

AN APPLICATION OF LEARNING ORGANIZATION THEORY TO INCREASE WORK PERFORMANCE IN MODERN BUSINESS COMPANIES

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Abstract

This article aims to study learning organization theory to increase work performance. The study revealed that in the current context, organizations continually develop, educate their personnel and adopt new methods to through learning processes increase work performance. The goal is to create sustained learning and long-term behavioral changes within the organization. This is achieved through experiential learning or the individual experiences of each person which are crucial for the organization's growth and success. Learning organization concepts focuses on teamwork, adaptability, and agility, with a learning method widely accepted as effective Action Learning (AL), a method that is popularly used in Organization Development (OD). It aligns with the idea that "action and learning must go hand in hand." It involves learning from practice, relying on experiences, knowledge, and perspectives within a group or individual through questioning and exchanging ideas to improve the working processes in the organization. This leads to new and diverse solutions, encouraging the sharing and transfer of knowledge among individuals, teams, and the organization to reach organizational goals.

Keywords: Learning organization, work performance, management theory, teamwork

Introduction

The concept of the learning organization can be explored through the works of Chris Argyris, a psychology professor specializing in education and organizational behavior at Harvard University. He co-authored a seminal book with Donald Schon, a philosophy professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in 1978, which is considered the first handbook on the Learning Organization. Ubben et al. (2001) characterized a learning organization as an entity that proactively advances and continuously reinvents itself while maintaining self-awareness and seeking new possibilities and opportunities. It emphasizes the use of feedback and problem-solving to improve the current state by thinking holistically, both in terms of reasoning and exercising discretion, encompassing knowledge and the power to help create new innovations. Senge (1990) stated that a Learning Organization extends the abilities of its individuals continuously, not only at the personal level but also within groups and the organization itself. It fosters new thinking

patterns and expands the boundaries of creative ideas, providing ongoing inspiration. The staff within the organization learns together, and the organization acts as a catalyst for spreading collective learning. Marquardt & Reynolds (1994) noted that a learning organization creates an environment that rapidly stimulates individual and group learning while teaching staff to think critically and reflect on what is happening, helping them learn from both mistakes and successes. This results in improved effectiveness and efficiency for the organization. Marquardt (2002) presented the essential concept of becoming a learning organization, emphasizing that organizations must learn faster and more effectively. The Learning Organization consists of five components: 1) the vitality of learning, 2) organizational adaptation, 3) empowerment and capacity building for staff, 4) knowledge management, and 5) enhancing technological capabilities. These components collectively form the basis of the learning organization in a mutually interconnected subsystem of five systems: 1) learning, 2) organization, 3) people, 4) knowledge, and 5) technology.

The current methods for developing human resources in organizations involve continuous improvement and the emergence of new methods to facilitate learning among personnel, crucial for the organization's success. One widely accepted learning approach is known as "Action Learning." Learning, in this context, refers to the continuous process of behavior change resulting from individual experiences and training, both formal and informal (Pangprasert et al., 2020; Sirathanakul et al., 2023). Action learning is a specific type of learning that holds great importance and benefits for the development of individuals, teams, and organizations. It involves learning in subgroups that identify and tackle real work problems affecting both the subgroup and the overall organization. The distinctive characteristics of action learning include:

1. Learning from real work experiences: It involves learning from actual work situations, using work-related problems as learning challenges. Participants need to devise solutions to address these problems and develop their works, benefiting both their own learning and the organization.
2. Learning through exchange of experiences: Participants engage in meetings and brainstorming sessions to exchange experiences and find effective ways to proceed. This collaborative learning in subgroups requires members to work together.
3. Learning through feedback and recommendations: Participants learn through giving and receiving feedback and suggestions. This involves offering insights and constructive criticism during the implementation of actions, allowing for adjustments to improve the success of the undertaken activities.

Therefore, Action Learning (AL) is a popular method in Organization Development (OD). This method is based on the idea that "learning accelerates when it occurs in tandem." It involves learning derived from practical experiences, utilizing knowledge and perspectives gathered through questioning and exchanging views within a group or individual. This leads to new and different solutions, fostering a culture of mutual learning and knowledge transfer. It creates benefits for individuals, teams, and organizations. This learning is driven by the voluntary commitment of

practitioners and groups, following the Action Learning Process.

