

# Making Virtual Action Learning Effective for Leadership Development

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# Making Virtual Action Learning Effective for Leadership Development

New research shows that virtual action learning can be just as beneficial as face-to-face sessions for developing leadership skills, when implemented thoughtfully. A UK study of over 300 senior leaders by Professor Jean-Anne Stewart of Henley Business School at the University of Reading found that with proper facilitation, virtual action learning enabled valuable peer support, actions and reflection time, even during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## The Challenge of Remote Action Learning

Action learning has long been considered one of the most effective approaches for leadership development. The method involves small groups of peers working together to tackle real workplace challenges, combining action with reflection. However, virtual action learning conducted remotely has often been viewed as a lesser alternative to face-to-face sessions.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced a rapid shift to remote work, Professor Jean-Anne Stewart of Henley Business School at the University of Reading saw an opportunity to study virtual action learning on a large scale. Her research followed over 300 senior leaders participating in a two-year Master's programme in leadership, comparing their experiences with face-to-face and virtual action learning.

The study provides valuable insights into the differences between facilitating face-to-face versus virtual action learning, how to effectively prepare leaders for the virtual format, and the benefits that virtual action learning can offer. The findings suggest that with proper implementation, virtual action learning can be a viable and sometimes preferable option for leadership development programmes.

## From Face-to-Face to Virtual Overnight

Professor Stewart's research began in 2016 and initially focused on evaluating face-to-face action learning as part of Henley Business School's MA Leadership programme. The programme brought together senior leaders from diverse sectors, including healthcare, retail, pharma, manufacturing, education, and non-profit organisations.

Participants met in small action learning groups every one to two months over the course of the two-year programme. Experienced

facilitators guided the sessions, which enabled leaders to discuss workplace challenges, gain new perspectives from peers, and develop their leadership skills.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, the programme was forced to rapidly transition to fully virtual delivery. Professor Stewart explains that they suddenly had cohorts with varied experiences: some had only experienced face-to-face action learning, others transitioned mid-programme from face-to-face to virtual, and new cohorts started with virtual action learning only. This provided a unique research opportunity and allowed the researchers to compare the different experiences of students and identify key factors for success with virtual action learning.

The study ultimately included data from 37 face-to-face and 45 virtual action learning sets, facilitated by 12 experienced facilitators. Professor Stewart and her team conducted interviews and focus groups with the facilitators to gather insights on the differences between face-to-face and virtual facilitation.

## Key Differences with Virtual Facilitation

While the core action learning process remained similar, the facilitators identified several key differences when transitioning to the virtual format. Reliable technology and technical support proved essential for smooth virtual sessions. Facilitators had to become proficient with online meeting platforms and features like chat, hand raising, and breakout rooms.

More time was needed upfront to build trust and relationships among participants in the virtual setting. Facilitators emphasised introductions, contracting, and creating group charters. Without physical cues, facilitators had to find new ways to gauge and maintain engagement. In addition, encouraging use of video cameras and the 'hands up' feature helped.





Virtual sessions required more frequent breaks and a slightly adapted structure to avoid screen fatigue. The chat feature provided a useful way for participants to write and share questions, enhancing the reflective process.

Professor Stewart notes that the facilitators had to essentially re-learn how to create psychological safety and foster open dialogue in this new virtual environment. But with practice, they found effective ways to translate key elements of face-to-face facilitation to the virtual space.

### Preparing Leaders for Virtual Action Learning

Based on the research findings, Professor Stewart and her team developed recommendations for preparing both facilitators and participants for effective virtual action learning. For facilitators, this included providing training on relevant technology platforms, emphasising techniques for virtual relationship building and engagement, offering guidance on managing time and energy in the virtual format, and creating opportunities to share best practices among facilitators.

For participants, the preparation involved setting expectations about technology requirements and etiquette, allowing time to get comfortable with the virtual platform, emphasising the importance of having a quiet, private space for sessions, and reinforcing commitments to full participation and confidentiality.

