Leadership Development via Action Learning

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Abstract

Action learning is being used increasingly as a primary method for building leadership skills and improving leadership behavior. This article discusses the emergence of action learning as a methodology for developing leaders and how action learning is effective in developing and sustaining leadership skills and behavior. A comparison of the effectiveness of action learning to other methodologies currently used to develop leadership competencies is presented. Furthermore, the article illustrates how action learning can be tailored to develop specific leadership competencies identified by individual action learning team members while, at the same time, developing other leadership skills needed in contemporary organizations. Four case examples illustrate how action learning built leadership competencies at the U.S. Department of Commerce, Boeing, the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Keywords

leadership, action learning, leadership development

The pace of organizational life and change has accelerated the need for leaders to become better leaders and better learners. Organizations are faced with the growing challenge of increasing the capabilities of their leaders with less time and less resources (Bennis & Nanus, 1997; Linsky & Heifetz, 2002; Lojeski, 2010). A new and wider array of skills and competencies are needed by leaders in the 21st century (Charan, 2008; Menkes, 2010; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003). The high rate of leadership failure points to an alarming trend in contemporary organizations. It is estimated that 40% of new leaders fail within the first 18 months of promotion or appointment (Ciampa, 2005; Sessa & Taylor, 2000). More alarming, this rate of failure

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seems to be increasing. The outplacement firm, Challenger, Gray and Christmas, report that failure rates for CEOs doubled from 1999 to 2004 and doubled again in 2005 (Marquardt, Leonard, Freedman, & Hill, 2009). Clearly, the requirements for effective leadership have changed dramatically in a fairly short period of time. Leaders in previous generations have had to operate in much less dynamic and fluid environments than they do today. Borrowing the imagery of dangerous, rapids-filled rivers, Vaill (1996) referred to this unstable and treacherous environment as *permanent white water*.

By the mid-1990s, it was clear that leaders needed to become better learners in order to be successful. Action learning with its clear goal of improving the ability to learn as well as improving performance was well positioned to take advantage of changing leadership development needs. The growth in the inclusion of action learning in leadership development has been rapid. In the 1980s and 1990s, although there were pockets of application of action learning around the globe, only a handful of large global corporations (the GE Work-out Session is a good example; Davids, Aspler, & McIvor, 2002) were even aware of the action learning methodology. In recent years, however, a growing number of organizations around the world have turned to action learning, one of the most effective ways to develop their leaders (Boshyk, 2002; Boshyk & Dilworth, 2010; Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Keys, 1994; McNulty & Canty, 1995; O'Neil & Marsick, 2007; Pedler, 1997). By 2005, action learning had been identified by *Business Week* as one of the fastest growing approaches for developing leaders (Byrnes, 2005). In a recent survey of learning executives conducted by the Corporate Executive Board, 77% of the respondents rated action learning as a top driver for developing leadership competencies (Corporate Executive Board, 2009).

How and Why Action Learning Can Be Effective in Developing and Sustaining Leadership Skills

As Revans (1980, 1982, 1998), the founder of action learning, noted, people learn more and better when put into action than when passively listening to lectures or audio tapes or watching video presentations. Learning through doing has now become a familiar mantra in the training and development community. The National Academy of Sciences (Christina & Bjork, 1991), in reviewing what is known about optimizing long-term retention and transfer of knowledge, made a number of recommendations to educators and trainers. These recommendations, with additional notes on action learning's ability to address each, include the following:

- Engage the learner in the process: As Revans (1998) noted, "there can be no action with learning, and no learning without action" (p. 14). Participants who are engaged in meaningful action, with inquiry and reflection, cannot help but learn.
- Integrate new knowledge with existing knowledge: The action learning coach specifically uses this strategy when asking questions that require team members to identify not only what they learned but how these learnings can be applied in the future.

