A VOLUME IN **CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

MOVING THE NEEDLE

What We Know (and Don't Know) About Developing Leaders

edited by

David M. Rosch | Scott J. Allen | Daniel M. Jenkins

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A volume in
Contemporary Perspectives on Leadership Development
David M. Rosch, *Series Editor*

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2025

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83708-543-9 (Print paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-83708-542-2 (Print hardback)
ISBN: 978-1-83708-544-6 (Ebook)

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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

We could start with the James McGregor Burns (1978) quote, "Leadership is the most observed, yet least understood, phenomena on earth" (p. 3). Or we could open the book with a bland statement about how no consensus exists regarding the "definition" of leadership. Or maybe we could begin by writing about how effective leadership is more important than ever, given the acute needs of our society. All of them might be true (to a point) if overused as a rationale for focusing on how people develop the capacity to lead. Yet, to us, the most under-rated truism in the discipline of leadership is that we focus too much on the destination *and not enough on the journey to get there.*

Forbes, an American business magazine, has suggested in the recent past that the "leadership development industrial complex" (Kellerman, 2018) generates more than $366B in revenue each year (Westfall, 2019), just in professional organizations in the United States. That equates to almost $40M being spent every hour of every day on strategies designed to help build leadership capacity. What do those strategies look like? How do we know if we have built them well? What is their track record of success? Recent scholars (e.g., Leroy et al., 2022) have made increasingly strident calls to better examine what works and what we really know about how to develop the capacity to lead. This book is, in large part, a response to begin shifting the discourse from the destination (what "leadership looks like") to a stronger focus on the journey (how to help people develop the capacity to lead). Our goal is to describe the overall state of instruction and training for leader development, helping readers understand what really "moves the needle" in building the capacity to lead, describing what we know (and what we don't know) regarding what works.

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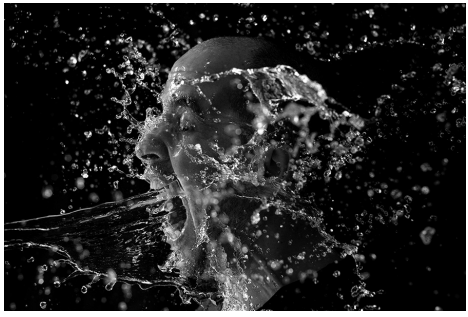
In contexts where the destination gets most of the attention while the process mostly gets neglected, what is popular can easily be confused with what is successful. For example, if we found ourselves in a typical high school or university classroom (even a virtual one) and asked students, "Please raise your hand if you have been in a collaborative group project as part of a class in the past month"—almost all of them, especially in the global West, would do so (Thom, 2020). A significant portion of young and emerging adult education is structured for students to engage in groups because educational administrators have long recognized that professional work now commonly involves collaboration with others. Putting students in groups to engage in work together seems like a great idea. And it is! (We even dedicate a chapter in this book focused on how group projects can be employed as a strategy for leader development.) Still, how that process is enacted matters more than the simple act of including a group project in one's curriculum. Many instructors simply place students in a group and say, "Get to it," with little or no training in managing group dynamics or expectations for communicating with each other. When throwing young people into a pool as a process for helping them learn how to swim, it is true that a minute later, some of them may look like this:

. . . proud of themselves, having fun with others, and ready to take on the next challenge. Or, they may look like this:



. . . wondering why the experience was so challenging and promising themselves never to jump in again. Indeed, research shows most students have negative reactions to collaborative group projects in their coursework (Colbeck et al., 2000; Le et al., 2018). To be clear, we are not suggesting that collaborative group projects are not successful instructional strategies to learn how to collaborate—only that many educators may not focus enough on how to effectively enact the strategy to realize its potential for learning. And that it is quite possible that more research is necessary to better understand its implementation.

We wrote this book to focus on the "journey" of leader development when engaging in formal and informal educational and training experiences. Our emphasis was specifically on popular teaching and training instructional strategies—for example, class discussions, collaborative group projects, individual reflection, multi-rater feedback, role-playing, after-action debriefing, case studies, and many more. Each chapter highlights a specific popular strategy, where the chapter authors describe what the strategy looks like, illustrates an example or two of how the strategy might be applied in a specific context, and provides resources for readers interested in learning more about how to optimally integrate the strategy into their own teaching and training. Importantly, we note that some of the strategies that are included in this book do not possess a robust record of empirical research indicating their connection to leader development outcomes. In those instances, the authors have described an agenda for future research necessary to move our field forward.

