

HELMGRAS: BUILDING AN ACTION LEARNING SCHOOL

Helmgras, an elementary school in the Netherlands, embraced Action Learning and was one of the 2017 award winners at the WIAL Global Forum in Shanghai. An article appeared in a Dutch magazine recently to describe the adventure. This is part 1 of the article.

Each day, teachers, administrators and directors dedicate all their energy to bring better education for students. Problems and challenges get more and more complex. Dealing with these challenges requires specific competencies. Managing uncertainty, complexity and diversity and fostering innovation needs a mindset of both learning and performance. Action Learning brings constant professional development and gives a director and the team the tools to deal with change. Hans Ploeg, director of the Helmgras Elementary school applied the method in his school.



Action learning is an approach to learning and change that empowers a school system (directors, managers and team members) to continuously improve the quality of the education, the level of collaboration and the professional development. It can therefore be considered as the cornerstone of a learning organization. Participants deal with actual

concrete challenges and apply their new behavior in the work setting. Taking actions, dealing with unfamiliar issues, finding new ways, taking risks and experimenting are key in Action Learning. It is learning by doing and experiencing, and constant reflection. This method stimulates the learning environment and increases the organization or the team's capability to solve problems. Action Learning is a methodology that helps with:

- Building the school's vision
- Creating a professional learning environment
- Dealing with diversity and sustainable competencies
- Developing personal and professional efficiency
- Solving practical challenges through collaboration
- Channeling requirements from students, parents and the community into the development of better education

Coal mines

At the start of WWII Reg Revans, Cambridge Professor and member of the UK Coal Board, is asked to improve the learning process in the Welsh coal mines. The mines are dealing with challenges that can no longer be solved by experts and the coal miners themselves need help with developing their learning capabilities. Revans experiments with what he later calls action Learning (Revans, 1982) and that develops 20 years later into the idea of the learning organization. The method stimulates learning around looking at problems and finding meaningful solutions. Action Learning invites reflection, both about the problem and yourself. It stimulates to evaluate the approaches and mental models underlying the problem.

Action Learning Academy is the leader in the Netherlands for Action Learning and is assigned by the World Institute for Action Learning (WIAL) to deliver certification for coaches and team leaders.

The key elements

The key elements of Action Learning are

1. Learning is rooted in practical problems and projects, not case studies
2. Learning happens through reflection about past and planned actions with a small group (maximum 8-10) of members who are connected through their different roles
3. The process does not only look at the problem (the content) but also at the group process, learning together and individual development in collaboration with others. There is equality, there is no hierarchy.
4. Focus is on enhancing the actions and bring solutions to a higher level. It is therefore key that important and urgent problems are dealt with.

The first school

Hans Ploeg (53) is member of the Tabijn Foundation, director of the Helmgras elementary school, trainer and coach. He focuses on making schools and school systems more efficient. After 15 years of business development management experience, he changed careers and became a school director. He believes in the most important asset of the school: the teachers. Ploeg is the first director in the Netherlands using the Action Learning methodology intensely and successfully. His approach of thinking "outside the education box" and of embracing change took some time. But step by step, he built up success. In 2017 the school was the first to earn the designation of Action Learning Shool. Ploeg: "An experienced



education advisor recently visited our school and had never experienced using questions to solve problems. Collaboration and quality is rooted in avoiding statements and judgments.”

The World Institute for Action Learning (WIAL), the certifying body for action learning coaches and team leaders, awarded Helmgras Elementary School in October with the award for best application of Action Learning.

What was your initial experience with education after your business development experience ?

After my academic education, I started my career in business development because at that time I could not find a job in education. I was driven and I was quite successful. When I decided in 2002 to go into the education world, because I enjoy working with others, a colleague asked me how my ‘other life’ was going. I see education as real life as compared to the business world. There is first of all the great group of colleagues, but the educational system sometimes impacts them. In my first role as educator, I approached things in a business way. I tried to “sell” the school to the community. I always started with the team to define the director and was supporting the team members, the talented teachers. With good teachers, quality was automatic. We involved parents in what we did and in what we believed in for the school. I wanted to avoid discussions. Asking one another great questions is an important tool to achieve that.”

Discover part 2 in the next WIAL Newsletter !

Twan Paes is WIAL Master Action Learning Coach and supported Helmgras elementary school. He is director of WIAL Netherlands and WIAL board member.

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