



POWER OF ACTION LEARNING

by Dr. Bea Carson

Beyond its valuable problem solving benefits, Action Learning teaches:

- Strong teams to process more efficiently,
- Stagnated teams to revolutionize,
- Floundering teams to swim,
- Anxious teams to calmly find solutions,
- Dysfunctional teams to perform effectively.

A key component of the Action Learning process – it forces the group to fully understand the problem *before* moving toward defining solutions. This dissection can lead either to resolution, or to realizing that the dilemma presented is merely a symptom of multiple problems.



Action Learning synthesizes thinking. Not only does it clearly demonstrate these skills in the Action Learning environment, but also it molds participants' attitudes in their daily interactions with each other. It changes communication tactics from making statements to asking questions.

This shift converts talking *at* each other, to hearing, comprehending, and caring what the other person has to say. It forces individuals *to listen* to each other – significantly increasing the *comprehension* experienced during the discussion.

Action Learning sessions start with the coach explaining the process. For those already familiar with Action Learning, this step reinforces the technique.

The two fundamental ground rules of Action Learning are:

- Statements can only be made in response to questions, and
- The coach has ultimate authority.

The coach must have this authority to insure that all learning opportunities are optimized. Through these learning windows, the coach guides the dynamics that the groups use to communicate changes.

There are three basic types of learning opportunities:

- Early intervention,
- Process interventions, and
- Group dynamic interventions.

The coach uses the early intervention to be sure everyone is participating in the process. One of the most difficult aspects of group processing is getting all attendees into the conversation.

Often, in typical problem-solving sessions, a few people with dominating personalities monopolize the meeting, preventing the quieter participants from speaking. The longer it takes these reserved individuals to get into the conversation the harder it becomes for the group to ever work as a unified force.

During this early period in Action Learning, it is imperative that the coach enables everyone to participate. This short intervention serves the purpose of ending that silence; thus breaking the barriers that make it so difficult for some members to speak openly.

Process interventions by the coach simply insure participants are playing by the rules. The coach will re-focus participants who shift into old habits of making statements or accusing. Additionally, the coach will make sure the group has come to a consensus, defining the problem before allowing the group to move to the solution phase.

More often than not, the problem presented at the beginning of the session is simply a symptom. Typically, as the group asks questions to learn the nature of the problem, it becomes clear that a deeper issue needs to be resolved.



Other times, during these process interventions, the group members begin to realize they are actually talking about multiple problems: this can either be a conflict that exists at several levels or a situation that is complex, touching many aspects. In either case, the participants determine how they would like to attack the multi-phases:

- When the problem exists at multiple levels, they will decide whether to start with the local issue then move toward the global – or start with the global then move toward the local.
- When the problem is complex, they will frequently use the first session to isolate the individual components. This helps prioritize the list – using future sessions to resolve the individual elements.



For the group dynamic interventions, the coach handles both positive and negative learning opportunities. During these openings, the coach will ask questions – all in a positive vein – to determine how the group could be processing better. The coach never tells the members how to handle a situation appropriately, but rather lets the group determine what works best for the individuals involved.

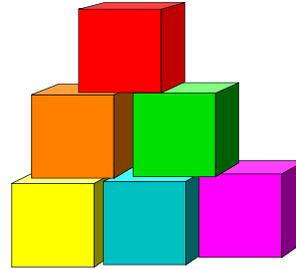
The coach takes the group to the deeper level of understanding why the changes they are making in their processing are more effective. By understanding not just the “what” of this technique of processing, but the “why” and “how” of making it better, the participants carry over these behavior modifications into their everyday interaction, with all members of the organization – co-workers as well as superiors – functioning more effectively and harmoniously.

A second aspect that emerges from these group dynamic interventions is a clearing of the air regarding hidden issues. A trained coach recognizes when the group is harboring resentments that need to surface. By exploring these issues and processing them, the group can then move ahead. Bringing these issues into the open – some that have possibly been festering for years – the group comes to a better understanding of each member.

