

Action Learning: 3 Way Benefit Model, How Positive impact on individuals facilitates the Management and the Organization?

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to develop a model that highlights how action learning results in benefits for individuals, management and the organization. Model is developed through extensive review of existing literature while the main focus was on case studies. It was found that action learning results in benefits at all levels in the organization. Action learning programs in the organization would result in creative problem solving, raising employee voice, creating organizational change, forming a learning organization. Little research is available on the implication of action learning in the organization. The present study seeks to contribute to the gap in existing literature by proposing a model that details on how action learning affects individuals, management and the organization.

Key Words: Action Learning, Organizational Change, Employee Voice

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Action Learning Concept

The Birth of Action Learning is attributed to Mr. William Reginald Revans who first coined the term in the coal mines of England and Wales, striking for Revans was the fact that Managers

who experienced organisational problems talked through their difficulties and personally took action with support of their colleagues. This notion of 5 to 6 people working together on their own and others problems means a productive way of inspiring in turbulent times.

The concept of action learning is somewhat nebulous, Although Revans himself did not come up with a specific definition for the concept however a few points that summarize the concept were identified. Revans (1998) is of the opinion that

- Questions that have yet defied solutions are offered a chance by the problem solving concept of Action Learning.
- “Learning is cradled in the Task”, interrogating the activity, reflection on the task helps in understanding the tasks which result in a difficulty.
- Although Action Learning deals with resolution of problems but there is no single course of action.

Above features of the action learning concept advertise the notion that Action Learning makes use of the individual’s cognitive abilities to think, analyse, and solve problems. A SET of 4 to 6 people is created to perform Action learning (Revans 1998, Johnson, 1998) that is helped by a Facilitator who Johnson (1998) finds a creator of an environment that is congenial to learn. Revans (1998) referred to the facilitator as “Integrator”. Action Learning is about changing behaviour of people at work, it is a mean to empower, engage, enhance commitment and create ownership to problems by finding solutions through learning, taking initiatives and more importantly enhancing learning and making the change happens through constant action and reflection.

The Action Learning Equation

The concept of action learning was equated by Revans (1998) as

$$L = P + Q$$

Learning takes place through insightful questioning of the programmed knowledge people have, however an important link was found missing in his equation, i-e is off implementation. Inglis

(1994) further proposed the equation to include an important aspect of Implementation and proposed

$$L = P + Q + I,$$

The above equation could still be referred to as missing an important aspect of Reflection, as according to Simmonds (2003) learning is not complete without reflection

$$A - R \neq L$$

It is argued that Inglis formula is still incomplete; the current study will propose a more comprehensive equation. Action learning results in variety of benefits, The benefits discussed here are

1. Communication
 - a. Employee Voice
 - b. Employee Involvement and Commitment
 - c. Participation
 - d. Partnership
2. Learning
3. Change

3 – Way Benefits of Action Learning

The benefits of action learning could arguably be divided in 3 ways; for Individuals, Top Management and the Business.

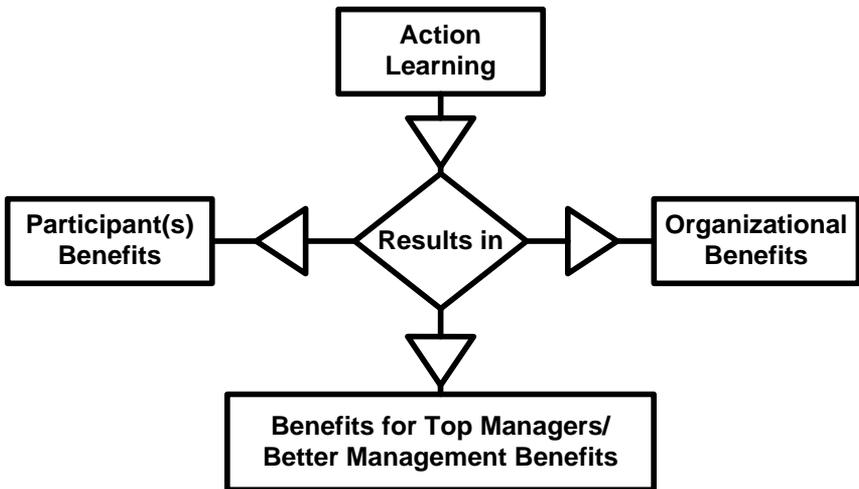


Figure 1. 3 – Way Benefit Model.

