

The Action Learning Programme

Information File

Purpose

Many organisations are convinced of the effectiveness of Action Learning as a means of developing employees and of making real progress on important projects and tasks. We launched this programme because these organisations want their managers to work with people from other organisations so that they are exposed to challenge and to new ways of looking at things.

The Action Learning Programme is especially designed for managers where there are high expectations of significant contributions to their organisations as well as the need for continuing personal development.

The managers and their sponsors recognise the need to continue to develop - beyond the skills and techniques of the various courses which may be on offer - and that real opportunities exist to work on a business/personal development project which would immediately benefit from the application of this new learning.

Objectives

To provide participants with the learning opportunities and support mechanisms to engage in personal development, whilst making a difference through the successful execution of a business or personal development project.

How involvement works

The programme was initiated with Hewlett-Packard in 1996. Other organisations, whilst committed to the programme as part of their management and organisational development strategy, prefer more flexibility and fit in around the partner companies. Twenty other organisations have participated so far.

Target population

People taking part in The Action Learning Programme usually fit the following profile:

1. An experienced manager likely to head up a function or department, or a person having a significant/specialist contribution to the business.
2. A manager having tangible responsibility for a part of the business in a line or support role.

A person likely to be managing other managers or other specialists.

3. A person likely to have completed a number of 'conventional' management courses.
4. Individuals who want to continue their development via a project based approach.

A way of summarising this might be – experienced managers, typically middle managers and the lower end of senior management. There is a separate programme for Senior Managers. These terms are imprecise and size of organisation would be important in interpreting these. These terms are applicable to large organisations or large divisions of very large organisations.

Programme Structure

There are three main elements to the programme:

1. **The Set** - a small group, typically 5-6 people, who meet regularly, for one day each month for six months
2. **The Project or Task** that each person works on during the programme
3. **The Process** that the group adopts when working together.

In addition, each participant should have a **sponsor**, i.e. a more senior manager who has some responsibility for the individual, and who is able to sanction a work based project.

1. The Set

- a) The Set is the 'organisation structure' of the Action Learning programme. The task of set members is to focus on the action and learning of each individual, rather than the group as a whole. They act as a resource to each other and as a 'support and challenge' group.
- b) There will be five or six members in each 'action learning set' with participants from a mixture of the sponsoring organisations. There would not usually be more than one member from the same organisation - except where they were from different divisions. Also sets would not include managers from competing organisations.
- c) Each day is structured around time allocated to each set member. Each programme has six one-day meetings over a period of about six months.

2. The Project

‘Project’ is the word to describe what the person wants to achieve at the workplace during the programme. It can be almost any, task, issue or project as long as

- It is something for which the person has responsibility and can take action
- Lasts longer than one month. It does not need to last the entire length of the programme
- Has some tangible output that is of value to the person and their organisation

Action Learning is most valuable if it is approached as a ‘creating’ rather than a ‘problem solving’ process. That means it should be seen as bringing something into being rather than eliminating or moving away from something that you want to avoid. With this in mind, types of issues that make good projects or tasks include:

- a) An organisation or department issue which is important to the individual and the business, where there are clear outcomes and the person has the authority to make things happen;
- b) Personal responsibilities or opportunities that have wider implications than everyday difficulties: e.g. a relationship with a key customer, getting a new product launched with little support;
- c) A developmental issue – particular qualities or skills that are required to do your current job or to prepare you for a new job: for this kind of project/task it would be important to be able to outline the kind of activities that you would engage in during the programme.

Note: If any individual is having difficulty identifying a project for the programme Transition Partnerships will provide help.

3. The Process

- a) The set adviser’s role is to encourage the set – and each individual within it – to look, listen, question, think, understand and learn. In this sense the set advisor is part of the set.
- b) Initially the set adviser will help the group come together and will help with structuring the meeting. As the set progresses the participants are encouraged to take increased responsibility for running the set themselves.
- c) Each person has a specific time allocation during which they raise issues on which they wish to make progress; they then make specific action plans, which will be reviewed at the next meeting. It is up to the individuals to decide what they want to do with the time and what actions they choose to commit to at the end of their part of the day.
- d) Active listening, skilful questioning and challenging are the core of the action learning process. Giving advice, sharing anecdotes and recounting experience may be interesting but it is rarely helpful. Offering suggestions and interpretations can be helpful – it is up to the individual to decide this.
- e) Each participant is invited to commit to actions on his/her project or task to be implemented before the next meeting and to report back at the next meeting.
- f) At each meeting time is allowed for a review the learning from each session. This reflection is a key part of action learning.

Some examples of projects:

- reorganising a sales team
- launching a radical change in an established function
- a major outsourcing project
- developing some new software
- improving communications throughout an organisation
- reorganising the production line
- starting a new role
- implementing a new business planning model
- managing a new acquisition
- creating a new business team
- leading a new product development team
- a personal development plan

$$\begin{array}{c}
 \text{Learning} \\
 = \\
 \text{Programmed knowledge} \\
 + \\
 \text{Questioning} \\
 + \\
 \text{Acting} \\
 + \\
 \text{Reflecting}
 \end{array}$$

A learning equation which applies to Action Learning

Benefits of Action Learning

Prospective participants and sponsors will be interested to know the benefits of this action learning programme.

- It is action oriented
- Delivers ‘useable’ learning
- Adds significant value to work projects
- Develops listening, questioning and coaching skills
- Draws on the experience of others
- Integrates high level goals with day-to-day actions
- Stimulates thinking ‘outside the box’
- High return on time invested

Further Information can be obtained from:

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Administration

Administration details are:

1. The programme is administered by Transition Partnerships LLP.
2. Bookings should be confirmed in writing or by email to the contact address below with the necessary invoicing information.
3. Transition Partnerships LLP
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Hemingford Grey
Huntingdon
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3. Joining details will be sent to individuals by their set advisor.
4. Cost. £3,100 plus VAT per participant.
5. Meeting dates are set in advance and can be changed with the agreement of the set members.
6. Meetings will be at a suitable location for set members.
7. The set adviser will produce brief notes after each meeting. These will be circulated confidentially to set members.

Calendar

Programmes start regularly throughout the year.

Participating organisations: Abbey Life, Agilent Technologies, Alstom, BBC, Bristol & West, British Bakeries, Brose, BT, Carlsberg Tetley, CEGELEC Industrial Controls, CSC Europe, Eli Lilly, GlaxoSmithKline, HBOS, Hewlett-Packard, Honda UK, ICI, Intercontinental Hotels, Jaguar Cars, National Air Traffic Services, Parkside Community Healthcare Trust, PLP, QinetiQ, R3, RMC, Roche Products, TIG, Thames Water, Warwick University, Whipps Cross Hospital.