

## **'UNLEASHING POTENTIAL - LEVERAGING ACTION LEARNING AS A CATALYST FOR LEARNING, INNOVATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS'**



Action Learning has quickly emerged as a tool used by organizations and companies worldwide for solving their critical and complex problems. At the same time the methodology effectively develops leaders, builds collaborative teams and improves professional capabilities.

### **Key benefits of Action Learning:**

Action learning is a methodology used to engage groups in addressing real organizational problems. It emphasizes asking pertinent questions and gathering data from both inside and outside the organization. The goal is to solve a problem, generate creative ideas, or enhance an aspect of organizational life while facilitating learning and development. This approach combines problem-solving with skill acquisition, yielding improved results and supporting individual and team growth.

Participants in action learning engage in real-time problem-solving within their work environment, honing their problem-solving abilities and gaining new knowledge, skills, and perspectives. The method promotes continuous learning and improvement, deepening understanding of roles and expanding capabilities for greater contributions to organizational success, through enhanced critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration to find innovative solutions.

Additionally, action learning fosters personal growth through self-reflection, helping individuals identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for development. Regular feedback and support from peers and facilitators provide valuable insights and guidance for professional advancement. This dynamic approach to on-the-job development enables individuals to achieve better results while evolving continuously.

In Asian contexts, where questioning norms may be less prevalent, action learning offers vital support for participants in embracing the practice of questioning. The Coach creates a safe environment, encourages critical thinking, and facilitates a shift in mindset towards questioning, exploring new perspectives, and sharing them within diverse, multicultural settings, including with senior colleagues.

### **Some examples of Action Learning Application<sup>1</sup>:**

1. Problem solving during project implementation, often in fragile and fast changing environment requiring high level of agility (internal relations - interaction across organization: CO, RO, HQ, inter-country collaboration, external relations - donors IPs and sub-contractors)
2. Support to formulating and/or implementing of Action Plans
  - Technical clusters (infrastructure, procurement, green energy)
  - GESI and PSEAH country-level interventions
  - Addressing key areas for improvement indicated in the feedback via Partners' Survey
3. Creating a better and more inclusive workplace (issues - cross-cultural, hybrid work, disconnection with staff in the field, equal opportunities), enhanced relations between supervisor - supervisee, within teams, across countries, trustful environment for human innovation, co-creation.
4. Self-development - having the purpose, being part of creating positive impact through close connection to the UNOPS vision and values, generating creative ideas and solutions to the pressing problems, enhanced motivation and engagement - identifying and understanding underlying reasons behind dissatisfaction, well-being and stress management.  
Operational: clarity on role and responsibility, better time management, multitasking (also during transition period), effective communication.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of challenges brought by teams at MMCO and ARO

## 5. Potential area for application:

- partnerships, stronger inter-country collaboration and adopting a unified approach to tackle regional challenges effectively and harness diverse expertise to expand UNOPS portfolio
- increased effectiveness in project delivery
- teambuilding and cross-functional collaboration

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## **Annex**



Action learning is a purposeful pathway created to facilitate hands-on learning for individuals, teams and organizations. Its adaptable nature allows it to be tailored to the specific needs of the participants, team and organization. It enables organizations to find areas for improvement in their workflows and design real-world action learning projects for individuals and teams to address these pain points. At the same time the methodology effectively develops leaders, builds collaborative teams and improves professional capabilities.

Action Learning is based on an essential concept:

The process involves a small group that only shares / brings to the table individual and group challenges as well as support: individuals learn best with and from one another

as they each tackle their own problem and go on to actually implement their own solution. AL enables achievement of concrete learning outcomes that align with the real goals of teams and organization. Instead of treating learning/training as separate from actual work, it empowers employees to integrate it with individual and organization's priorities, thereby complementing the Learning and Development objectives.

