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practical example

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Workplace Learning by Action Learning: A practical example

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# Workplace Learning by Action Learning: A practical example

## Key words

Workplace learning, action learning, learning organisation.

## Abstract

Leaders of organisations are seeking new ways of developing capacities in their organisations to learn and re-learn. Describes an action learning approach to facilitating the implementation of a workplace learning strategy to assist a group of managers enhance their capacity to learn and respond to organisational issues more effectively. Outlines the methodology used and the attempt to measure behavioural and organisational performance improvements as a result of the intervention. Lessons learnt that may be useful to others responsible for implementing workplace learning are detailed.

## Introduction

Just how difficult it is for leaders of organisations to introduce workplace learning into their organisations has been thoroughly researched and published. At the same time, the critical importance for organisations to make moves towards becoming a 'learning organisation' is also well reported in the literature. Indeed, some researchers (Massey and Walker, 1999) indicate that the level of learning in organisations may in the future become the only differentiating factor between successful organisations.

One of the founders of the organisation learning discourse, Peter Senge has said that 'if anything, the need for understanding how organizations learn and accelerating that learning is greater today than ever before' (Senge in Starkey, 1996). It is therefore no surprise that leaders of organisations are seeking new ways of developing capacities in their organisations to learn and re-learn.

Action learning as long been held out by some researchers (Marquardt, 1999) to provide a sound basis for introducing learning into workplaces.

This paper will detail a case study where an action learning methodology has been used to commence a process of implementing workplace learning into an organisation, and then to explore some of the issues that emerged during the intervention and the lessons offered for others responsible for introducing workplace learning into their organisations.

## Background

The context to this case study is a private hospital with a capacity of 250 beds and approximately 400 full time staff. The organisation has been undergoing rapid changes over the last several years and has moved from a public hospital to a substantially private facility. At the same time, the climate in the health sector in Australia is both volatile and turbulent. Health funds are placing major pressures on hospitals to concentration on cost reduction and to seek productivity increases with significant changes in the way they fund operations. For example, procedure payments to hospitals have been introduced to replace the previous system of paying for the time patients remained in care.

The CEO of the organisation is future oriented and wants to introduce change strategies that will allow the 35 managers of the organisation to engage in the change process, take responsibility for implementing change and importantly, to ensure the organisation embraces workplace learning strategies that will assist the organisation to move towards the elusive concept of the 'learning organisation'.

Typically, the literature defines the general characteristics of learning organisations as improving the focus on acquiring, improving and transferring knowledge, facilitating and making use of individual

learning and then modifying behaviours and policies within the organisation to reflect the learning (Starkey, 1996).

To assist in the process, the CEO engaged a consultant to guide the implementation of a workplace learning process. After some discussion on the process to be adopted, it was decided to select a real workplace problem that was of concern to all the managers and where real productivity outcomes might be expected to flow from its resolution. After designing an intervention, an action learning methodology was selected as the most appropriate intervention strategy.

After some discussion among the managers, the issue selected for investigation was that of performance management. The organisation currently had some 27 different types of performance management systems in place. The systems differed both within and between classifications in the hospital. For example, nurses used several different types of performance management instruments, managers used another, general and technical staff others and so on. There was no general policy relating to performance management and all the systems in place had little or no connection with strategic goals or business plans and they were not outcomes focused. Both the staff and the managers were frustrated with the multiple systems in place and it was considered that a number of staff who were long serving employees retained a 'public service' culture and had not made the transition to the new private sector ways of doing things and therefore needed much more focused performance management.

By selecting a problem that was of concern to all stakeholders in the organisation, that was of a size and scale where resolution of the problem was likely and engaging in a process that demonstrated to the managers that they could take control of an issue in a collaborative way and bring the issue to a successful resolution, it was considered that the process used to resolve this issue might then be adopted confidently by managers to use as a means to approach other problems and issues that exist in the organisation. That is, it was considered that the foundation stones for a workplace learning culture in the organisation were being laid.

