

"MANAGEMENT IS A MATTER OF GETTING THINGS DONE;
TO TAKE ACTION IS THE ESSENTIAL TASK. THE INABILITY
TO ACT IS A FAILURE TO BE A MANAGER!"

MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT BY ACTION LEARNING

BY NANCY G.
McNULTY

Management is a matter of getting things done; to take action is the essential task. The inability to act is a failure to be a manager. Action learning, as the term implies, is learning to act through taking action. In its broadest use, it is a way of tackling complex social and industrial problems which have since proven to be of particular value in the development of individual managers.

Since the purpose of management development is to effect change in managerial performance and thereby change the performance of the organization, management development by action learning helps individuals and groups to recognize and develop their own personal resources, held to be the most effective tools to bring about change. By unlocking these, building maturity and an understanding of their own personal style of managing, managers are prepared to confront the major challenges and problems of tomorrow and the future — a future wherein old

standards may no longer work, where negotiation rather than unilateral decision is fast becoming the name of the game.

The concept of action learning was developed as a method of problem-solving by a Briton in 1954, had its beginnings as a method of management development in Belgium in 1967, has now spread to 18 countries, and is used by leading-edge businesses and government organizations throughout the world.* Yet today, it is little known in the United States.

Action learning is quite different from other forms of management education. It is less structured because it follows a variety of management practices on which it draws. As Michael Bett, director of Personnel for the British Broadcasting Corporation, noted, it "*has no theology and no church.*" It has no syllabus of its own; it has no

*Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Egypt, France, Great Britain, India, Ireland, Libya, Malaysia, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Sri Lanka, and the United States.

textbooks; for the most part, it has few classrooms, few lectures or formal instruction; it makes little use of teachers and professional staff. It is a semiguided course in self-education and is as unique as each manager and his or her problem.

Action learning contrives to create the conditions in which managers learn from their own experience in a real-life problem, helped by and helping others in a similar situation. Problem-solving and personal development become equal parts of the same learning process and thereby the learning — in the sense of a manager actually changing the way he or she manages — is based on reality.

And what is most important — action learning works! David Barrow, manager of Development at Cable & Wireless, the AT&T of Great Britain, states, "*every person we have sent through a course of action learning has matured five years during the six - month course.*"

Action learning arrived at its present state of development from primitive beginnings in the nation-

alized coal mines of Great Britain soon after World War II. To improve managerial talent and efficiency, the Manpower Department of the National Coal Board, headed by Sir Geoffrey Vickers, set up a committee of managers from the pits to study the situation. At the suggestion of Dr. Reginald Revans, then Director of Education for the Board, these managers began their study by discussions among themselves. From these small group discussions it became evident that there were breakdowns in the sub-systems of the minds, and that only with an open and clear communication system to and from all levels, from the colliery managers above ground to the miners in the deepest pit, would the information needed to avert impending mine disasters reach those with the power to forestall them. That is, accidents and inefficiencies of production were symptoms of the disease of bad communication in the mines. And a corollary conclusion was reached: managers, whether supervisory or directorial, must learn to respect the knowledge and expertise of their subordinates and must request and respect communication from them if the system is to work. With such understanding came new solutions and new approaches which have made the coal mines of England the safest and most efficient in the world.

Several years later this theory — that an urgent and responsible anxiety, if shared, will lead through managerial self-disclosure to managerial self-understanding — was tested in the jungles of East Nigeria.

A palm oil processing group of 100 mills, each with its own set of managers, employing thousands of workers, was about to go into bankruptcy and shut down. Through the local Institute of Productivity and Management, small working groups of these managers were set up to study their common problem. Faced with their own economic survival and recognizing their common needs, the managers soon identified the cause of the trouble: the gatherers of the date-palm nuts spent their days

peddling them from mill to mill, seeking the highest price. By raising the prices paid for the nuts, the supply became plentiful and the mills became profitable, much to the astonishment of the company's economic advisors.

