

Richard Hale and **Charles Margerison** explain the work-based learning questions approach, outline its advantages and provide case study examples of success.

The corporate world is experiencing an accelerating rate of change. 'Heard it', you say. But are training professionals able to keep up? Not if they continue to peddle old material, sheep-dip programmes and course content with a decreasing shelf-life. Today's organisational problems will be tomorrow's dead case studies. So how can we add value by transforming, as many say we should, from trainer to internal consultant or learning specialist?

Trainers spend too much time fretting about how to evaluate training. Evaluation is seen as something to be done after they have delivered training. They buy, adapt or concoct a fancy formula that purports to assess what the return on investment (ROI) is. The purpose of such efforts is often self-preservation. Donald Kirkpatrick said:

The future of training directors and programs depends to a large extent on their effectiveness. To determine effectiveness attempts should be made to measure training in scientific and statistical terms.¹

Unfortunately, this means that quantitative measures of dubious validity can sometimes be applied to qualitative aspects of training and development. If we can find a formula and apply it to all training or at least major categories of training then the life of the trainer becomes easier: straightforward generalisations can be made about the value of training. The people receiving the training will, of course, be happy to allow the trainers to take on the onus for evaluation. After all, that gets them off the hook from having to demonstrate they have changed or are applying their learning.

The point often missed when applying this sort of thinking to the evaluation of management and leadership development is that learning is very different to training. Learning is about the sustainable application of knowledge and skills over time and in the workplace. It is about the ability to apply learning from one area or context to another. So it is a very individual, contextual and intangible thing, and therefore difficult to evaluate against a standardised set of criteria.

The work we have been doing with organisations and their managers and leaders has led us to the view that both training and learning need to be tackled at all four levels shown in Value Projects' model of Action Learning (see Figure 1, above). All too often we see examples of managers going through a training or education programme and acquiring new knowledge (easily tested through examinations), developing new skills (easily seen in role-plays and case studies), and demonstrating motivation (seen in

end-of-programme enthusiasm), *but* failing to put their learning into action.

Often this is not helped by the positioning of training and learning as something that takes place outside of the real-world job situation. But ask any experienced and successful manager or leader to reflect on the source of their best learning and you are most unlikely to hear them quote a formal training or education programme. They will quote real-work experiences such as having a new job, being thrown in at the deep end, learning from other managers or leaders, and so on. Despite this, there is a real irony that we are conditioned to think of and 'frame' learning as something that takes place separately from the real world.

In essence we believe there is a need to reframe how we view management training and development. Effective management training and development is:

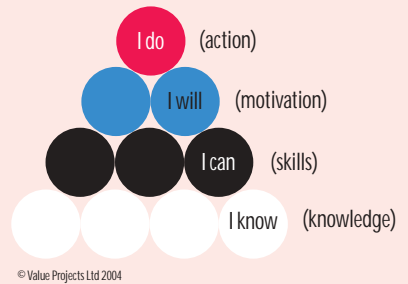
- about what happens *before, during* and *after* the 'training events'
- evaluated continuously
- facilitated by learning specialists and owned by senior executives
- continually adapted to the changing needs of the business
- about challenging participant managers and leaders to define their success criteria through consultation with stakeholders
- about requiring participants to demonstrate and verify how their learning has been applied.

Effective management training and development is not:

- only what happens during formal training events
- evaluated by end-of-course evaluations alone
- owned by trainers and HR professionals
- fixing a programme design and sticking with it rigidly
- about force-fitting ROI formula into personal learning plans
- about standardisation of content, delivery and the sheep-dip approach.

So let's look at how trainers, in their new roles as facilitators of learning, can support managers and leaders before, during and after the formal training event.

Figure 1: Value Projects model of Action Learning



Adding real with work-based learning questions

The work-based learning question model upturns the historic model for business education

THE METHODOLOGY

We have followed the precepts of Professor Reg Revans, doyen of Action Learning (AL). He said we should judge people by the questions they ask rather than their knowledge alone, thus distinguishing between wisdom and cleverness. He also showed that learning is a social process in which managers who are faced with real-life messy problems will learn best with and from others. So taking these insights to heart we worked with managers and leaders in major organisations to develop the work-based learning question methodology. It works like this.

