

Business Driven Action Learning (BDAL)

Yury Boshyk, Chairman, The Global Executive Learning Network

*Published as an article in **Experience-Driven Leader Development: Models, Tools, Best Practices, and Advice for On-the-Job Development**, edited by Cynthia D. McCauley, D. Scott DeRue, Paul R. Yost, and Sylvester Taylor. San Francisco: Wiley, and the Center for Creative Leadership, 2014, pp. 413-421.*

Business Driven Action Learning (BDAL) is an approach used by companies and organizations to engage their people in exploring and resolving critical challenges and opportunities, while at the same time enhancing their leadership development and self-awareness. It integrates aspects of the project-based action learning that appeared on the organizational development scene in the late 1980s, with traditional action learning as developed in the United Kingdom by Reg Revans and others a few decades earlier.

Action learning relies on "sets" (groups) of no more than six individuals working on business problems and leadership dilemmas. It is also grounded in principles that stress mutual help and collaboration, empowerment, appreciative and "questioning" inquiry, learning and reflection, at a pace faster than or equal to the rate of change, and teams or task forces tackle "real" business challenges facing an organization. Figure X.1 illustrates the key elements of Business Driven Action Learning.

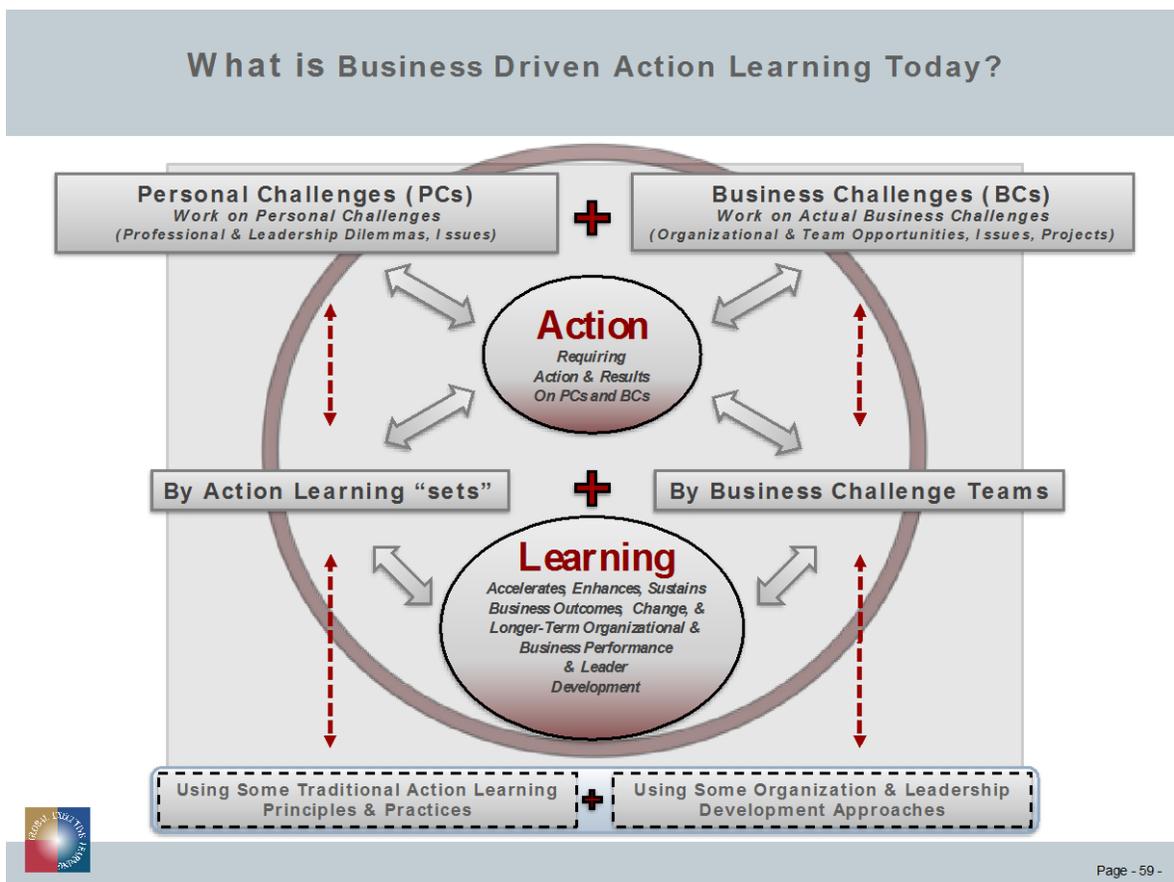


Figure X.1. What is Business Driven Action Learning?