Notably, we included a chapter authored by Gary Lloyd in the overall volume dedicated to the potential of using generative artificial intelligence as a tool for leader development. As part of our research into AI, we shared with ChatGPT our list of chapter topics and asked it to summarize our book topics in 100 words or less for prospective readers. This was the response (actual chapter titles italicized):

> These strategies for leader development span diverse, interactive methods promoting holistic growth. *360-degree and multi-rater feedback* involves receiving comprehensive performance reviews from multiple perspectives. *Artificial intelligence* can tailor development resources to individual needs. *Action-learning* and *assessment centers* offer real-world problem-solving experiences. *Case in point, case studies,* and *competency-based assessment* emphasize practical application of theory. Creative expression through *creating art*, reflective *debriefing*, and collaborative *group discussion* foster communication and critical thinking. *Games* and *gamification* enhance engagement, while *group projects* and *improvisation* boost teamwork and adaptability. *Inter-group and intra-group competition* builds on social learning theories, encouraging comparison and auditory processing. *Microexperiences* and *mentoring* offer targeted, personalized learning moments. *Networking with senior executives, outdoor education*, and

> *peer mentoring* broaden perspectives through exposure to varied leadership styles. *Performance-based learning, personal development plans*, and *role-play* allow for active engagement with leadership roles. *Critical reflection* and *problem-based learning* promote introspection and application of knowledge. Collaborative efforts in *scholarly research teams* and *self-assessments* support self-directed learning. *Service learning* and *simulations* provide practical, hands-on leadership opportunities. Lastly, *student organizations* and *study abroad experiences* cultivate global awareness and initiative. These methods, collectively, nurture adaptive, reflective, and effective leaders.

Not the most gripping summary, and maybe arguably inaccurate in some instances (and like some students completing writing assignments, far over the word count limit). But not bad for literally 30 seconds of work. And as Lloyd identifies, AI is full of potential, but lacking any rigorous research as a tool for leader development to date.

Many of the strategies described in this book have been implemented in classrooms and professional training sessions for decades. Some of them—such as AI, creating art, and improv—are newer and possess a smaller body of research supporting them. What ties them all together is that educators and trainers are using them today to help develop the capacities of current and future leaders. These educators and trainers need to know what works, what are effective examples, and what we know and need to know to be successful.

As you prepare to dive into the following chapters, we want to close with some conclusions that we hope you share after consuming them. First, consider any other context where expertise is required to consistently make practical decisions quickly and effectively—such as practicing as a surgeon, or serving as a chef or military leader, for example. Like these roles, developing the capacity to lead requires trainers and educators who can skillfully implement a variety of instructional strategies, not just one or two. As educators and trainers ourselves, we recognize the often subconscious tendency to "stick with what works"—employing tried-and-true methods repeatedly. For example, MBA instructors lean heavily on case studies and lecture (Farashahi & Tajeddin, 2018), while undergraduate-focused leadership faculty often rely on group discussions (Jenkins, 2012). We have written in the past (e.g., Allen et al., 2022) about how these limited approaches should be expanded. This book can be employed to experiment with new strategies in your own work.

Second, while most instructional and training strategies can be applied broadly, some are more or less appropriate for specific populations. For example, preteen youth group leaders may not benefit from case-in-point instructional methods or a comprehensive 360-degree assessment the same way that adult professional managers might. In your own work, think through how to appropriately scaffold your chosen strategies to your unique audience of emerging leaders.

Third, many of the chapters in this book provide concrete suggestions for future research to understand more about the connections between specific strategies for leader development and their outcomes. Young—and maybe not-so-young—researchers can use these suggestions as a potential roadmap for their own work investigating effective pathways to leader development.

Ultimately, we hope that you find the chapters helpful in your own work as a leadership developer. Our large team of chapter authors and editors specifically designed the structure of each chapter to mirror the others so that readers can quickly sift through and find information relevant to them. Our fundamental goal is to "move the needle" in shaping the field of leader development, and we hope you join us on the journey!

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CHAPTER 1

ACTION LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Organizations operate in increasingly complex and dynamic environments. Action Learning is an innovative and dynamic approach to learning and problem-solving. Research suggests that learners develop critical thinking, decision-making, and communication skills through active participation and reflection in addressing complex challenges. Likewise, the collaborative nature of action learning may foster a culture of openness, trust, and mutual support, contributing to the overall development of effective leaders.

Developing strategies and taking action allow leaders to explore the whole through systems thinking and not just treat symptoms or part of a problem.

