

# **A Framework for the Development of Organizational Commitment Using Action Learning**

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*Organizational commitment has been explored extensively over the past 40 years because of its benefits to individuals and the organization. Action learning, in turn, has been used by companies worldwide to develop leaders, teams and organizations. No study, however, has been undertaken to determine how action learning might develop organizational commitment. Four propositions are offered to indicate how action learning could build powerful individual commitment to the organization.*

Key words: Organizational Commitment, action learning, organizational change

Organization commitment is seen as an important component for organizational learning and organizational success (Randall, Fedor & Longenecker, 1990). Numerous efforts to build individual commitment to the organization have been explored by practitioners, often without much success. Action learning, which has rapidly become a key methodology utilized by hundreds of organizations around the world to develop leaders, teams and individuals, (Coghlan, 2002; Marquardt, 2004, 2006), appears to be an ideal tool to build organizational commitment. This paper examines the constructs of organizational commitment and action learning, and poses four ways in which action learning can build organizational commitment.

## **Organizational Commitment**

Organizational commitment has continued to draw considerable attention for over four decades from researchers and practitioners because of its benefits to individuals and to organizations (Somers & Birnbaum, 1998). Commitment is an essential factor for organizational survival and effectiveness (Buchanan, 1974) A number of studies have shown that there is a positive relationship between organizational commitment and employee behaviors that enhance organizational effectiveness (Randall, Fedor & Longenecker, 1990). Angel and Perry (1981) showed in their research that organizational commitment correlates positively with employees' and organization's ability to adapt to unforeseeable events.

Studies also suggest that organizational commitment supports organizational citizenship behaviors that are central to flatter organizations, effective teams, and empowerment (Dessler, 1999). A wide array of potential benefits are associated with organizational commitment that include, employee retention, higher productivity, superior work quality, and personal sacrifice on behalf of the organization (Buchanan 1974; Porters, Steers, Mowday & Boulin, 1974). Kanter (1968) in her study of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American utopian societies, such as the Shakers, showed that the commitment producing strategies distinguished successful from unsuccessful societies: "commitment is "central to the understanding of both human motivation and system maintenance" (p. 499). According to Senge (1993), personnel commitment is one of the key requirements to become a learning organization. Be it a utopian society or a learning organization, commitment is seen as one of the key factors for organizational survival and growth.

## **Meaning of Commitment**

Organizational commitment has been conceptualized and studied in a variety of ways (Randall, Fedor, & Longenecker, 1990). According to Porter (1968), commitment involves willingness of employees to exert higher efforts on behalf of the organization, a strong desire to stay in the organization, and accept major goals and values of the organization. Kanter (1968) viewed commitment as the willingness of social actors to give energy and loyalty to the organization. Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982) classified commitment as attitudinal commitment and behavioral commitment. Attitudinal commitment refers to an individual's identification with the organizational goals and willingness to work towards them. In behavioral commitment employees are viewed as committed to particular organizational behaviors rather than to an entity.

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O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) classified commitment into three forms; namely, compliance, identification, and internalization. Morrow (1983) identified more than 25 ways in which organizational commitment was conceptualized and measured. Meyer and Allen (1991) identified three general themes that characterized various approaches to conceptualizations of organization commitment, namely, affective attachment to the organization, perceived costs associated with leaving the organization, and a moral obligation to remain with the organization. According to Meyer and Allen (1997), employees with affective commitment undertake actions because they *want to*; employees with continuance commitment engage in actions because they *need to* in order to avoid cost of leaving the organization; and employees with normative commitment engage in actions because they *should*. These three forms of commitment interact and employees can experience all the three forms in varying proportions. Most researchers in the field also consider commitment to be multidimensional in form and focus.

As pointed by Meyer and Allen (1997), the relation between the three types of commitment and performance parameters is different. Affective commitment has been found to be positively related to performance parameters in most of the studies. However, the relationship between continuous commitment and performance parameters has been negative or unrelated. In a majority of the studies normative commitment was found to be only modestly related to the outcome variables (Meyer & Allen, 1997). In the light of above observation, the present paper focuses on the development of affective commitment since it is this form of commitment that has the most influence on desired organizational outcomes.

### **Need for Newer ways to Develop Organizational Commitment**

Organizations are constantly engaged in devising employment practices to retain employees and induce in them higher levels of commitment (Hislop, 2003). However, the current workforce is becoming more emergent and less traditional. While the former is driven by opportunity, the latter believes that tenure dictates growth (Campbell, 2002). Hence, organizations will have to become emergent and provide growth opportunities in order to retain their workforce.

