

# Developing agile leaders at GIBS through the Action Learning process

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# Overview

We work in business environments characterised by hyperconnectivity, distributed leadership, matrix styles of managing and leading, and a pace of change that demands leadership agility. Businesses operate in what is called a VUCA world, which means a world of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. (Bennett and Lemione, 2014).

The development of leaders at GIBS is seen as an applied learning process. Agility arises from reflecting on formal learning input, asking the right questions and applying the learning to business challenges and opportunities. Theory alone does not build agility – the application of this theory does.

GIBS combines world-class faculty input with an applied learning process called Action Learning. Action Learning is “a method for individual and organisation development, based upon small groups of colleagues meeting over time to tackle real problems in order to get things done, and learning from their experience and from each other” (Hetherington, 2016).

The White Paper describes the Action Learning process practiced by GIBS over the last 18 years on customised (company specific) programmes and open enrolment programmes, such as the Programme for Management Development (PMD). The process is designed to develop agile leaders who can deliver improved business performance in the VUCA world.

## Keywords

Leadership  
Development

Management  
Development

Applied  
Learning

Action  
Learning

Return On  
Investment  
(ROI)

VUCA  
(Volatility, Uncertainty,  
Complexity, Ambiguity)

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# Introduction

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GIBS seeks to develop leaders with the capacity to adapt rapidly to changing business environments, making them agile leaders. These leaders develop the capacity to evaluate business challenges and opportunities, to build a questioning mindset, and to interact with colleagues and customers in delivering new ways of thinking and doing to improve company performance. Agile leaders are proactive in addressing the challenges of the VUCA world.

How has GIBS gone about using Action Learning to build leadership capacity across the full range of businesses in South Africa? The approach adopted is described below:

**“The responsibility of delivering the learning content, regardless of the delivery channel, stipulates that the learners acquire new knowledge, skills, attitudes and experiences that they then transfer to the workplace to improve performance on the job with results accruing to the organisation” (Berger and Berger, 2011).**

We appreciate the needs of executives who want to see results that demonstrate the impact of learning as a result of them attending a GIBS programme. The major question they ask about an investment in learning is, “Does the learning process deliver a return on investment (ROI)”? They also want to know, “How does the learning process help delegates improve ROI as reflected in improved business performance?”

In a VUCA world, Action Learning has been found to deliver sustained improvements in business performance in areas where the Action Learning process has been undertaken. This is seen in measures of the ROI and the return on learning investment (ROLI). ROI is measured as the ratio between the cost of the programme (including the opportunity cost of the absence of programme delegates from work) and the rand and cent benefits of the implementation of Action Learning project recommendations. ROLI is a measure of behaviour change that, when applied to business challenges and opportunities, delivers improved individual, team and organisational performance.

Agile leaders develop the skills that allow their organisations to move to a position where the pace of learning matches or exceeds the rate of change in the VUCA world of business.



# Defining the Action Learning process

Action Learning happens in teams of six to ten people who work on a business opportunity or challenge that demands attention. The projects are aligned to organisational strategy and are endorsed and guided by executive or senior management sponsors. The project process combines the application of learning with the opportunity to ask questions and reflect as a team on what has been learnt and how this learning can be used practically. The outputs are a report and a presentation to faculty and company executives that includes a set of recommendations, a business case and an implementation plan.

Whilst the focus is on applying learning, new insights and the combined thinking skills of a team of leaders, learning from top faculty input is still at the heart of the education journey. Without insights into marketing, operations, finance, etc., the process adds no value. It is in the combination of theory and examples of best practice, with application to the project topic, that learning is maximised.

Peter Cusins, a doctor with an active interest in Action Learning and who was the CEO of the Academy of Family Practice and Primary Care in Johannesburg in 1995, talks about Action Learning as being a cycle or spiral. Figure 1 below demonstrates this experiential cycle and explains the Action Learning process.

