



Companies worldwide are benefiting from the use of action learning to generate business solutions and develop leaders.

# Action Learning around the WORLD

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BY MICHAEL J. MARQUARDT

**A**ction learning is a powerful organizational tool that works like this: A diversified group of four to eight members solve a complex, urgent problem. While seeking innovative solutions to the problem, the group members simultaneously develop their leadership and team skills. Pioneered by Reg Revans in the coal mines of England in the mid-20th century, action learning has recently become the fastest growing leadership methodology in the United States. It's been used by such companies as Wells Fargo, Boeing, and Nationwide Insurance, to name just a few.

Its popularity has now spread worldwide, with thousands of organizations now employing action learning to develop breakthrough strategies and to create learning cultures. Here is a sampling of some of the best action learning programs from around the world.

### **Japan: Kirin Brewery**

Kirin Brewery, a food and beverage company in the Asia-Oceania region, was having trouble with the quality of its cans, a problem that began affecting sales and the company's relationship with customers. An action learning team, formed with members from four business units—customer service, sales, manufacturing, and quality control—developed a strategy for producing a higher-quality can.

The technology needed to redesign the can was relatively simple, and the resulting can took less time to manufacture, was less costly, and received fewer customer complaints.

## **THE MORE COMPLEX AND DIFFICULT THE PROBLEM, THE MORE THE ACTION LEARNING TEAMS LEARNED AND THE MORE BREAKTHROUGH THINKING OCCURRED.**

### **Caribbean: National Bank of Dominica**

Customer service had deteriorated at the National Bank of Dominica, and customer service staff had ongoing conflicts with other bank employees. An action learning team developed more than 40 strategies to address these challenges.

The solutions included rap lyrics for customer service, shirts with logos that fit within the bank's branding scheme, quarterly meetings with fun activities, a "meet-and-greet" training initiative on how to exchange pleasantries with customers, and a new reward system for service staff. Sample rewards are vouchers for vacations, shopping trips, and electronic products (such as netbooks and iPods), items that are less expensive than those top management had been considering.

### **Kenya: U.N. Environmental Program**

When the United Nations outgrew the office accommodations at its headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, it was determined to construct a new carbon-neutral building without compromising the quality of the working environment. An action learning team

comprised of U.N. Environmental Program officials and Microsoft leaders met for three days in Nairobi to develop a strategic plan for designing and building the new UNEP headquarters building, a plan that included fundraising, data collection, IT assessment, solar panel implementation, culture change, and marketing.

After the initial face-to-face meetings, the action learning team met virtually on a monthly basis. Amazingly, the construction of the UNEP headquarters was completed within 12 months. It was opened with worldwide acclaim by the U.N. secretary general, who described the building as a "living model of our sustainable future that takes environmental sustainability to a new level."

### **Australia: Downer Group**

The Downer Group is a supplier of services to the energy sectors in New Zealand, Australia, and the Asia-Pacific region. The challenge given to the action learning team was to decrease fuel burn, which created poor road haul conditions, with dump trucks not reaching their maximum speed. Trucks did not have the capacity to carry bigger loads because material was already falling out of the back and sides of the truck beds.

The action learning team concluded that by altering the angle of repose (the angle the material can reach before it rolls down or spreads out) and creating larger sides on the trucks, the average loose cubic meter tonnage per truck could be increased significantly. Also, a road analysis control system was established, which measured road haul improvement and efficiencies. The system tells the digger operators instantly how much weight each load is carrying, thus ensuring the maximum payload is reached on each truckload.

This allowed the payload per truck to be increased significantly, and the total loading costs decreased accordingly. The benefit to Downer has been calculated at more than \$36 million per year.

### **India: TEX Corporation**

TEX Corporation, a zipper manufacturer, used action learning to improve on-time

delivery from 45 percent to 80 percent, and reduce material waste from 18 percent to less than 5 percent.

The TEX action learning team first identified the root causes for these problems, and then developed a wide array of strategies involving restructuring the company, improving systems and processes, and conducting leadership and team development. These solutions enabled TEX to reach both targets within four months.

### **South Africa: Anglo American Mining**

Anglo American Mining is a large diversified mining and natural resource company that employs 107,000 people. Its headquarters is in London and it has operations in South Africa, South America, and Australia.

Cost management at the first-line supervisor level was substandard because supervisors lacked adequate knowledge of cost management principles. In addition, tracking of costs and expenditures within budget was poor or non-existent. The company's action learning team developed a cost tracking and training toolkit. Within one year, 100 percent of the line supervisors were using the new tools, and colliery expenditures reduced by \$500,000 per year.

### **China: Infinitus International**

Infinitus is a manufacturing and distribution company for Chinese herb health medicines. Action learning teams quickly and significantly improved both product development and brand awareness.

In addition, action learning was used to initiate a highly effective leadership training

program. For its efforts, the company won the 2014 outstanding healthcare industry award from the World Institute for Action Learning.

### **Worldwide: Sony Music**

Sony, like all music companies, was suffering a significant loss in income as album sales were dwindling due to the increased use of downloads such as iTunes. An action learning team of seven managers from seven different countries met for a week in London to identify ways to diversify revenue streams.

