

Get In on the Action: Utilizing Action Learning in Professional Development

by *Jessica Buchsbaum*

Many of us devote significant effort and resources to designing professional development programs to ensure our lawyers are developing both their substantive and professional skills. Generally, our technical skills training programs are augmented by the supervision attorneys receive during practice; on-the-job training cannot be underestimated.

We know that in today's environment lawyers need to be legal experts and more — they have to be counselors, business generators, leaders, and collaborators. Gone are the days when these were considered “soft skills.” It is a business imperative that we fill the void in our professional development strategies. Experiential training addresses how adults learn best and reinforces those skills through application. The conundrum then becomes, how do you offer on-the-job training for professional skills?

If your firm is focused on honing professional skills while identifying and grooming future leaders, you may want to consider Action Learning as a method to deliver this training. Action Learning is a development program in which companies ask a group to solve a significant and urgent business problem with no easily identifiable solution. It has the added benefit of building strong leaders in the process because the participants are “learning by doing” and delving into all aspects of leadership in a true-to-life setting. The goal of the group is to solve the urgent business problem and move beyond their individual expertise and collaborate to generate ideas and solutions that they individually

may have never considered before. The duration of an Action Learning project is generally nine months to a year.

Action Learning projects are facilitated by an Action Learning Coach who highlights lessons learned through the process of problem solving. The coach facilitates all of the programs and teaches the participants how to effectively use management tools. Additionally, an Action Learning Coach works with the group every step of the way to highlight and facilitate lessons learned. As the team members work together, natural leadership qualities emerge and the participants become more proficient at taking risks, making difficult decisions, asking the right questions and leading their peers, coaching and mentoring peers, and building team trust and collaboration. In other words, it addresses many of the areas of professional skills that we seek to develop in our lawyers. Approximately 50% of the Action Learning process focuses on solving the problem — the rest is about learning. Action Learning can boost the efficacy of your development initiatives; it did at our firm.

Action Learning is a significant initiative — one that deviates from traditional approaches to professional development and incurs costs, both in actual dollars and attorney time — so, it is imperative to obtain support from top firm management. Beyond their support, you need their complete commitment and perhaps involvement. At our firm, members of the Executive Committee were completely committed to taking on the role of

“Sponsors” of the program. This required members of the Executive Committee to offer guidance and mentoring, and ultimately to evaluate the success of the program. Once you have support from the key decision makers, you can focus on the development of your program.

An Action Learning program will have seven to ten sessions over a nine- to twelve-month period. The sessions should be mandatory. The groups are encouraged to reframe the problem and divide into smaller working groups. As the participants work on their problems during the sessions, the facilitator will stop the group to seek and discuss feedback, learn how to ask questions, support each other, and learn how to avoid making assumptions. This is all done in real time, because the participants need the information to effectively work together on their recommendations and as a team.

Between sessions, the group continues to work on their recommendations through subgroups. The groups will meet with the Sponsors periodically to communicate their progress, obtain input, and make sure they are garnering the Sponsors’ support before they make their final recommendations. Final recommendations are presented to the Sponsors at the conclusion of the program.

Action Learning programs can be an amazing professional development opportunity for your lawyers, but they are not without their challenges. This type of program is very time consuming and can be expensive — and obtaining participant buy-in can be difficult. You should be prepared to overcome these obstacles before implementing this type of program.

If you are undaunted by the challenges of offering such a program and you’re interested in implementing a similar program, even without the benefit of a consultant, I’ve provided some key takeaways from Bilzin Sumberg’s Action Learning program for you to consider as you design your own program:

- Gain buy-in and support from top firm leadership, as you would with any significant firm initiative.
- Be thoughtful in your selection of program participants. Take into consideration your firm environment and who would most benefit from developing their professional skills. Groups should be as diverse as possible but should be equal in standing at the firm.
- Carefully select and identify your program facilitator. Obviously a third-party consultant makes the program less complicated. However, it does increase the cost of the program. When selecting a consultant consider your firm culture and your participants. If you don’t have the budget for a consultant, don’t fret! This can be conducted in-house by selecting a firm member who has the time and desire to facilitate your group. I would highly recommend anyone managing an action learning program read *Optimizing the Power of Action Learning* by Michael J. Marquardt to prepare.
- Obtain participant buy-in and structure the program. It is important that you have a committed group of participants who are willing to devote their time and energy to a non-billable endeavor. Make it easier for the participants by tailoring the logistics to the group. Determine their venue, time, and date preferences. Identify sponsors who will be responsible for determining the success of the program, who will be a resource along the way, and who will determine which recommendations will be accepted.

At our firm, we have been happy with the results of our Action Learning program. When we compared the skills we wanted our participants to gain with those skills they felt they developed, we were pleased with the outcome. We had the added benefit of some valuable recommendations made to ad-

dress our “problem” that are already having a positive impact on our firm culture.

Action Learning is a powerful and underutilized tool in law firm professional development programs. To learn more about how my firm utilized Action Learning as leadership development and succession planning, I invite you to read my case study in the August 2015 issue of *PD Quarterly*.

Jessica Buchsbaum is the Chief Legal Talent Officer for Bilzin Sumberg Baena Price & Axelrod LLP in Miami, Florida.

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