Communication

Figure 2 Suggests that the process starts off with the establishment of a link through the exchange of information. Action learning involves people coming together to solve real work problems. It can be inferred that Action Learning gives individuals a platform to ask Questions and find answers or open up and speak their mind as it gives them a feeling of not being alone with problems. And this forms the basis for the interaction. The following graphical demonstration helps understand how the communication in the set works.

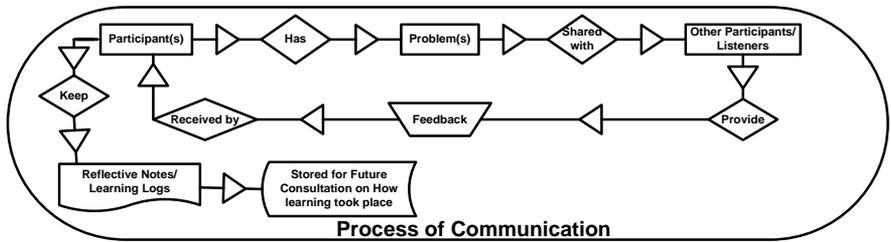


Figure 2. Action Learning: The Process of Communication.

Starting with the communication of issues, people face, the benefits start to flow from the concepts that are being discussed below.

Employee Voice. Rollinson and Dundon (2007) sum up different processes that determine employees ‘SAY’ at work which includes

- Involvement
- Participation
- Partnership

Involvement and Commitment: Gennard and Judge (2005) assert that employee involvement is designed to produce a committed workforce which is more likely to contribute to efficient operation of an organization but requires commitment strategies where employees contribute their own ideas not only to improve their performance but also for the product or service provided. The assertion support the notion that Action learning would aid in

achieving commitment as it gives employees a platform for involvement.

Action Learning through SET meetings offers an opportunity to discuss the business without any threat of the prospects of sharing information, it helped managers (Who were set members) achieve new self-fulfilment and job satisfaction, which according to Linz (2003) results in Organizational Commitment.

The increased commitment gives the top management an understanding of the employee's abilities and weaknesses, identified pro-active and strategic thinkers that brings management in a good position to manage their human resources as they can shape the individuals effectively who can contribute to the organization (Armstrong, 2003). Thus it could help in planning HR and also development of teams as now the management has good understanding of the abilities of the their employees. Considering the involvement provided by the action learning in light of the assertion by Gennard and judge it won't be wrong to say that action learning works as company's strategy to involve its staff to evolve commitment.

This increased commitment facilitates the achievement of organizational goals as commitment to organization means binding oneself to the organizational goals and choosing the course of action which leads to achievement of organizational goals (Cohen, 2007) that is one of the outcomes from the Adam and Dixon (1997) study whereby the process of communication helped them to have a clear and compelling goals to which all members were committed. Thus the commitment developed in the set through the process of communication helped the organization in creating a sense of responsibility on part of the employees that contributed to the achievement of its objective. The findings from the case studies cement the notion that if involved the employees become more dedicated to the organization that results in far reaching benefits for the organization.

Participation: Farnham (2000) refers to participation as employee share in making enterprise or corporate decisions

whereas Gennard and Judge (2005) points out that participation can help in adapting new methods of working, meeting customer needs and an opportunity to influence and participating in decisions likely to affect employee interests.