—Volz-Peacock et al., 2016, p. 322

Leadership is action, and leadership is learning. In the 1940s, Reg Revans established action learning (AL) as a predominantly hands-on problem-solving methodology in the coal mines of Wales and England to identify creative solutions to workplace challenges via reflection on results (Boshyk

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& Dilworth, 2010; Lyons & Bandura, 2023; Marquardt & Yeo, 2012; O'Neil & Marsick, 2007; Revans, 1982, 1983; Riggs & Richards, 2006; Volz-Peacock et al., 2016). This methodology focuses on improving organizational performance while developing employees using real-world situations. According to Revans, exchanging thoughts and feelings that are later put into practice produces visible action in response to a problem (Revans, 1972; Willocks, 2023). Addressing real-world problems has made AL widely used in organizations around the world, making it distinctive from other instructional strategies in education, non-profit, government, and business sectors (Anderson & Coleman, 2015; Leonard & Lang, 2010; Raelin, 2021; Scott, 2017; Willocks, 2023). This chapter defines AL, highlights an illustration of the strategy, and presents an overview of the primary evidence. The chapter concludes by describing relevant resources for readers to learn more.

ACTION LEARNING DEFINED

> *One of the strengths of action learning is that it is not based on a pre-determined set of skills or a pre-defined curriculum, but on the skills that the leaders themselves consider that they need in relation to the problems they face at that time.*
>
> —Willocks, 2023, p. 29

Today's organizations operate in what the military has termed VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) environments. These environments force leaders to adapt, learn, and respond to ongoing change quickly and efficiently (Baran & Woznyi, 2020; Willocks, 2023). Organizations worldwide face the dilemma of responding to constantly changing environments while developing their leaders to meet these challenges using limited time and financial resources (Volz-Peacock et al., 2016). Some have turned to AL as a cost-effective leader development strategy to address these challenges and compete.

"Action learning is a process that involves a small group working on real problems, taking action, and learning as individuals, as a team, and as an organization" (Volz-Peacock et al., 2016, p. 320). The AL methodology allows leaders to learn while working on real-time, complex problems. For example, a technology company charged with developing new time-sensitive software. The software team must seek input on defining the issue(s) the software addresses, soliciting feedback on courses of action, updating and changing the software, and identifying what they learned through the process—all within a predetermined time frame. Simultaneously, both leader development and organizational development occur. The goal of AL is to help leaders and organizations understand and improve processes through investigation, experimentation, communication, and reflection while

empowering leaders to be innovative (Cusumano et al., 2021; Saabye et al., 2022; Saabye et al., 2023).

AL emphasizes finding, facing, framing, and forming solutions, which presents problem-solving in groups as an advanced form of learning and leading (Ballé et al., 2019; Liker, 2021; Revans, 2011; Saabye et al., 2023). Naturally, AL teams encounter several challenges during the problem-solving process. These challenges may include recognizing the problem, defining the problem, analyzing the problem, generating solution ideas, critiquing ideas, selecting the best ideas, implementing the best ideas, evaluating results, and identifying new problems that need solving (Koberg & Bagnall, 1974; Marquardt et al., 2009). The group activities can be either reactive if they relate to returning a process to an expected state or proactive if the focus is on improving to an expected state (Marquardt & Yeo, 2012; Saabye et al., 2023; Smalley, 2018; Sobeck & Smalley, 2008).

Because AL contains an experimental learning environment, the methodology can be difficult to define and describe. Pedler (1997) provides the following definition of AL:

> An approach to the development of people in organizations that takes the task as the vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning. The method has three main components: people, problems, and a set of six or so colleagues. Action learning implies both self-development and organization development. Action on a problem changes both the problem and the person acting upon it. It proceeds particularly by questioning taken-for-granted knowledge. (pp. 12–13)

McGill and Beaty (2001) defined AL as:

> A continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with an intention of getting things done. Through action learning individuals learn with and from each other by working on real problems and reflecting on their own experiences. (p. 11)

Marquardt et al. (2009) contributed that AL is a process where:

> A diverse team uses a problem-solving methodology that emphasizes asking questions to create a solution for a real problem that is both urgent and important, with an agreement from senior leaders in the organization that the solutions would be implemented if good and feasible. (p. 7)

The core of these definitions are the tenets of developing individuals and organizations. According to Saabye et al. (2023), "both can be done by improving and developing the leadership of the organization, using the

concepts of action learning" (p. 140). Action learning provides the learning environment necessary to transform individuals and organizations, which can produce strategic success.

Action learning places a strong emphasis on ensuring a commitment to learning. An AL coach oversees the process to ensure the development of individuals, teams, and viable solutions. Likewise, the AL coach assures that learning occurs among the participants by building a learning climate that includes openness, trust, critical thinking, questioning, reflection, and stresses the importance of action (Volz-Peacock et al., 2016).

