

**WILLIAM J. ROTHWELL**

**DISK INCLUDED!**



# the **Action Learning Guidebook**

**A Real-Time Strategy  
for Problem Solving,  
Training Design, and  
Employee Development**

**WILLIAM J. ROTHWELL**

# **The Action Learning Guidebook**

**A Real-Time Strategy  
for Problem Solving,  
Training Design, and  
Employee Development**

**Jossey-Bass  
Pfeiffer**  
San Francisco

Copyright © 1999 by Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer  
ISBN: 0-7879-4591-9

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rothwell, William J., date.

The action learning guidebook: a real-time strategy for problem solving, training design, and employee development / William J. Rothwell.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7879-4591-9 (paperback)

1. Employees—Training of. I. Title.

HF5549.5.T7R656 1999

658.3'12404—dc21

99-10957

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Page v constitutes a continuation of the copyright page.

Printed in the United States of America

Published by

**Jossey-Bass  
Pfeiffer**

350 Sansome Street, 5th Floor  
San Francisco, California 94104-1342  
(415) 433-1740; Fax (415) 433-0499  
(800) 274-4434; Fax (800) 569-0443

[www.pfeiffer.com](http://www.pfeiffer.com)

Acquiring Editor: Larry Alexander  
Director of Development: Kathleen Dolan Davies  
Developmental Editor: Susan Rachmeler  
Editor: Brittney Corrigan-McElroy  
Senior Production Editor: Pamela Berkman  
Cover Design: Tom Morgan/Blue Design  
Interior Design: Bruce Lundquist  
Compositor: Interactive Composition Corporation

Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



This book is printed on acid-free, recycled stock that meets or exceeds the minimum GPO and EPA requirements for recycled paper.

# **The Action Learning Guidebook**

This page constitutes a continuation of the copyright page.

Permission to quote from the following works is gratefully acknowledged:

In the Preface: W. Rothwell and H. Kazanas, *Mastering the Instructional Design Process: A Systematic Approach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 1998 [based on *Instructional Design: The Standards*, p. 54, published by the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction]. Reprinted by permission of the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction.

In Chapter Five: W. Rothwell and H. Sredl, *The ASTD Reference Guide to Professional Human Resource Development Roles and Competencies*. Amherst: HRD Press, Vol. II, p. 389, 1992. Reprinted by permission of HRD Press.

In Chapter Six: W. Rothwell, *Beyond Training and Development: State-of-the-Art Strategies for Enhancing Human Performance*. New York: AMACOM, pp. 121–122 and pp. 176–178, 1996. Reprinted by permission of AMACOM.

*This book is dedicated to my beloved wife Marcelina Rothwell  
and my beloved daughter Candice Rothwell—the two  
most important women in my life.*



# Preface

**HUMANS** are, by their nature, learning beings. They learn all the time by finding and solving problems, watching other people, asking their friends or co-workers for help, and accessing such records of human experience as stories, books, and online information. While many people associate learning with their educational experiences, most learning actually occurs outside educational settings as individuals grapple with the daily challenges they face in life and in work (Zemke and Zemke, 1995). “Adults,” writes Malcolm Knowles, “are motivated to devote energy to learn something to the extent that they perceive that it will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations” (1990, p. 61).

Action Learning (AL) is one strategy that can be used in organizations to help workers meet these challenges. AL is focused on solving problems. While many models and approaches to AL exist, they share several elements in common:

- People usually—but not always—work in teams or groups to find, frame, or solve problems or address issues.
- Equal emphasis is placed on addressing issues of importance to the organization and developing individuals and a team or group.
- Learning experiences occur in or near the work setting.

Since AL is focused on solving problems in real time, it is a powerful means by which to build intellectual capital, realize the promise of learning organizations (Watkins and Marsick, 1993, 1996), and develop individuals both for the present and for the future.

AL relies on learning projects. A *learning project* is a “series of related episodes, adding up to at least seven hours. In each episode more than half of the person’s total motivation is to gain and retain fairly clear knowledge and skill” (Tough, 1979, p. 6). Tough’s research showed that “almost everyone undertakes at least one or two major learning efforts year, and some individuals undertake as many as fifteen or twenty . . . It is common for a man or woman to spend 700 hours a year at learning projects” (p. 1). Project formats can be powerful tools for learning and developing people (Bowen, Clark, Holloway, and Wheelwright, 1994).