## **Action learning and workplace learning**

There appears to be no one formal or structured process that an organisation can adopt to lead it down the pathway to successful workplace learning and to become a learning organisation. However, Garvin (1994) did provide some direction to those wanting to implement workplace learning by pointing to three identifiable stages that any attempted learning intervention should progress through.

The first stage is cognitive where managers should be encouraged to think differently, be exposed to and share new ideas and new knowledge. The second stage is behavioural change where the managers internalise their new knowledge and change their behaviours as a consequence. The third stage is effective improvement in organisational performance on whatever performance criteria the organisation uses to gauge success.

Learning by managers plays a key role in the creation of knowledge for organisations as managers are viewed by most observers as the ones most responsible for introducing change and learning into organisations (Carlopio, Andrewartha, and Armstrong, 2001). Action learning is a process of mutual learning within small 'sets' of managers, generally through application and reflection on workplace issues and problems. Therefore, there is a close but somewhat paradoxical relationship between action learning and workplace learning. Action learning may be viewed as a model of the 'learning organisation' (Morris, 1991). Workplace learning is viewed by some commentators as often synonymous with individual learning, particularly in the early stages of an organisation's learning cycle (Appelbaum and Reichart, 1997). However, any distinction between action learning and workplace learning becomes blurred as learning in an organisation takes place through structured learning 'sets' where groups and not individuals are involved in the learning process and the emphasis involves more than a mere extension of individual learning within the organisation. It is clear however that if action learning is to workplace learning and subsequently to a learning organisation, it must involve more than action learning set members and eventually connect with a much wider body of organisational members.

Therefore, it seems that workplace learning can be successfully implemented in a staged process that progressively involves increasing numbers of staff in the organisation and that the cycles of action

learning are an appropriate procedure to form the foundation of a planned workplace learning intervention.

## **Methodology**

It is said to be not often that organisations provide their managers with the learning tools necessary for them to extract maximum learning from their experiences (Wick and Leon, 1993). The methodology adopted for this intervention was therefore designed to allow the managers to not have just a skill building exercise in the traditional training sense, but also to provide an opportunity for maximum learning that aligned with the strategic directions of the organisation. Therefore, the program was to be based on an action learning framework with a follow through to the workplace on what was learned at the training seminar through the use of a 'compulsory mentoring' component.

### **Phase one - the seminar**

As it was considered by the CEO and the senior management team that skills in performance management were lacking in the majority of the hospital's managers, it was decided to require all the 35 managers of the facility to attend a 2 day seminar on performance management. Of course it was also necessary to motivate the managers to view the introduction of workplace learning as a positive and necessary opportunity for the hospital and outline the chosen intervention strategy and method of action learning. Therefore, the seminar was designed to achieve Garvin's (1994) recommended first stage where manager's skill gaps could be identified and where they are encouraged to think differently, be exposed to new ideas and new knowledge on performance management.

The seminar developed for the intervention focused on six critical areas of new knowledge for the managers on performance management. These were:

Performance coaching of staff to clarify expectations - there is a need to be specific when telling people what is expected of them. It was identified that a common cause of conflict in the organisation was that people were not always aware of exactly what they are expected to be doing and the level at which they were expected to perform. Activities during this topic were designed to get the managers thinking about how to clarify their expectations for others and the skills they need to do so. Important skills that the managers could use to resolve disagreements about expectations were practiced in an interactive way using real examples brought by the managers to the seminar.

Performance coaching of staff to build skills - this session examined how the managers viewed their own performance coaching skills, at existing levels of knowledge and some of the skills the managers already had in performance coaching. A knowledge test was used to focus on performance coaching skills in other people and activities were attempted to test skill areas.

Performance coaching of staff to build and enhance confidence - the intention of this topic was to assist the managers to identify if a team member has low confidence and if this is affecting their work.

Activities were designed around real examples of how to identify if team member has low confidence and if this is affecting their work and what steps managers can undertake to build confidence in team members.

