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## Take Action with Action Learning: A Valuable Practice for Navigating Change

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### Abstract

Action learning is a practical and high-impact way to enhance staff development within an organization. With action learning, participants are invited to own their learning experience by weaving personal experience, individual professional needs, and developmental training into a concentrated focus. In Extension, it is vital to offer tangible learning experiences that can be easily applied to one's position in real time while also building competence for future work, and action learning appeases this need. This article describes action learning in practice within an Extension program and details the necessary components to effectively execute an action learning project.

**Keywords:** [action learning](#), [action learning project](#), [staff development](#), [cohorts](#), [cohort learning](#)

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## Introduction

To flourish, Extension organizations must be able to successfully navigate a climate of continuous social, economic, and demographic change while helping their staffs develop the capacity to thrive in the future (Frahm & Brown, 2007; Smith & Torppa, 2010). Staff development is a logical point from which to begin the navigational process (Huebener, Walker, & McFarland, 2003). Using cohorts as an ongoing and long-term staff development model offers consistency to staff members. Embedding an action learning component in training provides a forum for participants to individually and collectively navigate change and take immediate action toward cultivating solutions.

A cohort is a group of participants who work together, assist each other, find success in each other's efforts, and simultaneously develop each individual's talents (Chairs, McDonald, Shroyer, Urbanski, & Vertin, 2002). Action learning is an experiential approach to learning that focuses more on what one does not know (Kinsey, 2011). It provides participants with the time to listen, the opportunity to ask questions, and the ability to respond to organizational issues (Haverkamp, Christiansen, & Mitchell, 2003; Kinsey, 2011). Pairing a cohort model with

action learning affords participants a designated platform for responding more effectively to change while developing creative, flexible, and successful strategies in partnership with colleagues.

## **Action Learning in Practice: University of Minnesota's Center for Youth Development**

University of Minnesota Extension's Center for Youth Development created a cohort training for employees who have been onboard for 6 to 18 months. The facilitators incorporate pertinent and timely topics into online and face-to-face meetings to provide continued staff development and enriched colleague connections beyond initial onboarding. Each participant then immediately applies relevant training and experiences to a pressing issue of his or her choice by developing an action learning project (ALP). The ALPs act as the cohort's nucleus by connecting relevant research and best practices to each individual's project.

Objectives of the ALPs are as follows:

- Provide participants with a forum for contributing in real time to organizationally valuable opportunities or issues and applying learning.
- Present the opportunity to study and learn from one's own practice and set goals to increase skills and abilities in the field of youth work.
- Create opportunities for participants to collaborate with colleagues and mentors.
- Allow participants to explore application of leadership behaviors with peers and receive feedback in a safe learning environment.
- Provide opportunities for participants to enhance their learning skills through the practice of reflecting on actions.

### **Components of the ALP**

The cohort learning experience lasts 8 months. The definition, purpose, and expectations of an ALP are introduced in month one. During month two, individuals articulate their ALP focus by providing a title, objectives that are in sync with the organization's logic model, and details about the personal leadership they expect to gain. Each project must center on a real opportunity that adds value to the organization, addresses a persistent leadership issue, or is a new organizational development activity. The ALP should not add to a participant's workload, but rather should relate to a concept the person is already working on or has been meaning to tackle that requires an intentional change of practice.

Participants form small groups of three to five peers with similarly focused ALPs. Using an experiential approach (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), the small group becomes a medium for sharing resources, asking insightful questions, and participating in reflective listening, which are essential elements of action learning (Kinsey, 2011). Small group members connect monthly to exchange feedback, which they incorporate into their leadership development plans.

During the final month, participants present to colleagues, supervisors, and organizational leadership. In these presentations, participants share the personal, professional, and organizational changes resulting from their

projects.

Ultimately, their collective ALPs will bring about a shift in the organizational structure, highlighting new initiatives and ideas that are rooted in intentional program planning that will lead to transformative change.

## Implications of the ALP Process

Forty-five staff members have participated in the ALP process over 3 years. Each participant learns to experiment with solutions, recognize constraints, and develop alternative resolutions (Sandfort & Gerdes, 2016). They all make some level of progress toward their expected outcome, even if they do not reach their final goal by the end of the cohort experience. Examples of types of outputs from ALPs are

- increased outreach efforts to new audiences,
- modified organizational policies and procedures,
- collaborative work on communication materials for families and partners, and
- modification to and creation of programming that best supports the changing needs of a particular community.

These projects address social, economic, and demographic changes occurring throughout Minnesota, and each participant takes a thoughtful, intentional look at issues he or she is uniquely positioned to address.

The following outcomes for participants of the training have been achieved:

- 100% believe the ALP pushed them to work toward a goal.
- 92% have found the ALP to be beneficially challenging.
- 78% believe the ALP process enhanced their ability to lead in their communities.
- 100% have found the ALP process to be useful in their work.
- 67% have noted that participation in the ALP was the single greatest takeaway of the cohort experience.

Additionally, cohort participants have had the following comments:

- "The ALP was a great learning tool for programming and presentation skills. I may not have focused on this work on my own, but the cohort made it happen for me."
- "It was nice to have the opportunity to intentionally focus on a project. Having more intentional planning will hopefully set our programs up for long-term sustainability and success."
- "The work of my ALP made me set concrete goals to work on beyond the cohort."

## Conclusion

ALPs are a tangible and concrete component of staff development for navigating change. Incorporating action

learning into your organization's staff development plan, especially in conjunction with cohort experiences, will create a community of practice in which participants engage in experiential learning. The practice of action learning in Extension is an especially valuable and practical option for professional growth.

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