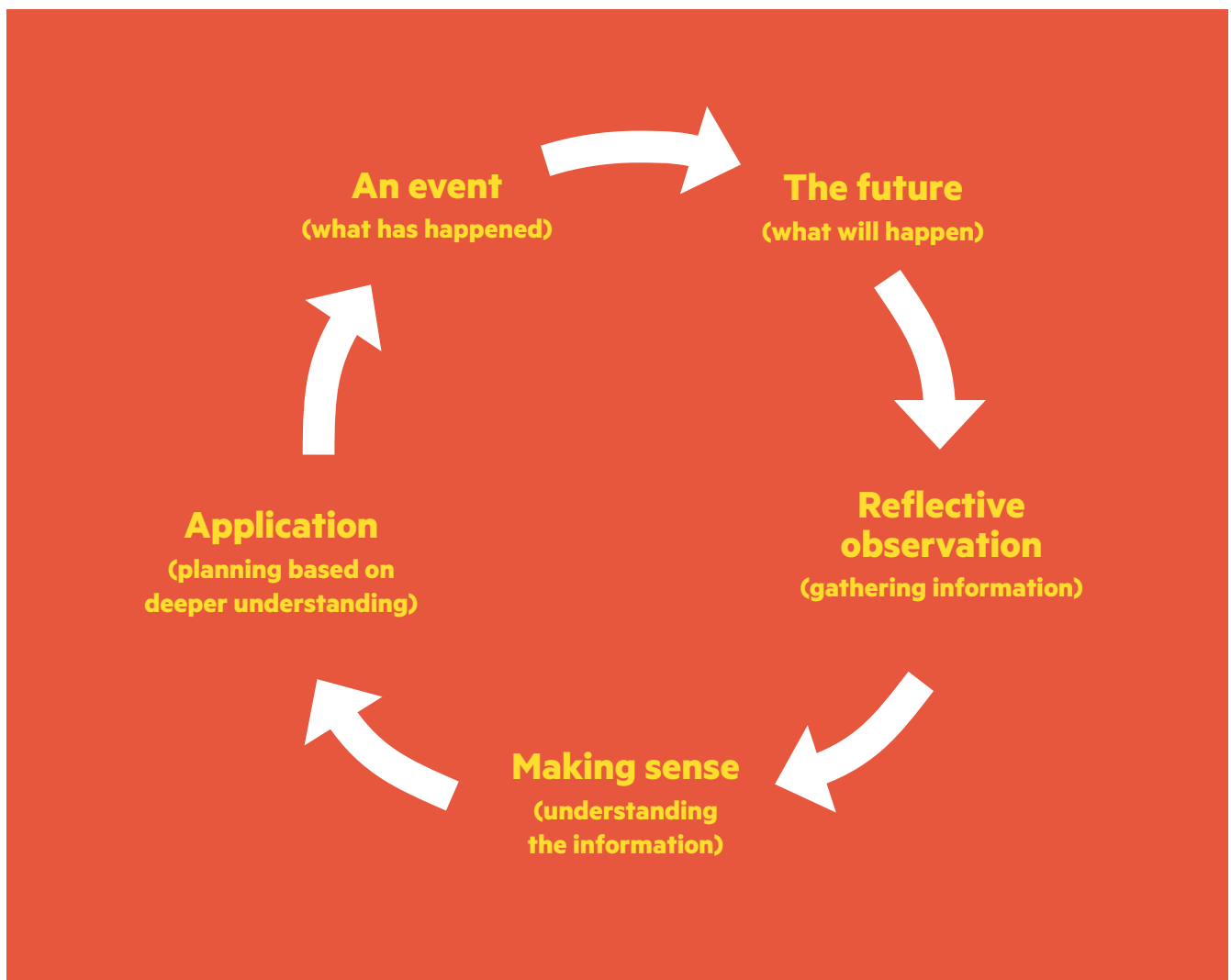
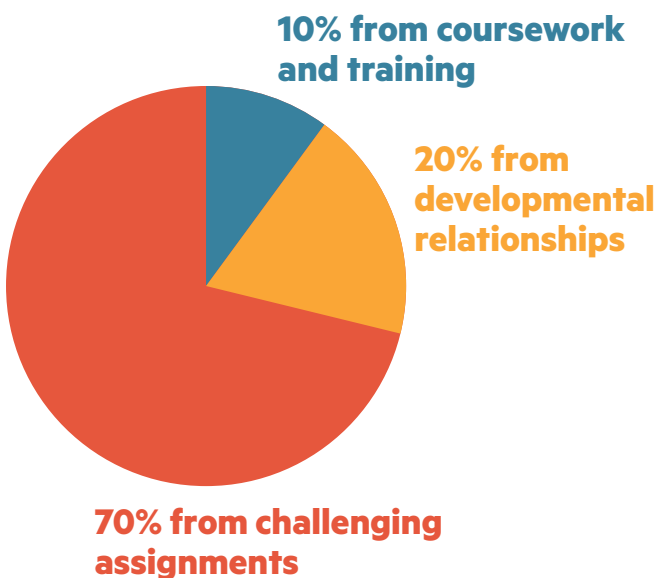


