Yolaine von Barczy oversees leadership development for Biogen in Europe and also leads a team of European HR managers. She first learned about the Leading Change & Organizational Renewal (LCOR) concepts during a custom workshop conducted by Harvard Business School. Participants were given an opportunity to learn some concepts through a combination of lectures and case discussions, and then were given time to apply the knowledge gained to their own situations. This, she thought, was a powerful way to combine learning with application in a team-based environment.

Not long after the workshop, von Barczy found an opportunity to test the education/action model with Biogen Europe participants. A marketing director identified a problem where a solution would require cooperation, expertise, and understanding across several functional areas of the company. He agreed to sponsor a workshop to test the LCOR framework and approach for solving problems.

Von Barczy assembled the participants carefully, meeting with the sponsor and the managers of those who were ultimately chosen. The resulting group included representatives from eight functions and six nationalities. She then ensured that each participant was contacted individually by her or by the participant’s manager. “Because this was a new problem-solving model for Biogen Europe, managing the expectations of all was critically important to the future success of the workshop,” says von Barczy. “The idea was to build a group that was close to the problem, who understood what was at stake, and to include some who had some distance from the problem so that the solutions chosen weren’t too narrowly focused.”

The participants were taken through the five steps of Solving Today’s Problems, the first module of the LCOR multimedia resource. Each step involved watching short video clips of the faculty (two to ten minutes each), viewing the case story example and discussing it, and then applying what they had learned to their own problem. Von Barczy notes that the group particularly liked the mix of multimedia: short faculty lectures, case stories, and tutorials on the framework.

1 Biogen’s Leadership Development process is well defined and includes capability building through action learning, stretch assignments, and job rotation as well as more traditional education through university programs. This workshop was the outgrowth of an earlier Leadership Conference sponsored by the company CEO for Biogen’s top leaders held at Harvard Business School.
Because the agenda was tight, the group remained very focused and was able to complete each step within one day. They walked out of the meeting with an educational experience as well as an action plan. Equally important, they had an improved understanding of each other’s roles and capabilities that could be applied to other issues. Participants’ comments ranged from “very useful and interesting” to “very productive day.”

Biogen Europe’s employee magazine described the benefits of this new way of combining education with real work. Participants could benefit from it in different ways:

- Develop their capability in change management and problem solving
- Learn about other functions and people through discussions
- Solve a “business issue” using a broad range of capabilities, including those of people not directly involved in the problem on a daily basis, thus enabling “out of the box” ideas to be brought forward

Since the initial workshop, von Barczy has used the education/action approach with an intact work team. Preparing for that group session required different preparation and design details, such as creating subgroups during the discussions to make sure that the team members didn’t just sit back and defer to their manager. She notes also that once a broad range of issues and options had been brought forward in subgroups, the intact team could get to solutions more quickly than a cross-functional team because the manager could make decisions that would move them to a next step.

What are the leadership development implications of the applied learning approach? Von Barczy notes that applying this process and material with cross-functional teams is enormously useful for developing a better culture of openness and understanding across the company. “On the other hand, intact teams can absorb and apply the frameworks and vocabulary more quickly, because these are transferable to the group’s other issues and situations,” she observes. Becoming more involved in applying leadership education to specific work problems, and being part of the solution process, has been quite stimulating for her personally. Von Barczy would like to move quickly to introduce more of Biogen Europe’s leadership to the Leading Change & Organizational Renewal concepts. Toward that end, she’s in the planning stages for a second session with her first team, this time using the multimedia resources from the module on Leading Change.

More information:  
Yolaine von Barczy  
Biogen Europe  
E-mail: Yolaine_von_barczy@biogen.com  

Web site:  
http://www.gsb.hbs.edu/lcor