Action Learning

The term "Action Learning" refers to the collaborative learning that occurs as individuals analyze problems together through continuous learning and reflection processes. It involves working on real problems and reflecting on one's own experiences, proposing problem-solving strategies, and implementing those strategies after careful consideration. Action learning is a process where individuals collectively seek solutions. This process contributes to the development of both individuals and the organization. In essence, it is a developmental approach for individuals and organizations, utilizing significant organizational challenges as tools for action (Inglis, 1994). This aligns with Marquardt's (1999) concept that emphasizes learning from practice, rooted in the ideas of Revans, who believes there is no learning without practice, and no practice without learning. Action learning is an effective way for individuals to learn and simultaneously manage challenges in real-life situations. This concept can be applied to organizational management by incorporating learning experiences into specific learning topics for individuals or teams. It encourages reflection, knowledge exchange, and collaborative discussions about experiences and lessons learned. The derived insights are then collectively summarized into comprehensive thoughts, tested, or applied to new situations.

McGill and Beaty (1995) describe action learning as a continuous process of learning and reflective thinking conducted by participants. It involves bringing together individuals with diverse skills and experiences to analyze real work problems, plan solutions, and implement them as part of the established plan. During problem-solving activities, group members meet, continuously exchange ideas, and collectively learn from each other's experiences, fostering mutual learning in problem-solving. Furthermore, Gordon highlights that learning from practice involves participants with different skills and experiences coming together to learn and solve real-world problems through practical actions. Participants take on roles as both learners and instructors, sharing their expertise and learning from others. The process involves practical actions, periodic meetings for evaluation, and the achievement of comprehensive skills and problem-solving strategies beneficial to the organization. In other words, learning from practice is a continuous learning and reflective thinking process where small groups collaborate to gain understanding, collectively develop solutions to real problems relevant to their work, and mutually benefit the development of individuals, teams, and organizations (Lamlak, 2004).

Additionally, Wongmajarapinya et al. (2024) and Weerawat and Pannitamai (2000) emphasized that action learning is genuine learning that requires the integration of both theory and art. It begins within the organization to enhance work efficiency, transforming from on-the-job training to on-the-job learning. Learning from practice implies individuals using existing knowledge and skills to analyze, plan, experiment, and derive new knowledge for future practical application.

Action learning cannot occur without asking questions and receiving feedback. It begins with existing

programmed knowledge (knowledge currently used, found in books, in the mind, organizational knowledge, lectures, etc.) combined with the process of questioning. This involves asking about what is unknown and reflecting, which includes recalling past events, considering assumptions, logical reasoning, and attempting to understand. The concept of action learning is rooted in the ideas of Revans, a scholar, administrator, and management consultant who pioneered the application of experiential learning in work development. The basic concept of learning from practice is represented by the equation:

$$L = P + Q$$

(Learning) = (Programmed) + (Questioning) Where P = Programmed Knowledge

Q = Insightful Questioning

Later, Marquardt (cited in Lamlak, 2004) clarified and expanded the equation into a more comprehensive and systematic form:

$$L = P + Q + R + I + R$$

Where R = Reflection

I = Implementation

From the equations proposed by Revans and Marquardt, it can be summarized that action learning occurs when individuals take existing programmed knowledge as a guide, combine it with questioning about the current situation, and then reflect on the outcomes. This reflection leads to practical action or experimentation.

Action Learning Processes

Although the fundamental concept of learning from practice emphasizes questioning, critical thinking, and concurrent action, several scholars have proposed different steps for the process. For example, Pedler has outlined the learning process from practice in four steps:

1. Analysis of Experience: Observe and reflect on past experiences, considering what has transpired and how it influenced the situation.
2. Understanding: Gain understanding of the situation after analyzing the experience.
3. Planning: Develop a plan of action based on the new understanding.
4. Implementation: Execute the plan as laid out.

Pedler's learning process can be summarized in figure 1.

