

Why does action learning help managers to become better managers?

Active engagement - the key to high performance learning at work?

The notion that management learning should first and foremost meet the needs of business clearly makes sense. Hence it seems almost inconceivable that it has taken over 50 years, endless debate about organizational learning, and a virtual revolution in working attitudes, practices and environment, for workplace-focused action learning approach to gain mainstream acceptance. The irony is that hitherto undervalued action learning, introduced as far back as the 1940s, literally mirrors business imperatives. It strongly promotes change. It actively encourages team working. It empowers and motivates managers. And, crucially, it brings a tangible return on investment because of its focus on tackling workplace challenges. What other management development approach offers this? The aim here is to illustrate some of the ways in which high performance, outcomes-directed learning can be encouraged at work.

Good enough for Nobel prize-winners...

Imagine, if you will, that you are a research physicist. Just when years of painstaking effort seem about to bear fruit, you come up against a problem. Fortunately you are surrounded by other research physicists - past and future Nobel prize-winners. Unfortunately none of them work in your field. Does this stop you seeking their help? If you are sensible, and want to win a Nobel Prize yourself, it does not. You put your problem to them. But what can they possibly do to help you out of your impasse? Back in the 1930s, Reg Revans worked in one such high-powered group at the University of Cambridge. When they were faced with difficult research problems, they would sit down together and ask one another questions. No one person was considered more important than any other and they all had contributions to make, even when they were not experts in a particular field. In this way they teased out workable solutions to their own and one another's problems. Revans was so taken by this technique that, when he went to work at the coal board, he introduced it there. When pit managers had problems, he encouraged them to meet together in small groups, on site, and ask one another questions about what they saw in order to find their own solutions, rather than bring in 'experts' to solve their problems for them. The technique proved so successful that the managers wrote their own handbook on how to run a coal mine.

Re-discovering the potential to learn from questions

Small children ask questions. How? Why? What? Where? Who? and question When? Parents may despair of the number; sympathetic teachers encourage the quest for knowledge and provide, whenever they can, opportunities for the children to answer their own questions by experiencing something for themselves. As the children get older, their teachers (themselves in possession of a vast number of facts which they feel need to be passed on to their charges) tend not to wait for the questions to be asked. They concentrate increasingly on supplying knowledge and on testing that their students have learned it and can produce the right answers to order.

It is a very long time before students are considered sufficiently well programmed with available information to start asking questions again which will lead them to find their own solutions to unsolved problems; so long that many will have already gone off to work in the 'real' world, perhaps under the mistaken impression that the answers to problems always exist in books, if only you know where to find them - or the expert who knows them already.

Can action learning help us to drive the business?

The short answer to this question is 'yes' certainly, providing that conventional thinking about 'learning' is turned on its head. This requires the courage to recognize that the organization itself is actually a fine business school in its own right and it can indeed develop its own expert consulting capacity from within. If action learning works for research scientists and for small children as they develop, how might its potential be harnessed in the corporate community? Specifically, how does action learning relate to the 'real world' that managers inhabit? As a learning environment, it is messy - in fact, it is full of complex messages, politics, conflict and challenges, often with no 'right' answer. But it is a world where the action learning approach, starting from the 'question' or challenge at work, fits well. In essence, if the key questions can be discerned, the manager is then able to draw in concepts and theories that will help to define and elaborate the action needed. Intuitively we might recognize that our most powerful learning is from experience. The main challenge is to facilitate this process at a pace that suits modern organizations, and resist the temptation to fall back on management guru-led solutions.

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"The learning process is simply life changing. My personal action learning project alone saved my company millions of dollars...". Vice President: Logistics, U.S. Health Care Corporation

This Vice President's 'secret' was to focus on an issue that mattered to the organization. In this way, the support is likely to be forthcoming to assist the manager and open doors to the possibility of finding and implementing radical solutions.

Typically, an action learning approach to managerial work can be characterized by:

- A focus on real issues that support the organization's corporate-level and divisional objectives. These normally have a direct impact on the bottom line through cost savings or the generation of new income.
- Participants identify issues in discussion with organizational executives, colleagues and advisers, assess options for change, make decisions, take action and manage the consequences of that action.
- Senior executive buy-in and practical support is crucial to the success of this initiative. It is anticipated that the host organization's executives will be identified with, and involved in, practical aspects of each course.
- Participants learn in cohorts, learning from and being supported by their peers.
- Support mechanisms are put in place including: the facilitation of learning in cohorts, specialist input, coaching support, an extensive online management library and other web resources.
- Professional degrees recognize and certify the outputs, rather than the inputs. An approach that has been successfully pioneered in fact by IMCA and Revans University.

