
Developing high-potential staff – an action learning approach

*John Peters and
Peter Smith*

The authors

John Peters is Chairman of The Buckingham Consortium, a strategy and quality management consultancy based in Buckingham, England. E-mail: johnpeters@gn.apc.org.

Peter Smith is Chairman of the Leadership Alliance, a consultancy specializing in HR development, based in Toronto, Canada. E-mail: 74164.364@compuserve.com.

Abstract

Suggests a selective approach to leadership development in organizations, focusing on employees identified as having high potential or those on the development “fast-track”. Identifies (from research) key psychological characteristics of fast-track staff, and discusses the match between those characteristics and the properties of an action learning approach to development. Concludes with a plan for adapting action learning to the development of fast-track staff.

Every large organization, and many small-to-medium sized firms, have staff who have been formally or informally recognized as the next generation of leaders. These heirs apparent, crown princes and princesses, are commonly characterized as “fast-track” employees – those who expect, and are expected to progress, speedily through the ranks.

But high-potential staff pose a perennial headache to most organizations. What to do with them while they are being schooled for the highest offices? How to keep them productive, busy, entertained? How to help them realize their potential without destroying them by moving them beyond their levels of competence, and without disillusioning them so they lose patience and leave? Even with today’s labour surplus, high-potential staff are relatively few and far between. A haemorrhage of talent is often both a cause and a sign of an organization in serious decline.

For the high-potential employee, whose familiarity with leading edge organizational theory is often the match of a university academic’s, traditional training methods are rarely appropriate. The standard secondment to a backwater operation or an overseas subsidiary, for example, aimed at developing “experience” in some vague manner, is likely to be seen by sophisticated graduate fast-trackers for exactly what it is in all too many cases – “they do not know what else to do with me”.

This article aims to draw together some of the diverse research around high potential staff, and proposes an action learning approach to their development. We will argue, supported by research findings, that development approaches which are not seen as utilizing the potential of high-potentials in contributing to the strategic future of the organization, can lead to counter-productive disillusionment and frustration, and so falling down on the aim of developing future leaders (see below). In connecting action learning methodology to fast-track development the article makes, to our knowledge, an original contribution, in combining both research and practical experience in the two fields.

A lack of leaders

Anyone who tries to bring about change in organizations bemoans the lack of “leaders”. Leaders, as Porras and Collins eloquently describe in *Built to Last* (Porras and Collins, 1994) are not necessarily high charismatic

individuals who create followers through personal magnetism. They are people who can think and act “outside the box”, who can confront and challenge old patterns, and spearhead new ones, at any level in the organization.

The ideology of the learning organization has to some degree addressed this problem, though to date in a manner where successes are few and far between. To be unkind, much of the literature on the learning organization has been wish-lists and glimpses about what could be, rather than pragmatic expositions of how to progress. Even the seminal *Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1994) fails to reference the issue of high-potential staff at all, even though one might expect the greatest learning leverage to be gained from them.

.....
 ‘...people in organizations perceive that they have neither the time nor the inclination to be learners...’

As those who actually try to implement learning in organizations know only too well, learning can be a hard sell. In truth, most people in organizations perceive that they have neither the time nor the inclination to be learners. They are “too busy” with daily operations. And there is a certain amount of what Senge (1994) describes as a balancing process at work here. In truth, if all our operational staff were spending their time challenging existing paradigms, toning their mental muscles and understanding supply chain dynamics, we would not get any work done. Many employees are speaking the truth when they say they are “too busy to learn”, or that they “come to work to work, not to learn”.

To get the best return on learning investment in an organization requires identification of those self-motivated potential leaders, where the most leverage is to be had. This is where we come back to the fast-track, where one finds the brightest, most motivated, most mobile, most influential staff; those who want to learn, see the most benefit in learning, and from whom organizations can get the best return on their investment in learning.

