

The BMC approach to Action Learning



Benefits of action learning:

- ▷ Integrate skills from a training course into the work place
- ▷ Develop high potential employees
- ▷ Prepare people for promotion
- ▷ Support culture change within the business

Action Learning is a flexible and dynamic method for developing talented people within a company, providing highly tailored learning opportunities for key staff and can help generate culture change within an organisation.



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Action Learning

Introduction to Action Learning

BMC is a member of the International Foundation for Action Learning (IFAL).

We give advice and guidance on the design and implementation of Action Learning Programmes. We also provide ongoing support through assigning highly skilled 'set advisors' to participate in set meetings.

Action Learning, as developed by Prof. Reg Revans, is based on the concept of:

$$L = P + Q$$

This means that Learning **[L]** is based on Programmed Knowledge **[P]** (the things that can be taught) plus Questioning Insight **[Q]** (the ability to apply what has been taught to 'messy' real life problems) across a wide range of situations. So advocates of Action Learning believe that people learn best from trying things out in practice and reflecting on what happens as a result of their actions and why.

At the heart of the process are **real business problems** and **specific individuals** who are asked to solve them.

Of course there is nothing new about developing skills and changing organisations by involving employees in problem solving and the decision making process. Action Learning, however, provides a clear set of guidelines and disciplines to ensure that the approach actually 'works' in practice.



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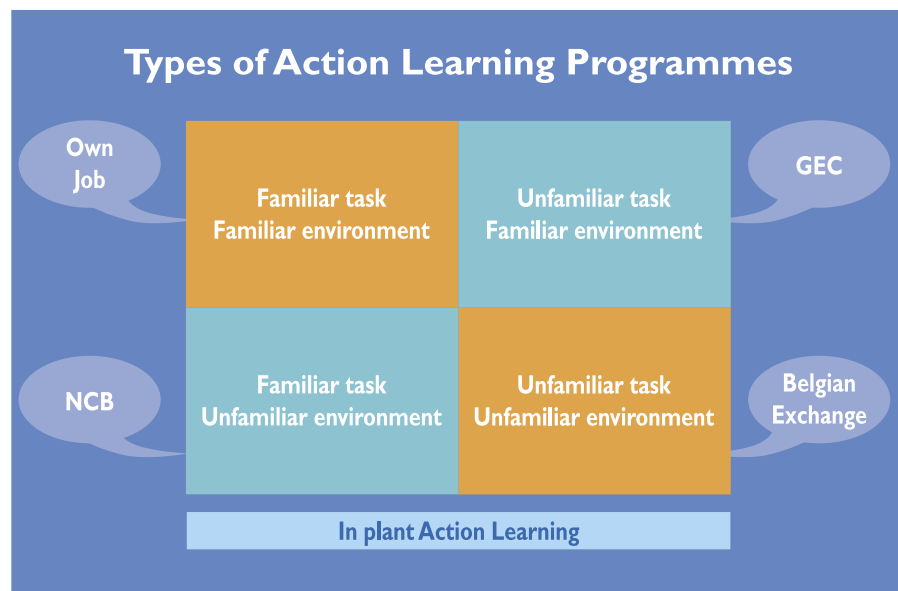
What format of Action Learning Programme is right for my business?

The first stage is to work with you to clarify the objectives of talent management in your organisation. Do you want to try to:

- ▷ retain people
- ▷ have more internal promotions
- ▷ conduct a risk assessment of the potential problems caused by over reliance on a few key people or over dependence on a key skill

Programmes can either be **external**, where participants from **different** organisations are involved and where meetings are rotated around the participating organisations.

Or they can be internal with managers from the same company meeting together to discuss their progress on their project work.



External 'Own job' Action Learning programmes were designed for those organisations wishing to develop managers by exposing them to other managers from quite different backgrounds. The idea being that people from different industries could challenge each others views of what was 'normal and acceptable' and thereby help to generate creative solutions to the problems that were posed. Internal programmes, on the other hand, are attractive because they are cost effective, easy to control and manage. In addition if each 'Set' or team of people who are attending the Action Learning meetings has a good mix of managers then functional barriers can be broken down.



