

# Microsoft Leaders Excel through Action Learning

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## Keywords:

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## Introduction:

The world is constantly evolving. New market leaders emerge. New business models are created. Competition springs up from unexpected sources. And external changes create both new pressures and new opportunities for corporations worldwide. While all industries are required to operate in these shifting conditions, the technology sector is one with a particularly rapid pace of change. IT Organizations succeed based on their ability to stay ahead of the competition, innovate and solve real-world problems, all the while remaining responsive and connected to their customers and partners.

Microsoft Corporation is one such company. Headquartered in Redmond, Washington, with approximately 89,000 employees worldwide and revenue of \$62.48 billion in FY10, Microsoft aims to help people and businesses around the world realize their full potential. To achieve this mission in the context of a changing business climate, Microsoft requires leaders who are agile, responsive to customers and external forces, and able to react quickly but appropriately to new and uncertain conditions. One of the ways Microsoft develops leaders who have these capabilities is by using action learning.

## Action learning: Overview

Action learning has rapidly emerged as a powerful tool used worldwide by organisations for the development of leaders. As well as Microsoft, 'Companies such as Boeing, Du Pont, Motorola, Alcoa, and Nokia have recently turned to action learning to solve their critical, complex problems as well as to grow the competencies and attributes needed by their leaders if they are to succeed in the twenty-first century.'<sup>1</sup> Action learning in practice employs the use of a set to solve for a complex problem, with one member of the set commonly acting as the 'problem presenter'. This set is overseen by an Action learning Coach, who whilst not actively participating in the set discussion operates as the catalyst to steer the set towards a

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Marquardt, (2000) "Action learning and leadership", Learning Organization, The, Vol. 7 Iss: 5, pp.233 - 241

solution to their problem. It is through this process that the problem presenter (and the entire set), learn from their own experience in a real life problem, assisted by and in turn assisting others faced with similar scenarios. Action learning is a process so applicable to developing leaders as a leader changes the way he or she manages based on reality. 'The focus of action learning is on learning about the process of managing change by actually managing organizational change. It stresses the importance of learning about self and the influence that our attitudes and assumptions have on how we lead and make decisions.'<sup>2</sup> In short, rather than being taught through case studies or simulation, participants learn through being exposed to real problems and to each other's insights

### **A need to develop leaders and a need to develop local communities:**

Microsoft having identified the need to utilize leaders with the ability to respond to the diverse and ever changing conditions, has developed an initiative named '*Microsoft Front Lines*' as one answer to combat the challenges encountered.

As Microsoft's Front Lines initiative places a particular focus on the work of the corporation within developing countries, it is evident that a focus on Corporate Social Responsibility is imperative to Front Lines, with the goal of developing a three-way win scenario whereby participants, partner organizations, and the wider Microsoft Business are all beneficiaries of Front Lines.

Microsoft Front Lines is a pioneering strategy whereby participants assemble for a 3-4 day workshop in a developing country. "They take on real issues and work in small groups using action learning to help partner organizations address pressing challenges."<sup>3</sup> The workshop is then followed by a period of virtual work, as the groups support the partner in delivering on the commitments they have made and reflecting on their progression. The immersion into the society and culture of the developing country that Front Lines places upon its participants is an aspect of the initiative that Microsoft deems essential in maintaining corporately responsible business strategies that are of benefit not only to the corporation, but also within the local community.

In February 2010, seven WIAL Action Learning coaches were present in Nairobi, Kenya to assist Microsoft leaders, senior UN officials and African managers to develop and implement country-wide, continent-wide, and worldwide action learning projects. Challenges that were involved in these projects included HIV-AIDS, community development, global tourism, and economic diversity. In this action learning program after the three-days of face-to-face learning sessions that took place in Nairobi, the action learning process was continued by virtual action learning

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<sup>2</sup> Marquardt, 238.

<sup>3</sup> Microsoft Front Lines

sessions for an additional thirty days. This project exemplifies the successes of the WIAL-Microsoft partnership through the use of action learning.

### **Action learning and the certification process:**

Using action learning to develop leaders that are aware of the varying climate of business practices in developing countries, place emphasis on corporate responsibility, and importantly have the ability to tackle the complex problems that will inevitably be faced due to these factors is a reality Microsoft is aware of. Implementation of an action learning certification program that trains and develops the leadership skills of executives to ensure they have the skills to deal with the problems they face day-to-day is therefore crucial. Leaders have undertaken the WIAL action learning certification program, which upon completion enables them to become a certified action learning coach, and therefore able to oversee action learning programs of their own accord.

For a candidate to become a certified action learning coach they will typically first undergo a workshop titled 'Introduction to Action Learning', which introduces the concept of action learning and provides hands on experiences. The next workshop is 'The Foundations of Action Learning', which offers a deeper understanding of action learning, and is pre-requisite for those considering being certified as an action learning coach. To progress to certification level as an action learning coach, participants will then be required to attend two, two-day workshops named CALC 1 (Certification for Action Learning Coaches) and CALC 2, as well as conduct several action learning sessions independently from their class experiences. The focus of CALC 1 is on advanced coaching methods, while the focus of CALC 2 is on organisational issues that must be addressed with the implementation of a successful action learning program.

### **Conclusions:**

Action learning is a proven and effective concept that enables organizations to utilise their own team members to solve real problems with the catalyst of an action learning coach, whilst at the same time developing their own leaders. Microsoft has developed innovative methods of using action learning that develop leaders and assist their own career progression, whilst providing tangible results for the corporation. The implementation of Microsoft's 'Front Lines' workshops are aiding leadership development, whilst tackling some of the most pressing issues and concerns of developing countries in line with Microsoft's commitment to benefiting and empowering local communities through its activities. The WIAL certification process is a further initiative Microsoft have employed that is creating a growing number of certified action learning coaches within the corporation with the ability to solve and examine the ever-present complex problems and challenges of a multinational corporation in an ever-changing business climate.

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