A review of the organizational commitment literature reveals that the outcomes of commitment (employee turnover, performance, citizenship) have been fairly well established. However, the relationship between organizational commitment and its antecedents is *much more varied and inconsistent* (Reichers, 1985). According to Reichers (1985) "this literature is still characterized by a "laundry list" of significant antecedent or correlate variables" (p.467). In addition, scant attention has been paid in the literature to the organizational processes, through which commitment develops (Buchanan, 1974). Even though organizational commitment has been researched for over four decades, most of the variables that have been researched as possible antecedents to organizational commitment are 'transactional' in nature. For instance, variables such as recruitment and selection, compensation and benefits, assessment and promotion that are often associated with organizational commitment have a significant *quid pro quo* component. It is almost akin to 'buying' commitment. Hence, we consider such variables as 'transactional' in nature. This is not to suggest that none of the variables that have been researched as possible antecedents to organizational commitment have a developmental component. On the contrary, variables such as job scope, work design, participation, training and development have a significant developmental component. The point that we wish to emphasize is that the instrumental view of commitment, where an employee exchanges his/her contribution with the inducement that the organization offers (Penley & Gould, 1988) has in many ways influenced the research on antecedents to organizational commitment. We propose that the variables that emanate from an instrumental view of commitment will have little impact on fostering commitment among knowledge workers. Instead employees will be committed to an organization if they perceive learning opportunities in that organization. To quote Gaertner and Nollen (1989):

Psychological commitment is higher among employees who believe they are being treated as resources to be developed rather than commodities to buy and sell. Even controlling for other known antecedents, employees are committed to the extent that they believe the company is providing a long-term developmental employment opportunity (p. 987).

Organizations that are committed to employee development, their well being and their need for actualization tend to have employees with high commitment (Dessler, 1999). Meyer and Allen (1997) express the same sentiment when they state, "organizations that provide competence enhancing experiences, in turn promote affective commitment" (p.48). Paul and Anantharaman (2004) found in their study of Information Technology companies in India that of all the HRM variables that correlate with commitment, the Human Resource Development (HRD) variables of (1) career development, (2) development oriented appraisal, (3) comprehensive training and (4) employee friendly work environment have the strongest correlation. The research by Paul and Anantharaman (2004) reiterates the need to understand organizational commitment from learning and development perspective. However, to date only a few

studies have explored the linkages between learning and commitment. This is rather surprising since, “a deep, profound form of on going learning appears to be at the core of sustained commitment” (Kovan & Dirx, 2003, p.101).

Theorists in the field of knowledge management have broached on the influence of organizational learning subsystems such as knowledge sharing (Nonaka, 1994) and employee perception of his/her learning and development opportunities on organizational commitment (Gaertner & Nollen, 1989; Dessler, 1999). Of late a few empirical studies have been undertaken to understand the relationship between organizational commitment and knowledge sharing (Cabrera, Collins & Salgado, 2006; Hooff & Ridder, 2004), between knowledge based structures and organizational commitment (Brooks, 2002). However, there are no studies to evaluate whether participation in knowledge sharing activities affect commitment (Hislop, 2003). Further, no study has examined the impact of organizational learning processes such as action learning on organizational commitment. The present study attempts to bridge the gap in the literature between the related fields of organizational learning/knowledge management/action learning and organizational commitment.

### **The Purpose of the Research**

The present paper proposes that there is a relationship between action learning and organizational commitment and explores this proposed relationship. The study proposes that action learning is a commitment producing strategy and that the principles of action learning can be used by organizations to develop commitment to both groups/teams and to the organization as an entity. The paper presents a conceptual framework to link the two constructs, namely, action learning and organizational commitment. It is hoped that this new linkage between action learning and organizational commitment will provide the HRD professionals with a new practical tool to foster commitment in organizations.

### **Methodology**

The literature review was conducted using academic literature databases, Proquest Research Library Plus and Academic Search Premier. The search terms that were used are organizational commitment, organizational commitment and action learning, action learning. First, the recent data bases (1990-2006) were searched, and then earlier literature was searched. The references from books and articles were used to uncover additional material. Creswell (2003) recommends the use of literature maps to organize the literature around a topic. The present study made use of literature review summaries to organize literature. All the researched antecedents to organizational commitment were grouped into two categories; namely, those emanating from an instrumental view of commitment and those from the development view. From this review emerged the need to explore organizational commitment from a learning perspective. Next, the literature from knowledge management and organizational learning were reviewed to identify studies both theoretical and empirical that had explored linkages between learning and commitment. Finally, the action learning literature was reviewed to propose a model that links action learning and organizational commitment.

