

## **ACTION IN CRISIS: HELPING UKRAINE REFUGEES RESTART THEIR LIVES THROUGH ACTION LEARNING**

It started as just a simple demonstration of what action learning is all about. But after the session, clarity, and certainty for a full-blown mission that could potentially help improve the lives of many Ukrainian mothers and children refugees started.

That was how a problem-solving exercise, Action Learning, helped solidify the intentions and cleared the limitations of Casa Prietenilor Ucraineni or House of Ukrainian Friends (<https://www.ukrainianfriends.house>)—an ad hoc project meant to help Ukrainian citizens displaced due to ongoing armed conflict.



*Senior Action Learning Coach, Elizabeth Rushton*

### **Welcome, Come In**

Weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine broke out, private equity expert Alexandra Florea attended an invitation from a long-time acquaintance Elizabeth Rushton for an action learning session back in April. The session formally introduced what Action Learning is and how it applies to real-life and business problems.

"The participants came from very, very different backgrounds. But they wanted to learn about Action Learning. I knew some of them, and others I had met only a couple of times. It was a real mix. Nevertheless, they were all open-minded and keen to learn," Rushton said.

A Senior Action Learning coach since 2019, Rushton said the session was a unique one, the most memorable she had done so far—not just because of the people that actively participated in it but the impact and empowerment Action Learning brought to these individuals.

"When they heard about Alex's problem, they became completely focused and worked together amazingly well as a team. At first, you would have thought that these other attendees would have no reference points around Alex's dilemma. But as it turns out, each of them had some really valuable similar experience to share," she said. "They each had something really relevant to bring that directly helped the problem at hand."

Hence, right after the session, the idea of how to further improve the operations of Casa Prietenilor Ucraineni or House of Ukrainian Friends was introduced and implemented, allowing the mission to focus on its core purpose entirely.

### **Action After the Learning**

An unincorporated non-profit association of individuals collaborating to manage a special housing facility, Casa Prietenilor Ucraineni is dedicated to providing temporary shelter to Ukrainian mothers and children seeking refuge in the neighboring country of Romania.



*House of Ukrainian Friends in  
Romania*

"The House of Ukrainian Friends started as an ad hoc initiative I helped organize together with some of my former colleagues. We were all keen to help mothers and children escaping the war into Romania and who need a place to stay for a few months," Florea said. "When I attended the Action Learning session with Liz, we had already raised about \$75,000 for the project. We now have over \$100,000, which will allow us to host our guest families for up to six months—but as the situation keeps evolving, they may need support for longer."

Strategically located in the most convenient and safe area for the refugees near the Ukraine-Romania border, the House of Ukrainian Friends has started welcoming displaced families to its doors and provided them with complete amenities and food provisions.

However, the Action Learning session with Rushton steered the mission to a clearer and more straightforward path.

"Although I am the only one who got to attend the session with Liz, it helped us identify how we could truly provide a solution to one of our problems while managing the project. The solution is to focus on just providing temporary and transitional pension house rather than trying to give all kinds of support that these individuals might need."

Coming off from the Action Learning session, the mission is meant to be temporary--a limited but impact solution with a simple and singular purpose. Nevertheless, it was all that was immediately needed during a time of crisis.

"As we are not a formal organization but a group of volunteers, there are no formal roles. But we are all in this together, so we all contribute to most aspects of the initiative," Florea said.

For Rushton, guiding the team on how to go about the solution they came up with was as just important as the actual problem-solving.

"We know that the guests will have a lot of needs beyond food and boarding. Hence, beyond those, it is important for the people involved to pledge to each other not to allow mission creep to happen," she shared.



*Private Equity Expert & House of Ukrainian Friends founder, Alexandra Florea*

She added that while almost everyone involved in the project lives far away from the project location, the team members all recognize the huge responsibility of this mission.

### **Correlative Change**

While the refugees are the main beneficiary of this mission, both Rushton and Florea acknowledge that Action Learning has served them more than they could ever imagine.

As an expert and coach for years now, Rushton is not a stranger to the benefits of Action Learning. But the one she ran for the group with Florea was a life-changing one—both literally and figuratively.

"I get a lot of energy from running Action Learning sessions. Getting the opportunity to spread the word about Action Learning empowers me. That is what Action Learning has been for me for the past years. For this particular session, however, it was a real reminder that when you give people the opportunity to contribute, they often surprise you and know things you don't expect," Rushton said.

Meanwhile, as a participant, Action Learning became that catalyst for Florea to change her leadership and problem-solving approach.

"This is my first Action Learning, and I need to look into it more. But I was blown away by its power when the only thing you can bring into the session is a question. It completely changes the dynamics of the conversation and the way you think about the conversation," Florea said. "It wasn't only the tone of the conversation that changed, but also the quality of the information being shared and the quality of the personal insights."

More than anything else, the Action Learning session was an exceptional leadership and personal learning experience for Florea.

"Action Learning taught me to focus on what was most important in the mission that we started, and that was focusing on the core needs first and then worrying about what else we can do for refugees after," she added.

As individuals, Action Learning has also led them to develop skills that are usually only an aspiration for many.

"What changed to me was that I was better able to stay curious and open about how we would achieve our goals instead of trying to control and manage outcomes. Staying curious was the leadership skill I had chosen to focus on in the session. And in the end, things on the ground developed beautifully. Now we just need to bring that same spirit to the next stage of the initiative," Florea further added.

Meanwhile, to Rushton, Action Learning is a lifestyle, a method that can be used and applied to everyday life.

"As an Action Learning coach, some of the tools that I use in Action Learning I use outside of Action Learning. It helps me take perspective before making a judgment or jumping to a solution. Action Learning has taught me to consider actually what might be going on and ask questions around to deepen my knowledge and understanding of the problem," Rushton said.

The Ukraine crisis is a huge problem with worldwide implications, but methodologies like Action Learning can make a difference at the grassroots level by solving problems, generating ideas, and improving teams and communities while doing so.

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