Action Learning Based Skills Development

Developing superior knowledge, skills and attitudes by tackling ‘real life problems’
action learning

Group coaching based skills development

Focus on real life issues
Benefit from peer group mentoring
Develop questioning capabilities

This six-month programme is for people who want to develop their skills so that they can reach their full potential as a leader, manager, technical expert or consultant.

The work is based on the Action Learning Philosophy, developed by Professor Reg Revans. At the heart of Action Learning is the idea that people learn best from (i) trying things out in real life situations and (ii) sharing the results of their efforts with a peer-coaching group, who provide support, advice, guidance and encouragement.

Executive summary

Engagement outcomes

This programme uses the Action Learning Philosophy to develop knowledge skills and attitudes in a tailored yet systematic way.
The Action Learning based skills development programme has seven stages:

1. Initial Needs Assessment
2. Assigning Clients
3. Launch Workshop for participants
4. Action Learning Meetings (over a six month period)
5. Demonstrating Value (coaching on writing ‘final reports’)
6. Closure Workshop
7. Closure Report

The programme begins with an initial needs assessment, where each participant identifies a ‘real life’ challenge, issue or problem that they need to address if he/she is to move up a gear in terms of his or her performance. The needs can be self-generated by each participant, or it can be agreed informally as part of discussion with a consultant or mentor. It can also be done formally as part of an output from a development centre or performance appraisal process. Alternatively, the needs definition might focus on a business initiative e.g. the challenge involved in implementing a restructure or leading a change management programme. The Boulden consultant will give detailed advice on which of these approaches should be adopted.

An important aspect of Action Learning is that each participant either chooses a ‘Client’ or has one assigned to them. The Client is a senior manager (who can be the person’s line manager) that takes a personal interest in the way that the participant (or ‘fellow’ in Action Learning jargon) is progressing as they work on their issue or challenge. In AL they are described as a person who “knows, cares and can.” That is they know about the issues being addressed care that they are dealt with and can intervene (if necessary) to make things happen e.g. to remove roadblocks.

The Launch Workshop is designed to clarify the Action Learning philosophy; allow participants to review and refine their goals; build a sense of team-work and trust. The content includes:

- The Action Learning Philosophy
- The Action Learning Equation
- The elements of an Action Learning programme
- Refining the goals for the programme
- How to run a Set Meeting
- Typical agenda for an Action Learning meeting
- House rules and their impact on the Set
- Making the best use of the Set Advisor
- Working with the ‘Client’
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Programme structure

Action Learning Meetings
Six months

The Set Members (or fellows) work to address their personal development issues that have been identified during the needs analysis phase.

As they work on their ‘development needs’ they meet once a month for six months with a Boulden Set Advisor. As they attend these meetings the set members discuss their progress and as they do so they mentor, challenge, coach and advise one another.

The intense listening and complete focus that set members give one another as they present their issues, and the questions that arise in response to what has (or has not) been said, creates a powerful development experience and provides a strong impetus to new action. By ‘learning with and from’ one another in this way the group strengthen and hone their ability to make changes to the way they do things in the real world of work and develop their skills. The role of the Boulden Set Advisor is to support the participants and ensure that personal learning points are developed and explored. The Boulden Set Advisor will also (if appropriate) recommend specific reading, administer psychometric profiles and/or run micro training sessions on topics requested by the group.

During this time Set Members should also keep in contact with their Clients who can give them additional assistance and insights as they develop their capabilities.

Towards the end of the six month long Action Learning phase there is a half-day ‘Demonstrating Value Coaching Session’ during which the participants are given ‘pre work’ to help them design their closing presentations. These presentations should clearly show how (i) they as individuals and (ii) the organisation as a whole, have gained from the Action Learning process. They then practise their talks and are given advice on making their delivery compelling and charismatic.

At the end of the six months each participant writes a one-page report on how they have developed their capabilities during the Action Learning process. They then present these reports at a half-day closure workshop to the Client group. The success of the programme is then discussed and the Action Learning initiative is formally ‘closed’.

The Boulden consultant collates the individual presentations made by the programme participants during the closure workshop and creates a summary report that captures the outcomes of the initiative and highlights the key learning points. It also captures the return on investment of the programme.
Action Learning, as developed by Professor 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 Skills \( Q \) (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
- Structured counselling in real work situations
- Regularly sharing the experience with those who are also learning by doing

There are a variety of formats for Action Learning and the ‘Own Job’ version that is recommended here is used to build a bridge between a development opportunity, and the challenge of changing behaviour and improving performance in the ‘real world’. This means that delegates are placed in a peer-coaching group (or ‘Set’) of six to nine people and asked to carry out a six month long “project” based on developing their knowledge, skills and attitudes so that they can raise their performance to a higher level. As each participant works to develop their skills he/she meets his/her fellow course participants, once a month, over a six-month period.

The Set members provide each other with advice and guidance in these group coaching sessions and in doing so they learn with and from each other. To further strengthen this ‘learning by doing’ process, a Boulden consultant facilitates these monthly sessions and provides additional support to the Set members. The learning and development that takes place in an Action Learning Set is (by its very nature) tailor made to the needs of each individual person and to the requirements of the organisation. In addition, by emphasising individual initiative, plus group support, it greatly enhances the self-confidence and self-reliance of the participants.
Virtual World

We can, if appropriate, run our programmes on a remote basis, either through telephone conferencing or (where the technology infrastructure permits), through video conferencing. This method allows people from different locations, countries’ and regions to participate in the initiative in a way that would not be practical using face to face meetings.

Expert Coaches

We offer experienced professionals with proven business backgrounds – not novice consultants. Our consultants are all highly qualified with backgrounds in Psychology, Coaching, NLP and Action Learning. In addition we have access to best practise leadership and management capabilities and the latest research findings.

Our experts regularly deal with senior managers across a range of industries and are commercially focused and pragmatic. They are also open, honest and prepared to challenge the status quo.

The next step

Further information is available by contacting Boulden Executive Coaching at:

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