At one time, AL was often associated with executive and management development conducted in classroom settings (Brown, 1991). It is also sometimes used as a means to customize purchased training programs so that they fit in a unique corporate culture (Filipczak, 1995). But AL can be applied to other uses as well. It has more recently been seen as a strategy for developing all job categories—not just executives or managers.

First, AL can be focused on finding or solving real-world problems. Teams or groups are commissioned to clarify a problem or issue, gather information about it and find possible solutions to it, experiment with innovative solutions, and evaluate the results of team experiments. By forming a group or team that is knowledgeable about an issue, the organization’s decision makers demonstrate a genuine commitment to empowering employees and giving them free rein to try out creative solutions to tough problems. In this sense, AL bears some resemblances to quality circles or process improvement teams.

Second, AL can be applied as an alternative to traditional approaches to training design in which instructional designers shoulder most or all of the burden to answer such questions as:

- Is it a problem or issue that can be solved by training?
- What is the gap between what people need to know or do to perform and what people presently know?
- Who are the targeted learners, how will the work setting influence the application of training, and how will the work that learners do influence the application of training?



- What should learners know, do, or feel upon completion of training?
- How will learners' mastery of training be measured?
- In what sequence should topics be presented to learners?
- What methods and materials should be used to present training?
- How should training be delivered?
- How can training be field tested before widespread delivery and how can the results of a field test be used?
- How should the results of training be evaluated?

Using Action Learning teams to answer any or all of the questions stated above conforms with current trends that favor empowering learners to assess their own learning needs, find the means to meet their needs, carry out learning in real-time and on-the-job situations, and evaluate the results (Rothwell, 1996c).

Third and finally, AL places equal emphasis on problem solving and on individual or group development. People learn as a byproduct of their experience. Work on an AL team is an important source of learning about approaches to problem solving and working cohesively in teams or groups. Individuals learn from their peers as they participate on an AL team, usually with the help of an *AL set advisor* (who is also known as a team facilitator).

Familiarity with AL is increasingly important to practicing managers and human resources (HR) professionals alike. Developing individuals and teams will increasingly occur in busy work sites and away from quiet classroom settings. Managers will often take ownership of this process, either through their own coaching or by creating an Action Learning process by which to encourage real-time problem solving and learning (McCall, 1997). According to HR guru Warner Burke (1997), HR practitioners in the first decade of the twenty-first century will need to be familiar with nine key concepts: performance improvement, restructuring, organizational change, globalization, groups and teams, Action Learning, time shifts, power shifts, and interrelationships. AL is thus a topic of growing importance.

William J. Rothwell  
University Park, Pennsylvania  
December 1998



# Introduction

**THIS BOOK** is meant to introduce Action Learning to anyone who works with people. The audience of the book may include business and industry trainers, instructional designers, supervisors, managers, executives, team leaders, team facilitators, organization development practitioners, and human resource management professionals.

This book is a primer that serves a three-fold purpose. The first purpose is to show how Action Learning can be used as a real-time strategy for problem finding or problem solving. It can be a valuable tool by which to tackle business problems and meet business needs. The second purpose is to show how Action Learning can be applied to training design. It is intended to stimulate the thinking of instructional designers about a new way to analyze needs, design and develop training, deliver training, and evaluate results. The third purpose is to show how Action Learning can be maximized to build intellectual capital and enhance human talent (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). In this sense, the book shows how team or group work can become a means for developing people in its own right.

This book is organized in three parts.

Part One introduces Action Learning. It consists of Chapters One and Two.

Chapter One, entitled “What Is Action Learning?,” opens with six vignettes that demonstrate typical problems encountered by an organization. It then compares how

those problems would be solved using a traditional approach and an Action Learning approach. The remainder of the chapter defines Action Learning, lists barriers preventing its application, reviews ways to overcome those barriers, and introduces a foundational model of the Action Learning process. Chapter One concludes with some thoughts about the relationship between AL and individual learning.

Chapter Two is entitled “Why Use Action Learning?” It summarizes the benefits that may be expected from using Action Learning.

Part Two describes how to facilitate Action Learning. It consists of Chapters Three through Seven.

