To support the development of talented employees showing the potential to become partners or senior leaders of the firm.

Selected employees took part in a formal Accelerated Leadership Programme. It included action learning as a mandatory structured element of a process that included other optional modules, to embed newly acquired leadership and business skills through experiential learning.

The programme was designed to drive engagement and increase diversity, flexibility and the power of their internal leadership pipeline, as a core element of Ernst & Young’s market leadership strategy. Overall, the firm was looking to enhance its capabilities and competitiveness in the marketplace.

We put in place a programme of action learning sets to support the learning process of the Accelerated Leadership Programme. This programme was run on a large scale covering the whole of the UK and Ireland.

The work involved attending the initial onboarding conference and demonstrating action learning to a large group of seventy to eighty people using what's known as the ‘fishbowl technique’.

We went on to conduct eight action learning sessions, two months apart, with up to nine participants per set. Overall, we worked with over seventy people on the programme each year, and were involved in the programme over 8 years in total. In addition, we ran two smaller supplementary programmes.

Participants were required to set themselves leadership challenges for the duration of the programme and to share these objectives. They were taken from across the business functions and represented Mergers & Acquisitions, Risk Assurance, Business Tax, International Tax, Advisory, Consultancy, Valuation, Project Finance, Restructuring and Audit.

It was agreed, and made clear, that the objectives for the work were to provide:

- a structured opportunity to reflect and share their learning as they progressed through the programme
- support and challenge from peers during their development
● the experience of a powerful process that increases listening, questioning, mentoring and engagement skills
● a safe space for honest feedback from the facilitator and peers
● time for practical application of learning in problem solving, planning and idea generation.
● An opportunity to hone skills critical for coaching and enabling others

At the beginning of each set, participants were required to report back to the group on the actions they had taken as a result of the decisions they made at their previous meeting. This was an important part of the process, ensuring they took responsibility for actions and applied their learning when back in the workplace.

RESULTS

New leadership skills resulted in an overall improvement in performance and better team cohesion across the globe.

Delivering action learning and development work to such able and talented people can provide a challenge. We were pleased to hear these experts in their professional field report that their client management skills developed as result of the listening and open questioning practice. Progress was tracked using an evaluation process to gain feedback from participants.
How did the organisation benefit?

By using action learning to support and augment the learning taking place during the Accelerated Leadership Programme, the initiative helped to create:

- An internal pipeline of future leaders
- Greater ownership and engagement of people with the highest potential to lead
- A commercially focused group of future leaders
- “A real return on investment”

“I found action learning really useful - not only personally building on my listening, interpreting, team building skills but also in what I have gained from the actions with the ALS and learning different skills that I can take to the business.”

Christine Molden, Resource Co-ordinator

Which of our strengths did we draw upon for this programme?

- We were able to tailor a series of action learning sets to specifically enhance the learning of the accelerated leadership programme
- We planned and managed the programme to maintain continuity of delivery over a period of years
- We were uniquely placed as a deliverer of action learning, with a large team of facilitators who had experience in the consultancy world and could recognise the challenges presented in this programme

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