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# Getting Things Done

*Through Action-Learning Teams.*



by Bruce LaRue

**W**E'VE ALL HEARD, "Experience is the best teacher." Yet relying on experience alone leaves us vulnerable to reinventing the wheel and repeating yesterday's mistakes.

As the pace of change quickens, we tend to react to problems. We may feel that we lack the luxury of time to formulate a more thoughtful response. We may feel that we need to update our skills and knowledge, but the weekend seminar seems ill-suited to help us cope with the complexities we face daily.

Many professionals have returned to the university to earn new credentials. Yet, the distance between the traditional classroom and today's high-performance workplace has never been wider.

What we need is relevant knowledge in a form that we can rapidly apply, test, and refine. Every individual and team must also learn to apply this knowledge in a manner that aligns with the strategic direction. The knowledge we need is often so context-sensitive and unique to the complexities of the task at hand that our peers may be the best source of knowledge and insight. However, the dynamics of many teams are counterproductive. The paradox is that we can accomplish little of significance alone, yet many teams, groups, divisions, and organizations function so poorly that they drain the human spirit.

## Enter Action-Learning teams

Action-Learning Teams (ALTs) are a unique form of team charged with developing special capabilities that are designed to close particular process gaps, or to generate new capacities where none exist. Such capabilities tend to be strategic. By nature, ALTs tend to be cross-functional and cross-organizational, drawing together individuals with specialized knowledge to collaborate on developing and applying new forms of knowledge. ALTs rely

on a form of learning characterized by reflection in action, and the capabilities they develop are created by a form of intellectual boot-strapping wherein new knowledge and capacity are created.

The work of teams and organizations today are characterized by non-routine, unforeseen problems and opportunities. We must learn to free up resources to exploit opportunities that may not be part of official strategy and abandon tried-and-true but outmoded practices.

Increasingly, as workers at the periphery are the ones who spot hidden opportunities, leaders must remain flexible and seize upon the unexpected.

The concept of ALTs emerged from research and experience as to how the



best teams perform under pressure to achieve extraordinary results. From these examples, we can learn lessons and distill basic principles for creating a culture that fosters innovation.

## ALTs and the Informal Organization

Something akin to ALTs already operates within your organization. Resembling "communities of practice," these groups comprise the informal organization that has learned how to work around barriers imposed by the structure, hierarchy, and procedures.

The problem is that these groups tend to work "under the radar" and may even pose a threat to those who derive their legitimacy through formal rank and hierarchy. Hence, communities of practice are rarely formally sanctioned. They tend to be ad hoc, under-

utilized, under-resourced, non-strategic.

For example, Rich, a senior manager in a telecom company, said he could look at his organization under two different light and see two different patterns of activity. Under normal light, Rich saw his team of 600 highly skilled engineers and technicians working within a carefully defined structure indicating a complex series of reporting relationships and authority structures.

After working with us, Rich started seeing his team in a new light. What he saw changed the way he thought about and hence has he *managed* his team. He saw how work actually got done, and how learning occurred. He learned that most of the productive activity—the real work and learning—took place in the "white spaces" between the boxes of the organizational chart. Rich realized that while his team members were highly competent, customers were having a poor experience. Each function appeared to be meeting its targets and metrics, but the process was breaking down between the functional areas.

Learning and knowledge transfer take on a different character in ALTs. Since organizations are complex, adaptive social systems, to fully learn something, we must go beyond learning about the subject and become a member of a community where that knowledge is applied in practice. Learning is less about acquiring certain concepts and more about socialization into a practice community.

Knowledge, too, takes on a different character under this light: It is context-sensitive and dynamic, always changing. The meaning and relevance of knowledge changes based on the context in which it is used or how it is applied in practice. This is why knowledge management systems that are predicated on storage and retrieval of fixed knowledge assets are inadequate.

We must move from simply learning about something to becoming part of the communities where knowledge resides, where it is created, transferred, and applied. In such ALTs, the most significant forms of learning take place. **LE**

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**ACTION:** Create action learning teams.