

Fresh Perspectives on Leadership Development

ACTION LEARNING:
ADDRESSING TODAY'S BUSINESS CHALLENGES
WHILE DEVELOPING
LEADERS FOR TOMORROW

by Mary Stacey



Executive Summary

Action Learning has a 60-year global history of supporting exceptional business results. It is a proven approach used by companies such as 3M, General Electric, and Wal-Mart to deliver operational and strategic results. Action Learning is gaining currency as a leadership development practice that simultaneously builds individual leadership capacity, strengthens management teams, and creates learn-as-you-go strategic change.

In Action Learning sessions, individual leaders bring real and complex accountabilities to their peer group for coaching. Alternatively, an intact or cross-enterprise team can address a multi-faceted strategic challenge or project. Facilitators guide leaders as they learn a question-based coaching method that enhances creative problem solving, builds flexible thinking required for decision making, pushes back against the fear of change, generates energy and momentum, brings a sense of urgency, and develops the capacity to take effective action.

Our clients have successfully used Action Learning to create:

- ◆ Leaders who move beyond tactics to become strategic thinkers with greater capacity to make important business decisions
- ◆ Management teams that are rich social networks and take more collaborative, strategically aligned action
- ◆ Organizational culture that shifts from entitlement focused and change resistant to agile and energetically customer focused

Effective leadership development is situated in the context of real work. Action Learning uses an organization's complex challenges as the focal point for leaders' development. While leaders learn, they build their management team *and* deliver business results.

The Context for Action Learning

Today's leaders work in environments of increasing complexity, ambiguity, and evolution, where change is constant and yesterday's solutions are insufficient guides to the future. One way forward is to develop leaders with higher order capacities for self-awareness, reflection, learning, empathy, courage, and collaboration. Another is to provide them with a network of relationships that is rich in common language where they are able to share experiences of their workplace action, increase their engagement, and focus their energies in service of the common good.

As a leadership development method, Action Learning creates a forum and provides a structure for continuous learning and change. It is based on the view that organizations are complex adaptive systems and that the most leveraged change occurs simultaneously at all levels: individual, team and organization.

Organizations that use Action Learning develop change leadership capabilities, build cross-functional teamwork, address complex organizational challenges, and build the capacity to take more strategic action. Action Learning participants gain awareness of the deep patterns that drive their decisions and find leverage points so they can shift the system in the direction of its vision.

Action Learning is based on the following principles:

- ◆ ***Leader centered***— The leader who brings a current challenge is responsible for subsequent action in the workplace. Therefore, they are in control of their learning time and their action commitments.
- ◆ ***Inquiry based***— The method does not seek one right answer. Learning is strengthened by the diverse experiences of participants. Through group inquiry, participants see their blind spots and broaden their perspectives.
- ◆ ***Accountability focused***— In an environment that respects diverse perspectives participants can set aside turf protection and the need to have all the answers. This level of trust enables them to openly reflect on underlying assumptions and more easily focus on accountabilities.
- ◆ ***Systemic learning***— The commitment to learn together over time enables leaders and teams to discover the common patterns in the challenges they face and translate these insights into systemic change.

There are two types of Action Learning: Peer Coaching and Team Learning. In Peer Coaching participants meet to reflect on challenges for which they have individual accountability to action. Team Learning creates a forum for intact teams to work on a shared project and improve the effectiveness of their actions. Choosing which type of Action Learning to use depends on the strategy and change goals; some groups may include both

types. Action Learning can be a stand-alone method or applied with other change methodologies.

Action Learning Results

The three biggest trends in leadership development are the use of senior executives as faculty in learning programs, Action Learning—in which people work on teams focused on current challenges or opportunities, and executive coaching.

—Fast Company, 2006

In our clients' experience with Action Learning, managers learn to ask questions that challenge limiting assumptions, broaden perspectives, and see opportunities in ways that leads to more strategic and sustainable results. In recent evaluations in client organizations, respondents identified the return on their investment:

- ◆ 82% – Results in greater customer focus
- ◆ 84% – Increased alignment to business strategy
- ◆ 88% – Breaks down silos to create integrated management teams
- ◆ 90% – Manager leads by example
- ◆ 99% – Able to adapt to changes at the company

One of the most impressive aspects of Action Learning is its ability to achieve multiple, simultaneous results in a relatively short period of time. The following case examples illustrate the results achieved by practitioners in a variety of settings.

