

AL2: BUILT-TO-LEAD CASE STUDY

When Southland Industries contacted Dr. Charles Tweedly, from Pine Manor College, to design a leadership development program, he proposed an Action Learning based approach that combined learning labs, assessments and individual coaching over a one year period to assure real-world, sustainable results. The collaboration between Dr. Tweedly and Southland generated a new program called AL2: Agile Leadership through Action Learning. This case study describes the program and its impact on the participants and the company.

The Challenge

The only thing Southland had not yet achieved was a consistent means of identifying potential leaders and of helping those employees make the transition into a leadership role—a situation complicated not only by the company’s rapid growth, but also by a characteristic somewhat unique to its employee profile:



As a leading mechanical engineering company, most of its high performing employees had attained their success by doing what they did best as engineers: independent problem solving.

However, the type of talent the company desperately needed to support its growth while maintaining its quality edge were leaders who were not just technically savvy, but who also understood the nuances of managing a collective—of enabling the members of a team to bring their aggregate talent to bear on a problem.

Engineering a Solution

They mapped out a leadership development program that would include several key components:



1. Individual assessment—Utilize assessment tools that would enable participants to gain insights into their own communication, problem-solving and leadership styles.
2. A “stretch” problem or project for the participants to work on which would have a positive impact on the company’s profit and growth while providing significant opportunities for learning.
3. Exposure to Southland’s executive management team and board of directors.
4. Outside coaching and a general leadership curriculum.

Best practice suggests that to get the desired results from the experiential component of the process it is essential to also take steps to enhance both participant readiness

for the experiences and their capacity to *reflect* afterwards to internalize the lessons learned (see figure).

Readiness would be achieved through the use of various personal assessment tools, including 360 degree feedback instruments, which shine a light on their current leadership strengths and development needs. The use of a coach and access to the executive management team would provide both support and a means of continual reflection during the program. The unanswered questions, however, were:

Best Practice Common Elements in Leadership Development



1. How do we manage the “stretch” experience in a way that we produce both a meaningful learning experience and productive result for the company?
2. How do we organize this into a sustainable process for leadership development?



Dr. Tweedly suggested that Action Learning, a powerful workplace learning tool which had been used successfully in major corporations for many years was the ideal answer to the first question. It had been used to solve corporate problems, build teams, expand corporate capabilities, and develop leaders for many major corporations, and, according to Dr. Tweedly, the skills developed were sustainable and lasting. In the short run, Action Learning enabled the organizations who used it to gain important

resolution to a problem, project, issue or task with quantifiable impact on profitability, efficiency or expansion. In short, Action Learning represents real people resolving and taking action on real problems in real time and learning while doing so.

To address the need for a coherent process Tweedly augmented the Action Learning tool by adding the elements of coaching and learning labs spun together into a repeatable process of action and reflection. The learning labs would provide focused, modularized content targeted at the initial assessment and the emerging needs of the group over the 10-month program. These thought-provoking sessions would raise questions and challenge existing paradigms around effective leadership. The coaching and executive support would provide regular opportunities for reflection and assist participants in developing new strategies to address their most pressing leadership challenges.

A peek into the learning labs

The program was designed to move through various phases with the first devoted to readiness, in other words, increasing self-awareness and team building. State of the art personality assessment tools such as the Leadership Agility 360 Assessment were used to build awareness in the participants in terms of what their communication styles were, how they approached change and problem solving, how they viewed competition, adversity, new ideas and many other factors. It gave them a personal benchmark in terms of how they handled pivotal one-on-one interpersonal conversations, how they functioned as a leader in a team situation and how they led within the context of organizational change. Often these assessments led to key moments of insight for team members, and from those moments, participants could see what they were doing well and also where they needed to improve. With the assistance of a personal coach, individualized growth plans were created, and over the course of the year, work with the coach, peer coaching and individual reflection were used to develop skills. The Learning Labs were tailored to the development needs of the participants and they provided a framework to learn and apply new skills that would build on their strengths and address their development needs.



Questions before Answers



Action Learning emphasizes questions and reflection above statements and opinions. Questions prevent the group from solving the wrong problem and precipitously jumping into wrong action. The process drives home the point that most challenges of significance are “problems, not puzzles.” As Tweedly explains, “with a puzzle you know what the solution will look like and you have all the pieces to put it together. Problems are messier. You often have no idea what the solution should look like nor

do you necessarily have all the right pieces.”

The benefits of the technique are many. It becomes more likely that all participants will be drawn into a dialog and that multiple talents and perspectives will be utilized to define and eventually solve the problem. It keeps the problem open long enough so that the issue can be pared down to what truly lies at its foundation. This means that once the effort to resolve an issue begins, work advances efficiently.

After participants believed they fully understood the problem, the program switched more fully into the experiential phase of developing a solution. However, even with this very action-oriented phase underway, a steady stream of exercises and learning labs were injected to teach participants other key leadership tools. Sometimes these labs were on topics chosen by the coach, but often they were facilitated by the experiences brought back to the table by team members themselves. Throughout the process, every effort was made to utilize the full strength of Action Learning by tying theory and practice together.

The third phase of the process, or reflection, is something that in reality, Southland team members were encouraged to practice throughout the program. In his role as action learning coach, Tweedly stressed the importance of taking time to reflect on what was learned, how it was applied, whether or not it worked, and how the situation could have been improved upon.

In Summary

In the case of Southland Industries, AL2 was effective because the company devoted the resources necessary for the program to do what it was intended: Give independent, task-minded engineers the tools and insights they would need to become thoughtful, effective managers.

During interviews with those involved, most expressed the desire for a follow-up program. Each said their involvement had made such a deep impression that not only did they feel more effective at work, but they also noticed their approach to life outside the office had been enriched in terms of their marriages, parenting abilities and even in volunteer activities such as coaching.

As one participant joked, "My wife likes me better now!"

The process implemented at Southland, now known as Agile Leadership through Action Learning, works because it is based on the old fashioned, common sense notions that "learning is doing," "confidence comes through action," and "getting an outsider's objective perspective can be valuable." In Southland's case, the facilitator tailor-fitted leadership development best practices to the company's unique situation. It evolved into the perfect tool for teaching Southland's employees leadership skills and giving them a chance to cement those skills in a real world laboratory.

Learn by **DOING**.



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/published2019