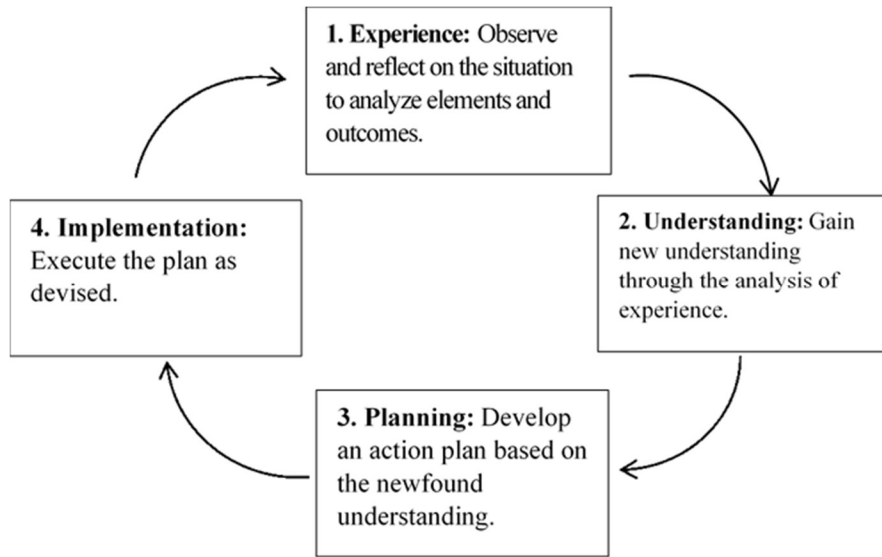


Figure 1 Action Learning Process according to Pedler

Similarly, from the article "Action Learning Model," the learning pattern from action learning is summarized into four crucial steps: Problem Analysis, Action Planning & Implementation, Decisions on Next Step, and Reflection and Evaluation. The action learning model can be summarized in figure 2.

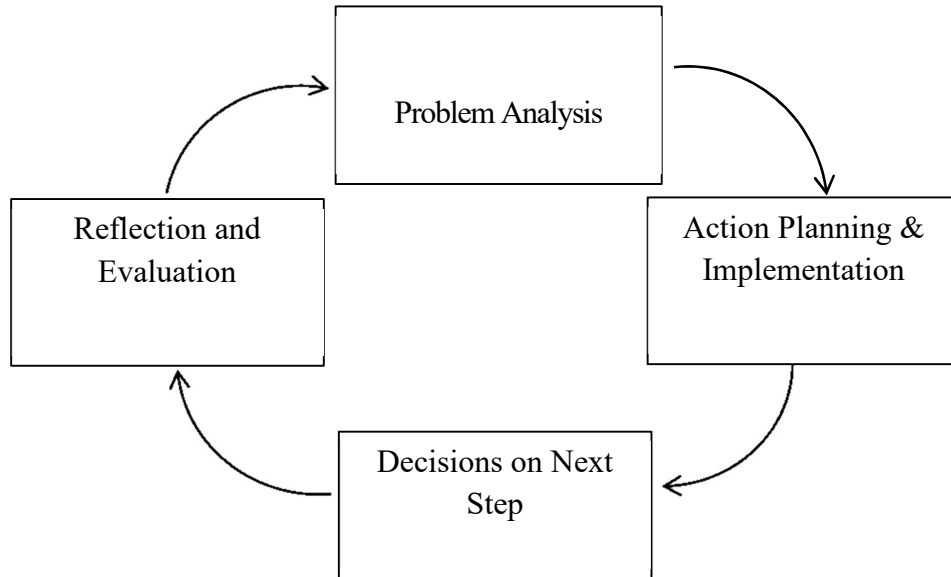


Figure 2 Action Learning Model

Lamlak (2004) explained that after facing a problem, one should follow the 8-step learning process, which includes:

1. Define the learning objectives through a group process.
2. Form groups, ensuring each group has members with diverse knowledge and abilities.
3. Convene a meeting to identify the issues to be learned and practiced.
4. Return to the workplace to practice the specified skills.
5. If there are specific issues that require in-depth study, subgroup learning can be arranged.
6. After a period of practice, hold another group meeting to assess progress and plan the next phase of learning.
7. Repeat the process until the learning objectives are achieved.
8. Document the process for future reference and application in the ongoing development of work.