Figure 1. Experiential learning, viewed as a cycle or spiral (Cusins, 1995)

The process of applying learning is the most compelling case for taking learning beyond the classroom and into the work world. However, this does not mean that the learning of theory and practice as reflected in faculty input, literature, case studies and research is less significant. In fact, it is an important key to unlocking new insights in the search for new ways to do things that challenge conventional business practice. That is, learning is most successful when it is put into action. This is particularly true in the field of leadership and management development. The passive absorption of material delivered in lectures rarely contributes to significant changes in behaviour. Action Learning provides the impetus to put learning into practice.

The model often used to motivate learning by doing is the 70/20/10 model. The Center for Creative Leadership's (CCL) Morgan McCall and his colleagues are credited with originating this model in 1996. Lombardo and Eichinger (2010) note:

“Lessons learned by successful and effective managers are roughly:



The Action Learning process is based on challenging assignments that are carried out by teams and result in the application of learning back at work. The logic is that by linking formal content from a specialist to the right sorts of questions, the learning outcomes are powerful and will inform and drive action. In the Action Learning team, the “comrades in adversity” learn not only from programme input, but also from the dialogue shaped by questions that elicit new insights. The members of the team reflect on what is happening in the process, build theory around what they have seen and experienced, and then test what has been learnt in practice.



Sofo, Reo and Villafañe (2010) accurately encapsulate what happens in Action Learning project teams:

**“...what we believe are the three most critical learning elements or premises in Action Learning, [are] namely, (a) the need to ask reflective questions; (b) the need for learning at the individual, team, and organizational level; and (c) the need for an Action Learning coach.”**

The process is based on the development of new insights based on “useful and discriminating questions”. It is this way that the leader develops the skills to navigate the VUCA world. The objective is to “change the way we do things around here” before we encounter the argument often heard in organisations – “this is the way we always did it and it worked”. Organisations in the 21st century fail if this behaviour is encouraged. An agile leader ensures that the company consistently reinvents itself, which is how the best organisations survive.

What do organisations expect as outcomes of GIBS’ leadership development programmes?

- **Did the programme deliver recommendations for action that add value to the organisation?**
- **Have programme delegates returned to work with new insights and ways of thinking and doing that will deliver sustainable value?**
- **Are there changes in the behaviour of delegates that generate innovative ideas to influence business performance and deliver an ROI?**

The objective is to meet these challenges with a development process that improves leaders’ agility. The goal is to build organisations that continue to learn.

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# Leadership skills developed in Action Learning processes

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What leadership and management skills are required in the VUCA world? A capacity to evaluate the volatility that comes with doing business in an emerging market, whilst also competing in a global market. Leaders need to be agile in times of uncertainty, such as sudden changes in the business environment, political shocks and unpredictable market conditions. The skills developed in the Action Learning process address these elements of the VUCA challenge.

Leonard and Lang (2010) elaborate on Action Learning as a way to develop leadership skills. They talk of a “leadership competency cluster” that includes cognitive, relationship, self-management, and execution skills. Agile leaders learn and demonstrate these skills in the Action Learning process and take this learning back to work.

These skills are at the heart of agile leadership, and are defined by Leonard and Lang (2010) below:







# Individual, team and organisational learning

How does this cycle of experiential (Action Learning), demonstrated in Figure 1, translate into individual, team and organisational learning?