- Increase generalizability by practicing a variety of situations with increasing levels of complexity and difficulty: Early in an action learning process, the team grapples with some basic problems such as how to get organized, make decisions, and balance personal and team goals. Although these tasks and processes occur throughout the life of the team, they become more complex and complicated as the problem and goal are clarified and the solution begins to emerge.
- Increase proficiency and mastery by adding more challenges once more basic skills and knowledge are mastered: The team has multiple opportunities to practice and master the team skills necessary for high performance. As the skills are practiced, the team begins to recognize more nuances to the problem and processes.
- Use spaced practice: A key advantage of a spaced program is that it allows team members to integrate and practice new skills between sessions (Marquardt et al., 2009). In most action learning programs used for developing leadership skills, teams meet on a periodic, spaced schedule, typically every 2 or 3 weeks.
- Diminish external feedback: As team members become more proficient in dealing with challenges, the coach provides less feedback and encourages them to be more self-monitoring.
- Encourage mental rehearsal: Although the coach does not direct the team to rehearse for important events and meetings, they often indirectly encourage team members to mentally prepare for and rehearse before important situations (Marquardt et al., 2009).

Hicks and Peterson (1999) provide another developmental model, the Development Pipeline, that helps to explain why action learning is such a powerful method for developing complex skills such as leadership. These authors identified what they considered the necessary and sufficient elements for learning and sustained development–insight, motivation, skill development, real-world practice, and accountability. Each of these elements represents a "success factor" or "active ingredient" in the learning or development process. Each element also represents a potential "pinch point" that determines how much actual learning or development occurs. For example, a leadership program with a great classroom curriculum will have limited effectiveness without opportunities for real-world practice or organizational policies that provide consequences, both good and bad, for performing the new skills on the job.

When viewed through this lens, action learning does a better job in ensuring the inclusion of these necessary and sufficient elements than other popular leadership development strategies. Table 1 provides the authors' assessment of how well a number of popular leadership development approaches meet the requirements for successful learning and development articulated by Hicks and Peterson (1999). It should be noted that the estimates in Table 1 are consistent with the survey responses of executives reported by the Corporate Executive Board (2009) in which action learning was rated higher than professional coaching, traditional classroom-based training, or 360-degree feedback.

Table 1. Assessment of Effectiveness of Typical Leadership Development Methods With Respect to Hicks & Peterson (1999) Leadership Development Model

Type of Program	Insight	Motivation	Skill Development	Real-World Practice	Accountability
Test-based developmental assessments with IDP	S	M	W	W	W
Mentoring	M	S	W	W	W
360-degree feedback with IDP	S	S	W	W	W
Traditional leadership development program	S	M	M	W	W
Semitraditional leadership development program including IDP	S	M	S	M	W
Simulation-based developmental assessments with feedback including IDP	S	S	M	M	W
Developmental assignments	M	S	M	S	S
Individual coaching with trained coach	S	S	S	S	M
Action learning	S	S	S	S	S

Note: IDP = Individual Development Plan; W = weak; M = moderate; S = strong.

Leadership Skills Developed Through Action Learning

One of the virtues of action learning is that learning is focused on the skills that individual team members consider high priorities *for them* (Dixon, 1998). Action Learning is not based on a fixed curriculum that includes the skills that other people (such as training designers or the organizational leadership) consider important. Individual team members decide what behaviors or leadership skills they want to develop at that time and given the problem at hand. Typically, the behaviors and skills chosen relate to previous feedback from supervisors, training, 360-degree feedback, and self-assessment instruments (Dilworth & Willis, 2003). The final selection of developmental goals, however, is up to each individual.