Performance coaching of staff to encourage organisational flexibility - this session commenced with a review of how each manager could improve their performance coaching skills to encourage flexibility by looking at their existing level of knowledge and some of the skills necessary to have in this area.

Activities were designed around situations where a team member was not able to be flexible or adaptable in a new situation, how this may have resulted in some unwanted consequences or ill feeling and possible steps the managers might take to resolve the situation.

Performance coaching to resolve conflicts - this topic examined whether it is the manager that is directly involved in a conflict situation or if the manager is a third party mediating the dispute, the knowledge and skills to coach others to resolve conflicts. Interactive activities were designed to get the managers thinking about the importance of coaching to resolve conflict and the skills they needed to do so. Real current and past examples of conflict within the organisation were used as case studies.

Performance coaching of staff to develop motivation - this session concentrated on how to get a better understanding of the importance of developing motivation and how to do it. Key concepts relevant to developing motivation were examined, as were the characteristics of motivated team members and how to motivate others. Case studies brought by the managers to the seminar were used to highlight important areas.

On the completion of the skill building sessions of the seminar, the managers were introduced to the concept of action learning (another area of new knowledge) and then moved into workshops to explore and propose a new model of managing performance at the hospital. At the completion of the seminar, it was agreed by the managers to go forward by using three 'action learning sets' to be facilitated by the consultant to develop:

- a new policy for the hospital on performance management
- an organisational wide instrument for use at the hospital to replace the 27 existing instruments
- a number of performance indicators to use within the procedures that aligned with the hospital's strategic and business plans.

### **Phase two - the action learning sets**

Managers self selected into one of the three action learning sets and set about at weekly meetings lasting around 1 1/2 hours to develop the outcomes agreed at the seminar. Alternate managers chaired the action learning sets. The consultant provided each group with the knowledge they required to keep the sets moving forward and to overcome roadblocks that often seemed to frustrate progress. For example, some research was needed on performance indicators, as the managers were not familiar with how specific measures might be designed, constructed and evaluated (Neely et al, 1997) and that there are different types of performance indicators (Kaufman, Thiagarajan, MacGillis, 1997).

The action learning sets continued to meet weekly for up to 8 weeks. When each group had developed an outcome that was satisfactory to all the group members, 3 members from each of the three groups formed a final composite action learning set to bring the outcomes from the three action learning sets, that is the draft policy, the new instrument and the performance indicators, that had been developed independently of each other, into one coherent document. The consultant also attended the meetings of the composite group. Senior management was kept apprised with progress and ensured that the groups were resourced with the support they needed to continue progressing.

The outcome of this phase was a coherent draft performance management document which comprised a new policy for the hospital on performance management, an instrument to be used by staff during the 'performance and development review' process which included a list of performance indicators that could be used to evaluate progress toward goal achievement.

### **Phase three - implementation**

In order to implement what Garvin (1994) described as the second stage of workplace learning, that is behavioural change where managers internalise their new knowledge and change their behaviours, the managers were required to pilot the new performance management instrument at what was called the 'performance and development review' with a member of their work team. The consultant attended at least one of these interviews for the majority of managers under the guise of a 'compulsory mentoring' arrangement to ensure that each manager developed the required performance management skills in real situations. Detailed feedback on the specific behaviours where improvement was necessary was provided to each manager by the consultant at the conclusion of each interview. Where behavioural change was agreed as necessary, the consultant arranged to attend another follow up interview until any required changes to behaviours by the manager were effected. While behavioural change for the manager was the key focus of the mentoring process, the time was also taken to assist the managers to reflect upon their own mental processes and reason about why their behaviours are as they are.

The performance and development review process also enabled the new instrument to be effectively piloted. Members of the composite action learning set saw no significant revisions to the instrument as necessary.

Once all the managers were confident in their behaviours, the new performance management process was implemented across the hospital and all staff completed at least one cycle of the process.