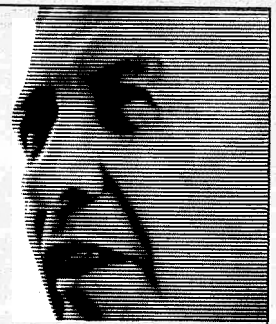
A third program involved a group of 10 London hospitals. Teams of doctors, nurses, social workers, administrative managers and other personnel at all levels studied the problems of hospital inefficiency. Working in small groups in hospitals other than their own, they found a significant inverse correlation between the rate of student nurse dropouts and the speed of patient recovery. Morale was found to be critically dependent on the passing of messages up the management ladder, from subordinate to superior, a direction which is contrary to that advocated by many management theories. As a result of this study, the savings in financial terms amounted to several million pounds a year.

From these and other early efforts, it was evident that working managers, organized into groups of four or five, and faced with a common problem, by working and learning with and from each other, could usually find some solution to that problem. Could this method be moved a step further? Could managers learn how better to deal with complex problems by disclosing their difficulties to other managers, facing similar problems, all set on a similar course of self-improvement? Would it teach managers how to manage better?

Gaston Deurinck, director of the Fondation Industrie-Universite (a management-education foundation supported by both industry and the six universities of Belgium), and Dr. Revans, decided to try it. They designed a structured action learning program of self-education in management for senior executives, calling it the Inter-University Program for Advanced Management.

Management Development Perfected

From that first management development by action learning program, other programs under uni-



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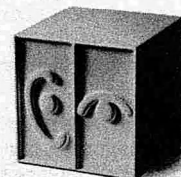
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The Inter-University Program For Advanced Management

The first Inter-University Program (IUP) is the model program for the development of senior executives, and has been copied with variations all over the world. In this, as in all action learning management development programs, three parties are required.

1. Participants known as Fellows.

2. Host companies (one for each participant) which are faced with a serious management problem and which commit themselves and their employees to working out the problem with the Fellow assigned to them.

3. The teaching staff which at the IUP is made up of faculty from the Belgian universities and other schools of management and of businesspeople.

The first session officially began in October 1968 when 20 male executives (32 to 47 years of age), selected previously by their organizations to be trained for top management positions, met in Brussels. However, for six months these executives had been following a study and reading program especially prepared by the Foundation's staff to complement the educational background and organizational experience of each. Fellows were matched with a problem in a host company other than their own so as to remove them from the power structure. These projects had been previously selected by the Foundation staff to fit the needs of the program; that is, they were strategic problems of a fundamental nature to which no known answer existed. And the answer, when found, must have evolved from the resources of the host company.

The Fellows were assigned to tasks and fields of work quite alien to their backgrounds, so they could not use their particular expertise. For example, a banker was assigned to the marketing division of an oil company, an importer of cars to product innovation in a steel mill, a telecommunications engineer to poultry-feed marketing, and so on. During this preliminary period the Fellows met representatives from their host companies (known as Clients) who were to be their personal hosts within those companies throughout the nine-month period.

The work developed through six phases: analysis, development of a solution, procurement of resources, construction of the solution, application and review. These phases were broken into four work periods in order to impose time limitations just as actual organization life does:

- a two-week introductory period
- a four-month diagnostic period
- a two-week consultation period

- a four-month implementation period

The Introductory Period

During the first two time periods the Fellows sought the answers to three questions:

- 1) what is the company trying to do and why?
- 2) what is stopping the company from doing it?
- 3) what can be done about it?

To answer these questions, the Fellows were given a basic vocabulary to work from as well as some understanding of management methods, of management development and how they were to learn. The vocabulary is built around six discussion areas which, incidentally, are basic to all management practice and basic to all decisions concerning change, whether they be social, economic or technical:

a) *Nature of information.* What is the value of the message to the manager?

b) *Nature of risk.* The difference between what is known and what is needed to be known.

c) *Nature of the system.* The system is the network from which a manager draws his values. If he is not getting values from the system, then it should be changed. But change in any part of a system affects the whole system.

d) *Nature of value.* Values, whether tangible or not, determine the degree of risk.

e) *Nature of decision.* A decision, based on weighed values and risks, requires not only change but learning.

f) *Nature of learning.* In making a decision and acting on it, one must realize that he is changing not only the situation or system, but also himself, learning by what he does.

