

WHY VIAL ACTION LEARNING IS SO UNIQUE

AND SO DIFFICULT TO EXPLAIN

Leading in a VUCA world

Leaders and managers face a multitude of challenges. The challenges faced by the CEO of a multinational conglomerate are different in magnitude from those a frontline supervisor of a manufacturing plant is faced with, but both kinds are complex and without straightforward solution.

Leaders and managers are faced with competing objectives trying to satisfy all stakeholders. They need to innovate and prepare for the future and at the same time ensure this week's performance is better than last week's. They need to recruit talent and make sure it grows and thrives, but also retain existing talent and motivate teams. They need to handle unprecedented crises effectively and at the same time deliver on the top and bottom line, and pretty much everything in between.



This is the real VUCA world they face every day, at different levels. Most of these leaders are very well aware that they cannot fight all those battles single-handedly and that they need all members in the organization to play their part. They need their employees to know about new technologies and to explore how innovations in their environment will impact the company's products and services. They need them to sharpen existing skills, develop new ones and learn how to use new ways of working.

Besides technical skills, leaders also want to help develop those around them to become better leaders themselves, to be more creative, to work better across silos, to make better decisions and to communicate better with those around them. And they also need them to motivate and engage with others in the organization.

Developing individuals and teams

These needs to develop individuals and teams are not new. They existed long before we even talked about VUCA. Over the years, organizations large and small, private and public, have put lots of efforts (and money) in developing individuals and teams so they better support the organization to be successful, innovate, survive and thrive. Many approaches have been developed over the years such as



training, workshops, facilitation sessions or retreats. Role-play and simulations try to bring the new skills or content as close as possible to participants' experiences. Case studies focus on discovering what challenges other organizations faced and what can be learned from them. Executive education programs of all reputations and fees are plenty around the world. Learning approaches now have gone online with solutions such as MOOC or e-learning. Other approaches are to call in gurus or experts to work with the company's employees. Executive coaching has now become popular all around the world.

Organizations have used a combination of these approaches to answer the need in developing individuals and teams and spend significant effort to sustain these methods. Thousands of coaches, trainers or facilitators offer programs to fulfill these never-ending development needs. They offer their programs in different formats from short chunks to multi-day intensive off-site programs. There are probably very few employees around the world who have not been part yet of a personal development program of this kind.

And what results does this bring ?

So all these trainings, workshops, short or long programs have as objective to fulfill the leader's needs of development for his team members individually and as a teams. The participants in these programs are expected to return to their work and apply all these skills, techniques and even new ways of thinking to make better decisions, be more innovative, work and communicate better with others to bring



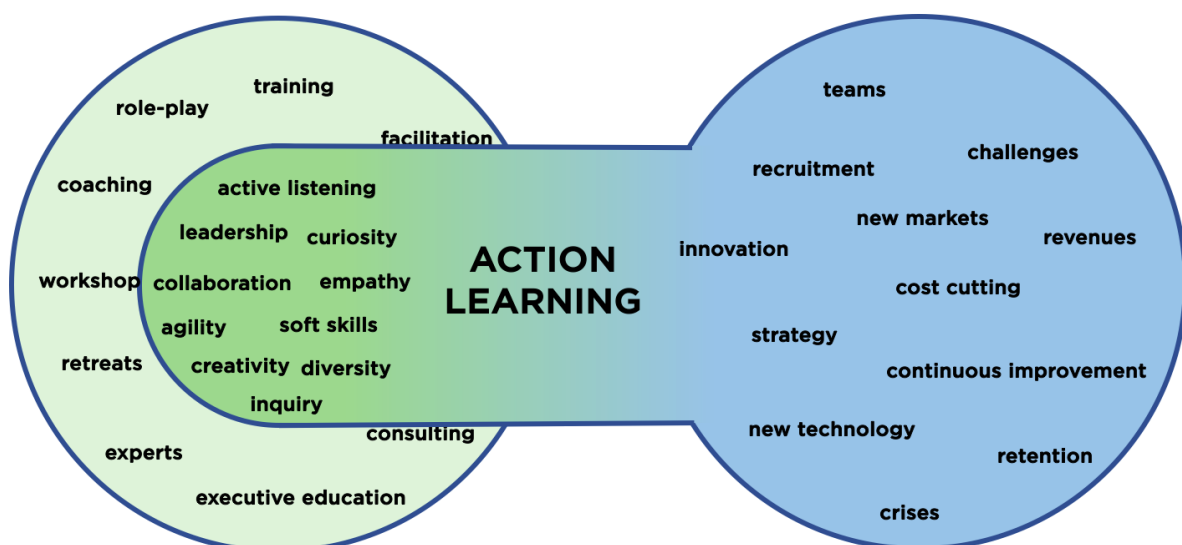
new products to new markets. At least that is what should be happening. So is that the case ? It is very rare to come across a leader who is really satisfied with the

