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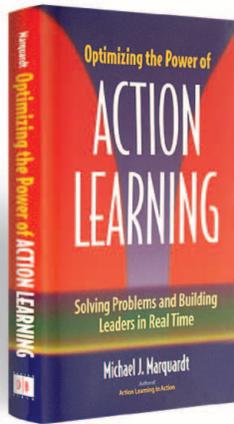
By Michael J. Marquardt

Solving Problems and Building Leaders in Real Time

OPTIMIZING THE POWER OF ACTION LEARNING

CONTENTS

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Novartis, a Swiss-based pharmaceutical conglomerate with more than 72,000 employees in 140 countries, recently formed a consortium of six noncompetitive companies from different sectors. At the heart of the consortium are six to eight action learning groups formed of members from each of the six companies. The action learning groups work as teams on specific business projects of importance to their respective companies. The overall goal of the action groups is threefold: to solve the business problems of the companies, to develop leaders, and to build organizational capacity.

Around the world, writes George Washington University professor Michael J. Marquardt, companies and organizations of all sizes are using the action learning methodology to solve major problems and build productive and effective teams.

In Optimizing the Power of Action Learning, Marquardt, an expert on the action learning process, details exactly how the methodology works and how it can be used for important problems impacting businesses large and small.

What You'll Learn In This Summary

✓ The criteria for an action learning problem.

✓ The characteristics and roles of the group in action learning.

✓ The reflective inquiry process, a key component of action learning.

✓ The individual, team and organizational learning that can be achieved through action learning.

✓ The roles and responsibilities of the action learning coach.

✓ Twelve steps for introducing action learning.

OPTIMIZING THE POWER OF ACTION LEARNING
by Michael J. Marquardt

— THE *COMPLETE* SUMMARY

What Is Action Learning?

Action learning is a problem-solving tool that at the same time builds successful leaders, teams and organizations.

The action learning process has six components, which will be briefly explained below and then explored in greater detail in the rest of the summary.

The six components of action learning are:

1. A problem. Action learning centers on a problem or, more specifically, a project, challenge, opportunity, issue or task. The resolution of this problem has to be of great importance to the organization — action learning is not for minor issues. The problem must be significant and urgent.

2. A group. The second component of action learning is an action learning group or team. The ideal group has four to eight diverse members, who bring various perspectives and fresh viewpoints to the task of resolving a significant organizational problem.

3. Questions. A process of insightful questioning and reflective listening is key to the success of the action learning initiative. Action learning succeeds because the process focuses on the right questions, not the right answers. Questions build group cohesiveness, generate innovative and systems thinking, and enhance learning results.

4. Action. Action learning requires that the action learning group be able to take action on the problem to which it has been assigned. The group must either have the power to take action, or be assured that its recommendations will be implemented. If neither of these conditions is in place, raising the specter of recommendations sitting in the bottom of a drawer, the team will lose its focus and energy.

5. Learning. An equal commitment to learning is also essential for the success of action learning. While the short-term action steps needed to address the problem will be valuable to the company, it is the long-term learning gained through the exercise that most benefits the organization and its members.

6. A coach. To keep the group focused on the important as well as the urgent, an action learning coach is required. Through helping group members reflect on how they listen or how they may have reframed the problem, for example, the coach keeps the group focused on what they are achieving, what they are finding difficult, what processes they are employing, and the implications of those processes.

Action learning is at its peak if all six of these components are in operation, interweaving and reinforcing each other.

Solving Problems at National Semiconductor

Here's an example of what action learning can offer a company:

Executives at National Semiconductor's Portland, Maine, plant recognized that they were having difficulties providing quality service at AT&T (National Semiconductor is one of AT&T's major suppliers).

Their response was to create an action learning team called the Customer Request Improvement Team.

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What Is Action Learning?

Members of the Customer Request Improvement Team were pulled from the sales, marketing, engineering, manufacturing and planning functions of National Semiconductor. The team also included members from AT&T.