During this introductory period which is residential, the Fellows were divided into four project sets of five men and each set began the process of weling itself into one operational unit.

The current program is adding a study of change in society today to the above.

The Diagnostic Period

The job here is to analyze the situation in all its aspects — reading and interviewing — four days a week at their host companies. On the fifth day the Fellows meet with their project set and the set advisor. The latter has proven to be a very critical factor. The advisor's job is that of a facilitator and catalyst: to get the set working together cohesively, to challenge the set if it falters, to prod the set if it delays, and to aid the Fellows if stymied by bringing in experts, not to solve the problem (for there is no known answer to the problem) but to tell of management tools and

techniques which may be employed to help solve the problem. The advisor's role is not to teach, but to create an atmosphere wherein the Fellows can learn for and of themselves.

At set meetings each Fellow describes his problem and progress in detail. The other members discuss it with him, discuss his handling of situations, criticizing and making suggestions so that all members of the set become involved in the problems of each other. Sometimes Clients will be asked to join set meetings so that set members can learn more of the problem and perhaps be of influence on the Client. In other words, the set becomes a team of problem-solvers and thereby multiplies the effectiveness of each member.

The Consultation Period

In 1968 this was a short period of two weeks designed to bring further academic support to the Fellows with visits to management professors at Harvard and MIT and with American businesspeople. The current sessions of IUP will bring participants to the United States to study the social responsibility of business and see how American businesses are coping with the many problems the country and they are facing.

The Implementation Period

In the Diagnostic Period, the Fellows used their intellectual abilities to analyze problems and to develop a paper solution. In the process, they also took into account the resources and support that might be available to them in or for the implementation. Here each Fellow engages in the micropolitical arena within the host company, seeking answers to three questions:

- 1) who knows about his problem?
- 2) who cares about this problem and why?
- 3) who can do anything about it?

First, the Fellow will assemble a team within the host company to help sell his solution to the company. This may take several stages of advance and retreat until a solution is agreed upon. Thereafter, with the aid of the team, he will set that solution into motion which will test all his personal skills and those of the project set which will be helping him. During this period, the strength and power of the set comes into full play.

At the end of every program, a review is included so that each Fellow can learn to what extent his efforts have been successful. Fellows learn the secret of responsible action only when they know the outcome of plans which are essentially their own and when all the others in the program see the Fellow as a leader, as a manager who bears his own responsibility.

versity guidance have followed, such as those at the Stockholm School of Economics, the University of Oslo, Delhi University in Saudi Arabia, Al Azhar University in Egypt, Trinity College in Dublin, Deakin University in Australia, and Oxford University; and a group of two British universities and two British schools of management — respectively Durham, Manchester, Ashridge and Cranfield — are now ready to offer action learning programs jointly on request.

Action learning is a most flexible educational tool. It can adapt to innumerable forms and variations of forms, as we shall see. One variation of the IUP form of program is the joint program set up by Cable & Wireless, Unilever and The Imperial Group, wherein executives were exchanged within the three companies.* Instead of using a university as sponsor, the program was organized by the Action Learning Projects International (ALPI), a consulting organization which used managers, management consultants and individual professors who have been trained as set advisors for the program. The six-month C&W group program has now expanded to take in other industries, including nationalized ones, and remains under ALPI guidance. A similar three-company program operates in Sweden.

Another variation of the IUP program is known as the Nile Project where 10 years ago action learning was used by 13 nationalized companies in the cotton fields and copper mills of Egypt with the assistance of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development. It was similar to other programs except that the Fellows worked in pairs, alternating week by week between their jobs in their own enterprises and those of their Clients. This program has been duplicated in Libya.

