

USING ACTION LEARNING IN AN MBA PROGRAM AT LA ROCHELLE BUSINESS SCHOOL: AN ONGOING POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

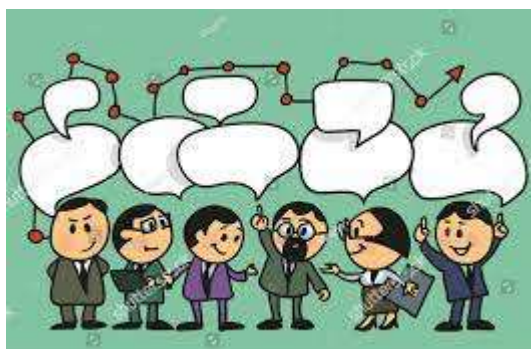
Being both professor of human management and leadership at La Rochelle Business School and a certified action learning coach, I had the opportunity to experiment with action learning with students in my courses as a new pedagogical approach to develop their leadership competencies. I have tried to use action learning in all my management courses in several educational programs (Bachelor, MBA and Master) for 3 years. Although it is still a short experience, I would like to briefly share with the WIAL community some features of this ongoing pedagogical experience: results, difficulties, conditions of success and some ideas about its future.

La Rochelle Business School is a mainstream business school with a traditional pedagogy focused on the cognitive content of each discipline course with traditional exams. But it allows very little efforts to behavioral learning to prepare managers for their future jobs as most French universities and « Grandes Ecoles » are still doing. This is a main critique for many years of most of the companies hiring these business school graduates.



Unfortunately, until now, this critique did not really impact the content of the mainstream curricula of the present French management education system. So I decided to experiment with action learning in my human management and leadership courses to foster the development of these missing behavioral competencies linked to communication and leadership.

I focused my efforts on the newly redesigned two years junior MBA program of our School. I was lucky to convince the director of this MBA program that action learning is an excellent method to contribute to the development of the leadership competencies of these students. In the medium term this would be a great benefit for them and in the short term this teamwork method would help them with their multiple team assignments for which they often have difficulties, lacking an efficient work method or approach.



At the beginning, the students were a bit surprised by this method but they quickly liked it and found it pleasant, helpful and powerful to quickly solve complex issues. Mastering the questioning process was a bit of a challenge for the first sessions as they are not at all trained to ask questions and some preliminary exercises were necessary to improve their abilities in this area. Monitoring the chosen competency while working on solving the problem also required some practice and some training.

But after some sessions the results were quite encouraging and most of the students were thankful to me to introduce them to action learning as they appreciate its power and its main benefits. I use action learning both to solve personal issues coming from the students and to deal with short business cases I provide to them.

One of the main difficulties that I encountered was to motivate the faculty to appreciate action learning and to engage other professors and speakers to encourage the students to use it for their group assignments in their own courses. Some were quite interested and open to it but other were sceptical or even reluctant to discover this new work process as I proposed to them.



I had the great chance that the MBA program director was quite open to this method and convinced of its interest for the students. He set a compulsory one day seminar about action learning for all the new students during the first week of the program, so they can use this method for their group assignments. He even advised that action learning become a pedagogical « common theme » for the first year of this MBA program in all the courses from next year onwards.

The main present problem and brake to action learning development within the School is to get and to train enough coaches to help the students and to check that they are correctly using action learning for their team work. So with my colleague who is a certified action learning coach we organized some training sessions to train voluntary internal and external coaches to the method but their availability is not easy to fit to the students' agenda...



So from this ongoing experience we see that despite very encouraging results at the students' level, it is not easy to introduce action learning within a mainstream business school as it implies many changes from the usual curriculum.

However we are rather optimistic at least in the short term for the future development of action learning in this MBA program because of the support of its director and its plans to increase the use of this method. We hope that the positive

results of this experience will encourage further practice of action learning and that there will be growing support from the faculty and the top management... Based on this endeavour I am convinced that a true action learning based leadership development education requires to completely re-think and redesign the mainstream MBA curriculum and its faculty profiles as some other interesting experiences in different countries have shown.

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