Action learning offered every participant a chance to communicate; SET members have their own airspace where they could provide input on their problems. Clarke et al (2006) highlight this aspect of action learning and point out that it gives members a 'SPACE' of their own where they can think of long term for the business rather than short term which they regularly do in their office. The reason to think towards the betterment of the organizations may well be attributed to the sense of trust shown by the Management.

Davey *et al* (2002) referred to sets activity was referred as a 'Mechanism' giving busy managers 'Time to Think' and in collaboration of colleagues test validity of new ideas. The set members began to address issues which were although part of regular practices but laid 'Dormant' as their 'common sense' suggested that existing ways of working was normal. The better working practices achieved through action learning potentially have direct impact on customers, evident from the study conducted by Davey et al (2002) suggest that it can foster understanding of clients plus make positive impression on potential clients as better working practices can potentially result in better service, improved quality, effective and efficient product and service, all of which contributes to reduced time for production and delivery of product/service.

Partnership: Getting a chance to participate in the process of "decision making" gives birth to the notion of Partnership, where employee feels that the loss of the organization is their loss. Revans (1998) called the Set members "Partners in Adversity". This can be attributed to the support, confidence, collaboration, one gets from each other through the process to get out of the fears and discomfort of sharing of information. The partnering relation is evident in the case of Davey et al (2002) where members became

“Partners” with the support of set Advisor who helped them explore issues through asking questions. The importance of this is obvious as it sets the stage for openness in sharing of ideas, getting involved, willingness to contribute and importantly unanimous implementation of ideas. Adams and Dixon (1997) study takes a similar view where Success of the set is attributed to the Support from team, and the set advisor.

It can be asserted that partnership paves the way for better contacts and more importantly the implementation of ideas which is the essence of action learning. The partnership could be termed as “Organizational Level Partnership” and the reason for this is that participants came together from different departments and are involved in a process of sharing and commitment. This will have profound implications on the individuals and organization in terms of development of interpersonal skills, barriers to change, and importantly the transfer of knowledge. It can be concluded on basis of results from the case studies that giving voice to the employees doesn’t only benefits the employee, it facilitates organizations a great deal as well, Rollinson and Dundon (2007) further strengthen above assertion by referring to some of the potential; benefits of employee participation and include commercial benefits to the organization and contribution to management efficiency and most importantly the opportunity to resolve potential conflicts which might arise from lack of commitment, satisfaction, trust and loyalty.

Learning

Weinstein (1995) identifies the reason for which the learning is important; and asserts that Yesterdays answers are not necessarily those for tomorrow. This is true for the individuals, Management and the organization, new challenges faced by the organizations pose threat for the individuals to devise ways to cope with the issues and emerge with success.

Action learning offers organizations an approach to learn, Evident from a Set Members comment in the Case Study by Davey

et al (2002) who identified Action Learning as the basis for the way forward and achieving efficiency and referred to it as the only way for Learning. The reason could be attributed to ease of sharing information, questioning, and experience that the set members bring to the set and most importantly the commitment, sense of responsibility, as learning can never be forced, it has to be by will of the person, Action learning helps create that 'WILL' for learning.

Learning starts from individuals and won't have its effect unless or until the individuals apply what they have learned. Study of Adams and Dixon (1997) suggests learning about the group dynamics and content knowledge facilitates the work environment. Group dynamics refer to the interpersonal skills members acquire through the programme as it gives them a chance to work with other people thus helping them to learn better ways of communication, motivation, independence, confidence, getting involved and participation whereas members learnt more about the organizational content and working, from different people with whom they were involved on the programme. Apart from the rich learning experience for the individuals which transferred to the work environment the organization also benefits from Solved problems, new skills of communication which are facilitated through learning from each other, problem solving and team development.

The set involves people coming together with different attitudes, skills, aptitudes, and behaviours with an intention of sharing their problems and finding solution, this notion of sharing with others itself gives birth to learning as one might know what other people might do. In a more appropriate and formal terms we can refer to it as learning from experience which resulted in case of Adam and Dixon where set members learnt from there expert members who had 'Content' and 'Project Management Skills'.