But learning about what? What is the learning agenda for tomorrow’s leaders and change agents? It is likely to be something like learning how to:

- get things done within the organization’s cultural and political norms;

- take risks within a psychologically safe environment;
- use sources of information and contextualize it;
- self-develop;
- act with others, and how to act alone;
- comprehend the strategic agenda for the organization, present and future.

This can be, and has been, achieved through a developmental method called *action learning*. We will go on to describe exactly how a little further on. For now, we will describe some of the characteristics of the fast-track employee, and some of the characteristics of action learning, and see how the two might fit together.

What makes high-potential staff tick?

Gritzmacher (1989) outlined nine key characteristics of fast-trackers, as follows:

- (1) *A unique perception of their occupation*: fast-trackers see their daily activities as fitting into a career pattern, rather than just doing a job, and see their role as making their organization into a global leader in its field (and playing an active leadership role in that).
- (2) *A broad-thinking style*: seeing wholes rather than job-bounded parts; seeing symbolic significances to actions.
- (3) *Time-consciousness*: a drive to achieve the most as soon as possible; a drive to achieve a goal and embrace the next one.
- (4) *Independence*: a creative urge to add value to guidelines; a fast-learned knowledge of what would be good to accomplish.
- (5) *High commitment*: not wanting to miss out on anything interesting for the organization; a belief that the organization would be diminished without them and a drive to enact that self-perceived importance constructively.
- (6) *High energy*: the ability to get supra-normal amounts of work done and cheerfully come back for more.
- (7) *A need for creativity and variety*: fast-trackers need new and testing challenges.
- (8) *A varying interest in teamwork*: the badging of fast-trackers as the favoured sons and daughters can make team interplay difficult; also the need to move ahead faster than the pack can make them impatient with others.

(9) *Continual improvement*: a hunger to challenge and improve whatever they are involved in.

Kovack (1989) identified from research 11 psychological characteristics which include:

- work is a primary source of satisfaction;
- time and energy can be stretched if managed well, i.e. are less finite resources than are usually portrayed;
- problems are really opportunities;
- self-responsibility is key.

Harris and Field (1992) described fast-trackers on a development programme at a US corporation as follows: “They itch to ... get involved, make real contributions ... they want visibility ... these people want a challenge. High risk/high reward is what they are looking for”.

In an earlier study, Field and Harris (1991) surveyed 276 identified fast-trackers on key sources of frustration on development programmes. They identified lack of career planning and counselling, lack of perceived job challenge, lack of responsibility given, lack of developmental activities, and slow career progression as important sources of frustration.

Interestingly enough, the same study identified the traits of below-average employees as frustration with low pay, inability to tie into important organizational networks, and lack of supervisory attention.

The studies paint a familiar picture to those who have dealt with fast-track staff, of people with a sense of destiny, a high degree of self-belief, motivated to give of their all, seeking challenge, intellectual stimulation, variety; asking for, and frustrated if they do not get a real opportunity to contribute to the really significant heartbeat issues of the organization; acutely aware of their developmental needs, and hungry to embrace significant development opportunities.

The parallels with bright schoolchildren are irresistible. Failure on an organization's part to deliver, create “derailment” (Kovack, 1989; Ramos and Chapman, 1994), leading to disillusionment, insubordination, disruption, and frequently departure if the individual cannot be re-engaged with his or her organization. Given the strategic significance of fast-track staff to corporations as the next leadership generation, the importance of effective developmental activities hardly needs emphasizing. While some might say that they come to work to work, not to learn, the fast-

tracker most decidedly comes to work to learn, and is frustrated if that learning agenda is not made available.

Why action learning holds the key

Subject knowledge is relatively easy to instil. Any reasonably bright individual can be given the basic body of product knowledge in any organization in a matter of days; and similarly can pick up and understand the conceptual frameworks behind, say, marketing or financial control, in a few weeks or less. But organizations are littered with successful technicians who fail when given managerial and leadership responsibility. How can that be?

