

# CASE STUDY

## A Work-Applied Leadership Development Programme

This is a summary of a project in a National Postal Delivery business organisation

### Programme Summary

The Work-Applied Learning (WAL) approach is increasingly being used for leadership and management development. This WAL case study reports on the use of a WAL process in the Delivery Business Unit of a National Postal Delivery business organisation. It shows how an Action Research Group used Action Learning projects within the organisation to develop Delivery Centre Managers (DCMs) and Team Leaders in light of a new organisational structure.

### Background/Problem

The organisation operates in a competitive commercial environment for the delivery of mail throughout the country. It operates competitively in the markets of logistics, retail, and financial services.

In 2001, it introduced a significant investment in training and development and the establishment of a new Team Leader structure. It also focused on improving the knowledge and skills of the DCMs. This programme was called the Leadership Development Programme. The proposed new structure removed existing line control supervisors and replaced them with Team Leaders who would be upgraded and given line control responsibilities for groups of up to twelve Postal Delivery Officers (PDOs).

This new structure was to be implemented and required major changes in the way Delivery Centres were to operate. DCMs needed help to train and develop their new Team Leaders to become effective line control supervisors.

### Purpose of the WAL Programme

The traditional way of learning and implementing a major change programme was a fragmented approach and would result in varying degrees of individual learning, combined with short-term projects. There was no consistent system for learning and problem solving in Delivery Centres and no integrated approach towards individual and team learning at the different levels and functions in the organisation.

The director of the unit felt WAL could be a more powerful method of learning that would also produce better business outcomes.

### The WAL Programme & Process

#### The Design Stage

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Firstly, a plan to improve leadership qualities for the organisation's DCMs and Team Leaders was developed by an Action Research Group made up of a Researcher, a Facilitator, three Area Managers and three representative DCMs within the Delivery Business Unit. According to research, Action Research Group members should:

1. develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening
2. act to implement the plan

3. observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs; and
4. reflect on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of cycles

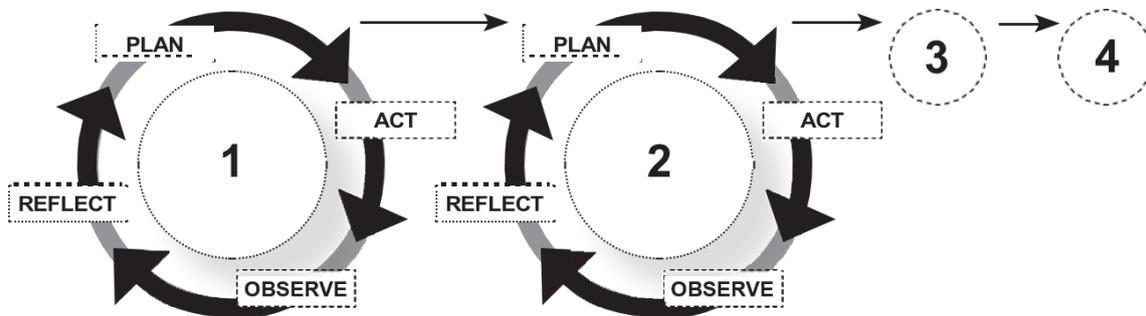
## The Implementation Stage

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Next, all DCMs attended a Knowledge Workshop to receive knowledge on leadership related subjects. The DCMs applied the WAL approach and facilitated their projects with others directly affected at Delivery Centre level.

At the third stage, the Action Research Group met to reflect on events and learning, after each Knowledge Workshop.

Finally, the plan was reviewed by the Action Research group with appropriate adjustment to improve benefits of the programme as it progressed. The Action Research method, when used for the implementation of change, involves cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection, and re-planning.



The Team Leaders in the Delivery Centres had to be trained and developed to take on first-line managerial responsibilities.

**The Phase 1 intervention** involved a Leadership Development Programme for DCMs and their Team Leaders with the principles and practices of Action Learning, Leadership, Strategic Operations and the facilitation of workplace projects.

**The Phase 2 intervention** involved the development of Team Leaders through an accredited Certificate IV in Front-line Management that incorporated the principles and practices of Action Learning.

**The Phase 3 intervention** of the programme involved Area Managers and DCMs gaining an accredited Graduate Certificate in Management on successful completion of the Leadership Development Programme, and cascading the facilitation of Action Learning projects throughout the Delivery Business Units in the region.