An important ingredient to learning, change and action is reflection, reflecting back on what is learnt makes learning an effective process. As mentioned earlier learning is not complete

without reflection. Although Inglis (1994) added the implementation (I) to the Revans formula, but in light of Simmonds equation it can be said that learning is still not complete, so it can be suggested that questioning the programmed knowledge and after implementing the ideas, to complete the process of learning it should be added with reflection (R). The suggested advancement to the work of Inglis (1994) can be

$$L = (P + Q + I) + R$$

The proposed model of Learning, change, Action and Reflection brings together these three elements and also highlights their relationship with each other.

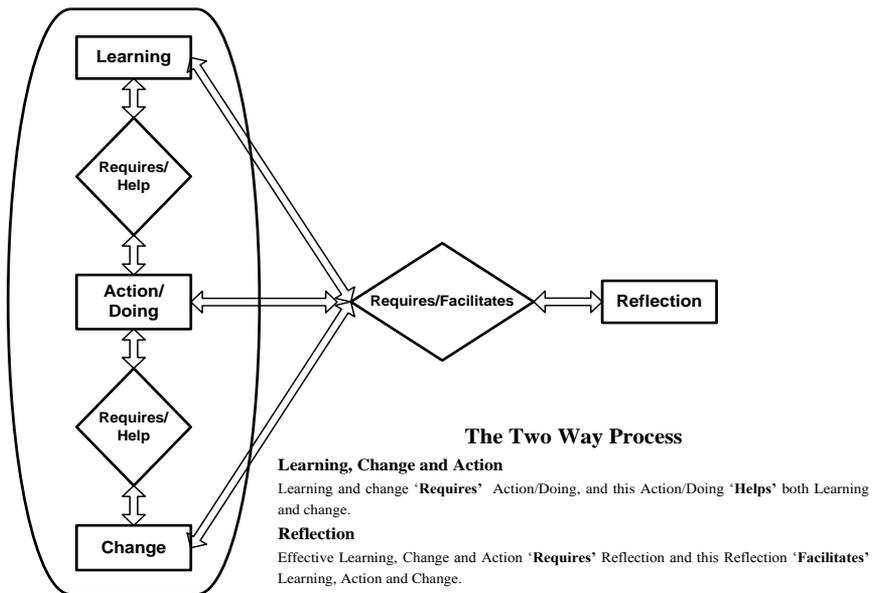


Figure 3. Two Way process – Learning, change, Action, and Reflection.

Building capabilities.

Cunnington et al (1994) points out one criterion for Learning Organization. In a learning organisation, leaders’ roles differ dramatically from that of the charismatic decision maker. (They) are responsible for building organisations where people are

continually expanding their capabilities to shape their future – that is, leaders are responsible for learning,

Referring to dictionary meaning of Capability, Oxford refers to it as the “power or ability to do something” or it can be said that it’s the ability to take action. Action learning approach helps individual take action through support and challenge of the set members but The Questions which might arise is that how Leaders are responsible for expanding people and in case of action learning the answers comes from O’Neil and Marsick (1999) who are of the opinion that the recommendations from the team will not appear very “credible” if members cannot function in an empowered, self-directed manner.

Davey et al (2002) study showed that the Set Members had the commitment of the chairman through establishment of mutual set of objectives which increased the trust and friendship between the two parties and facilitated the action and achievement of objectives Whereas in case Adams and Dixon (1997) action learning was already apart of Management Development effort and Senior management sponsored the programme which facilitated the process and showed management trust in the programme and in the empowerment of the employees.

Action Learning a Step towards Learning Organization.

Weinstein (1995) identifies 9 characteristics which are a step towards the learning organization.

Action Learning a Step towards Learning Organization

- Listening
- Questioning
- Self-Awareness and Confidence
- Willing to Open – Discussion
- Learn from Others
- Respect others
- Networking – Contacts
- Energetic, Motivated

- Ability to Change

Analysis of the various studies provide potent evidence that above mentioned characteristics can be identified in the organizations that are considered in the studies.

