Action Learning and development at The Body Shop

**CASE STUDY**  
**Company:** The Body Shop  
**Sector:** Retail

**CHALLENGE**  
To support The Body Shop in developing two successful leadership development programmes.

The Body Shop used action learning as part of The People Management Essentials (PME) and Improving People Management (IPM) programmes. A key consideration was the fast paced and competitive retail environment in which all participants worked. They were used to reacting quickly to market pressures and consumer behaviour. Taking time out for considered thought and reflection was an unusual concept.

Participants were challenged to develop their leadership skills and become more aware of their own management style and how this might impact on the people that they managed and ultimately, how it might affect the business as a whole.

**METHODOLOGY**  
Participants took part in action learning sets of 6 participants per set. The majority were working with others whose areas of work they did not know, although they had met each other as part of the wider Body Shop people development programme.

The action learning sets began by setting objectives for the programme, specifically what would help them develop as better leaders:

- To improve ability to take on real life challenges  
- To develop active listening skills  
- To develop questioning skills  
- To develop self awareness

The participants were asked to rate themselves against the above objectives at the beginning and the end of the programme, so that progress could be tracked.

They were also asked to note any personal objectives they would like to achieve for themselves, goals that were specific to their own development.

Some examples of these were:

- Greater confidence and peace with my current role  
- Better appreciation of my leadership strengths and weaknesses and tactics to address them  
- Be more assertive  
- Be clearer at delegating work
- Have more confidence in tackling difficult situations
- To adopt more open questioning style with my team on day to day basis
- To develop more empathy

As set work progressed, our action learning facilitator noted how many of the participants ‘presented’ on real life issues that were about exploring the challenge of working with their teams, and took on an external focus with a desire to change others’ behaviour. The facilitator was able to identify this trait, highlight it to the group and bring about a shift in approach.

The nature of the action learning process is to pause and reflect on one’s own behaviour and assumptions about a given problem. Our facilitator encouraged the cohort to look at how a change in themselves could bring about a different outcome.

Whilst this shift in thinking was challenging and hard work, the emergent learning was owned by the participants, who developed a clearer understanding of the value of reviewing situations from a number of different perspectives.

RESULTS

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

At the end of the programme, participants were asked to identify how they had benefitted as individuals, and how they saw that the organisation would benefit too. Their responses fell into four main themes:

- Improved people management skills
- Understanding of the value of the coaching approach to being an effective leader
- Improved organisational awareness
- Greater confidence and resilience
- Progress against objectives

Participants reviewed progress against objectives using a six-point scale where six was ‘Completely’ and one ‘Not at all’.

Without exception, the participants scored themselves more highly at the end of the programme, than they had at the beginning, and they felt they had met their objectives either to some extent, to a great extent or completely.

Feedback from The Body Shop participants:

- Improved organisational awareness
- Improved people management skills
- Understanding of the value of a coaching approach
- Improved confidence and resilience
- Progress against objectives
Personal objectives

91% of participants reported that they had made progress on their individual objectives either to a great extent (61%) or to some extent (30%).

“I really enjoyed being part of the group. Having the opportunity to talk openly about situations. I hope The Body Shop continues to do this or similar type of training with the managers in the future!”

To what extent have you met your personal objectives?

- 60% to some extent
- 20% to a great extent
- 20% completely

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

- Ability to successfully create a learning environment that was slower paced, using a reflective learning and development initiative for participants who were more used to a fast moving leadership style
- Take a more objective view of participants’ work challenges and express the value and importance of taking time to explore problems and think more openly about possible solutions
- Recognise that there was a culture of looking externally to others for solutions and offer an alternative perspective to problem solving by using reflection as a learning tool, focusing on personal development rather than trying to change others

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