So how do you link personal and organization learning to business objectives? Tuned in managers know the problems that lie around them. However, the question is do they matter to the organization at large and, crucially, those in positions of power to make changes? The initial route to discovering and refining the right issue to tackle is one of discussion:

- with line managers and learning coaches;
- with fellow associates (the 'action learning set');
- and with learning specialist facilitator(s).

But can you really boost productivity by learning at work?

History shows that corporations who send their best people away to take MBA and other executive courses generally fail to transfer the learning benefits back into the workplace. Maybe they've had a previous experience a bit like this one:

1. A group of 'high flyers' were selected; people seen as the next generation of leaders.
2. These young executives study full-time or part-time at a 'big brand' institution.
3. They learn theories that look fabulous and can't wait for an opportunity to apply them to something at work.
4. People back at the ranch look blank when suggestions are made, apparently from outer space.
5. Opportunities aren't forthcoming to use what has been learnt - clearly folks back at the firm aren't on the executives' wavelength - maybe they're out of touch with the latest management thinking?
6. The young executives become frustrated and unsettled, nobody understands them, they are clearly being held back.
7. Luckily they have a network of fellow execs from other companies and know what the opportunities are out there. They've also got a wider view of their own self worth - not least a marketable big brand MBA certificate.
8. Leaving is easy - either to join another firm or to work as a management consultant - at last a chance to put theory into action!

So why design your in-company courses like this at all? Actually there are plenty of challenges that young execs (and the rest of the organization too) can learn from by finding and implementing lasting solutions to the things that are likely to really affect the organization's own future.

Assuming that you are willing to set-up your own corporate business school / university framework and provide formalized, accredited pathways that lead to professional certification, why not focus instead on:

- Issues that matter to the company, giving the participant the opportunity to make a real difference and boost their profile and status within the organization.
- Issues that matter to the participant where satisfaction can be gained from being listened to, taken seriously and seeing the results of change.
- The organization supporting participants and working with them to assess which issues should be tackled and how uncomfortable change can be implemented.

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- Building networks within the organization, not outside, so that managers can support each other in bringing success to the company.

IMCA's action learning system for management development is called IMCA Socrates™, it provides a complete framework (based on an IMCA credit accumulation model) as an 'own brand' service to users, at low unit cost. This took three years to develop and refine, with the active support of several foundation corporate users. It is positioned at the centre of the corporation's own learning initiatives - its role is to certify credit pathways that have been custom designed to reflect the precise needs of the user. In effect, it is an integral part of the support infrastructure for corporate universities - a very different positioning from traditional universities, who focus on attracting individual students to study pre-configured courses.

Benefits to the organization

- IMCA Socrates™ is designed to enable the organization's executives to deliver on business objectives via accredited action learning at work.
- Every project and output deals with a live issue within the organization. Senior management buy-in is sought to ensure relevance to business objectives.
- Tangible results are obtained from each output / project, which can be reviewed against key corporate benchmarks and measures (as appropriate). A return on investment is achieved by careful project selection and scoping.
- A new generation of managers will become effective agents of change and process improvement. As they complete their work, they are recognized and certified in the workplace.

Benefits to participating managers

- Managers tackle real challenges at work, working with senior managers and colleagues to identify substantive issues, generate options for change, plan and implement change to get results.
- Participants gain a reputation for tackling multi-faceted issues, solving them and getting results. They visibly succeed, greatly enhancing their own career development, professional development and promotional prospects.
- Managers experience and internalize a process that enables them to continue learning through problem solving; taking action and team-working long after their own particular course has completed.
- Participants learn together in an 'action learning set', team environment, building a network that lasts for life.
- Learning is made convenient for the manager. Specialist advisers from inside or outside the organization (as required) facilitate input work. A learning platform (complete with some 3,500 management journals) and other resources provides the main content resource and the 'look and feel' of this environment is customized to endorse the company's own brand for learning.
- Managers earn relevant qualifications related to the scope and responsibility they hold and the attainments that they can demonstrate.

UK corporate business school (UK CBS) case study

The case study UK corporate business school (CBS) was created in 1998 as part of a strategy to tackle the multifaceted challenges facing the company and the hospitality industry in general. Key issues for the company at the time included: service leadership, maintaining competitiveness and improving profitability and return on investment. UK CBS concluded that the best response to these challenges would be to set-up an open, responsive and supportive learning community at work.

UK CBS set itself the task of constructing a framework for accelerated 'active' learning so that it could build on the bench strength of its managers as quickly and as cost effectively as possible. The human resource challenges were to:

- Generate and retain competence
- Leverage technology
- Develop future leadership performance capabilities
- Create rapid development routes for managers
- Accelerate paths to competency.