returns received from the development programs, even if this has been going on for years. We often hear that the program was really good, but that the participants kind of fall back into their previous habits as soon as they are back to work. In a few cases people take up a few new practices but real breakthroughs or profound changes are rare. Although there is a great variety of programs to support individual and team development, it seems there is a gap or a disconnect with what happens in the 'real' world (blue sphere). It is as if the development or learning world is a parallel world (green sphere), separate from the business world. Although the development is supposed to support the business, the reality is that most often the impact is not there to see or measure.

We have created two separate worlds. The first world is that of the business with its challenges, competitors, need to innovate and grow, deal with crises and deliver on top and bottom lines. The second world is that of the Human Resource department, or more specifically the Learning & Development or Organizational Development functions. These functions exist to support and enhance the business. The reality is that this is not a happy marriage and in fact both worlds live alongside one another. They do not seem to be able to break up because neither know of a better way . The title of "Human Resource Business Partner" has become popular in recent years. It is a nice phrase to promote the connection between these worlds but it is in fact illustrating that both worlds are disconnected.

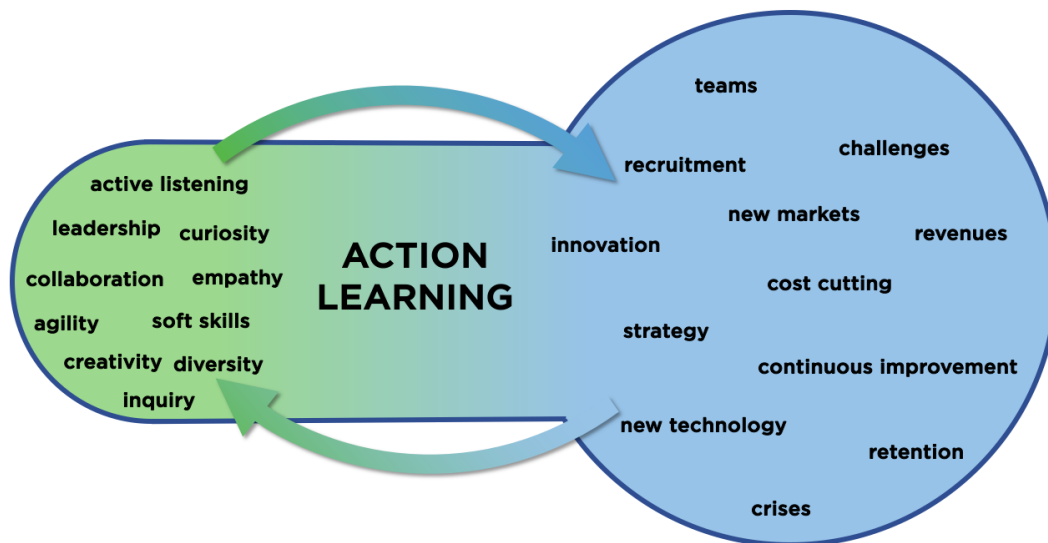
Is there a better way ?

Action Learning is not a program or a one, two or three days event. It is a mindset and a way of working more than a discrete happening.



Action Learning is very different from the other approaches organizations have used to develop their individuals and teams. Action Learning sessions are

completely anchored into the issues the organization is facing: each Action Learning session focuses on a real, important and current problem that exists in the organization, and is not a simulation or case study. It is the actual challenges that participants know very well that are the raw material of the Action Learning sessions. The Action Learning group will tackle a real business issue or urgency, and learn and develop as individuals and teams at the same time.



Action Learning does not fit with any of the other approaches from the green sphere. Action Learning creates a direct connection between learning and development of individuals and teams on the one hand, and the business on the other hand, whereas all approaches listed earlier claim the same but in reality fail to do so. Participants are not “going back to work” after the Action Learning session, because the Action Learning session IS work.

That is the reason Action Learning is so hard to “explain”. Everybody is familiar with the case study method, or knows what an expert or consultant does, and knows about workshops, trainings or retreats. Action Learning is none of that, because it addresses the development needs these methods are designed for, yet does this by solving real business problems.

We all agree it is really difficult to explain what Action Learning is and does. The best way to show the power of the method is and remains an actual Action Learning session where participants can see the power of fully integrating individual and team development with the business priorities. Action Learning is the only approach that truly connects the world of business (blue sphere) with the world of individual and team development (green sphere).

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