

INTEGRATING ACTION LEARNING COACHING INTO AN EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM



Background of the project

Introduction:

Melbourne Business School (MBS) approached me to integrate Action Learning coaching into their Executive Development program for one of their clients.

The program covers a spectrum of competencies, starting with strategy, financial acumen, business economics, and digital marketing. It is designed to upskill managers across a single organization; these managers stem from diverse business units or companies within the conglomerate. The activities of the conglomerate range from Automotive, to Aeronautic and some functions (like finance, corporate communication) are centralized at the corporate office.

Desired outcomes of incorporating Action Learning in the project

- Reinforce the learning after each module by practicing the new skills and tools acquired during the coaching sessions
- Learn to identify and solve problems related to the topic of the module

- Develop groups of “trusted advisors” that can come together beyond the Leadership program time frame

Design of the project

Executive Development Program



1- Program Structure:

The Action Learning group coaching was structured to complement the Executive Development Program delivered by Melbourne Business School (MBS). The MBS program consisted of 3 courses.

Each course comprised

- A one or two-day Face-to-Face workshop
- Post-workshop Assessment
- 2 Action Learning (AL) group coaching.



The two AL Coaching sessions of 90 minutes each, concluded each course, 2 weeks, and 6 weeks after the workshop.

I conducted AL sessions with a different set of skills for each course. The list of the key skills and essential content that participants needed to master for each course, was prepared with the professor who ran the workshop.

The purpose of Action Learning coaching is to help participants work on workplace challenges from the perspective of the key competencies taught during the Face-to-Face Workshop. The list of competencies to focus on was defined with the instructor

of each workshop, so the participants were familiar with them. The Action Learning coaching sessions allow participants to work on real-world challenges, apply the subject matter taught, and gain valuable insights and practical experience to enhance their leadership abilities.

128 participants were selected for this program. Each of them will attend for 6 sessions of AL group coaching. The total program will consist of close to 140 hours of AL coaching. So far only course 1 and 2 have been completed, Course 3 will take place before the end of the 2023.

Participants attended courses at Advanced, Intermediate or Foundation level depending on their pre-program assessment. Hence the grouping was very fluid for each course.

Teams were formed based on participant availability, with a mix of consistent and reshuffled compositions across the project's duration. Most teams comprised managers representing diverse segments of the business and varying functions, which fostered a rich array of viewpoints. Additionally, certain groups were composed predominantly of individuals from a single department.

This approach offered notable advantages. Managers and participants enjoyed increased chances to interact with colleagues spanning different areas of the business, leading to substantial learning opportunities. By approaching challenges from varied perspectives and gaining insights into other parts of the organization, participants enriched their understanding of the larger group dynamics.

2- Preparing the Problem Presenter:

2.1 Round 1:

The first module taught was strategy, which encouraged participants to identify strategic problems facing their organization or team. In collaboration with the professor of strategy, we asked each participant to describe an important and urgent strategic problem to bring to the Action Learning (AL) session.

Before the first AL session, participants watched a short video¹ introducing Action Learning. During the first coaching session, I reminded them of the ground rules and key components of Action Learning. Participants shared their problems and decided which problem to work on as a team. At the end of the session, the problem presenter (PP) shared the action they would take, and we spent time debriefing the benefits of Action Learning and how the participants practiced their competencies.

During the second AL session, the first PP shared the outcome of their action, and the team chose another problem to work on. We followed the same process.

2.2 Round 2:

¹ Link to the WIAL video: <https://youtu.be/x8gjjN0pu5o>



The subject matter of Workshop 2 was business economics and financial acumen. To prepare for the next two AL sessions, participants watched a short video² about presenting the problem statement. This allowed them to refine the problems they were bringing to the session. Once again, they submitted their problem ahead of the coaching session, with a focus on the subject matter of the workshop.

Upon reviewing the challenges presented in the initial 40 MPAL coaching sessions, a pattern emerged wherein a handful of common issues were raised by multiple participants, all of which held broader implications for the organization. Recognizing the significance of these shared concerns, it became evident that delving deeper into these matters would be highly beneficial during the second round of coaching. I selected 4 problems that the teams would be working on during their 4th AL session.

The overall outcome of these sessions were included in the report that MBS prepared for the company.

2.3 Round 3:

Now that participants are familiar with the methodology of Action Learning, I will ask their manager to come up with a complex, urgent, and important problem that they would like the team to help with and ask the team to prepare recommendations for the manager.

These sessions will be conducted between September and November 2023. We will engage with the managers ahead of the coaching sessions. Details are still being finalized.

Results and learning by participants for round 1 and 2

The main learning themes that the participants reported were the following:

1. Importance of communication and collaboration:

- Capitalizing on brand and tapping on insights from colleagues to solve problems across departments

- Getting support from colleagues to gain perspective and share experiences

- Discussion with a group & with people from different teams is more fruitful compared to solving individually

- Ensuring effective communication: As individuals from diverse segments of the business delved into crucial challenges, it became apparent that their perceptions of the issues didn't consistently align. Each department held only a fragment of the entire puzzle. This underscored the imperative for enhanced cross-organizational communication.

