Case Development Guide

Action Learning Approach

This is not a traditional course where you attend weekly lectures, memorize key information, and be tested on your knowledge through a midterm and final examination. While you are familiar with the traditional lecture approach – it is not the most effective means of learning. The action lecture approach is focused on providing knowledge. It falls short by not addressing the need to develop the skills and attributes required to help put your new-found sustainability knowledge to work – right away.

Our goal in using the **Action Learning** approach (McGill and Beaty, 1996) is to provide an environment where you can develop the skills and attributes to address real world sustainability challenges in your own organizations and communities. "Knowledge alongside skill will ensure capability and through experience this capability will produce competence. It is capability, rather than subject knowledge, that employers require of their staff." (Stephenson & Weil, 1992). The discussion of tools and contextual approaches within a cohort group provides the kind of approach to learning that is favored in this course. This guide presents information on the use of the action learning approach to developing sustainability competency (KSAs - knowledge, skills and attributes).

Weekly Cohort Discussion Process

Cohorts

Each student will be assigned to a cohort group which is composed of approximately 25 students and is facilitated by one of the Teaching Fellows. This course attracts students from around the world. Understanding culture and context is critical to the success of any sustainability program whether it be in an organization located in a culturally diverse community or through the procurement of resources from an organization located in another part of the world. Cohort discussions are a key element of the action learning process. For the past 12 years, this course has helped students develop friendships, contacts and collaboration that are necessary for expanding your network of sustainability colleagues.

The Organization

Each graduate student will select an organization of interest to them. The organization will be developed into a "virtual case," but will have to be "located" in a specified community of their choosing. Undergraduate and non-credit students can select from a number of virtual organizations that will be located by the Instructor in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Each of the topics listed in the course syllabus will have a tool or technique that will be used to help the organization embed the knowledge presented into the day-to-day activities common to that organization operating in its proper context. In order to advance your knowledge and develop skill, each topic will be presented in the context of a local organization. The knowledge is presented in the form of a book chapter. An audio-visual presentation is posted by the Instructor to provide additional insights from his experience with the subject matter. Information on a virtual case is posted along with a separate audio-visual presentation by the Instructor that includes the nature of the tools and techniques that should be used within your cohort discussions and activities during the week.

As an example, **Organization and Context** is the topic covered in the first full week (Week 1) of the course. A "house of worship" (example of a social organization in a community) will be the case for that week. It is important for this and all organizations in the community to understand the context of their organization and how it presents the "uncertainty" that might complicate its ability to meet its objectives. Putting this case into a real world context will include information from the Massachusetts Interfaith Power and Light organization - http://www.mipandl.org/index.html. This organization works closely with many faith-based organizations to help them develop sustainability programs and link the programs to matters of their faith.

The Process

Action Learning

As you discuss how the members of the cohort groups are developing their case each week, your cohort group will use the action learning process to help each member structure their research and learning (McGill & Beaty, 1996). The elements of action learning include:

- **Presenting** your proposals/ideas to the cohort group in response to each approach
- **Receiving** feedback from others in your cohort group that support your learning, challenge your assumptions, or expand the discussion
- **Reflecting** on the feedback you have received from your fellow cohorts

- **Committing** to a course of action to apply the tool or approach going forward.

In order for the action learning process to be effective – you must be an engaged, active, and energetic member of your cohort group. There is little benefit to being a passive observer of the discussion or relying on the Instructor or your Teaching Fellow to provide you with all the answers. "Action learning also provides an ideal forum for facilitation of learning to be a shared activity and not simply the preserve of the tutor. Participants in action learning setting learn to take responsibility for their own learning and they develop skill in supporting their peers. These skills – of listening, questioning, observation, giving feedback, etc. are transferable to the world of work, where students will be required to work independently and in teams" (McGill & Beaty, 1996).

Prepare to Participate

The first step in the weekly action learning process is **preparing to participate** in the discussion. Preparation activities will include reading the knowledge information, viewing the audio-visual presentations, exploring the recommended internet resources, and considering the application of the methods and/or tools provided for that week. You may wish to research the topic by using Google Advanced Search with a domain restriction of ".edu".

Present Your Approach

The next step in the process is to **present your approach** by posting in response to one of the threads already posted on the discussion board. In Week 1, you will be using a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) tool, a PESTLE (political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, legal, and environmental) tool to determine the internal and external context of the organization. There will a thread on each tool and a separate thread on converting the information into a form that is relevant to the organization within its own context. A "general thread" is used to address issues which may emerge that do not fit neatly into the the other threads. You will gain the most benefit by briefly explaining your approach and asking questions of others which inspires your thinking, matches your interest, or challenges you're your stated approach.

As you develop your posting, it is appropriate to fully engage the spirit of your virtual case by imagining yourself as a member of the local organization under consideration. It is also reasonable to share your own personal and professional experience if it is applicable to the case or the use of the tools and/or methods. Your posting must be supported by Internet sources which are cited using APA format.

Presenting your approach to applying tools to your virtual case is not an exercise in simply sharing your opinion on how things "work" with your cohort colleagues. This process is intended to a thoughtful development of your ability to understand the topic (e.g. the understanding of the internal and external context) and the ability of the organization to use this information effectively with credible information from Internet sources or the collective actual experience of the cohort group members.

