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Memories of Reg Revans – 1907 – 2003
by Charles Margerison

I first met Dr Reg Revans in 1973. It was a privilege to know him. He was the champion of continuing professional development by work based action learning. These are some of my personal recollections of the times we met, as well of his life and career.

He was an extraordinary man by any standard. Born in 1907, he trained as a scientist and worked as a young man with the great names of his day including Einstein, and those at the Cambridge Cavendish Laboratory. During this time, he represented England at the 1928 Olympics. He then established a career in education and industry. He was Director of Education for the National Coal Board after the end of the 2nd World War. Later he became Professor of Management at the University of Manchester Institute of Technology.

At the National Coal Board, he said that there were so few people who could manage the mines, due to the losses during the war years, that it was not appropriate for those who returned to be off the job attending courses. Therefore, he adopted a system he had seen in the research laboratories, where colleagues shared and compared their problem, ideas and findings.

He invited the managers of coal mines to do likewise. He suggested that they visit each other's coal mines usually in small groups, which he called "a Set of managers". One of the managers could be managing safety very well. He was asked to share his methods. Another one might be doing well on productivity and teamwork. Another manager might be controlling costs well. By their visits and discussions, they not only learned best practice, but also had mutual support from each other to introduce the new methods to their own mines.

Revans called this "Action Learning". It sounded simple enough, but to his dismay he found the training profession going in the opposite direction. The professional trainers wanted to control the agenda, and set up courses and have people sit in classrooms. They introduced a passive, rather than active approach to work based learning. Revans said that might be appropriate when the issue was a puzzle, and the solution already known. But,

for real work problems, where there could be various options, it was best to research the action, and help people learn from what they do.

When I first met Reg Revans in 1973, I was in Belgium at the European Foundation for Management Education, where I was assessing different approaches to management development in various countries. A colleague said there was an Englishman nearby who was advising the Belgium Government. It was Reg. I contacted him and he invited me round. He welcomed me, and outlined how his ideas for getting managers together to study what they did at work had not found favour in UK universities. So, at an age when others were retiring, he had accepted the challenge of establishing action learning with a consortium of Belgian companies.

What were my first impressions? I can still see him, dressed immaculately, in his small Belgian office talking in an eloquent way about his ideas. He clearly felt his own countrymen had rejected him. But, he was determined to show action learning was the right way. In summary, he said, our task as advisers was to help managers meet together and learn from each other, rather than someone, who does not know their problems, trying to teach them, and then hoping they will use it.

I left feeling everything he said made sense, but it was totally at odds with the formal world of formal education in which I worked and that I observed on my travels round Europe. Should I join his anti establishment camp or continue under the teaching first and learning second model of the business school? With a wife and three children to support, and not understanding how to make his ideas work I returned to my job. Of course, I now know that he was saying that we had to start with the political realities of a managers work first, not the academic content of a course.

His ideas were however accepted by the National Health Service in the UK. He introduced a range of challenging processes that brought doctors, nurses and administrators to work in the same project groups. Independent research later showed that in those hospitals where action learning was applied, there were a number of clear improvements. These included reducing the number of days in hospital per patient, in comparison to others that had not used action learning.

Later, he was to accept the challenge from Arnold Weinstock, Head of the GEC Company, to introduce action learning. He again he rose to the challenge with great success. He brought managers from different parts of their giant business together to ask questions, find the facts, assess options, make choices and implement them and share their learning.

It sounds straightforward and obvious when set out in words. But, I can tell you from personal experience that it is not. The reason is that the learning is rarely shared. People focus on getting the task done, then rush to the next assignment. The learning is often lost. As Revans kept saying, it is not just the action, but also the learning that is important.

I met Reg again in 1979. I was by then a Professor of Management at Cranfield University School of Management, and part of the establishment that he was challenging. We invited him to speak, and he did so with gusto, for he was a brilliant orator with people waiting upon his word. Afterwards, we had a discussion, and I asked him a question about the progress of action learning. He replied, “it will not be a success until places like Cranfield, and other universities, offer doctorates in action learning”.

At the time, we thought we knew what a doctorate was based on traditional scientific method, but Reg was talking about work based doctoral work and the acceptance of that. I am pleased to say that I am now involved in that work as a member of the International Management Centres Association – www.imcassociation.org. Dr Revans was the first President of the organization.

I began to realize that what Reg Revans was saying added up with what managers were saying, albeit they did not have a political process or structure to make it work. This became clear when he wrote his opus *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*, published by Chartwell Bratt in 1984. By chance, I met him on a train the day he had been to his publishers to agree the final version. He again outlined the value of the approach and but did not press me to be an advocate though clearly he felt that was the way to go and he had recently become President of the International Management Centres Association to support the initiatives led by Gordon Prestoungrange as he is now known, and his colleagues.

My next major meeting with Reg was in Australia. I emigrated there in 1982. He was now in his late 70s but accepted the invitation, and gave a brilliant series of talks. I can see him now talking with a group in the sunshine on a beautiful Australian afternoon. The listeners sat under the shade of a tree while Reg gave forth, in Old Testament fashion, for he was without doubt a prophet. During the meeting, he said something that has always stayed with me. “Remember”, he said, “*the measure of the person is not in the statements he or she makes, but in the questions they ask*”

So, it was with Reg. He would expect you to ask questions about your work, your team, your life, your relationships, your career, and so on. Yet, he had strong opinions and felt that too much money was wasted on non-work based training.

He was a modest man in terms of his approach to business and style of life. He never tried to establish a business out of action learning, and was suspicious of those that did. He was reluctant to institutionalize his ideas, as he wanted them to challenge the status quo. In that sense, he was a revolutionary. His revolution was to enable people to take responsibility for their own learning and development and assist others through mutual support.

He did not want followers, but rather for each person to be their own leader contributing to improvement at all levels. Management education was not just for managers. It was for all, including the unemployed, who he encouraged in his work in Wolverhampton to meet together to assist each other find work.

He was a fund of knowledge in many fields. When he talked I and others listened. This was a man who knew what he was talking about. He ranged over many subjects with ease and conviction. He called upon the scriptures in the widest sense for he understood many faiths, plus his deep knowledge of philosophy and science and history.

At another level, his memory was incredible. I remember being with him at a conference when he was asked for names of people who were applying action learning. He not only gave the names, but also reeled off their phone numbers and addresses without reference to any notes.

Reg Revans believed in the ordinary person, and their factory floor/ office work, understanding and streetwise knowledge. He was suspicious of business schools, their restricted entry, and their passive learning style divorced from the real place of work. He was a populist, without a big organization or army of people supporting him.

He said that learning is all about us, and for everyone, not just those fortunate enough to get into colleges and universities. Open the doors and the windows, he said, bring people together who share problems and care about getting solutions. That is the starting point. Then encourage them to understand qualitative and quantitative research and focus on the real positive politics of how to get action.

That was the message of Reg Revans. Many people ignored it, and still do. To my knowledge, he never received an OBE or MBE, or other similar award. Yet, his contribution to the nation, and the world, has been many times greater than so many who have been recognized. It was a pleasure, and honour, to know him and to learn from him what action learning can mean and can do, for I have benefited in my work and life considerably.

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