



THE TEN BEST PRACTICES FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT ACTION LEARNING PROJECTS

by Gregg Thompson

Leaders learn best when they immediately apply newly-learned practices and concepts to important challenges and opportunities facing their organizations. Action learning is a powerful leadership development process in which participants work on specifically designed project teams, receive feedback on their performance, reflect on their experiences and seek to incorporate the lessons learned into their day-to-day leadership activities. Unfortunately, most action learning programs suffer from poor planning and poor execution resulting in disappointing experiences for participants and sponsors alike. An increasing number of organizations are abandoning action learning, however, some leading organizations continue to make it the centerpiece of their highly effective leadership development programs. Here are the ten best practices employed by these organizations.

They:

1. **Select projects that are extraordinarily ambitious and mission-critical.** To attract and sustain the interest of all involved, action learning projects need to be bold and vital to the organization's raison d'être.
2. **Form highly diverse, cross-functional teams.** This process provides an excellent environment in which the participants can assess and increase their ability to work effectively with others who differ in some way.
3. **Assign participants to projects in which they have little or no expertise.** This stretches participants and requires them to use their leadership skills (such as connecting, influencing and communicating) to gain resources and support from others.
4. **Determine clear, stretch outcomes for the action learning projects** (e.g. increase margins by 25%). While the outcomes should be clear, the best path forward should be unclear, requiring participants to balance complex, competing issues and explore uncharted territory.
5. **Set time frames that are clear and tight.** To keep an intense focus on the projects, provide participants with no more than three months for completion.
6. **Challenge participants to implement their projects.** Encourage teams not to simply conduct a study and make recommendations but, rather, lead a significant change initiative through to conclusion.
7. **Enlist qualified executive team sponsors.** Ensure that sponsors have a stake in the project, sufficient availability, useful resources and strong coaching/mentoring skills.
8. **Specify milestones, prototype reviews and presentation dress rehearsals.** The probability that the projects will result in high-value outcomes is significantly increased when the participants are provided opportunities for feedback and course correction.
9. **Insist on both quantitative and qualitative success measures.** Commission the participants to create a comprehensive measurement system that will include the impact on all relevant financial, customer and organizational improvements.
10. **Provide each participant with an experienced leadership coach.** This provides participants with the opportunity to clarify their most important learning, identify their personal development priorities and commit to major shifts in their leadership effectiveness.