- Managers define the questions they need to tackle in their job roles through consultation with their stakeholders.
- Their work-based learning questions are then tackled through a process of research, inquiry and comparison. This means that relevant theory, models and concepts are accessed in real time when appropriate.
- Comparison is encouraged as participants are linked with managers and leaders from other parts of the organisation or other organisations and sectors. We recognise the importance here of gaining 'external perspective' (EP) as proposed by recent Cranfield University Research.²



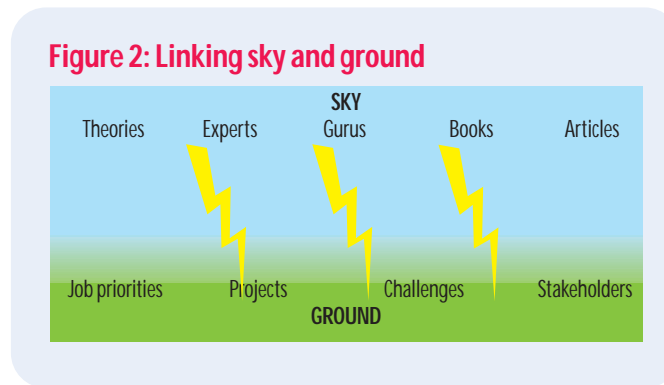
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Key learning points

- Form a steering group with top business managers chairing it and ensure they scope the key business challenges to provide a framework for work-based learning questions.
- Involve participants in the design of their own programmes.
- Challenge providers of training and education to ensure they help people deal with on-the-ground issues.
- Go into learning and development sessions with your managers without a formal presentation or material and feel confident that you can add value to their learning.
- Encourage the development of 'external perspective' through comparison with other organisations and sectors.
- Press managers to take on more responsibility for evaluating learning and its impact on the business.
- Develop yourself as an Action Learning (AL) facilitator.
- Aggregate the business impact of work-based learning questions across your organisation and show real value.

While we encourage managers to look to the 'sky' to see which models or theories relate to their questions, we also **encourage comparison with other organisations and managers**

- They work in small learning sets, typically trios, and in larger learning groups in which they support each other in the learning process and problem solving.
- They write up summaries of their actions and learning, and submit them for assessment and accreditation towards professional management qualifications at Master's and Doctoral levels.



- knowledge was tested through examinations but the requirement to apply knowledge was ignored.

Connecting 'sky' and 'ground'

We use the sky and ground analogy to help managers using this approach (see Figure 2, left). With work-based learning questions we start with 'on-the-ground' issues or problems and look to the 'sky' for sources of comparison. The key AL principle

The organisation has an aggregated summary of the impact of the completion of the work-based learning questions. In the case of HBOS Financial Services, for instance, this means 16 managers tackling 128 work-based learning questions. The participant managers themselves state the case relating to the impact on the business, and have this verified by other key stakeholders in the business. David Collier, organisation development consultant, HBOS Financial Services, says:

When we were setting up our Business Management programme we realised that the problems and issues of today would not be the same as the problems of tomorrow. We needed a methodology that would enable us to adapt to the changing needs of the business without compromising the integrity of the educational programme. Managers may start with a plan for their future work-based learning questions but several months into the programme the business is restructured, priorities change or the individual moves to a different job role. We need to accept this as the reality of business today and in the future, and our programmes need to reflect this by adapting and changing in real time. With the work-based learning question approach, new questions are developed as new issues emerge within the business. The programme reflects the current and future reality rather than teaching old models and case studies from the past.

This approach is being taken up by other major organisations including Lloyds TSB, and, interestingly, some academic institutions in the UK such as Middlesex University Business School and the Department of Management Research at Bristol University which are linking their accreditation facility to the work-based learning question methodology.

Reg Revans fought hard throughout the second half of the twentieth century for British business schools to accept that they should start by asking managers what their issues were and he said such schools should support managers in resolving their own problems. He was no doubt ahead of his time as only now after his death are we seeing academic institutions opening their doors to this client-centred AL approach to design and assessment.

The work-based learning question model upturns the historic model for business education, which borrowed from a more traditional academic paradigm in which:

- it was assumed that tutors knew more than participants
- predetermined content and syllabi were designed by people removed from the workplace and independent of the manager as a 'student'
- timing of programme delivery was predetermined regardless of participant work priorities (for example, the Finance module is always run in September)
- key measures were of inputs such as classroom hours and amount of content provided

here is that the theory follows the action. Rather than starting by teaching theory and then hoping that managers will find a means of applying it, we start on the ground with the real business, organisational or career-related questions and help managers to investigate or draw from the theories, models or concepts in the sky that are relevant to the on-the-ground issues as defined in the work-based learning questions.

The relevance of designing management and leadership education that starts on the ground rather than in the sky can be seen by the following two examples.

Example 1

A senior manager in a major pharmaceutical company is studying on a distance learning-based degree programme, sponsored by his employer. He is nearing the completion of his foundation stage and reports that he has to complete assignments incorporating in-the-sky models and theories but has to write them as though they are memos to his boss. He admits what he is writing is nothing like a real memo to his boss. It is a work of fiction but it will meet the needs of the education provider and his tutors, whom, he says, have never worked in industry. Why does he continue? Because he wants the qualification, his employer is willing to pay, and there is a history of supporting further and higher education in this way.

