

UNLOCK CREATIVITY USING DESIGN THINKING AND ACTION LEARNING



Design Thinking and Action Learning have many parallels, are supportive of each other, offer tools to creatively solve problems and focus on continuous learning. In this article, the integration of the two methodologies will be briefly explored.

Design Thinking, (<https://dschool.stanford.edu>), includes five key process stages including empathize, define, ideate, prototype and test.

The first stage, *empathize*, focuses on the user. Empathy is the foundation of the human-centered design process whereby we observe and engage with users, immerse ourselves to uncover their needs (they may or may not be aware of) and discover their emotions. We can think of empathize as part of the process that guides the innovation efforts and identifies the right users. Thereby, immersion gives context to the work of the organization and users, which is also an important component of Action Learning. Action Learning draws upon a diverse group of people across the organization at various levels to get an understanding of the context and identify various user needs.

The second stage, *define*, supports unpacking and synthesizing the empathy findings into compelling needs, insights, and a meaningful challenge. Basically, like Action Learning, this is critical in terms of determining the underlying problem/challenge so that we are able to get breakthrough solutions. Through questions and reflection in Action Learning, we are able to draw upon the diversity of the group, encourage deeper thought and then identify the real problem.

The third stage, *ideate*, focuses on 'going wide' in terms coming up with many radical design alternatives or concepts on how the problem might be solved. Action Learning also supports this phase. Action Learning focuses on diverging offering many ideas,

then converging on possibilities and finally solutioning. Again, the diversity of the team helps ensure that many different alternatives are considered to solve the real problem.

The final two stages in the Design Thinking process are *prototype* and *test*. Prototyping aims to get the newly developed ideas (pilot program, plans, documents) into the physical world to start a conversation with users. Whereby testing, the final stage, seeks to get valuable input from users. This phase focuses on continuous learning and making solutions even better. In Action Learning, although the terminology is different, the team has ongoing conversations with the sponsors/users to make sure their input is heard and that the team is on the correct path. Ideally, the Action Learning team will have the opportunity to implement the suggested recommendations and make adjustments as needed during this phase.



Although some people may believe differently, Design Thinking and Action Learning complement each other well. Both are iterative, employ a flexible mindset and offer tool that can be well integrated with the other. Action Learning and Design Thinking both focus on the users, clarifying the real problem, offering many perspectives, creating breakthrough solutions to long standing problems and challenges, and a strong focus on learning by doing and working.

Based on presentation at WIAL Global Conference, Netherlands, 2018. Shannon Banks, MALC and Managing Director, BeLeadership Ltd, combined the art of Design Thinking and Action Learning to unleash greater creativity within teams. Shannon draws on her 20 years of experience at Microsoft where she was introduced to the key stages of Design Thinking (Stanford) and explains how with Action Learning, yields greater impact and achieves higher levels of creativity in teams. In her current work, she focuses on social leadership bringing corporate leaders and leaders from non-profits together often in the developing world to solve problems.

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