Developing Change Leadership

Case example: A major organizational re-design of a fortune 100 financial company required leaders to rapidly learn as they implemented a new structure and new way of operating. Peer Coaching groups were established for geographically dispersed leaders. Participants reported Action Learning supported the implementation of the new organization, strengthened their peer relationships and positively impacted their business results. Most groups met several years beyond the original commitment.

Learning is a key component in the realization of both strategy and change. A significant shift in strategy requires transformational change that influences the cultural norms of the entire organization—and the mindsets and behaviors of those within it. Leaders themselves must change if they are to lead change across the organization. For transformational change, a discovery learning strategy is needed, mapping the territory as you go. It is best accomplished through an action-reflection cycle that helps leaders access operating

assumptions and shifts those that are no longer serving them well. Without this, there is a strong tendency to repeat old patterns, which can contribute to increasing organizational resistance and cynicism.

Through Action Learning, leaders experience increased power in their leadership. They become skilled observers of themselves and how they operate within the system. They learn to see their own blinders and habitual patterns of interaction. They become more intentional when choosing responses and are more inclined to take personal responsibility for their own actions. To lead change, leaders must first change themselves. This kind of learning is never easy, but Action Learning provides a safe learning environment that makes it possible, engaging, and rewarding.

Addressing Complex Challenges

Case example: *A small business owner was frustrated by the rate of his business growth. Using Peer Coaching with other small business owners over 6 months, he was able to reframe his growth strategy. Several years later his business has grown ten-fold. He credits his insights and subsequent changes to Action Learning.*

A complex challenge is like an iceberg: much of it is hidden under the water where it can't be seen. Problem-solving methods may chip away at the surface of the problem, the part that is obvious. Using Action Learning, participants clarify the underlying patterns and assumptions that shape current ways of thinking. When these assumptions are examined, new insights emerge, turning current barriers into new opportunities for action. Participants find they ask better questions and become more strategic in their approach to work challenges. The insights gained help people see more innovative ways to deal with complex challenges, and better recognize when they may be addressing the wrong challenge altogether.

Improving Cross-Enterprise Teamwork

Case example: *Executives in a large insurance company were seeking greater effectiveness integrating business unit leaders across silos. They met monthly using Action Learning to help with individual project initiatives. After one meeting, they discovered that all of their projects were being impacted by a broken process in the company. Instead of struggling with their projects separately they drafted a plan to get sponsorship and fix this process. Dealing with this systemic problem removed the roadblocks to their projects.*

Complex initiatives and challenges ignore an organization's structural boundaries. Regardless of where a project resides or how an organization is structured, work creeps across functions. Integration strategies are required to be successful. When leaders from across the organization participate in Action Learning, they strengthen cross-enterprise

relationships, understand each other's worlds and begin to think more systemically. This enables them to collaborate and integrate their respective projects within the context of overall business strategies.

Too often, leaders feel they must make sense of their challenges alone, regardless of the camaraderie of those around them. Individual leaders and organizations benefit from providing structures that support ongoing "sense-making" across functional lines. Action Learning connects individuals to a rich source of untapped knowledge, a broader perspective of the system, and support from their peers. This connection results in greater insight and integration.

Increasing Strategic Thinking and Action

Case example: *A new subsidiary had the mandate to create an organization capable of learning. Two pilot Action Learning groups were held the first year. One group developed facilitators; the other group assessed the perceived value of the process by operations managers. Several years later Action Learning was still going strong with over 50 leaders. It has improved strategic action, strengthened horizontal integration and built peer relationships.*

Middle managers are essential to a successful change strategy. (Huy, 2001) They manage the tension of continuity and change; translate strategy into operational tactics; work within a vast network; and are the face of management to most employees. Yet they often struggle with focusing their energy on the most strategic challenges. (Bruch & Goshal, 2002) Action Learning involves middle managers in change initiative and helps support their focus.

Strengthening the middle enables top leaders to focus on strategy. (Oshry, 1994) More strategic and integrated middles may alleviate the executives' concern about operations. And it will reduce the executive acting as mediator between middles. All of this frees up the top of the organization to focus on strategy. Action Learning helps top leaders think through strategy in an integrated way. When top leaders model integrated strategic thinking, it encourages more holistic and systemic thinking throughout the organization.

