

# HOW DOES ACTION LEARNING THEORY SUPPORT THE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT?

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**Abstract.** *In businesses all across the world, action learning has quickly emerged as one of the most important and effective methods for growing management and leadership. The long-term goals of action learning include participation, group replication, and knowledge acquisition. Peer groups frequently convene under the guidance of seasoned moderators. In order to generate original solutions to challenging issues that may be implemented, participants include real-world difficulties into the discussion. This review study set out to find out how action learning theory affected the development of leadership. After determining the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 10 published publications were selected. The research's conclusions indicate that using the action learning theory is crucial to a leader's growth. Action learning theory has the ability to develop leadership skills in individuals owing to its systematic and problem-based learning method. Based on the study's findings, it is advised that businesses use action learning to grow their leaders and improve organizational performance.*

**Key Words:** *Action Learning Theory, Support, Leadership Development*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A small group works on real-world issues using the action learning technique, taking initiative and learning as individuals, teams, and organizations. It helps companies come up with creative, flexible, and effective answers to pressing problems (Volz-Peacock et al., 2016). It's a process that provides opportunities for individuals, teams, executives, and institutions to effectively adjust, acquire, and create in a dynamic manner (Hafeez et al., 2022).

Individuals and organizations may also describe action learning as the process of developing realistic solutions to challenging issues. It comprises taking efforts to address the issue and then evaluating their efficacy (Edmonstone et al., 2019). Action learning is a powerful tool for developing leaders at all levels. It is shown to be very helpful for cooperative problem-solving methods and fosters teamwork inside organizations (Scott, 2017). Organizations that prioritize staff development and allow action learning get the benefits of having a more capable and engaged workforce (Trehan & Pedler, 2016).

In an action learning session, every leadership ability may be cultivated when participants collaborate with a group to address an issue for which there is currently no recognized answer. Each action learning session would incorporate all four components of skill development (important to the individual, practice opportunity, feedback from others, and self-reflection) if a qualified action learning coach with particular leadership development responsibilities was included (Volz-Peacock et al., 2016).

The action learning coach combines each of these four components by doing the following:

1. The action learning coach invites each group member to select the leadership talent they will focus on during this action learning session before the group starts working on fixing the challenge. To make it clear to everyone the leadership talent each person is working on, these skills are listed on a flip chart.
2. After that, the coach informs the group that, at the conclusion of the session, she will: (a) ask each participant how they performed on the skill she had identified; and (b) invite other participants to share instances of how they had used the skill.
3. The coach may step in during the action learning session if she sees a chance to support participants in honing their leadership abilities, inquire about the impact the

skill is having on the group and the problem-solving process, or offer proof that the skill is being used.

4. At the conclusion of the workshop, each participant considers how he/ she has exhibited the leadership ability and gets confirmation from others on how they have done so.

### Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to determine the role of action learning theory in leadership development.

### Research Question

How does action learning theory support in leadership development?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many prosperous businesses employed action learning to improve the leadership abilities of their staff members (Roupenel et al., 2019). Professor Reginald Revans (Revans, 1982), the creator of action learning theory, showed that learning and problem-solving may be accomplished effectively by having a minor group of people share their practices and struggles in order to discover solutions. Action learning facilitates organizational transformation and the liberation of human vision within businesses. Techniques that include real-time dynamics analysis of one or more significant organizational problems, application of solutions based on constructive peer criticism, monitoring of outcomes and learning from them with responsibility for these activities to enhance future challenge solving and opportunity grabbing (Marquardt et al., 2018).

Volz-Peacock et al. (2016) stated that action learning is a technique for the development of an organization and individuals in which people work in groups to address actual problems or concerns, completing tasks while reflecting and learning along the way. Pedler et al. (2005) defined action learning as a technique and a learning culture. Zabiegalski and Marquardt (2022) concluded in study that action learning is an approach wherein a heterogeneous group employs a methodology focused on questioning to generate a solution for an actual problem that is both pressing and significant. Senior executives in the company agree that if the solutions are reasonable and practical, they will be implemented (Geerts et al., 2020).

In conclusion, given the increasing importance that leadership has put on technology and globalization, businesses have turned to action learning as a timely, innovative, effective, and adaptive method for educating their leaders wherever they may be.

The action learning theory process is presented in figure 1.

