

ACTION LEARNING IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT

“What I experienced is how we came to together as a team to solve the problem together - both Microsoft and the UN.” Geoffrey Lipman, UN World Tourism Organization

As coaches, many of us use action learning to solve problems and challenges faced by our clients. Most of these challenges are internal business opportunities that when worked on by employees using action learning can help move an organization forward. But what if the challenge were instead presented by a third-party organization, while the group that were solving the problem came predominantly from a different company? And what if the third-party organization was focused on a social challenge? Could action learning bring the two organizations together, leveraging the business insights and experiences of the corporate participants to address a difficult systemic social issue?

These were the sorts of questions that we asked ourselves back in 2009 when we first started to develop Microsoft Front Lines – an executive development program that brings senior leaders from the Microsoft business to an emerging market, where they work with locally operating organizations to tackle socio-environmental challenges such as climate change, poverty, access to services and education. At the start of that journey these questions were unresolved but after a number of years of working in this area we can say that the approach has been broadly successful.



Front Lines is an example of using action learning to combine leadership development with corporate social responsibility. Not only does this provide an opportunity to move the needle on important social challenges, it can provide immense benefit to companies. In this structure, small groups of corporate participants work with members of carefully selected ‘partner’ organizations – such as non-profits and government agencies - on

challenges that they are facing. These programs can be structured where one action learning group works with a single partner, or as we have done in Front Lines, a number of organizations can come together in one location and multiple action learning groups can work on separate and unrelated challenges in parallel.

Of course, such designs require resources – money as well as participants’ time. So what’s in it for them? For the corporation, these kinds of experiences provide impactful leadership development aligned to skills and behaviours leaders need as they progress to more senior levels in the organization. Through this unique development opportunity, participants are taken out of their comfort zone and are given safe space to learn important leadership skills. These vary from program to program but include elements such as working with government, understanding national competitiveness, incorporating multiple perspectives into decision making, working collaboratively with diverse teams, preparing people to lead

through ambiguity, and global awareness. In addition these experiences can drive employee engagement - participants in these programs feel humbled and privileged by the opportunity to apply their skills to make a real social difference, which can help connect their work to a sense of purpose. Finally, the good work can be harnessed by the corporate citizenship team to help communicate both internally and externally around the wider impact that the company is having on society.

For partners, who within our models of working usually invest the time and cover their own travel costs, it is clearly an opportunity to get some help with the challenges that they are facing. As expected from action learning, the diverse group makeup and focus on questioning brings new perspective to what are sometimes entrenched challenges. In our work we have seen some clear outcomes for the partner organizations, including:

An energy-neutral headquarter building in Kenya: The United Nations Environment Program came to Front Lines twelve months before opening a new headquarter building, with growing concerns about its expected environmental impact. An action learning team comprised of UNEP officials and Microsoft leaders developed a strategic plan for a new energy-neutral building, which opened one year later with an inauguration by UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, who described the building as a “living model of our sustainable future that takes environmental sustainability to a new level.”

Funding to provide education for children in Uganda: Child of Hope, a small charity providing education to children in a slum area of Uganda, had exhausted its funding sources, growing too big to continue to be funded by the donations that had gotten them established. A group of participants from Ernst & Young helped them to develop and implement a strategy that led them to increase their funding three fold within 18 months, allowing them to provide 100 more children with schooling, educate their existing pupils through secondary education and build a new floor for their school.



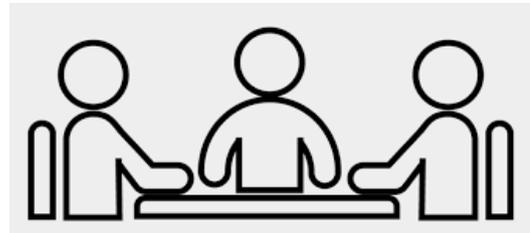
In addition to clear project outcomes, we have seen how partners are able to use the engagement to deepen relationships with the corporations they work with and engender a sense of commitment to the causes they are working on amongst the individual participants. We have also seen that bringing different partners together into one location to work on separate challenges brings a networking benefit to them, which in turn can add value to the corporation as the convenor.

Through our work on these social action learning programs, we have identified a number of key elements that ensure their success:

- 1) **Strategic partner selection:** Social problems can be business problems too – choosing the right partners and problems can help add to the value proposition of the program. Identifying partners that are strategically aligned to the corporation’s purpose – for example organizations providing internet access in developing countries for Microsoft - have both business

and a social benefit. This can help convince the sceptics and increase return on investment for the corporation.

- 2) **Careful partner engagement:** When approaching partner organizations to be involved in this type of program it's important to understand their concerns and language.
- 3) **Clear problem ownership:** As in any action learning scenario, getting the problem and presenter right are important. When working with NGOs and governments, decision making structures may be quite different to those of corporations so care should be given to understanding who owns the problem and how action can be taken.
- 4) **The right mixture of group members:** With too few partner organization representatives, there may be insufficient bandwidth to take forward the actions agreed upon by the group. With too many, there can be too many entrenched perspectives on the problem. A good group has a mix of corporate and partner representatives, including both those new to the challenge as well as those who are more invested for the longer term.
- 5) **Involvement of a relationship manager:** Particularly in complex organizations, it helps if within the team design, one of the corporate participants has some experience of working with the partner previously and can stay involved after the action learning to take the actions forward.
- 6) **Skilled action learning coach:** As with all action learning, much depends on having a skilled action learning coach. With the additional dynamic of two organizations coming together, this coach can provide the reflective inquiry and interventions to ensure success.



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