

By Will Perry, Erik de Haan and Kathleen King

Action station

The BBC has put its weight behind action learning, an initiative that is helping it to instil a coaching culture – and changing the way its leaders deal with staff

Organisations such as Nokia, the Alzheimer's Society and the BBC are discovering that the best way to develop leaders and to embed a coaching culture is to support coaching initiatives with action learning.

The BBC has certainly done so – and on a massive scale. BBC managers have been embarking on the organisation's leadership development programme, jointly designed with Ashridge Consulting, since September 2003. And action learning and coaching are consistently described by participants as one of the components with the most impact.

The action learning component of the BBC leadership programme, which is grounded in leading-edge complexity thinking applied to organisations¹, involved 33 facilitators from Ashridge and the BBC, with around 4,000 leaders taking part over a four-year period and around 95 action learning sets running concurrently. The BBC's action learning community has been the largest yet in the consultancy's extensive action learning practice.

The BBC's leadership programme was set up to establish a coaching culture in the organisation. Action learning was felt to make a significant



contribution to this.² In the course of reflecting on their issues, participants experienced the power of a facilitative, rather than an overly directive, style from their peers. Many commented on the extent to which this experience motivated them to alter the way they dealt with their staff, from a managerial “sell and tell” approach to a more enabling style.

Moreover, with the support and challenge of the facilitator and feedback from their peers about the value of their contribution, they developed their coaching skills in the action learning meetings.

Going live

Action learning is highly supportive of a coaching culture because it encourages participants to focus on issues that are “live” and significant to them, and to reflect on their own contribution to the problem.

With the support and encouragement of the facilitator, set members learn to take a coaching approach to supporting and challenging one another, learning to listen with care, ask probing questions, test their understanding and summarise, rather than falling back on the often deeply ingrained habits of giving advice or offering quick solutions. The facilitator, by

eliciting feedback from the “client” about the helpfulness of the various contributions, creates an environment in which participants learn to give and receive feedback.

One participant, historically prone to offering advice, said: “I used to think: ‘Let’s stop beating about the bush, it’s obvious what you need to do. I’ll just tell you so that we can get a move on.’ It took me a long time to realise that my solution was usually missing the point and that it was much more valuable (however frustrating on occasions) to help people to think through what works for them, in their setting.

“I’ve learnt not to make so many sweeping generalisations. In fact, when my staff come to me with an issue, I now usually start by asking them some thought-provoking questions rather than offering a quick fix.”

The personal benefits

Feedback from participants suggested action learning was valuable at both a personal and organisational level. Personal benefits included:

● Unexpected insights

“Action learning has been incredibly valuable, both as a learning tool and as a way of maintaining the momentum of the leadership programme,” one participant said. “Our group

comprises individuals of very different leadership types; not people I would have naturally gravitated towards for help, but certainly people who have been able to give me excellent insight into issues. I feel our group works well together as a learning set but also as a source of general leadership support.”

● Seeing past the problem

As in many organisations, the difficulties of working for an autocratic leader was an issue for many participants. In the process of sharing their experience of “working for a bully”, they discovered more about the conditions that contributed to and kept autocratic leadership in place. They discovered “the bully within”, recognising the conditions in which they too became autocratic and overly controlling.

● Being less demanding

Another recurring theme was the tension between “maximising professional freedom” and “imposing tight and immovable deadlines”. Individuals discovered how they too sometimes put impossible demands on the organisation, their staff and their leaders.

● Increased self-awareness

People reported feeling more self-aware as a result of their action learning experiences. This self-discovery did not happen without

some discomfort. Action learning, participants reported, felt both supportive and challenging, enjoyable and painful.

● **Reframing the issues**

Reframing participants' issues often led to an unexpected discovery of hidden or unconscious benefits of problematic situations and, conversely, unintended consequences of attempted solutions. One participant said: "Action learning is a powerful tool to help people address issues that are causing blockages in their working lives. Well facilitated, the set learns how to push boundaries with each other and with the topics under discussion."

● **Reduced stress**

Others said they felt more grounded and less stressed, and more supported in their leadership role. Many participants reported taking their newly gained process skills into their daily dealings with colleagues.

● **Taking skills to work**

Participants with a talent for action learning were encouraged to develop their facilitation skills so they could support their sets beyond the programme boundaries, thus further enriching the pool of process skills in the organisation.

No mean feat

Action learning has been applied in many different forms in a host of organisations over the years, with varying degrees of success. But it was no mean feat for the BBC to manage a community of action learners and facilitators on this scale, and in a way that helped it to establish a coaching culture and safeguard essential preconditions, such as confidence and trust, safety and freedom, so easily jeopardised by rigid management structures.

It was certainly successful. Some 89 per cent of delegates engaged in

this optional element of the programme, and 77 per cent of delegates reported their experience as "very positive", with the remaining 23 per cent reporting it as "positive".