In the context of leadership development, any leadership behavior or skill that an individual team member chooses can be developed in the action learning process. This is because effective management and leadership is always about directing, motivating, inspiring, and empowering a group, team, or organization to achieve an important goal (Leonard, 2003; Pearce et al., 2003; Pearce & Sims, 2002). As the action learning group is working on a problem for which there is no yet-identified strategy, and

Table 2. Leadership Skills That Can Be Developed via Action Learning

Leadership Competency Cluster	Specific Leadership Skill or Behavior
Cognitive skills	Analytical skills, strategic thinking, creativity, and global perspective
Execution skills	Customer focus, planning, program management, and focus on results
Relationship skills	Influencing, engaging and inspiring, managing talent, creating open communication, collaborating, and building relationships
Self-management skills	Establishing trust, adaptability, impulse control, curiosity, and love of learning

everyone is equally responsible and accountable for developing a strategy, a wide array of leadership competencies can be practiced and demonstrated (Marquardt et al., 2009). A list of leadership competencies that can be readily developed by action learning are presented in Table 2.

In addition to developing individually tailored leadership skills, action learning is particularly effective in developing the collaboration, conflict resolution, and sharing skills that are emerging as critical for effective contemporary leadership (Hii, 2000; Kim, 2003), especially in "knowledge work" environments (Drucker, 1999; Pearce et al., 2003; Pearce & Sims, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003). Action Learning provides a learning environment that is particularly effective in developing the following leadership skills that lead to timely and creative solutions (Dilworth & Willis, 2003; Marquardt et al., 2009):

- When to lead and when to follow
- When to be directive and when to encourage collaboration and consensus
- How to use intrinsic as well as extrinsic motivators to keep people engaged
- How to engage people's idealism and desire for personal development and growth to develop inspiring visions and passion
- How to empower subordinates and peers to use and develop their ability to self-manage and self-lead
- How to develop a mindset for continuous learning throughout the organization.

We will now present four case studies in which action learning was used to develop the leadership skills of the group members.

Case 1: Leadership Development via Action Learning at the U.S. Department of Commerce (DOC)

A senior leadership development program at the DOC provides an example of how action learning can be used to develop the leadership behaviors and skills required in

this agency. This program used a single problem, spaced design as described by Marquardt (2004). Each team worked on a single problem identified by senior leadership at DOC, and the team met on a weekly or biweekly basis for 2 to 3 hr over a 4-month time period. The solutions developed by the action learning teams were presented to senior leaders at the end of this process.

Program background. The action learning projects were designed into the leadership programs at DOC as an anchor to the total developmental experience of emerging leaders in the agency. Although action learning is not currently required by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, which provides guidance that all agencies must follow when designing senior leadership programs, leadership of the Office of Training and Knowledge Management (OTKM) decided that it made good business sense to include it in the curriculums of the programs at DOC. Prior to 2004, there were no senior leader programs at the Department level. The first senior leadership program that rolled out in 2004 included an action learning component.

There are three levels of leadership development programming at DOC. The Action Learning Development Program is a competency-based leadership development program that provides training and developmental experiences for high-potential managers. This program prepares participants for leadership positions throughout DOC and is focused on 6 of the 27 executive core qualifications established by the Office of Personnel Management, namely, customer service, communication, flexibility and adaptability, team building, problem solving, and continual learning. This program assists in building a pool of candidates qualified to assume future leadership and management positions in the DOC.

The Executive Leadership Development Program supports DOC's Human Capital Management Plan, which includes succession planning as a major component. This 18-month program is designed to provide a pool of graduates who can compete to fill midlevel vacancies. It also prepares the participants to apply to the Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program (SES CDP), a similar program for more senior-level leaders. The Executive Leadership Development Program focuses on eight competencies: creativity and innovation, conflict management, communication, decisiveness, human resources management, influencing, negotiating, and partnering.

The SES CDP program is a competitive program designed to develop senior managers who will be able to assume executive positions within DOC. The program is targeted at the five executive core competencies from the Office of Personnel Management, namely, leading change, leading people, results driven, business acumen, and building coalitions/communications. This 18-month program is based on the design for an SES candidate development program as described in the Code of Federal Regulations in 5 CFR, Part 412. In addition, other components have been added to increase the learning experience of the candidates.