Example 2

An HR manager in a UK finance organisation is completing a psychology degree sponsored by her employer. She is required to write up an assignment in the form of a psychological experiment according to the proper academic protocols, yet she admits she has not conducted a psychological experiment. What's more, her tutor knows she hasn't conducted a psychological experiment. She admits she would never conduct a psychological experiment in her professional role.

The External Perspective

Recent research by Cranfield University has shown the importance of what they have termed 'external perspective', or EP, in providing innovative breakthroughs. The research showed that organisations seeking to introduce new techniques of creativity and innovation, and which are only working with the existing internal population, are wasting their time. They need fresh eyes and different perspectives, not just fresh techniques. So this raises some interesting challenges in terms of implementing the work-based learning question methodology with organisations. We have taken two approaches here:

- in-house programmes, facilitating external comparison
- cross-organisational programmes.

The work-based learning question approach has to be positioned in the **social context of the organisation** for which managers are working

► *In-house programmes*

In the programme with HBOS Financial Services we recognised there were advantages in working with a dedicated in-company group in terms of being able to tackle many of the real strategic issues of the business through work-based learning questions. However, it was important to encourage managers to engage in comparative activity – in other words, to compare their own questions with how others may have tackled similar issues in different organisations or contexts.

While we encourage managers to look to the 'sky' to see which models or theories relate to their questions, we also encourage comparison with other organisations and managers. A key theme was that of change management, and we decided to look to other organisations in the same geographic area as a source of information on how they approached major change issues. We found a director of Operations for an NHS Trust who joined the programme for a day. In AL style, the participants prepared a number of questions to ask him about how he had managed change, rather than him preparing a 'stock presentation'. This led to tremendous insights far beyond those that might have been gained by bringing in a change guru to speak from the podium. Key learning points for both participants and the organisation development and training team were as follows.

- Sources of comparison are often on your doorstep.
- Comparison across sectors of similar issues in different contexts can be most powerful.
- It is easy to stereotype other organisations – for example, public sector and private sector – and to assume they have nothing to offer by way of meaningful comparison, but the exact opposite can be true.

With this group in particular, the experience led them to drive the design of future workshops whereby they organised visits out to other organisations with a focus on investigating the theme of innovation.

Cross-organisation programmes

The other way in which we have encouraged learning across organisations is by establishing cross-sector groups that come together to work and learn, again with the structure of the work-based learning question methodology. One such group is Leadership at work, which comprises organisations as diverse as international banks, local authorities, fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) conglomerates, construction companies and the civil service.

This is what we call a 'rolling set', where members can join at any time and diversity is the key. Members can join for a minimum of six months and may tackle work-based learning questions relating to their job leading to accredited qualifications. Speaking of his experience of the set, David Thomas, director of Government and Archive Services, says:

I have greatly enjoyed being a member and have found it challenging and exciting. Everyone is very positive and supportive but is not afraid of asking difficult and probing questions. I find it provides a safe and supportive environment in which to discuss complex work-related issues.

DEVELOPING WORK-BASED AL FACILITATORS

We have realised that the work-based learning question approach has to be positioned in the social context of the organisation for which managers are working. The process has to be integrated. It will not work if, for instance, a training manager decides simply to superimpose some AL sets on top of a suite of standard training courses. The Action Learning Facilitator Accreditation programme³ provides a means for trainers to integrate work-based AL into its organisations.

While we do cover the micro-skills of how to facilitate an Action Learning Set meeting, the more important aspect of this programme is developing an understanding of how to work with the politics and structures of the organisation.

For instance, we have found it critical to success to have a steering group that owns all work-based AL programmes established. Trainers and HR professionals are represented on this group but as advisers and facilitators. The group is always chaired by a senior line executive. For trainers this can seem threatening, like they are giving up ownership and responsibility, but the reverse is true. By facilitating the development of such an organisation within their organisation, they raise their own profile by contributing at a strategic level to the business. And there is more likelihood of the programme riding the waves of corporate change. Individuals may come and go, but the steering group remains and governs the programme, presenting challenges to the design and delivery team to ensure it remains business relevant.

Clare Wooler, HR manager at BWB Consulting, the Nottingham-based environmental and engineering consultancy, has built a superb foundation by forming a senior level steering group that will guide the work-based AL strategy. Discussing the benefits, she says:

For some time I have felt that sending people on training courses, particularly for management development, interpersonal skills and personal development, was not really producing measurable results for the business. I have often been disappointed in the off-the-shelf training we have bought in and have found it difficult to identify with individuals how they have applied any learning to their situation.

As we all know, the daily rush takes over and the course notes gather dust in drawers. Also, directors in the business keep saying to me 'We should be able to do this in-house'; 'Can we have training that directly relates to what we do?' 'Are we getting value for money?'