Implementing Action Learning

"When I showed up to my first Context Action Learning session, I quickly realized that there is a specific process that is followed. People really buy in. Everybody is there listening and paying attention. You leave the room with something to action. That's pretty powerful."

—Senior Manager, Canadian retail organization

Link to Business Needs and Goals

Most groups will need to see the benefit of making the commitment to Action Learning. Before establishing a group, the business reason for such a commitment needs to be established. By clarifying the key reasons for the Action Learning, the group gains commitment. These reasons become one basis for evaluating group or program effectiveness. There are a number of benefits that may be emphasized in setting up the business goals for an Action Learning application:

For the business

- ◆ Observable improvements in business results
- ◆ Successful strategic change
- ◆ Solutions to complex organizational problems
- ◆ Greater ability to innovate

For the management team

- ◆ Stronger peer relationships and support for personal development
- ◆ Team commitment and flexibility, resulting in higher-quality results
- ◆ Productive discussions that lead to more strategic and focused action
- ◆ Information sharing across business functions

For individual leaders

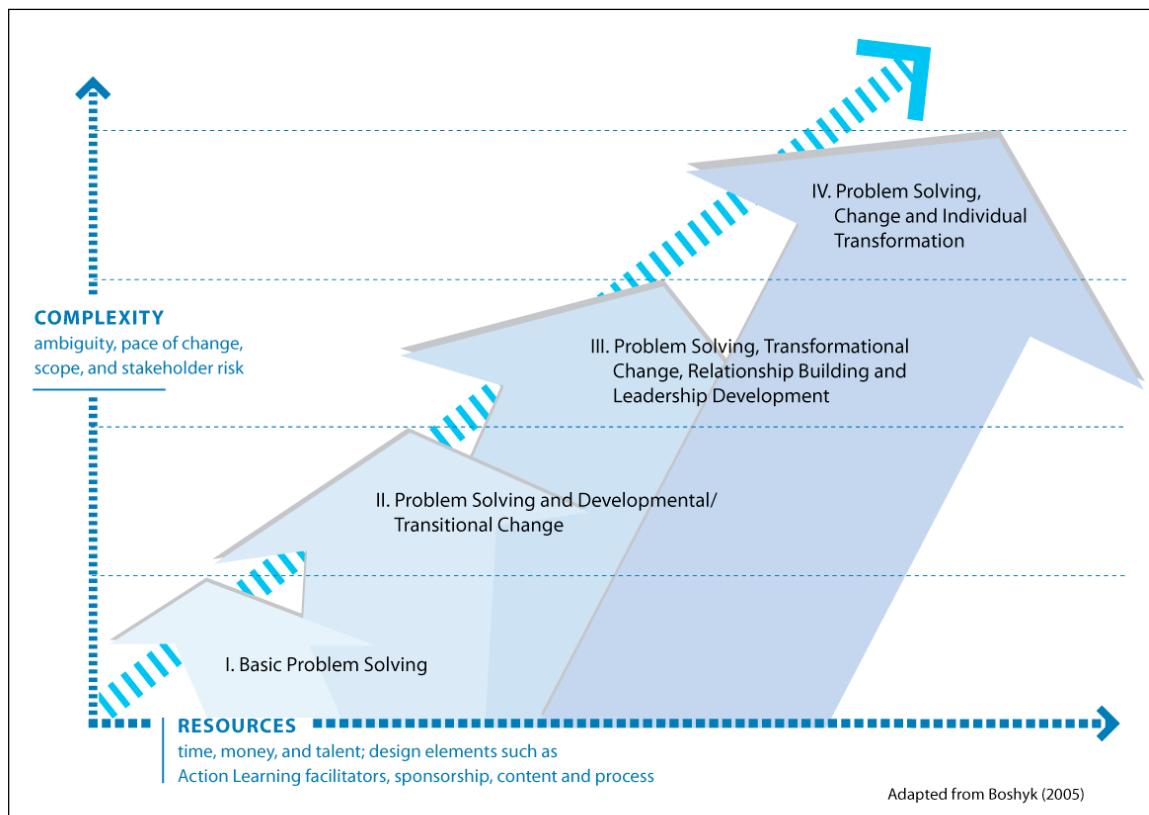
- ◆ Cross-functional knowledge and a big-picture perspective
- ◆ Strategic thinking and action
- ◆ Coaching support for individual development
- ◆ Awareness of own strengths and development needs