## Individual learning

The focus here is on encouraging change in individuals and is reflected in how they can apply new knowledge in different contexts. Programme content is applied to the Action Learning project by individuals, which is enhanced by the insights gained in response to reflective questions and the engagement with team members.

The thinking framework or cognitive window that the individual brings into the project is expanded. Through the process, people build the capacity to think more strategically, to analyse and plan before acting, and to manage themselves in a team environment by reflecting on how they do things and how this impacts the team.

## Team learning

The project has a set of deliverables that require that the team delivers results over the course of the programme and beyond. Teams need to reflect and consistently ask, “How we are doing and how can we perform better?” Here, the Action Learning and personal development coaches play critical roles. The team stops, reflects and refines how it operates.

In looking at the dynamic of what happens in teams, it has been shown that they work well together, respect each other, collaborate, and build relationships whilst being prepared to engage in robust dialogue around the challenges they face in the project. Where these behaviours are used, team members perform better and deliver high-quality outcomes. In many cases, these teams outperform others that have many subject matter experts.

## Organisational learning

This involves the transfer of individual and team learning back into the organisation. It means that the impact of learning is demonstrated by changes to the “way we do things around here”, based on changes in behaviour influenced by the delegates’ learning journeys. Individual and team learning become the foundation for organisational learning.

The impact of the new learning can be seen in changes to the delegates’ behaviour when they return to work. Post-programme,

the individual behaviour change would be reflected in an improved ability to analyse and think strategically, and to offer creative solutions. At the same time, one would expect a greater propensity to act and deliver results. This is the dimension of individual learning impact.

In the team context, one would notice the individual working to build trust, to be adaptable, and to be able to control his or her impulses. A further dimension of behaviour change that would be observed would be an increased focus on relationships, a capacity to engage and influence, and build relationships that contribute to the delivery of results. This is the team level of learning impact.

Agile leaders develop their portfolio of knowledge and skills in Action Learning processes where there are opportunities for individual, team, and organisational learning. Their concern is to return to the company with insights and new ways of thinking and doing that will “change the way we do things around here”. This is the ultimate objective of applying learning to real and immediate business opportunities and challenges.

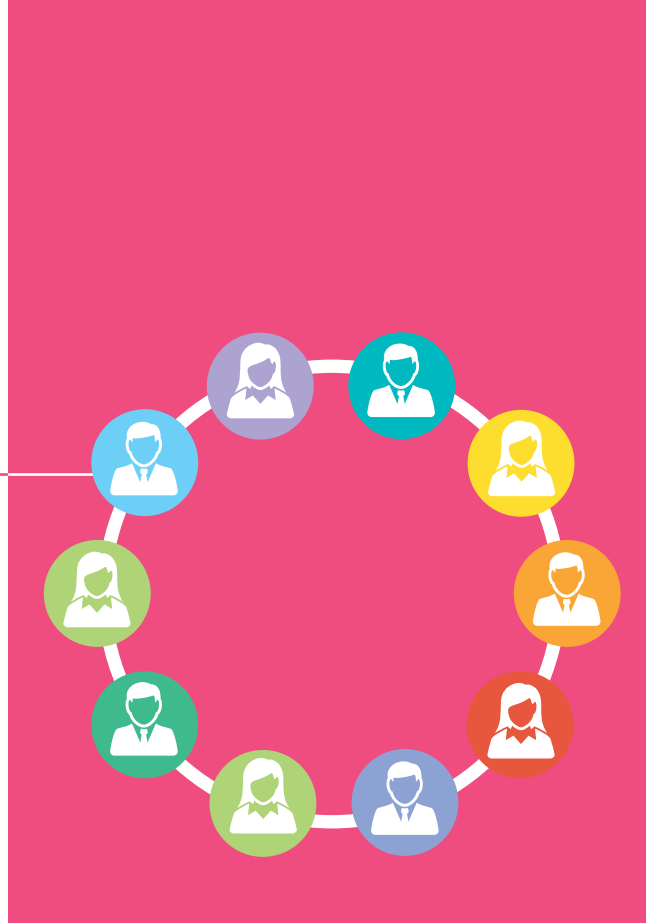
The measures of change in these two areas would be based on feedback from the delegates’ line managers. The best way to measure progress is via a structured questionnaire done before, during and after the programme. Similarly, the use of a 360-degree leadership questionnaire before the programme and repeated three to six months after the completion of the programme is a powerful mechanism that can be used to establish progress at the individual and team levels. These measures are what we call the ROLI. These are not financial measures, but rather indicate to what extent a change has happened and how we can expect greater agility in leadership practice.

