



PRAXIS – ESTABLISHING ACTION LEARNING’S DEEPER VALUE IN HIGH-POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

BY CORI HILL

June 2013

Nearly 40 percent of Action Learning programs produce tangible results; but all too often when the project ends, the learning does, too. Korn/Ferry research reveals that when “critical reflection skills” are added into program design, participants “learn how to learn” – effectively improving their long-term learning agility, and maximizing action learning’s ROI.

People identified as having high potential for a given role generally share some common characteristics. They thrive on challenge, risk, and visibility. Their drive and energy keeps them focused on moving forward, often without taking the time to reflect on what they’re learning from their leadership experiences. While this may be inherent to their nature, if organizations miss out on the vital role critical reflection plays in development, the overall impact of an action learning program can be severely diminished.

Problem-solving alone doesn’t maximize true learning

It’s well accepted that due to constantly changing organizational contexts, leaders in organizations must be agile and able to continuously learn and grow. To facilitate learning, action learning has become a standard component of high-potential development programs. However, the full value of action learning is often undermined by a lack of balance between action and learning. While there are divergent definitions of action learning, it’s widely agreed that learning occurs when a group of participants solve a real-life business challenge together. So, the question is not whether learning occurs, it’s how to maximize a mindset of continual learning habits that will not end when the project does. In an action learning environment, simply finding a solution to a problem, whether informally or as a team, does not serve the real purpose of action learning. Solving the problem together as a team with a high focus on results is also not adequate to maximize learning. Something more is required if action learning teams are to both solve problems and reap the most benefit to become agile learners. We call this Balanced Action Learning or “praxis” – a term taken from the ancient Greeks that connotes “practical,” to which the end goal was action.

The table below illustrates the balance between learning and results:

Maximizing Impact	High Focus on Results	Task Force	ACTION LEARNING NIRVANA Balanced Action Learning (Praxis)
	Low Focus on Results	Informal On-the-Job Project	Leadership Development Exercise
		Low Focus on Learning	High Focus on Learning
		Maximizing Learning	

Establish continual learning habits to ensure lasting agility

For action learning to create maximum value with high-potential leaders, it must produce meaningful action and generate first and second order learning benefits (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith 1985). First order learning occurs within a framework where action takes place and the learner observes that action. First order learning benefits are those that come as a result of learning from the actions and consequences of the project itself. By contrast, second order learning benefits are those that come as a result of “learning how to learn” because of how the project supports and teaches self-regulated learning. Second order learning goes beyond first order learning by getting participants to use critical thinking skills to explore how they observe. It’s based on the principle that assessing and changing the way people observe can cause them to break out of old mental models, and lead to fresh insights, new points of view, and different actions and results in the future. It asks reflective questions and gets leaders to think about why they think the way they do. It is the basis for true continual learning. Organizations that couple learning agility with a culture that supports continual learning, equip their learning agile leaders to create organizational agility.

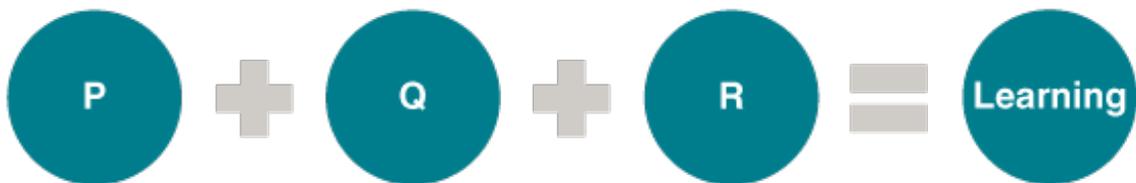
In order to produce both first and second order learning benefits, action learning programs must balance action with reflection. Programs must be designed to drive continual learning and not just be a one-time learning experience. To do this, collaborative, critical reflection that build “habits of mind” in the use of critical thinking skills must be an integral component. By taking a praxis approach, theory, lessons, and skills will be deliberately practiced in a context that reinforces how learning is achieved. Leaders “learn how to learn” and take those skills into future situations. Praxis-based action learning programs fully leverage action learning’s maximum value.

Praxis leverages the full ROI of action learning

Today's organizations need agile learners equipped and enabled to continually learn.

This means that they need to ensure that they are leveraging:

1. The **P**rogrammed knowledge already resident in their high-potential group
2. Active **Q**uestioning by peers, sponsors, mentors, and an experienced action learning coach to foster group discussion and sharing of knowledge (this is where new ideas emerge), then put into practice (results demonstrated and experienced)
3. Critical **R**eflection skills to form habits of mind and enable the deliberate practice of continuous learning



Participants in praxis-oriented action learning develop critical reflection habits that contribute to their own agility and, through them, the performance capacity of the organization. This added value is where HR leaders can drive ROI by ensuring that their investment is maximized to provide a longer-term value. Leaders who have solved a specific problem may know how to solve that problem again; leaders who develop a learning mindset know not only how to solve it, but how to adapt their thought processes to solve unfamiliar problems as they arise. The goal of high-potential development is to prepare leaders to lead in new and challenging circumstances of the next level or a pivotal assignment. To do this, they need to continuously learn. We propose that “learning how to learn” is more beneficial and the highest value goal for action learning.