BDAL started life primarily in global companies in the early-1990s, and over the years many organizations have incorporated the method in their management and executive programs. BDAL can be used to create experience-based learning systems for all enterprises: small, medium and large organizations. Action learning interventions don't have to be limited to leaders. They can also involve a company's stakeholders as for example, customers, suppliers, government officials and civic society NGO's. Some aspects of the BDAL method are used in public service education as well. While most BDAL is in the form of management and executive programs, BDAL can also be initiated in almost any context where work takes place. The crucial element with BDAL is the equally important focus on explicit organizational, team and individual learning.

There are several **objectives** and **component parts** to a BDAL approach and program. In order for BDAL to be successfully optimized, all of these components should be included and well aligned. Seven components have emerged as particularly important in building effective BDAL programs (see Figure X. 2).

1. Top Executive Ownership: Sponsorship, support and active engagement.
2. Information Capture and Knowledge Sharing: Using technology, such as web sites and collaborative tools effectively to cascade learning
3. Company-wide Sharing and Collaboration with Business Challenge Stakeholders: Engaging those who know, who care and can do something about the Business Challenges.
4. Individual Development-- Personal and peer coaching and sharing, personal development plans, reflection: Assisting and encouraging individuals to gain greater self-awareness that leads to behavioral change through the use of coaches, psychometric, 360s and learning tools.
5. Teamwork on Business Challenges and Action Learning "sets" on Personal Challenges: Self-managed sub-teams addressing the Business Challenge and small groups or teams helping clarify thinking and action on Personal Challenges.
6. "Outside-In" Dialogs and External Discussions: Involves stakeholders, thought leaders, customers and others about the Business Challenge and other issues relating to the external environment of the organization, and discussions with external peers on leadership and personal business challenges.
7. Recommendations on Business Challenges and Follow-up. Organizational implementation and evaluation and further Personal Leadership Development: What will be done by top executives with the recommendations and what further commitments and actions will be undertaken for leadership development

