

Conference Design Using Action Learning

Action learning is an approach that was developed to help people deal effectively with complexity, change and uncertainty. It uses the task of solving problems as a way to learn from action while working with a diverse group of people to solve real problems in real time. Action learning can be used as a very effective structure for conference design because it quickly engages a diverse group of people in solving a real life problem and at the same time exposes them to a new way of working and thinking about problem solving.

The following case study illustrates how action learning was used for conference design in an oil and gas company in order to bring together a diverse group of people who all had a common interest in integrity management for the company's assets. The conferences were used to introduce new concepts and ways of working to the group in order to improve the effectiveness of the integrity management effort and action learning was integral to both introducing and sustaining these new ways of working together.

Case Study: Corrosion & Integrity Management Conference

Background

Due to the combined effects of an ageing infrastructure and declining oil production, the corrosion and integrity management (CIM) team at a major oil company in Western Canada was experiencing increasing demands on their time and the resources within their team but had also seen the resource level of the team cut by 50% with no plans for replacement. In order to deal with these increasing pressures it became apparent that a new way of working and interacting with their internal customers was required.

The CIM team was responsible for providing technical support and program management as well as on-site support for oil and gas fields in Alberta, Manitoba and the northern BC. The team consisted of two engineers, a technical assistant and between 2 – 4 engineering students (depending on the time of year). The team was supported by an operator in each field location who took on additional responsibility for management of the integrity management programs for the field.

The CIM team decided that in order to handle the additional demands on their time they would have to engage the operators in the field locations to take on a higher level of responsibility for the programs. Because this responsibility was over and above the operators' normal role, it was important that the field operators found the additional work required interesting and challenging and considered it part of their career development. The team also recognized the need to provide the operators with an increased level of technical training and some diagnostic tools to help them to recognize problems and use the CIM team technical resource effectively to solve them. The team also wanted to encourage a greater degree of communication between the field locations so that experience and learnings were shared directly between the operators.

To this end, the team decided to organize an annual conference involving the operators, their management and other technical support people both within the

company and from outside suppliers. They used action learning as the basis for the conference because they felt it would ensure a high level of participation and interaction between the conference attendees and because it was important that people felt their time at the conference was productive so everyone was asked to bring real problems to solve within the action learning context.

Purpose of the conference

The CIM team had several specific things they wanted to achieve through the conference:

1. Introduce operators from different fields and engage them in problem solving as well as social activities so they develop relationships and communicate common issues after the conference finished
2. Introduce new ways of working with the CIM team, specifically a action learning oriented manual for dealing with corrosion and integrity problems at the field level and illustrate the effectiveness of the new manual to encourage it's use in the field.
3. Provide some technical development for the operators involved in CIM team activities and support
4. Solve real problems
5. Have fun!

They felt that an action learning structure would be able to achieve of the above desired outcomes.

People Involved

The conference attendees ranged from field operators to engineers to chemical supply company field representatives to field foreman and head office management. Such a diverse group of people and perspectives also made action learning an ideal conference design tool because the structure of the conference allowed all these different people to interact as equals and solve problems together within the action learning framework.

Conference Structure

The conference was 3 days in total but was flexible in that some people were only able to attend for part of the time due to other commitments. On the first day of the conference MHA consultants presented an introduction to the action learning process to the groups and gave them an opportunity to practice and ask questions about the process. The CIM team structured the groups ahead of time to provide an appropriate mix of people and experience and make sure that people would be exposed to new people and problems.

The remainder of the conference agenda was structured around technical focus topics and for each topic there was a series of short technical talks by experts to introduce ideas around the topic and then presentations of real field problems by field operators. This section took approximately one hour for each topic. This was followed by an action learning session in groups of 6 – 8 people where the group solved a real problem belonging to one of the group members related to the technical topic. Each action learning session took 1.5 – 2 hours including a debrief where each group presented their findings back to the larger group. The number of

people at the conference ranged from 40 – 70 people at any time so there were typically about 8 groups. Each group also had an engineering student to act as minute-taker and facilitator as required. The CIM team and MHA consultants were able to circulate amongst the groups in order to provide assistance where required. As new people joined the groups the group would take on responsibility for introducing them to the process and structure of the conference.

Results

The response to the conference was overwhelmingly positive. Participation and enthusiasm for CIM team activities increased dramatically. Management saw the conference as positive because the attendees were seen to be solving real problems and taking solutions back to the field with them. The conference became an annual event until the company sold its assets in 2004 with high attendance every year.

What we learned, what worked well, what we think about action learning

There were several things the team learned that were fed back into subsequent conferences and activities:

1. The different groups all worked at different paces and some groups were not able to finish their action learning cycle in the allotted time. It was important to encourage the process rather than the result and not necessarily expect all groups to finish or impose a schedule.
2. The first action learning cycles took the longest as the groups got used to the process and got to know each other. Keeping the groups consistent over the entire conference worked best as they were able to develop relationships with the other group members.
3. Encouraging people to think about specific problems before the conference helped the conference run more smoothly. Providing a framework for people to do this with conference registration helped this happen effectively.
4. The action learning sessions can be quite mentally challenging so making sure to mix in some fun activities and lots of breaks into the schedule was important.
5. Ensuring people took something positive away from the conference by having an overall debrief at the end of the conference was important
6. Ensure continued communication with the other group members was possible beyond the end of the conference.

Overall, action learning provided an ideal structure for the CIM conferences because the structure addressed all of the desired results and most importantly encouraged the interaction and the learning processes which were most important to the long term needs of the team. It was very effective in delivering a high level of participation and encouraging new ways of thinking and interacting within the context of corrosion and integrity management. The conferences succeeded in introducing and sustaining new ways of working and forging new relationships between people who shared common challenges in their work.