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UK CBS was also keen to create and nurture a corporate culture that fostered learning and valued knowledge whilst encouraging experimentation, risk taking and problem solving. It recognized that employees expect ongoing personal development as a key element of their employment. To address these and other design considerations, UK CBS decided to use an action learning approach.

UK CBS designed its own credit pathways, using the prototype version of IMCA Socrates™. These were individually tailored to the needs of the different managerial communities of participants (or associates) - from team leaders to senior managers. All the associates participated via a collaborate 'learning set', enabling managers to share their learning experiences in smaller sub-sets, with their work colleagues, using a customized learning platform to communicate with each other whenever face-to-face contact was not possible.

To measure the effectiveness of the pilot courses, UK CBS used a variety of tracking and evaluative tools to review learning effectiveness at five levels:

Level	Category	Description	Techniques
Level 1	Reaction	Learning is subjectively reviewed by the associate on completion. They give their personal views and impressions of the relative value added.	Associate evaluation questionnaire
Level 2	Learning	Evaluates the learning journey in terms of key insights, experiences and outcomes.	Associate evaluation questionnaire
Level 3	Job behaviour	Reviews ways in which the action learning course affected the associate's work performance (6-9 months later).	Structured interviews
Level 4	Organization	Considers the overall impact of the courses on the organization, using criteria such as productivity and labour turnover.	Impact on guest satisfaction survey, labour turnover and staff satisfaction survey statistics
Level 5	ROI level	Assesses the impact of learning on profitability and growth of the organization as a whole.	Investment appraisal techniques

At level 5, return on investment was assessed by performing a detailed cost benefit analysis calculation. The direct and indirect costs of resourcing UK CBS provided the starting point. ROI benefits could be directly attributed to the outputs arising from the work-based projects that were the most crucial element of the pilot courses. The ROI flowing from the first two pilot courses greatly outweighed the support costs - in fact, the outcomes from a single project in the form of an immediately workable solution, produced savings of £1.5 million - a sum that would have been spent with outside consultants if the pilot action learning set had not come along at exactly the right moment and enabled the project owner to fix the solution internally!

Learning at work really works!

The UK CBS case example is one of several live pilots that demonstrated dramatic and rapid return on investment in learning, using the IMCA Socrates™ international system. The case example firm went on to implement the full system, in support of a wide range of learning applications. In essence, the system is an innovative educational experience, characterized by:

- Integrated (not delivered) features, enabling users to run the system themselves
- Credit for outputs - allowing associates to accumulate credit in many different ways towards professional certification
- Accredited status for user training, learning and development, placing focus and emphasis on output applications
- Customized learning designs that reflect user priorities
- Low unit cost of registration and certification, enabling the centre to pass on costs to operating units without difficulty
- A powerful, yet practical learning audit requirement that tracks and helps codify learning and organizational ROI

Working with the case example firm and others that use action learning, we have detected some significant changes in human resource practice over the past few years. In particular, that many companies are questioning the value of, and return on investment from traditional training input.

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We now able to provide corporations with a unique educational framework in the form of an international system that can be embedded in the organization. Its purpose is to connect learning and development with strategy implementation via credit-rated learning at work. Here the work itself provides the agenda for learning and the 'classroom' is the workplace. Managers accumulate credit by working on real business issues and, if their outputs reflect the tasks that they are expected to accomplish, then they are 'trackable' in return on investment in learning and career development terms. You can literally see the benefits derived from every pound sterling or dollar of expenditure on learning and development. To help with tracking, we help companies to audit their own learning, an approach that is influenced by financial audit principles.

At its core, the IMCA Socrates™ system uses credit as currency and this builds towards professional qualifications - all founded on pathways that are customized and managed by the corporate user - not pre-specified by an outside institution. Aside from the added value of external recognition, credit accumulation actually helps to promote, sustain and integrate active learning by providing purpose. Managers obtain qualifications that are fully aligned with their own work, the organizational direction and focus, and all aspects of HR linkage with strategy implementation. You might imagine the benefits that flow from connecting and integrating a wide variety of internal and external inputs. The biggest gain is that managers stay engaged in learning and development for a sustained period of time because they know that their business outputs will enable them to gain a relevant qualification.

We know that the issues raised here reflect the challenges posed by learning at work - difficult yes, but certainly meaningful as action learning tends to open minds and doors for people. Furthermore, we know that the IMCA Socrates™ system provides a mechanism for open-minded organizations to engage with employees at every level of the organization.

Source: Accrediting Managers at Work in the 21st Century, Richard Teare & Gordon Prestoungrange, Prestoungrange University Press, 2004.