I decided that the Action Learning Facilitator Accreditation route looked like the answer to these concerns. We are working in small groups asking questions like 'How do I negotiate reasonable schedules of work with a demanding client?'; 'How can I go and introduce myself to a potential new client at a social function?' and 'How can I make real impact with my pitch for a multi-million pound project?' and together sharing experience, exploring options, discussing techniques, taking action and adding value to our business.

I sense that I may have found a key to really developing people in a way that will solve business issues and measurably improve both organisational and personal performance. I have set up a work-based Action Learning group with new managers who have been eager to take part. It is already evident that they are motivated by our discussions and indeed are taking action that will address the questions they have asked.

WORK-BASED LEARNING QUESTIONS: EXAMPLES

Work-based learning questions may have different areas of focus. For instance they may relate to:

- business situation questions – which require a review of the business issues and the context of the problems and opportunities, plus views on action already taken, learning points gained and the plans for the future
- personal style and philosophy questions – for which the person indicates his or her personal approach to work, work preferences, and guiding principles and philosophies
- application questions – actions in the current job where the person indicates what s/he personally has done, or is doing, to deal with the challenges at work

The more important aspect of this programme is developing an understanding of how to work with the **politics and structures of the organisation**

- career questions – for which the person has to indicate the personal learning points s/he has gained from previous jobs, review career learning and prepare for the next phase of his/her life and career
- project questions – which relate to how a person sees his or her role in project teams, the contributions s/he has made and the lessons gained from experience.

From these headings the manager develops and personalises the work-based learning question. Here are just three summaries of examples of specific questions tackled by managers on programmes.

- Brand conflict – examination of how to manage potential duplication of product types and distribution routes while keeping competitive advantage.
- Developing leadership behaviours in an information systems (IS) function – identifying and developing the leadership behaviours to transform an IS function into a high learning, future skilled and optimistic workforce. This is linked to the introduction of a new platform, redundancy of roles and need for culture change.
- Talent management – defining how the new model of talent management fits with previous HRD strategies and how the organisation's talent management strategy should be put into operation.

In the academic world there is demarcation between subject faculties such as psychology, sociology, economics and politics. With the work-based learning question method we accept that these are usually all relevant dimensions of any one question. So rather than teaching these subjects in isolation – in other words, starting in the sky – we encourage managers to investigate how these issues are manifest in their work-based learning questions. Therefore, taking any of the questions above there will be:

- on-the-ground budgetary considerations (economics)
- aspects of organisational politics to manage (politics)
- personal influence challenges (psychology), and
- possible team dynamics to manage (sociology and social psychology).

It is fascinating when it is presented like this to see managers become aware of the relevance of these issues, which had previously seemed academic. Also the way in which the managers go about tackling their work-based learning questions is real. By this we mean that managers cannot approach others in the organisation for support with a question on the basis that it is for a course and therefore any less real than tackling a project as part of their everyday job. Managers are encouraged to reflect on the challenges they faced as they went about investigating their questions in the workplace. Therefore they consider questions such as these.

- 'How did I co-opt support?'
- 'How did I manage situations where I may have been seen as treading on other people's turf?'
- 'How could I have approached people more effectively?'
- 'Why did people react to me in the way they did?'

Here are some of the learning benefits that managers who have been through programmes using the work-based learning question methodology have reported.

- 'Learning sets are a great way to learn.'
- 'I am an "activist" by nature. The discipline of the approach has forced me to slow down and reflect. This has produced far better results.'
- 'There is a huge body of academic work I can access that directly improves business performance.'
- 'This is broadening and deepening my leadership capability, particularly in areas such as inspiring and influencing people.'
- 'I am developing a network of peers throughout the organisation to facilitate collaborative learning and a more productive working environment for the organisation.'
- 'I am exploring new approaches to resolving problems, particularly with regard to the specific challenges I am likely to face in my new role.'
- 'I am investing more time in reflecting on my career to date and establishing the direction(s) that I would like to explore in the future.'

The Margerison McCann Types of Work model, see figure 3 (©TMS Development International Ltd), highlights nine key areas that are found in every business and public service organisation. It has proved valuable in guiding continuing professional development before, during and after workshops. Managers consider how their own work preferences influence their approach to action, learning and building relationships with those whom they have to influence.

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Figure 3: Margerison-McCann Types of Work Model



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1. Donald Kirkpatrick, 'Four levels of evaluation', *ASTD Training and Development Journal*, January 1996.
2. D Butcher, C Bailey, M Meldrum and M Bristow, *Thinking Outside the Box: Developing External Perspectives in Senior Managers*, Cranfield University School of Management, 2004.
3. For more information visit www.viprojects.com/_Downloads/Articles/VPL-IMCA-ALFA.pdf

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