

Coaching through Action Learning – to get Business Results

By Peter Winston Guess

Of all the interventions and developmental methods, **Action Learning** is one of the most powerful coaching approaches to obtain both measurable business results and meaningful human development. (Q: What's this about? A: Look at the picture below for quick reference.)

In this article I will describe Action Learning, who uses it, where it originates, how to apply it as a coach and what benefits it has.

What is Action Learning?

Action Learning is an approach that uses current, real-life business (or community) challenges as the primary coaching tool for human development. In business, these challenges are best assigned as a project to a learner or team of learners by a senior client (or manager). Alternatively, the learners can do their own research to identify a suitable project from a range of business needs. I used the latter method for several project teams in one of the largest petro-chemical organisations in South Africa.

The individual or team is accountable to the client for delivery on both the task (business challenge) and the learning outcomes (lessons and competencies). This client takes on the role of a sponsor and needs to be fully committed to supporting successful delivery and learning.

Action Learning can be defined as: "a way of learning from our actions ... by taking the time to question, understand and reflect, to gain insights, and consider how to act in future." (Krystyna Weinstein, *Action Learning: A Practical Guide*, 1998)

Who uses it?

Action Learning is used for individual, team and organisational development. It is used in MBA programmes such as Business School Netherlands, Canadian School of Management and IMC (International Management Centres Association). Organisations such as General Electric, Sasol, Motorola, Siemens, Boeing, DuPont, Johnson & Johnson, and Volvo Car Corporation, use it for leadership development. I used this coaching approach in South Africa at Koeberg Power Station and Sasol.

Origins

Action Learning was developed by Reg Revans in the 1940's. He used it in the coal mining environment in the UK. Initially, he used it as a consulting approach that focused on resolving current, real-life business problems through small groups of learners. He came to refer to them as "comrades in adversity". He coached them to help each other by critically reflecting on action being taken on projects, such as the optimal running of a mine. "The technique proved so successful that the managers wrote their own handbook on how to run a coal mine." (*Canadian School of Management*).

People would typically come from different parts of the organisation or from different organisations. Currently, one practice is that project teams work on one specific project within an organisation. Another practice is for each individual to have their own project. This approach is still being used in MBA's.

How do you coach using Action Learning?

• Phase 1: Coach the Business Outcomes and Secure Senior Level Commitment

Firstly, you require a real, meaningful business problem. Resolving this business need must have the full support and commitment of a senior sponsor and other relevant stakeholders. This ensures management commitment from the start. Management needs to be committed to: Action Learning; providing resources; supporting the learning process and outcomes; and finally resolving the challenge by implementing agreed solutions. You need to coach the sponsor and learner/s to clearly define the expected results in terms of date of delivery and measurements for quantity and quality improvement. This means that the business needs drive the learning and not the other way round, as in many conventional learning approaches.

• Phase 2: Coach the Learning Outcomes

This phase may occur first or concurrently with the first one. During this phase the coach assists in preparing the learners and helping them identify specific learning outcomes that relate to the business challenge at hand. These can include: individual competencies (skills, knowledge and/or personal attributes); team learning outcomes (e.g. collaboration); and organisational know-how (e.g. how business works). In the South African context, these learning outcomes can be linked to Workplace Skills Plans, Learnerships, Skills Programmes and Accelerated Development initiatives.

- **Phase 3: Coach the Project Team to Shape the Project**

This phase is used to coach the learners into forming a project team with a detailed project plan. The learners are known as a "set", in Action Learning terminology. This set is coached from the outset to become self-managing, with the coach as an external facilitator and the sponsor as a higher level mentor.

- **Phase 4: Coaching through to Implementation**

The coach helps the learners to focus on questioning their action. This critical reflection is used to gain new insights, perspectives and to obtain additional input from inside or outside the team. This results in taking further, informed action. In turn, this leads again to reflection. This circular process is similar to the action-reflection process described in greater detail in experiential learning and by David Kolb in his Learning Styles (1984).

The coach varies the style of facilitation from pure observation and feedback, on the one side of the spectrum, to providing high direction, on the other side. The style needs to be based on the needs of the learners and their movement towards meeting the agreed outcomes.

It is very useful for the learners to journal personal and team lessons along the way. This discipline is a valuable aid to deeper reflection, investigation and self-development.

- **Phase 5: Coaching the Project Evaluation**

During this final phase, the learners design and deliver presentations and reports to give feedback to the sponsor and other stakeholders. This is usually a formalised session or series of road shows to give and receive feedback. The learners often reach a peak at this point as they are coached to critically evaluate the process, results and themselves. The adrenaline also comes from integrating a lot of different data gathered externally, from various levels in the organisation, and internally, from personal experience.