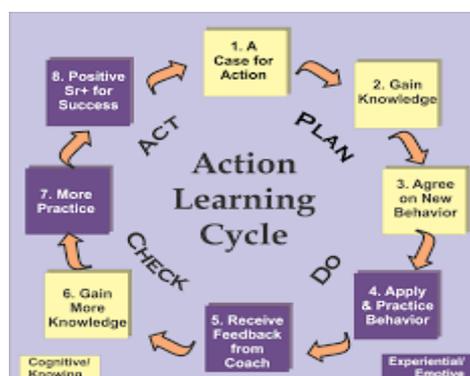


Figure 1. Process of Action Learning Theory

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

#### Article Selection Process

The Prisma diagram was followed for the selection of the articles. Its procedure is discussed in the following lines:

##### i. Identification

###### a. Databases and Time Limit for Literature Search

The researchers searched the articles on the action learning theory and leadership development from January 2010 to November 2023 from the major electronic databases including ERIC, Web of Science, Google Scholar and Scopus. The key terms used for literature search for articles were: Action learning theory and leadership development.

###### b. Inclusion Criteria for Literature

The articles were included based on the following inclusion criteria:

- Only those articles were included that reported the action learning theory and leadership development. The studies that have no link between action learning theory and leadership development were excluded.
- The studies that were published in a peer reviewed journal, from the year 2010 to 2023 and written in English were included in the study. The studies that did not meet this criterion were excluded. So, initially 52 studies were identified.

##### ii. Screening

After removing the duplicate records of 17 studies, the remaining studies were 35 based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Records excluded on the basis of the abstract review were n=6, not relevant n=4, and not in English n=2.

##### iii. Eligibility

The total full-text articles assessed for eligibility obtained were n=23. The full-text articles that have no link between action learning theory and leadership development were also excluded n=13.

##### iv. Included

So, the final studies included in the review were obtained as n=10. The article selection process followed by the Prisma diagram is shown in figure 2.

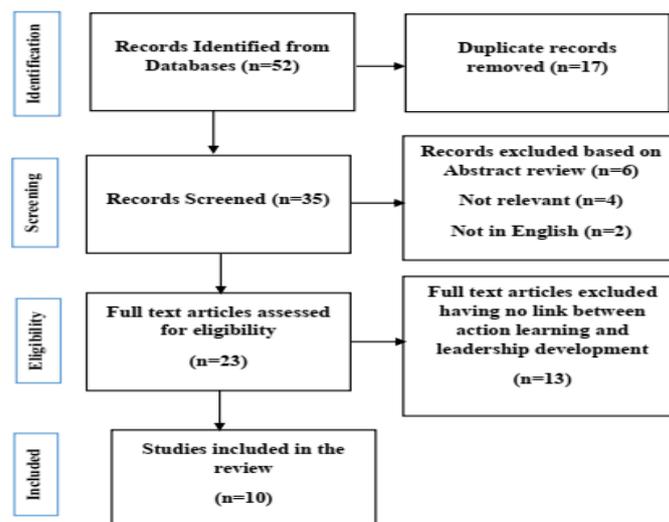


Figure 2. Prisma Diagram for Article Selection Process

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study's goal and research questions served as the foundation for formulating the findings. What function does action learning theory play in leadership development was the research question pertaining to the study's purpose, which sought to ascertain the role of action learning theory in this respect. The study's findings were examined in the lines that follow:

##### **1. Action Learning Stimulates an Individual for Real-word Scenarios**

The majority of people in the real world of business learn via doing their jobs. On the other hand, most people rarely see learning as an opportunity ahead of time, and they also don't know how to seize these opportunities. By assisting and being helped by others in similar situations, action learning establishes the conditions required for people to learn via personal experience in a real-world environment. Participants in action learning sets expose their actions to the helpful criticism of committed, persistent peers. People may learn to comprehend why they say what they say, do what they do, and value what they value via this process of forced self-revelation. Additionally, people start to let go of a false sense of self, thinking that all they do is in service of their goals (Abramovich et al., 2019).

Action learning creates settings where people may learn from their experience solving real-world problems while helping and being helped by others in a similar or different situation. An individual adjusts their management style based on reality. With action learning, students are given real-world organizational transformation responsibilities in order to teach them about the change management process. It emphasizes the significance of self-awareness and the impact that ignorance and presumptions have on our problem-solving and conclusion-making processes (Konyushkova et al., 2017).

Mumford (1995) asserts that action learning is especially successful because it integrates the following components that people require training in:

- For people, knowing how to take successful action should be the aim of action learning.
- To be successful, action must be taken, not only arguments for action or analyses of other people's conditions.
- The most effective way to learn is to work on a specific project or an ongoing problem that is important to management.
- The best approach for managers to learn is via collaboration and mutual learning.
- When there is a chance, managers can discuss issues that need to be resolved with their colleagues.