In each of these programs, the manager to be trained is given an unfamiliar job in an unfamiliar setting. This is just one of the four basic forms which action learning programs can take, each of which can also vary to meet a company's

*For fuller description, see "The Self-Developing Manager," published by Cable & Wireless, London, 1978.

Figure 1.

JOB	SETTING	
	Familiar	Unfamiliar
Familiar	A. Part-time or Management Clinics	B. London Hospital Project
Unfamiliar	C. General Electric Program	D. IUP-type Program

needs. The four basic forms are best described in Figure 1.

While these can be changed and interchanged by level of managers, these four basic forms of action learning are matched most usually with the four principal ranks of managers in the organizational pyramid (Figure 2). Estimates of the percentage of managers who will be most likely to be trained in each type of action learning in the years to come are indicated.

The second form or option to a company is to train its managers in an unfamiliar job within their own familiar setting (C on Figure 1). The most widely known example of this type is the General Electric Co. program in Britain.¹ GEC has been operating its own internal action learning program since 1971. Its executives are moved from one division of the giant company to another to study a major management problem for seven months.² As with the C&W group, ALPI was instrumental in the organization of this type of training which is used quite extensively throughout the company and at many levels of management. GEC maintains its own management school, the Dunchurch School of Management, which now operates these action learning programs for the company.

The third basic form or option to a company thinking of using action learning for management develop-

ment is to place a manager in a familiar job but in an unfamiliar setting (B on Figure 1). The best example of this form of action learning is the hospital study described above.

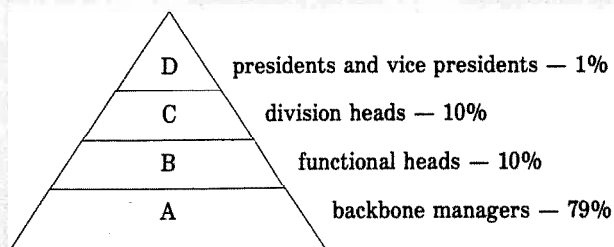
The fourth basic form (A on Figure 1) — learning to be a better manager in a familiar job in a familiar setting, that is, learning while doing one's normal job — is known in the United Kingdom as "Part-time Management Development" or the Management Clinic. For a company which cannot spare an executive for six or nine months and/or the added expense of the program (tuition at the IUP is \$7,500 which does not include travel expenses), this type of training has proven immensely successful.

Action Learning Theory

Any educational or training program is based on a set of hypotheses about learning. In action learning programs, participants are made to face real-time management problems to which there is no known answer and to which an answer is urgently needed because, just as a doctor learns by interning, as a fighter learns by fighting, a manager learns to be a manager by bearing responsibility for action, not by talking about it or listening to someone else talk about it. Management tools and techniques can and should be taught but managers are all differ-

Figure 2.

ORGANIZATIONAL PYRAMID



ent and each can act only within the limits of his or her character, ability and past experience. Each will have his or her own manner of managing, both him or herself and others. Therefore, management as such simply cannot be taught but must be individually learned.

This theory of learning was advanced earlier by two American pragmatists, William James and John Dewey (children learn by doing) but it is even older than America for it was taught by Aristotle in ancient Greece; it is to be found in the Bible and was preached by Buddha. Studies have shown recently that without active participation in the learning process, adults forget 50 per cent in one year, 80 per cent in two.

A second basic tenet about learning, as John S. Randall noted in the *Training and Development*

Journal,⁴ is that "learning is based on experience." Adults interpret new experience on the basis of past ones. Or as Revans said, new knowledge is but the reorganization of what has already been written on the cortical slate. It is not fresh facts that we absorb but the ability to make better use of those we already know. Knowledge is the tool, then, not the product. "You actually teach the people, not the subject." (Randall)

Thus the participant's own experience, plus that of fellow members in the set, is used to work out the solution to each problem. By organized exploration of real problems, experienced managers are given a view of their own styles of management and their likely effects on their subordinates as well as an understanding of their own processes of learning.

