More About Action Learning at MIT Sloan

Theoretical Foundations

Action Learning theory began to emerge in the first half of the twentieth century, when it was used primarily as an executive training method in corporations. [1] More recently, this learning methodology migrated from the corporate workplace into the academic environment of higher education, where the key concepts of leadership and organizational development through team-based learning have become the norm.

The roots of this pedagogical approach at MIT Sloan can be traced to the 1960s, when Professor Ed Roberts created an elective course called "Applications and Implementation of Industrial Dynamics." In this class, student teams worked with local companies building System Dynamics models for senior managers.

More recently, Action Learning at MIT Sloan emerged in the early 1990s, when the Entrepreneurship Lab (E-Lab) course was first offered in cooperation with the Trust Center for MIT Entrepreneurship. The course provided teams of students in management, science, and engineering to engage in active on-site experiences helping to manage high-tech startups in the Boston area. E-Lab paved the way for the launch in 2000 of the Global Entrepreneurship Lab (G-Lab), an innovative course that fundamentally changed the learning landscape at MIT Sloan. G-Lab became MIT Sloan's flagship Action Learning course and has served as a model for establishing several similar classes.

Action Learning Today at MIT Sloan

Action-based learning opportunities are found throughout MIT Sloan's degree programs. Students working on their projects at MIT and on-site get a rare first-hand look at new corporate structures, new business ideas, and a wide array of operational challenges facing organizations around the world, including well-established companies, entrepreneurial ventures, NGOs, and nonprofits. The varied settings challenge students to manage projects in multilingual, multicultural settings with a range of management and business development approaches.

[1] Read more at the International Foundation for Action Learning website.

While project activities vary, they are united by common themes, including experiential, reflective, and peer learning; faculty mentoring; real-world problem solving; knowledge transfer; and, perhaps unique to MIT Sloan, a student team engagement intended to have a measurable business and/or social impact. These real-time management challenges bring theory to life.

Act
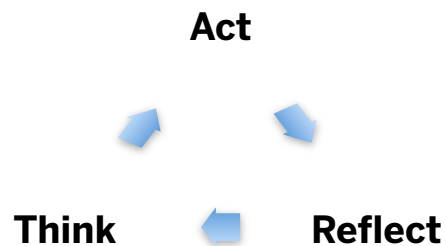
Think   **Reflect**

Adapted from "The Learning Cycle" by David A Kolb in "Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development," 1984, Prentice-Hall

Think/Act/Reflect: The MIT Sloan Distinction

MIT Sloan's Action Learning model, which is based on an ongoing, iterative process of thinking, acting, and reflecting, is the foundation of our students' Action Learning Lab experiences. The Labs provide multiple opportunities for students to reflect on their entire learning experience, combining their professional work experiences and accrued knowledge prior to MIT Sloan with their work in both the classroom and on-site with their host organizations. The students are asked to reflect on these experiences throughout the process, enabling them to better understand management theory and practice—and about their own leadership skills. By doing so, they become aware of what they still need to learn at an opportune time, during which they can take advantage of the mentorship and critical guidance offered by MIT Sloan faculty. In short, the Think/Act/Reflect model is integral to providing students with both the theoretical and the practical skills they will need in order to become principled, innovative leaders.

Members of the MIT Sloan faculty take a distinctive approach to developing and executing each part of the Think/Act/Reflect model. In both scope and scale, MIT Sloan's Action Learning Labs are viewed through the lens of the Think/Act/Reflect model, as described in the following overview of the process in practice.

THINK

Within the MBA program, the One-Semester Core offers a highly analytical and rigorous tools-based overview of management theories and principles. In the first semester, initial exposure to action learning is integrated into the curriculum through the required Organizational Processes (OP) course, which challenges students to identify a local company that is facing significant organizational change, analyze the change, and prepare deliverables for both the company and their faculty mentor. Students can subsequently enroll in one or more of MIT Sloan's Action Learning Labs to pursue more focused knowledge in a specific managerial domain, allowing them to further apply and develop their knowledge.

ACT

In the lab courses, teams of students work with real organizations to solve actual problems. In G-Lab, for example, classroom learning focuses on entrepreneurship in a particular region of the world, and student teams are matched to entrepreneurial ventures in emerging markets around the world that are facing real problems. Students engage remotely from campus with these startups to begin researching the problem. They then spend most of January working on-site with their host organizations. Throughout both phases, each team works closely with a faculty content mentor who provides industry expertise, as well as a process mentor who offers guidance in team dynamics. This dual-mentor approach is integral to guiding and supporting students facing largely unfamiliar business problems, often in resource-strapped environments, who are being asked to respond in real time to pressing issues and challenges. These experiences demand of students heightened cultural sensitivity, extraordinary dedication to teamwork, and willingness to challenge theory-based assumptions about management. Typically, mentors visit teams on-site during January.

REFLECT

At MIT Sloan, we systematize the process of reflection, emphasizing it as a key learning method. Students engage in formal periods of reflection throughout the class and during their client-related work. They also benefit from informal opportunities for reflection within their teams. Reflection is seen not only as a process for reviewing past actions and decisions, but also as an ongoing assessment method of reflective practice, in which students learn in a variety of ways: in anticipation of the client project; in the moment while working on the project; and in retrospect after the project has concluded. Multiple reflection methods, such as reflective journal writing, team processes, and mentor coaching, as well as more

formal public presentations like a student poster session after the conclusion of the projects, combined with the experiential nature of our action-based learning opportunities, foster a depth of understanding that would not be achievable through case studies and lectures alone.

For further information, we invite you to contact **actionlearning@mit.edu.**