² Specific videos made for this program: <https://youtu.be/4cAKRXnpC-4> and <https://youtu.be/lciVKEIoTZw>



2. Asking questions to understand and solve problems:

- Using questions is very beneficial
- Asking questions and finding the right solutions
- Understanding the issue by asking the right questions and able to respond to suggest solutions
- Ask key question to open more opportunity for solutions
- Ask power question to get a better understanding to get a solution to the problem
- Problem solving and how to do things differently and ensure the system is okay!
- As question as specific as possible to narrow down the problem scope and identify the real problem
- Brainstorm to know more about other subsidiaries' problems and resolve them better
- Root cause analysis

3. Importance of perspective and empathy:

- Trying to think from the perspective of both parties involved
- Exploring perspectives of people not in your field/area to solve the problem
- Connecting the dots, hear different perspectives first (no judgement), analyze the perspective, and come to a decision.

4. Being open to new ideas and approaches:

- Being open with any possible solution although we face challenges in finding one
- Sharing ideas and collaborating with others
- Understanding the problem before jumping to the solution finding stage
- Ensuring that both parties achieve the same objectives to solve the problem.
- Listen to others' challenges and opinions as well

5. Personal and professional development:

- Embracing the process of Action and asking many powerful questions
- Asking each person around the table their view on the matter to understand different perspectives

- The art of explaining the problem³

- The art of negotiation

These themes are interrelated and show how important it is to have effective communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills to achieve success in any organisation.

Reflection of the coach on the learning of the teams

I could observe that for most of the sessions the following outcomes:

- The team were engaged and committed to helping the problem presenter.
- Participants came up with good options to encourage everyone to speak, the people who seems quieter were able to contribute when asked for their opinions.
- The team members had a diversity of experience and backgrounds, providing new perspectives on the problem. This diversity was highly valued and the participants appreciated to benefit for the perspective and experiences of colleagues from different business units.
- The teams worked on identifying the root cause of the problems and were able to generate multiple options to approach it.
- Some participants were open to feedback and adjusted their behaviour based on it.
- The problem presenter (PP) and all participants benefited from the session. The PP shared the actions that they would take, and all the participants shared their learning from the session. They struggle to identify how their peers practiced their chosen competence, and I had to step in as the coach to give that feedback.
- Most teams demonstrated a high level of psychological safety and camaraderie.

Learnings and challenges as a Coach

Key Learning:

1. Intervening early as a coach is crucial to address any issues that may arise in a team, such as a slow pace of asking questions.
2. Engaging all team members is important, even if some members have strong expertise and contribute more.

³ Example of problems submitted in Appendix.



3. Managing online sessions can be challenging, especially when some team members join the session while driving, but it is still possible to have an active and productive session.

4. Using AL can be an effective way to reinforce the learning from a previous leadership session and encourage participants to use new tools and competencies.

5. Maintaining a balance between the role of learning coach and nudging the team towards effective problem-solving can be challenging, but it can be achieved by being more directive in helping the team identify the real problem, encouraging them to look at all the problem statements, and demonstrating how to engage the entire team. For example, when the team didn't have an agreement on the problem I asked, "What will be the consequence if we move forward before having an agreement on the problem?" and then "What does the team wants to do now?" resulting in the team exploring further the problem and going through a second round of writing the problem statement.

6. Focusing on one's own learning as a coach during sessions can help be a better coach during the session and do better debriefs. After each session, I wrote down my own key learning as a reference throughout the program.

Key Challenges:

1. Dealing with a shy Problem Presenter (PP) can present a challenge for coaches. However, working with the PP ahead of time and ensuring they are willing to present the problem can help alleviate this difficulty.

2. Getting more engagement from the team, managing a fixed mindset of the PP, and finding interventions that focus on learning while not impeding the problem-solving process.

3. Helping the group dive further into the problem by coming up with more powerful questions.

4. Managing disruptions caused by bosses and ensuring participant focus during the session can also be challenging.

5. Unexpected events such as a PP disappearing in the middle of the session

6. Slow participation from team members. Therefore, it is important to intervene early and ask the team how they can improve.

7. Managing team members with strong expertise that the team members are keen to hear while engaging all team members equally to ensure the best outcome.



8. Managing online sessions with team members on the move can pose unique challenges.
9. Shifting the mindset of a problem presenter who is resistant to shifting their perspective and encouraging them to consider new options.
10. Encouraging team members to participate equally.
11. Technical issues may arise, which can slow down the problem-solving process and pose challenges for coaches, when in the context of an executive leadership program, rescheduling the session is not really an option.

Opportunities for Improvement:

1. Helping participants identify real complex strategic challenges rather than day-to-day problems can be an area for improvement.
2. Helping junior participants manage disruptions by their boss can be improved.
3. Coming up with more powerful questions as a coach can also be an opportunity for improvement.
4. Helping participants to better identify when the competence that they choose are being practiced, so they can give each other better feedback at the end of the session.

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