#### **Phase four - evaluation and review**

After the new performance management system was in place for a period of 12 months, a comprehensive evaluation was undertaken which involved an opportunity for all staff of the hospital to be involved. A survey instrument was designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data from hospital staff as to the effectiveness of the new performance management system and its impact on departments within the hospital. The objective was not only to collect data on how the new performance management instrument was viewed by staff, but also to ensure that Garvin's (1994) final stage of effective improvement in organisational performance was measured and also to continue the action learning cycle.

It is the goal of all workplace learning interventions to have a positive impact on organisational performance. The same goal might be said of any workplace training program. The difficulty is how to measure if any positive impact on organisational performance has resulted from the intervention.

While there are a number of models that may be used to measure the effectiveness of training or workplace learning programs (Hamblin, 1974; Kirkpatrick, 1987; Bernard and Ingols, 1988; Endres and Kleiner, 1990; Lewis, 1996), evaluation is generally undertaken at several levels. Accordingly to Kirkpatrick (1987), evaluation should occur at four distinct levels:

- level 1 - emotional reaction to the program. This is generally undertaken using a post-course questionnaire and attempts to measure the manager's attitudes to the program and the perceived overall value of the program. The process is subjective and generally lacks any external quantification.
- level 2 - achievement of the learning objectives contained in the program. This level aims to assess the knowledge gained by the end of the program. Knowledge in this context would refer to a heightened awareness by the managers of the concepts, issues and skills that might be used when back at work to increase their managerial performance.
- level 3 - behavioural changes for the managers in the programs. The third area focuses on the behavioural changes of managers back in the workplace following participation in the program. Surveys, interviews, observations and critical incident methodologies have been used to measure behavioural change (Burke and Day 1986).
- level 4 – concerns the impact on the organisation of the program. Accordingly to Endres and Kleiner (1990, p.7), measuring the impact on the organisation may take 'the form of measuring improvement or the lack of it in a department's profit contribution or in levels of safety, productivity etc'.

Kirkpatrick's fourth level of evaluation is the most complex and difficult to achieve due to the complexity of an organisation's operations and the interaction effects of the manager, organisation and environment which would need to be controlled in a true experimental setting in order to isolate the effects of any one workplace learning intervention.

Any attempt to measure Kirkpatrick's fourth level impact on an organisation of a workplace learning program is concerned with describing measures of organisational performance. In the commercial sector, the attention until recently was concentrated solely on financial measures of performance such as profit, earnings per share and market share. More recently, a more balanced and strategic view of business performance has emerged which attempts to assess the performance of the whole organisation using criteria in addition to the traditional financial measures. The emergence of the 'balanced score card approach' (Kaplan and Norton, 1996, p.75) has supplemented traditional financial measures with criteria that measure performance from additional perspectives including those of customers, internal business processes and learning and growth.

This study did not attempt to measure broad or balanced performance indicators of organisational performance as this would be very costly and time consuming and would necessarily involve an experimental methodology. However, it did seem both possible and practical to attempt to measure if there were any behavioural changes for the managers who participated in the workplace learning program and at least the perceptions of the hospital employees as to any impact the workplace learning program may have had on their individual and work unit performance. In other words to make a

relatively unsophisticated attempt to measure the third and fourth levels of evaluation in the Kirkpatrick model.

Accordingly, an evaluation instrument was designed and included two areas of measurement. The first area was in relation to the performance and development review process itself. Questions were rated on a five point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

Examples of questions in the instrument related to this area were:

- The new performance and development review process works better than the process we used before
- The training I attended for the new process was helpful in understanding how it would work
- I am confident in setting goals with my manager
- I will be better at goal setting next time I have to undergo the process
- The process allowed me to feel more in control of my job
- The process allowed me to feel more in control of my future career

The second area addressed in the survey examined the intended outcomes of the performance and development review process and its impact on behavioural change and organisational performance (the third and fourth levels of evaluation in the Kirkpatrick model). Examples of questions in this area were:

- Since using the new process, communications with my manager have improved
- Since using the new process, I have a better understanding of my department's business plan
- Since using the process, I now understand the key performance indicators for my work or department
- Since using the new process, I better understand the expectations of me in my job
- Since using the new process, I am now more confident in setting goals for myself
- Since using the new process, I feel my work is more planned
- Since using the new process, I think my individual performance at work has improved
- Since using the new process, I think the performance of my work unit has improved

## Results and discussion

Surveys were distributed to all staff of the hospital and 392 useable surveys were returned.

