The Emergence of Action Learning

By Lyle Yorks

This new quarterly column will update you on proven practices—hence the title, What Works—from reviews conducted by ASTD's Research-to-Practice Commitee. It's need-to-know information just in time.

The last decade has seen the emergence of action learning as an increasingly popular approach to producing innovative solutions for organizational problems and for developing management talent. Many advocates of "earn while you learn" define action learning as an experience-based approach to developing people that uses work on meaningful problems as a way to learn. Action learning programs involve small groups that meet regularly to take action on critical, real problems while explicitly seeking learning from having taken that action. Usually, the learning aspect is facilitated by a learning coach who is skilled in using the collective experience of group members to create learning opportunities.

Within that broad definition, there are several ways you can design an action learning program, depending on your learning objectives. But the flexibility of action learning can also lead to confusion if you're exploring action learning for the first time, depending on what examples you come across. Making matters more complex for the novice is the potential for confusing action learning with other experience-based learning approaches, such as outdoor venture trips and simulations.

As you may have observed, a significant amount of learning and development on the part of managers and senior executives is informal learning drawn from experience. Action learning builds on that kind of learning by formalizing it through experience into a more conscious and directed activity. What makes action learning unique is the use of real problems or dilemmas. Such problems are framed as questions that get reframed through cycles of action and reflection. The learning is facilitated through questions and dialogue, which help participants draw informed, nuanced insights as they work to answer the questions. Participants receive specific technical knowledge on a just-in-time basis as the question requires.

Although action learning seems to be a logical way to develop people, it can encounter resistance in various parts of an organization, depending on the extent to which people are accustomed to classroom-centered training and other structured learning. The result is an either-or debate. That's unfortunate because both kinds of learning have their proper places.

What to ask

If you're considering using action learning for the first time, you probably have many questions about the process, such as
❏ What kind of learning occurs during action learning?
❏ What are some of the advantages and benefits of action learning?
❏ What kind of program should I design (objectives, format, length, resources, and so forth)?
❏ How is a learning coach different from other types of group facilitators?
❏ How can I ensure that the learning transfers back to participants' jobs?
❏ How can I sell action learning to my organization?

Those are important questions, and, happily, the answers are coming out of a growing stream of research and carefully implemented programs in companies around the world.

For example, consider the question regarding what kind of project you should

design. After looking at 20 examples of action learning, researcher Krystyna Weinstein discovered a diversity of approaches. Some were group projects in which an action learning team addressed a problem together. Other approaches involved people who worked individually on different problems. In the latter instance, members of a group (or "set" as it's often referred to) take turns helping each other reflect on and learn from their experiences, by asking questions and challenging assumptions.

Despite the variety, Weinstein concluded that the most successful programs have one thing in common: They're clear about the objectives regarding what kind of learning is being sought. For example, is the primary learning objective personal development or developing participants in a way that parallels the organization's strategic direction?

In *Action Learning: How the World's Top Companies Are Re-Creating Their Leaders and Themselves,* David Dotlich and James Noel discuss how Citibank used action learning to break down barriers among various functions and business units that were impeding global growth and profitability. In Citibank's case, management designed the projects worked on by the action learning teams.

If you're wondering about how to transfer the lessons from action learning back to the job, consider the case of PSEG in New Jersey. PSEG has documented the extent to which learning from its action learning program has changed the way people in the organization relate to each other. An important part of the back-on-the-job transfer was the use of systems to capture and share the learning. PSEG's case is a terrific example of how action learning can be a catalyst for organizational change when properly linked to organizational goals and supported with the appropriate systems and activities.

Action learning has enormous potential, but making it come to fruition requires understanding how to use it and preparing your organization for the challenges.

Lyle Yorks *is an associate professor at Teachers College, Columbia University.*

Learn More

If you're interested in more answers about action learning, visit ASTD's new interactive publication *What Works Online* at www.astd.org/virtual_community/research/whatworks/what_works_main.html. You'll find an extensive summary of what works, or doesn't work, in action learning. You'll also have an opportunity to converse with leading practitioners and experts on action learning and hear what your peers have to share based on their own experiences.