Change

Organizations today face problems, challenges, issue, and tasks that are diverse and highly complex, the question is how to they tackle them, the answer is to learn the way to solve them, and bring 'CHANGE'; Organization will have to make changes to their current practices to resolve problems or issues faced.

Action learning facilitate Organisational Change, Armstrong (2003), notes that the aim of Change is to get the ownership – a feeling amongst people that change is something that they are happy. Action learning provides members with confidence, knowledge, support and most importantly *Ownership* in change process that helps to identify their role and results in consent for change and rather than looking at senior management for leading the way they themselves recognise their role and become active participants and thus act as a tool for the implementation of change.

Action learning program in itself is a big change to both the people and the organization. Action learning helps businesses in making change happen. One of the objectives is to move away from the stereotypes and assumptions. This can be achieved through the set since it first identifies the requirement of the business, and thus help in moulding the organizational structure and working practices in way that would benefit the clients and ultimately the organization.

Ownership and responsibility for change plays a vital role as the members themselves devised strategies and practices for bringing change in the organization and apart from the empowerment the Organizational Level Partnership developed through heterogeneity of groups contributes to the change as it

helped in Acceptance for change at all levels and departments. The literature provides potent arguments in favour of the action learning programme that has resulted in helping business make change happen.

3-Way Benefit Model of Action Learning

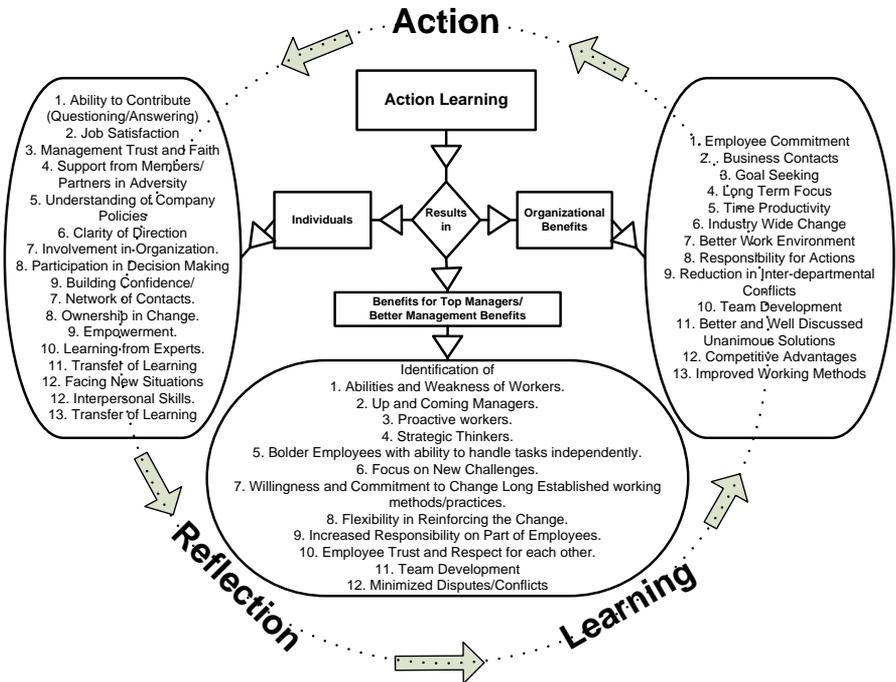


Figure 4. 3 – Way Benefit Model of Action Learning.

The Above Diagrammatic view summarizes the Benefits that are reaped from the Action Learning Programme. The Interpretation and Benefits pointed out are based on the Two Case Studies discussed in the report. The Benefits have been classified into 3 Categories.

1. Individual Benefits.
2. Benefits in Better Management/Benefits for the Top Management.
3. Organizational Benefits.

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