The ROI is a measure of the outcomes of an Action Learning process or project based on a simple equation: cost of the programme including the opportunity cost of the time the delegates spend at GIBS and on the project, against the return in terms of value added to the business. The outcomes of the implementation of the Action Learning project should exceed the cost.

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# An example of Action Learning best practice

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Anglo American runs a leadership development programme at GIBS called the Programme for Management Excellence (PME). The PME has been running at GIBS for 10 years, with 1 500 delegates having attended. Maryanne Trollope, the learning and development manager at Anglo American, says:

“The Action Learning projects deliver enormous value to the company. The delegates are encouraged to find a project in their own areas of work. This ensures ownership and the drive to implement in their respective areas. Just looking at the implementation and value add from the implementation of Action Learning projects provides us with an impressive ROI on learning”.

This programme illustrates best practice and is presented as a short case study in the Appendix. This case study includes a description of the key elements required for the success of an Action Learning project.

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## Conclusion

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In the rapidly changing environment of business (the VUCA world), it is critical that companies adopt learning practices that build agility in their leaders. When the CEOs, executives and managers understand the need to adapt and change, organisations will increasingly become what Revans (1978/2011) describes as “the enterprise as a learning system”. This is echoed by Senge when he talks about the “learning organisation”. The application of Action Learning principles encourages leaders to continuously reflect and ask incisive questions that contribute to changes in the “way we do things around here”.

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# Appendix

## Anglo American Case Study

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The case study below reflects a process that delivers measurable results for a customised programme developed with and for Anglo American, a major GIBS client. The study illustrates the core Action Learning principles and demonstrates the power of this process in delivering improved business performance where recommendations are implemented, and progress is measured and monitored.

In initiating this approach to leadership development, the company viewed the process as one clearly aligned with its strategic goals. The executive of the company bought into what can be achieved using Action Learning. The ultimate drivers of the process are executives. The person who manages and drives leadership development in the company is highly regarded by company executives and they engage actively with her throughout the learning journey.

GIBS collaborated with Anglo American to design and develop the learning process, and the focus is on the strategic intent of the company. Agile leaders need to be aware of the strategic intent and faculty immerse themselves in the business context.

The Action Learning topics are determined in consultation with business executives. What we look for here is clarity and alignment (how does your topic align with the company's strategic intent?).

Coaching and integration are core support elements of the programme. The learning integrator is present and actively involved every step of the way. The Action Learning coach guides the team as it works on the project. The coaches are skilled at encouraging team members to ask the questions that deliver novel insights, and also encourage reflection and regular interaction with the sponsor to keep the project on track.

A personal development coach provides personal insights and feedback based on 360 and other instruments as the learning journey progresses. The focus here is on helping individual team members use what they have learnt about themselves to optimise the team's performance.

The line manager is a significant participant in the learning journey. The delegate's manager is best placed to evaluate individual behaviour change and how this influences business outcomes.

The final report and presentation provide the opportunity for the teams to demonstrate their learning and how they have applied their learning to a bona fide business challenge.

The monitoring and evaluation happen during and upon the completion of the projects. A project sponsor is a consistent sounding board throughout the Action Learning process. The project outcomes are presented in a report and final presentation to an executive panel. The members of the panel have the opportunity to ask questions and test the validity of the outcomes. At the same time, ROLI is measured from the delegates' responses to questions on the learning journey and by how new behaviours are demonstrated back at work.

Anglo American has set a standard in Action Learning at GIBS that demonstrates the value of applying learning to real business challenges and opportunities. The delegates who complete the programme are better able to deliver results in the VUCA world in every country where the company operates. They are becoming agile leaders who want to "change the way we do things around here".

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