Professor Stewart emphasises that taking the time upfront to properly orient everyone to virtual action learning pays dividends. It helps create the conditions for psychological safety and meaningful dialogue, even in a remote setting.

### Reaping the Benefits

While some participants who transitioned from face-to-face viewed virtual action learning as a 'lesser' experience initially, those who started with the virtual format reported very positive experiences overall.

Key benefits of virtual action learning identified in the study included convenience, as eliminating travel time made it easier for busy leaders to participate consistently, as well as cost- and time-saving benefits. During the pandemic, virtual sessions allowed for continued peer support without health risks. For many leaders working long hours, the virtual sessions provided rarely found dedicated time for reflection.

The 'comrades in adversity' feeling was amplified during the challenges of the pandemic, with leaders valuing the chance to connect with peers. Leaders reported improved listening, questioning, and problem-solving skills that transferred to their workplace.

One NHS leader reported using action learning techniques in team huddles to address complex situations in the critical care unit. Others noted how the skills developed through virtual action learning improved their leadership, with colleagues observing that meetings were run more effectively and leaders asked more insightful questions.

Professor Stewart reflects that what was most striking was how, despite the challenges of the pandemic and new technology, the core benefits of action learning still came through strongly. Leaders consistently highlighted the value of peer support, dedicated reflection time, and skill development.

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## The Future of Virtual Action Learning

While the study arose from the forced shift to virtual during the pandemic, Professor Stewart sees ongoing potential for virtual action learning in leadership development. She believes virtual action learning opens up new possibilities for bringing together geographically dispersed leaders and providing more flexible, accessible development opportunities. As people have become more comfortable with virtual collaboration, she expects to see creative hybrid models emerge.

The research also sparked interest in how leaders might sustain virtual action learning independently after formal programmes end. Professor Stewart notes several examples of leaders setting up their own virtual action learning sets within their organisations. This points to exciting possibilities for more sustainable, ongoing peer support and development.

Moving forward, Professor Stewart and her team plan to further investigate best practices for facilitating virtual action learning, particularly around building trust and psychological safety remotely. They also hope to study the long-term impacts on leadership behaviours and organisational outcomes.

While this study showed virtual action learning can be highly effective, Professor Stewart acknowledges there's still much to learn about optimising the approach. However, she's excited by the potential to make high-quality leadership development more accessible through thoughtfully designed virtual experiences.

As workplaces continue to evolve, Professor Stewart's research provides valuable insights for organisations and educators looking to leverage virtual action learning. By understanding key success factors and benefits, virtual action learning can be a powerful tool for developing adaptable, reflective leaders equipped to navigate complex organisational challenges.

## MEET THE RESEARCHER

### Professor Jean-Anne Stewart

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Professor Jean-Anne Stewart is Professor of Leadership Development at Henley Business School, University of Reading. She obtained her DBA from Henley Management College in 2004, focusing on high-performing group facilitator competencies. Professor Stewart has over 18 years of experience in research and teaching at Henley Business School, specialising in leadership development, action learning, and management education. She is Programme Director for the MA Leadership and Senior Leader Apprenticeship programmes. Her research interests include leadership development through blended learning design, virtual action learning, and evaluation of leadership programmes. Professor Stewart has led several European and UK research projects on leadership, particularly in SMEs and the third sector. She has published extensively in academic journals and presented at international conferences. Her work is transforming how leadership is developed in organisations through innovative, practice-based approaches integrating action learning and technology.



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#### FURTHER READING

J-A Stewart, [Facilitating action learning & virtual action learning for leadership development: experiences and insights from a UK Masters programme](#), *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 2024, 21(1), 43–62. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2024.2310289>

J-A Stewart, [Evaluation of an action learning programme for leadership development of SME leaders in the UK](#), *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 2009, 6(2), 131–148. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767330903006802>



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