Chapter Three, entitled “How Can Situations Appropriate for Action Learning Be Recognized?,” addresses such questions as:

- Who decides when Action Learning is appropriate?
- How do decision makers recognize situations suitable for the use of Action Learning?
- When should a problem or improvement opportunity be handed over to an Action Learning team?

This chapter is written for decision makers who contemplate using an AL team to solve a problem or find an improvement opportunity.

Chapter Four is entitled “How Should the Members of an Action Learning Team Be Recruited, Selected, and Oriented?” It describes how to target individuals to be recruited for an AL team and how to select and orient team members.

Chapter Five focuses on the role of AL team facilitators. This chapter examines the competencies essential for team facilitators. It also reviews how team facilitators should work with Action Learning teams at each stage of group development and what pitfalls team facilitators should avoid.

Chapter Six offers suggestions and guidance for Action Learning teams engaged in finding improvement opportunities, troubleshooting problems, and experimenting with solutions. Chapter Seven explains how AL teams can undertake training design with the help of a facilitator with exceptional project management skills and knowledge of the instructional systems design (ISD) process. AL teams may tackle any or all of the issues in the ISD process, which include (Rothwell and Kazanas, 1998)

- Conducting performance analysis
- Conducting needs assessment

- Assessing relevant learner, work setting, and work characteristics
- Writing performance objectives, creating performance metrics, and sequencing performance objectives
- Specifying instructional strategies and media
- Making, buying, or buying and modifying instructional materials
- Delivering instruction
- Evaluating instruction

Part Three points toward the future and concludes the book. Chapter Eight explains what is meant by the phrase *evaluating Action Learning*, summarizes why AL is worthy of evaluation, describes who should evaluate AL, offers advice about when to evaluate AL, provides suggestions for the focus of efforts to evaluate AL, and discusses how members of an AL team should be debriefed about the experience.

The book concludes with three appendices and a reference section. Appendix One is an executive summary of the book, presented in question-and-answer format, that can be delivered to an organization's executives as a starting point for stimulating their interest in Action Learning. Appendix Two is an assessment tool that can help select or develop prospective or current Action Learning team facilitators. Appendix Three presents a series of critical incidents in the practice of facilitation and explains how specific facilitators chose to deal with these incidents and the outcome. The reference section can be useful to those who want to deepen their knowledge of Action Learning through further pursuit of the topic (see also Coghill, 1991; Lawlor, 1991; Lessem, 1991). Finally, a diskette is included to make it easier for users to customize and copy the worksheets found in this book.



# Table of Contents

List of Exhibits on Diskette	ix
Preface	xiii
Introduction	xvii
<b>Part I Introducing Action Learning</b>	<b>1</b>
Chapter 1 What Is Action Learning?	3
<i>Introductory Vignettes</i>	3
<i>Defining Action Learning</i>	4
<i>When Should Action Learning Be Used?</i>	10
<i>What Are Some Barriers to Applying Action Learning?</i>	11
<i>How Can the Barriers to Applying Action Learning Be         Eliminated?</i>	11
<i>What Are the Key Steps in the Action Learning Model (ALM)?</i>	12
<i>How Is Action Learning Related to Individual Learning?</i>	17
<i>Chapter Summary</i>	18
Chapter 2 Why Use Action Learning?	19
<i>How Does the Organization Benefit from Using         Action Learning?</i>	19

<i>How Does the Organization Develop Individuals Using Action Learning?</i>	22
<i>How May the Organization Benefit from Using an Action Learning Team to Design Training?</i>	23
<i>Chapter Summary</i>	25

