

What are the best methods for training talented employees and future leaders?

Action Learning: A path to real talent development

As company leaders, HR directors, consultants and entrepreneurs continue to look for better results from their training efforts, action learning programs seem to deliver a higher level of satisfaction. One step further from case studies and experiential learning simulations, this process provides an opportunity for delivering a lasting impact. The proven benefits it brings are well worth the efforts required to implement it.

The core of action learning involves investigating real and current issues: a strategic effort, a competitor threat, a product opportunity, a process or a company problem. It provides a stage for analyzing behaviors, the complexity of the company environment and creating solid working relationships between participants. The process includes the following elements:

Identifying specific competencies to focus on throughout the program that are key to succeeding within the current company context

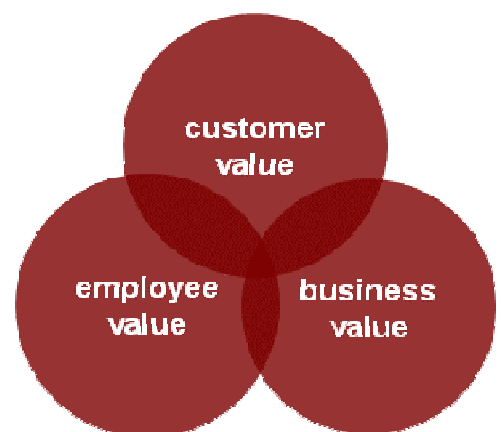
Creating an engaging experience by selecting a current strategic theme of study. It must be broad enough so the participants can explore innovative solutions without the immediate pressure of delivering a finished product. The experience must give an opportunity to provide real value to the company.

Debriefing the experience – review what happened and learn from 3 perspectives: results, process and team dynamics. The work produced can be analyzed through the lens of 3 axis of value: Customer Value, Business Value and, importantly for today's challenges, Employee Value.

Extrapolating the results: Make tangible links to what it means for the leaders and the corporate environment.

Some of the benefits observed by the author are:

- Real lasting learning from real consequences
- More serious and sustained engagement by participants
- An understanding of shared leadership
- New working relationships to other parts of the company
- Understanding the human dimension at a deeper level
- Understanding the dynamics of transversal collaboration
- Understanding your own style of management and its risks
- Immediately applying proposed concepts to today's needs.



How do you design an effective action learning program?

Here are some of the key ingredients to design an effective action learning program:

- Select a project theme that is current and important. For senior teams, a strategic issue may be selected for the participants to investigate
- Assess the competencies of the participating cohort based on the focus of what is needed to be successful in the company

- Help participants get to know each other and establish a team charter
- Let them work on their own and check on their progress regularly. A project coach can be assigned to the program to ensure that learning is accelerated and integrated. The coach can provide timely feedback and help diagnose team difficulties. Online tools can help them evaluate team cohesion.
- Provide tools for strategic planning, change management, managing diversity and inclusion, financial planning, collaboration, active listening, giving and receiving feedback, project management and/or developing high performance teams
- Augment the training with practical lectures from company executives and experts. Encourage meetings with internal sponsors and key customers
- Organize a presentation of the participants work to a jury made of senior executives where findings are shared and evaluated
- Set up powerful debrief and feedback sessions afterwards. As a result of the debrief session, participants establish a personal development plan.

There are many options available to design a successful action learning programs, the key criteria that this author recommends is to create a demanding, dynamic and pragmatic environment where participants feel recognized. Their work must be taken seriously by their senior managers. Access to and participation of those key senior managers is essential as the program can serve as a powerful motivator.

What are the challenges of implementing an action learning program:

Action learning is an entirely different training process and it requires a more complex setup and refined facilitation process. It also requires a specific coaching model and process. For instance, lectures need to follow a tightly crafted redline that is aligned with the project process of participants. Just-in-time trainings require lecturers to be well aware not only of learning objectives but of the state of project teams. Namely, the formatted case study techniques from Executive MBA lecturers will not suffice.

Participants and their company expect a focus on relevant pragmatism and immediately applicable concepts. Some other pivotal elements are:

- Conducting a well designed assessment prior to launching the project to evaluate participants competencies and identify clear areas for development. This can be combined with a 360 degree process.
- Creating a clear criteria for selecting a theme of study
- Designing a well thought-out project launch and coaching model
- Creating a clear criteria for evaluating the produced work by participants
- Spanning the training from 2 months to a year
- Creating highly diverse teams with no pre-assigned authority to help practice shared leadership and multi-cultural work.

Hervé Da Costa is an executive coach and the managing director at Softlink International. He has been a senior executive at Xerox PARC, HP Labs, the University of California at Berkeley and 2 successful startups in Silicon Valley. He is an Affiliate Professor of Executive Education. He can be contacted at info@sli-associates.com .

[All work is copyright protected. However, you are welcome to freely distribute this article as long as the author and his e-mail are mentioned]