

# Action Learning: A Powerful Inclusive Approach to Leadership Development

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**C**ARICAD has incorporated into its leadership development programmes the Action Learning methodology which is embraced by brand-recognisable organisations across the world. Based on the feedback from CARICAD programme participants, Action Learning has proven to be very effective in real time development of leadership skills, breakthrough problem-solving and strengthening of team effectiveness skills.

Organisations can significantly increase their internal capacity for leadership development, team building, innovation and problem-solving by using Action Learning. Action Learning, developed over the last 60 years, has been used by companies like Microsoft, Samsung, International Federation of the Red Cross and SONY as well as countries worldwide including the USA, Canada, China, India, Singapore, Brazil, and France. Several universities, governmental agencies and international organisations like the Organization of American States have found Action Learning to be of great benefit.

The Canadian-funded Caribbean Leadership Project (CLP) used Action Learning to develop public sector leaders of 12 CARICOM countries so that they can transform the public service. CARICAD assumed responsibility for continuing the leadership development work commenced in the Canadian-funded CLP. Some Caribbean organisations that have used Action Learning include the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre in Belize, Government of Grenada, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services in Trinidad and Tobago, the National Bank of Dominica Limited, the National Cooperative Credit Union Limited in Dominica, the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank, the Barbados Supreme Court, the Institute for Advanced Teacher Training (IOL) in Suriname, the Open Campus of the University of the West Indies, the Medical Benefits Scheme in Antigua, National Commercial Bank of Anguilla and the



Management Institute for National Development in Jamaica among others. In addition, CARICAD has brought Action Learning to its leadership programme participants who hail from several organisations across the region.

What differentiates Action Learning from other methods is that participants work on real problems to achieve breakthrough solutions on which specific actions must be taken and they are all required to develop identified leadership skills in real time during the process. The six components of Action Learning are: a real-life problem to which there is no easy tried and proven solution; a diverse group of six to eight persons committed to working on the problem; iterative questioning and reflective process; learning at three levels – individual, group, organisation; emerging strategies and actions that group members or committed problem owners are responsible for implementing; a Certified Action Learning Coach.

Within an hour or two, persons who have never worked together before, develop solid rapport and mutual respect in an Action Learning session. There is no other process that can yield so many individual and organisational benefits all at once. Moreover, Action Learning is remarkably simple in its elegance. So, an organisation's staff members can quickly and easily learn how to use Action Learning to achieve phenomenal results. Action Learning has been proven to be one of the most effective ways to give employees, work teams and organisations a leading edge.

In its Transformational Leadership Development Programme (TLDP), CARICAD brought together leaders from organisations across the Caribbean, which include the Caribbean Examinations Council, National Bank of Dominica Limited, Cannabis Licensing Authority (Jamaica), Forestry Department (Saint Lucia), Ministry of Tourism (Saint Lucia), and Ministry of Works (Antigua & Barbuda). Participants worked in two separate Action Learning Groups and the multi-problem, multi-session approach was used. Each participant presented to the group a problem that he or she was facing in the workplace.

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Over several sessions the participants were helped by their group members to find breakthrough strategies to their respective problems.

The problem as presented initially by a participant often is not the real problem. The first task of the Action Learning Group is to help the problem presenter reframe the problem so that it represents the core issues to be addressed. In one TLDP cohort, the reframed problems indicated that participants did not know how to do the following: build and maintain effective stakeholder relations; facilitate collaborative and inclusive planning; sustain optimal levels of employee engagement. The Action Learning Groups generated strategies for resolving these difficulties.

In addition to having mixed cohorts as in the TLDP, CARICAD administers leadership development programmes exclusive to specific organisations like eGOV Jamaica Ltd. and the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank. The single problem, multi-session approach was used in these programmes. Each group is assigned a single problem deemed to be urgent and significant to the organisation. CARICAD would have engaged the executive leadership of the organisation prior to the programme to identify the top problems.

In an Action Learning session each participant must select a specific leadership behaviour they intend to practice for the duration of the session. At the end, other participants will give each member specific feedback on how the skill or behaviour had been demonstrated during the session. Leadership skills used in the sessions included strategic thinking; asking powerful questions; creativity; active listening; empathy; showing respect for others; building on the ideas of others; systems thinking; inspiring others and being results-oriented. Several participants claimed that the Action Learning sessions helped them to entertain different perspectives on the problem being addressed and to find breakthrough solutions that they had not considered before.

Here are some participant comments about Action Learning from the Leadership Development programmes administered by CARICAD for the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank and eGOV Jamaica Ltd.:

*"I have accepted action learning as a powerful tool that can be used to arrive at "breakthrough" solutions to problems. By having its ground rules in place and people asking powerful questions, limitless ideas are generated toward a meaningful solution."*

**[Anthony Clarke – eGOV Jamaica Ltd.]**

*"Action Learning has allowed my thoughts and opinions to be expressed by asking powerful questions to unearth stimulating statements of discussions aimed at fast-tracking problem resolutions."*

**[Shakony Thaxter – eGOV Jamaica Ltd.]**

*"Action learning was quite interesting as I saw the importance of asking powerful questions and how questions [as opposed to making statements] stimulate others to be less Defiant, less Defensive, and less Dependent. This is also a powerful strategy to use while trying to solve complex problems."*

**[Kerisha Powell – eGOV Jamaica Ltd.]**

*"Action learning has allowed me to sit back, assess, think deeply, ask probing questions, self-critique and have confidence in my action planning within a team environment and systems framework."*

**[Allister Hodge – ECCB]**

*"Action learning sessions were very engaging, informative, and help to change your mindset towards working with your colleagues."*

**[Richard Charles – ECCB]**

*"It increases engagement from all participants and allows the team to remain focused on the task at hand, removing all ambiguity."*

**[Beverly Lugay – ECCB]**

Action Learning continues to hold much promise for leadership development, problem-solving and team development across the Caribbean. Key stakeholders in the region would have to agree on the most significant and urgent problems of the region, identify a problem owner who has the interest, authority, and ability to implement the solutions; select a diverse group of persons to constitute the Action Learning group and engage an Action Learning Coach to work with the group.