

Bernhard Hauser - Action Learning in Management Development Programs (Abstract)

Action learning is characterized by the fact that participants experience their environment *simultaneously* as a learning and action field. Thus, executives use their company *simultaneously* for personal growth and improving operations (Revans, 1998; Inglis, 1994; Weinstein, 1995; Marquardt, 1999).

Dotlich & Noel (1998, p.14) stress that "action learning is magical, at least in the sense that it kills two birds with one stone. The process helps organizations respond to major business problems and opportunities, and at the same time develops key people so that they have the capacity to lead organizations in the desired strategic direction."

The company's direct benefit consists of a business opportunity or process improvement and can, in principle, be financially quantified. However, to describe developing leadership quality as a main concern of management development programs, this study introduces the term "competency". Erpenbeck & v. Rosenstiel (2003) define competencies as "dispositions of self-organized action" (p. XI).

Approach: The study examines the hypothesis that achievement of both objectives – development of leadership competency and an immediate benefit for business – directly depends on the design and execution of action learning programs.

Several steps are used to test this hypothesis: First, the current status of action learning theory formation is presented (Chap. 2). Reference is made to the origins of action learning as well as to various characteristics and approaches. This is the base for developing a terminology consisting of a set of criteria that can then be used to analyze and compare practical examples.

As a next step (Chap. 3), three management development programs (A, B, and C) are introduced that have each used action learning in different ways. Three different companies created these programs one after the other. The companies belong to different industries (logistics, electronics, and utilities), in which they are key players. The author was involved in each of the three programs. Hence, each subsequent program was an effort to use the experience gathered during earlier programs to increase the degree of maturity and effectiveness of action learning.

Each of the three programs is analyzed and made comparable using the criteria developed earlier (Chap. 4). Then the benefits are estimated that each action learning program was capable of delivering during each respective period under study.

To determine the immediate action learning benefit for a company, the study checks whether an action learning team's results have passed the test of practice and are being used. Executive development (a management development program's central concern), however, is measured using a set of competencies that are relevant for executives. These competencies have been classified using von Erpenbeck's & v. Rosenstiel's (2003) key competencies (classes of competencies).

In a last step, benefit profiles are reconciled with the action learning programs' designs (Chap. 5) to validate the hypothesis that an action learning program's design has a significant impact on the benefit the program yields.

Discussion of Results: All of the action learning programs studied were successful; however, benefit profiles varied widely. The programs significantly differed in which school of action learning they followed (Marsick & O'Neal, 1999). Action learning according to the Critical Reflection School appears to be particularly effective in developing leadership competency.

Critical Reflection is clearly more effective if combined with appropriate measures such as reflection-oriented behavioral training and accompanying coaching. However, the implementation aspect (activity- and implementation-oriented competencies) is supported through the use of project management methods. So far, this aspect has been highlighted only very slightly in the action learning literature. Process-oriented project management (Doppler & Lauterburg, 1994) helps support situational management and cope with resistance during action learning.

A further approach is project management's breakthrough strategy (Schaffer, 1997) as a consistent way of conducting results-oriented learning by doing. This procedure is especially suitable to assure that the company by using Action Learning gains a direct benefit through the projects – in addition to the development of leadership competency.

All of the management development programs analyzed were conducted as action learning in addition to their participants' daily responsibilities. Teams that were well mixed according to all of the established criteria (e.g., location, function, training, etc.) jointly worked on a task. The results of this publication suggest that in such settings, it is particularly action learning according to the Critical Reflection School that will strongly enhance personality development and the development of leadership competency.

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