Design Considerations

An Action Learning design that strikes the right balance between the organization's strategic aspirations and the participating leaders' developmental readiness will achieve the greatest success. The design process is much like composing music. Action Learning facilitation is similar to conducting the orchestra. Both play together, attending to the whole and to each instrument at the individual, team, and organizational levels. As the leaders and their organization develops over time the Action Learning design evolves to keep pace with the ever-changing reality that is life in today's fast-paced organizations.

Action Learning design (Fig.1) considers the contextual complexity, resource availability, and desired outcomes. Other measures, including MBTI or Kolb Learning Inventories are useful in assessing leader developmental readiness and learning preferences.

FIGURE 1: Action Learning Design Variables



The CUED for Action Coaching Method

When leaders develop a common framework for coaching, they are able to connect to the ‘whole intelligence’ of the organization and access the minds of others who have creative (divergent) and analytical (convergent) thinking styles that complement their own. Context’s CUED for Action method (Fig.2) helps leaders learn inquiry-based coaching so that they can help their peers address complex, ambiguous, evolving challenges in a creative and strategically aligned way.

*Note that this example illustrates a Peer Coaching use of CUED for Action, which can easily be adapted for an intact team to address a shared accountability or project.

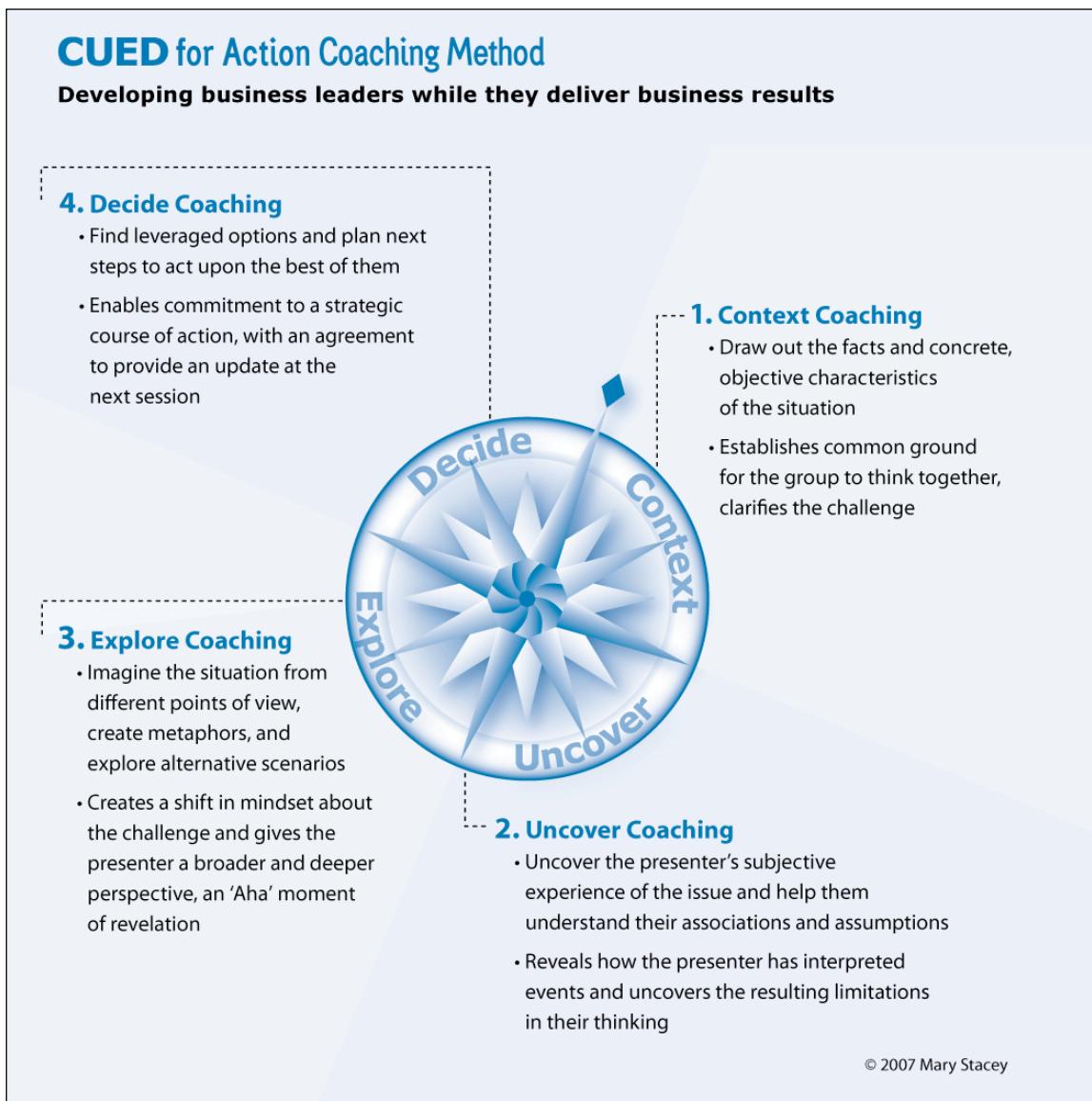
Context Questions— draw out the facts and concrete, objective characteristics of the situation. They establish common ground for leaders to think together, and clarify the key elements of the challenge.