Marquardt (1999) divided the components of action learning into six aspects:

1. A Problem, Task, or Project: When a problem arises, the most beneficial learning outcome is achieved when everyone participates in solving it.
2. The Group or Set: Learning from practice assumes that the learning process is social. Therefore, effective learning from practice occurs in a group setting with approximately 4-8 members. In some cases, group members may act as consultants or followers.
3. The Questioning and Reflective Process: Learning from practice emphasizes asking questions rather than finding answers. The reflective process involves the ability to look back and contemplate individual experiences.
4. Commitment to Taking Action: Taking action enhances learning because it involves critical thinking. Comparing the obtained results with the expected outcomes motivates individuals to reflect back on the hypotheses made.
5. Commitment to Learning: Learning is as crucial as practicing. Learning from practice is equivalent to achieving the goals of the task, contributing to personal and organizational development.
6. The Learning Coach: Providing learning as coaching helps the group develop good process skills. Working with the group through questioning and reflective practices facilitates skill development.

Table 1 Comparison Between Action Learning Processes

Pedler (1986)	Gordon 1993)	Marquardt (1999)
(1) Experience: Observe and reflect on the situation to analyze elements and outcomes.	(1) Define the learning objectives (2) Form learning groups (3) Convene a meeting	(1) A Problem, Task, or Project (2) The Group or Set (3) Questioning and Reflective Process
(2) Understanding: Gain new understanding through the analysis of experience.	(4) Return to the workplace to practice the specified skills. (5) Arrange a subgroup learning	(4) Commitment to Taking Action (5) Commitment to Learning (6) The Learning Coach
(3) Planning: Develop an action plan based on the newfound understanding.	(6) Hold another group meeting to assess progress (7) Repeat the process	
(4) Implementation: Execute the plan as devised.	(8) Document the process for future reference	

From the study of the learning process from practice, we can summarize the steps of learning from practice as follows:

1. Problem Identification: Define the problem that arises or what needs to be learned during the practical scenario.

2. Reflecting on Experience: Reflect on past experiences, situations that have occurred, or individuals with skills. Pool together diverse experiences for collective learning. In the group, learners take on the roles of both learners and teachers, meaning that those with expertise play the role of teachers while others act as learners.

2. Planning: Plan the practical steps to solve the problem based on the newfound understanding.

4. Taking Action: Implement the plan laid out. During the execution, continuous exchange of opinions may occur among learners, fostering collaborative learning.

5. Evaluate Learning: Assess the learning outcomes to determine if they align with the plan or objectives set. If the results are satisfactory, summarize the findings for future use.

The Processes of Learning Organization

Marquardt (2002) proposed the concept of developing a Learning Organization, emphasizing the creation of learning dynamics. This involves continuous learning, collaborative team learning, enthusiastic and self-driven personnel, systemic thinking, planned mental models, openness to new beliefs, participative exchange of ideas, various learning formats such as adaptive learning, learning from predictions, and crucially, learning from real practice (Action learning). This approach views learning as an experiential process, with the idea derived from the reality that people learn by doing. Learning from real practice involves forming groups of individuals interested in the same issues, facing common problems, sharing similar goals, and desiring to learn together. The learning from real practice method can be applied in the following steps:

1. **Define the Problem Situation:** Identify a real problem within the organization that requires resolution. The problem should be relevant, feasible, and fall under the group's responsibility. In this step, group members collaborate to present, select, and summarize the problem situation that needs addressing, focusing on issues of utmost importance and urgency.
2. **Questioning and Reflecting on Learning:** In this step, group members engage in questioning to gain a clearer understanding of the problem issues and reflect on past experiences. This involves analyzing experiences to find suitable solutions for the situation and exploring new approaches for future actions. Group members use questioning techniques to inquire about each other's past experiences, problems encountered, and problem-solving methods employed. The focus is on asking precise and targeted questions, emphasizing reflections on aspects that the group is not yet aware of. Simultaneously, the responses received help members reflect on past events, leading to considerations for future actions.
3. **Implementing Problem-Solving Strategies:** During this step, group members execute the chosen problem-solving strategy in real-world situations. This involves documenting the information obtained, recording encountered problems and obstacles, and noting successes achieved during the practical application. The process aims to collect data for future adjustments and improvements in the problem-solving approach.
4. **Implementing Problem-Solving Strategies:** During this step, group members execute the chosen problem-solving strategy in real-world situations. This involves documenting the information obtained, recording encountered problems and obstacles, and noting successes achieved during the practical application. The process aims to collect data for future adjustments and improvements in the problem-solving approach.
5. **Evaluation of Results:** The final step involves assessing the results obtained after implementing the problem-solving strategy and using the information gathered to refine and enhance the approach. Group members collectively discuss the outcomes, successes, failures, and various challenges encountered throughout the process. This evaluation helps summarize the findings accurately and comprehensively, leading to the best possible refinements for future problem-solving strategies (Bangbon et al., 2023; Channuwong et al., 2021; Wanitcharoenchai, 2005).

Action Learning (AL) is a tool widely employed by various organizations, both in the public sector and private

businesses such as Microsoft, Marriott, General Motors, and others. It is utilized for strategic planning, managerial development, competitive advantage allocation, operational cost reduction, teamwork cultivation, and transforming organizations into learning entities.

In the context of the Thai public sector, AL has been integral in shaping strategies, changing mindsets, cultures, and values to align with the new era of citizen-centric governance. Leveraging AL for self-directed learning from real experiences, organizations aim to create shared visions, foster a sense of mission commitment, and promote teamwork. Moreover, in projects related to the development of transformational leadership, AL has proven effective in establishing new perspectives in government system development and efficient change management in organizations. The emphasis is on understanding one's role, developing innovative thinking, and stimulating the potential development of both individuals and teams.

In the business sector, companies like Microsoft in the United States have successfully implemented AL to develop people, teams, and the organization itself. Through this program, the company aimed to gain and maintain a competitive edge in the rapidly evolving 21st-century communication business. The program initially started with utilizing Action Learning to develop a new generation of employees capable of navigating the challenges and thriving in the business landscape of the 21st century. The company organized The Global Organization Leadership Program (GOLD), a 21-day program divided into three phases over three months, focusing on Action Learning principles. The concept of learning from practice has proven highly effective in enhancing organizational learning. It goes beyond theoretical concepts and engages participants in real-world problem-solving, analysis, and resolution. The direct benefits include a deeper understanding of the concepts and a more profound connection to the real-life situation, aligning with the Learning by Doing philosophy, which emphasizes learning through hands-on practice, making the learning process more impactful.

Conclusion

Action Learning (AL) is a concept and theory that can be highly effective in fostering organizational learning. Its effectiveness lies in the fact that it goes beyond learning solely from theoretical concepts and involves addressing real-life problems or events through a process of critical thinking, analysis, and problem-solving. It is a method that necessitates teamwork, providing opportunities for every member to participate in problem-solving, give feedback, and communicate clearly to make joint decisions. This approach has the benefit of fostering camaraderie and teamwork, leading to a sense of commitment and accomplishment for individuals and contributing to the organization's success and pride. Moreover, it contributes to transforming an organization into a Learning Organization, where learning dynamics are cultivated. This involves continuous learning, team-based learning, enthusiastic and curious staff, and constant self-improvement. In a learning organization, personnel think systematically, plan their thought processes, avoid clinging to traditional beliefs, view the world futuristically, participate in exchanging ideas, engage in open conversations, and adopt various learning formats. Action Learning is a crucial aspect of this, as it aligns with the idea that "stimulation goes hand in hand with learning." It emphasizes learning through practical experience, utilizing knowledge, perspectives gained from questioning, and exchanging views within the group or individual. This, in turn, leads to new and different outcomes, fostering a culture of learning and knowledge sharing that benefits individuals, teams, and the organization as a whole.

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