Program design. The design of SES CDP integrates core training, executive mentoring, 120-day developmental opportunities, 80 hr of interagency training, leader-teacher exposure, and visits to both private and public sector organizations, all of which help to develop the five executive core competencies cited above. In addition, the program

includes a 3- to 4-month action learning project that is based on a real problem or challenge faced by the DOC. These challenges are identified by senior executives within DOC. All of these action learning project teams are assigned professionally trained action learning coaches for the purpose of facilitating learning in this very dynamic environment. Team charters were created to develop contracts between the team and the problem sponsors as well as among team members to set norms for effective team functioning. Although members of these teams may know each other quite well, they will have never worked together as a team prior to the action learning experience. The chartering process emphasizes the importance of establishing team norms before starting to work on the problem, despite the inevitable time and organizational pressures that accompany work on critical organizational challenges.

A member of the OTKM leadership typically meets with the executive who is sponsoring the project and the action learning team and becomes the buffer between the executive sponsor and the team, ensuring that all understand their roles and expectations. These meetings are also critical in preventing "mission creep" in the project scope. Creep can happen very easily unless both parties fully understand the expectations and the deliverables. The project teams have two deliverables: (a) to deliver a written report that outlines the recommendations of the team and (b) a formal presentation to the executive's senior staff that covers the team's recommendations.

OTKM also hires a lead action learning coach to coordinate the work of the assigned coaches. Ideally, this person does not serve as a team coach but may be asked to take over as a team coach in the event that one of the team coaches proves to be ineffective in establishing good rapport with his or her team. This "insurance policy" has been unnecessary so far. OTKM obtains monthly reports from the lead coach as the project progresses. At the point of project completion, OTKM also asks the team coaches to provide a full report of lessons learned to serve as a basis for improvement in the next iteration of action learning.

Problem selection. The selection of project problems for the 2009 SES CDP program illustrates the importance of ensuring that the problem is perceived as important to both the organization and the team. Normally, OTKM does not let the teams identify projects because it may put one or more members of the team at a disadvantage or may cause a lack of full support from the project sponsor. In addition, a few members on the team may fully support the project, but the remaining members may find themselves dragged into the project or may not possess the same skill set as the few who selected it.

As a result of problems in this area, OTKM made the decision to identify and propose all projects to the teams. However, in the winter and spring of 2009, the world's economies were in a dramatic free fall, the U.S. government initiated a huge economic stimulus package, and a new U.S. government administration was installed, all of which brought about a dramatic change in political vision and strategy. The problems suggested earlier in the year no longer seemed so urgent and critical to SES CDP participants.

The problems that were ultimately identified and chosen—with input from the teams as well as DOC leadership—were related to the dramatic economic events of that time: risk management practices for TARP (Troubled Asset Relief Program) and DOC

investments. These projects proved to be engaging and motivating for participants. In addition, the solutions provided were particularly timely and appreciated by the DOC leadership. Because of the close cooperation of the teams and DOC leadership, a number of team recommendations were seamlessly folded into the ongoing policies and practices as they were developed and implemented.

Program results. After 4 years of action learning, OTKM have incorporated the strategies as well as the learnings back into the program for continuous improvement. Group members as well as their supervisors acknowledge significant development of their chosen leadership competencies. The members also observed that the excitement and engagement they had for the problem provided the impetus for the action learning process to work and for the development of relevant, essential leadership skills.

Case 2: Leadership Development via Action Learning at Boeing

Program background. The Boeing Company is the world's leading aerospace company, being a global market leader in missile defense, human space flight, and launch services. The Global Leadership Program (GLP) debuted in 1999 as one of several tools to enhance Boeing's ability to operate as a global company and to develop leadership competencies within the executive population. As a first step, the Boeing Leadership Center set out to identify executive competencies that were most important for the success of global leaders. The result was a reorganization of 19 executive competencies into three categories of global competencies: (a) most critical competencies (adapting, thinking globally, building relationships, inspiring trust, leading courageously, aligning the organization, influencing, and negotiating), (b) very important competencies (shaping strategy, fostering open and effective communication, attracting and developing talent, driving for stakeholder success, demonstrating vision, and using sound judgment), and (c) important competencies (driving execution, inspiring and empowering, working cross-functionally, focusing on quality and continuous improvement, and applying financial acumen). Based on leadership competency prioritization, Boeing adopted action learning as the methodology because it fit the objective of enhancing the most critical global competencies. Action learning appeared to be able to produce a forum for senior-level executives to learn while being challenged with real corporate issues related to the international environment they were placed in.