WHAT IS ACTION LEARNING?

A dynamic process for problem solving, building teams, developing leaders, and changing culture, Action Learning consists of six components:

- 1) The problem,
- 2) A group of 4-8,
- 3) A commitment to learning,
- 4) A process that encourages questioning and listening,
- 5) A resolution to take action, and
- 6) An action learning coach.



The problem: This must be real - an urgent situation. Even during training sessions, where Action Learning is being introduced, only actual problems are used. Participants engage much more enthusiastically when they know the problem they are considering needs an immediate and innovative solution.

Problems are sometimes confused with puzzles; puzzles have only one solution. Action Learning is not an appropriate tool for puzzles; however, it is a powerful tool for problems.

A group of 4 – 8: Action Learning groups work best when there are 4 – 8 members. With fewer than 4 members diversity is too thin to unearth truly innovative solutions. With more than 8 members, the level of interaction increases vastly, becoming unwieldy. The more diverse the group, the more powerful the solutions. Ideally, one person should have little or no knowledge of the problem. This person, known as the Pizza person (see *Action Learning in Action* by Michael Marquardt), asks all the “dumb” questions, the ones everyone knows the answers to, but once the questions are voiced each discovers a different understanding of what the answer really is. New hires make exceptional pizza people; they have a plethora of questions that they need answers to and the Action Learning set is the perfect environment for these questions. This brings novices up to speed without taking deliberate time for it. Including individuals from other functions within the organization has the side effect of cross pollinating – bringing a better understanding of the entire organization to all departments.

A commitment to learning: During the Action Learning set, many opportunities for learning will be addressed. Before beginning the process, members agree they will be open to these learning opportunities. The long term advantage of Action Learning is the development and extension of these learning interventions. Participants take these techniques and continue to apply them in all areas of their work. Capitalizing on this provides a geometric impact that the organization feels, in addition to the immediate solution of the urgent problem.



Solving an organizational problem provides immediate, short-term benefits to the company. The greater, long-term, expanding benefit is the learning gained by each group member – as well as the group as a whole. Subsequently, these learnings are applied on a systems-wide basis throughout the organization. Thus, the learning that occurs in Action Learning has greater value strategically for the organization than the immediate tactical advantage of early problem correction. Accordingly, Action Learning places equal emphasis on the learning and development of individuals and the team as it does on the solving of problems; the smarter the group becomes, the quicker, better quality of its decision-making and action-taking.

A process that encourages questioning and listening: Action Learning requires questions and reflection; statements and opinions are secondary. By focusing on the questions rather than the answers, Action Learning fills the gaps in one's knowledge rather than showing off what one knows. More important, beyond encouraging this openness to asking questions, Action Learning makes it *safe to ask questions*. Participants discover that through questioning they expand the base of their own knowledge. This growth allows them to find much more innovative ways of addressing every day issues. This shift can be overheard in conversations in the hall, and seen in the change of tone in e-mails. Participants discover the true power of questions over statements.

A resolution to take action: The most powerful learnings take place when the action is implemented; through doing we solidify the notions of what we heard. Action Learning sets must not only be empowered to take action on the problem they are resolving, they must be required to take action. In some instances, the actions that come out of an Action Learning set may simply be to gather additional information needed to solve the problem. In other instances, it is a full-fledged change initiative that will set a new course for the organization. Because the group must be empowered to take action, it is imperative that at least one person in the group have the authority to approve the actions before the group disbands. Groups that have to send their solutions for approval after the meeting are less inclined to put their best effort forward.

An Action Learning coach: The Action Learning coach's primary role is to focus on the learning. The coach looks for learning opportunities and uses them to ask questions that will cause the group to determine better ways to function as a team. Through the use of questions, the coach is able to lead the group to reflect and determine the best ways for them to process. Additionally, the coach works as helmsman – keeping the team focused on solving the problem at hand. The coach also enforces the ground rules – particularly in terms of being responsible for the learning. The coach focuses only on the learning – not the problem at hand – reminding the group that the learning is equal to the problem, in importance.