## Performance Outcomes

Management development programmes have traditionally been designed by Human Resource Managers with little input from those actually involved in the programme. At the outset of this project, Australia Post developed measurable “desirable outcomes”.

## Project Outcomes

All DCMs and Team Leaders in the Leadership Development Programme were required to undertake projects linked to service quality or productivity improvement, and the initial projects formed the basis on which learning would take place in the long term.

Planning for each phase of the programme was done by the Action Research Group. All members of the Action Research Group participated in the Leadership Development Programme

Each Action Research Group member was allocated tasks and was required to bring knowledge back to the group throughout the programme. Special guests and participants were invited to join the Action Research Group, to make presentations and provide feedback.

PROJECT	OUTCOMES
Team Leaders adopt Action Learning as a way of solving problems	A small number of Team Leaders have adopted an Action Learning model, facilitating projects (i.e. problems and change) within their team. Further development is required.
Improved customer service quality and productivity	Customer service performance nationally has improved to the highest level. The region has the best service standards of all mainland states. Customer complaints have declined 20-30% during the programme.
Implementation of a continuous learning culture	The Mail Centre leadership team has undertaken a programme similar to that of the Delivery Business Unit. Another region has also embraced the concept of Action Learning, along with similar structure and process operating in their Delivery Centres.
To have a skilled Delivery leadership team within 12-18 months.	DCMs and Team Leaders have improved their leadership skills during the programme, and results have been encouraging.

## Process Outcomes

PROCESS	OUTCOMES
Matching labour resources to workload for street mail delivery function.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved productivity (not specified) and customer service</li> <li>Balanced workloads – improved morale</li> <li>Structure and process for learning and change implemented</li> <li>Team Leaders learning</li> </ul>
Improving customer service and improving internal cross functional relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Redirection complaints reduced</li> <li>Incorrect Delivery complaints reduced</li> <li>Retail/Licensee/Delivery and Transport relationships improved</li> <li>Operational savings realised</li> </ul>
Improving the workplace environment and mail processing activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Level of mis-sorted mail reduced</li> <li>Changed housekeeping culture to maintain tidy work areas</li> <li>Reduced costs to service Retail Shops in area</li> </ul>
Improving quality customer service by reducing mail redirection errors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Redirection failures reduced</li> <li>Cost reduction</li> <li>Improved customer satisfaction</li> </ul>
Improving on-time service for business customers and enhancing flexibility of resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Service standards improved</li> <li>Operational savings realised</li> <li>Structure and process to resolve issues and implement change</li> </ul>

## Learning Outcomes

LEARNING	OUTCOMES
Understanding cost drivers and reducing operating costs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear understanding of costs</li> <li>• Team learning</li> <li>• Operational savings realised</li> </ul>
Better management of staff on restricted duties due to injury or illness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limitations of all affected staff reviewed</li> <li>• Specific duty statements and job descriptions issued</li> <li>• Improved productivity and morale</li> </ul>
Team Leaders to have a clear understanding of their new role and responsibilities.	An audit has revealed that a majority of Team Leaders have a sound understanding of their role and responsibilities.
Team Leaders to have a clear understanding of how their role and responsibilities link to national, state and business unit goals and objectives.	Team Leaders understand this and their role and responsibilities. Special presentations occur each year as the national and state plans are communicated to all staff and implemented.
An increased understanding of organisational learning and the benefits of developing a learning organisation culture in the organisation.	Several participants have expressed a desire to continue with their learning. Change that has occurred to date is certainly a step in the right direction.
Involve all DCMs in the learning process, and have this become a normal way of operating	The Action Research Group continues to meet on a regular basis to discuss all matters pertaining to learning and leadership.
DCMs to have enhanced facilitation and coaching skills.	Outcomes from phase one of the programme were very good and evidenced that facilitation and coaching skills were enhanced.

## Reflections on WAL programme

This case study describes the implementation of a work-applied leadership development programme using the WAL method for a Delivery Business Unit of an organisation in a region.

While it is recognised that the WAL approach is not the only way of developing and implementing a learning and change programme, the organisation has experienced encouraging outcomes from the project implemented at his workplace. The participants on the programme had also learned and applied their knowledge to their Work-Based Projects.

This approach would be considered for implementing major change and learning and development programmes in other organisations.

*Material summarised from Abraham S 2015, Work-Applied Learning for Change Adelaide SA*