

Action Learning in Practice

– *when an impression leaves a lasting mark*

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One Friday evening a message popped up on LinkedIn. A group photo of six happy people at a restaurant – and the words: “The old process leadership team is back together.” Nine years earlier they had gone through a leadership development programme together at an IT company. Today they are spread across new jobs, but they still meet.

A good course can make a strong impression. But impressions fade quickly once Monday morning arrives. The question is what it takes for learning to leave a lasting mark – on the leader, on the leadership team and on the business.

This article is about action learning in practice: What it is, why it works, and how to design a programme so that the decisive part happens between the modules, not just during them.

From impression to lasting mark

Later that evening another message arrived from the team. The next morning I asked whether I could share it, and I was allowed to:

“We may have worked at the same place, but you are the one who binds us together, who made us confide in each other and created the bond.”

— Participant in a process leadership programme at an IT company, nine years later

What the team remembered was not slides or models. It was what they had done together: The difficult tasks they had solved under pressure, the honest conversations afterwards, and the trust that grew from testing themselves – also when things went wrong.

That is exactly the point of action learning. Learning does not stick because you have heard about good leadership. It sticks because you have practised it, received feedback and tried again.

What action learning is – and what it is not

The concept comes from the British professor Reg Revans, who as early as the 1940s had managers in the coal industry learn from each other by working on real problems. His simple formula was $L = P + Q$: Learning is programmed knowledge plus questions that challenge what we think we know.

In practice this means that leaders work on their own current tasks – not on textbook cases. What they train in a module can be used at the next staff meeting, in the conflict that has been simmering, or in the decision that keeps being postponed.

Action learning is therefore not games in the woods for their own sake. Outdoor exercises, simulations and cases have their place, but only when they mirror reality and are linked back to the leader's everyday work. Otherwise it becomes yet another “woo-hoo kick-off” – and then it was Monday morning again.

Head, hands and heart – all at once

Why does learning stick when it happens this way? My experience is that three learning fields must be activated at the same time. We call the method [3H](#): Something for the head (the reflective), something for the hands (the physical and the willpower) and something for the heart (the emotional).

A lecture reaches the head. A tough physical task reaches the hands. An honest conversation around a campfire reaches the heart. It is the combination that creates lasting change in behaviour – also in leaders, who after all are human too.

That is why we deliberately change the learning arena: The production floor, the hotel, the forest, a small theatre or a tipi by the sea. When the setting changes, habits loosen, and people see themselves and each other with new eyes.

Train before it burns

As a young emergency management officer I learned a training method that the Danish fire service calls *tørudlægning* – literally a “dry lay-out”. You simulate a real fire – with smoke, flames and all the procedures – but without burning down a house and using tonnes of water. The exercise is repeated again and again, and the difficulty is turned up until everyone knows their role when it gets real.

The point is simple: In truly critical situations, nobody suddenly invents brilliant solutions. You do exactly what you have trained. Organisations do the same – whether they know it or not. If you want something different, you have to train something different.

I experienced it myself during the war in Bosnia, where I was head of logistics for Doctors Without Borders. When we set up new aid stations, it turned out that nobody had been properly trained in the equipment: Water pumps, tents, emergency generators and off-road driving with trucks. We organised local training for all staff, and it worked. But it was training after the fact. Action learning is about doing it beforehand.

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The decisive part happens between the modules

Many people think of a leadership programme as a series of good days away from the office. But the real development happens in between, when leaders try out what they have learned in their own everyday work – and someone follows up.

What happens between the modules:

- **Homework with a concrete purpose:** It is reviewed at the next module, where intensity and difficulty are stepped up.
- **Buddy system:** Two leaders follow each other, spar and hold each other to their commitments.
- **1:1 coaching:** Preferably at the leader's own workplace, so the conversation starts from real situations.
- **Personal development plan:** It is followed up and evaluated – not left in a drawer.
- **Feedback on new behaviour:** From employees and senior management. This is the mechanism that turns a course into changed practice.
- **Meetings with key customers:** So that leaders hear what customers really value – and what they are dissatisfied with.

In the modules we also use a feedback method we call “the aquarium” (a fishbowl): A small group evaluates its own performance in the middle, while another group sits around them, observes and gives feedback afterwards. It takes trust and courage, but it trains exactly the openness about mistakes that most organisations lack.

The sequence: The leader first

Many strategy and development processes follow the same recipe: First the financial targets, then the customer segments, then the processes – and finally, oh yes, we train a few leaders to run the show. It rarely works, because the sequence is wrong.

At the contractor [Christiansen & Essenbæk](#) we turned it around. On a summer's day in 2011 all the leaders gathered, and we started with the leaders themselves: Intensive leadership training in Denmark and abroad, where they were challenged to the limit and learned to trust themselves. Then came collaboration and processes. And only then did we invite the customers in as co-designers of the future we wanted.

Along the way the 24-7 concept for renovating motorway bridges was born, cutting traffic congestion in the pilot project from 20 to 4 weeks. Sickness absence fell by more than two thirds, well-being rose by 7 percentage points, risk factors fell by 30%, and EBITDA improved by more than DKK 10 million on a turnover of around DKK 150 million. The project “Trivsel – 360 grader” (Well-being – 360 degrees) first won the Danish Working Environment Award and then Børsen’s CSR Communication Award, based on my book “[Lederens inspirationsguide](#)” (in Danish). Not everything can be attributed to the leadership training – but none of the results would have come without it.

When the client takes the programme with them

At [e-conomic](#), leadership development became the cornerstone of the company’s own academy. Rapid growth kept producing new middle managers who were skilled specialists but had no experience of managing people. The answer was the “Process Leadership” programme with five modules, the last of which was about “Power” – a leader’s ability to communicate and convey a message. At the kick-off, SVP Kim Sneum Madsen put the participants’ goal short and sharp: “The target for you is to become a better version of you.”

When Kim later became CEO of [Umbraco](#), he took the approach with him, and we ran several process leadership programmes there – in English and built the same way:

Process Leadership at Umbraco – five modules:

- **Module 1:** Personality and leadership styles, with JTI as a shared language.
- **Module 2:** Operational management and leadership in practice.
- **Module 3:** Personal leadership – as a common thread through the whole programme.
- **Module 4:** Customer Deep Dive, based on the company’s customer culture.
- **Module 5:** Communication and personal impact as a leader.

That may be the best evidence that a programme works: A leader takes it with them to their next job. And when the programme is integrated as part of the company’s own academy rather than an off-the-shelf course on an open programme, it lasts. The leadership language becomes shared, new leaders can follow the same path, and development continues after the consultant has left.

Three questions before your next leadership programme

Ask yourselves:

- Do the leaders work on their own current tasks – or on other people's cases?
- What happens between the modules, and who follows up on the leaders' commitments?
- Will the programme become part of your own academy – or will the learning disappear when the course ends?

Conclusion – learning is something you do

Action learning is not a new method. But it is still rarely done properly. It requires real tasks, changing learning arenas, training that reaches head, hands and heart, and disciplined follow-up between the modules.

When it succeeds, something happens that no course can deliver on its own: The leaders grow while the business moves forward. And the impression leaves a lasting mark – sometimes so strong that a team still meets nine years later. In fact, here in 2026 they have now passed 15 years and have become skilled managers and executives.

This article builds on my article [“Action learning in leadership development”](#) from 2019.

Want a leadership programme that leaves a lasting mark?

Cronquist Consult ApS designs modular leadership development programmes and in-house academies based on action learning. Read more here:

<https://cronquist.dk/en/leadership-development>

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