

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: BUILDING AND SUSTAINING GLOBAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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The Annual Global Forum on Executive Development and Business Driven Action Learning is a worldwide community of practice that has been in existence for eighteen years (since 1996). In this brief survey about the Global Forum we would like to focus on the success factors, especially for those who would like to develop and sustain their own community of practice. These component parts are highlighted throughout the text in bold.

Origins

The Global Forum was the idea of company representatives from General Electric (Stephen Mercer), Johnson & Johnson (Ron Bossert), IBM (Herwe de Schepper) and Yury Boshyk, at that time a faculty member of IMD in Lausanne, Switzerland. In 1995 we had come together at the IBM Learning Center in Armonk, New York to share good demonstrated practices about Action Learning especially as Johnson & Johnson was thinking of designing and implementing an executive program based on Action Learning principles and methods used by both General Electric and IBM. After a very stimulating meeting we decided we wanted to share and learn from others about their Action Learning and management education initiatives. **Our strong motivation** was that we felt that Action Learning was the wave of the future--today Action Learning is used by many companies throughout the world.

About a year later the first Global Forum took place (May 1996) with a group of about thirty Action Learning practitioners from the international business community who met in the Sophia Antipolis Science and Technology Park in southern France, near Nice at the Theseus Institute, where I was based at that time. Our focus was on doing Action Learning with major corporations, and companies represented included **the core group**--General Electric, IBM, Johnson & Johnson--as well as Fiat, Philips, and about twenty-five others. Little did we realize that this meeting would prove to be the foundation of the Global Forum on Executive Development and Business Driven Action Learning, a worldwide community of practice that has met annually ever since.

Structure and Operating Guidelines

The Global Forum is **very practitioner-oriented**, with a **clear focus on participants from the Global Forum's desired constituency**--mainly from the business community and primarily from global companies and major organizations. The emphasis is on **sharing our learning from practical experience** and not an exploration of the theoretical aspects. In fact, one academic once turned down an invitation to participate because she felt that the Global Forum was "not theoretical enough".

Participants include senior executives and those from Leadership and Development, Human Resources and other functions. The **guidelines for attendance have been set by the core group of participating companies and by a Steering Committee comprised of community members**. One such guideline is that consultants who are invited are asked to bring along a client. **"No selling"** is another stipulation and on occasion, some participants were not invited to return after crossing the line in this matter due to the rule of "one strike and you're out". Thought leaders, business school representatives, international organizations such as the World Bank and the World Council of Churches, national public service, government leaders and some Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) also take part.

We meet annually and **attendance is by-invitation-only with no media allowed, and with no more than one hundred participants**. This is deliberate in order to **ensure the right mix and composition of participants, genuine interaction, confidentiality, and a more open and intimate setting for discussions**. **Community members must be willing to learn and share**. The Global Forum is **not-for-profit**, meaning that all participants cover their own travel and accommodation and the meeting expenses are paid at cost by all, including the organizers.

To ensure its global character, **we meet yearly in a different continent than the previous year** thus also **engaging an ever wider community of practitioners**.

For the first nine years or so, companies from the community hosted the Global Forum at their leadership centers which were often situated outside the main business districts of cities. In time, however, Global Forums came to be organized in downtown venues in the downtown districts to facilitate the organization of so-called **"Outside-In" meetings and discussions with major local companies and leaders in the location**, which is an important part of the Global Forum.

The organizing team for each Global Forum usually consists of the small core team and community members from the location. This core team looks after all logistics regarding location selection and program details. The wider community members also contribute topics and themes they would like to see on the program through a Retrospectives exercise, introduced to the Global Forum by Intel, at the end of each annual meeting that formulates suggestions for topics to be covered at the next Global Forum.