Uncover Questions— illuminate the presenter’s subjective experience of the challenge and help them understand their associations and assumptions. This reveals how the presenter has interpreted events and uncovers the resulting limitations in their thinking.

Explore Questions— help the presenter imagine the situation from different points of view and explore alternative scenarios for the future. This creates a ‘shift of mind’ by broadening and deepening the presenter’s perspective. When the process works its magic, an ‘aha’ moment of revelation surfaces new possibilities for action.

Decide Questions— find the leveraged options, so the leader can choose the best of them and begin to plan next steps. This supports commitment to a strategic course of action, with an agreement to provide an update at the next session.

FIGURE 2: CUED for Action Coaching Method



Sponsorship

Senior management sponsors provide strategic context, act as a liaison between the group and other management, provide resources if necessary, and support groups within the organization. Committed and visible sponsorship is critical when participation is mandated. It is possible for highly committed groups to be successful without sponsorship. A sponsor is not as essential once the group is already established; however, sponsorship can help support the time commitment and reinforce value.

Facilitation Support

Initially, Action Learning groups benefit from an experienced facilitator. This can be a trained line leader who has experienced the process and who understands the principles and practices of Action Learning, or a professional facilitator. Evaluations show the quality of the facilitation has a tremendous impact on the success and continuation of the group. After the group has sufficient experience, they can self-facilitate.

Group Size

For groups working on Peer Coaching, the most workable size is three to ten members. Groups can be established with fewer members, but these run the risk of having too little diversity or losing critical mass if a member leaves or is absent. Larger groups may not be able to accommodate every member's project at each meeting and may become unwieldy with the questioning process. Larger groups may need more time allocated through more frequent or longer meetings. However, even if all members don't present a challenge at each meeting, they will still gain benefit from coaching on other member's projects.

For intact teams working on team issues, the group size will vary and depend on the stakeholders of the project selected.

Group Membership

Groups of peer leaders or professionals are the most appropriate audience for Peer Coaching. Group membership should not include direct reporting relationships. Often, bosses will want to participate in these groups and group members may even say they are comfortable with their boss attending at the initial stages of group formation. However, our experience is that having direct reporting relationships in the group impacts the group's ability to develop trust and openness. This can, at the very least, slow the rate at which the group deepens their inquiry. And, most likely, will impair the group's satisfaction with Action Learning.

For intact teams, it is helpful to have as many stakeholders of the project involved as possible. Sometimes this means just the key leadership of the change and at others it could mean involving all stakeholders. Here it is appropriate to have direct reporting relationships participate.

Time Commitment

Groups usually need to meet at least four times before evaluating progress. Participants need time to develop trust, learn the questioning process, and develop their ability to inquire at a deep level. Groups need facilitation and coaching support during this time period. A key challenge for participants at the beginning is honoring the time commitment required. After four meetings, a group will understand the process but may need additional facilitation support before moving to self-facilitation. Many groups continue on for several years or more once the skills and the group trust is established.

