

MELBOURNE BUSINESS SCHOOL'S EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Executive Summary

Melbourne Business School (MBS) faced the challenge of translating theoretical insights from its Executive Development Program into practical skills for a cohort of managers and high-potential leaders from a prominent Malaysian conglomerate. This gap between learning and application often left participants with limited ways to apply new knowledge to real-world situations, impacting the program's overall effectiveness in developing agile and competent leaders.

To address this challenge, MBS integrated WIAL Action Learning into its Executive Development Program. This structured coaching methodology emphasizes reflective problem-solving and collaborative inquiry, designed to bridge the divide between theory and practice. Over 18 months, participants engaged in intensive Action Learning sessions across five key business modules, applying theoretical concepts directly to their organizational challenges.

The implementation of WIAL Action Learning led to substantial operational and strategic improvements within the participating teams. Participants reported increased efficiency, enhanced problem-solving abilities, and improved stakeholder collaboration. Additionally, the program fostered a culture of continuous learning and inquiry, contributing to a lasting impact on leadership and organizational development.

About Melbourne Business School

Melbourne Business School (MBS) is one of Asia-Pacific's leading providers of executive education, offering specialized development programs that combine academic rigor with practical applications. MBS's mission is to cultivate transformative leadership through innovative, real-world learning experiences. Serving clients across industries,



the school emphasizes the importance of actionable insights and critical thinking, particularly for executives and leaders. For MBS, addressing the gap between theoretical learning and practical application was essential to maximizing the impact of its Executive Development Program.

The Challenge

As part of MBS's Executive Development Program, 480 managers and emerging leaders from a large Malaysian conglomerate participated in a comprehensive curriculum spanning five core areas: Business Strategy, Marketing & Customer Centricity, Financial Acumen, Technology & Digital Transformation, and Supply Chain Management. Despite the program's academic depth, MBS recognized a need for practical methods that would allow participants to apply their learning in real-world contexts.

This challenge became increasingly pressing as the organization experienced industry-specific disruptions and evolving market demands, which required leaders equipped with advanced problem-solving skills, agile thinking, and resilience. Without an effective solution, the program risked failing to meet its objectives, impacting both the development of leaders and the organization's overall strategic goals.

Let me know if you would like to continue with the next sections or if there are any specific areas you want to emphasize further.

Solution: Applying WIAL Action Learning

Approach and Implementation

Melbourne Business School introduced WIAL Action Learning as an innovative, structured approach to bridge the gap between theory and practical application within its Executive Development Program. This methodology was selected for its unique ability to foster real-time problem-solving and reflective practice, enabling participants to address organizational challenges directly.

To integrate Action Learning effectively, MBS collaborated closely with WIAL-certified coach Marie Tseng, who worked with program faculty to ensure alignment between each module's learning objectives and Action Learning sessions. The approach involved the following key steps:

1. **Preparation and Alignment:** Prior to each module, faculty and the Action Learning coach reviewed core competencies and targeted skills. Participants received preparatory materials, including emails and videos, prompting them to reflect on real work-related challenges they might address using Action Learning techniques.
2. **Structured Sessions:** Each module consisted of two days of classroom instruction followed by Action Learning group coaching. Participants engaged in structured sessions, focusing on either individually-owned or team-owned problems, with the goals of fostering leadership development, enhancing team collaboration, and generating practical solutions.
3. **Role Definition and Group Dynamics:** Within the Action Learning framework, participants were organized into small groups, with each session led by an Action Learning coach. Roles included a Problem Presenter (PP), whose challenge became the focal point, while other team members contributed by questioning, reflecting, and offering insights. This dynamic aimed to empower participants to take ownership of their learning while encouraging collective problem-solving.

Key Activities and Milestones

The Action Learning process unfolded through multiple rounds, each marked by key activities and milestones that fostered collaboration and innovative thinking:

- **Multiple Problem Identification Rounds:** In rounds one, two, and five, participants introduced individually owned challenges. By collaboratively questioning and discussing each issue, team members developed action plans addressing areas like digital tool optimization, supply chain resilience, and stakeholder management. This structure enabled personalized learning, as participants explored solutions specific to their roles and teams.
- **Single Team-Owned Problem Rounds:** In specific sessions, teams tackled a single, organization-wide issue. For example, in one round, the entire group addressed marketing challenges, leading to strategies for budgetary control, revenue diversification, and digital transformation. This collective approach fostered a deeper understanding of complex issues and encouraged unified solutions that benefitted the organization as a whole.
- **Organizational Challenges Round:** In the third round, participants collaborated on three major organizational problems, culminating in strategic recommendations presented to management. These recommendations included actionable insights into cost reduction, efficiency gains, and enhanced cross-functional coordination.
- **Overarching Action Learning Project:** In the fourth round, each participant selected an Action Learning project that integrated insights from previous modules. This milestone required participants to synthesize their learning, leading to the development of comprehensive solutions for multifaceted organizational issues.

Adaptations

MBS and its WIAL coach introduced several customizations to tailor the Action Learning methodology to the organization's needs:

- **Emphasis on Real-World Application:** To address participants' initial difficulty in bringing relevant problem statements, the coach guided them in framing specific, actionable issues linked to module content. This approach allowed participants to connect theory directly to their work, ensuring relevance and maximizing practical impact.
- **Support for Organizational Uncertainty:** Due to a recent organizational merger, some participants initially hesitated to engage fully. The coach addressed this by creating a supportive, collective learning environment that promoted peer support and resilience, helping participants to re-engage and see Action Learning as a tool for navigating transitions.
- **Outcome Sharing Between Sessions:** To reinforce the tangible value of Action Learning, the coach encouraged previous Problem Presenters to share their outcomes at the start of subsequent sessions. This practice underscored the impact of collective learning and helped participants understand the real-world benefits of their efforts.