Some people feel a sense of "shyness" at first when working with "strangers" in a cohort setting. We do provide introductions of every member in your cohort group. However, some students may want to share their first few ideas with their Teaching Fellow before posting them. By privately vetting the information prior to posting, the students should become more comfortable sharing ideas and experiences with each other after the first couple of weeks. If you have some anxiety with this process, please initiate a discussion with the course Instructor. Every student has something to add, no matter what kind of experience the person has with sustainability. All of us belong to and function within organizations with experience to share.

Response from your cohort

Once you have made your brief presentation, your cohort colleagues have an **opportunity to respond**. Your cohort colleagues may choose to support your approach, (gently) challenge your assumptions, or create an informative discussion that will involve others as well. These responses must advance the action learning process in some way – simply saying "I like your post" or "I disagree with your approach" is not a sufficient response. In all cases, you will respect the opinion and feelings of the person that you are responding to. Proper social etiquette and cultural sensitivity is required at all times.

Reflect & Commit to Action

The last step in the weekly posting process is to reflect on your original posting, consider the feedback from your cohort colleagues, and making changes in how you are developing the sustainability within your virtual organization. This action may improve how you develop sustainability within that organization. It may introduce your personal and professional experience, if is applicable to the topic being covered or understanding of someone's case development process. This process of making an presentation, receiving feedback, reflecting, and committing to action forms the cycle of action learning that will be employed throughout the course.

Further Reflection

Each Monday evening there will be a discussion of what transpired collectively in all of the cohort groups. Cohort members and the Teaching Fellows will use a dedicated discussion board to share their reflections with the entire class. Please remember that the cohort discussions are for the presentation of guidance and receiving feedback from others. The reflection on this process will be gathered and discussed by the entire class. There may be significant differences in approach that need to be discussed by the entire class. In many cases, these differences at the cohort level result from the experience of the members of one of the cohort groups when compared to the other groups. Of course there will be some issues that cannot be reconciled even upon further discussion. Using these two-levels of discussion will help each of us reach consensus on where the knowledge, skills and attributes are well understood. It will also point out areas where the local context of the organization complicates the conventional thinking.

Cohort Roles

The roles that you will play in your cohort group include those of **Presenter, Supporter, and Facilitator.**

As a **Presenter**, you will raise an approach for consideration by your cohort group. This process may include describing, exploring, questioning, thinking, and exploring future actions which are relevant to each week's topic (McGill & Beaty, 1996).

As a **Supporter** you will listen, observe, comment, and question the approaches and concerns raised by the presenter. This process may include asking "what if" questions and reflect back what the presenter has said to make sure that you understood their approach. As a supporter – it is important that you approach your role with an attitude which is curious and thoughtful – not judgmental (McGill & Beaty, 1996).

The **Teaching Fellow** assigned to your cohort group will serve as the **Facilitator** for the action learning process. The facilitator serves a number of roles which include:

- **Enabling** the process to be useful for participants
- **Supporting** effective operation of the cohort
- **Modeling** how to give support
- **Reinforcing** how the action learning process works
- **Summarizing** and tying the threads together

- **Creating** a safe and trusting learning climate for cohort members

As we move farther into the semester, it is expected that the Teaching Fellow will be successful in transferring some of those facilitation skills to the cohort members and that you will support one another by modeling those skills in your interactions with your cohort colleagues (McGill & Beaty, 1996). The methods used in action learning and facilitation of online courses will be shared with every participant in the course.

Ground Rules

A few ground rules are in order to ensure that the cohort groups function well and provide a healthy learning climate for everyone. These include:

- **Support** – helping each other explore the tools and methods
- **Challenge** – questioning each other's assumptions
- **Empathy** – understanding the perspective of your fellow cohort members
- **Empowerment** – taking responsibility for the learning process
- **Quality of Attention –** showing a commitment to the action learning process and to the interaction with your fellow cohort members
- **Trust and Confidentiality** – creating a safe environment with respect for each cohort member

Posting Requirements and Grading

The minimum posting requirements for each week are as follows:

- **Post -** Present your approach in **one** of the discussion threads
- **Respond –** Respond to a post made by one of your cohort colleagues
- **Reflect and Commit –** Incorporate the feedback of your cohort colleagues and commit to a future action relative to your original post

In addition, your post, response, and reflection must incorporate at least one of the internet sources provided in the case materials as well as an additional source identified by your own research.

The grading scale the weekly posting activity is as follows:

- **0 points** – no posts or failure to meet minimum requirements
- **1 point** – meets minimum requirements
- **2 points** – exceeds minimum requirements
- **3 points** – exceeds minimum requirements, rated as an "influencer" by your cohort colleagues and/or your Teaching Fellow

You have a responsibility to provide "influencer" ratings to those who have helped you understand some element of sustainability or that took a chance to further a discussion by asking important questions. You can do so by sending an email to the Teaching Fellow.

Additional information will be posted on the website and we will use the live discussion period each week to assess the manner in which the action planning method is working with different cohort groups or in general.

References

McGill, I. and Beaty, L. (1996). *Action Learning – A guide for professional, management, and educational development*. Second Edition. London: Kogan Page Limited.

Stephenson, J. and Weil, S. (1992). *Quality in Learning: A Capability Approach in Higher Education. London*: Kogan Page Limited.