What are the components of an Action Learning Programme?



An Action Learning programme consists of seven key elements. By changing the shape of these elements it is possible to use Action Learning to achieve a variety of different outcomes. We advise businesses on how to configure the components in order to achieve a specific aim or objective e.g. developing high potential managers or growing business leaders. We start with the nature of the problem to be addressed.

The Problem



The focus for any Action Learning programme is the problem or problems that are to be tackled. It follows therefore that problem selection is crucial to an effective programme.

The three main issues to consider here are that the:

- ▷ Problem(s) must reflect a real business need.
- ▷ There must be a genuine willingness by senior managers to have the problem(s) 'fixed' by the programme participants.
- ▷ A specific senior manager must be prepared to 'own' each of the problems selected and be willing to use his or her influence to ensure that any changes are actually put into practice.

The Sponsor



The Sponsor is the person who has the authority to ensure that the Action Learning programme runs its full course. In a large-scale programme this person will normally be the General Manager or Chief Executive.

The Client



The Client is a senior manager who takes ownership of a specific problem and its eventual solution. His/her role in an Action Learning programme is to delegate the responsibility for tackling the problem either to a specific individual or to a team of people. He/she is often defined as the person who 'knows and cares' about the problem and who can implement any changes that are suggested by the nominated problem solver(s).

The Fellow



The term 'fellow' is used to describe the people who are tasked with solving a problem on behalf of a 'client' i.e. the programme participants. Identifying the people with the right mix of skill and experience and at the appropriate level of seniority to engage with the Action Learning initiative is one of the key factors in determining the success of the programme.



The Action Learning Set

Participants in an Action Learning programme are assigned to a self-help group or 'Set' of around six to nine people. The Set meets once per fortnight and members tell each other about how their work is progressing and 'bounce' ideas off one another. In the Set 'fellows' learn with and from each other and as a consequence the development that they experience is greatly strengthened.

The importance of the Set is based on three key beliefs, namely that:

- ▷ Human beings learn best from reflected practice. That is by stepping back and thinking about what they are doing and why they are doing it.
- ▷ The best test of any learning is trying it out in action.
- ▷ The process of learning is greatly strengthened by regularly sharing the experience with others who are also learning by doing.

The Set provides an environment in which these beliefs can be put into practice.

The Set Adviser

Each Set has a 'set adviser' whose job it is to sit in on the regular team meetings to (a) help the participants to work effectively together to achieve the goals of their projects and, (b) capture the individual learning that is taking place. This is a highly skilled mentoring and facilitation role and one that is often filled by one of our consultants.

The Co-ordinator

The Co-ordinator monitors and controls progress of the Action Learning sets on a day-to-day basis and offers help to the team with their administrative arrangements e.g. time tabling meetings.



Example assignment

Developing senior management potential

The chief operating officer recognised that the senior management team were reluctant to identify and implement new initiatives, generally waiting for permission or direction from him and struggling to focus on the outcome which would deliver the greatest commercial benefit, becoming distracted by day to day activities rather than overall results.

The objective of the programme was to provide individuals with the skills and techniques to identify opportunities for performance and business improvement and to work as a team to implement these improvements; the underlying theme was to develop a greater emphasis on transformational rather than transactional leadership.

The solution involved a series of skills based workshops, one to one coaching and 'action learning set meetings' to support the individuals. The groups received input on key skills such as project management and business process improvement techniques and consultancy skills. Alongside this the set members worked on group dynamics, rapport building, influence and impact skills.

As a result of the programme participants have increased their individual capability to think both operationally and strategically and their effectiveness in implementing change and realising performance improvement. The organisation has benefited in the implementation of several successful projects which have resulted in savings of £1.1 million and participants feedback includes, *"...increased my self awareness around the impact I have and enhanced my ability to influence key stakeholders"*, *"...Improved problem solving, stakeholder management and decision making"* and *"I am able to focus on the areas I can really add value"*.

The next step

If you would like to know more about how we can help you use Action Learning please contact us

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