



Five Factors for Successful Action Learning

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To succeed in bigger roles, leaders need a higher level of business, strategic and interpersonal skills. Larger roles also call for breaking siloed habits that limit enterprisewide results. Action learning requires leaders to work with each other under the “pressure cooker” of real business challenges.

Action learning programs typically last three to nine months. It includes group work on a business challenge complemented by development of individual leadership capabilities. There are facilitated sessions by company executives and outside faculty. Programs culminate with presentation of the groups’ results to senior executives.

If done right, action learning can significantly expand the pool of talent ready to fill executive positions. However, because it uses the business as a platform for learning, program flaws can become broadly visible much faster than with other types of learning. To ensure that your action learning program is successful, make sure to address these five crucial factors:

1. Establish strong executive sponsorship. Identify the CEO or another senior executive as the program’s sponsor. The executive sponsor can advise participants on when they should — and should not — challenge the organization’s conventional wisdom. Having a senior sponsor also brands the program as an important development experience. Action learning teams will present recommendations to executives who should have the authority to make decisions based on the teams’ proposals.

2. Select pressing business challenges and scope them appropriately. Action learning programs that fail to work on strategic projects weaken the performance pressure essential to optimize learning. Non-strategic projects are more likely to be placed on the back burner when other priorities come along. Strategic projects push your company forward into unfamiliar markets, solutions or business designs. Strategic projects also can engage high potential leaders in taking the organization to new levels. When defining your program’s strategic challenges, be sure participants can make significant progress within the program’s timeline.

3. Invest in participants with the most leadership potential. Participants do not merely learn by doing; they learn by doing it with other high-potential leaders from diverse functions and geographies. Building professional networks to broaden perspectives and successfully work across complex organizations is a common goal for an action learning program. Participants are surrounded by other “rising stars” who are also candidates for assuming more significant roles. If you do not currently identify high-performing and high-potential leaders, the time to start is now. If you already have such a process, action learning is a powerful method to accelerate the growth of targeted leaders.

4. Challenge your action learning teams with strong team coaching. High-performing leaders tend to focus so much on getting superior business results that they do not adequately address learning. This can result in a failure to make career-changing breakthroughs. To counter this tendency, coaches for action learning teams should challenge participants to examine their own strengths and development areas. The pressure of working with a group of leaders to tackle a strategic business objective provides the ideal platform for revealing hidden strengths and “warts.” Leaders should be challenged to live up to the highest expression of your company’s leadership competencies. Team coaches work with leaders to examine and surmount obstacles that keep them from developing the leadership judgment and capability required at the most senior levels.

5. Communicate broadly about your action learning program. Many executives are initially reluctant to communicate regarding an action learning program. They might be concerned that the program could provoke resentment by those not chosen to participate. Our experience is that the broader employee population will learn about

the program anyway, and so it is in your best interest to shape the communication upfront. Instituting an action learning program is an opportunity to highlight the organization's commitment to developing leadership talent. Communicated correctly, you can reinforce key messages about your desired culture while providing enough transparency about the selection process to mitigate concerns about fairness.



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