

DEVELOPING GREAT LEADERS WITH ACTION LEARNING



Action learning, since its inception in the 1940's with Reg Revans' work in the coal mines of Wales and England, has been used extensively as an effective problem-solving methodology. It is only more recently, however, that action learning has become a popular tool for developing leaders.

What has caused this recent turn to action learning for leadership development? Foremost is the fact that organizations worldwide are faced with the growing challenge of increasing the capabilities of their leaders with less time and fewer financial resources.

Organizations need to be able to develop their leaders while at the same time get 'real' work done. In addition, a new and wider array of skills and competencies are needed by leaders in the 21st century, including the ability to lead teams, ask insightful questions, and solve complex problems with systems thinking. Organizations need agile, continuously learning leaders to keep ahead of the rapidly changing environment in which we live and work.



However, most leadership development programs are ineffective and expensive. Too often businesses tend to focus on the function of business more than the practice of leading. Typical leadership development programs provide little of the social and interpersonal aspects of the organizations and tend to focus on tactical rather than strategic leadership.

As a result, and with increasing leadership focus on technology and globalization, organizations have increasingly turned to action learning as a timely, innovative, effective and adaptive methodology for developing their leaders.

WIAL Action Learning Model for Leadership Development

WIAL recognizes that every leadership skill could be developed in an action learning session since individuals were working with a group of people on a problem for which there is no known solution. The inclusion of a skilled action learning coach with specific leadership development responsibilities would assure that all four elements of skill development; namely, important to the person; opportunity to practice, feedback from others, and self-reflection, would become part of each action learning session.



In order to incorporate each of these 4 elements, the Action Learning Coach does the following:

1. Prior to the group beginning its work of solving the problem, the action learning coach asks each group member to identify the leadership skill that they will work on during this action learning session. These leadership skills are put on a flip chart so that everyone can see who is working on which leadership skill.
2. The coach then tell the group that at the end of the session she will (a) ask each person how he did on the skill he identified and (b) ask other group members to provide examples on how that person demonstrated the skill (note that the coach use positive inquiry and thus only asks for positive examples; never for what the person did not do).
3. During the action learning session, the coach may intervene whenever he sees an opportunity to help members develop their leadership skill, ask the impact of that skill on the group and problem-solving process, or provide evidence of the practice of that skill.
4. At the end of the session, each person first reflects on how he has demonstrated the leadership skill, and receives evidence from others as to how he has done so.



session, but also between each session.

To further develop and practice the identified leadership skill, group members are informed that, at the beginning of the next session, the action learning coach will be asking them for an example of their practicing the leadership skill in their organization and the impact of using that skill. Thus, leadership development occurs not only during the action learning

It should be noted that the WIAL model not only emphasizes the role of the coach in helping the group members develop their leadership skills, but she also serves as a leadership role model throughout by demonstrating good listening and questioning skills.

Leadership Development with WIAL Action Learning: The Evidence

We will now present the results of our research findings gathered from reviewing WIAL action learning cases over the past 10 years. Our sources of data were twofold: (1) analysis at the collective level of eight organizations which participated in WIAL-based leadership development programs, and (2) analysis of 139 certification cases in which coaches must provide evidence relative to the impact of their coaching on enabling a group to solve a complex problem as well as developing the leadership skills of each group member.



(1) Organizations

WIAL coaches have worked with hundreds of organizations from around the world over the past 10 years. For this research, we chose to focus on eight organizations, both public and corporate, from every corner of the world; and to provide some highlights relative to results obtained and/or assessments received.

Microsoft

Most of the top leadership in Microsoft participated in WIAL programs as part of their leadership development. Microsoft noted that they had “seen great value from action learning because it allows members to practice and develop leadership competencies, work together as high-potential teams, and learn to ask great questions as leaders, all while working on real, urgent business problems”

Boeing

Boeing identified 19 executive leadership competencies that were important for their leaders: *Most critical:* adapting, thinking globally, building relationships, inspiring trust, leading courageously, aligning the organization, influencing and negotiating; *Very important:* shaping strategy, fostering open and effective communication, attracting and developing talent, driving for stakeholder success, demonstrating vision, using sound judgment. *Important:* driving execution, inspiring and empowering, working cross-functionally, focus on quality and continuous improvement, applying financial acumen. The company conducted intensive pre and post leadership assessments of all the leaders who participated in the action learning programs, and discovered that participants not only immediately improved in their leadership skills, but continued that improvement one-year later.

Wells Fargo

Wells Fargo has made WIAL action learning the cornerstone of its leadership development programs. Participants note that they are much better leaders after the process, especially in the areas of listening, asking powerful questions, critical thinking, and collaboration skills. Leaders also indicate that while the solutions they created were effective for the company in the short term, the longer term impact of their increased leadership effectiveness offers the most sustainable and impactful benefit to our organization.

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

The US Department of Agriculture conducted pre and post 360 degree feedback on the 10 key organizational leadership skills and found that everyone of the eight participants had improved in 8 or more of the 10 skills.

Sony Music

Sony Music used WIAL action learning as the key tool for solving its most complex and important problems which developing its top leadership. Kathy Chalmers, senior Vice President for Human Resources, declared that action learning developed the “type and quality of leaders that Sony Music needs in the highly competitive entertainment industry.”

Panasonic

Panasonic found that action learning developed the leadership traits desired by its founder, Konosuke Matsushita and an important component of the company’s basic business philosophy; namely, (1) courtesy and humility, (2) cooperation, team spirit and collective wisdom, (3) the *Sunao mind* (understanding the truth without bias or self-interest, and (4) adaptability and untiring effort for improvement.



