

Action learning for Facility managers

The ideal method for sharing knowledge in FM practice.

1. Introduction.

In modern vocational education a curriculum is built on competences to be obtained. Facility managers need general managerial competences and special ones. A good, effective and efficient method for learning is *action learning*. Action learning is an ideal method for part time pathways of facility management for students working in practice.

2. Competences for facility management.

In The Netherlands facility management is a clear profession. In every larger office building, hospital or educational centre you are able to go in and ask for the facility manager or the facility management department and reception will show you where to go. Nation wide approximately 5000 students are in undergraduate pathways and about 125 students in master programs.

A large amount of research was doneⁱ to find out the most important competences for facility managers in The Netherlands and the satisfaction of alumni working in practice regarding their education on an undergraduate (bachelor) level.

The ten most important competences for Facility managers according this research are:

- To communicate convincingly
- To manage projects and processes
- To operate according plan and result driven
- To assess plans on reality and feasibility
- To translate corporate strategy
- To communicate strategic and operational plans
- To lead, motivate and stimulate
- To budget and to assess budgets
- To lead and coach
- To manage the facility service offered.

If we take a look at the BIFM competences we see the following listⁱⁱ

- Understanding business organisation (in which developing FM strategy)
- Managing people (in which communication)
- Managing premises
- Managing services
- Managing the working environment
- Managing resources (e.g. procurement)

Being non-core in organisations facility management and its tasks feels a lack of commitment of general management. Of course the facility manager is able to show general management the impact of some of its managerial decisions, but on a more operational level it is not always easy to provide evidence of the importance of the services delivered. And at the same time, Facility management processes, policies and procedures are often taken for granted as are the demands of the (internal) customer.¹

3. Learning and teaching.

Of course there are several methods available to teach and learn these competences. Long lectures could be offered and different managerial theories could be discussed. Another way of teaching is to work with strong case studies where students try to find solutions for different problems. In vocational curricula very often long practical periods are part of the pathway. In the practical periods students often use skills already trained in skill labs at school. In some pathways these skills are trained at the practical placements on the spot. But competences are more than skills. Competences are skill, applicable knowledge and attitude together. Recognition that student-learning takes place in contexts other than the lecture hall or the seminar room, requires a 'holistic' approach to the learning which starts entering the program, and even continues after graduation during the graduates career. The dissemination of 'advice' or the teaching of 'study skills' is most effective when students themselves come to understand their own learning. This 'holistic' approach to the components of student learning and support underpins the various strategies which have been developed by the project.

4. Action learning.

Action Learning is a way of educating employees in practice. Real life cases are the starting point for a structured learning process, while theory is just a tool. It was mainly developed through expertise of the School of Facility Management of Saxion Hogescholen. Students were stimulated to use real problems, to use developments in their work to facilitate the learning process and to develop quality management. Action Learning can be best described as a method that uses real problems not only to implement knowledge that has been acquired (e.g. through a training) but also to develop new knowledge by 'learning by doing'.

Each Action Learning theme consists of three phases:

1. *Vision*

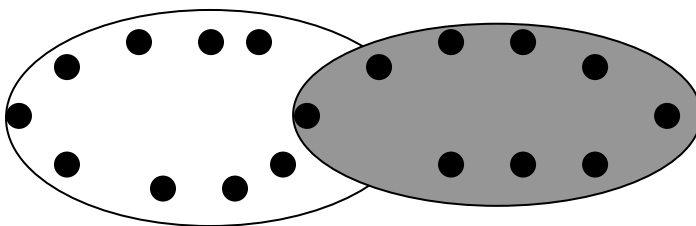
Students describe processes in their own organisation and discuss differences and problems surrounding these processes.

2. *Instruments*

Students find instruments to explain differences and problems and exchange possible solutions.

3. *Integration*

Through the exchanges of possible solutions students find new working methods to be implemented in their organisations.



The student is part of the white set with peer students and part of the grey set within his own organisation with peer colleagues.

Each theme starts with a complex and real problem without a direct and unique solution. Students then research this problem within their own organisation and discuss the results with other students in a group. This group is called a 'set', used to enhance learning of individual students by fellow students' questioning work and thus improving it, and also by learning to ask good questions. Possible solutions are developed from this process of inquiry and questioning.

However, it is however important to stress that this process does not only take place in a 'set' but also in the organisation.

The research of this complex and real problem demands an active role of colleagues in the company. It automatically involved them in the Action Learning process. The role of teaching staff in providing help for set members is essentially and crucially different from that of the traditional teacher. Their role is not to teach (whether through lecture, case or simulation), but to assist students to learn from exposure to problems and to each other. This method is ideally suited to the subject of quality and of implementing quality as it involves the whole company and deals with day-to-day problems. Action Learning could even be part of a quality system within an organisation.

Van Looy ² describes studying case studies within a group as a good way for developing competences, but case studies remain studies and the real practise is still out there in the real world. Action Learning attempts to overcome this by combining formal training with practical experience. Action Learning is an increasingly common method for middle and upper management development which combines on- and off the job learning in innovative ways. Most crucial to managerial success is the ability to seek out and use knowledge to solve real problems in innovative ways and action learning is enhancing these necessary insights. Action Learning programmes usually feature some classroom instruction along with an applied project(s) tackled by a team of trainees. As these projects actually take place, they are richer in terms of real-life context and complexity. On the other hand, as these projects are often limited in time and resources, they tend to not be as rich in terms of content as case studies. At Saxion Hogescholen we try to enrich action learning by making a good theme book in which steps are described to solve the problem or to widen the bottle neck.