Part-Time Management Development or The Management Clinic

Action Learning works when a manager is placed in an unfamiliar job in an unfamiliar situation. But, a Belgian consortium asked, is that necessary? What about the person that could not be spared for that long a time? Could managers be trained to be better managers while working on their own jobs?

In 1973 Deurinck and Revans attempted to answer that question at the University of Brussels. They patterned the program in a general way after the IUP. Companies in the consortium nominated managers to be trained and serious management problems presented by their own companies and jobs were selected; professors from the Business School were provided as set advisors. The program called for four days' work on one's own job and the fifth day was divided, half spent working on the problem and the other half meeting with the set.

The following year the Training Services Agency of Great Britain⁵ subsidized the Institution of Works Managers, a managers' association, to start a program to upgrade its 18,000 members. Four experimental Management Clinics were established and have since been expanded to 18 under the guidance of Alan Lawlor, a disciple of Revans. These differ from the Belgian program of 1973 in that the set advisors are managers, management consultants and

only occasionally an academic, all specially trained as set advisors.

An eight-month program follows the familiar action learning pattern:

- An introductory two-day workshop to acquaint the participants with the principles of action learning and of management development at the same time organizing the people into sets.
- Diagnosis. Four months' study of problems one-half day a week and meeting with the set or clinic the other half day.
- Action. A second four-month period for implementation of the solution.
- Evaluation. A workshop of sponsors and participants to discuss the effectiveness of problem solutions, the amount of learning that has taken place, and to what extent the program has met the five objectives of an action learning clinic:

- a) to learn knowledge sources and how to get information.
- b) knowledge and the use of problem-solving procedures.
- c) personal development as a manager.
- d) company development through helping to solve the problem.
- e) learning how to learn.

To date more than 200 men and women have gone through the Management Clinics and the part-time learning programs.

Learning is a social process. People learn best from other people in the same situation; managers learn best from other managers. Referred to as peer learning, its success lies in the mutual identification of interests (or problems) and the social restraint on authoritarianism among equals. In action learning, through the project sets, peer learning is brought to its highest efficiency and even the set advisors and auxiliary teachers learn from the collective processes of the set.

True learning involves change, not only on the cortical slate but in observable ways, in modification of behavior. Learning is an active, positive process accomplished through the individual's own activity. But we know adults only learn what they want to — or have a need to. Action learning creates a risk-laden situation in which the participants need to learn in order to survive.

What Action Learning Is Not

Action learning, while encompassing some of the values of other teaching and learning methods, is categorically different. For example:

1. *Job rotation* aims to teach a new job in a given culture by an expert in that job and in that culture. Action learning aims to challenge that culture and to change it.

2. *Task forces* work in groups on a problem with its solution as their main objective; the main objective of action learning is self-learning or management development. However, through the meetings of the sets, action learning makes use of the group involvement and group commitment values of task forces (or project work), both so important for motivation.

3. *Simulation, including case studies, business games, etc.* In such methods, the situation to be analyzed is quite theoretical; participants do not bear any responsibility for the solutions they propose to problems. Without risk, without being able to see the consequences of their own action, there can be little true learning leading to behavioral change.

4. *Group dynamics* are also task-

free exercises without the time-imposed schedule of a business situation. On the other hand, interpersonal relationships, both through the set meetings and in the participants' dealings within their host companies, are at the very heart of action learning.

5. *Consultants* are specialists in the problems of their clients; action learning participants are substitute managers studying a management problem. Consultants are paid; action learners are not.

Consultants are engaged to teach their clients; action learning participants invite their host companies to learn as they themselves learn.

The problems of a participant and a consultant are similar in that both must expose the company to its problem and get it to initiate action.

6. *Operations research* is a management technique which action learning participants may or may not use as befits their problem. OR is not management development.

7. *Simple common sense* is what action learning tries to instill. However, it seeks a common sense for meeting today's and tomorrow's business world, not common sense based on yesterday's problems. David was the solution to the problem of Goliath which flew in the face of the best common sense of the Israelites.

Who's Using the Action Learning Concept?