Samsung

Action learning was introduced to top leadership by the Samsung HRD Department and became the strategic modality to develop the next generation of leaders who would create the future business opportunities of the company. Action learning fostered an “ingenious management style built on reflection and questions” that the company believes will transform Samsung into a first-class global organization.

National Bank of Dominica

Leaders in the National Bank of Dominica had problem in recognizing and appreciating the importance of customer service. As a result of the WIAL action learning program, the Bank was recognized as the top bank in the Caribbean for its services and creativity in responding to customers.

(2) Certification Documents

We collected and analyzed 139 WIAL certification papers/cases representing coaches from 33 countries (see map below) for this study. The countries represented are: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea (south), Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Philippines, Poland, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States of America, and Vietnam. The papers/cases represented over 200 action learning sessions and over 400 mentions of leadership skills being developed.



This review of the WIAL certification papers/cases also identified more than 100 instances where the transference of the skills practiced in the action learning session were transferred to the work place.

Five key themes emerged:

1. Participants appreciated the safe environment that they could practice their chosen leadership skills.

Several coaches noted how action learning had enabled the group members “to ask questions and express leadership competencies, which they could use to inspire subordinates, enhance team collaboration, and solve problems.” Others coaches wrote how the action learning method enabled the participants to have greater “awareness of leadership from the very beginning” and the ease of putting the leadership “principles into practice.”

“It is a down-to-earth way to help participants be authentic leaders who could raise self-awareness, lead from the heart, and practice leadership competencies.” Many of the papers commented on how action learning “propels the development of leadership skills.”

By means of continuous questioning, “abilities of attentively listening, systematically thinking, self-examine and problem solving are cultivated.” Team members “learned to consciously practice and acquire new leadership skills.”

One coach reported how a group member initially told the team that she did not believe how leadership could be developed in a single action learning session. However, she witnessed the change in herself “with the power of setting the right intention, asking questions clearly, and giving feedback at the end of the session. The group member proclaimed how she had learned to trust action learning as a great tool for individual and team development, a testimony that was “uplifting to the whole team.”

2. Team members saw how easy it was to practice their chosen leadership skill and appreciated the real time feedback

Action learning provides a real-time experimental environment for participants to apply and practice leadership skills through questioning and listening. “It is much easier to learn leadership skills through the exercise of action learning,” commented one leader to her coach. Action learning, noted one of the coaches, “provides the avenue for them to apply the knowledge to solve real business problems in a collaborative manner.”



Several of the WIAL action learning team members observed how any individual leadership skills “can be improved in a short time (even in only one day). Others recognized the power of how the action learning coach in helping each person “sum up and evaluate the individual leadership competences.”

Many participants expressed amazement that when “comparing the assessment of the team members’ capabilities and quality between before and after the action learning, it can be clearly seen that their leadership capabilities have improved.” Leadership skills were developed by “demonstrating it right away through practicing the specific skill in a safe environment and receive feedback from other members.”

Corporate leaders noted that management trainings for frontline managers was often conducted in class room environment detaching from the realities of branch environment, which made it difficult for them to transfer new learning into real practices when back to work. However, they were “amazed at how action learning can develop people’s leadership skills so quickly.

3. Team members transferred the newly practiced skills to their organizations

In many of the papers, the coaches noted how group members were excited about not only what they had learned, but how quickly and appropriately they could “take away the skills from the session both for personal improvement and improvement of

the organization by applying it to their jobs.” Particularly valuable was the leadership skill of “asking powerful questions in their repertoire of navigating through their careers.” They could see how these leadership skills of listening, patience, empathy “could be utilized to develop subordinates and influence peers.

Group members saw that the competencies and behaviors in action learning were transferable throughout the organization.” “Whereas, the greater and long-term value of action learning for the company is the application of new learning on a system-wide basis throughout the organization and the participants’ professional living.

Coaches commented on how ‘many members of the teams worked with began using leadership and team skills and processes learned in the action learning teams for other internal team work.” The participants “understood the power of giving constructive leadership-based feedback which could help them become true leaders and grow more leaders.”

4. The development of leadership skills is a natural outcome of action learning

Numerous coaches in their certification papers noted how the participants “felt empowered and would in turn encourage their subordinates instead of giving criticism only.” One stated that action learning has “changed how I lead and my team, and I love it.” Most of the participants were excited about how “remarkable action learning is designed for leadership skill development.” The participants say how action learning could be “a great complement to an overall leadership development package of the organization.’

They saw how action learning provided them “a forum for leaders to become self-aware of their competencies and how they might choose to use their skills with organizational issues.” Another participants was amazed at how much easier to learn leadership skills through the exercise of action learning” than the leadership programs she had conducted as a trainer for over 15 years, which took so much time to design and required much effort in advance.



5. The organization learned that creating breakthrough strategies could be achieved while developing leadership skills

Almost all of the participants recognized that action learning was not only “ a cost effective means of training leaders, it generated breakthrough solutions to real and urgent challenges the organization is facing.” They noted action learning was “a powerful tool for both problem solving and leadership development.”

Several commented on how “action learning has the amazing capacity to simultaneously and effectively enable organizations to solve complex and urgent

problems, develop skilled leaders, quickly build high-performing teams, and transform corporate culture and create learning organizations.” Action learning could also “create a new mindset in the organization that (effective) learning actually occurs outside of the training room.” It is “simple to implement but effective in problem solving and leadership developing.” Action learning was truly an example of the way companies could “provide leadership development for leaders who do not have many opportunities to come together to learn.”

Conclusion

Organizations around the world are continuously looking for innovative methods for developing leaders. To do so in a cost effective manner that makes a meaningful difference for the organization is critical for corporate success. The WIAL action learning methodology has been demonstrated to be a powerful and effective approach being used globally to develop leaders while they work.

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