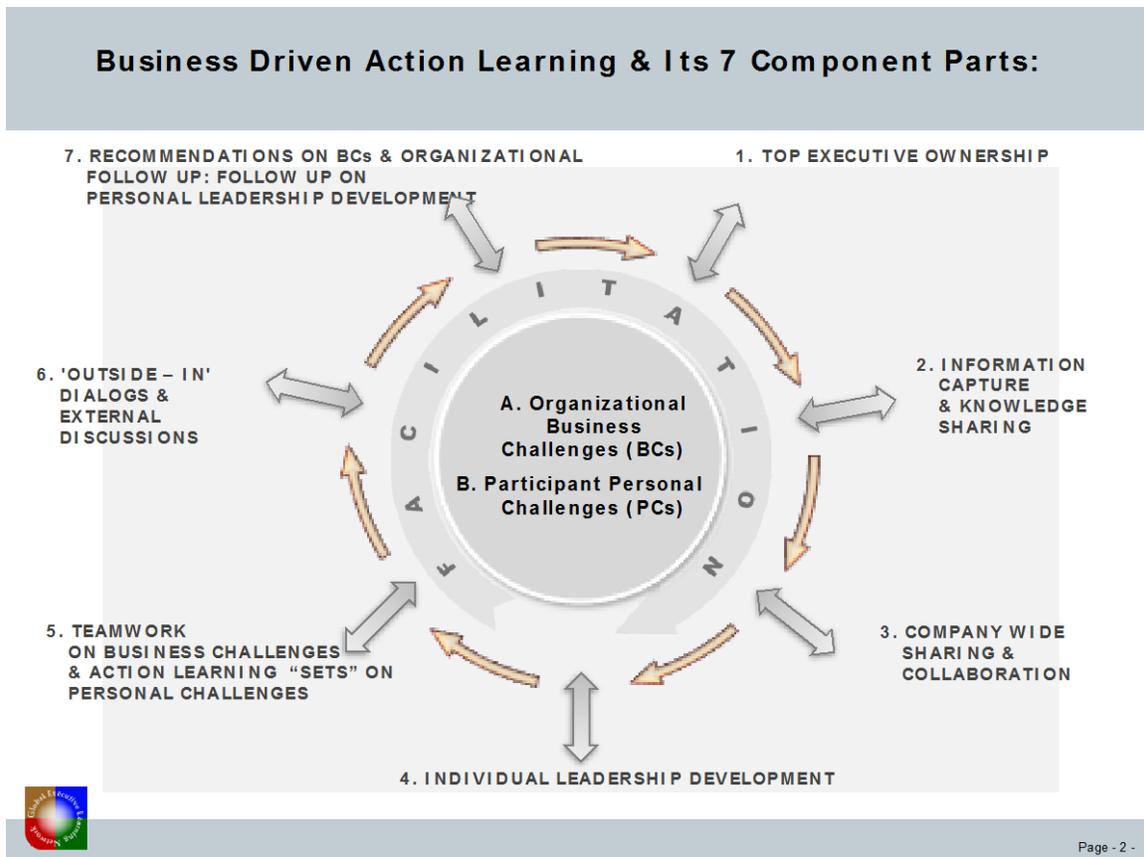


Figure X.2. BDAL: The Seven Key Components

Crafting the Business Challenge

At the heart of BDAL is a **Business Challenge** (or opportunity) for the organization. Business Challenges are issues that are without a clear and obvious solution. The top leadership of the company is responsible for providing Business Challenges for the BDAL program and to participants. These are almost always in the form of dilemmas that demand clarification, exploration, analysis, a decision, and ask for recommendations on a way forward. Business Challenges are usually strategic in nature and bold in scope because they tend to be the nature of issues at the senior executive or board of directors level.

Here are some examples of a few BC's over the years:

- What are some exceptional growth-related opportunities in "emerging" markets?
- How can we accelerate growth in "mature" markets?
- What are some key future trends and how do we "get to the future first"?
- How do we stimulate innovation?
- What are some critical elements that we need to consider for our strategic and sustainable growth?
- Create a \$1 billion service/solutions-based business for the company.
- If a low market share competitor broke all the rules (destroyyourcompany.com) how would he compete?

Each Business Challenge is accompanied by a detailed background document (a "Business Challenge Statement") that outlines the reasons why this is an important issue for the company and contains a detailed listing of "deliverables"--what is expected from participants tackling the Business Challenge(s) in the management or executive program. Internal and external subject matter specialists provide background on the Business Challenge, but this is a lesser component of a BDAL program. More

importantly, participants are encouraged by the senior team to ask fresh questions about the Business Challenge in order to stimulate innovative recommendations. In some companies no participant is allowed on such a program if they have "expert" knowledge about the Business Challenge in order to ensure a completely fresh look at the BC.

Identifying Personal Challenges

The other major objective of BDAL is to help individuals better understand themselves and do something about their **Personal** leadership and business **Challenges (PCs)**--the other major component part at the core of BDAL. These are issues that are daily dilemmas, problems or seemingly unresolvable matters especially around leadership and management situations such as leading without authority, doing more with less, motivating one's subordinates and fellow team members in difficult times to perform better, or engaging with their clients and their work.

Personal Challenge discussions are addressed in Action Learning "sets" --small teams of leaders who coach each other-- using a systematic and inclusive process developed by Revans and by others over the years. Through a structured yet largely self-facilitated process using open-ended questions, sets help clarify issues for the individual leaders, and through mutual cooperation assist them throughout the process associated with individual behavioral change. Facilitation is carried out throughout a BDAL program and in the Action Learning "sets", but only when requested by participants and only as required to initiate the process.

Action Learning "sets" meet regularly throughout the program to discuss their Personal Challenges. Figure X.3 describes the process that leaders use to share their Personal Challenges within their "sets."

The Essentials of Being a Set Member: What is Involved with the PC's?