Each participant has his own project derived from his own organisation. During the Action Learning project the participants, coming from the different organisations, share their knowledge and experiences in discussion groups; the so-called subset meetings. Subsequently, the discussion group prepares the agenda for a dialog with a panel of experts, the set meetings.

With the help of Action Learning we developed a curriculum, which is equally accessible and equally applicable to students and lecturers. To be explicit, it is proposed that students and lecturers learn in the same way.

What it does:

- Action Learning works two ways. It develops the competences of the individual employee and it develops the organisation at the same time.
- Action Learning enhances networking. The dialog with peers and experts is a main goal of the programme.
- Action Learning contributes to Competence Management. The newly obtained skills are continuously assessed during each Action Learning project.
- Action Learning enhances creativity and conceptual thinking. Students are expected to develop new ideas within their organisation by using a wide variety of tools.

Action Learning contributes to educate Facility Managers in practice at low costs. Facility Management is a multidisciplinary field and moreover it is manifested in the different organisations in very distinctive ways. The Facility Manager him/herself has to develop relevant knowledge. So, Action Learning is the ideal way to exchange experiences, ideas and developments.

5. The way of working:

The first step was of course to look at the competences and to describe the competences in sub competences which are divided over the different modules.

The curriculum is divided in six large modules. Each module is an Action Learning module. Only at the start of the curriculum some standard lectures and some specific communication training are delivered. In the intake procedure the Action Learning concept and the requirements for the concept are discussed with new students. Most students are not acquainted with Action learning and therefore some (old fashioned) lectures are delivered to smoothen the new experience. For every Action Learning theme a conceptual model has been developed. According to the Vision Instrument and Integration Model steps are described by which the student could solve the chosen problem or bottleneck.

The steps are described in such a general way that they are applicable in every student's organisation.

In line of the curriculum the Action learning issues will become more complex, more strategic, more entrepreneurial and have a higher degree of risk.

Every theme has a clear matrix for assessment in general management and peer-assessment is an essential part of Action Learning.

Students have a set and subset meeting every Tuesday evening (18-20 evenings per semester) and two whole days per semester.

Living and working in the neighbourhood of the university, part time students do not encounter commuting problems when attending (sub)sets at the university.

Most students discuss beforehand with their organisation the project to be managed in Action learning so the outcome of the Action Learning can be presented to the management and will be implemented in most cases.

After the successful implementation of Action Learning within the part time pathway the university introduced Action Learning for the full time students being in practical placements. For this group (scattered around the world) it was of course necessary to introduce e-learning in set and subset. The university did so by introducing theme books by Lotus Learning Space. In this electronic environment students and lecturers are able to perform set and subsets based in a forum setting. In the program students and staff members are organised in teams around more or less comparable projects. Even chatting is possible though forbidden by most companies and not used in practice.

One staff member has a half-day task to organise the learning space environment.

In this e-learning environment exchange of knowledge is easy to perform at low cost.

6. Frequently asked questions.

What are the difference between Action learning and a project study?

Of course in Action you will work on a project in structured way. But AL is more. In AL problem a solution is not direct to find and set members asking the right questions do the problem solving.

In what situations you can apply Action Learning.

Action learning is a tested and effective way for problem solving in practical situations in which many uncertainties are. It is a method to aggregate the learning of staff members so they will be able to manage complex situations and change

Does an Action Learning team need a process manager?

A good process manager gives Action Learning something extra. He or she is able to lead the team members through the process. He or she encourages the members to find new learning experiences, to act and to reflect.

The process manager will manage the quality and the structure of the AL program

7. Model for development of an AL curriculum in FM.

1. Research the competences needed.
2. Make sub competences and rewrite them at different levels (higher risk, more complex, more strategic)
3. Make a decision what can be delivered in AL and what not. Do think in competences not in learning outcomes)
4. Assign subjects to the different semesters and assign the competences. Do not forget to increase complexity in time.
5. Make a model for the role of Facility Management in organisations or make a model for aspects of FM per semester.
6. Develop theme books as guidelines for problem solving per Action Learning module.
7. Evaluate the program.

8. The results.

In the eighties, the university offered a part time pathway in the same way as the full time. Lectures were delivered on three weekly evenings during a 20-weeks semester. These lectures offered a curtailed full time programme. Everyone was disappointed. Lectures were only able to offer half the programme and most students found the programme not very realistic. After 5 years only 25 % of the student enrolled in the programme were able to get a diploma. Nowadays, the university has a graduate passing rate of 65% after 3,5 year in the part time pathway.

Furthermore, almost all students make a career within their own organisation after the fourth semester "procurement" in which they are able to show their managerial quality to their organisations in its utmost.

Previous year, the pathway was accredited by an independent quality consultancy with zero faults.

Aktuelle Literaturhinweise und Internetquellen finden Sie unter www.lehridee.de - Tipps und Hinweise - Literatur bzw. Links

ⁱ Corpeleijn ,Schreurs "Facility managers in Nederland ISBN 90-808496-1-8 Heerlen; 2004

ⁱⁱ BIFM competences registration number 2750720 1999

¹ Peter Ruepert Margot Steinell, Further education in Quality management in FM; FH Anhalt 1999

² Van Looy among others: Services management isbn 0273 67 353 Pearson Harlow 2000