Today from Sweden in the north and Nigeria and Australia in the south and all around the globe from east to west, action learning marches on. The Saudi Arabians are building a \$2 million International Centre of Action Learning in Cairo where they plan to train not only Arabs but Third World managers in what they consider the best training method for people from their worlds to use to solve local problems as well as develop managers. Eighteen of the nationalized industries of India use action learning, chief among them, Coal India which supervises 650,000 miners. In the villages of India action learning is being introduced for local planning — public, industrial and commercial. In Sweden 14 regional governments are using action learning to solve the problems of care of the elderly. In France it is being used in the planning of the rehabilitation of old towns and villages in the Dordogne and the Courrege. In Sri Lanka a program is developing for small enterprises with the aid of the national bank. And in Ireland a small business development program through action learning is proving quite successful.

Action learning is sweeping over Australia, being used at the highest ministerial levels of government, in all training programs of the Victorian government, by its universities and by its businesses. As in England,⁵ Australia has established a nonprofit organization, Action Learning Australia, for the purpose of promoting action learning, acting as a clearinghouse for its literature and information, and providing set advisors and programs organizers for companies

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"What other form of management development offers a program in persuasion as well as in fact finding, in selecting pertinent data, diagnosis, formulation of solution, decision-making, communication and motivation?"

which wish to set up their own programs. A group of Americans are planning to organize a similar organization to aid companies to set up their own programs if enough interest develops to warrant the effort.

To date in this country only SMU uses action learning in a somewhat limited version in its undergraduate Business School and is working with funds from the HEW for use in an MBA program. The Exxon Corporation is now at work planning an Action Learning Program.

The American Productivity Center in Houston reportedly uses action learning techniques in its

research. The first management development post-experience program by a university is now under consideration by Columbia University and is tentatively scheduled for 1979 or 1980.

Not only does this country *not* use this highly effective method of management development, but it does not use it to solve the many other problems of our country. If the wretchedly poor villagers of the Panchayat and elsewhere in India can use action learning to solve their marketing, rural and other problems, could not the educated residents of urban areas in industrialized countries do as well?

Could not the seemingly unresolvable problems of the environment or of inflation be advanced toward solution by teams from differing points of view working in small groups and using action learning?

And what about industrial relations with both managers and shopfloor union leaders together seeking solutions to the problems that face their companies and their industries?

A report just released by the EEC, "Management Education in the European Community," states, "The most important road for management education to take in the next few years is to study and discuss together the issues and problems shared by the four main groups in society wherein influence and authority be: business, unions, central and local government."

The report also notes that "new approaches in educational technology (such as) action research and action learning, should be broadly experimented with and promoted."

For as Revans and others have noted, if leaders and managers are

to go on existing in our changing social ethic, they must do so by persuasion, not power. What other form of management development offers a program in persuasion as well as in fact-finding, in selection of pertinent data, diagnosis, formulation of solution, decision-making, communications and motivation?

What other form of management development at the same time develops question-powers rather than question answer-givers, organic risk-takers rather than functional experts, leaders rather than specialists? Action learning does all that!

REFERENCES

1. AT&T in the U.S. pioneered a similar type of program some years ago. A large engineering firm in Sweden runs a similar program.
2. For full description, see "Action Learning Comes to Industry," by Nancy Foy, *Harvard Business Review*, Sept./Oct., 1977.
3. In England and France training of workers is compulsory. The program in England is handled by the Training Services Agency.
4. Randall, John S., "You and Effective Training: Part 2 — The Learning Process." *Training and Development Journal*, June 1978.
5. Known there as the Action Learning Trust.

Nancy G. McNulty is director of the International Survey of Management Education in New York City. The author of *Training Managers, The International Guide*, the only existing resource tool on management education programs throughout the world, she is now compiling a new edition, entitled *Management Development Programs: The World's Best As Selected By The International Academy of Management*. It will be published in the summer of 1979. A member of the European Foundation for Management Development and the Action Learning Trust, London, she travels extensively conducting research on management education.



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