RETROSPECTIVES (1)

1. Self-Reflection:

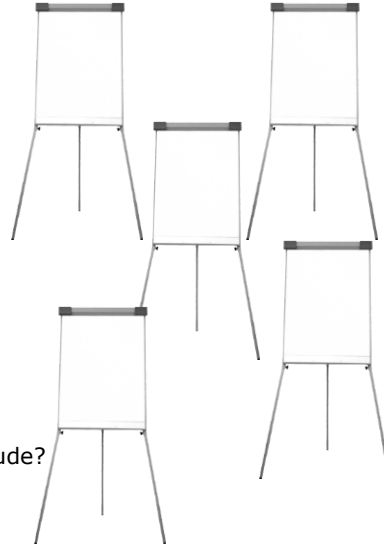
- What did I enjoy?
- What made the greatest impact?
- What actions shall I take personally as a result of this experience?



RETROSPECTIVES (2)

2. Table groups together in rotation:

- What did you learn during these days?
- What surprised you?
- What still puzzles you?
- What will you do differently as a result of this experience?
- What will you carry back and to whom?
- Next Global Forum: what should we include?



Content and Format

Over the years the fundamental content has evolved from (1) "show and tell" presentations on "what your company or organization is doing, why it is doing these things, your lessons learned from these experiences and next steps" to (2) much more interactive and PowerPoint-free discussions on dilemmas and issues that are being tackled by attending organizations. Today, there are far fewer plenary sessions than in the past.

There is also a general guideline that "the first time you participate, the next time you present" thus **ensuring active sharing by all community members.**

The format lends itself to interactive discussions and is varied to cater to all learning styles. A predominant format is what is referred to as the "Galleria Walk" and can be best described as follows: There are usually three presenters per session over a period of two hours in a large room. Each presenter is in a different part of the room with a table, some chairs and a flip chart. No computers or projected slides are allowed but slides are sent in advance and can be uploaded by participants for study before the Global Forum. In each session, presenters will see three different groups of participants, and will spend roughly 35 minutes per group, followed by a 15 minute wrap up in plenary on what was discussed and what each presenter learned in their discussions. It is not unusual for there to be about twenty sessions with about 65 presenters over the course of the four-day Global Forum meeting.

The content of the Global Forum is related either to what organizations and businesses are doing in the field of executive development and leadership, and/or to Business Driven Action Learning initiatives. As many are aware, the house of Action Learning has many doors and the Global Forum has always had, and continues to have, participants representing the many varied approaches to Action Learning. **The content is therefore diverse but inclusive.**

Every year about thirty per cent of participants are new due to changing locations and generational turnover including retirements. In order to introduce the concept and variations of Action Learning to new Global Forum members who may not be that familiar with Action Learning, there is always a preliminary session or workshop that provides a roadmap to various Action Learning principles and practices. This session also includes an update on the latest developments in the field.

Post Global Forum Community Collaboration and Cooperation

There are many opportunities for community members to network and collaborate after each Global Forum. This is of course done informally and also in a more structured way. When appropriate, companies share experiences and dilemmas in more formal meetings that are part of **regional or local gatherings**. Some examples include the early meetings of the Korean Action Learning Association (KALA), the Southern African workshops, and the Nordic Forum. Sharing good practices and dilemmas also occurs as part of Business Driven Action Learning executive development programs through what are referred to as "**Outside-In**" **dialogs or meetings** with participating companies. Some benchmarking **research** has also involved many community members, as for example, a recent study and subsequent article on developing global executives, today and tomorrow. The Global Forum **web site** also serves as a resource center for the community. Here members will find Global Forum presentations, photos from the gatherings as well as an extensive Resources section that includes links and references to primary and secondary materials, videos, news, articles, and other relevant items. Over the years, community members have also **contributed to several publications** including books and articles that deal with Action Learning and Executive and Organizational Development.

In the end, it is a committed core group that, despite changes in composition over time, makes the difference. Through its motivation, dedication, ecumenical inclusivity, transparency, and curiosity, this group creates a welcoming spirit that helps nourish and sustain a community of trust that in turn inspires learning and sharing in our community of practice--the Global Forum.

Further Information and Sources

www.globalforum-actionlearning.com