Over a period of three months, the team considered more than 40 ideas for improvement, which resulted in four specific action initiatives:

1. Analyzing in new ways the delivery misses.

2. Increasing frequencies of lead-time updates.

3. Creating critical device lists.

4. Developing pre-alert reports.

Following the implementation of these initiatives, AT&T recognized National Semiconductor as one of its "world class" suppliers. ■

> **For Additional Information on how action learning balances chaos and order, go to: http://my.summary.com**

Ground Rules That Empower Action Learning

The power of action learning is built on two key behaviors: reflective inquiry and continuous learning. In order to ensure that the process doesn't stray from questioning and learning, all action learning initiatives must follow two ground rules.

The first is that *statements should be made only in response to questions.* In other words, participants in action learning groups must think questions first, not answers first. They should not enter the meetings prepared to make statements and judgments. They should enter the meetings prepared to ask questions.

This doesn't mean that action learning is against statements. In fact, since questions will elicit more than one response, there will be more statements than questions in the course of the action meeting. The goal is to prevent action learning participants from jumping immediately into statements to solve the problem.

The second ground rule of effective action learning is that *the action learning coach has the power to intervene.* This ground rule addresses the need for continuous learning.

The first important point to remember about action learning coaches is that they are not there to work on the problem. That is the responsibility of group members. The goal of the coach is to see the opportunities for learning that arise, and to pounce on those opportunities to increase the group's ability to solve the prob-

Action Learning At LG Electronics

With more than 55,000 employees and 72 subsidiaries around the world, Seoul, Korea-based LG Electronics (LGE) is a major global company specializing in electronics and telecommunications. Its "Global Marketer" program is one of LGE's numerous programs to develop executive and employee competencies.

The Global Marketer program uses the action learning approach to develop global leaders in marketing — leaders who will have the competencies to solve any possible problems that they may face in a constantly changing environment.

Each action learning team in the program is composed of three LGE managers, an MBA student from a foreign university, a Korean expert, a foreign expert, and an executive who has specific knowledge and experience.

The teams are given major marketing projects, such as "how to improve brand equity" or "how to launch a new product." The project will include seminars by Korean and foreign experts as well as on-site interviews and surveys with competitors, customers, suppliers and best practice companies.

Each project has an allotted time of two-and-a-half months — one-and-a-half months in Korea and one month overseas. At the end of the program, each team presents its recommendations to corporate sponsors and executives for implementation.

Through this action learning-based Global Marketer program, LGE improves its business performance while developing the problem-solving and global leadership skills of the participants, and reinforcing in those participants a global perspective.

lem and develop innovative action strategies.

One can use the dichotomy of the urgent vs. the important. The group, trying to meet deadlines and reach solutions, will focus on the urgent. It's up to the coach to discern what's important and focus the group on those issues.

In order to make this happen, the coach must have the power to intervene, and, essentially, bring the process to a halt. The group stops working on the problem and instead listens to the coach's questions (questioning is the process by which the coach will advance learning). ■

> **For Additional Information on why action learning works so well, go to: http://my.summary.com**

PART TWO: APPLYING THE SIX COMPONENTS OF ACTION LEARNING

The Problem: Starting Point For Action Learning

The starting point for action learning is the problem — which can also be referred to as the project, challenge, opportunity, issue or task. Not all problems, however, qualify for an action learning initiative. Small, specific issues, such as how to deal with an unmotivated manager, hardly require the creation of an action learning team.

To optimize the power of action learning, choose your problems carefully. The best problems for action learning will have the following attributes:

1. Importance. First and foremost, the problem has to be important; it should make a significant difference to the individual or organization. A problem that is insignificant or too easy to solve will not motivate a problem-solving team, nor fully tap its potential.

2. Urgency. An action-learning problem must have a real time frame in which the problem must be defined and actions taken. The results of an action learning initiative are not meant to languish in a bottom drawer.

