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Action Learning, what it is and how it can be used in e-learning

Action-based learning allows you to learn by tackling real problems and unexpected events that you encounter in the workplace. Here are the advantages of action learning

Action learning is one of the training methodologies that places experience at the forefront, used to develop individual and group growth. It is an educational process that aims to resolve work-related problems and develop adequate skills to face real challenges and deal with obstacles that arise in the professional field. At the same time, however, action-based learning allows you to assimilate new knowledge and acquire new skills through **practice** and **direct experience** in the field. Action learning allows individuals to learn to work with others, strengthening their team building skills and sharing their experiences.

What is action learning?

With **action learning** we mean a training method based on real experience, through which the student can learn to deal with the problems he actually encounters in the workplace. In general and in certain ways, action learning can be included in the large group of **experiential learning**. It is a process that involves a group of people, who intend to cooperate to face **real challenges**, to optimize their work and to allow each member to learn from the others.

This learning methodology leads individuals to learn from their own **experiences** and to capitalize on the diversity of colleagues. These, in fact, could lead to professional and personal enrichment and the resolution of problems for which a solution would not have been found independently. Learning, therefore, is based on action and **group analysis**, which strengthens the knowledge of individuals and promotes individual learning, as well as collaboration and the ability to work in a team.

Action learning, in fact, is a training process dedicated to a small group, trained to work on real problems, which acts as a single team, helping companies to develop strategies to face obstacles and solve problems successfully and quickly. that are encountered in various professional realities.

The **objectives** of action learning are:

Solving a problem or overcoming an obstacle;

- Improvement of the learning capabilities of individuals within the group;
- Development of analytical skills;
- Strengthening the ability to work in a team;
- Improvement in change management strategies;
- Enhancement of communication skills.

The first to introduce the action learning method was Reg Revans, a Cambridge physicist who was impressed by the abilities developed by the interdisciplinary groups present in the University laboratories and composed of various scientists, who had managed to understand the advantage of individual differences for the solving the most complex problems of their research.

The six distinctive elements

Action learning is made up of six distinctive elements, which characterize this action-based learning methodology.

1. **Problem:** it is the center of the action learning activity, which is represented by a project, an objective to be achieved, a challenge to be faced or a problem to be solved. The problem should be an opportunity for growth, which leads to better

learning and represents an opportunity to share information and experiences, useful for developing new skills and abilities. The problem usually consists of an urgent task that puts the group to the test.
2. **Group:** understood as a group of people who, united, must arrive at the solution to the problem identified previously. Ideally, the team consists of 4-8 people with different knowledge and skills, who can thus enrich each other. The diversity within a group, in fact, represents a wealth, because it allows us to observe the problem from different points of view.
3. **Question:** the method used to solve the problem is based on the use of relevant and useful questions for group reflection, eliminating the idea of the presence of right or wrong answers. The focus, in fact, is on identifying the nature of the problem and the strategies that can be implemented to solve it. Questions allow you to create an environment dedicated to the development of productive and effective group dialogue.
4. **Action:** learning and solving the problem does not happen until you take action and reflect on what you have accomplished. Each member of the group must be able to make decisions to intervene on the problem being worked on and be certain that the indications given by the team are implemented. Once the problem has been identified, the strategies to follow to achieve the established objectives are then developed.
5. **Learning:** each member of the group, by working on achieving objectives and solving professional problems, acquires new knowledge and different skills. But learning is not limited to this, because thanks to action learning the group acquires greater cooperation and decision-making skills and improves its speed of response and problem resolution.
6. **Coach:** is a guiding figure of the group, who helps team members to focus on the objective to be achieved and on how to reformulate and resolve the problem. Furthermore, the coaching activity is useful for making the individuals who are part of the group reflect on the learning they are developing. The coach can be identified as a person on the team who, in rotation, takes on the role of guide or who has the task of pulling the strings of the team's work for the entire duration of the project.

Advantages and disadvantages

Action learning presents a series of strengths, which could push companies to use it, to strengthen the skills of their workers and to improve the ability to face a challenge quickly and effectively, so as to immediately solve the problems that arise they show up from time to time. In general, 5 strengths of action learning can be identified:

1. It proposes a **creative way of training**, which at the same time allows you to act. In a constantly changing world, which presents ever new and unpredictable work challenges, the possibility of learning and acting at the same time can represent an important advantage for companies.
2. It is a **tool for action**, which helps to concretely solve real problems.
3. It provides observable results in real time regarding the training investment, because it allows you to verify its effectiveness in the company reality.
4. Increases workers' **motivation** to learn, because training has a direct effect on work and individuals can actually experience its effects.
5. Teaches **team work**, making joint decisions and carrying out coordinated actions. In this way, workers develop collaboration and sharing skills and competences, which allow rapid management of problems and change processes and which can also constitute an important resource for future challenges. Furthermore, group work improves the communication skills of the people involved in the team.
6. Improves reflection and **analysis skills**.

On the one hand, therefore, action learning represents an advantageous way of learning and managing unexpected events that arise in a professional context. On the other hand, however, companies also have to deal with the downside, which consists of some disadvantages:

1. It is a training process with a higher cost than other learning approaches;
2. It must be carefully designed, because otherwise it would risk creating management problems;
3. Creating an action learning team may require other changes within the company.

Action learning in virtual environments

Action learning appears to be an effective learning modality and a good method for combining training and action. In the contemporary world, however, new technologies and the possibility of working remotely, which has been increased during the

Covid-19 pandemic, represent a reality that must also be dealt with in the training sector. However, it is not certain that action learning must necessarily be developed in person, involving a team of people who meet physically.

If individuals work in different and distant locations on a national or global level, it is possible to adopt a **virtual mode** of action learning which, in addition to guaranteeing all the advantages of in-person action learning, can provide:

- The opportunity to form a working group at a national or even global level, connecting individuals in every part of the world;
- The possibility of reducing costs, because those relating to travel, accommodation and rental of the office are eliminated, as well as all costs relating to utilities.
- The convenience of participating in the work group from a more comfortable environment, such as your own home;
- Greater flexibility;
- The environmental advantage, given by the reduction of CO2 emissions that cause travel.

Why use Virtual Action Learning

Despite the physical distance, **Virtual Action Learning** can be an important resource for companies that intend to focus on learning, while at the same time developing the communication and collaborative skills of their workers. The virtual action learning method allows you to communicate solutions on a global level and reduce the costs that the company would have to bear for this training method.

Virtual Action Learning, however, can also bring benefits to group members. In addition to the convenience and flexibility that the use of new technologies guarantees, thanks to the online process, the individual can reflect more, without feeling the pressure of having to intervene immediately in the group. Furthermore, the lack of direct eye contact and the slower pace allow the worker to examine and plan questions and answers before sharing them, thus improving the quality of listening and providing more timely and thoughtful answers. Furthermore, the use of a virtual environment allows participants to develop new expressive skills and learn skills and competences related to virtual environments, which are increasingly expanding today.

The use of action learning implies a **change** in the classic vision of learning, because it overturns the role of the teacher, who takes on the characteristics of a critical observer, and that of the students, who are the actors of the learning process, capable of self-manage and make decisions yourself.