Action Learning is a powerful method of building mutual respect into an organization's training program. It teaches people to continually question, creating an environment where "because that's the way we have always done it" becomes an unacceptable answer. It empowers employees to handle the permanent white water that is part of everyday life. It sets the process in motion that allows strategies to be continually flexible.

Action Learning is effective for solving dilemmas of all sizes. It is most powerful for solving problems that require creative, out-of-the-box solutions. Senge describes a need to get away from institutional training and generate a learning environment; Action Learning creates this environment. It teaches people to question and think about how to do it better, rather than blindly continue the old way of doing tasks.

ACTION LEARNING IS EFFECTIVE

Case Studies

Culture Change: The problem presented was that we need programs to create a positive work culture. The organization only has forty employees; split between two divisions. The divisions happen to be located on separate floors. The level of animosity between the two divisions has reached a destructive level. Something needs to be done to create a positive culture.

The team tenaciously started asking questions - it was clear they were avoiding something. After a few learning interventions they started peeling back the onion. They started identifying the groups of employees that were not part of the problem. Tensions started to rise as they were getting close to naming the problem employees.

I intervened asking "How are we doing as a team?" The angry response was "Great! Until you interrupted!" Our conversation continued –

"What are we doing great?"

"We were just about to identify who the problem is!"

"Is that important?"

"Yes!"

"Would the behavior be acceptable from someone else?"

This was followed by silence, then a more subdued "No. The behavior would not be acceptable from anyone."



With this, I let them continue with defining the problem. It wasn't long before they concluded there were only two people that were feuding. However, the battle was so intense that it was infecting everyone. Within minutes, they realized the real problem was - we don't deal with conflict. The remainder of the set was spent identifying unacceptable behaviors; and how they would be addressed.



Shift Schedule Change: The problem presented was that the group needed to determine better shift schedules without increasing paid overtime. The site needed coverage 24 hours a day, six days a week. At that time, to cover the six days - they were running three 8-hour shifts.

During the process of understanding the true nature of the problem, the real issue surfaced. One of the members of the team had been at the plant when it went from a seven-day week to a six-day week. Covering seven days allowed longer shifts over fewer days – employees worked four days and had three days off. One of the benefits of using Action Learning techniques, the group heard from an ordinarily quiet participant. They learned the issue was twofold. Many of the employees commuted over an hour to get to work: shifting from four days to six days a week added a heavy toll to travel time.

However, the deeper issue that surfaced was that the site went to the six-day schedule without consulting the employees. They simply were handed the new schedule.

If, during the problem solving, we had simply come up with a new schedule, the issue of consulting the employees still would not have been addressed. Consequently, the team proposed three different schedules. The employees were then able to choose the work schedule that best fit their needs without the company incurring additional cost.

Two for One: The problem: We have more problems than we have time to address. How can we prioritize them and start addressing them?

The whole group decided a core cadre would prioritize the list. We would then split into two teams, each taking one problem at a time to work through to completion. The teams would then report on the actions they had evolved. Everyone in the whole group would abide by the actions determined by the team working the problem.



The core cadre identified eight problems that needed to be addressed, and set them in priority order. The group seemed ready to split into teams and start working the issues. At that point, we hit our first snag of the day. Both teams wanted to be responsible for the item that was given the first priority. It was not that each wanted to be the hero in tackling this issue, it was that neither wanted to trust the results that the other team created.

A key element of Action Learning is that only one team works on a problem. If multiple teams work the same problem, the same level of effort is not applied towards it. In such circumstances, each is aware someone else is working the issue, so the urgency to find “the solution” is lost. Members of Action Learning sets need to know the problem they are working is real and that they will be responsible for taking the actions, and implementing the solution.