The AL coach's main role is to motivate the team by ensuring learning occurs at every learning stage. The coach acts as a team participant; however, the AL coach does not actively generate solutions (Volz-Peacock et al., 2016). Instead, the AL coach focuses on building a high-performing team, enables the group to solve complex problems, and assures that continual learning and feedback are provided, which supports the leader development competencies of each team member at every AL session (Rao, 2014; Volz-Peacock et al., 2016). Oversight of the problem-solving process is the main responsibility of the AL team coach while ensuring that ethical values, principles, humility, and respect for others are carried out (Boshyk & Dilworth, 2010; Saabye et al., 2023).

AL has been associated with strategic development, knowledge management, executive coaching, and team dynamics. However, AL is most commonly found in human resource development (HRD) initiatives, so opportunities exist for researchers, educators, and practitioners to expand the scope of AL (Faller et al., 2020; Marquardt, 1999; O'Neil & Marsick, 2007; Pedler, 1997).

ILLUSTRATION OF AL FOR LEADER DEVELOPMENT

Action enhances learning because it provides a basis and anchor for the critical dimension of reflection.

—Marquardt et al., 2009, p. 38

Ideally, AL produces creative solutions to the organization's problems (Marquardt et al., 2009). Asking intriguing and insightful questions is the foundation for enabling participants and groups to understand, clarify, and explore solutions and actions. According to the theory, doing so strengthens teamwork, conflict resolution, and fuels individual, team, and organizational learning (Marquardt et al., 2017; Saabye et al., 2023). This rich dialogue can shift the organization into a learning organization (Senge, 2006), providing the opportunity for an ideal, sustainable, and futuristic state. Guiding the process are two ground rules that empower AL: (a) statements

should be made only in response to questions and (b) the AL team coach has the power to intervene (Marquardt et al., 2009).

Implementation of Action Learning

The World Institute for Action Learning (WIAL) action learning model incorporates six components necessary to optimize the fullness of AL—identifying an important problem, arranging a diverse group of four to eight members, using questioning and reflective listening, developing and implementing action strategies, committing to learning, and identifying an AL team coach (Marquardt et al., 2009). Examples of AL in the classroom and a professional setting are outlined below.

Classroom Example

A common AL method used in classrooms involves simulations. For example, a human resources course in a business school can involve activities where students bargain and negotiate employee contracts under specific deadlines. The instructor serves as the AL team coach and divides the students into groups. The student groups encounter typical challenges with employee negotiations and learn how to use course concepts and resources to aid decision-making. The students work together and make decisions that ultimately help or hinder the negotiation process. In a protected classroom environment, the group receives feedback at the end of each session, where they learn and reflect on the outcomes.

Professional Example

In an organizational context, digital marketing could be a relevant context for AL. Architects identify a problem, such as increasing return on investment (ROI) by 10%. Next, four to eight people from various backgrounds address the problem and chart a path forward. Of course, identifying an individual with the necessary training to serve as the AL team coach is essential. Under the guidance of the AL team coach, objectives are discussed based on historical challenges shared by the group. Once the objectives have been agreed upon, the digital marketing campaign strategy is developed and implemented. The outcomes will provide positive and/or negative feedback from senior leaders, which sparks reflection and learning. The group shares feedback and reflects on challenges and successes that occurred to facilitate the learning process. Based on the learning, adjustments are made to improve the digital marketing campaign.

While the above examples are general, AL is most associated with "learning by doing." AL is centered on an urgent task, problem, or project. The resolution or solution must be highly important and not easily identified to

those involved. Group members should have diverse backgrounds and hail from relevant areas of the organization to bring different perspectives and viewpoints. Reflective activity is crucial to developing and implementing action-learning outcomes (Berberich, 2022; Bourner et al., 1996).

EVIDENCE SUPPORTING ACTION LEARNING AS A STRATEGY FOR LEADER DEVELOPMENT

The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action.

—Dewey, 1916, p. 408.

Since Reg Revans first structured AL in the 1940s, the AL methodology has been used in multiple contexts, including executive education (e.g., Berberich, 2022), government (e.g., Leonard & Lang, 2010), and business (e.g., Faller et al., 2020; Gold & Jones, 2023; Lyons & Bandura, 2023; Willocks, 2023).

Executive Education

Berberich (2022) describes an AL program that introduced agile practices to help the workforce fulfill strategic business needs despite rapid and unexpected changes. The design created an environment where participants experienced the tension and impact of changes on task completion. The scenarios forced learners to adapt to real-world situations and kept them focused and engaged in the executive training. According to the author, learning outcomes were met.