The Business Benefits of Action Learning

1. Action Learning works primarily with current and real business challenges, issues and problems. As a result of this focus, learning is closely linked to reality. Therefore it helps to integrate theory and practice. The opposite of this approach is to use case studies, simulations and outdoor experiential learning. Action Learning does not exclude these methods in the overall process. Instead it integrates whatever methodologies are being used into the real-life problem solving process.
2. This approach facilitates real time and just-in-time learning, which ensures that the coaching adds immediate value and is a catalyst to personal and organisational development. These impacts are experienced directly in day-to-day business.
3. Learners often come from different parts of the organisation or different organisations. This contributes invaluable diversity to the learning process on an ongoing basis. The learners are challenged by different perspectives and different business models. The learners also learn to work in a diverse learning team which is vital in the South African context, especially for leadership development.
4. Action Learning fosters a positive climate for change. The coach and the project team encourage ongoing behaviour and attitude change by providing an ongoing peer-support system.
5. This Action Learning process also helps the team learn what they need to, relevant to their pace. Some groups move fast, some slow. Some encounter many start-up challenges due to leadership or personality clashes. These act as valuable catalysts for deeper learning.

Conclusion

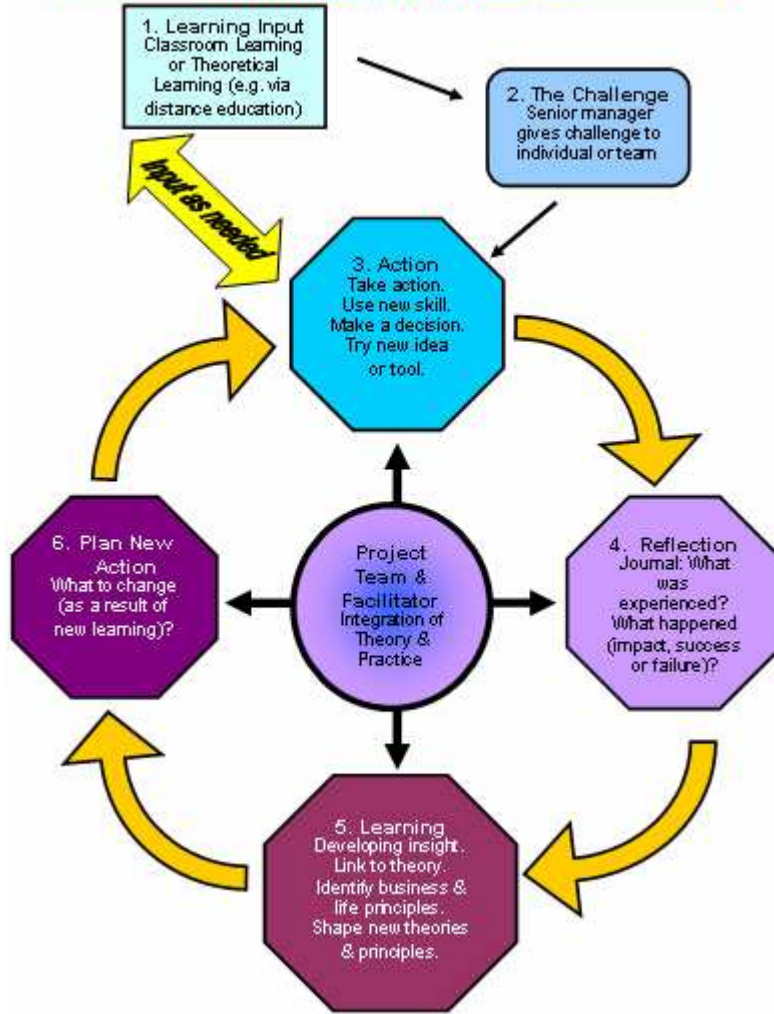
Coaching through Action Learning is an uncomplicated process with clearly defined, yet dynamic phases. This approach harnesses the power of real-life business needs to produce extraordinary learning and business results. As a result, the organisation is the beneficiary. This on-the-job approach is business driven and significantly cheaper than most formal training.


For the learners and the coach, it is a very rewarding process because it is results focused and at the same time people oriented. The extensive use of this approach world-wide and the documented success stories make *Coaching through Action Learning* a vital model for human and organisational development.

A few resources

1. [**A Tribute to Dr. Reg Revans**](#) (the father of Action Learning, who died in 2003)
2. [**IMC Association**](#) (for download on background to the use of Action Learning in online virtual campuses)

An Action Learning Example





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