Program design. All participants of the GLP were senior executives of Boeing, typically directors, division directors, and vice presidents. In addition, GLP participants were potentially identified on a company succession plan to be considered for the top company leadership assignments. At various points in the GLP, action learning coaches worked with the teams to help members reflect on how they could develop their leadership competencies and improve their capabilities as a team as well as how they could transfer their learnings to other aspects of Boeing operations. The action learning coaches received an intensive 2-day training course prior to serving as an action learning coach and guidance during the initial facilitations of the Boeing teams.

Both HRD staff as well as Boeing managers with no previous group facilitation background served as action learning coaches.

Program assessment. In an effort to ensure that the training program was effective in meeting its objective of enhancing Boeing's ability to operate as a global company, the GLP developed an aggressive and comprehensive evaluation process. The questions posed were carefully worded and designed to measure specific usefulness, applicability, and learning transfer. All data were held strictly confidential. The evaluation design was developed by experienced I/O psychologists, researchers, and evaluators of the Boeing Leadership Center as well as outside consultants knowledgeable in program evaluation methods. The follow-up evaluation instruments were developed by first linking the carefully worded questions with program objectives. Questions were a combination of qualitative open-ended questions and requests for quantitative responses. Graduates of the Global Development Program were asked if they have used and applied what they had learned, and if so, how. This approach allowed for respondents to convey "success stories" as well as specifically identify what parts of the program were most useful and what parts of the program could be made even more useful. The follow-up evaluations at the end of each program, as well as the follow-up evaluations conducted at 3 months and 1 year after graduation, were compiled, analyzed, and reported to the Boeing Executive Council. Analysis was conducted by both internal and external Boeing evaluators. Potential bias was minimized through independent data analysis.

In addition, follow-on interviews have been conducted with a sample population of each program. The interviews were conducted at 3 months and 1 year following completion. Each interview was approximately 30 min in length, conducted with approximately 66% of the participants, and was a mixture of qualitative and quantitative questions. The follow-up interviews were designed to measure learning transfer in terms of the objectives of the program. These data were analyzed and resulted in an executive summary report that was also shared with the Boeing Executive Council.

Program results. Overall results show that the GLP has been very successful in providing participants with enhanced skills in those leadership competencies targeted as most critical to doing business globally. Over the years, the GLP has also regularly received high marks on the overall quality of strategies, the transfer and adaption of the learnings to the workplace, and the building of networks and teams. As one graduate noted, "I have been to university-based leadership programs in the past and they are not nearly as effective using action learning and having a real-life issue to work on."

Case 3: Leadership Development Program at the National Institutes of Health

Program background. One of the institutes at the National Institutes of Health initiated a leadership development program that was part of a large organizational transformation effort. The charter for this program was to

- develop scientists who can lead science, not just develop better managers of science projects;
- increase collaboration between scientists and programs, not just produce better project teams; and
- develop scientist-leaders and programs that are more flexible, creative, and adaptive, not just more proficient in the areas of their specialization.