Through these carefully structured steps and adaptive strategies, WIAL Action Learning became an integral part of MBS's Executive Development Program, equipping participants with practical skills to address complex organizational challenges.

Results

The integration of WIAL Action Learning into Melbourne Business School's Executive Development Program produced measurable and transformative outcomes across operational, cultural, and strategic dimensions. Through targeted, inquiry-based coaching sessions, participants developed practical skills that led to quantifiable improvements within their teams and organization.

Operational Impact

The Action Learning sessions fostered a hands-on approach to problem-solving, which participants applied directly to their work. This practical application resulted in:

- **Increased Efficiency:** Participants reported improved monitoring and tracking processes that streamlined operations. As they applied concepts like Toyota's Just-In-Time (JIT) methodologies, several teams saw significant reductions in bottlenecks and optimized resource allocation.
- **Cost Reduction:** By re-evaluating workflows and addressing inefficiencies, participants were able to make impactful changes. For instance, one participant restructured their team's workflow, reducing operational costs by eliminating redundant steps and upskilling team members to improve productivity.
- **Enhanced Forecasting and Inventory Control:** Leveraging JIT principles, teams reduced stock delays and optimized inventory levels. These changes minimized risks related to stock obsolescence and improved the alignment of supply with demand, leading to a more agile supply chain.

Cultural Shift

Beyond operational improvements, WIAL Action Learning catalyzed a notable shift in team dynamics and morale:

- **Improved Communication and Collaboration:** The Action Learning methodology emphasized the importance of clear, consistent communication. Participants noted that their enhanced inquiry skills helped them to communicate objectives more effectively, resulting in stronger stakeholder engagement and better aligned team goals.
- **Proactive Problem-Solving Culture:** Action Learning instilled a collaborative problem-solving mindset, with participants reporting greater confidence in tackling issues collectively. The practice of questioning assumptions and

involving diverse perspectives empowered teams to address challenges more creatively and efficiently.

- **Strengthened Team Morale and Cohesion:** By fostering an environment of mutual respect and shared learning, Action Learning sessions improved team morale. Participants noted a sense of camaraderie that emerged from the process, as they felt more supported and engaged with their colleagues.

Strategic Benefits

The strategic impact of integrating WIAL Action Learning extended to the organization's long-term goals, with tangible benefits for future growth and innovation:

- **Alignment with Organizational Goals:** The collaborative problem-solving skills gained through Action Learning helped participants develop strategies that aligned with the broader organizational objectives, including digital transformation, revenue diversification, and enhanced financial control.
- **Foundation for Continuous Improvement:** The emphasis on inquiry and reflective practice established a mindset of continuous learning among participants. This shift empowered leaders to remain adaptable, constantly seeking ways to refine processes and drive better outcomes.
- **Opportunities for Innovation:** Through the group coaching sessions, participants began identifying additional areas for improvement, creating a pipeline of actionable ideas that positioned the organization for sustained growth and innovation.

In summary, the implementation of WIAL Action Learning at Melbourne Business School produced clear and lasting benefits, both operationally and culturally, while

aligning with the organization's strategic objectives. The program's success demonstrated the value of embedding Action Learning as a practical tool for developing leadership and advancing organizational goals.

Participant Insights

Participants of the Melbourne Business School Executive Development Program shared transformative insights about their growth, highlighting the personal and professional impact of WIAL Action Learning. The methodology inspired new perspectives on leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving:

- "This program taught me the importance of asking the right questions before jumping into a solution. I realized that understanding the root cause first leads to decisions that resolve issues effectively and sustainably."
- "I've become more proactive in collaborating with my team, ensuring everyone understands our objectives from the start. Action Learning sessions showed me that clear communication can change the way we approach and solve problems."
- "Working with colleagues from different departments helped me see issues from multiple angles. The diversity in perspectives was invaluable and taught me that innovative solutions often come from collective thinking."
- "I've learned to listen more and involve my team in discussions. Now, I make it a point to foster an open dialogue where everyone feels comfortable contributing ideas, which has led to more effective and cohesive solutions."

These reflections underscore the lasting influence of Action Learning on participants' approach to challenges, as they embraced collaborative, inquiry-driven practices that improved both team dynamics and personal leadership styles.

Future Plans

Following the successful integration of WIAL Action Learning into the Executive Development Program, Melbourne Business School plans to expand the methodology to additional programs and departments. MBS envisions Action Learning as a cornerstone of its executive education strategy, supporting continuous improvement and skill development among leaders across industries.

Future applications include incorporating Action Learning into other leadership programs to further embed reflective practice and collaborative problem-solving across its educational offerings. MBS also intends to enhance its data collection processes during Action Learning sessions, enabling the school to gather deeper insights into program outcomes and further refine its approach. By doing so, MBS aims to strengthen its commitment to fostering agile, innovative leaders equipped to drive meaningful change in their organizations.

Through these steps, Melbourne Business School is poised to set a new standard in executive education, demonstrating the enduring value of WIAL Action Learning as a practical, results-oriented methodology for leadership development.

If you have further questions, contact Marie Tseng [marietseng@culturalimpact.org].