

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

How and Why Action Learning Works

WHAT IS ACTION LEARNING Action Learning is an employee development program in which organizations solve critical and complex problems in real time, while simultaneously building strong leaders. This form of “learning by doing” is the primary method leading companies worldwide are using to develop leaders, build teams and improve corporate capabilities. Action Learning delves into every aspect of true leadership in a true-to-life setting.

HOW ACTION LEARNING WORKS

The Action Learning process starts with a group of high-potential individuals with diverse functional backgrounds and experiences. This cross-functional team is assigned to work on an important and urgent business problem, different than anything most of them have ever dealt with previously. With the multitude of different perspectives brought to the group, they are able to move beyond their own areas of expertise, combining their broad knowledge base to come up with ideas and solutions that they individually may have never considered before.

The duration of an Action Learning project varies on a case-by-case basis, but most engagements last anywhere from nine months to a year.

THE ACTION LEARNING PROCESS

- A group of individuals identified by the organization as high potential, with diverse backgrounds and experience, is brought together for an Action Learning project.
- The group is confronted with a significant and urgent problem with no easily identifiable solution.

- An Action Learning coach directs the learning and development of the group.
- Insightful questions are asked in order to understand the problem and look at it in a new way by examining its depth and complexity.
- Strategy and planning take place by formulating a goal that can be acted upon.
- The group develops and tests strategies and takes appropriate action.
- Experience gained by the group and each group member can be applied throughout the organization.

WHY ACTION LEARNING WORKS

In an Action Learning environment, the project is facilitated by an Action Learning coach. The coach is able to highlight lessons learned throughout the process amid the urgency of getting a specific problem solved.

In this setting, people become more willing to learn from one another, more flexible and better able to shoulder difficult tasks. In addition, the learning gained by the group transcends the problem’s resolution. The skills and abilities developed through this process can be applied throughout the group’s professional career, again and again, regardless of the challenge at hand.

As the group works together, natural leadership qualities will present themselves.

THE BENEFITS OF ACTION LEARNING

Participants in Action Learning experience transformational results, as they are placed in a highly visible, collaborative process where they take action together in small steps. This process enables these potential leaders to become more proficient at taking risks, making difficult decisions, coaching and mentoring peers and building team trust and collaboration.

Action Learning is a great way to discover true leaders—before moving people into positions they may not be suited for. With the intensity of this process, the group is basically brought to the edge of chaos, where each individual discovers in him or herself whether they have the makings of a true leader—the ability to ask the right questions and lead their peers.

Only 50 percent of the Action Learning process is about solving the problem—the rest is about learning. Maximum learning occurs at the edge of chaos, where the group is responsive to the difficulties but is still structured enough to succeed. Balancing chaos requires continuous learning *as well as* reflective inquiry. Action Learning sessions reinforce this concept with the help of a coach who is able to guide the conversation and develop the group. ■

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