

Learning Area Activity

The following is an example of one learning outcome which forms a learning area to be submitted for a claim of 30 credits at level 7.

Group tasks:

- 1. Read through and discuss as group. Note any observations/questions**
- 2. Suggest improvements to the referencing**
- 3. Draw up a list of possible supporting evidence for the learning outcome discussed in this learning area.**

Example of a Learning Area

(Please note that the narrative below is for 1 Learning Outcome)

Title of Learning Area – Establishing Action Learning Sets

Amount of credit claimed for learning area - 30 credits

Level at which credit is being claimed - level 7

Learning outcomes

1. Devise a strategy for establishing action learning sets in an organisation
2. Implement the strategy across the organisation
3. Monitor, review and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy
4. Evaluate the impact of action learning sets on team and organisational performance

Introduction

I have chosen to claim credit for this learning area because the experience of introducing and establishing action learning sets in my workplace significantly contributed to my personal knowledge, understanding and skills.

Background

I am Head of Staff Development in XYZ Insurance Services, and manage all aspects of staff training and development. A full job description is in section two of this portfolio. I have been employed by the Company for almost five years. XYZ was established in 1926 with a staff of eleven, and originally sold personal life insurance policies door-to-door, with weekly collections. The business grew steadily

over the years, and currently offers a wide range of personal and commercial insurance products and services.

Five years ago XYZ merged with ABC Cover, and went from 156 staff to 213, although 68 people were made redundant in the process. The merger presented many challenges for the Company, including managing change, integration of staff, business process re-engineering, re-branding and marketing, and re-defining culture.

The period immediately following the merger was an unsettling time as people from the two organisations came together and there was considerable misunderstanding, suspicion and clinging on to the “old ways of doing things”.

At XYZ, managers had been given a great deal of autonomy, and were very customer focussed, driving the business through customer satisfaction and flexible approaches to problem solving. The approach at ABC Cover was more controlled, with most decision making passed up to senior managers, and operating constraints imposed rigorously.

As Head of Staff Development, my role is to ensure that people within the organisation are given training and development opportunities they need to enable them to perform efficiently and effectively, and to achieve the objectives of the organisation as well as personal growth.

The issues arising from merging two organisations with very different cultures, e.g. integrating staff and developing teamworking impacted performance and there was a need for specific, innovative approaches to organisational and team development. Against this background, I decided to include the establishment of Action Learning Sets

A definition of Action Learning

“Action Learning is an approach to the development of people in organisations which takes the task as the vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning. The method has three main components: people who accept responsibility for taking action on a particular issue; problems, or the task that people set themselves; and a set of six or so colleagues who support and challenge each other to make progress on problems. Action Learning implies both self-development and organisation development.” **Mike Pedler (1991)**

As well as developing individuals’ problem solving skills, and personal responsibility, action learning would also bring business benefits (by identifying practical solutions to problems) I felt that this approach would help to develop positive working relationships and team spirit. It would also break down cultural barriers and help to develop a common sense of purpose and shared objectives.

Establishing Action Learning Sets - How I achieved the learning outcomes

Learning outcome 1. *Devise a strategy for establishing action learning sets in an organisation*

The first step in devising the strategy was to gain a thorough understanding of Action Learning Sets (ALS) and the implications of introducing this intervention in the organisation.

I had previously read some articles on Action Learning Sets, and had spoken to a friend who is a training manager in a manufacturing company that was using them, **evidence**, but I needed to get more in-depth information. I am a Chartered Fellow of the Chartered Institute of People and Development (CIPD) **evidence** so accessed their website and found some case studies on action learning at KPMG, Just Born and Christian Aid **evidence**. I read several books on the topic, the most useful being *The ABC of Action Learning* by Reg Revans (**ref**) who is the founder of Action Learning, and *Action learning in practice* by Mike Pedler (**ref**)

My predominant learning style is Theorist, **evidence** and I like to have a solid theoretical basis for action, so reading theory and research on action learning was an effective learning method for me. I thought it might be useful to attend a training course on action learning to find out more about the process and practice, but on researching what was available I found that most courses focussed on facilitation skills. I had already done an advanced facilitation skills course via the Industrial Society two years previously **evidence** and had been putting that learning into practice in team building courses since then. I did not think that I would gain much from attending another course.

I contacted the training manager mentioned above and arranged to sit-in on two action learning group meetings in her organisation **evidence**. This was most useful as I was given free and open access to see action learning as it happened, and I was also allowed to get feedback from the participants on the usefulness of the process. I used a short survey to get qualitative information from them **evidence**. Analysis of the survey responses **evidence**, led me to conclude that Action Learning was working effectively in the organisation that I studied, mainly because they had adapted it to their own culture. The four principle exchange options identified by Revans (**ref page 18-21 Abc of Action Learning**) were evident in the design of the Company's action learning programme, and most of the key conditions necessary for implementing ALS successfully (**as identified by Pedlar ref page 4 chapter 2 Action Learning for managers**) were present in the organisation. Another important factor that contributed to the success of action learning sets in the organisation was that the employees were incentivised by bonuses for solving problems where money was saved.