### **Theoretical Framework for the Development of Organizational Commitment Using Action Learning**

The present paper uses Marquardt's model of action learning along with Eby, Freeman, Rush, & Lance's (1999) framework of the motivational bases of affective commitment to propose a theoretical model for the development of organizational commitment using action learning. Eby et al.'s (1999) model, which describes the process by which affective commitment develops among employees in an organization, was chosen for the present study for a variety of reasons. First, it is one of the few models that actually describe the process through which commitment develops. Second, the model takes into account complex patters of relationship among psychological antecedent to commitment, and third, an operational version of the model was tested for its overall goodness of fit by using meta-analytic correlations and structural modeling.

Eby et al.'s model identifies four psychological states that lead to intrinsic motivation:

#### *Meaningfulness*

Meaningfulness is brought about by working conditions such as skill variety, task significance, and task identity.

#### *Responsibility*

Responsibility is brought about by working conditions such as autonomy.

#### *Knowledge of Results*

Knowledge of results is brought about by working conditions such as feedback from the job, and feedback from others.

#### *Empowerment and Exchange*

Empowerment and Exchange is brought about by working conditions such as supportiveness, participation, and fairness.

The present paper presents a theoretical framework to describe, how action learning promotes organizational commitment by fostering the working conditions that stimulate these four psychological states.