Government

Leonard and Lang (2010) provide three case studies using AL in the United States government. The first case was with the U.S. Department of Commerce (DOC), where project teams were assigned a coach and two deliverables: a written report outlining the team's recommendations and a formal presentation to senior staff. The authors highlighted a second case with the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH), which designed a leader development program that was 1 year in length. The goal was to develop the collaboration and leadership skills of scientists. Leonard and Lang (2010) provided the third case using AL at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In this program, each participant focused on eight leader competencies

they believed were most critical for development: interpersonal skills, team building, decisiveness, conflict management, continual learning, oral communication, creativity and innovation, and integrity and honesty. The results revealed increased growth in each of the eight competencies.

Business

Gold and Jones (2023) reviewed three small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that underwent virtual leader development using AL. While the SMEs were from different industries, they shared the common goal of understanding how to become more future-oriented, strategic, and creative. The action-learning sessions were designed in a series of four to five meetings that supported ideas for action in innovation, and the three SME firms that participated in the study were labeled Firm A, Firm B, and Firm C.

For Firm A, becoming future-oriented, strategic, and creative focused on new income streams. As a result of the action-learning sessions, a shift in strategy resulted in the firm taking a more proactive approach towards sustainability and committing resources to employ a "sustainability manager" for the firm. Frim B centered on transaction processing, customer needs fulfillment, and relationship building to help them become more future-oriented, strategic, and creative. Toward the end of their sessions, the group agreed upon innovations and plans for each to present to the firm's leaders. Firm C developed ideas for innovation, leading to a strategy of identifying success indicators, goals, and key activities to guide the identification of business plans and resource requirements in helping them become more future-oriented, strategic, and creative.

ACTION LEARNING CONSIDERATIONS

The examples illustrate that AL is a highly engaging, cost-effective, and targeted instructional strategy. AL facilitates learning through experience, based on the principle of learning by doing, and that people learn best when facing specific challenges in a diverse group through active listening, reflection, and exchanging information. With the exchange of ideas, leaders can learn to navigate time-critical and complex topics and develop creative solutions for successful strategies under the guise of an AL coach in a supportive and safe environment. However, examining the organizational setting is critical for AL to support leader development.

AL is a transformative approach to leader development, but only some organizations are ready. For many leaders and organizations, acknowledging a problem can be challenging, let alone providing an environment that

supports the freedom to explore solutions to the organizational problem. For many leaders and organizations, this involves vulnerability and discomfort, which can be barriers for this instructional strategy.

Qualitative research methods, such as interviews, focus groups, case studies, and ethnography, are prevalent in describing AL, and taken together, a large body of research suggests AL is an impactful method in leader development. However, limited peer-reviewed studies report high-quality research findings (Cho & Egan, 2009; Lyons & Bandura, 2023; Scott, 2017). Reports on the findings indicate positive results; however, there is an opportunity to understand the AL method better. For instance, a mixed-method design to study AL may yield interesting insights. Likewise, a pre and post-assessment of the organization using variables such as hourly wages of participants and coaches, time devoted to preparing the AL sessions, and identifying an area of improvement (e.g., increased sales, cost-saving measures, improved supply chain processes) would provide quantitative measures of the impact on the organization. This suggestion could also be explored by analyzing the effectiveness of the AL coach in developing individuals and improving the organization.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

We contend that professional and leadership development in organizations is increasingly self-directed, budget and time constrained; that it is most effective when designed to engage with others to learn in the action of doing.

—Faller et al, 2020, p. 304.

Since the first articles about AL by Reg Revans in the 1970s, this instructional strategy has gained in popularity over the last 20 years. Dr. Michael Marquardt expands upon the original works of Reg Revans' approaches to AL methodology. In Marquardt's co-authored book *Action Learning for Developing Leaders and Organizations: Principles, Strategies, and Cases* (Marquardt et al., 2009), he thoroughly describes the process (i.e., finding creative solutions to workplace challenges while reflecting on results) and real-world examples. In addition to authoring four books on AL, Dr. Marquardt has introduced the concept to several hundred companies and non-profit organizations around the globe. Dr. Marquardt engaged in a dialogue with Reg Revans, which led to creating the World Institute for Action Learning (WIAL) model of AL. WIAL is globally recognized as the leading certifying organization for AL (https://wial.org).

Individuals interested in learning more about AL can read the article by Lyons and Bandura (2023), which provides a specific action plan and the roles of an employee and a manager (guide/coach). The action plan involves