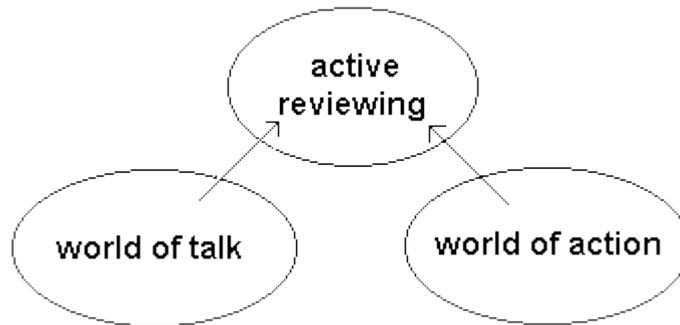


Active Reviewing



Bringing the worlds of talk and action together

An article by Roger Greenaway, *Reviewing Skills Training*

Learn how facilitators can bring together the worlds of talk and action in experience-based learning by making use of these active learning methods

When words are not enough

The purpose of reviewing is to assist the process of learning from experience. This paper outlines some active approaches to reviewing that offer a way forward when words are not enough, or when words get in the way.

ACTIVE REVIEWING

Active reviewing improves our ability to learn from experience. Most active reviewing is simple, basic and direct. Used wisely it can enliven and sharpen the process of reviewing experience.

Integrating the worlds of talk and action

- Over-reliance on words can restrict our ability to learn from experience, however articulate or inarticulate we may think we are.
- Talk and action tend to inhabit distinct and separate worlds, especially when there is a clear demarcation line between doing and reviewing.
- The more separate these worlds, the less likely it is that learning from experience is happening.
- *Active reviewing* brings these worlds closer together, by narrowing the gap

between theory and practice.

The benefits of active reviewing

The benefits arising from the habit of active reviewing can include:

- More effective learning from experience
- An improved confidence in translating words into action, trying out ideas, making decisions happen, and turning plans into reality
- Soundly based resolutions and action plans. The transition of learning from a course is more likely to happen if plans for the future have already been rehearsed in some way while on the course.
- Language is more likely to be used accurately, responsibly and sensitively. When language and action are no longer 'safely' separated, the quality of communication can only improve.

Active reviewing complements discussion-based methods - it does not replace them

There is a risk that active reviewing might be seen as 'anti-language' or as an attack on the value of verbal reviewing. It is the trainer's responsibility to maintain a suitable balance between language, action and any other media which are used for reviewing. Active reviewing methods simply extend the choices available for learning from experience.

Preparing for active reviewing

Setting up new languages

It is useful to have a wide range of options instantly available when reviewing. If a trainer intends to use active techniques during a review, an earlier session involving communicating through action can prime the group for using 'active language'. 'Active Images' is an example of setting up and using a new language:

ACTIVE IMAGES

On a course which has 'teamwork' and 'leadership' as themes, each group member can be asked to demonstrate an ideal active image of 'teamwork' by directing the rest of the group in a short realistic or symbolic presentation. These presentations can then be readily adapted during later reviews to illustrate how the group is actually working as a team, and to represent people's changing views about teamwork or leadership.

Setting up conventions

A number of games, communication exercises or movement exercises can be used to set up a range of conventions for use during reviewing. Strict observance of conventions can be just as vital to the success of a review as it can be to the success

of a game.

A group which already knows various conventions and has experienced their value, is more likely to be responsive when such conventions are re-introduced during a review.

The discipline of 'rounds' or of 'sustained silences', or the precedent of moving everyone else or of freezing during action - these are just some of the conventions that can be valuable during reviewing.

CONVENTIONS FOR CONVENTIONS

If conventions are simply established by default (e.g. that people always sit in the same places and keep to the same pecking order in group discussions), then it is unlikely that effective reviewing will get off the ground. By making alternative conventions available in advance, trainers create more room for manoeuvre during reviews - both for themselves and for participants.