3. No existing solution. Action learning is not an exercise. In other words, the problem should be real and unsolved — it should not be hypothetical, and the solution for the problem should not exist somewhere in the organization or outside the organization. For example, top management should not look for an action learning group to reinforce a solution that it has already determined.

4. Feasibility. The group should be challenged but not overwhelmed. The problem must therefore be one that the organization has (or can acquire) the resources and time to resolve.

5. Familiarity. Some members of the group must be familiar with the context of the problem. On the other hand, it is often productive to have group members who do not have previous experience with the problem to bring a fresh perspective.

6. Significance. The problem must be significant and important to one or more members of the group. There must be stakes attached to the success of the group's strategies.

7. Learning opportunity. The best action learning problems provide excellent and important learning opportunities for the group. A fundamental premise of action learning is that we learn best when undertaking an action, which we then reflect on and learn from. If the problem does not offer an opportunity to learn, a great benefit of the action learning process will be lost.

8. Group authority. The group must have the author-

Action Learning At New York City Transit

New York City Transit identified three major problems of the subway system to be resolved using action learning: 1) Increased ridership; 2) unintelligible announcements; and 3) lack of teamwork. Action learning groups were created to address these problems. Group members were chosen from a wide range of job functions in the New York City Transit organization; diversity based on gender, age and ethnicity was also emphasized. Each action learning group identified five to 10 solutions, and all but two were implemented.

ity to solve and implement action. The group will not be motivated to seek innovative strategies if it believes that suggestions may or may not be implemented. ∎

The Group: The Power Of Diversity

The second component of action learning is the action learning group. The effective action learning group shares many of the same characteristics as effective teams: a commitment to solving the problem; a clear, common purpose; the willingness to work with others to develop strategies; and clear and accepted norms.

Selecting who will participate in the action learning group is key to the success of the initiative. As with the first component of action learning — the problem — action learning team members should meet certain criteria in order to create a group that will fully optimize the power of action learning.

The criteria for action learning group membership are the following:

1. Commitment. One or more group members must have a stake in the problem.

2. Knowledge. One or more members must have specific knowledge about the problem. Outside knowledge can be sought, but there should still be reasonable knowledge within the group.

3. The power to implement. Ideally, it is the members of the group who will have the power to implement

The Group: The Power of Diversity
(continued from page 4)

the suggestions developed by the group. If this is impossible, the group must be assured that their suggestions will be implemented by the organization.

4. Familiarity. At least one group member should be familiar with the context of the problem, although, as noted above, new perspectives are also valuable.

5. Diversity. Action learning is questions-based, which opens the door for the inclusion of members from all levels of the organization. You do not have to be an expert on the problem; you just have to be in a position to ask specific questions that relate to the problem.

6. Member selection. If the organization selects team members, it should not take the task lightly. The selection should not be random; selecting people from different departments, for example, is an opportunity not only to bring fresh perspectives to the problem, but also to create new networks and connections that did not exist before.

7. Attendance. Attendance should be mandatory. It's better to schedule fewer meetings that people can attend than a large number of meetings that will always have absentees.

Group Size

The ideal size of the action learning group is four to eight members. With too many members, the participation of some members may be crowded out by their colleagues, communication is more complex, and reaching a consensus is more difficult. An action learning group that is too small, on the other hand, limits the number of perspectives and may also cause the group to either misunderstand the complexity of the problem, or be overwhelmed.

Roles in the Action Learning Group

Participants in action learning programs cover a number of different roles — both inside and outside the action learning teams. Within the team there will be a problem presenter (more than one if there is more than one problem being addressed by that team). There is also the action learning coach, of which we will learn more about later.

Generally, there will be a problem sponsor, who may or may not be part of the team. The sponsor makes sure the problem is given high visibility and ensures that the solutions developed by the team will be implemented.