The breakthrough strategy that emerged was the "full-services contract" that stated that Sony Music would not only distribute artists' music, but also arrange their tours, market their merchandise, and get their music placed in movies and television shows. This win-win strategy increased revenue by millions of dollars and enabled Sony to attract many new well-known artists from other record labels.

### **Global and national leadership programs**

Developing real leaders with real problems in real time with real consequences is what makes action learning a unique and powerful leadership development program. Organizations such as Microsoft, Ernst & Young, Goodrich, and Panasonic have made action learning an integral part of their global leadership development programs.

Using action learning to develop leaders also has been central to Siemens in Germany, MOH Holdings in Singapore, Samsung in Korea, Toyota in Japan, and Firjan in Brazil. In







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In addition, business schools such as the Gordon Institute of Business Science in South Africa, La Rochelle in France, Institute Brem Sarawak in Malaysia, and Rikkyo in Japan have made action learning the core of their curriculum and teaching approaches.

### Increasing the success of action learning

Based on a detailed analysis of these world-wide best action learning programs, there appears to be 10 key elements that ensure power and success.

**Problem with urgency and complexity.** Unless a problem has urgency, those tasked with solving it will devote limited energy or creativity to it. Simply put, without an urgent problem, there will be neither significant learning nor meaningful action.

The more complex and difficult the problem, the more the action learning teams learned and the more breakthrough thinking occurred. Complexity generated a need for creativity as well as a sustained, systemic, and successful approach.

**Questions and reflections.** Questions are the essence of breakthrough problem solving be-

cause they serve many purposes for an action learning team.

They enable group members to be creative and stay focused. They provide new insights and ideas for strategic actions and potential paths toward solutions. Questions also serve as the foundation for individual, team, and organizational learning.

**Mindset and values of group members.** The way group members perceive themselves, their tasks, and their internal and external environments has an impact on the results they achieve. It is important, for example, for group members to explore their ideas collaboratively rather than imposing them on others.

Their attitude toward others and the recognition that they may need to change their behavior affect the value they imbue in the process, which in turn determines their potential for becoming better problem solvers and decision makers.

**Integration of learning into all programs.** It is vital that all participants improve their knowledge and competence through action learning, both for the short-term benefit of solving the problem, and for the long-term benefit of solving future problems for the organization.

Competencies include teamwork, leadership, communication, conflict management, and innovation skills. Appropriate time and support should be given to help the team capture the relevant learning that will guide their subsequent actions.

**Clear and enforced norms.** Norms and routines should be clearly specified and agreed to by all members and should be reinforced through frequent reviewing and monitoring. This will help maintain behavioral boundaries and healthy and balanced interactions throughout the process.

Norms such as focusing on questions, taking time to learn, seeking input from all members, respecting different perspectives, and accepting the role of the coach/facilitator are necessary for the success of action learning programs.

**Commitment of top leadership to action learning projects.** A diverse action learning team without the project support of top management will have difficulty being successful. The organization's top management needs to first understand the value and role of action learning in solving business problems, and then support the team with resources and other involvement.

They can show the team that they are fully committed to the project by helping select the problem, being available for feedback and discussion, and providing the appropriate support for the implementation of the strategies.

**Timelines and expectations.** Setting an explicit timeline is an important step in helping the action learning team prioritize its tasks, keep pace with what needs to be done, and achieve specific goals. It also determines the expectations of the problem sponsor about how time should be divided among the various complex tasks.

In addition, the sponsor or coach needs to set realistic expectations and manage them in a way that prevents conflict and poor performance. High expectations by top management imply a psychological contract between management and employees and increase the participants' desire to meet them.

**Power allocated to teams.** The power of the action learning team is derived from its en-

dorsement, support, and recognition by top management.

The team first needs to know that its efforts are of value to the organization and that the team's ideas will have an impact on the business. Energy, creativity, and synergy are directly correlated with the expectation that the work of the group will result in organizational action.

**Diversity of team members.** To increase the power of an action learning team, select members from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines, even if they are located in different geographic areas. Team diversity can raise the level of learning, creativity, and problem solving by bringing alternative perspectives to the collaborative inquiry.

Group diversity also will create new dynamics that promote active debate and discussion on issues that require wider and more in-depth explorations. Different ways of thinking and seeing the problem, as well as varied skills and backgrounds, enhance the probability that the group will achieve breakthrough strategies and actions.

**Skilled coaching.** Perhaps the most important components to attaining regular success in action learning is the presence and skills of an action learning coach. The primary role of this coach is to develop the team and leadership skills of the group by creating an atmosphere of learning and reflective inquiry.

By enhancing the group's ability to grow and learn, the coach enables the group to solve the problem more quickly and innovatively.

When properly implemented and supported, action learning not only enables organizations to creatively solve complex, urgent problems, but it also can simultaneously help organizations develop their leaders, build high-performing teams, and become learning cultures. With minimal adaptations, action learning can be an effective action and learning resource for every culture in every part of the world.

■ **Michael J. Marquardt** is president of the World Institute for Action Learning and a professor at George Washington University; MJMQ@aol.com.



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