.....
 ‘...an understanding of and a feel for factors such as organizational politics and culture, the art of influencing others...’

Success in an organization depends on far more than acquiring technical knowledge and management concepts. It comes from an understanding of and a feel for factors such as organizational politics and culture, the art of influencing others, the ability to delegate, the skills of timing, presentation and selling ideas, not just having them. These are the qualities we expect from organizational leaders, and without them, and without a developmental approach to gaining such qualities, the emergence of effective leaders will continue to be a hit-and-miss affair.

In this sense, the accusation that traditional business schools fail the organizations they are intended to serve is both an understatement and a misconception. A business school, presenting a standard-format MBA, cannot ever hope to deliver individuals attuned to such nuances. All they can do is pack technical knowledge into an individual in a manner slightly more (and some would argue less) efficiently than he or she would get from reading a book.

We can only learn about work at work, just as we can only learn how to ride a bicycle by riding a bicycle. Nothing else feels how it feels. No MBA programme can prepare a person for the first time they fire someone, or are blocked by a politically-motivated colleague, or are confronted with an angry customer. In the end, we can only learn about it by doing it.

But experience itself is a slippery teacher. Most of the time we have experiences from which we never learn. Action learning is a developmental method which builds on what is, rather than operates in a pure, detached, analytical and rational world of what should be. It aims to capture experience and force through the processing of it, and the learning from it. In so doing, it delivers leadership development in a way that most other approaches do not.

An action learning programme of development starts with syllabus determination, rather than a given syllabus. The syllabus can only be the key issues facing an organization and an individual within it (Wills (1992) provides an insightful discussion of action learning as it applies to the concept of the learning organization). From there, individuals are encouraged to draw from the relevant areas of the body of knowledge – books, journals, other individuals, company literature, other organizations – appropriate, targeted and contextualized information. This approach is elicitive, in that it *elicits* relevant information, rather than *disseminates* what a teacher thinks is good for his or her students (Day and Peters (1990)) first coined the phrase “elicitive education” and discussed its application).

In so doing, it seeks to throw a net around slippery experiences, and capture it as learning, i.e. as replicable behaviour in similar and indeed differing contexts. An action learning programme of development forces reflection. The individual makes sense of an experience by conceptualizing it and generalizing the replicable points; and plans for future actions based on the learning gathered.

A well-designed programme does this by creating a safe environment for such learning to occur, while recognizing that real responsibility lies outside any classroom environment: it lies with the individuals who must own the outcomes. The complex issues in organizations have, unfortunately, no “right” answer awaiting discovery. Business decisions entail a maze of trade-offs and what-ifs, where ambiguity reigns.

What is more, in using the organization itself as a learning laboratory, it does not require any special set of conditions to be in place before it can be effective. Action learning works well in a bureaucracy, in a flat organization, in a firm culturally hostile to education and development, in a firm encouraging self-actualization. It does so because its whole

ethos is learning about the surrounding context, and learning to be effective within it, thus leveraging whatever the prevailing culture is to its own advantage.

All activities are therefore focused on the organization and its articulated current and future needs, leading to the justifiable charge of action learning as a narrow (but deep) learning agenda, rather than a broad but superficial one. In the final analysis, we believe that an organization has to take a cost-benefit approach to its developmental activities, and it should, quite rightly and justifiably, focus on learning activities which are of direct benefit to itself. Only then will it be in a position to benefit others.

Does this developmental methodology fit with the organization’s requirements of fast-track employees, and the psychological profiles of these people? We believe it not only fits, but fits almost perfectly. We can illustrate with two examples.