##### **2. How Action Learning Prepares Individuals to Think in Systems?**

Before attempting to address an issue, action learning requires a varied group of individuals to pose fresh and creative questions in order to thoroughly understand the problem and its context. Investigating underlying causes and long-term solutions, attempting to offer the most leverage, appreciating the significance of connections, and admitting one's own role in issues and their resolutions are the core questions of action learning. The process of action learning involves thinking back on how to make connections, evaluate data that appears contradictory, and look for novel solutions rather than rote fixes. Participants in action learning programs learn how to solve difficult, apparently unrelated organizational problems as well as analytical thinking techniques (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018).

##### **3. How Action Learning Develops Change Agents in Leaders?**

McNulty and Canty (1995) stated that action learning improves the capacity to affect change while maintaining courage. Members are better able to perceive and understand the simultaneous changes taking place inside of them, which makes it easier for them to repeat the procedure. The action learning technique is based on the idea that you have to change yourself before you can change the system. Actions cause changes in the system.

Learning facilitates human development, therefore mastering effective learning is a prerequisite for mastering successful behavior (Revens, 2011).

#### **4. How Action Learning Prepares Leaders to Take Risks and Innovate?**

Action learning, via critical reflection, reframing, and context switching, improves one's ability to think creatively and imaginatively about modern concerns and realities. Marsick (2002) came to the conclusion that in order to know if they are solving the right problem, a person has to be able to see under the surface of perception and evaluate presumption assumptions and values. During times of crisis, the organic collaboration of allies generates novel inquiries and imaginative concepts. Taking a chance inspires individuals to act and opens them a world of opportunities. Lastly, by being honest and transparent with one another, members must take a chance on teaching one another about themselves.

#### **5. How Action Learning Empowers Individuals to Serve as Stewards and Servants?**

In many respects, the learning coach or Set adviser is an excellent illustration of a servant-leader. The responsibilities of the Set advisor and the servant-leader are quite similar, specifically:

- By giving people the chance to solve problems on their own and benefit from one other's experiences, successes, and mistakes.
- Creating an atmosphere where individuals support and push one other.
- Keeping one's own wisdom and knowledge to oneself.
- Individual and collective assumptions are being tested.
- Giving members direct input.
- Posing queries to encourage individuals to consider the logic underlying their opinions.
- Acknowledging faults in public and using them as learning opportunities.

#### **6. How Action Learning Prepares Individuals to Serve as Polychronic Coordinators?**

Action learning has made people realize how important it is to take new paths and always be in a state of inquiry. They know how important it is to get information, pose questions, and periodically assess the state of affairs. Taking chances and owning up to our ignorance are necessary to deal with all of these unknowns, but nobody likes to do these things. Our greatest accomplishments, however, come when we are overcome with potential and things go awry (Cho & Egan, 2023).

#### **7. How Action Learning Prepares Individuals to be Instructors, Coaches, Mentors and Role Models for Others?**

Finding and maximizing each person's, group's, and enterprise's capacity for learning is one of the key goals of action learning. Not just the learning coach, but all of the set members are advised to support one another's learning. In action sets, learning occurs continually as followers imitate their viewpoints, relationships, and discoveries. The set is always refining and growing its enabling, coaching, and leadership skills. Members assist the customer in finding the root cause of the issue and workable solutions to address it. They wish to grant the client the capacity to take on reasonable levels of accountability in order to determine how to advance (Chance & Furlong, 2022). Members of action learning sets also provide mentorship, assisting speakers in overcoming their problems. The person gains insight into what it's like to be a presenter getting mentorship.

#### **8. How Action Learning Fosters Visionary Leadership?**

Action learning groups are frequently faced with a situation where nobody knows which direction to go. However, by admitting their glaring ignorance, the group starts to formulate an idea of where they need to go to solve the issue. Action learning, according to

Hartikainen et al. (2019), produces leaders who, to use a metaphor, are able to carve out a better path through the jungle than just taking the one that already exists. You might learn how to understand challenging subjects through active learning. Developing visions especially shared visions is a typical practice in action learning. Sets as participants build thorough, system-focused solutions to difficult problems. Organizing people to adhere to a short-term plan is one thing; trying to convince them to embrace a vision of a new future is quite another.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of action learning is to improve performance via ongoing learning and reflection. Within the organization, it is a process of liberating human vision and organizational transformation. The process consists of addressing one or more major organizational issues, assessing their dynamics in real time, putting colleagues' constructive criticism and suggestions into practice, keeping an eye on the outcomes, accepting responsibility for these actions, and using the lessons learned to improve future outcomes. The action learning technique was shown to be supportive of leadership development in the current study. The literature research revealed that action learning is a valuable learning approach that helps people become more capable of leading others and significantly enhances the management and results of the business.

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