The group consisted of too many participants to allow them to work as a single group. A lively discussion ensued. The most vocal remark was, “I can’t let THEM decide for me.” As the Action Learning coach, I finally opted to trust them. I allowed the group to talk me into letting them work the same problem. I had strong reservations about permitting them to do this, but the level of distrust between the participants in the room was so strong that we decided this was the best course of action. We left ninety minutes at the end of the session to allow each team to report, and then consolidate the issues into a single list.

Not surprisingly, the number one issue that had been identified was their communication issue. This group was made up of members from multiple companies. They had a situation where each company had its own interest to worry about, in addition to the interest of the project. Sometimes these interests were in direct conflict with each other. Developing successful means of communicating were imperative to the success of the solution.

These groups worked for several hours, and worked hard to understand the basis of their communication issues. From listening to each other, they generated next steps, including specific actions that they would be taking. Each team generated about a dozen concrete action items that would be taken to improve the communication across the companies.

The groups came back together with their lists in hand; each ready to defend why their recommendations were the RIGHT actions. We only had about ninety minutes to reconcile the lists, so there was a bit of tension in the room, whether we could accomplish that.

The lists were posted in the front of the room, guarded by the team’s spokesperson. As soon as the lists were up, each group started scanning the list produced by the other team. A disbelieving silence fell over the room. Then the murmurs started. It was with totally amazement



that everyone realized the lists were virtually identical. The same folks who had voiced their distrust of the other team spoke up again – “I guess I CAN trust them.”

Roles and Responsibilities: The problem was that it is not clear that the current structure works for understanding what the roles and responsibilities within the organization are. The group worked diligently for several hours attempting to clarify the meaning of this problem. Ultimately, what they decided was that they had a much bigger problem that needed to be resolved before they could even begin to address the problem of roles and responsibilities.

No reorganization would work until they addressed the communication issues. The team continued with the Action Learning process; as they proceeded, they realized there were three dimensions to this communication problem.

They persisted for many hours; recognizing the perceptions and attitudes that were flowing from each side of each of the communication paths. Each person was free to express his or her perception of what was occurring. In exchange for being allowed to express one side of the issue, they openly listened to the other side. Through questions, each of the communication issues was re-evaluated. Each situation was looked at from both views, from how it made the recipient feel, to what the transmitter’s intent was. The team decided on specific actions to prevent the same situation from arising again.

Typically, these communication issues are addressed during the learning portion of an Action Learning set. However, this group decided their issues were so deep that they needed to be worked head on. This group learned the lessons about communication issues that all Action Learning teams learn - leading to the development of the Communication Code of Conduct.

COMMUNICATION CODE OF CONDUCT

The Communication Code of Conduct cards were designed to be a constant reminder of the rules of engaging in communication. They are wallet size so they can be carried conveniently. At some point, these simple rules emerge in every Action Learning set. Because of this linkage, the Action Learning rules are printed on the reverse side of the Code of Conduct rules.

The sessions where groups have decided to attack the communications issues head on tend to hit on all of these issues in a single session. These groups will frequently come up with dozens of actions to be taken as a result of their set, however, as they examine each of them, they come to realize they fall into one (or several) of the items identified in the Communication Code of Conduct.



Action Learning Ground Rules	Communication Code of Conduct
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) statements can only be made in response to questions2) the action learning coach has the power to intervene whenever he/she sees an opportunity for learning.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) ASSUME NOBLE INTENT2) Use the power of questions3) Really listen4) Stay focused5) Build on each others questions6) Respect the perceptions of others7) Keep responses short8) Draw others into the conversation

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Communication Code of Conduct:

Assume Noble Intent

Most of us do what we do because we believe it is the best thing to do. Within “societal structures” we base our actions on what we believe is best for “the whole,” whether in the boardroom, or the factory. But our altruistic actions sometimes appear questionable to others. However, if we start from the assumption of noble intent we are more likely to approach the situation with an open mind.