Self-direction

The distinction between an emergent, elicitive syllabus and a tutor- or trainer-directed one is a profound one, going deeper than a change of tone. In designing action learning interventions we are forced to admit that, as teachers, we do not hold all the answers. Indeed, how could we, as external consultant-facilitators, who do not live, day-to-day, with the consequences of the actions and decisions which affect organizational participants? While the job of the skilled action learning programme architect will be to understand the big picture and create the conditions for learning to take place which delivers the expectations of both individual learner and organizational client, in the end the learners themselves must adopt, own and ultimately live with the consequences of their programme. Irrelevance does not exist within the well-designed action-learning intervention, albeit that learners can (in some circumstances) create irrelevant outcomes for themselves, of their own choosing. As one of our clients suggested: “It effectively separates sheep and goats”.

Working together and working apart

An effective executive in today’s organization is able to work alone and as part of a team. We ignore these two facets at our peril. Executives schooled solely as team players may never learn to take personal responsibility, and can find themselves unable to act, only to advise (Drucker, 1996). Drucker raised many

interesting issues about frequent fundamental misunderstanding and misuse of the team concept. But likewise, the lone wolf executive, schooled to think and act alone, will find him or herself increasingly alienated in organizations calling, rightly, for shared vision.

As discussed above, action learning recognizes that executives must develop self-direction and self-reliance. These leadership traits, as discussed above, are part of the innate characteristics of fast-trackers, who often become frustrated and impatient with less self-reliant colleagues. Action-learning programmes always work with groups – “sets” to use the action-learning jargon – which encourage executives to discuss, share, pool their ambitions and experiences and therefore create something else, a *Gestalt*, where the group produces a better result than the individuals alone could. Although action learning as a management development methodology dates only back to the 1970s in any serious application (Revens (1977) describes the first applications in post-war Britain, and first mainstream adoptions in the 1970s within the General Electric Corporation), its origins as a facilitated developmental methodology reach back to Socratic dialogue (Zeldin, 1994)[1].

A specific action learning approach to developing high-potentials

Our own experience in both research and practice (Peters and Smith, 1996) has honed the adaptation of the action-learning methodology to fit the development of high-potential employees in today's organization. This takes into account our own experiences in conducting action-learning programmes over many years in various parts of the world; in working with high-potential fast-track employees in a number of organizations, and on the extensive body of literature on both subjects, albeit that the two bodies of knowledge have not, as far as we can tell, been brought together before:

- High-potentials are given specific, real and meaningful problems to tackle. The problems are largely of the learner's own endorsement, although it is important that they receive guidance and support from an in-house senior manager, known as the client. Perceived strategic significance and degree of difficulty seem to be the important variables. Each person, therefore, agrees the problem with the client who cares about the issue to be solved and who may also play a personal mentoring role.

- The high-potentials work in learning groups of, typically, five to eight members, ideally drawn from a range of functions and levels.
- The duration is fixed, after which groups re-form into new sets, with new groups of peers. The identification and addressing of significant present and future challenges by high-potential staff should be seen to be a continuing process.
- The roles of both facilitator and architect should be carefully engineered to provide good design and good support without any degree of long-term dependency. To make effective fast-track development stick, the organization must learn to manage its own development process. Our interventions have been most effective when we have made ourselves redundant from what we have begun.
- Support to sets should use front-end technology (such as e-mail and the Internet, at the time of writing) both allowing geographical barriers to be overcome and forcing intelligent applications of emerging technologies to the host organization's business.
- Performance assessment is primarily made by set peers and organizational sponsors – although we have successfully brought action-learning participants' documented outcomes for university assessment and certification.
- The approach creates natural 360-degree mentoring by other high-potentials and organizational clients, and the construction of a natural, organization-wide network of future benefit to high-potentials.
- Implementation of outcomes, over and above recommendations, is key to success. Organizational leaders need to be problem-solvers as well as problem-diagnosers; a quality which differentiates the paid executive from the hired consultant.

Conclusion

Developing people is not one of the physical sciences. Apply the same forces with the same technology to metals of the same composition and the same results will occur, largely regardless of where the metals are in time and space. The dependent variables are the forces, the applying technologies and the metals. But in developing people, that level of predictability does not occur. A key variable is the

environmental context which the person being developed is in.