Facilitator Skills

The Action Learning skillset is best learned by first participating in a group with a skilled facilitator. Action Learning facilitation is different from process or training facilitation. Facilitators need a thorough understanding of Action Learning principles and the ability to hold the integrity of the methodology while working with the group to build capability.

One facilitation challenge is to keep the group focused on the learning work versus letting the session become just another meeting. Facilitators who have let the group simply share best practices, study articles, or share notes on office politics do not achieve the level of learning possible with this method. Action Learning facilitators need to teach the group to manage their learning environment so that the right balance of respect, trust, and safety with challenge is maintained.

Action Learning facilitators operate more like co-learners than like experts. They need to model the skill of inquiry, maintain neutrality and help participants take charge of their own learning. The facilitator role helps the group:

- ◆ Build commitment and set appropriate agreements
- ◆ Develop support and trust
- ◆ Learn the Action Learning process
- ◆ Stay on track
- ◆ Deepen their learning
- ◆ Ideally, enable the group to self-facilitate and sustain over time

Although this seems like a job for professional facilitation only, many line managers become effective Action Learning facilitators.

Participants

Participation in Action Learning may be voluntary or mandated. We have seen many “drafted” participants become enthusiastic supporters once they experience the benefits.

Participants do not always start with positive relationships. As a matter of fact, it is not uncommon to begin a group with managers who are competitive or who do not necessarily trust one another. By supporting one another to achieve current work accountabilities, participants actually build relationships. If relationships are extremely damaged, individual coaching may be needed prior to starting an action-learning group.

Upfront Agreements

The facilitator will establish some agreements with the group to ensure they understand its purpose, what they can expect to gain, and what is required of them to have a successful experience. Action Learning groups require a commitment to participate for a period of time (usually 6–8 months). This is critical because making time for these meetings is the most critical success factor.

Typical agreements address these issues:

Show up. Regular attendance is needed to accelerate the group's development.

Own your challenge. Bring real work accountabilities into the group.

Start slowly. New members should bring projects they feel comfortable discussing. It is important to build trust and skill before members exhibit more vulnerability than they or others are ready to handle.

Use the 0/100 model of partnership. When supporting others in the group peer coaches need to ‘zero themselves out’, and focus entirely on the presenter's challenge. Presenters need to be 100% present and allow others to support them in their exploration.

Listen with empathy. To participate with empathy, you need to put aside your own assumptions and biases. Participants need to share their challenges without interruption, leading questions, or judgmental reactions.

Let go of solutions. Action Learning groups that meet over time develop the ability to get beneath the surface of a challenge, examine limiting assumptions and find new opportunities. By letting go of having the right answer, whole new pathways can open up.

Maintain confidentiality. Confidentiality is key to building trust. The group needs to be explicit with what can be discussed outside the meeting. Any concerns about breaches need to be addressed immediately.

Focus on questions. A key benefit of Action Learning is developing the ability to ask great questions. Questions open up thinking and encourage the learner to be responsible to find their own answers. Advice effectively closes down options and short-circuits the learning process. Collective brainstorming or suggestions work best in small doses later in the process.

End in action. At the end of each session, the presenter commits to high leverage actions. Results and lessons learned get reviewed at the next session. This accountability is important. The group will learn more about their challenges over time and get to the deeper patterns that must change to affect changes in behavior.

Conditions for Success

Before initiating Action Learning, it is important to assess its fit. It effectively supports change when you have:

- ◆ Changes in strategy requiring new leadership behaviors
- ◆ Teams undertaking long, complex projects
- ◆ Cross-functional teamwork that needs strengthening
- ◆ Strategic thinking needs throughout the organization

Action Learning is not an ideal method to use if you:

- ◆ Are simply refining established processes, roles, and structures
- ◆ Don't have the right people on the team
- ◆ Are doing basic problem-solving
- ◆ Cannot commit to meet over the length of an action-reflection cycle
- ◆ Have poor sponsorship and participation is mandatory

Potential Pitfalls

Action Learning is an investment on the part of the individual leader and the sponsoring organization. It is helpful to understand that there are some behavioral and systemic pitfalls that can inhibit the effectiveness of an Action Learning initiative:

Uneven commitment— Groups can be derailed if participants fail to show up, especially at the beginning when groups are learning the process and building trust with one another.

Poor sponsorship— Being pulled from meetings by leaders into other work or being pushed for confidential group information hurt participation.