Finally, an action learning champion, who does not participate in specific action learning groups, ensures that the organization is committed to action learning. ■

Questions and Reflection

Questions, or more specifically, a reflective inquiry process, is the third component of successful action learning. Questions help understand and clarify problems, and open up paths to innovative solutions. Questions are also key for individual, team and organizational learning.

Effective problem solving begins by getting a big picture perspective of the problem. The old Hindu tale of the seven blind men who encounter an elephant — the blind man who touches the trunk thinks the elephant's a snake; the blind man who grabs a leg thinks the elephant is a tree trunk; and so forth — is a good allegory for what happens when focus and convergence occur before divergence.

Before you start to zero in on solutions, you want a helicopter's view of the problem; questions (and reflecting on the answers) help you get perspective. In other words, if the blind men had been asking questions of the others, instead of making statements ("It's a snake!"), they would have a better understanding of the animal they were dealing with. Questions, especially challenging ones, help group members to think and to learn.

Listening Without Prejudgment

Reflection involves recalling, thinking about, pulling apart, making sense, and trying to understand. In order for real reflection to occur, group members must have the space to stand back and let go of their assumptions and presuppositions.

Listening without prejudgment to what others have to say is key, which is why it is critical that questions rather than statements are the primary means of communication. Forcing statements to be made only in response to questions dramatically changes the dynamic of the group's interaction: Listening takes precedence over talking.

Communication that emphasizes questioning and listening is the essence of dialogue, which is very different from debate or discussion. In dialogue, the goal is to learn through inquiry and disclosure. In debate, the emphasis is on persuading, selling and telling. ■

Action Strategies: Learning From Action

One of the axioms of action learning is that "there is no real learning without action, just as there should be no action without learning." Learning is significant only if we take some type of action as a result of that learning.

Action involves what occurs within the action learning sessions — problem reframing, establishing goals,

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and developing strategies — as well as (and even more importantly) what occurs outside of the sessions — testing, gaining support and resources, and taking action.

Specifically, an action learning group will go through four stages from when it first examines the problem to when it implements strategies.

Stage 1: Understanding and Reframing The Problem

The first stage is understanding and reframing the problem. This is perhaps the most important stage — after all, the right solutions to the wrong problem don't really help. Yet, it's more common for teams to try to rush into solutions before they've fully clarified the problem.

As groups begin the questioning process, one vital and surprising development is often the discovery that the originally identified problem is not actually the real or most important problem. In other words, the group is able to dig past the surface or visible problem to uncover the hidden problem beneath it.

Another benefit of the questioning process is that it reveals and separates out the assumptions, expectations, biases, symptoms and limited perspectives that both the presenter and the other group members bring to the problem.

As the group better understands the problem, it also begins reframing the problem in one of two ways — either members see the *content* of the problem in a new way, or they see the *context* of the problem in a different way.

In the end, the group members must reach a consensus on the problem before moving on to the next stage. As one anonymous wit put it, "It's better to first put your finger on the problem before sticking your nose in it."

Stage 2: Framing and Formulating the Goal

The next action stage is to determine what the group, organization or individual is striving to achieve. Often, the formulated goal is different from the originally intended goal of the initiative. The reason is simply that the problem, as discussed above, was misidentified.

It is thus as important not to accept the given objective as it is not to accept the given problem. The group must select a goal that is the most strategic, has the most staying power, and will solve the real problem with easy-to-leverage results.

The ultimate goal may not be clearly and fully defined at this stage — it will become more refined as the group works on strategies. However, it's important that the group now shifts from a problem frame to an

outcome frame, from an "it is impossible" frame to an as-if frame, and from a failure frame to a feedback frame.

Stage 3: Developing and Testing Strategies

Once the group has its goal, the next step is to develop and test strategies. In stage 2, you identified what you wanted or what you needed to do. In stage 3, you become more specific: What will work best and why? What resources do we need? What will be the impact of the action?

