

# Action Learning Adds Value

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## Action Learning and Skills Development

Action learning strategies rely on the active involvement of participants in the learning experience. Thus, there is no trainer standing at the front of the room with a set of overheads, a prepared lecture, and some handouts. Rather, the workshop will more likely involve trainers acting out real-life situations that participants will then discuss, critically evaluate and provide alternative ways of doing things.

### Innovative Approach to Skills Workshops

In the context of customer service environment, for example, the session might look something like this:

#### Scenario: Neil and Sue

The trainers set up a scene whereby Neil has just received on his desk the file for action. He has been expecting this file since November and now it's March. He's got another urgent job on for one of the regions and is trying to put together some ideas for the new 'Seamless Interface of Government' project.

Reading quickly through the file, he finds the request is a complex one involving other departments. He rings the project manager, Sue. The scene follows their conversation over the phone. Neil is angry because he wasn't notified; the file is late; and what has been asked is 'impossible'. A lot of research will have to be done, people who know about this issue have moved on from their respective departments and the people who have replaced them don't know the job, etc, etc.

Sue responds defensively. She tells Neil that if he had bothered to come to meetings he'd know what was going on. Sue says she can't be expected to keep a check on all aspects of these projects and that's why Neil's got the file now; etc, etc.

The trainers play out the scene to its ultimate conclusion - angry "hang ups" at either end. Participants are then invited to discuss two aspects of the scenario - process and behavioural:

- a) *how that situation could have been avoided in the first instance, and*
- b) *how best to handle the conversation, from both Neil and Sue's perspectives.*

The purpose of the workshop has been for participants to develop skills in critically evaluating both organisational and people interaction processes. Reacting to a situation which all have witnessed during their working lives provides participants with an opportunity to transfer what they have learned in the workshop to their own work processes.

## Action Learning and Facilitation

Active learning can also occur during the facilitation process, in the following way.

During facilitated problem-solving activities, the following technique is added to traditional brainstorming activities.

When a problem and a range of solutions are identified, participants play out the outcomes in a real life situation, paying attention to human variables as well as organisational processes. The activity looks like this:

The facilitator records the situation and the possible solutions on a whiteboard. Participants rank the solutions in order of the most desirable. Participants then identify the roles of people who would be involved in implementing the favoured solution or process. The facilitator then assigns those roles to participants and they try to implement the solution. By sitting around a table, wearing a different hat and arguing from within the role, the barriers to implementation are more easily identified and a desirable solution is either improved upon or rejected *in a short period of time.*

The purpose of this activity is to stimulate creative and realistic thinking among participants and it is most useful when participants are tired and/or have lost some touch with what can be realistically implemented (through their experience with the brainstorming process).

### Value in Learning and Problem-Solving

The degree of participation which these types of techniques encourage is remarkable, and appears to be associated with the level of interest which participants take in the "real life" situations they are using to solve and resolve problems. Moreover, because it is an action learning approach, people often find themselves problem solving in this way "on the job" and are more inclined to chew over problems wearing a variety of hats following exposure to these techniques.

Rather than someone standing up and giving a lecture about good communication skills, excellence in teamwork, etc, the action learning approach enables participants to experience these skills, and the consequences when they lack.

**The action learning approach gives a quality output in a very quick period of time.**