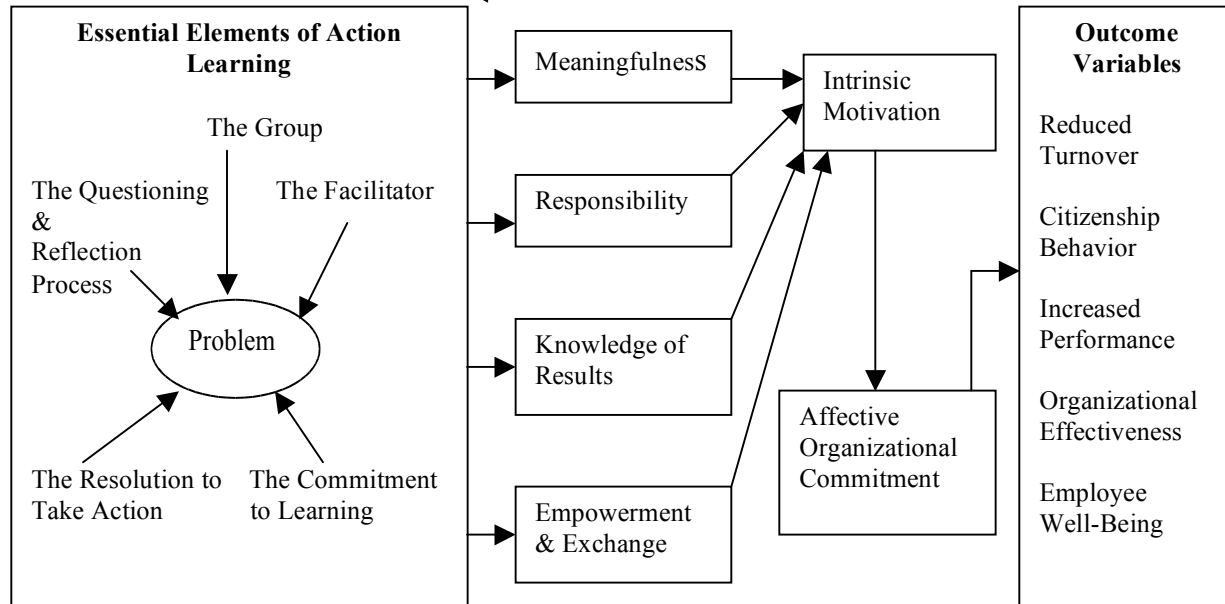


Figure 1. Action Learning and Organizational Commitment

### Action Learning

Action learning is an HRD process and program used by individuals and organizations not only to solve complex problems but to develop employees' knowledge, skills, and values (Marquardt & Waddill, 2004). Action learning has proved to be a powerful tool to increase significant learning in individuals and teams in relatively short periods of time (Revans, 1980, 1982; Marquardt, 1996a, 2000, 2004; Pedler, 1997; Marsick 1992; York, O'Neil & Marsick, 1999). The primary focus of action learning is the learning that is critical for the group to be more effective to solve complex problems in complex organizations. The group not only works on problem solving via the action learning process; simultaneously, it develops its internal learning capacity and learns how to learn (Marquardt, 2003, 1996b; Marsick & O'Neil, 1999). Action learning is built on the application of new questions to existing knowledge as well as reflection about actions (Marquardt, 2004). The learning aspect of action learning makes it strategic rather than operational. Action learning is based on the premise that authority and responsibility for analysis and implementation is conferred on those individuals who have the psychological ownership of the problem and must live with the proposed solution (Garratt, 1997). It is quite evident from the above discussion that action learning is a very effective tool for learning at individual, group, and organizational levels.

#### Core elements of action learning

Ever since action learning was first introduced by Reg Revans in the coal mines of Wales and England in the 1940s there have been multiple variations of this concept. However, all forms of action learning involve real people resolving and taking actions on real problems and learning while doing so (Marquardt, 1999, 2004). The following components, according to Marquardt, are central to action learning.

*A problem (project, challenge, opportunity, issue, and task).* Action learning centers on a problem, a project, a challenge, an issue, or a task-the resolution of which is of high importance to an individual, a team, or the organization. The problem should also provide an opportunity for the group to generate learning opportunities, build knowledge, and develop individual, team, and organizational skills.

*An action learning group or team.* The core entity in action learning is the action learning group that is ideally composed of four to eight people with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Those differences will enable the group to see the problem or task from a variety of perspectives, and thus be able to offer fresh and innovative viewpoints.

*A process that emphasizes insightful questioning and reflective listening.* Action learning emphasizes questions and reflection above statements and opinions. By focusing on the right questions rather than the right answers, action learning focuses on what one doesn't know, as well as on what one does know.

*Taking action on the problem.* A critical component of action learning concerns empowerment of the action learning group to take actions or be assured that their recommendations will be implemented. If the group only makes recommendations, it loses its energy, creativity, and commitment. Likewise, there's no real meaningful or practical learning until action is taken and reflected upon; one is never sure an idea or a plan will be effective until it has been implemented. Reflecting on the action taken provides the best source for learning and organizational change.

*A commitment to learning.* Solving an organizational problem provides immediate, short-term benefits to the company. The greater, longer-term, multiplier benefit, however, occurs when the learning gained by each group member, as well as the group as a whole, is applied strategically throughout the organization. Accordingly, action learning places equal emphasis on the learning and development of individuals and the team as it does on the solving of problems; the smarter the group becomes, the quicker and better the quality of its decision making and action taking will be.

*An action learning coach.* While other members of the group focus on solving the problem, one member, the action learning coach, devotes all of his or her efforts toward helping the group learn. This person identifies opportunities that enable the group to improve its problem-solving and strategy-creation capacity. Experience shows that unless there's a person dedicated to the learning, a group will tend to put all of its time and energies on what they consider to be urgent (the problem) and will neglect what's more important in the long-run, (the learning). Through a series of questions, the coach enables group members to reflect on how they listen, how they may better frame the problem, how they give each other feedback, how they're planning and working, and what assumptions may be shaping their beliefs and actions.

## **Development of Organizational Commitment Using Action Learning**

### *Meaningfulness*

The sharing of problem among the group creates a common understanding of others' situations and improves the bonding among group members (Marquardt, 2004, 2006). There is a reciprocal relationship between trust and problem sharing. While sharing problems in an environment of trust, the group members inherently increase trust among themselves. Action learning with emphasis on problem sharing is an effective instrument to increase trust among group members (Marquardt & Carter, 1998). Research in organizational commitment has demonstrated that one of the significant antecedents to affective commitment is the perceived fairness of the organizational policies and the level of trusts that the organization places on employees work related judgment (Meyer & Allen, 1997).

The reflective questioning and accountable actions inherent in action learning groups help to foster creativity in the group. Action learning enables groups to harness their collective potential, work together in meaningful and reflective ways, and produce coordinated action (Marquardt, 2004). Participation in action learning promotes meaningfulness as it provides group members opportunity to use a variety of skills (skill variety) and has an impact on others' lives (task significance). Quite often the group members find the experience of participating in action learning as transformative. Existing researchers by Buchanan (1977), Mathieu and Zajac (1990) suggests that skill variety, task significance increase affective commitment (Eby et al., 1999).

