asked me what I thought about it. We started a research project - that eventually got me to Australia - and it was of an unusual design, in that we convinced those working in the hospitals that they, too, had to help launch, monitor and interpret the inquiry from start to finish. When, in 1964, our sponsors, the Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust, published our findings, they were seen to confirm the silent thesis of the daughters of Florence Nightingale - that the most precious asset owned by any hospital, howsoever imperfectly employed, was the conviction and experience of those working at or near the bedside ... a conclusion, alas, still far from understood.

To imagine there to be some 'science of administration', some 'syllabus of health care management', outside and independent of all clinical responsibility is self-deception of the highest order. Unless the bedside talents, both clinical and emotional, both clever and wise, both qualified and sacrosanct, are fully brought to bear, nothing permanent will follow ... Action learning will show us how. The King Edward VII Hospital Fund for London went on to prove how it could save us millions, speed patient recovery and raise staff morale.

Perhaps IMCA will help still more?

Source: *Accrediting Managers at Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Richard Teare & Gordon Prestoungrange, Prestoungrange University Press, 2004.