Examples of active reviewing

Action replays: improvised group re-enactments of a group event

Action replays are the basis of many active reviewing techniques. The purposes and variations of action replays are endless. Purposes include clarifying what happened (1-3 below), celebrating what happened (4-5), investigating what happened (6-9):

1. keeping everyone in the group informed about what others were doing (especially where a group has split into smaller units during an activity)
2. informing others outside the group about a group event (or possibly just to update the trainer following an independent exercise)
3. reconstructing a distant or complex event (to help people recall and relive the facts and feelings of an event)
4. celebrating a success (and appreciating more about what contributed to the success)
5. helping people to see the serious side of a humorous incident (or vice-versa)
6. agenda-raising (using an action replay as a sweep search for issues to review)
7. awareness-raising (bringing out different points of view and disagreements)
8. focusing on issues which participants have found difficult to recognise or confront during the activity
9. analysing a problem (similar to reconstructing the scene of a crime)

Action Pre-plays (or rehearsals)

Pre-plays (or rehearsals) are a natural development of action replays. They simply focus on future possibilities rather than on past events. Acting out alternative courses of action is more committing than talk, but is less committing than the real thing.

- pre-plays create quick and convenient opportunities for second attempts (compared to real second attempts). There may also be fewer distractions

from key issues.

- pre-plays create opportunities for experimenting with alternatives
- individuals can swap roles with each other, leading towards criticism becoming more constructive...

Reviewing By Doing: active testing of theories during a review

Course members arrive with theories about what a good manager or a good team member does. They record their theories for display, and after doing some group tasks and receiving feedback from observers, the group considers whether to adjust the theory and/or their practice.

Groups also develop theories about themselves and each activity may put such theories to the test.

Testing theories is a sound process, but groups can sometimes delude themselves.

Reviewing can be a time for examining any of these theories (whether about managing, or about teamwork, or about the nature and behaviour of their own group). Trainers should be alert to opportunities for testing out theories - especially suspect ones. 'EXCUSES' provides an example of this.

EXCUSES

A group which was highly disorganised following their arrival at a remote and basic mountain hut came up with a theory about themselves during their initial review in the hut. This went along the lines of:

"...it was dark..."

"...we'd never been there before..."

"...we were tired..."

"...we would manage it much better another time, or in a different 'new' situation..."

After their return to the training centre, their disorganised arrival at the hut was reviewed for a second time. This time, the trainer darkened the room and supplied the group with three torches after scattering information about the hut's resources around the room on bits of paper.

This simulation allowed the group a second attempt to organise themselves on arrival at the 'hut'. It was just as much of a shambles. The second (active) review had exposed the inadequacy of the initial (all-talk) review and brought out a more accurate explanation of the group's disorganisation.

Newsround Extra: sharing individual experience through action

This is particularly useful where a group has been operating in smaller units or comes together to review their individual experiences. In these situations (where there is a lot of news to exchange) verbal review methods can be particularly time-consuming. Levels of concentration and interest may be low when the time comes round for the last people in the group to tell their stories.

One way of keeping people 'involved', is to invite people to act out the story as it is told. One person acts or mimes the part of the narrator, while others take the parts of any animate or inanimate objects which turn up in the narrative. This can become

exhausting and chaotic! It can become so physically involving that rather than bringing the story alive, the story gets lost as the group concentrate on the challenge of staging it. More time-consuming, but more controllable (if desired), is to give individuals time to prepare performances in subgroups. Each performance can be required to include (for example) 2 high points, 2 low points, 2 interesting points and 2 learning points.

Sharing work experience through action

Individuals can represent their work experience or 'problem at work' by putting it into action using the group. The problem-solving resources of the group can then be harnessed by other group members offering alternatives through action.

"SHOW ME A BETTER WAY"

A trainer was unhappy about his introductory meeting with a new group. A few days later, he invited group members to enact alternative ways of starting the course, each in turn taking on the role of the trainer. The trainer discovered a wider range of options and received useful advice as the group discussed their suitability.

