

Skills for Success: the Health Library Staff Development Framework

Sponsored by the National Library of Health, building on work developed by London Health Libraries and the Library & Knowledge Development Network

Introducing Learning Sets

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What is a Learning Set?

Learning Sets are one of a range of personal development tools which can be used to learn new ways of working, share experiences and help with problem solving. As with all learning methods they suit some people and not others, depending on individual learning styles, preferences and so on.

A Learning Set consists of a group of about 5-8 people who agree to meet together on a regular basis to discuss work-related issues or to develop skills in an area of common interest. Learning Sets give individuals time to explore issues that they need to resolve in an environment which is empowering and which helps the individual to find a solution – rather than be told what to do. All members of the group also develop skills in listening, reflecting back what they have heard, demonstrating empathy, questioning to help the presenter to understand the issue more fully and providing feedback.

In a Learning Set participants are able to raise real life problems, difficult questions, discuss sensitive issues and share their learning in a supportive environment, secure in the knowledge that what they say remains confidential to the group. A Learning Set can consist of colleagues from a single organisation or from different sectors and different professional backgrounds.

The group is usually supported by a facilitator, though over time a group may become self-facilitating.

How does a Learning Set operate?

Learning Sets can operate in different ways – the most frequently used approaches are:

- “open” sessions where individual members bid to discuss issues of concern to them. The members agree at the start of each meeting which bids will be successful and therefore will be discussed. The focus is on using questioning from other members to help the individual understand the issue and to identify an action plan for handling it, rather than providing direct advice or sharing experiences.
- “planned” sessions where the topic is agreed in advance. This model may be helpful where a Learning Set is supporting members who are all developing the same set of skills at the same time, and where members will benefit from brainstorming and sharing experiences of implementing new skills. Common focuses for discussion may include “what worked for me and what didn’t – and what would I do differently next time”

- “combined” approach where the meeting is divided between “planned” and “open” sessions, allowing both the structure of a planned approach with the opportunity for individuals to raise issues of current concern as well.

How do learning sets differ from more traditional learning?

The process is different from traditional learning in that Set members:

- make a shared commitment to real action and change
- become mentors to each other – learning with and through each other
- are expected to ask questions, seek answers, gain support and expect challenge
- need to be positive and open-minded about issues/problems being discussed and possible solutions.
- work on real problems and implement solutions – i.e. development which is learning by doing
- all discussions are confidential to the group

What is expected from Learning Set members?

Sets typically meet once a month for about a half day (this is negotiated with members). Members are expected to commit to attend all meetings – only in very exceptional circumstances should anyone miss a meeting. Issues such as confidentiality, trust, respect and so on are key to effective Learning Set working. The Set members will discuss these and agree their “ways of working” at an early stage.

Resources

McGill, Ian; Brockbank, Anne (2004). The action learning handbook. London, Routledge,

The following website provides brief descriptions of the learning set approach:

<http://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/?gclid=CKqWtq6okosCFSUnEAodEQ0ZSA>