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Action Learning in Management Development Programs

Action learning is often 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).

The question is how much the achievement of both objectives – development of leadership competency and an immediate benefit for business – directly depends on the design and execution of an action learning program.

To answer this question three management development programs of major companies were selected that have each used action learning in different ways. The companies belong to different industries (logistics, electronics, and utilities), in which they are key players.

All of the management development programs analyzed were conducted as action learning in addition to their participants' daily responsibilities. Sets that were well mixed according to all of the established criteria (e.g., location, function, training, etc.)

jointly worked on a task.

The action learning programs differed in three respects

1. The action learning school they followed (Marsick & O'Neill, 1999) – tacit, scientific, experiential and/or critical reflection.
2. The project philosophies which were used – classical project management, process

orientation as used in change projects and/or the breakthrough strategy approach with its strong output orientation.

3. In each program action learning was accompanied by further activities like behavioral training (role plays, communication etc.), business school inputs (marketing, business development etc.) and/or personality development training (feedback, coaching, reflecting team etc.)

To determine the immediate action learning benefit for a company, it was checked whether an action learning set's results have passed the test of practice and are being used. So one set developed and implemented an employee suggestion system which was operated successfully in the company afterwards.

Executive development (a management development program's central concern), however, is measured using a set of competencies that are relevant for executives, such as

problem solution and implementation, team, network and social competencies, business and innovation competencies and reflection. Erpenbeck & v. Rosenstiel (2003) define competencies as "dispositions of self-organized action".

All of the action learning programs studied were successful; however, benefit profiles varied widely.

1. **Action learning schools:** Although each program combined elements of various schools they still had a main focus on one

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school. The program following the tacit school concentrating on implicit learning seemed to have the least developmental effect on the learners. Action learning according to the experiential and notably the critical reflection schools appeared to be particularly effective in developing leadership competencies and was also regarded as more challenging and helpful by most participants.

2. Project philosophy: Process orientation as in a change project with situational management understanding the messages of resistance in the field and using them for guiding the project seemed more helpful for action learning than classical well-structured project management alone. When combined with a consequent need for business impact like in Schaffer's (1997) breakthrough strategy learning by doing instead of merely analyzing apparently gets much more likely as was demonstrated in two programs.

3. Program designs: One of the management development programs offered well-structured business school contents beside the action learning activities. This "programmed knowledge" was mostly provided independently of the needs of the action learning sets. The participants sometimes experienced these lessons and their rather passive reception as much more com-

fortable and interesting than the effort of doing action learning. In this sense lessons and action learning could be counter-productive. The other two programs used behavioral training or even personality development training. These activities seemed to prepare and sensitize the participants for action learning, sharpening their observation of themselves and of others and their will to express these observations. There was also a certain counter-productive effect sometimes, because the training sessions were perceived as more playful and with less stress than real-world action learning, but the advantage of preparing the participants for reflection seemed to outweigh this effect by far.

Dr. Bernhard Hauser, director and founder of Bernhard Hauser Consulting – www.bhcg.biz Specialized for many years in action learning, change management, leadership training, team development and executive coaching. His programs focus on personality development as well as business impact to make leaders more successful.

The study was accepted as doctoral dissertation at the University of Munich, Department of Psychology as Hauser, B. (2006): Action Learning in Management Development. München und Mering: Hampp. (The book is available in German language only).

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