

THE PANDEMIC PURSUIT: A POST-GRADUATE CALC'S TIMELY TALE



As someone who loves to learn and to take action, you can imagine the immediate curiosity I had when I first heard about Action Learning. My colleagues who have had the chance to participate in Action Learning sessions spoke about it with much enthusiasm, but when asked about the details, all of them said the same thing: “You have to experience it to understand it.” Eventually, I did join one session. Little did I know that a single session would cause a huge ripple effect in my life.

It was early 2021 and I was a struggling graduate student stuck without a thesis to pursue to finally complete my master’s degree. I wanted to conduct exploratory research that would not only contribute to the field of Organizational Psychology, but also benefit organizational development practitioners in the Philippines. I took note of possible topics to focus on and read through tons of literature to identify gaps that my study could address. I kept hitting deadends. It seemed like all my topics of interest were already charted territory.

As customary for graduate students, I was working part-time as a facilitator for workshops in the midst of my thesis crisis. One fine day, while our participants were in their breakout rooms on Zoom, my lead facilitator asked me how I was doing. I opened the can of worms and told him about my struggle in finding a thesis topic. He asked if I had already considered a topic related to Action Learning and I said I couldn’t because I had never been part of a session. Like an answered prayer, he said that he could accommodate one more person to be part of an upcoming session he was coaching. A CALC certification and a master’s degree later, I can safely say that my first taste of Action Learning back then went incredibly well and now, I am happy to share the fruits of my labor.

My thesis focused on expanding current knowledge of the group coaching experiences of leaders in the Philippines as they address organizational issues and

challenges amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The group coaching approach referred to here is Action Learning. I gathered data during the pandemic from interviews with 12 organizational leaders belonging to various organizations including IT/BPO, retail, advertising, manufacturing, telecommunications, and government. These leaders were at least one to two levels below c-level and they must have been working in their organization for at least six months prior to the first Action Learning session. Leaders must also have participated in at least two Action Learning sessions to qualify for the study. After gathering all the data, I analyzed the data using the analytical procedures of Moustakas¹ for phenomenological research.

Findings primarily surfaced the disruptions brought about by COVID-19 in organizations and in the execution of leadership. Because of the pandemic, leaders prioritized the safety and well-being of their employees. They initiated shifts in work arrangements to minimize exposure to COVID-19, but this led to delays in work processes. Leaders also constantly checked on their employees through casual conversations and implemented interventions focusing on employee well-being and engagement because of the effects of the personal challenges employees faced. Leaders even adjusted their leadership style to be more collaborative and empowering to help their teams become more effective in facing pandemic challenges.

Results also demonstrated how leaders were driven to participate in group coaching sessions. Leaders chose to pursue group coaching as an approach to dealing with COVID-19 related problems in the organization and as a personal motivation to learn something new and to help other people.

Findings highlighted the experiences of leaders in adjusting to the group coaching format and in addressing the problem at hand. Leaders shared that they were not used to the Action Learning process, so they needed time to become familiar with it. They also expressed their difficulty in coming up with questions to understand and identify the real problem and getting consensus on the problem to work on. In addition, they explained how the process was time consuming and energy consuming. However, leaders said that they eventually achieved a better understanding of the problem and reached a consensus with the group on what the problem really is after the first session, which led to an appreciation for action learning. They were also able to solve the problem at hand, while at the same time experiencing group learning and self-learning.

Finally, leaders identified key challenges that need to be addressed in order to maximize the utility and improve the practice of Action Learning. First, leaders were challenged by their own bias to get things done immediately. In a crisis situation like the pandemic, leaders are pressured to act quickly to help the organization adapt to the effects of the crisis immediately. Action Learning coaches should therefore consider the duration and the schedule of their sessions so that leaders still have the flexibility to manage the crisis situation effectively.

Second, leaders felt that the Action Learning coach could have taken a more active role in the Action Learning process to fill the gaps left by the team. In light of this, Action Learning coaches should be clear about their role in the beginning of the session and emphasize the strength of the team to take charge of the process. Lastly, leaders were aware that some members of the group were hesitant to participate because they were afraid of a specific participant, they saw others were asking most of the questions, or they were not open to the perspective of others. This challenge is of particular importance in the Philippine context because the dynamic in the Action Learning groups reflected high power distance and high collectivism in Philippine culture². The higher the power distance, the more the members of the group expect and accept that power is distributed unequally, and as such implies that members with the lower rank expect and accept the participant with a higher rank to dominate and direct the session. The higher the collectivism, the more the members of the group rely on each other, which implies that the members are loyal to each other and will maintain the status quo, even at their individual expense. Given these observations, Action Learning coaches must consider cultural nuances in the conduct of action learning. In the Philippine context, coaches should therefore explain this to clients when deliberating on the participants that will form the group.

Now it all makes sense. “You have to experience it to understand it” was simply another way of saying “There is no action without learning, and there is no learning without action” - that my thesis informed my actions as a coach and my actions as a coach enriched my thesis writing. More importantly, my experiences as a graduate student and as a CALC changed who I am as a person. I learned to be more patient with others when they come to me with challenges. I learned to be curious about why they do what they do instead of being hijacked by emotions. I learned how to learn better - to ask impactful questions, to recognize and value different perspectives, and to welcome help from others.

It was a single stone cast in the water of 2021, but the ripples will last as long as I continue to learn and take action.



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¹ Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological Research Methods*.

² *Philippines - Hofstede Insights*. (2019). Hofstede Insights.
<https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country/the-philippines/>