

WHEN ACTION LEARNING BECOMES PART OF THE DNA

Introduction

FirstBank of Nigeria is Nigeria's largest financial services institution (Global Finance, 2012) with over 750 branches and over 5 million customers in the Nigerian market. The bank has over 15 subsidiaries including BIC, Congo DRC, FBN Bank (UK), FBN Bank, Guinea, FBN Bank Ghana, FBN Bank Gambia, FBN Bank Sierra Leone, and representative offices in South Africa, UAE, and China.

Firstbank has always been in the forefront of innovation in the financial services sector in Nigeria, being the first to launch a world-class corporate academy that won the international Silver Award for Best Impact by the Global Council for Corporate Universities (GlobalCCU) Awards 2015. The academy is affiliated to the Global Association of Corporate Universities and Academies (G-ACUA) and the World Institute of Action Learning (WIAL). It also has working partnership with INSEAD, Michigan Ross School of Business, China Europe International Business School (CEIBS), Lagos Business School (LBS), amongst others.



FirstBank
Since 1894

Firstbank Action Learning Journey

The bank's journey with Action Learning dates back to 2010 and 2011 when the then Group Head of Human Capital Management and Development (HCMD) birthed the idea of the Academy and exposing it to international scrutiny and bringing in leading practices from across the globe to the corporate academy.

The highlight of the Action learning journey in the bank was when it produced the very first WIAL Action Learning Coach in Nigeria and West Africa as a whole. Subsequently, the bank produced 8 other certified coaches thus producing 8 of the 9 certified coaches in the country.

How Action Learning is used

1. **Corporate Transformation and Branch Operational Issues:** The bank is constantly faced with a lot of challenges, those characterizing the corporate environment in an emerging market – technology, regulation, customers taste, stiff competition, and etc, which forces it to embark on development of tools, processes, and etc to match the pace of the changes. Action Learning is central to all of these as AL sets are organized to understand where problems are



coming from within the operational environment, and the possible solutions to each of the problems.

It was a major part of an enterprise-wide knowledge management framework of the FirstAcademy. These AL sessions bring in a lot of people from all over the business, sharing ideas and proposing practical solutions that are always applied in the business. There have been a lot of AL ambassadors across the bank always calling for the setup of sessions to provide solutions to real life problems.

- 2. Foundation School:** One of the schools in the FirstAcademy is the foundation school designed to equip new joiners with the necessary aptitude and attitude needed to excel in a financial services company in Nigeria. Action learning is a key part of the learning as learners are taken through the WIAL AL theory and practical demonstration of the practice. Students are given problems to resolve using the methodology. This is aimed at inculcating the practice in the minds of the new joiners thus helping them to think and use the methodology in creating practical solutions when they commence work and in their careers in the bank.



- 3. Leadership and Management Schools:** These schools are part of the four major schools in the FirstAcademy. The schools are designed to take “identified leaders and managers through a systematic and holistic curriculum that would ensure consistent leadership and management practice bank-wide”. The curriculum for the schools are taught in partnership with business and leadership institutions locally and internationally.

Action Learning is an integral part of the curriculum – it is taught both as a subject together with practice, as well as one of the leadership and management tools in providing solutions within and across teams in the organisation. Certified Coaches take the presentations and lead the teams during the AL practice sessions. The leaders and managers leave the learning events with the knowledge of Action Learning, but most importantly with the appreciation of the power of the methodology to provide solutions to real life issues. The result is that they constantly call on the Academy to set up sessions for them as problem presenters.

- 4. Strategic projects:** The bank undertakes strategic projects from time to time and Action Learning is always integral to the implementation of these. Amongst several other projects are the ‘Transition to Front Office’ and ‘RM Guidebook’ projects. The ‘Transition to Front Office’ project was designed to

prepare back office staff identified for front office roles to be fully equipped and be able to function from the start.

Action Learning was intensively used to identify all the fears and possible problems associated with the transition and in proffering practical solutions. The RM Guidebook was another strategic project aimed at equipping Relationship Managers across the enterprise with a readymade and easy to carry tool that will assist them in carrying out their jobs as relationship managers. Action Learning was used to first reorganize the concept, its practicality, the proposed outline, possible issues, and implementation. It was amazing how Action Learning came in handy at each step of the way in implementing this solution.



There are numerous other ways that Action Learning is used in the bank including proffering solutions to the constant front office back office issues and in the human capital management and development group. The methodology is found to be very valuable, practical and easy to use, hence its utilization in many ways across the enterprise. It is the dream of the FirstAcademy that Action Learning will become the most popular and 'go to'

tool in the provision of organizational solutions across the enterprise.

The author is a Certified Action Learning Coach who worked for over three years in Firstbank and was fully involved in the projects mentioned in the article.

Gideon Ataraire

CALC

Director, WIAL

Chair, Research and Publications Committee

/published2015