

Action Learning

Take Your Business to the Next Level

By Jayan Warriar

AT most workplaces, people run a race. They start early on Mondays and end late on Fridays. They need time to renew and recuperate. We often hear of people wanting to spend more time thinking, but most of them are sucked into fire fighting. The solution to the workplace challenge lies not in the hands of a consultant, but within teams and organisations. If we have no time to talk about them, how are we going to tackle them with accumulated wisdom? How do we learn so that we get better at what we do?

Overdependence on training programmes reduces productivity, wastes corporate resources, and does not result in an expected return on investment. This situation raises a few questions on:

- How to integrate learning into our daily work,
- How to make use of our learning in our daily work so that we get better every day as individuals and teams,
- How to support each another to learn and develop,
- How to create a positive and safe environment of inquiry to think together and collectively manage our workplace challenges, and
- How to leverage the strengths that we have within the organisation and build a sustainable mode for high performance.



Action Learning brings together groups of people with varied levels of skills and experience to analyse an actual work problem. The aim is to develop an action plan, develop mid-course corrections, and learn from the implementation of actions.

PICTURES: SS

Action Learning

Action Learning is a tool or process built on the principles of “learning by doing” founded by Reg Revans. Trained as a physicist at Cambridge University, he worked with some scientists who went on to win Nobel prizes. He observed the importance of being open of our own shortcomings and learning from other’s experiences, while challenging one’s knowledge and assumptions. Later, he applied these principles to solving workplace problems. In the process, he enabled managers to handle their own issues and reduce their dependency on others. There are many schools of action learning, which have developed their own methodologies.

The World Institute for Action Learning, WIAL, uses a method which comprises a process with two ground rules and six components. It involves a group of four to eight people from diverse backgrounds enquiring about the problem at hand. They jointly develop solution strategies and essential leadership skills. The process enables empowered teams to apply problem-solving techniques while learning about the business, team members, and team dynamics.

The action learning coach helps the team reflect on group interactions and learn from each other in a safe and neutral environment. Leaders can be developed in real time as they tackle the problem at hand. The coach and members feedback on their contributions to the team. Theories like systems thinking, appreciative inquiry, and learning styles are embedded in the process. Each session ends with an identified set of committed actions to be carried out by the team before the next session—making it result-orientated.

Dr Michael Marquardt, president of WIAL says: “The rapidly changing environment and unpredictable global challenges require organisations and individuals to act and learn at the same time. Learning cannot be accomplished effectively in a classroom environment in isolation. It has to be interleaved with real time work involving burning issues and people responsible for finding sustainable solutions to problems.” He adds that leaders and team members find it difficult to sit in classrooms with lectures and case studies, when there are urgent issues to be handled. They would rather focus on real issues that call for their attention.

The action learning methodology involves asking questions about each other rather than enforcing opinions and debating about solutions. The process helps team members spend time enquiring about the issue at hand, rather than jump to action items and target dates. The questions create opportunities for the team to navigate uncharted waters, challenge assumptions, and set aside their ranks in the spirit of collective inquiry.

The action learning coach plays the role of an empowering 21st century leader who believes in the team and their ability to identify strategies in addressing issues. The leader takes on the role of a neutral authority to help the team reflect on their behaviour. He creates a safe environment of trust and openness where pertinent issues can be raised.

The intervention of the coach creates noticeable behavioural changes in the team—an indication of learnt application. The coach provides specific feedback to the members on their contributions by asking questions on chosen leadership focus areas. The methodology helps create an ideal environment which elevates team performance and develops future leaders.

Action learning sessions help the team pause, reflect, and challenge assumptions—thus creating space for innovation, collaboration, and change in organisational culture.

Action learning creates change in individuals, groups, and organisations. Stakeholders interested in change should consider this as a potential tool for aligning an organisation to the dynamic environment. In the book, *Action Learning for Developing Leaders and Organisations*, the authors describe how action learning allows for leadership and organisational change through single, double, and triple loop learning. They identify action learning as an “enduring and enhanced capacity” for change. Business owners who believe in staff involvement and participation in business decisions will find the sessions useful in engaging staff and getting them to solve issues.

Breaking down silos, increasing collaborative efforts, building great teams, learning beyond one’s own business, and developing emotional quotient are several benefits that leaders can achieve through action learning sessions.

Human resource, HR, teams tasked with the responsibility of developing and retaining talent can consider action learning as an alternative tool. HR plays a catalyst role as a consulting arm to the business and should be able to fully leverage its benefits in creating a high performance culture. Action learning sessions help the team pause, reflect, and challenge assumptions—thus creating space for in-



**Action learning promotes
teamwork and the principles
of learning by doing.**



novation, collaboration, and change in organisational culture. The sessions create an opportunity for the teams to slow down and re-evaluate before taking the leap.

Considerations

Clearly-defined goals and strong leadership commitments are essential for success in an action learning project. Programme managers need to be aware of the principles and practices of action learning, the role of a coach, sponsor, and the members.

What differentiates action learning from other interventions is its focus on learning. Without that continued emphasis, the project is less likely to succeed. As teams progress through the sessions, they discover new challenges and problems. A strong commitment to the process and focus on the end goal will help them overcome rough patches.

Unlike a training session or leadership workshop, action learning sessions tend to thrive on the brink of chaos. It is important that the project team is mentally prepared to handle the challenges and have spent enough time preparing for them.

An action learning project will succeed if:

- The leadership team is committed to learning, team empowerment, and leadership development for the long term,
- They demonstrate their commitment to learning by being open to change, irrespective of current situation and culture,
- The project management team has spent enough time understanding, planning and preparing for the sessions,
- The organisation has access to a team of action learning coaches, and
- The team has clarity on the objectives of the programme and awareness of the challenges they might face along the way.

Embracing action learning develops one as an individual and a leader. The first step is to understand the principles, the process, and steps involved. The most effective way to learn these is to experience them. Participating in an action learning session allows one to better grasp the fundamentals on which it is built. This is when one gets hooked to its power, flexibility, and impact. Welcome to the world of action learning.

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