
Editorial

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Issue 1: contribution of action learning to organisational practice

The special issue on ‘Action learning for human resource development (HRD) and human resource management (HRM)’ has attracted a good number of quality papers. After a rigorous reviewing process, we have decided to put together two issues, one focusing on the relevance of action learning to organisational practice and the other on the impact of action learning on management education and development.

In this first of the two issues, our aim is to promote debate and discussion on the application of action learning in solving problems, developing leaders, building teams, and transforming organisations. It therefore seeks to illuminate the impact and relevance that action learning brings to organisational practice, examining the distinctiveness of action learning from the perspective of HRD and HRM.

Action learning is not merely a paradigm that resides in the minds of individuals; it is a powerful and practical methodology that can be used in a wide array of settings to promote in-depth learning and reflective action-taking. More importantly, action learning operates by means of real problems and complex social relations to bring about the reflective and collaborative experience of learners.

Take HRD for example. HRD promotes holistic experience based on the action-oriented behavioural change that operates at the individual, group, and organisational level. Such a change is facilitated by both planned and systematic interventional activities aimed at unleashing human expertise through a range of learning techniques and strategies for the purpose of performance improvement. Action learning has been proven to be an effective methodology as it captures learning through informal

patterns of interaction and unplanned actions. Action learning is also relevant to HRM as it promotes different levels of learning when individuals engage in social exchange through complex problem solving and interpretation of organisational issues. Action learning can thus be used to solve emerging problems that confront HRM both functionally and strategically. As much as HRD is concerned about human development, HRM provides a more macro perspective on employee relations and the deployment of employees to achieve optimal organisational outcomes.

We present our first paper (Yeo and Marquardt) which sets the stage for this issue by arguing that complex problems can be used as opportunities for action learning. Reinforcing its relevance to organisational practice, we suggest that managerial thinking and reflective action taking can be enhanced through complex problem solving embedded in action learning. We emphasise the importance of metacognition as much of the literature on action learning is concerned about action and learning as separate concepts but we suggest that a higher level of cognition involving 'thinking about thinking' can lead to action taking through continuous learning.

The second paper by Cho, Bong, and Jang discusses a case study of two action learning programmes in the development of nurses in South Korea. It examines the importance of reflective practice as a significant component of ensuring effectiveness in action learning. The authors suggest that choice of problems is crucial in action learning as it determines ownership and the nurses' responsibility in solving them. The context in the nursing unit is also unique as it does not involve medical doctors and administrators, constituents that may not necessarily share the same vision.

The third paper describes an action learning approach designed to assist a group of middle managers in the Australian public sector to enhance their performance as effective leaders. Nelson and Yeo suggest that action learning can be used as a model for management development based on four distinct components: plan, act, reflect, and react. They found that learning primarily occurs through engagement in the form of action-by-doing and collaborative reflection. Implications for HRM and HRD are also discussed.

The fourth paper explores the role of action learning coaches in creating a climate conducive to learning. Gibson found that these coaches perceive themselves as instruments to help unfreeze their participants' behaviour to achieve a more desirable level of learning and then introduce important changes in their learning patterns. The final process involves the refreezing of behaviour to maintain a high and effective level of functioning as action learners. The paper further examines the outcomes of action learning through the lenses of performance improvement.

The fifth paper by Gold and Yeo explores the power of action from a socio-cultural perspective and reinforces that action and learning are intertwined to produce goal-oriented outcomes. It suggests that social cognition and interpretive schemes based on interaction and self-reflection give rise to meanings that are both interpreted at different levels to guide collaborative action taking. The Vygotskian notion of 'tools' – language, psychological, and technical – is used as an interpretive device that creates the conditions for unlearning and relearning.

Finally, this special issue would not have been possible without the involvement of 13 international reviewers whose names cannot be acknowledged in this editorial given the integrity of the blind reviewing process. Still, we would like to commend them for their efforts in undertaking a developmental approach to helping the authors shape the conceptual and/or empirical contribution of their papers in meaningful ways. We hope these five papers will widen your perspective of action learning and its application in actual practice in complex organisational environments.

Enjoy this special issue!