The average rating on each of the questions related to the introduction of the new performance management process are shown in table 1 below. Questions were rated on a five point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

Table 1- Summary of scores from the survey in relation to the performance and development review process.

Question	Mean	Std deviation
The new performance and development review process works better than the process we used before	4.27	0.73
The training I attended for the new process was helpful in understanding how it would work	4.56	0.87
I am confident in setting goals with my manager	3.75	1.65
I will be better at goal setting next time I have to undergo the process	4.60	0.64
The process allowed me to feel more in control of my job	4.29	0.89
The process allowed me to feel more in control of my future career	4.77	0.76

It can be seen from the table that respondents were very satisfied with the new performance management process, although there appeared to be some concern with the issue of goal setting with managerial staff. It is significant that the new performance management process assisted staff of the hospital to take more control of their careers and to use the new process as a negotiation tool with their managers to plan for their future staff development activities.

Respondents were also asked to consider a range of questions relating to whether their perceptions were that the new performance management system was having an impact on the behaviour of

managers and on organisational performance. Questions were rated on a five point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Table 2 below records the results.

Table 2- Summary of scores from the survey in relation to impact on behavioural and organisational performance

Question	Mean	Std deviation
Since using the new process, communications with my manager have improved	4.66	0.83
Since using the new process, I have a better understanding of my department's business plan	4.72	0.72
Since using the process, I now understand the key performance indicators for my work or department	4.79	0.81
Since using the new process, I better understand the expectations of me in my job	4.54	0.95
Since using the new process, I am now more confident in setting goals for myself	3.88	1.73
Since using the new process, I feel my work is more planned	4.20	0.82
Since using the new process, I think my individual performance at work has improved	4.69	0.61
Since using the new process, I think the performance of my work unit has improved	4.71	0.58

As indicated in table 2, respondents were also well satisfied with the behavioural changes of the managers (communication, goal setting etc) and the organisational changes (planning, individual and work unit performance) brought about by the new performance management process.

It is acknowledged that the data gathered to investigate behavioural and organisational performance improvements is crude, relies on perceived values rather than actual values and overall is a relatively unsophisticated attempt to measure the third and fourth level of evaluation in the Kirkpatrick model.

However, in all enterprises, there are some performance results that can be measured absolutely with the support of concrete information (for example profits), some which can be measured but are not because of the time it takes or the costs involved in undertaking the exercise and other important results which cannot be measured absolutely and which must be measured using perceptions.

Notwithstanding this limitation, the values table 2 indicate that for these performance indicators, the high values in the table (that is a mean value greater than 3.0) indicate that for these performance indicators, while being perceptually based, they are founded on hard data as staff would be aware of the elements that make up their perceptual ratings for these questions.

Accordingly, it is argued that the research largely captured actual performance differences and not just perceived performance differences among the work units in the study.

Qualitative comments gained in the survey from participants were also very positive and supported the quantitative data. Selected comments that were representative of the overall themes in the qualitative data were:

- 'The new process is much better than the jumble of appraisal forms we use to have'
- 'I now talk with my manager much more often about what we are doing in our department and its goals'
- 'The performance and development review enables me to have some influence on my career development'
- 'I can honestly say that I understand for the first time what we are trying to achieve here'
- 'I have altered my priorities at work to better achieve key areas'
- 'Our department seems to run much better now that the new process is in place'

As a result of the survey, some minor changes were made to the performance management instrument to improve readability and to enhance the relationship between individual employee goals and business plans. It was also found that staff would benefit with some training in goal setting.

