



*"This guy is either the rudest man I've ever met or an original thinker from whom I shall learn a great deal"*

# Reg Revans - a tribute

**Professor Reg Revans was the architect of Action Learning, which has been widely adopted at Ashridge. He died on 8 January 2003 aged 95.**

**Two associates over many years look back on his life and work: David Pearce outlines his work and influence and David Casey recalls the man he knew.**

## **David Pearce, Ashridge Consulting Associate**

Reg Revans' work has had a considerable influence on the development of Ashridge as a learning institution, complementing its acknowledged expertise in the teaching arena. He would have been disappointed that Ashridge still feels the need to use lectures and case studies to develop managers and leaders.

Ashridge Consulting's Action Learning for Chief Executives is acknowledged as a major contribution to the development of 'top leaders'. The programme has no syllabus and no teaching. Each of the CEOs brings current key issues to the group of 'comrades in adversity' where they 'learn with and from each other by tackling real-life problems' in conditions of mutual challenge and support – in an attempt to find new solutions to their issues by 'rewriting their cortical slates'.

Ashridge's MBA and a wide variety of its programmes now make use of Action Learning groups as a means of bringing real-life issues into the classroom and of transferring the learning back to the workplace.

Ashridge Consulting has fully embraced Action Learning in the development of its own consultants and in the way it consults with clients.

Revans' ideas spread far and wide – influencing Mrs Ghandi on the regeneration of Indian villages, the Egyptian Ministry of Industry on the regeneration of the Nile Delta, the Australian government on the running of the Civil Service, and the improvement of patient care to reduce recovery times by improving the communication between the various functions in hospitals in the UK. The list is huge and continues to grow.

Probably his biggest success was the way he influenced the governmental, commercial and educational sectors of Belgium at a time of major transition to become a vibrant economy. The King of Belgium recognised his contribution by creating him a Knight.

In the UK his best-known convert was Lord Weinstock, the CEO of GEC. Weinstock recognised that there was a great need for a better understanding between government, industry and trade unions. In GEC's pioneering Programme for Developing Senior Managers, Action Learning sets were created which included managers, civil servants and trades union officials – revolutionary! It even led to some management developers of the time saying it had made management development 'untidy'.

Revans was ahead of his time in recognising that organisations require leaders who can deal with the big change issues which require them to learn faster than the rate of change in the environment. He was well placed to do this, using his mathematical and scientific mastery to develop equations and graphs which expressed this very clearly. He was a direct link to Einstein and Maynard Keynes, who influenced him personally in his younger days.

A disappointment for Revans would be the fact that very little use is made of his other tenet of Action Learning, that organisations and countries should swap senior people to undertake significant projects in each other's workplaces, while working together in Action Learning sets.

Reg Revans' influence on us has been profound and wide-ranging AND there is still a long way for Action Learning to travel.

## **David Casey, former Ashridge Consulting Associate**

In the Summer of 1969 I met Reg Revans in a smoky lunchtime Tottenham Court Road pub. It was not what I had planned. I had invited him down from Manchester to discuss our programmes of Management Training in Reed International and had booked a fine London lunch, assuming such an eminence grise would expect the best hospitality. Wrong. He preferred a pint of beer and one cheese sandwich please; he didn't own a watch; he didn't drive a car; if it was too far to walk, we would take a bus.

In the pub he was soon probing deep into my work, his steady brown eyes watching me. As it happened, I had just finished running a two-week programme for senior company managers called Leadership of Working Groups. It had gone very well – lots of gushing feedback – I was still on a high. Professor Revans asked me one quiet question, "What did they learn, Mr Casey?" That was easy enough to answer – I had studied the feedback and I knew what we had taught – I rattled off a long list. Reg took a deep pull on his pint and wiped his mouth... "They set up some hypotheses; they didn't learn anything", he said. I remember staring back into his intense gaze in that noisy bar and thinking "This guy is either the rudest man I've ever met or an original thinker from whom I shall learn a great deal". In the years ahead I would discover that he was both.

A walking set of paradoxes was our Reg! The endless fascination was that one never quite knew what would happen next. He came to stay with my family and when his dinner plate was overflowing with the best we could offer, he looked at it and said simply "This would feed a family in Ethiopia for two weeks". My wife forgave him because she loved him; "You have to love Reg Revans before you can like him", she used to say.

John Morris at Manchester Business School wrote a perceptive piece lamenting that such a towering intellect was tangled up in such a difficult personality. If only, John cried in despair, he would share with his academic colleagues some of the great love and warmth he showers on the managers he works with!

Reg Revans was hard to work with; compromise was not allowed; he knew he was right. Those of us who had the stamina to stay with him, and accept him for what he was, learned massively and at a rather fundamental level. He has shifted forever some of the world's assumptions about how managers learn, and for this he deserves to be remembered with honour.