***'We learn most when faced with a real problem which we are obliged to solve.'* Lord Weinstock, Managing Director, GEC**

Action Learning strength and effectiveness derive from its simplicity and a powerful blend of **six key components**:

**The problem**, also called a project, challenge, opportunity or task, is a starting point of Action Learning and its resolution is important to the individual, team or organisation. The problem is not only considered as a burden but rather as an opportunity for the individual, team and organisation to learn.

**The Group** is ideally composed of four to eight members, from diverse backgrounds and experiences. It is the diversity and inclusion that provide different perspectives and fresh ideas! Team members of the Action Learning team have full responsibility to understand what the real problem is, determine action to be taken, identify the most strategic goals, and recommend the strategies and reflect upon them.

**Questions and reflection** make Action Learning an absolutely unique process that is focusing on questioning rather than running into solutions. The key to the success of the Action Learning session is the quality and flow of questions, which encourage new way of thinking and create more clarity in understanding the problem, and creativity in coming up with the solutions.

**Learning**, while a lot of coaching or training methods focus on either problem solving or learning new skills, Action Learning combines both components equally. It has been noted that learning has greater strategic value than an immediate advantage of solving the current problem. Learning takes place at the individual, team and organisation level, enabling information sharing, reasoning in a different manner, altering beliefs, suspending judgement, evoking creativity and learning how to learn.

**The action** follows the phases of the agreement on the problem, setting strategic goals (SMART) and determining the recommendations, finally agreeing on the implementation of the action plan, with the roles and timeframe assigned. The actions, testing, experimenting take place between the sessions and their outcomes

are discussed in the beginning of the next session through the questions verifying whether there are any unexpected outcomes or a need for alterations.

**The coach** optimises the power of Action Learning, and through powerful questions accelerates learning and bonding of the group, while solving the problem. Using reflective questions, the coach ensures the learning takes place, and supports team to examine the interactions, thinking process towards understanding of the problem, the cooperation and finally taking actions.

Action learning offers numerous advantages for organisations. It aids in retaining top talent, driving innovation through creative problem-solving, fostering collaboration and equipping employees for leadership roles. By providing a controlled yet directly productive environment for learning by doing, it establishes a built-in reward system that benefits managers, teams and individuals.

### **Testimonies:**

*'Throughout the action learning sessions, I have discovered that asking questions enables us to recognize challenges and approaches to address them. This process is not only for personal development but also encourages team brainstorming to overcome the challenges collectively. Furthermore, it serves as a safe space for the team to openly discuss the problems and challenges they are encountering.'*  
(National Partnerships Officer)

*'Action Learning gives a fun and interesting opportunity to explore blockages in my own behavior that affect my professional and personal development, proving that I can produce a rapid change that otherwise seemed to be impossible to resolve.'*  
(International Senior Engineer)

*'The GESI/PSEAH action learning sessions have been a wonderful platform to discuss real work challenges in a small but diverse team. It has felt like a safe space to discuss problems and gives a sense of solidarity as the team engages in open, reflective and creative discussions and solutions to support each other.'*  
(Gender Equality Officer)

*'Through the Action Learning Initiative, I began openly sharing and discussing topics that I had been pondering and wrestling with on my own. This led to a sense of solidarity with other colleagues and a feeling that I was not alone in addressing these issues together. Above all, I realized that my voice was being heard by someone, and it was considered as*

*a valuable input. Through the initiative, I realized that I was receiving support and practical help in addressing the real challenges I faced'.  
(Programme Management Advisor)*

*'During our sessions, we can learn from each other and get ideas/thoughts on how to resolve real-life challenges. A colleague told me "We should not be depressed alone (WFH) and come to the office to keep in touch with the team. We realize that everyone has challenges". The good benefit of this learning is connecting with each other, better collaboration, and identifying the real cases, (it seems rare to express in normal time). I have learnt that interaction, flexibility and soft skills are important elements to solve problems'.  
(National Finance Officer)*

*'Given that I was new to Myanmar's context, and had to start remotely, Action Learning helped me immensely to understand the challenges faced by the local team members and connect with them more strongly'.  
(Senior Programme Manager)*

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