It's simply more efficient and economical to optimize an action learning program to teach leaders how to learn and use that learning agility to confront future leadership challenges, than it is to implement a program where leaders solve a problem and walk away without a deeper understanding of the mindset, skills, and tools to continue to self-learn from what they experience in their careers.

It goes back to the old maxim: you can give someone a fish or you can teach them how to fish. The same principle applies: you can give a leader a learning experience or you can teach a leader how to learn from their experiences.

Praxis engages leaders in practicing habits of mind that are associated with longer term leadership careers. Those habits include the ability to acquire new knowledge and put it into action, self-reflect, seek critical feedback, and adapt new approaches to unfamiliar challenges. Praxis-based action learning provides a rich environment for high potentials to engage in deeper learning, while at the same time provides the real-world results these leaders crave as they invest their time and energy in the program.

Leaders that employ a learning mindset as they tackle real-world challenges offer the agility and responsiveness organizations need to effectively compete in the marketplace. By establishing a learning mindset/skillset in high-potential leaders, organizations also set the stage to deepen the value of future development initiatives. The value of leaders who know how to self-learn and foster/coach learning skills in others throughout their careers cannot be underestimated.

The essential components of Praxis-oriented action learning

Action learning as praxis emphasizes the following components:

- A diverse group of participants
- An action learning coach
- A knowledgeable internal sponsor
- A specific organizational problem without easily identifiable solutions
- Collaborative, critical reflection

A diverse group of participants.

The more diverse group of leaders included in the program, the richer starting point for collaborative dialogue in action learning. Selecting high-potential leaders from across the organization and bringing them together to work on a challenge creates a greater depth of individual programmed knowledge to draw from, compared to choosing only those leaders who have experience in the function or area of the problem. The richer the starting diversity of knowledge, the better the outcomes will be.

An action learning coach.

Many high-potential action learning programs do not involve an experienced action learning coach. However, an action learning coach (either an external or internally trained one) has the ability to foster greater collaboration and inspire deeper reflection. A coach can “slow” a group of high potentials down, ask them to stop and reflect on what they’ve learned, elicit participation from those who are under-heard, and keep the participants aligned with the true goal of the program – learning how to learn.

A knowledgeable internal sponsor.

People learn from those who have walked before or are in the shoes they want to walk in. A knowledgeable internal sponsor will be available to answer questions and provide knowledge and feedback. They possess the wisdom of the journey that brought them to the role the high potentials aspire to and can share what they've learned along the way. Their involvement also signifies the organization's commitment to the program and the future of the high-potential leaders.

A specific, organizational problem without easily identifiable solutions.

The problem must be real and challenging. It must have true, tangible value to the organization and clear reward in terms of visibility and outcomes for the participants upon resolution. It should stretch the participants out of their comfort zones, yet not be so daunting as to feel impossible.

Collaborative, critical reflection.

Critical reflection involves habits associated with thinking about the outcomes of work, identifying the positive actions that supported those outcomes, and the actions that could have been changed to achieve a different outcome – culminating in formulating a changed behavior strategy due to that reflection. The mechanism for learning is through asking questions. By asking questions, participants share knowledge and, in that process of continuing to ask questions, reach a place where neither person has more knowledge. This is the point when learning occurs: when combined knowledge equals more than individual knowledge. Knowledge transfers into learning by means of critical reflection.

The action learning coach and internal sponsor facilitate questions throughout the program, instigating and teaching participants to reflect and share their knowledge. Collaborative, critical reflection becomes an embedded aspect of learning that participants take back to their individual leadership roles and extend throughout their careers.

Summary: Praxis action learning maximizes continual learning

To increase the value of action learning, the organization can adopt praxis (Marquardt 1999) as a way to facilitate a mindset that embraces “learning how to learn.” This should be the primary goal of action learning programs. While solving a critical business problem is an essential component, praxis-oriented, balanced action learning offers a longer-term payoff and should be incorporated in the concept, design, communication, delivery, and expectations of the action learning program. Focusing on the long-term value of having leaders who understand how to learn, critically reflect on their actions and adapt to new situations underscores the enhanced value of utilizing a praxis-based approach to action learning.

The upfront investment need not be much greater than the originally designed action learning program; however, the long-term benefits can be exponential.

References

Argyris, C., Putnam, R., and Smith, D. 1985. *Action Science: Concepts, Methods, and Skills for Research and Intervention*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Marquardt, M. 1999. *Action Learning in Action*. Palo Alto: Davies-Black.

About The Korn/Ferry Institute

The Korn/Ferry Institute generates forward-thinking research and viewpoints that illuminate how talent advances business strategy. Since its founding in 2008, the institute has published scores of articles, studies and books that explore global best practices in organizational leadership and human capital development.

About Korn/Ferry International

Korn/Ferry International is a premier global provider of talent management solutions, with a presence throughout the Americas, Asia Pacific, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. The firm delivers services and solutions that help clients cultivate greatness through the attraction, engagement, development and retention of their talent.

Visit www.kornferry.com for more information on Korn/Ferry International, and www.kornferryinstitute.com for thought leadership, intellectual property and research.

High-Potential Experience Cycle™ is a trademark of Personnel Decisions International Corporation, a Korn/Ferry company.