Chapter 3

Action Learning Coaching: A Practical Model for Novice and Emergent Leader Development

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ABSTRACT

Action learning coaching is advocated as an aspirational means to develop novices and emergent leaders that builds personal capacity as well as ability to meet new challenges. In this chapter, action learning coaching will be considered in three different ways. The first marks a broad overview of action learning and coaching, along with its integrated practice. The second way presents a practical model of action learning coaching as an innovative method to fortify novices and emergent leaders in the workplace. Finally, insights are drawn from an action learning action research (ALAR) case study and an object lesson to show as to how five novices in human resource development (HRD) in roles such as instructional design and training and development gained heightened capacity and efficacy in performing their roles through action learning coaching.

INTRODUCTION

An ever-changing competitive landscape and heightened business volatility compel organizations to think differently about their approach to human resource development in the workplace. The approach to and utilization of human resource development (HRD) practices, including training and development initiatives, plays an important role in developing employees in organizations (Noe, Clarke & Klein, 2014). Integration of consistent approaches or well developed methodologies for managing and developing employees can prove to be illusive (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones, & Michaels, 2002; Boudreau, 2004). As a result, many firms continue to rely on formal training opportunities which focus narrowly focus on surface-level skills that prepare employees with current skills and competencies but not tomorrow’s (Cullen et al., 2002; Matthews, 1999; Winch & Ingram, 2002).

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Management theorists have long concluded that sustained success in the workplace is only possible when new forms of learning, knowledge creation, and organizational change emerge (Drucker, 1993; Senge et al., 2005). Contemporary trends in workplace learning now focus on how individuals ideally transcend their existing limits (Illeris, 2003). In an effort to source innovative methods for developing employees and specifically leaders, human resource development practitioners continuously seek ways to address competency development needs, and build current as well as future organizational capacity (Volz-Peacock, Carson & Marquardt, 2016). One method that has been demonstrated to be an effective approach and used universally to develop leaders is the action learning coach-facilitated methodology (Volz-Peacock, Carson & Marquardt, 2016).

Action learning coaching produces learning for innovation in complex, ambiguous situations (O’Neil & Marsick, 2014). Its subjects, though responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, achieve the intended changes to improve their observable behavior through participation in small groups called “sets” (Revans, 1982, p. 626-627). Similarly, coaching within professional or business settings is an informal dialogue that facilitates new skills, possibilities and insights in the interest of individual learning and organizational advancement (Bacon & Spear, 2003). The International Coaching Federation website defines professional coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” (icf.com, n.d.). Of late, the incorporation of coaching with action learning has begun to gain traction in scholarly circles, albeit with little practical application (Carter, 2015).

The use of action learning and professional coaching as an integrated practice actually has its roots in business literature as far back as the 1950’s (Ellinger, 2014). Action learning coaching can be the first step for participants in a journey toward greater self-insight and a greater capacity to learn from experience (Marsick & O’Neil, 1999), ultimately allowing participants to work on the problems occurring in their own work settings and reflect with peers who offer valuable insights into each other’s workplace problems (Cho, 2013). Not only is action learning an effective tool for learning, problem solving and leadership development, the addition of coaching elements and the personalized attention that coaching brings (Ellinger & Kim, 2014) can serve as a means to develop employees’ leadership abilities and personal capacity in the workplace.

Participants largely missing from the action learning coaching discussion include novice and emergent leaders, also known as high-potential employees. Novices are individuals who are new entrants in the workplace and emerging leaders, also known as high-potentials, and are recognized as an organization’s likely future leaders (Cope, 1998). Novices and high-potentials are critical to ensuring current and future businesses success and are playing an increasingly important role in an organization’s competitiveness (Lamoureux, 2012). Few studies have specifically investigated the learning of employees who are not yet leaders, or who are new to the organization or industry. Privileged instead is the research that heavily favors an action learning approach used by leadership development programs and teams within organizations to resolve larger business or team-based issues. (Carter, 2015).

In this chapter, we discuss the facilitated action learning coaching as an effective way to support novices, emergent leaders and new professional members in the workplace, and further, assist them in building capacity for the future. The beginning of the chapter engages in a broad discussion of action learning and coaching, seeks connections to empirical data of learning by novices and emergent leaders as under-researched groups. The middle part of this chapter presents a practical model depicting action learning and business coaching as a way to build capacity in emergent leaders and novices in the workplace. Following the model is an examination of an action learning action research (ALAR) case.
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