The results of this action/workplace learning intervention have important implications for how workplace learning is implemented in organisations.

Workplace learning interventions need to be accompanied by a planned strategy that encourages managers to work together in a collaborative way on real workplace issues or problems that will have immediate benefits to the managers and the organisation. Action learning is ideally suited to this as it provides a safe environment for managers to work together in a climate of trust.

It is ideal to use off site training as part of a workplace learning implementation strategy to get managers to think differently and to allow them to be exposed to and share new ideas and new knowledge, but this needs to be combined with learning back in the workplace and follow up. Mentoring of managers back in the workplace appears to be an effective tool for ensuring real behavioural change takes place. This can be very confronting to some managers who lack the necessary skill areas and mentors must develop the trust and confidence of the managers and be seen as independent and not a conduit to higher management. This requires a level of confidentiality between the managers and the mentor to be respected by the CEO and a high level of trust between the consultant and the CEO.

There is an obvious need to have senior management support in any workplace learning implementation process. Learning can be an expensive exercise for the organisation as well paid managers are not 'on the job' or appear to be 'absent' attending action learning set meetings or off the job at training seminars. However, the support required from senior management is not just financial. If true creativity is to be released, managers engaged in workplace learning need to feel that the environment allows experimental approaches to workplace issues. They need to be confident that mistakes are seen as part of the process. They need to feel supported if their skills are not where they should be and that the resources from either inside the organisation or from outside the organisation (via consultants) are available to assist in their development when it is needed.

Each workplace issue may need a different approach. However, in workplace learning programs there is a need to use real and practical organisational issues as a basis for learning with real outcomes that will benefit those charged with its implementation. Where possible, outcomes should be aligned with strategic or business needs and goals.

The usefulness of the action learning approach in addressing workplace problems and issues, changing workplace cultures and as a vehicle to commence the process of introducing workplace learning into organisations has been demonstrated. When managers see the usefulness of adopting learning values, the commencement of a workplace learning culture has been achieved.

Lessons offered for workplace learning

Start small with issues or problems that are readily solvable. As confidence builds, tackle more difficult problems where success might be more tenuous or longer term.

As managers are the ones expected to introduce workplace learning and show continued leadership in the area, legitimise a focus on the managers of the organisation and contrive ways of ensuring that they are the ones that are deeply involved in the process and benefit from the outcomes.

Ensure the process offers a safe and comfortable way for managers to express themselves without fear of being criticised for not knowing. Well-managed action learning sets can offer participants a place where trust may be engendered among and between participants.

Use collaborative techniques where individual managers are not left solely responsible for achievement when learning processes are relatively new.

For workplace learning processes to be legitimised in the eyes of senior management and therefore be continually supported, a return of investment must be realised. This requires some form of measurement of outcomes that should be related to the organisation's strategic plan. Quantitative measures that consist of hard numbers to show 'effects on the bottom line' are preferred by most senior managers but a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures provides a fuller picture of the results.

Outside consultants can be a way of ensuring that the inevitable blockages that occur for workplace learning sets are removed.

## Conclusion

Workplace learning plays a key role in organisational productivity and effectiveness. Organisations that have not yet learned to learn are behind in the competitive environment in which most organisations exist and their very long-term survival must be questioned. And yet, it is sometimes difficult for leaders of organisations to conceptualise how to implement a workplace learning strategy, let alone achieve the elusive goal of becoming a learning organisation.

This case study has demonstrated that a workplace learning strategy can be implemented with the use of an action learning methodology. The first stage is to find a workplace problem or issue that requires resolution and then to put in place an incremental approach that makes learning a focus for managers. Of itself, such a process will not necessarily create a learning organisation. However, once a learning process has been successfully navigated and real and measurable benefits have been realised for both the managers and the organisation, it will be difficult to find a senior manager in the organisation that will not want to put in place learning systems to ensure coordinated repetition of the learning achieved. Knowledge and learning are now seen to be new strategic assets of the organisation.

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