I had lots of prior experience in formulating strategy and producing written plans, but I was aware that in devising a strategy for establishing action learning sets, I would have to deal with the cultural differences and value conflicts **x-ref evidence in other learning**

areas? that were manifest across the organisation. These issues would influence my approach to introducing the concepts and practice of action learning.

For instance, there was a real sense of “them and us” amongst XYZ and ABC Cover staff, the XYZ culture was very much along the lines of Harrison’s “Achievement culture” (Harrison, 1972) and its people had a “can-do” attitude. Their culture also leaned heavily towards being a learning organisation as described by Peter Senge (1990: 3) “learning organizations are organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.”

ABC Cover’s culture was predominantly Role Culture but also with strong leanings towards Power Culture. (Their CEO had established and run the Company on a paternalistic leadership basis, and had involved himself in even quite minor decision-making. His retirement co-incided with the merger). ABC Cover people were used to working within clearly defined roles and boundaries and controlled processes. Introducing Action Learning Sets (ALS) presented me with a dilemma. If successful, ALS would break down cultural differences, instil a sense of common purpose and develop team working, as well as resolving problems. However, in order for ALS to succeed people had to be open and honest, trust each other, and co-operate to seek solutions. This was a real “chicken and egg” situation! I recognised the risk of highlighting and entrenching differences even further.

To address these sensitive and potentially damaging issues, I produced a strategy which included the following features:

- Dissemination of information

- Conducting an internal “Readiness for ALS” survey Promotion

- A pilot programme, which would be evaluated

- Planned rollout of the ALS across the organisation

Evidence of strategy

I knew from experience that one of the key factors (arguably the key factor) in the successful introduction of change is communication, so I produced a fact sheet on ALS for issue to all staff **evidence** This would explain ALS, and our objectives in introducing them.

Pedler, in Action Learning for Managers (ref) suggested using a Readiness for ALS survey. I thought that this would be useful in finding out how whether the conditions, and attitudes of staff were right for introducing ALS. My perception and that of the senior management team may not have been correct.

I included a pilot programme in the strategy because of the problematic context of introducing ALS. A pilot would enable me to identify positives on which to build and any weaknesses that would need to be addressed.

I produced a Gantt chart to plot the roll-out of ALS. As ALS was to be a long-term and on-going learning intervention, a Gantt chart was more appropriate than a simple action plan. **evidence**

Reflection on my learning

In addition to the reflection I've included above, I am able to identify some other factors about the way I learn and how I apply what I've learned. As mentioned above my predominant learning style is Theorist as identified by Honey and Mumford (**Honey, P. & Mumford, A.) evidence**. My second preference is Pragmatist. I learn best when I can see concrete reasons for things, I like sound logic and enjoy exploring underlying theories and principles. I can be detached and analytical when studying or researching. Therefore, reading theory of Action Learning, looking at case studies and carrying out research with another Company were effective learning methods for me, and certainly extended my knowledge and understanding of the topic.

In terms of applying what I learned – in this case to produce a strategy - the Pragmatist in me led me to review the situation within my own organisation, and to identify problems and opportunities to be taken into account in formulating a workable strategy. I also identified tools and techniques that I had previously learned from experience or training courses, that could be applied and/or adapted to this situation.

Although I had produced many strategic documents (and successfully implemented them) in the past, I had to develop new understanding and learn and/or adapt a wider range of skills in devising the strategy for establishing ALS.

This in itself was a learning experience i.e. the realisation that tried and trusted methodologies may not work without situational analysis and adaptation.

Could I have done things differently?

On reflection, although I gained a valuable insight to ALS in practice, it might have been better to have carried out research and a survey with a service industry company rather than a manufacturing company - manufacturing is obviously very different to insurance. Although I did look at the other case studies as mentioned above, and it was clear that they all applied some basic principles, but adapted them to their own circumstances.

It took time to produce the strategy - almost a month, which is quite a long time.

However, it was a beneficial investment of time, as the strategy was comprehensive and robust, and consequently its implementation was relatively smooth, and very successful (ALS has become a natural part of XYZ life). This confirmed my long held suspicion that time spent planning is an investment.

Learning outcome 2. Implement the strategy across the organisation

Content

Learning outcome 3. Monitor, review and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy

Content

Learning outcome 4. Evaluate the impact of action learning sets on team and organisational performance

Content

In concluding the Learning Area the following items will be included

Bibliography

- Pedler, M., (Ed.). 1991. Action learning in practice (2nd ed.). Aldershot,UK: Gower.
- Revans, R. W. 1998. ABC of action learning. London: Lemos and Crane.
- Senge, P. M. (1990) *The Fifth Discipline. The art and practice of the learning organization*, London: Random House.
- Harrison, Roger (1972) *Understanding your organisation's character*, Harvard Business Review
- Honey, P. & Mumford, A. (1982) *Manual of Learning Styles* London: P Honey

List of evidence

Items of evidence included in the appendices