- Describe your personal leadership and/or leadership challenge (PC) through a narrative account
- Each presenter gets equal time (from 30-60 minutes)
- Others in the set (usually no more than six) ask **open-ended** questions
- Decide on action points to take forward and commit to, and share this with the group
- Report on ensuing events at a subsequent meeting of the group



Figure X.3 Sharing Personal Challenges with Set Members

Connected to work on the Business Challenge and Personal Challenge is a very critical component of the BDAL method-- the “**Outside-Ins**” or dialogues with all external stakeholders relating to the BC and PCs. “Outside-In” interviews can be with clients, suppliers, thought-leaders, government and regulatory officials, even competitors. BDAL participants are encouraged to interview these people by asking open-ended questions and not to prepare questions or checklists that are designed to confirm or refute their opinions.

Working in small teams of two to three people, each team takes the time and makes the effort to learn as much as possible about the leader and their business. This is not tourism but a serious and thorough process of capturing, analyzing and sharing new perspectives from the “outside” as can be seen in Figure X.4.

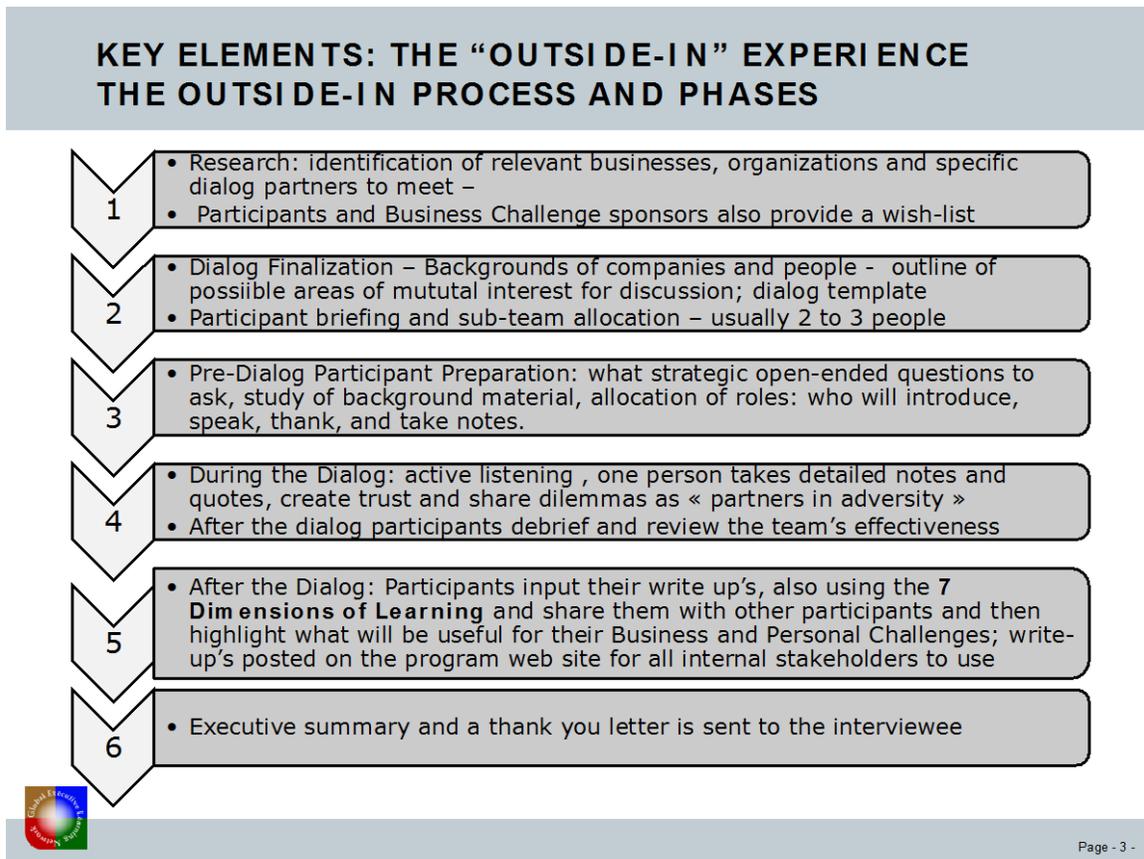
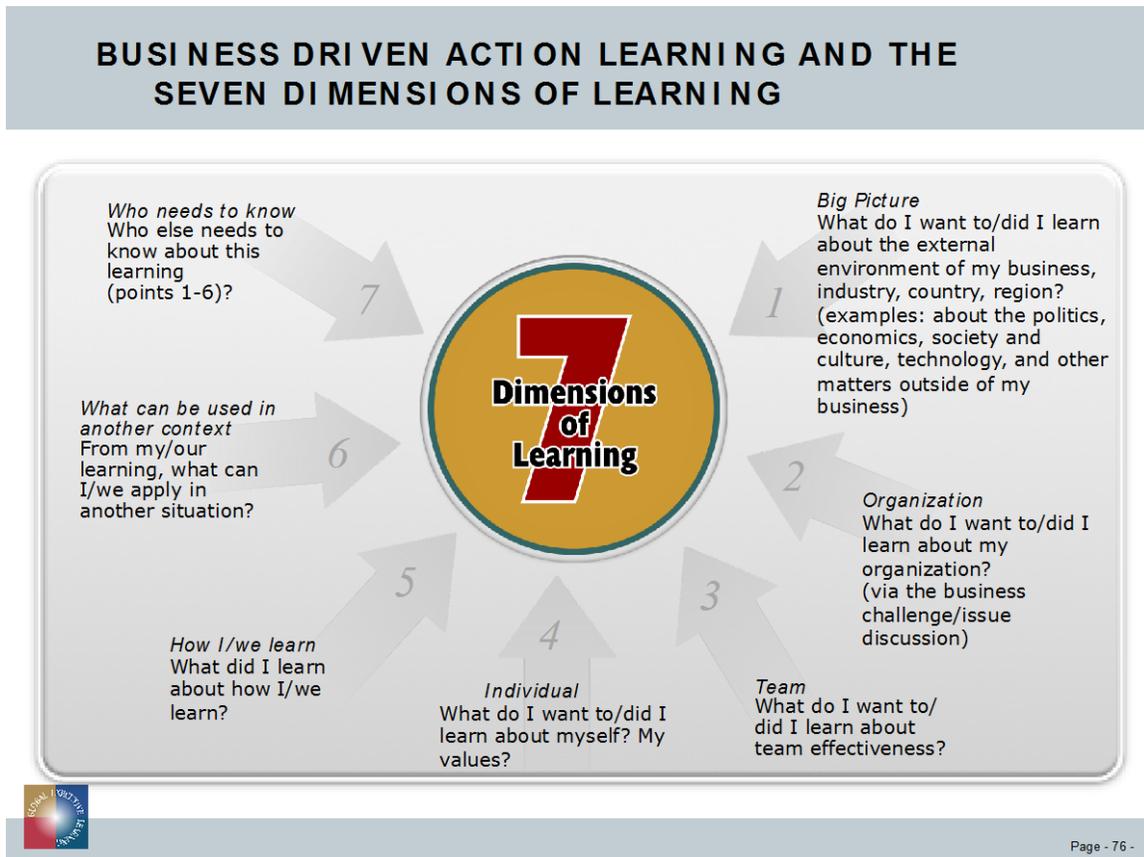


