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*Action Learning In
Management Development Programs*

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An accelerating trend in management development is the combination of different learning processes. For many organizations, management development simply equals sending folks to open-enrollment programs at business schools. Combining real work projects with a true learning component is known as action learning, and its popularity is on the rise. Companies such as GE, Boeing, Siemens, Johnson & Johnson and Bertelsmann use extensive action learning programs for management development, and many others are evaluating such programs. Action learning simultaneously develops individual managers and teams and tackles business issues. As such, it is expected to continue to grow in awareness and popularity. Indeed, we may be in the early stages of harnessing its power and success.

Components of Action Learning

There are many variants of action learning, but at heart, they all share some key characteristics:

- A real business challenge is used as the content.
- Participants work with others, in teams.

Time for reflection and discussion among members is built in.

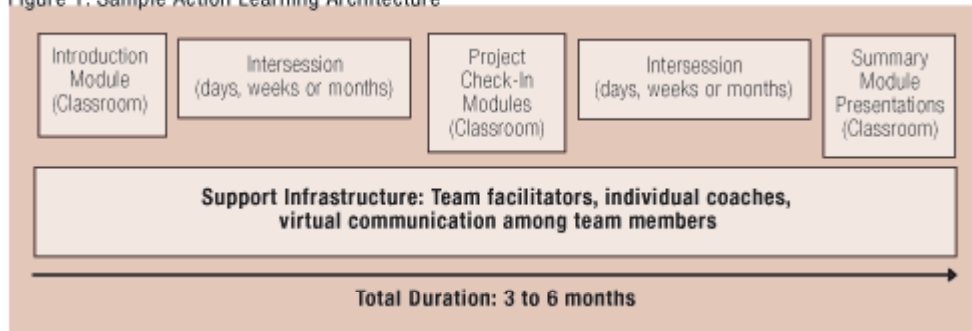
Action learning is more than learning while doing. Team and individual reflection differentiates true action learning—a developmental event that supports the work of the organization—from a run-of-the-mill group project.

Learning occurred on the job long before structured training and formal development ever existed. However, action learning and, more specifically, action learning for management development are relatively new. What might action learning look like at a high level? Imagine that a large global organization, with 200 vice presidents and defined developmental needs, is embarking on an action learning program. A subset of the 200 vice presidents is selected and divided into teams of six to eight people. The teams are diverse—representing different functions, business units and geographies. Each team, or perhaps a few groups of teams, are given real business projects to work on. Throughout the program, the teams meet to coordinate work, discuss progress and team dynamics, and reflect on previously determined developmental goals. Moderators help in some or all of these sessions, and there is always some level of support. At the end of the process, projects are presented to executive management, and are evaluated and ideally chosen for implementation in the organization. (See Figure 1.)

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Figure 1: Sample Action Learning Architecture



Action Learning's Popularity and Benefits

There are several reasons for action learning's increased popularity. First, as one moves up the corporate hierarchy, the applicability of traditional classroom development decreases. With the exception of business school executive education programs, which are typically designed to improve specific skills, the type of development that senior managers need is generally best done outside the classroom. Second, action learning provides senior management with exposure to additional parts of the organization through the content of the project (a participant may be on a team working to solve an issue in a completely different division) and through exposure to new peers from different domains or business units. A broad-based perspective of the organization and a personal network of colleagues are critical success factors for senior management.

According to Heinz Thanheiser, professor of strategy at INSEAD Business School and an action learning expert, the value of being able to work the politics of large organizations is often underestimated, and action learning projects allow for exposure to and practice navigating these realities for the participants. Additionally, action learning is great for honing emotional intelligence, which is increasingly recognized as a better predictor of leadership success than an IQ score. When managed properly, action learning programs are a great vehicle for transforming an organization's culture, especially when projects cascade throughout the organization. Finally, with the constant pressure to minimize hard-dollar expenses and ensure that all learning supports corporate goals, action learning justifies its costs. By definition, it helps the organization meet its goals.

There are significant benefits for organizations that use action learning. The technique can be used to develop high-potential managers and showcase them to top executives, who are often the recipients of the final presentations of the action learning projects. There are many anecdotes of final presentations to executive management that resulted in on-the-spot acceptance of a proposal to change a fundamental corporate procedure or internal policy, launch a new product or even consider a strategic acquisition or divestiture.

Initiating Action Learning Programs for Management

In his book “Action Learning Worldwide,” Yury Boshyk, a global expert on action learning and executive development, writes, “The house of action learning has many doors.” Indeed, there many ways to implement action learning, in whole or in part:

- Consider the organization’s business challenges and, more specifically, management challenges. Also, consider what you are trying to accomplish: building organizational capability, building individual skills, showing off high-potential talent to senior management, etc. If relatively narrow functional expertise is desired, then skill development might best be done in open-enrollment programs at a business school. For example, if there is a need for organic growth for the corporation and the organization’s management team does not possess key capabilities to create this internal growth, action learning can be a great option.

Evaluate the organization’s culture and resources to determine which type of action learning is most appropriate and how it should be implemented. Do you want multiple teams working simultaneously on the same business problem that culminates in a public presentation to the CEO? Will the organization embrace or reject this type of competition? Is the CEO the type to accept some, or any, of the proposals on the spot? Is this a good time to embark on a program? Do enough managers have the bandwidth at this time?