Program design. Each program consisted of 25 people who participated in each element of the leadership development program over a 12-month period. The program had the following elements:

- Pre- and postorganizational climate assessments comprising cross-sectional personal interviews and surveys assessing 21 fundamental organization processes
- Three-sixty-degree feedback surveys for participants. These surveys were used to help participants identify the two or three leadership skills that they would work on developing throughout the program, including through the action learning project
- Traditional training modules core leadership program, plus modules on teamwork and collaboration, and strategic thinking
- Individual coaching
- Action learning projects

The action learning programs were 4 months in length and were positioned quite purposely between the Teamwork and Collaboration module and the one focused on Strategic Leadership. Although the action learning process teaches many useful skills to help teams behave more creatively, it works best when participants already have some knowledge about teams and creativity before they begin. In the Teamwork module, participants learned many basic teamwork and creativity-enhancing skills that were helpful in their action learning projects. The team leadership skills that were developed through Action Learning were later applied in the Strategic Leadership module, where participants faced leadership challenges in teams during a 3-day organizational simulation. In this sequence, the leadership skills necessary for later in the program were developed in earlier program components (Marquardt et al., 2009).

Problem selection. It was recognized that good problems must be important and critical for the organization but must be engaging and motivating for the participants as well. To achieve these goals, multiple methods were used to surface good problems:

- Results from organizational surveys were used to identify the top organization problems as perceived by all organizational members. For instance, employees reported that the "grapevine" was more reliable and accurate than formal organizational channels, which resulted in a lack of trust in the leadership of the Institute.

- A creative problem-identification exercise was used to surface a number of latent issues that normally would not emerge in traditional top-of-mind discussions of problems.

The Institute leadership considered problems generated through both methods when developing projects for the four action learning teams in this program.

Program results. This year-long program provided desired organizational transformation results, "moving the needle" on all 21 of the organizational functioning dimensions assessed through the pre–post organizational surveys (Leonard & Goff, 2003); mean differences on the 21 organizational variables were significant at the .01 level, $F(5, 531) = 3.96$, after controlling for organizational membership, sex, race, and disability status. The Action Learning experience was perceived by participants as significantly contributing to their development as organizational leaders.

Case 4: Leadership Development via Action Learning at the U.S. Department of Agriculture

Program background. The National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a traditional agency in a large bureaucracy, was one of those organizations not satisfied with their existing leadership programs. NASS decided to take a risk and began an extensive search to find a new model for leadership training. This case study describes the design, implementation, results, and assessment of its first Leadership Development with Action Learning Program (LDALP). The LDALP was designed for NASS managers with direct supervisory responsibilities, including Staff Directors, State Statisticians, Branch Chiefs, Deputy State Statisticians, and Section Heads. Any eligible NASS manager was encouraged to apply by completing an application form. All participation was voluntary and complete confidentiality was required. A total of 14 NASS leaders were selected for the first LDALP.

The learning focus was on the development of specific leadership attributes that had been identified by each participant as a result of a Leadership Effectiveness Inventory (LEI). All 14 participants ranked the following five competencies most critical for them to develop: Interpersonal Skills, Team Building, Decisiveness, Conflict Management, and Continual Learning. Three other competencies were listed by two or more of the participants as critical for development: Oral Communication, Creativity and Innovation, and Integrity and Honesty. This leadership development through action learning process focused on all of these eight critical competencies.

Program design. Two series of Leadership Development through Action Learning workshops were conducted during the 5-month program for two groups of seven NASS leaders. A final 6-month follow-up session was held to discuss continued development and application of the respective leadership competencies as well as to support each other's progress. Both groups were composed of a mix of Washington, D.C., and state-based managers. Each action learning group met face-to-face, and communicated

via e-mail, telephone, and teleconference calls, as needed, between meetings. Each participant implemented some specified actions aimed at resolving their leadership challenges between each face-to-face session. All selected candidates were expected to attend and fully participate in each session by coming prepared to discuss a challenging human relations problem that they could affect in the area of Interpersonal Skills, Team Building, Conflict Management, or Communications. Participants realized that although the discussion focused on challenges in the four competencies just cited, they would also develop the remaining four competencies of decisiveness, continual learning, creativity and innovation, and integrity and honesty during the Action Learning process.