Figure X.4 Preparation and Implementation of the “Outside-In” Conversations.

Each meeting is written up thoroughly and then shared with other members of the larger team of participants. Each write-up also has a section on their learning from the experience, using what is referred to as "The Seven Dimensions of Learning" (See Figure X.5).



The preparation of these meetings involves a major effort in order to ensure proper alignment and relevance for participants, and the company, and for the external dialog partners. This element of BDAL works best when there is good collaboration and alignment between executive sponsors, participants, internal subject-matter experts, and external specialist organizers well before and after a program.

Eventually, this completed write up finds its way to the program web site for even more sharing within the entire company after the program. It becomes the repository and the center of information, knowledge, and collaboration before, during and after a management or executive program. Naturally, the learning from dealing with Business Challenges and Personal Challenges remains on the web site for both private and general use and for post-program alumni networking.

Some Things That Could Go Wrong

When companies report a less than successful result on the Business Challenge(s) they usually mention the following:

- Lack of clarity by senior executives, and lack of alignment with participants on the Business Challenge and the expected “deliverables” by both executives and participants
- Participants who were not appropriate for the Business Challenge: usually too junior, inexperienced, or chosen for the wrong reason (on occasion, as a reward for their previous performance or length of service), and were not able to understand the Business Challenge and lacked the business acumen needed to solve the problem or challenge
- Dysfunctional teams working on the Business Challenge that were not able to agree and to work together;
- Some teams lacked the courage to say what they really thought about the Business Challenge and hence their recommendations lacked depth and clarity; their presentation was less than committed and hence unpersuasive.

BDAL Success Factors and Lessons Learned

Successful BDAL interventions share several common characteristics. Some of the most important ones are listed below.

- *The “right” organizational culture is required for BDAL:* In closed, very controlling cultures, it is difficult to design and implement BDAL “correctly”, let alone in a manner optimizing and integrating all the "Seven Component Parts". Senior leaders who act as sponsors of BDAL programs must trust their people and trust the process.
- *The active support and participation of top executives is essential:* Always keep in mind that it is their program and their Business Challenges that are being addressed. In turn, they must appreciate that BDAL is more than just a task force: it integrates both Business Challenges and Personal Challenges, and that they must be actively engaged on several fronts: In the selection of Business Challenges or opportunities that are really strategic with clear deliverables and follow up, participation in the selection of participants that helps set the right business focus, and engagement in the program ("leaders teaching leaders") or in a BDAL learning intervention.
- *The best senior executive sponsors are those who understand that there can be no action without learning, and no learning without action;* That is, the ideal sponsor should ensure and allow that there be a balance between action and learning in a BDAL program and not just a focus on business results.
- *The Program Manager/Director is very important:* someone who is well connected to the top leadership and is seen as a business partner. This helps in aligning roles and processes, as well as content, in a way that is constructively challenging.
- *Company-wide support is needed:* mobilizing those who know, care and can do something about resolving the Business Challenge, thus engaging internal “stakeholders”.
- *The involvement of key stakeholders outside the company can help with clarifying and resolving the Business Challenge.* This can include customers, suppliers, "best practice" companies, subject matter specialists, thought leaders, government representatives and others.
- *Information capture and knowledge sharing can be magnified through a collaborative web site.* The website leverages the processes and expands the learning to other parts of company.
- *BDAL is more than just a program:* The Follow Up component of the program should be seen as just as important as the program or event. This includes Follow Up on Business Challenge recommendations by senior executive BDAL sponsors, on the "outside-ins", Personal Challenge development, and action and learning commitments by participants, and the details of "how" and "when" should be considered seriously well in advance. Unfortunately, many organizations do not spend much time, nor do they devote enough resources to this aspect of BDAL. Those

organizations that do spend the time and resources on the Follow-up find that there is an easy transition to an appreciation that BDAL can be used in “on the job” contexts, with intact business teams, in helping boards make decisions on such things as strategy and investment decisions.

- In general, *the journey from initial discussion or exploration of the idea to implementation takes approximately two years for BDAL programs*. And actual preparation for an organization's first BDAL program takes about six months.
- *Failure can also be a powerful learning experience*. A “failed” BDAL program with mediocre recommendations on the Business Challenge often results in great learning; but a company and its leadership must be prepared to tolerate perceived shortcomings. They need to use the opportunity to develop leaders and develop themselves.
- *The results from work on the Business Challenges in these programs are usually positive*. For many companies, there is no need for a Return on Investment (ROI) analysis of a BDAL program because the results are so obvious. In the opinion of one very successful practitioner in Asia: “If there is a request for an ROI on a BDAL program, either there is lack of trust in the process or the people involved.”

Sources and Further Reading:

Yury Boshyk (2000), ed. *Business Driven Action Learning: Global Best Practices*. New York-London: Macmillan Business.

Yury Boshyk (2012), “What is Business Driven Action Learning Today?”, in Mike Pedler, ed., *Action Learning in Practice*, 4th ed. Aldershot, U.K.: Gower, pp. 141-152.

See also link to videotaped MIT presentation on Action Learning by Yury Boshyk:

<http://video.mit.edu/watch/2012-mit-sloan-action-learning-presentation-by-yury-boshyk-12301/>

Or go to the Resources section at:

www.globalforum-actionlearning.com