This method can help people develop constructive action plans. Symbolic and abstract representations of work can sometimes provide a more effective means of sharing than realistic representations, but both approaches have their value.

Instant reply (through re-enactment)

This is a method of promoting understanding between groups or between subgroups. Group A has a theory, perhaps a grudge, about Group B, which is related to a particular incident. Group A now re-enact the incident as if they are Group B, and in the presence of Group B.

As soon as Group A has finished, Group B replies with their version of what happened. Because the reply is spontaneous, it is likely that the dialogue between the groups is honest and open, with the groups learning about each other without lapsing into defensiveness and justification.

To even things up, the exercise should be repeated, this time starting with Group B re-enacting an incident as if they are Group A.

Active appraisal

The presentation of mimed gifts to each other can be worth more than lots of words. These tend to be more considered and sincere than verbal 'gifts'. Verbal explanation of symbolic gifts is recommended if there is a risk of misunderstanding!

Acting on appraisal

"I'LL TRY OUT YOUR ADVICE"

A manager led a group on a mountain expedition, and received a thorough and constructive appraisal. A few days later he staged a re-enactment of the

expedition in which he tried out the advice offered by the group.

Search techniques

Some active reviewing techniques can be surprisingly time-efficient. Some techniques simply provide quick and easy ways of finding out what's worth talking about (although they can also be used for other reviewing purposes). Amongst these 'search techniques' are:

- **Head-Height Happy Charts** in which individuals show their state of morale at various points during an earlier exercise by the height of their heads above the floor.
- **Line-ups.** Attitudes, behaviours and contributions during an exercise can be quickly revealed by lining up in order of, say, enthusiasm, thoughtfulness, job satisfaction etc.
- Alternatively, the attitudes within the group can be demonstrated by **human sculptures**, in which the centre and periphery of the room correspond to the centre and periphery of the group.

In all such techniques, individuals can place themselves, and can have the option of moving one or more (perhaps all) of the others in the group.

Key Points (conclusion)

1) Active reviewing as a group norm

Active reviewing techniques should not be regarded as the sole property of the trainer.

Once a group is familiar with the use of active language and active conventions, then the mixing of discussion and action can become the norm - providing everyone with wider opportunities for enlivening, extending and enriching their reviews.

2) Holistic experiences need holistic reviews

If the experiences being reviewed are holistic rather than purely cerebral, then it makes sense to offer reviewing media and methods that are suitable vehicles for these multifaceted holistic experiences. If the reviewing vehicles offered are merely discussion-based, then the less discussible aspects of experience will remain untapped, unreviewed and unharnessed. Important sources of power, energy and insight will remain neglected and underused.

3) It's difficult to find words to express ...

People interviewed after disasters struggle to find words that adequately express their feelings. Experience-based training should of course not expose people to such trauma, but the principle is the same: new and intensive experiences, however traumatic or pleasurable they might be, challenge us to find adequate ways of expressing ourselves. Experience-based learning (especially when it is also adventure-based) creates experiences that can be very rich, extensive, intensive, confusing or

complex. If the quality of the experience is to have maximum impact for learning, then it must be matched by reviewing methods that are capable of dealing with the depth, essence and richness of the original experience.

4) The reviewer's toolkit

Active and creative reviewing techniques should be seen as basic tools in a reviewer's toolkit, but they will never replace the need for the skilful and imaginative use of verbal techniques, and for facilitating group discussions. Active reviewing techniques have many purposes. At all stages of the reviewing cycle there are active techniques that can assist the reviewing process i.e. for establishing facts, for expressing feelings, for examining findings and for exploring futures.

An earlier version of this article by Roger Greenaway appeared in Bulletin, Group Relations Training Association, (1983). This version was revised in 1996 as a handout for Reviewing Skills Training, since when some of the methods have evolved and have been renamed.

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