Program results. Data were collected before, during, and after the LDALP from participants themselves as well as from their colleagues, superiors, and subordinates on each of the 10 LEI competencies. During each session, rich verbal and written data were collected during each session of the program. Verbal data were collected in two ways during each session. It was noted on flip charts as participants discussed leadership concepts, and evaluated themselves and each other. Verbal data were also noted, along with other observations, by facilitators taking verbatim notes during each session. In addition, at the end of each of the sessions, written data were collected by means of an evaluation form. After each session, the data from the evaluation form were summarized and shared in aggregate among all session participants. Between the May and December sessions, several participants were contacted by telephone to assess the value and application of the program back in their offices. Finally, a "postcourse" evaluation was conducted 12 months after the program began.

The assessments made during and after the NASS Leadership Program revealed an increased growth in each of the self-selected leadership skills. Based on the pre and post 360-degree assessment of the competencies of the 13 leaders (one person left USDA before the final session, and no posttest was completed for that person), 9 of the 10 competencies improved whereas 1 remained the same (see Table 3). Most of the competencies showed an increased score of more than 10%. It is interesting to note that the competencies that improved the most were "conflict management" and "continual learning." No competency was rated lower in the postcourse evaluations.

Qualitative interviews and follow-up data collection indicated that the 13 leaders learned the value of questioning more and listening actively. All participants indicated that they grew in the critical eight leadership competencies on which this developmental program focused: interpersonal skills, team building, decisiveness, conflict management, continual learning, oral communications, creativity and innovation, and integrity and honesty. The NASS action learning programs demonstrated to the USDA executives that action learning has the capacity to provide development of specific leadership competencies with a methodology appropriate for government as well as corporate HRD professionals. Ultimately, leadership is built on the premise of learning while solving problems and taking effective actions.

Table 3. Pre- and Postcourse Assessment of NASS Participants by Subordinates, Peers and Superiors

Leadership Competency	Precourse	Postcourse
1. Overall leadership	3.4	3.8
2. Interpersonal skills	3.5	3.5
3. Team building	3.3	3.7
4. Decisiveness	3.6	3.9
5. Conflict management	3.0	3.5
6. Continual learning	3.8	4.3
7. Oral communications	3.7	4.0
8. Creativity and innovation	3.8	3.9
9. Integrity and honesty	3.7	4.0
10. Cultural awareness	3.6	3.9
Average for 10 competencies	3.54	3.85

Implications and Applications for HRD

There are a number of implications and applications that can be derived from the theories and case studies presented in this article.

- It is important to identify specific leadership development competencies prior to the action learning program, and to have frequent reflection opportunities during the sessions to discuss one's personal learnings and planned applications.
- When everyone is working on specific leadership skills, the atmosphere in which leaders acknowledged their imperfections and need for improvement results in opportunities for each of them to grow.
- The role of the action learning coach is important to successful leadership development, as through the reflection initiated by the coach, group members see when and how they are, or are not, practicing leadership skills.
- The selection of the organizational problem is a critical factor in generating group enthusiasm and developing leadership competencies.
- Action learning provides an opportunity for significant and targeted leadership development with minimal outside time or costs. Unlike academic programs that have difficulty in applying what is learned back at work, action learning can be and should be built on actual global challenges faced by the organization.

Conclusions

In this article, we have argued that developing the ability of leaders to learn rapidly in real time is critical for the success of contemporary organizations. We have further

argued that action learning does this better than other leadership development approaches. One of the reasons why action learning is effective as a leadership development method is that it is efficient; instead of focusing on a large or core set of skills (often 15-20 in number), action learning encourages participants to focus on a smaller number of skills that are most important and relevant to them. Action learning is also flexible in providing a learning environment and problem context that allows for the development of any leadership skill that may be chosen by participants. Furthermore, because action learning provides actionable solutions to real and important problems, this method provides the kind of real-world practice and accountability that Hicks and Peterson (1999) identify as necessary conditions for transferable leadership learning to occur. Finally, the article provides four case examples to demonstrate these points, with a specific focus on the process of selecting problems and reflecting while working, which are, from our perspective, two of the most important elements for building leadership skills via action learning programs.

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