The BBC's track record of professional development, coaching and training helped to draw in participants, as did the fact that signing up was voluntary, with participants free to choose which issues they tackled and able to influence the kind of facilitation required.

Also helpful was the establishment of a team of BBC colleagues, including an experienced action learning facilitator, to co-ordinate the action learning support framework. Those participants with a special interest and enthusiasm for action learning were encouraged to facilitate their own and other sets beyond the programme.

The team involved in the design and implementation of the leadership programme understood the importance of leaving the responsibility for learning as much as possible with the participants.

The extra mile

The BBC leadership programme took action learning the extra mile by training a number of staff extensively as action learning facilitators. To support them and to gather feedback, voluntary "action learning cafes" were introduced, helping facilitators to reflect on issues arising from the action learning groups, in a safe environment.

A shift towards process consultation at the BBC and a heightened process awareness of the organisation's internal consultants and leaders was often attributed to the action

Nokia gets connected

The element of increased connectivity within action learning is important for Nokia, which uses it to bring people together from across the company's global network, helping them to become more aware of organisation-wide issues and of the impact of their decisions on other divisions.

Bruno Dalbiez, senior organisational development consultant at Nokia, has used action learning for many years to help individuals, teams and organisations change

learning process and its supporting infrastructure.

As the BBC has found, action learning sets can help to increase connectivity across the organisation. Reflecting jointly on each others' issues, participants felt less lonely and realised that others were struggling with similar issues, and they found ways to support each other beyond the meetings.

The latter is a benefit we recognise in our work with clients across the private, public and charitable sectors. The multiple benefits of action learning, on both an individual and organisational level, is one of the reasons it has had such a significant revival since its heyday with Reg Revans.³ As globalisation increases and pressure mounts on sustainable business practices, virtual action learning is rapidly becoming a preferred development choice for multinational corporations.⁴ ■

● The Manager as Coach is a two-day course that aims to give managers the confidence to adopt a coaching management style and maximise the potential of the individual in the workplace.
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**Nokia's head office
in Espoo, Finland**



and learn at the same time. "Used well, action learning creates a culture of simultaneous maximum support, maximum challenge, individual responsibility for change, and collective responsibility for learning," he says.

"It is an approach that is congruent with what has started to happen around Web 2.0, Enterprise 2.0, social networks and leaderless organisations, and is one of the most effective and least expensive ways to develop people and organisations," Dalbiez adds.

The Alzheimer's Society develops its leaders

The Alzheimer's Society, along with many other clients of Ashridge Consulting, is a strong advocate of combining executive coaching and action learning. It believes this is the most cost-effective way to develop senior leaders and a coaching culture.

The charity launched a leadership development programme for its senior leaders, including the senior management and corporate management team – some 35 people in total – in collaboration with Ashridge.

Because of the heavy workload of the people involved, and to make the most of the scarce resources of the organisation, the design team agreed to a blend of action learning and executive coaching, combined with a number of one-day events to allow participants to share their understanding of the current issues facing the charity.

Senior managers receive one-to-one coaching, and their direct reports, the corporate management team, meet in action learning groups, which enables them to coach one another with the support of an Ashridge facilitator.

One of the corporate management participants said action learning had given him "the opportunity to discuss some of my most intractable issues with colleagues. It has also made me feel more connected with those working in other divisions, less lonely and more able to understand different facets of organisation-wide issues".

But the most important thing for one participant was that action learning had changed the way he dealt with his direct reports, supporting an empowering coaching culture in which staff found their own answers.

"In the past, when staff came to me with a problem or a question, I would just tell them what to do. Now I find myself asking questions, probing, listening, all that good stuff we are encouraged to explore in our action learning meetings. Some of my staff are beginning to get it. They'll walk into my office and start to say: 'What do you think I should do about...?' then they stop themselves and say: 'I know, I know, you're going to ask me what I think about the situation.'"

The participant said the process took time and patience but that while "it doesn't come naturally" to him, he is beginning to reap the benefits: "They come to me much less often about trivial matters and seem more confident in thinking things through for themselves. I sometimes have to stop myself from reverting to my old style, just telling them what to do because it's quicker and easier, but I remind myself that it's worth taking a coaching approach in the long run, even if it can feel like hard work on occasion."

References

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2. J Massy, "External evaluation report – the BBC leadership development programme", ROI Institute, 2006.
3. R Revans, *Action Learning in Practice*, Gower, 1985.
4. G Caultat and E De Haan, "Virtual peer consultation: how virtual leaders learn", *Organisations & People*, 13(4), pages 24-32, 2006.

About the authors

Will Perry, director of coaching provider Changing Post, was the BBC's head of action learning and a member of the core design and delivery team for the organisation's leadership programme. **Erik de Haan**, director of the Centre for Coaching at Ashridge, and **Kathleen King**, business director at Ashridge Consulting, were responsible for developing the BBC's action learning facilitators and for running the action learning cafés.