

Learning from the Masters

How do you (really) build a team ?

Action Learning is powerful for finding breakthrough solutions to complex problems and to embed leadership development in the normal working practices. Results on these two dimensions are often very clear and visible. Building high-performance teams is one of the “solutions” that Action Learning brings, but here the results are more often anecdotal testimonials from team members about better listening and better ‘connections’ with the others in the team. How can we go beyond anecdotal evidence and really “measure” how a team’s strength evolves when applying Action Learning? That’s exactly what I have been focusing on over the last couple of years.

“Team psychological safety is the shared understanding by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking.” A. Edmondson

When team members take interpersonal risks – asking others for help, admitting they made a mistake, or sharing new ideas – this can either be seen as efforts to learn and share, or be a source of ridicule and behind-the-back jokes. In the first case, the team is a safe environment, in the second it leads to team members hunkering down and avoiding to stick their neck out. Both academic research and evaluation of work teams at Google has confirmed that team psychological safety is the key ingredient that determines whether a team will perform as a high-performance team or not. Team psychological safety can be measured with a simple anonymous tool. But how do we go about not just measuring but increasing team psychological safety ? Doing that would be the real measure of how team connections change over time. I have investigated how Action Learning sessions impact a team’s psychological safety with eight different teams through 4 to 5 SPAL sessions.



There are seven statements in the original team psychological measuring instrument each linked to a key concept of taking interpersonal risks in a team: reactions to mistakes, dealing with tough issues, accepting diversity, taking risks, asking for help, mutual support and appreciation. Measuring team psychological safety highlights which of these concepts the team members think are the major challenges. This gives indications for the Action Learning coach to hone learning interventions so that the team can find better ways to deal with those areas. For example, if “dealing with tough issues” is something the team struggles with, the coach can use a moment in the session where the team is going around in circles and ask “How difficult is it to work through the current situation ? How does this compare with how this team deals with difficult situations outside of the SPAL sessions ? What could be a better way to work around this kind of situations ?”. In the following session a few

weeks later, the coach can ask the team to reflect on their regular work in the preceding weeks. “What were difficult situations that occurred in the last two weeks ? How did you deal with them ? What went well and what could you have done differently ?”. Similar interventions can be built for each of the seven elements of team psychological safety.

Without exception, measuring team psychological safety before and after a series of SPAL sessions shows an increase in the average and a decrease in the dispersion. A smaller dispersion means the different team members have a more aligned view of how comfortable they are to take interpersonal risks in the team.

So rather than just say to your client that Action Learning builds teams, make it tangible by measuring team psychological before and after your intervention.

Written by Peter Cauwelier, PhD, MALC

Peter Cauwelier's TEAM.AS.ONE concept helps teams improve the way they work, whatever their starting point. More information at www.teamasone.com