



LeadingAge New York Leadership Academy

ACTION LEARNING PROJECT (ALP) GUIDELINES

The Purpose of an Action Learning Process and Project

During the action learning process you will: 1) make progress toward an improvement or innovation that matters a lot to you and is of value to your organization, community or the individuals you serve, and 2) learn and practice critical leadership skills for fostering organizational innovation and learning. Balancing the dual purpose of the action learning project is in itself a leadership challenge. The process and project will allow you to:

- Benefit from the wisdom and wise questions of colleagues about the innovation that you are pursuing.
- Integrate insights from actions taken and from a wide range of resources and knowledge bases.
- Strengthen your ability to step back from the action and reflect on dynamics so that your actions are increasingly effective.
- Strengthen your skills at leading and influencing change.
- Become more aware of your style for learning and leading change.
- Deepen your leadership capacity to provide consultative coaching to colleagues.
- Understand a process for learning and innovation that you can use in your daily work.

Choosing an Action Learning Project

Identify a project/problem/innovation/improvement that appeals to you and on which you can have influence. Is there a program, process, or idea you've always wanted to make progress on? Maybe you'll be embarking on a new project outside your job description. Or perhaps you would like to take ownership of a dilemma within your organization and find a creative path forward. Your project can be something you would do regardless of your participation in IGNITE Leadership Academy. And it should be something that will serve your organization and ultimately, the field. The "action learning process" goes beyond just the project itself. It will give you experience with an organized process of personal reflection and colleague coaching. Keep in mind the three central themes of IGNITE Leadership Academy: transformational change, innovation, person-centeredness. Think about how your project reflects the themes.

During the first stage of the work you will:

- Meet with your team and share what you have in mind for your project.
- Respond to the questions of your team colleagues and make note of any clarifying thoughts or new directions you may take as a result.
- Detail what you see as next steps paying close attention to what you are learning as you observe the impact of your actions.
- Return to your team with your insights, experiences, confusions; again entertaining your colleagues' questions.

During the next stage of the work you will:

- Explore the idea tentatively with an organizational sponsor who has some authority/influence over the project area – your organizational client for this project. This person is the organizational representative who can give you authority to do the work.

Goals

Write goals that clarify what you want to learn from your ALP and what you want to accomplish. Your goals will provide direction for your project, and for refocusing as surprises occur. Second, the goals provide criteria for assessing project progress and impact. Third, the goals keep you simultaneously focused on both the learning and the action. When you are setting your goals keep in mind that the life of this project will likely extend well beyond the time frame of your IGNITE year. Allow yourself a flexible timeline but, for your own learning and sense of satisfaction, choose something that allows you to learn and feel a sense of forward movement. Your goals should:

- Support the overall project purpose – for impacting your organization, the field, and your professional development.
- Be measurable – include an observable, measurable standard.
- Reflect at least one of the three core tenets important to the IGNITE Program.
 - Why it is transformative?
 - What makes it innovative?
 - How does it promote person-centeredness?
- Note the necessary resources, training, and support.

Team Back Home

As early as possible identify those back home who will be part of your project. Even during the thinking stage, talk with colleagues who might be involved to get their reflections, questions and perspectives. You will have your own sense of timing, but allow space throughout the process for input.

Depending on the type of project, your back home group could include a combination of collaborators whom you engage in the project: a back home learning team, your mentor, or two or three advisors. Part of the learning experience is cultivating social capital and leading those people to success.

If you are working with a team of people back home, you will want to reflect not only on who you have enlisted for this work, but how you've identified them, and how you have engaged them. How did you approach your team members? Some theories of change identify useful stages in managing change including:

- Assemble a powerful guiding coalition of formal and informal leaders
- Assess roles, responsibilities, and accountability for team members
- Collaborate or partner with other teams, departments, divisions
- Manage transitions and prepare others for change

Throughout the year, you will:

- Participate in scheduled IGNITE team coaching calls to discuss your project and in return give feedback about the projects of others – this process is called collaborative coaching through inquiry.
- Meet with your sponsor at regular time intervals.
- Meet with your back home team at regular time intervals.
- Share progress and elicit feedback from the IGNITE community using coaching calls, discussion at in person sessions, and online.

- Regularly journal your musings, challenges, successes, and ah-ha's to be reflected upon at various opportunities for report out and sharing.

Begin with the end in mind

In the end, we want you to be able to look back on this experience and learn from everything – both the developments you hoped for, and those you didn't want. A good scientist runs experiments to help the field move forward; an experiment that doesn't prove what was hoped for is not a failure. It is still an experiment. We want you to learn from the journey. And we want the field to learn from you and with you.

Ongoing reflective notes will enhance your learning. Keep detailed (unedited) journal notes from the very beginning as you are thinking about the ALP, so you keep track of your thinking over time. A large part of the learning can involve noticing shifts in how you are thinking, and what you are learning from the actions you take. With your notes in hand you can explore these questions:

- What would you have done differently; why and how?
- What were the challenges/barriers?
- What opportunities did you take advantage of and what opportunities did you pass on?
- What did you learn about your leadership style during this project?
- Did you identify strengths and weaknesses in yourself as a leader?
- What did your IGNITE team provide in the way of support, insight, consultation?
- Are there things about how you lead that you would like to strengthen?
- How did the talents of your implementation team complement your talents?
- What are the key takeaways you would like to share with the field?

At the close of our year together you will have the opportunity to share your project with your peers and the greater IGNITE community. You will be asked to submit information prior to **April 25, 2017** about your project via a questionnaire template. Your answers to the template questionnaire will feed directly to a booklet or web-based directory. The ALP is a great opportunity to experiment with an innovation in our field. But it is also a chance to experiment with the optimal balance of action and reflection – a balance that is central to gifted leadership.