## **Part II Facilitating Action Learning 27**

Chapter 3	How Can Situations Appropriate for Action Learning Be Recognized?	29
	<i>Who Decides When Action Learning Is Appropriate?</i>	29
	<i>How Do Decision Makers Recognize Situations Suitable for the Use of Action Learning?</i>	35
	<i>When Should a Problem or Improvement Opportunity Be Handed Over to an Action Learning Team?</i>	40
	<i>Chapter Summary</i>	41
Chapter 4	How Should the Members of an Action Learning Team Be Recruited, Selected, and Oriented?	45
	<i>How Are Action Team Members Recruited and Selected?</i>	45
	<i>How Are Members of an Action Learning Team Oriented?</i>	53
	<i>Chapter Summary</i>	59
Chapter 5	What Is the Team Facilitator's Role in Action Learning?	61
	<i>How Should Team Facilitators Work with Action Learning Teams at Each Stage of Group Development?</i>	61
	<i>What Competencies Are Essential for Team Facilitators?</i>	64
	<i>What Pitfalls Should Team Facilitators Avoid?</i>	79
	<i>Chapter Summary</i>	79
Chapter 6	How Can Action Learning Be Applied to Solving Problems and Developing People?	81
	<i>How Can an Action Learning Team Identify and Solve Problems or Address Other Organizational Issues?</i>	81
	<i>How Can an Action Learning Team Experiment with Solutions?</i>	100
	<i>How Does Action Learning Build Individual and Group Competencies?</i>	105
	<i>Chapter Summary</i>	108

Chapter 7	How Can Action Learning Be Applied to Training Design?	111
	<i>What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Using an Action Learning Team to Design Training?</i>	112
	<i>What Special Competencies Are Required of Team Facilitators and Team Members When an Action Learning Team Designs Training?</i>	113
	<i>When Should Action Learning Be Used to Design Training?</i>	114
	<i>How Should an Action Learning Team Design Training?</i>	114
	<i>Chapter Summary</i>	152
<b>Part III</b>	<b>Pointing Toward the Future</b>	<b>153</b>
Chapter 8	How Should Action Learning Be Evaluated?	155
	<i>What Is Meant by Evaluating Action Learning?</i>	156
	<i>Why Should Action Learning Be Evaluated?</i>	156
	<i>Who Should Evaluate Action Learning, and What Is the Role of the Team Facilitator, Team Members, and Others in Evaluating Action Learning?</i>	156
	<i>When Should Action Learning Be Evaluated?</i>	157
	<i>What Should Be the Focus of Efforts to Evaluate Action Learning?</i>	157
	<i>How Should Members of an Action Learning Team Be Debriefed?</i>	169
	<i>Summary and Conclusion</i>	172
Appendix I	Questions and Answers About Action Learning	175
Appendix II	An Assessment Instrument for Action Learning Facilitators	179
Appendix III	Critical Incidents in the Practice of Facilitation	191
	References and Resources	205
	How to Use the Disk	213
	About the Author	215
	Index	217



# List of Exhibits on Diskette

Exhibit 3.2	A Briefing Worksheet for an Action Learning Team	42
Exhibit 3.3	Desirable Criteria for an Action Learning Experience	43
Exhibit 4.1	A Worksheet to Identify Individuals Appropriate for an Action Learning Team	48
Exhibit 4.2	An Application for an Action Learning Team	51
Exhibit 4.3	A Checksheet to Guide the Orientation of an Action Learning Team	55
Exhibit 6.2	A Worksheet for Planning an Action Learning Project Using the Analytical Approach	85
Exhibit 6.3	Sample Proposal Format	86
Exhibit 6.8	A Questionnaire to Assess Group Process	97
Exhibit 6.9	A Worksheet for Scenario Generation	102
Exhibit 6.10	A Worksheet for Planning Competencies to Be Built by an Action Learning Experience	109
Exhibit 7.2	A Worksheet to Answer the Question “Is It a Training Problem?”	119



Exhibit 7.4	A Worksheet to Conduct Learner Analysis	124
Exhibit 7.5	A Worksheet to Conduct Work Setting Analysis	125
Exhibit 7.6	A Worksheet to Conduct Work Analysis	127
Exhibit 7.7	A Worksheet to Clarify Training Objectives	130
Exhibit 7.9	A Worksheet for Preparing a Training Plan	135
Exhibit 7.12	A Worksheet to Guide Formative Evaluation	144
Exhibit 7.14	A Questionnaire to Document the Impact of Training	151
Exhibit 8.1	A Questionnaire to Assess Perceptions of the Value of an Action Learning Experience	159
Exhibit 8.2	A Questionnaire to Measure Team Member Perceptions About the Value of an Action Learning Experience	161
Exhibit 8.3	A Questionnaire to Measure Learning of Action Learning Team Members	164
Exhibit 8.4	An Assessment Instrument for Measuring On-The-Job Behavior Change of Participants in an Action Learning Team	165
Exhibit 8.5	A Worksheet for Measuring the Cost-Benefit of an Action Learning Experience	167