In forming the action plan, the group must keep two things in mind: first, whether this action is appropriate to the problem; second, whether this action is doable. Determining whether the action is doable also involves who will be responsible for the action — who has the insight, the power and the commitment to take the action identified by the group.

More than one strategy should be developed and, if possible, tested. Pilot actions are key to ensuring the success of the strategy once it is fully implemented.

Stage 4: Taking Action and Reflecting on the Action

Action is obviously an important element of any action learning group's work. Some concrete, specific action should be agreed upon and taken at the end of each session. It's up to the action learning coach to ensure that the team does not run out of time before agreeing on action items. If a session ends without any actions decided on, the time between sessions becomes lost time. ■

Developing Training at Fairfax County Public Schools

Eight staff members of the Fairfax County Public Schools, including principals, assistant principals and HR staff, had one two-hour action learning session to develop a long-term training program for principals and assistant principals.

Because of the tight time frame, some members were anxious to move to the third and fourth stages of action learning: developing strategies and an action plan. But the team kept the focus on determining the real problem and the real goals first; this process used up more than 60 minutes of the allotted time.

Once the real problem and real goals were identified, however, the team took just 30 minutes to identify strategies and develop the outlines of a training project — a project that ultimately led to a $5 million grant from the Reader's Digest Foundation for leadership development.

Individual, Team and Organizational Learning

Solving a particular reengineering problem may be worth $1 million to the company. Applying that knowledge throughout the organization may be worth $10 million. And if the team members apply the new leadership and team skills developed in the action learning program, that learning may be worth $100 million over the course of the team members' careers.

Thus, the learning that occurs in action learning is more valuable than solving the problem itself.

Group members are advised from the very first session that they have a responsibility for their own, their group's and their organization's learning. They understand that time will be set aside for learning, and that the action coach will carve out and manage this time. (In the next article, we will explore in greater depth the responsibilities of the action coach.)

How Action Learning Generates Learning

In action learning, the group creates knowledge through 1) concrete experience; 2) observing and reflecting on this experience; 3) forming generalizations from experiences; and 4) testing the implications of those generalizations.

Through these four stages of knowledge creation, the learning takes place at two levels: the first level is the level of the actual problem-solving task; the second level is the level of reflection on how the group worked together.

For example, the concrete experience mentioned above involves solving the problem. Clearly, the group learns as it finds the strategies to resolve the problem. But, at a second level, the group is also learning through the group experience required to resolve this problem. For example, the group learns how to interact effectively, overcome disagreements, and tackle other group issues.

At the observation and reflection stage, the group observes and reflects at the first level on the strategies chosen to resolve the problem. Will those strategies work?

But at this stage as well, the group reflects at the second level on the skills that they learned in the process: group skills, such as decision making and group interaction, as well as individual learnings.

Forming generalizations involves, at one level, generalizing the specific solutions developed in the group to address other problems. At the second level, it involves generalizing the group skills learned in the process.

Finally, the test and experiment stage involves testing the strategies to resolve the problem at one level, while at the second level, the group reflects on whether its new behaviors and values acquired in the action learning process will help them work on additional problems.

Team and Organizational Learning at GE

Through action learning, GE employees and managers learn and apply new skills — such as team building, conflict resolution, and understanding change management methodologies and tools — while working on real problems. Some of the achievements supported by action learning include: boundaryless behavior in which employees work easily across business units; greater speed in decision making and implementation; accountability at appropriate levels with less controlling leadership; and reduced impact of the burdens of hierarchy.

Competencies Developed in Action Learning

As mentioned before, the competencies developed in action learning involve individual, group and organizational skills and knowledge.

Individually, group members learn such skills as critical reflection, inquiry and questioning, systems thinking, active listening, self-awareness, empathy, problem solving, decision making, presenting and facilitating. The learning process leads to becoming aware of, and changing as necessary, one's beliefs, values and basic assumptions.