Giving advice versus asking questions— Most of the participants have experience in quickly solving problems. It is hard to change the pattern of giving advice to questioning. Skill building and practice are critical.

A poor learning environment— This kind of learning needs an environment that supports deep listening and focus, free of the day-to-day demands of the job. Meetings work best off-site, away from the continuous distractions in the office.

Strong need to look good— A group will not usually find value in Action Learning if they stay at a superficial level of reflection. Building a safe, yet challenging learning environment helps participants drop their armor and allow themselves greater vulnerability.

Programmatic approach— Participants will not find value if this is just another “program of the month” without a real commitment and clear sense of purpose for meeting.

Impact on Culture

At the heart of Action Learning is developing the capacity to surface assumptions, patterns and mindsets that are influencing action. Sometimes these are widely shared; sometimes they are individual. The method uses inquiry and creative thinking techniques to surface and examine current assumptions. With this insight, leaders find new perspectives and choices for individual and collective action. Over time, this action-reflection cycle repeats, moving learning and change deeper into the system. The results that emerge contribute to change in organizational norms, and faster movement in desired strategic directions.

Action Learning is effectively used with leaders across a system. This strengthens cross-functional relationships and enables leaders to act in the interests of the whole. Participants create change within their individual spheres, and recognize the interconnectedness of their action. This translates into stronger feedback loops, tightly integrated management teams and more integrated strategies. A system more connected to itself is more able to change.

Overcoming Resistance

The question we are asked most frequently is “How can we afford the time to do this?” With hundreds of emails each day, and most of the day already spent in meetings, it is difficult to fathom carving out several 3–8 hour meetings. At the onset, it seems like an unnecessary diversion from “real” work. In reply, we ask what the costs are of silo mentality, reactive leadership, or an unsuccessful change initiative. Change leadership is critical for culture change. (McGuire, 2003) Structured time and a process to develop change leadership are as important as other change work. Without a structure it slows down or gets lost in the day-to-day demands of the workplace.

Strategic change occurs over time. Effective leadership and cross-functional teamwork develop over time. All of these are supported by the learning that occurs in Action Learning groups. One of the fundamental tenets of organizational learning, as noted by Senge (1990), is that for change to take hold, we need to ‘slow down to speed up’. Action Learning provides this opportunity to slow down in the short term and then yield long-term gains in terms of accelerated change, more skillful leadership, and better teamwork. These interact synergistically to create a powerful momentum for organizational performance gains.

Until they are engaged in the process, it is difficult for participants to see the extent to which Action Learning accomplishes change across many domains—in a relatively short period of time. Participants report that after a few sessions they come to recognize the benefits of the method. They often refer to Action Learning as an oasis, a welcome opportunity to step away from the ‘tyranny of the urgent’, to think together and prepare them to be more effective in the workplace.

Sustaining the Results

Follow through is built into the Action Learning structure in a cycle repeated over time. Yet, it takes good initial contracting to maintain the practice. Another factor that sustains momentum is having a designated facilitator. Even though groups can self-facilitate with practice, having a participant-facilitator who sets up the meetings and follows through with participants keeps the practice intact.

Regular check-ins about how participants are translating the skills learned back to the workplace helps them generalize the new skills in other parts of their leadership work.

A sponsor who sees the benefit of the learning strategy and ensures follow-through can sustain results. Some sponsors build Action Learning participation and project accountability into annual objectives and appraisals.

Why Does Action Learning Work?

“Context Action Learning gives us a sense of team among peers with leadership responsibility, offers the opportunity to increase cross-functional awareness, and a chance for leaders to talk about work-related issues that really matter in a safe context.”

—Senior manager, IT organization

To succeed in continuous change, learning must equal or exceed the rate of change. Action needs to be balanced with reflection. Even though it is counter cultural, sometimes

leaders need to go slow to go fast. They need to stop, look at their intentions and actions, and contemplate their options. This reflection is enhanced by a diverse group of supportive colleagues asking obvious and not so obvious questions from different perspectives and vantage points throughout the organization. Organizations need to *try a lot of stuff and see what works.* —Collins and Porras, 1994

Action Learning matches thousands of years of evidence that we learn best from experience. *Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand.* —Confucius around 450 BC

Participants are not working on abstract concepts or recommending how someone else should change. They are using themselves as instruments of change. *Be the change you wish to see in the world.* —Gandhi

Participants are not just talking about action; they are committing to take action and learning from it. *In this life it is generally a mistake to confuse talking about action with action itself.* —Reginald Revans (Pedler, 1997)

Action Learning: Is it or isn't it?

