

## Action & Learning = Change<sup>1</sup>

By Allen Hirsh

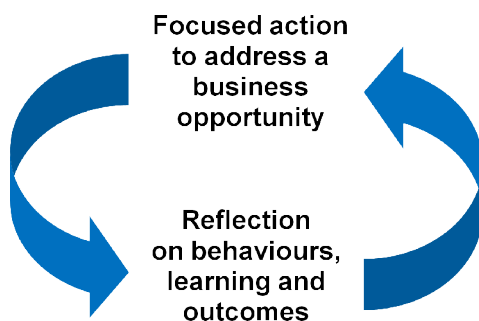
A simple definition of Action Learning is "learning by doing." When used in a structured environment and linked to business projects that are meaningful to senior management and participants, there is great opportunity to serve the dual objectives of driving progressive change and developing leaders.

Over the years, colleagues at [NextGenLeaders](#) have helped structure different types of action learning projects and coach sponsors and team members towards successful outcomes.

This **Insight** presents some of the critical success factors and check point questions that we have found useful, to help you maximize your investment.

### Origins

In the 1950's and 60's Reginald Revans started using the "action philosophy" in the UK. This was a way to promote both business and personal improvement through practical projects of interest to the organization and the participants.



By assigning a team of highly capable people to a strategic business issue, and creating an environment for them that encourages innovation, the organization helps increase its odds of successful change implementation. One of our colleagues described this as giving participants a *'license to speed.'*

<sup>1</sup> David Dotlich and Jim Noel's book [Action Learning: How The World's Top Companies Are Recreating Their Leaders and Themselves](#) is one of the best resources on this topic, and also the source of this powerful equation.

Learning by experience is more effective when it is treated as a conscious and reflective process. By supporting the leadership development agendas of team members with coaching and a deliberate focus on team reflection and examination of consequences, we are able to deepen the leadership development experiences and *'stickiness'* of the learning (compared to traditional classroom training).

Action Learning gives organizations the power to make change happen, while helping leaders evolve.

### Critical Success Factors

Keep the following themes in mind as you design and execute Action Learning teams. The questions serve as a good acid test about whether you've added the right mix of ingredients for success.

#### 1. The Project has clear business value

If the project opportunity is not squarely on the business agenda, it will not get the executive profile and attention it will require, and runs the risk of being seen as academic or of lower priority. The project purpose and outcomes must be valued in order to gain traction.

#### Nail down:

- What are the expected outcomes and benefits your project could generate; e.g., economic, social, technical, environmental?
- Why is your project a priority; why will it add real value to the organization?
- What is the impact and consequence if this project is not pursued?

#### 2. There is clear, deliberate, active and effective executive sponsorship

Effective executive sponsors have a vested interest in the success of the project work. They are keenly invested in both the business outcomes of the project and learning objectives of the team members. Successful sponsors hold the team leader and members accountable for results.

## Nail down:

- As a sponsor, why would you want to be actively engaged with this specific project?
- How will the sponsor reinforce his/her accountability relationship with the team?
- What might interfere with the sponsor's effective support and sponsorship?

## 3. The project work has high potential to be meaningful to the participants

Chances are you will put your best people and 'rising stars' on to your most important projects. They will bring natural energy and commitment to the team. Reinforce this with the opportunity to make a real difference on an important topic and you've got a winning combination.

## Nail down:

- What will make this specific project attractive to the team members?
- How can we ensure that team members have a meaningful experience working on the project?
- Will the challenges of the project provide each individual with learning about their own leadership approach and style, and opportunity to further develop strengths?

## 4. The team is well selected and structured in terms of size, composition and diversity to reflect business and learning objectives

Be very deliberate about how you design and staff these teams. Factors to be taken into account include: skills; experience and success track record; chemistry; leadership style and potential group dynamics; longer term career aspirations and stretch potential.

## Nail down:

- What skills and capabilities are required to generate a successful outcome?
- What are the specific learning objectives, needs and goals of team members?
- How will the diversity of the team drive innovation and healthy team dynamics?

## 5. The project is well scoped and achievable

Whether it is a focused one month assignment or a six month project, the work needs to be realistic. We've all seen 'boil the ocean' type projects where 'scope creep' has taken over. The requisite accountabilities, authorities, time and resource commitments need to be well determined with the project sponsor.

## Nail down:

- Is the project scope achievable given the timeline and parameters?
- Are team members and sponsor genuinely committed to the Project Charter?
- What are your greatest concerns about delivering results (e.g. budget, time, quality), and how are these being addressed?

## 6. Apply rigorous project management disciplines

Action Learning projects are **different** than other projects because they put more attention on reflection, coaching, team process and the learning agenda. They are **similar** to other forms and types of successful projects, because they need active, effective project management.

## Nail down:

- What is your project management game plan toolkit and resources?
- Do team members have specific roles - e.g., team leader, project manager, researcher, team historian/recorder, facilitator, etc.?
- Are there any accountability and authority issues 'lurking in the weeds'?

## 7. Action coaching is used to help quickly create a high performance team

Coaching has probably been the fastest growing and most successful organization development tactic over the past ten years. When applied to Action Learning projects, coaching can provide a rich third party perspective to help the team stay focused on its business agenda, while also exploring Individual and team learning objectives.

## Nail down:

- What specific needs and expectations do individuals and the team as a whole have regarding their coach? (and vice-versa)
- What are the highest and best uses for coaching? (assuming a limited coaching budget)
- What is the preferred relationship between the coach and the project sponsor?

## 8. A safe environment is established, characterized by high levels of trust among team members and sponsor

Balancing tasks and process; providing enough room for experimentation and mistakes; learning how to have fun together and fight well together; quickly moving through *'forming, storming, and norming'* stages to becoming a high performing team. These are key examples of the team building challenges that await your action learning team.

## Nail down:

- Will the inherent challenges of your project provide the members with the right team building opportunities?
- What are the ground rules?
- How will the team establish, monitor and sustain healthy group dynamics?

## 9. Make it feedback rich

Action Learning assignments provide great opportunities for useful feedback that is often not received or given in day-to-day work. The best teams incorporate feedback into everything they do, and it becomes part of a natural rhythm rather than a forced, deliberate and typically painful experience.

## Nail down:

- How will the team establish and sustain commitment to open and honest feedback?
- What process will be used to keep the feedback specific, behaviorally descriptive, balanced, respectful, focused, timely and actionable?
- How will the team constructively deal with conflict and tough conversations, vs. aiming for easy consensus and issue avoidance?

## 10. The project has profile and visibility

Great projects have helped build great careers. An effective sponsor will create and seize opportunities to spotlight and celebrate the achievements and successes of the team and its members.

## Nail down:

- What is your core story line and message of the project? Does it generate a clear and compelling case for change?
- Does the team have a communication strategy? Have the right stakeholders been engaged?
- Beyond an executive presentation at the end of the project, are there other opportunities and forums for promoting the progress and outcomes of the project?

## Teaming Up

We welcome the opportunity to talk with you more about your action learning agenda, and how you can accelerate the execution of your projects and the development of your leaders.

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NextGenLeaders® is a network of highly experienced colleagues working together to serve clients. We offer a range of management consulting services including strategy implementation, organization design, top team development, leadership assessment, coaching and development, and change management.



Allen Hirsh is the founder of NextGenLeaders®. With 30 years of experience helping clients design and execute their strategic agenda, and assess and develop their leadership capabilities, Allen is known for his collaborative, creative and energetic style.

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We welcome feedback to this [Insight](#).

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