

# Action learning for further developing project management competencies: A case study from an engineering consultancy company

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## Abstract

Competence development of the employees is a core element when it comes to successful implementation of planned change. In this article, findings from an in-depth empirical study in an engineering consultancy are presented. The consultancy wanted to further develop the organization due to changed market conditions. Among other initiatives, top management established a competence development programme for the project managers. Action learning was used as a developmental method in one of the projects in the programme. The research showed that certain preconditions needed to exist in order for the project managers to benefit from participating in action learning, e.g. a proper and respected selection process for participants, proper training of the facilitators, sufficient time spent together in each action learning session, and sufficient follow-up.

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*Keywords:* Change; Competence development; Action learning; Project managers; Facilitators

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## 1. Introduction

Planned changes in companies typically involve a people side (Kotter, 2007; Schifalacqua et al., 2009). Therefore, competence development of the employees is a core element when it comes to successfully inducing changes to an organization. Reflective thinking, i.e. persons involved in a given activity reflecting on what they did, is acknowledged as an efficient way to facilitate leadership development (Parkes, 1998). However, research has shown that “reflection does not come naturally or even easily to most managers” and “explicit attempts to encourage adoption of learning and reflective practices through either logical explanations or development sessions have been largely unsuccessful” (Smith, 2001, p. 33). Action learning may be a promising way of facilitating leadership development as it involves reflective thinking (Smith, 2001). Even though a lot has

been written about action learning, unfortunately, it is not really clear from the existing literature how to support action learning. The author of this article has done an in-depth case study in which action learning was used as a method to enhance the competencies of the project managers. The outcomes of the action learning activities were mixed. Some of the project managers did benefit a lot from the action learning activities, while others did not. The research revealed that the context, content, and process related to the action learning sessions differed considerably in the successful action learning sets compared to the less successful ones. Based on the case study, the aim of this article is to discuss conditions necessary to enhance competence development among project managers by action learning.

The structure of the article is as follows: The next section presents relevant concepts drawn from the existing literature. Hereafter, the research methodology underlying the research is described, and findings from an in-depth case study are offered. The findings are related to existing literature in Section 5, and propositions on preconditions

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needed to benefit from participating in the action learning are presented. Further, challenges related to various roles associated with the action learning are discussed. The article is finalized by Section 6.

## 2. Literature

### 2.1. *Project, change, and change management*

The ability to accomplish planned change within a company is a central part of being and staying competitive (Gareis, 2010; Kotter, 2007). Gareis (2010) points to the importance of differentiating between various types of changes e.g. “further developing” and “transformation” in order to better grasp the challenges related to each of the specific change types and to define appropriate and relevant processes, activities, and roles. However, change cannot only “be difficult for individuals, but [it is] also often an up-hill battle for organizations” (Bennet and Bennet, 2008, p. 378). Even though projects and programmes are mentioned in the project management literature as vehicles for change, (Lehtonen and Martinsuo, 2008; Turner et al., 1996) research on how to combine change management and project and programme management has only been carried out to a limited extent (Gareis and Huemann, 2008). The concepts project management and programme management are here understood as processes of the project-oriented company containing the sub-processes ‘project start’, ‘continuous project coordination’, ‘project controlling’ and ‘project close-down’ and if necessary the ‘resolution of a project discontinuity’ respectively ‘programme start’, ‘programme coordination’, ‘programme controlling’, ‘programme close-down’ and if necessary ‘resolution of a programme discontinuity’ (Gareis, 2005). If projects and/or programmes are chosen as vehicles for the planned change, Gareis (2010) points to the importance of defining roles relevant for both the change, e.g. change owner, change manager and change agents, and for the project/programme, e.g. project and programme owners, project and programme managers, project and programme team members, etc. However, the current literature does only to a limited extent report on challenges related to role fulfillment. The research underlying this article took place in a company in which top management wanted “further developing” (Gareis, 2010) by accomplishing a competence development programme for the project managers in which action learning was used as a development method within two of the projects in the programme. An important part of this article is, therefore, to provide a rich description on challenges related to the combination of change wishes, programme and project management, and action learning as a specific development method. Central concepts of action learning are presented in the next section.

### 2.2. *Action learning*

It is generally acknowledged that learning can be seen as a means to get a competitive advantage and that change is

related to both learning and action (see e.g. Parkes, 1998). Bennet and Bennet (2008) stated it this way: “With learning comes knowledge, with knowledge comes action and with action comes change” (p. 378) and further: “[Knowledge is] the capacity to understand situations, recognize their meaning and implications, identify underlying problems (versus symptoms), create solutions, make decisions and implement effective actions” (p. 379). However, the same authors point in another publication to the fact that knowledge cannot be ‘managed’ but have to be ‘nurtured’ (Bennet and Bennet, 2004). Action learning is a suitable educational approach to enhance and nurture workplace learning (Pedler and Abbott, 2008a) as it is a way to involve participants in working on their own problems and taking appropriate action. The pioneer within action learning was professor R.W. Revans from UK who already at the end of the Second World War published his first book (Revans, 1945) based on consultancy work in the mining industry. He was convinced that another type of training than the then prevailing “telling” style was needed (Revans, 1983b). Since the first book Revans has done a lot of work and a lot of publications on action learning, e.g. the book ABC of action learning (Revans, 1998). Even though the long-term existence of the concept and a lot of research done (e.g. Bennet and Bennet, 2004; Dunton, 2008; Marsick et al., 1992; O’Hara et al., 2004; Parkes, 1998; Pedler and Abbott, 2008a, 2008b; Peters and Smith, 1996; Pounder, 2009; Revans, 1983a,b; Smith, 2001), full agreement on the approach has not been reached. Pedler and Abbott (2008b) state that “action learning is a maturing approach to management, leadership and organizational development, yet it has no single definition and varies considerably in practice. It is not a simple methodology with universal procedures, but an approach or discipline with core values and principles which are applied by various practitioners in differing ways in diverse situations” (p. 186).

Typically, action learning involves a small group of people, like 4–6, known as a “set”, who work together on real problems. In some sets (and this was the original intention of Revans (see e.g. 1983a) the participants work with individual problems “owned” by the participants, while in other sets (and this is especially reported from action learning in the US (see e.g. a review in Parkes, 1998)) the problem covered is a common problem for all set participants, e.g. in a project group. The philosophy behind action learning is that individuals are offered a safe environment in which they are, with the support of others, encouraged to reflect upon and take ownership of problems and challenges and to find new ways of facing these (Pounder, 2009). Action learning “focuses on the individual that is presenting the problem or challenge and creates an opportunity for curiosity from the participants in the room” (Dunton, 2008, p. 109). The set members meet in a number of sessions over a period of time for mutual reflection and follow-up on issues from previous sessions as well as on new issues related to real problems. This

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