
Original Research Article
Action Learning and Leadership Development: An Article Critique

Dr. Raed Awashreh

*Independent Researcher, Palestine***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Raed Awashreh, E-mail: raed.raya2020@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This critique is for an article entitled "action learning and leadership development" written by three scholars: Volz-peacock, Carson, and Marquardt in 2016 and was published in the journal of Advances in Developing Human Resources. Action learning, a famous widely used method in developing people skills. The authors explain that action learning teaches individual and groups of managers to handle real problems that may face in work. This method benefits three parties: learners themselves, employees, and their organizations and ensure the pipeline of leaders will not stop. The popularity of action learning rose because the method helps to develop leaders with less or limited resources. Managers who are learning through this method continue performing their duties. Although the article has no clear objective, it finds that action learning suits both open and closed organizational systems. Action learning uses leaders from inside organization to develop potential leaders.

1. Introduction

Action learning, a widely used method in developing people skills, helps potential leaders examine and solves real problems. In the last several years, action learning became a famous tool, although its inception occurred in the early 1940s. The popularity of action learning rose because the method helps to develop leaders with less or limited resources; recent employers use action learning to increase the leadership capability of managers to do their work. Managers who are learning through this method continue performing their duties. The authors explain that action learning teaches individual managers or groups of managers to handle real problems that may face in work. This method benefits three parties: learners themselves, employees, and their organizations. Organizations can benefit from the contribution of developing leaders at present and in the future, so the pipeline of leaders will not stop.

2. Review

The purpose of the article is to supports the method of action learning in developing leadership skills. The authors illustrate this purpose by describing the action learning components, procedures for developing leaders, providing evidences from reports, and presenting the application of action learning after analyzing secondary data. The article has two main questions: how leadership skills are developed through action learning and how skills are obtained and transferred into work at a participant's organization (Volz-peacock et al., 2016). The study focuses on advantages of actions over individual and group participants. The authors build their research design through practitioner reports, from those who are involved in developing managers in the action learning. The study depends on 139 individual reports from 33 countries written by coaches, from profit and nonprofit organizations. In addition, the article used 200 case studies built from the collection of information from the reports of other coaches, not direct observation by the researchers (Volz-peacock et al., 2016). A third limitation is the researchers' bias in favor of the action learning method. The authors clearly state these limitations in the article. The analysis covers a few themes, data triangulated from case studies, reports, and previous literature, supported when suitable by leadership development quotes (Volz-peacock et al., 2016).

3. Findings

The findings and the results have combined in one section. The results of this articles presented according to few themes: safety of environment, ease of gaining skills, speed of receiving feedback, cost-effective action learning, and skills that transferred to participants' organizations. Gaining leadership skills through action learning is considered a natural outcome. The article concludes that action learning enables potential leaders at their workplace, transfers leadership skills to organizations staff, and helps learning occur in safe suitable environment, consuming little resources. The article recommends that action learning provide opportunity for potential leaders to gain the necessary leadership skills and allow them take corrective actions through coaches' direct feedback. In addition, the authors suggest further studies, recommending researchers to use both qualitative and quantitative methodology to measure the outcome of action learning by measuring pervious and post participant's leadership skills (Volz-peacock et al. , 2016)

The article aims to contribute in the knowledge of action learning and leadership development. Sharing this research in the action learning domain provides support to managers, practitioners who engage in developing leadership skills. Based on the research conclusion and aims, the article has confirmed the results of previous studies that action learning can develop leadership capability and endorse the advantages of the method (Volz-peacock et al., 2016). In addition, the article has no clear objectives, but clearly supports the view that action learning as a method uses to develop managers' leadership skills. The absence of the objectives affected major sections in the article, namely methodology, the lack of primary empirical data, and findings replaced with results of examining secondary data.

The authors have mentioned the study limitations at their article (Volz-peacock et al. , 2016: 392) but still empirical data gathered via interviewing some of the participants makes the article strong. Empirical data helps in developing both the analysis and finding sections. In addition, primary data can double check the results of secondary sources. Gathering data from action learners is very important; they are the direct beneficiaries, potential leaders who are the focus of the author's two main questions (see the research main questions in Volz-peacock et al., 2016: 318).

The article helps several parties: researchers to build on their future studies, practitioners in considering the use of action learning at their organizations, human resources staff can develop their plans using action learning as a method in fulfilling leader pipelines at different managerial levels. Thinking from leadership perspective, action learning enables staff and potential leaders, individually and in groups, by raising their leadership capabilities (Kolzow,2014). From organizational development, action learning goes smoothly with the transactional change. (Action Learning Associates, 2020). Changing things slowly over phases through learning internally from experienced leaders. Also, action learning helps after major changes, as a few leaders can help learners to gain some new skills. In case of a fundamental change, change that touches the organization structure or culture, using external resources or new blood as Kotter's (2008) has suggested. Thus, leaders can use action learning to transfer skills from outside to inside the organization. Action learning has more affects over learners when suitable principles of collaboration and sharing decision between coaches and participants accompany the method.

4. Action learning and organizational system

Reilly (1998) agrees with the author that action learning sets both open and closed organizational systems. Three Approaches to Organizational Learning. Action learning uses leaders from inside organization to develop potential leaders. In addition, action learning brings experience from outside to potential leaders directly by hiring outside consultants or through their trained leaders (Volz-peacock et al., 2016). Sounds that action learning method can include some external consultants who meet and review the progress of both the educator and learner.

The article confirmed that action learning assists in leadership development programs when used alongside other methods (Raelin, 2017; Leonard & Lang, 2010). Practitioners and researchers consider action learning an effective method in terms of safety environment, suitable for open and closed systems and cost-effective with minimal expenditure of time (Volz-peacock et al., 2016). Researchers: Leonard & Lang (2010), Raelin (2017), Muzindutsi et. al (2018) and Serrat (2017) agree with the article's conclusion on how effective actions learning. Action learning considers the effective method in developing and sustaining leaders and leadership skills. The method ranks strong compared with other methods on scale of (strong, moderate, and weak). Action learning is strong compared with other methods over several themes including insight, motivation of participants, use in worldwide practice, and accountability of the method over several parties – leaders, educator, other staff, and organizations (Leonard & Lang, 2010).

5. Conclusion

In summary, the article has contributed in the knowledge of action learning and leadership development although it has no clear objective. Action learning provides support to managers, practitioners who engage in developing leadership skills, and it goes smoothly with the transactional change. The article describes action learning as a strong method on scale of (strong, moderate, and weak). In addition, The article recommends that action learning provide opportunity for potential leaders to gain the necessary leadership skills and allow them take corrective actions through coaches' direct feedback.

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