The term Action Learning has been used loosely over the past 10 years. It is common to see experiential learning (such as ropes courses or highly interactive leadership training) being called Action Learning. The beginning assumptions are often the same—that learning from experience is effective. Many experiential learning events are controlled by the course designer or facilitator. This does not involve the application and then further reflection back in the workplace.

Another common misconception is that groups who take on a problem and make recommendations are doing Action Learning. While there are benefits to be derived from this approach, it is not Action Learning. First, Action Learning requires action. The power of the process is in participants applying the learning themselves. Even though it is often easy for us to see what others should do, it is more powerful to implement our own action. Second, the action-reflection cycle needs to take place over time. Studying an issue for a short period of time is not the same as conducting experiments and learning as you go.

A final misconception is that Action Learning is a program. It can be successfully implemented as a program to support large change efforts or a leadership development program. And it can be so much more. The full benefit is when Action Learning becomes a way of life.

Conclusion — A Fresh Perspective on Action Learning

Action Learning has been producing operational and strategic results for many years. In ever-changing and action-oriented organizations it is a method that is valued for its efficiency and efficacy. Yet it can be much more.

Well designed Action Learning powerfully addresses today's emerging leadership realities such as increasing complexity, ambiguity, and the compression of human and organizational resources. Through their authentic participation leaders are able to engage with peers, develop as individuals, turn business challenges into opportunities—while developing the capacity to meet the unknown requirements of tomorrow.

When introduced into the strategic and cultural fabric of an organization, Context's CUED for Action coaching method supports leaders in achieving desired business results while they continuously transform themselves, their teams, and the organizations they serve to achieve a better future for all.

About the Author

Mary Stacey works with executive leaders and their teams at the intersection of strategy, leadership and change. Her Action Learning initiatives have been published as a case study in *The Change Handbook: The Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems* (2007), identified as a best practice in strategic change by the Atlanta-based Information Management Forum (2004, 2007), and designated a best practice in leadership development by the CEO of Canadian Tire Corporation (2005). Learn more at www.contextconsulting.com

Appendix A: The Theoretical Foundation for Action Learning

The theoretical foundation for Action Learning can be traced from a variety of fields. Reginald Revans pioneered Action Learning groups with organizations beginning in the 1940s. However, 400 years ago, the Quakers created a similar process known as the Clearness Committee: A Communal Approach to Discernment (Parker Palmer 1998).

Action Research as described by Kurt Lewin (credited with coining the phrase) is an approach to research that is oriented to problem-solving in social and organizational settings. Action research is a process by which change and understanding are pursued at the same time. (Bob Dick, 1997) Action Learning applies this same action-reflection cycle, embedding action research into daily work. It provides a mechanism for continuous learning.

Adult learning theorists laid the groundwork for viewing knowledge development as an active process in which the learner brings objectives, prior experience, and personal motivation. (Kolb, 1984) This personal set of conditions impacts what the learner takes in and uses. In the adult learning cycle, learning begins with an experience. Conscious reflection on the experience leads to an awareness of the assumptions in use. New theories arise and are applied to future applications. These applications, now experiential data, are analyzed for patterns and themes and become the basis of new theory for testing in the next experiential phase.

The social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman, 1966) offers another important theoretical basis to the Action Learning method: that which we name as real is based on the assumptions held in tacit agreement by the group or prevailing culture. And as Argyris and Schon's (1978) work in critical reflection points out, these unconscious assumptions (which Senge (1990) describes as mental models) serve as operating theories about how the world works and are further shaped by our personal and collective experiences.

In the emerging field of complexity science (Wheatley, 1992) (Olson and Eoyang, 2001) planned change gives way to the concept of emergence through self-organization. The new role of the change agent is to help organizations recognize existing patterns and support the emergence of new patterns that are more useful in dealing with current and changing conditions. Change agents also focus on enriching the exchange of knowledge that helps generate a wider view of the whole system. This kind of change work happens naturally in the Action Learning process.

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