Leadership skills are another important set of skills learned through action learning. For instance, action learning initiatives help group members build what is now known as emotional intelligence, which consists of five primary abilities: self-awareness, managing emotions, motivating oneself, empathy and handling relationships. Every leadership skill just listed can be demonstrated and used in the action learning setting.

Action learning also develops group skills. Action learning groups quickly mold into high-performance work teams. For example, all high-performance work teams have certain characteristics, such as clear and common goals, a willingness to work with others, and the courage to question others. Action learning develops these attributes. Since the first stage of the action learning project is defining the goal, for example, the outcome is a clear and common goal for the team. And since one of the ground rules of action learning is that all statements are in response to questions, the courage to question others is quickly developed in even the shyest participant.

Finally, action learning builds learning organizations. Learning organizations have four components: increased learning skills and capacities, a transformed organizational culture and structure, an involvement of the entire

Individual, Team and Organizational Learning

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business chain in the learning process, and enhanced capability to manage knowledge.

Action learning helps organizations construct these four components. For example, group members learn the principles and theories of effective learning, the different types of learning, and the key skills of learning. Action learning develops a culture and values that see learning as essential for corporate success. Action learning involves not only staff, but also vendors, suppliers, customers and even the community in learning. And action learning helps the organization learn to acquire, create, store and transfer knowledge. ■

The Coach: The Catalyst For Learning

The primary role of the coach is to help the group grow and learn. The focus of the coach must always be on enhancing learning, not solving the problem.

The principal tool of the coach is the inquiry process. Through questions, the coach helps group members examine and learn from their actions and interactions.

It's important that a person be specifically assigned to be the action learning coach. Otherwise, the learning process will be crowded out by the urgency of the problem to be solved. This does not mean that the role cannot rotate among members of the group — just as long as the assigned person gives up problem solving while serving as coach.

Building the Learning Climate

The action learning coach is not the teacher or expert or chairperson of the group. The coach does not tell others what to do; instead, he or she should assist them in discovering what needs to be done. This is accomplished through questions, not statements. Questions keep the coach from being seen as judgmental, controlling or even manipulative.

However, the coach must have the power to intervene when he or she sees fit — which means that the coach has the power to stop the group from continuing to work on the problem and instead focus on the question or questions that the coach is raising.

This authority, however, requires the coach to know when to ask and how to ask questions. In other words, knowing when to intervene is one of the most important skills of an effective action learning coach.

In general the coach should intervene at the beginning

Introducing and Implementing Action Learning

Here's a checklist for introducing and implementing action learning initiatives:

Step 1. Gain support of top management.

Step 2. Conduct a preparatory workshop.

Step 3. Choose projects, problems or challenges.

Step 4. Select and prepare action learning coaches.

Step 5. Determine membership and establish the action learning groups.

Step 6. Orient and prepare the action learning group or groups.

Step 7. Carry out and implement the action learning sessions.

Step 8. Reframe problems and develop action strategies.

Step 9. Pilot test and recommend actions.

Step 10. Implement action strategies.

Step 11. Finalize activities and capture final learnings of the action learning group.

Step 12. Assess value and power of the action learning program and seek ways to expand it throughout the organization.

and end of each session, and one or more times during the session. Samples of questions that the coach might ask at the beginning and end of sessions include the following:

● At the beginning of the very first session: questions on the familiarity of group members with the action learning process and questions about the problem to be solved by the group.

● At the end of the first session: questions on what actions are going to be taken as a result of the session, questions about the performance of the team, and questions about the learning that occurred as a result of the session.

● At the beginning of subsequent sessions: questions on the actions and learning that occurred since the last session.

● At the end of the final session: questions on whether the goal was achieved, and on the individual, team and organizational learning acquired in the process.

The questions that are asked during the sessions will vary, of course, but could include the following:

● How are we doing as a team?

● Do we have agreement on the problem?

● Are we building on each other's questions and ideas?

● What is the quality of our ideas and strategies? ■