

Solutions for Public Managers

Action Learning:

AL Proves to be an Effective Tool for Contemporary Public Administration Education

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The Washington, DC metro area is crowded, congested and cost of living is high. All these factors contributed to the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, experiencing difficulty in recruiting and retaining employees within its DC-based headquarters office. The NWRS deputy chief mulled over these dilemmas and in 2002 asked one of the deputy division chiefs, Barry Stieglitz, to develop an employee development program to address these issues. The result was Action Learning, or simply AL.

AL is especially effective in executive MPA programs because it bridges academic theory to agency reality by using a real-world situation to learn. Stieglitz and classmate Jennifer Wicks selected the NWRS employee development program as their AL project.

What Is Action Learning?

The late Reg Revans coined the term, Action Learning, and expressed the concept with the equation $L = P + Q$ where learning (L) occurs through programmed knowledge (P) and insightful questioning (Q). As a problem-centered and experiential learning methodology, AL aligns well with the core principles of andragogy (adult learning theory) and is particularly effective with adults. In *Action Learning in Action*, Michael Marquardt writes, "For many organizations around the world, action learning has quietly become one of the most powerful action-oriented, problem-solving tools, as well as their key approach to individual, team and organizational development."

Key Components

1. *Problem*—AL revolves around a special project, challenge, issue or task. The individual, team and organization all consider the problem's resolution important, but there should not be an easily identifiable solution.

2. *Set*—The core AL group is comprised of four to eight individuals. The set has a senior agency leader as a sponsor to define the problem and provide support and a coach/facilitator acting as a neutral observer and advisor.

3. *Commitment*—The organization, its leadership and set's commitment to the AL process (questioning, reflection, problem resolution and ultimately learning) is the most critical component.

Why Should the Public Sector Use Action Learning?

In "A Review of Action Learning," Alan Mumford writes, "the seductiveness of Action Learning lies in the attractiveness of completing significant required tasks."

Mutually Beneficial

AL projects benefit both the individual and organization. AL projects revolve around real organizational problems so the project can be easily aligned with an organization's strategic goals, initiatives and needs, and an individual's personal growth and career development. AL's flexibility permits customization to an organization's specific parameters. The practical learning experience enables participants to acquire specific skills and competencies desired by the organization, such as problem-solving and team-building, while also developing leaders. Marquardt writes, "Perhaps AL's greatest value is its capacity for equipping individuals, teams and organizations to more effectively respond to change."

The individual also benefits. The parallel relationship of theoretical learning with practical application makes the overall experience more valuable. AL enables the individual to practice academic theory while increasing personal self-awareness and confidence through the process. The individual, on an empowered team, may also benefit from increased visibility and interaction with senior leadership.

Limited Resources Required

AL projects are based on organizational situations and therefore require few additional resources. The primary resource

is the time commitment required of the set, sponsor and coach. AL's reflective process requires additional time dedicated solely to introspection and evaluation.

Visible Results

AL offers results—something traditional training typically cannot guarantee. While attendance figures frequently determine a conference's success, AL provides opportunities to acquire and apply skills, knowledge and abilities. AL's interactive and iterative process asks the participants to continually reflect on personal 'lessons learned,' team performance and process improvement. The sponsor and coach also act as evaluators.

What to Consider When Creating an Action Learning Program?

Several federal agencies, such as FAA and Veterans Benefits Administration, followed the private sector's lead and incorporated AL into their leadership development programs. This was the first time NWRS used AL. The authors believe they positively influenced their project team and larger organization through their AL project. Based on their experience, they offer six suggestions to agencies on establishing AL programs:

1. *Set Membership*—Create interdisciplinary teams drawing from varied program areas inside or outside the agency. The set learns from each other. They act as learning resources offering different areas of expertise. Wicks worked at the Army while completing the NWRS AL project. She gained significant knowledge and understanding while providing a unique perspective to the team.

2. *Questioning and Reflection*—Understand and appreciate AL's true purpose. Learning is not about having the answers. Rather it is about asking the right questions and knowing how to reframe situations with the ultimate objective of instituting behavioral change. Properly framing a problem or question increases overall support by addressing multiple concerns and chances for successful

resolution. This innate questioning and probing ability then results in more effective leaders and organizations.

3. *Set vs. Task Force*—Recognize a set is not a task force. Unlike a work task force, the set's solution to the organization problem is secondary to learning from the process, interaction, and each other.

4. *Time Allocation*—Set aside sufficient time. Identify specific times for reflection on meeting agendas and incorporate debriefing sessions into the schedule. While the time required differs with the Problem's complexity and scope, we found ourselves often underestimating the time we needed, especially to reflect.

5. *Conduct an Environmental Scan*—Find out whether there is sufficient interest in AL and support. Having a sponsor to empower and support the set is critical to success. And for real learning to occur, participant buy-in is equally important.

6. *Flexibility*—Adapt the AL model to fit your organization. The NWRS AL project did not incorporate all aspects of Revan's traditional model. Instead it was a hybrid conforming to NWRS' constraints. However, these modifications did not diminish AL's effectiveness because the reflection component remained intact.

AL's strengths and benefits align well with current training and development needs of contemporary public sector agencies. Both MPA programs and agencies should seriously consider AL as a learning tool. Because AL stimulates behavioral change, the experience can be the impetus for, or part of, an individual, organization or cultural change effort.

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