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•Obtain top-level management buy-in. They need to agree on the programs, contribute to choosing the projects and participants, and participate as the projects come to a close. A fundamental part of the learning comes from the fact that the projects are real, and as such, management needs to be prepared to act on recommendations. If participants sense that the projects are not “live,” they will not display their real behaviors and will not have ample learning and reflection opportunities. Care needs to be taken to choose a project with some flexibility (e.g., a mission-critical project that needs to be completed within the same operating quarter is not a good candidate), as time needs to be allocated for the team to collaborate, reflect on its actions, seek input, self-reflect and potentially change course, both individually and as a team. For time-sensitive projects, the reflection and team communication typically will be the first to be cut, depriving the group of the developmental experience.

•Structure the program and set up boundaries. According to Jane Hiller Farran, a senior fellow at Wharton Executive Education, this is where many projects fall short. “It is important to build an invisible support structure,” she said. “You want participants to be able to fall, yet not fail.” Letting participants founder can be counterintuitive for a moderator, but it is important to know when and when not to intervene. Often, companies implementing action learning programs will provide too many pieces of the puzzle or embark on a program with a set answer already in mind, depriving participants of the learning. Learning happens from small failures, from reflection and post-mortem discussions with teammates, and from ambiguity.

One of the coach or facilitator’s main tasks is to extract the learning from the process. The coach must do sessions with the team members on a regular or spontaneous basis to reflect about the learning. It also is important to identify learning goals early in the process, both on the team and individual level, and to revisit them periodically with the group. Sometimes moderators can help this process, and are skilled in asking the appropriate questions to provoke thought, reflection and self-awareness.

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Figure 2: Action Learning Versus Classroom-Based Management Education

	Business School and Classroom Programs	Action Learning Projects
Key Elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants learn from experts and external peers. • Used for specific developmental interventions. • Often need to "get away" from daily work routine as part of learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use live projects within company. • Management support. • Diverse teams. • Time and structure for discussion and reflection. • Learning while doing.
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great at teaching finite skills (e.g., finance, marketing, etc.). • Learn cutting-edge theory from dynamic professors or experts. • Meet others from different businesses and industries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accomplish needed work and real problems for organization. • Build individual and team capabilities • Allow for self-awareness. • Grow participants' network across the organization.
Drawbacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case studies are not relevant to participants' organization. • Price (usually \$7,000 per person and up). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must have flexibility with project deliverables. • Require support infrastructure • Require senior management commitment.
Timeline	Short (three to seven days).	Long (two to six months).
Management Support and Involvement	None: Other than the "hall pass" and financial sign-off, no additional senior management commitment is required.	High: Senior management must play an active part in choosing participants for programs, helping to determine action learning projects, and evaluating and implementing projects at completion.

Challenges and Pitfalls for Action Learning Projects

Perhaps action learning sounds simple to manage, but there is a major difference between the theoretical concept and its real-world implementation. Several pitfalls present challenges to the implementation of action learning in a real, business-driven and time-constraining environment:



•**Choosing Weak Projects:** Urgency and importance are key criteria for a good action learning topic. If the topic is not important or urgent, it will not engage the passion and emotions of the team members, and they will not release and invest their energy. Real learning requires real projects.

•**Insufficient Management Buy-In:** A key part of management buy-in is having a sponsor from the top management team on each action learning team to serve as a conduit to the rest of the organization, and to help steer teams clear of politics and keep their projects relevant to the organization. At the end of the process, management must be committed to seriously evaluating projects for implementation, or at least must openly communicate and give good reasons for the decision to hold off.

•**Insufficient or Excessive Facilitator Support:** The facilitator's main task is to ask questions and facilitate the process, not to become part of the solution. They may provide tools to run the projects and to help the team check its progress. Facilitators must stay neutral during team conflicts—only asking questions, never taking a position.

•**Poor Team Formation:** The team must be diverse enough to create a variety of ideas and perspectives. Inevitably in the team-formation stage, the project organizers are tempted to put those with domain expertise on the teams tackling like issues—for example, putting the top marketing professionals on a marketing project. You don't want to create a situation where a solution is already on the table. The idea is to foster creative thinking by other members who take a fresh look at problems.

•**Not Reaching Consensus on Project Targets:** The target or goals of the project must be clear at the beginning of the action learning process. If a project comes from management with targets, the team needs to verify that the targets are realistic and achievable. If they are not, the team needs to work out alternatives or refuse the project. The targets must be as precise as possible because when the project is complete, the team and management should be able to determine whether the targets were met. For example, goals that are overly ambitious and time frames that are too short will limit success.

•**Insufficient Involvement of Team Members:** Many who attempt to implement action learning programs do not allow participants to be partially released from their day-to-day job while participating on the project. Even if participants volunteer to become team members, they often run into conflicts with their regular responsibilities, as do their managers. This leads participants to miss team meetings or fail to achieve what they had promised to the team, and therefore slows down the team's progress. The only solution is for the team members' managers to buy into the program and send an explicit message to participants that the action learning project is a high priority.

Comprehensive Development

Is there a right or wrong time for an organization to embark on an action learning program for top management? How does an action learning program fit into the larger strategy of management development? Action learning programs do not replace other types of management development initiatives.

Of course, if your organization has just launched a comprehensive coaching or mentoring program that will take some months to unfold, it might be too much to ask managers to also invest their time in action learning.

Carol Zulauf, associate professor of adult and organizational learning at Suffolk University in Boston, has worked with many corporations on management action learning programs over the years. Zulauf said that action learning programs are very complementary and are an important component of a larger developmental effort. For example, she explained that many business schools utilize action learning in their open-enrollment courses, as well as in custom programs. Action learning programs that run parallel to coaching efforts also provide great content for discussion and reflection outside of the action learning team. Learning professionals need to take a holistic look at organizational needs and the variety of developmental options to determine the right timing for action learning.