*Proposition 1: Groups using action learning will experience higher levels of meaningfulness than groups that do not use action learning, and hence the action learning groups will have higher affective organizational commitment.*

### *Responsibility*

Action learning helps to develop several team-related skills and competencies (Marquardt, 2004, 2005). Some of these skills include ability to focus on process and product issues, improved self-understanding and self awareness through feedback and use of learning loops, group building skills, and a variety of leadership skills. There is some evidence that people's perception of their own competencies plays an important role in the development of affective commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Mathieu and Zajac (1990) in their study found strong correlation between perceived competence and affective commitment.

*Proposition 2: Groups using action learning will experience higher levels of responsibility than groups that do not use action learning and hence the action learning groups will have higher affective organizational commitment.*

### *Knowledge of Results*

Action learning helps to develop the highest form of communication, that is, dialogue (Marquardt, 2004, 2006). Dialogue involves active and empathetic listening, suspension of judgment, and creative exploration of issues and problems. All the above mentioned aspects of dialogue are core elements of action learning. The commitment literature reports of linkages between communication and commitment. Studies by Konovsky and Cropanzano (1991)

and Greenberg (1994) show that the manner in which information is communicated in an organization effects commitment among employees (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Encouragement and feedback develops among the employees stronger loyalty to the organization and there are several studies that have shown that feedback plays an important role in enhancing the levels of commitment among employees (Eby et al., 1999).

*Proposition 3: Groups using action learning will have higher knowledge of results than groups that do not use action learning and hence the action learning groups will have higher affective organizational commitment.*

#### *Empowerment and Exchange*

One of the distinguishing features of action learning is that the participants take ownership of the products. Action learning helps to develop strong commitment due to intense personal sharing and selected actions by group members (Marquardt, 2004). Action learning groups, unlike other groups (for example, task forces, quality circles), cannot work without high degree of cooperation and collaboration (Marquardt, 2003). The ownership and accountability that the group has over the problem and proposed course of action makes them seek ways in which they can work as a team.

*Proposition 4: Groups using action learning will have higher levels of empowerment and exchange than groups that do not use action learning and hence the action learning groups will have higher affective organizational commitment.*

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this paper was to propose a theoretical framework that describes how action learning can serve as a powerful antecedent to the development of affective organizational commitment. Action learning has been used by many organizations globally to bring about powerful individual and organizational changes (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Marquardt, 2004). Organizations worldwide report how action learning has quickly and effectively transformed teams, developed executive skills, and improved personal competencies. (Coughlan, 2002; Coughlan, P. D. Coughlan, T. Dromgoole, D. Duff, R. Caffrey, K. Lynch, I. Rose, P. Stack, A. McGill & P. Sheridan, 2002; Dilworth & Willis, 2003; Dotlich & Noel, 1998). However, no study to date has explored the linkages between action learning and organizational commitment. The present paper provides a framework to depict how action learning creates working conditions that foster organizational commitment.

Over the past four decades extensive research has been carried out that shows how organizational commitment can contribute to a firm's survival and growth. Yet, in many ways it is surprising, as noted by Buchanan (1974) that there has not been much research on the actual organizational process that develops commitment. Further, most of the research that has looked at possible antecedents to commitment has only looked at one or two component of the HRM system (Meyer & Allen, 1996). In addition, there are very few studies that have tested theoretically based alternate models of commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). The present paper is an attempt to address these gaps in the literature.

The model for the development of organizational commitment using action learning that is proposed in this paper looks at organizational commitment from an HRD perspective. It is based on the premise that employees will be committed to an organization, if the organization in turn is committed to their learning and developmental needs.

## **Conclusion, Implications and Suggestions for Future Research**

The present paper has both practical and theoretical implications. By viewing 'learning in organizations' as a commitment producing strategy, the study moves away from the traditional instrumental view of fostering organizational commitment; namely, compensation, benefits, assessments and promotion, to a learning and developmental perspective. The model that is proposed in this paper provides a framework to guide applied research that seeks to develop strategies to build high commitment organizations. The HRD professional can use action learning as a tool to create experiences for employees that will enhance meaningfulness, responsibility, knowledge of results, and empowerment, which in turn will help to develop a workforce that is committed to the organization's values and objectives.

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