We have reviewed the action-learning approach to developing executives as a departure from normative methodologies which treat people development as a physical science – the traditional input-process-output model favoured by car manufacturers and universities. Action learning seeks to leverage the surrounding context as a key part of the developmental experience, rather than pretending it is not there. As such, it is a more credible management and leadership development methodology which seeks to share knowledge appropriate in context, rather than impart some supposedly objective standard of knowledge.

One could argue that, as such, action learning might be a developmental methodology of choice for any kind of executive development. We have argued more narrowly than that – that the specific issues associated with the development of fast-track employees as potential future organizational leaders, demand an action-learning approach. These specific issues are not the impartation of knowledge *per se*, which we have suggested is relatively simple, but the learning of the ability to function as a leader and a manager.

Characteristics shared by fast-track employees, and the problems associated with managing them, have been reasonably well (if not extensively) researched. Similarly, the theory and practice of action learning is a well-trodden research path. We believe that the contribution of this paper is original, in bringing together these two areas in a way that suggests action from practitioners. We hope that future researchers in executive and management development will explore the field further, specifically with case study references of fast-track development using an action-learning approach.

We have set out a series of prescriptions for organizations addressing the challenge of developing their high-potential employees, based on action learning, and more specifically on a particular application of action learning. The implications for high-potential employees, and those charged with their development (which we would suggest is the province of both senior HRD personnel and the board of directors of an organization) are that the challenges of nurturing the fast-trackers must be left neither to chance, nor to traditional developmental methodologies. High-potentials come to work to learn, and their learning must be synchronized with the

strategic present and future challenges of their employers. If the heirs apparent are not able to rule, or not able to be brought to positions of leadership, or defect to other firms – the organization's future health is at great risk.

Note

- 1 Zeldin, T. (1994), sums up the Socratic version of the action-learning group, as opposed to the tutor-led classroom, superbly: "Before [Socrates], the model for all speech was the monologue: the wise man or the God spoke and the rest listened ... His brilliant idea was that if unsure individuals were put together, they could achieve what they could not do separately: they could discover the truth, their own truth, for themselves. By questioning each other and examining their prejudices, dividing each one of these into many parts, finding the flaws, never attacking or insulting, but always seeking what they could agree between them ... they would gradually learn what the purpose of life was".

References

- Day, A. and Peters, J. (1990), "The role of the architect in training and development", *Management Decision*, Vol. 28 No. 8.
- Drucker, P. (1996), *Managing in a Time of Great Change*, Butterworth Heinemann, London.
- Field, H.S. and Harris, S.G. (1991), "Participants' frustrations in fast-track development systems", *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 12 No. 4.
- Gritzmacher, P. (1989), "Strategic management of fast-track employees", *National Productivity Review*, Vol. 8 No. 4.
- Harris, S.G. and Field, H.S. (1992), "High-potential management development programmes", *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 11 No. 1.
- Kovack, B.E. (1989), "Successful derailment", *Organizational Dynamics*, Autumn, Vol. 18 No. 2.
- Peters, J. and Smith, P. (1996), "Developing high potentials, the action learning approach", unpublished working paper.
- Porras, J. and Collins, J. (1994), *Built to Last*, Century Hutchinson, London.
- Ramos, J., and Chapman, D. (1994), "Why executives derail", *Across the Board*, November/December, Vol. 31 No. 10.
- Revans, R. (1977), *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*, Chartwell Bratt, London.
- Senge, P. (1994), *The Fifth Discipline*, Doubleday, New York, NY.
- Wills, G. (1992), *Your Enterprise School of Management*, MCB University Press, Bradford, provides an insightful discussion of action learning as it applies to the concept of the learning organization.
- Zeldin, T. (1994), *An Intimate History of Humanity*, Minerva, London.