Use the power of questions

The many faceted effect of the “power behind questions” becomes a tremendously long list.

For starters, by asking questions, we can:

- ◆ Uncover information about the things we do not know.
- ◆ Express an interest in what the other person has to say.
- ◆ Draw the other person into the conversation.
- ◆ Make it clear we are not making assumptions and are open to possibilities beyond our initial reaction.

Questions allow us to uncover the underlying causes rather than simply looking at the symptoms. Questions encourage multiple perspectives.



When we ask someone a question, we force him or her to listen to us. It is only through listening that he or she will be able to respond to the question. Because questions indicate we care what the other person has to say, trust and openness increase. Perhaps most important, questions help us reach a common truth.

Really listen

Simply put, we cannot come to a common understanding if we do not truly listen to each other. It is through the cycle of listening and questioning we get to the root of the situation.

Stay focused

During discussions, we sometimes allow ourselves to be sidetracked; those additional facets of the subject might be interesting, but they prevent us from getting closer to understanding the current situation. Sticking with the subject at hand allows us to get to the root cause, and remedy the problem so that it will not need to be addressed again.

Build on each other's questions

Asking a question is great, but if a haphazard approach is used, the focus will be lost and discussions will need to be repeated. By building off the previous question, a train of thought can be run to complete clarification before diverging to the next element of the discussion. These questions force us to investigate all elements of the original question, thereby analyzing it completely. This fleshing out approach to asking questions insures none of the elements is missed. Even if no one in the group has the answer, the question is captured for future follow up.

Respect the perceptions of others

Everyone looks at each situation through his or her own lens. We all do it – especially adults reflecting back on childhood. Whichever sibling you ask in a family, he or she was the one who had the toughest time growing up. It was all because of this “tough childhood” that each is so successful – or dysfunctional.

In the work place, we see it almost on a daily basis. When someone does something that is out of synch with our thinking, our immediate response often is that he/she is doing some evasive fancy footwork, or back stabbing, or sucking up into position for promotion.



Once we accept that there could be another side to the story we open ourselves to the possibility of agreeing on a common truth.

Keep responses short

We all know one – a person who gets on a soapbox and just never stops blathering. The drone goes on and on and on and on until everyone has tuned out the bore. Unfortunately, since the orator is unwilling to relinquish the floor, nothing else can be discussed. By staying focused and simply answering the question, much more communication can take place. It is very rare that a person needs more than just a few minutes to answer a question.

Again, simply answer the question. If someone wants more details, you will be asked.

Remember, you will learn much more by asking the questions that allow you to broaden your knowledge. You move further ahead! Your trying to show off every minute detail of your knowledge can leave you in quicksand.

Even worse than those who try to show off knowledge, are those who tout opinion as fact.

Draw others into the conversation

Multiple perspectives allow for the shifts in paradigms that facilitate the out of the box solutions. In terms of benchmarks – if it is “benchmark-able” someone else can do it better. It is relatively easy to improve on the current standard. To really get out ahead of the competition, processes need to be changed to establish new targets. To achieve these changes, those closest to the process need to step back. They need to allow new eyes to look at it. They must encourage these eyes to ask questions. By thoroughly probing the process from different perspectives, the current blinders, which are focused solely on the current way of doing things, are lifted.

Living by this Communication Code of Conduct, organizations are experiencing a shift in culture. Graduates of the program respond to what was previously an upsetting “non” communication, situation, by approaching the other person. No one is considered a guilty party, because by assuming noble intent and accepting that there is another perspective it makes the person approachable. By simply going to the other person and asking a question it becomes quickly apparent there was no malicious intent – just overworked people who missed keeping everyone informed. They realize the deep problems they thought they had, no longer exist. They

realize the people they used to think were “out to get them,” like themselves, are simply trying to get their own job done.

CONCLUSION

Even more powerful than the problem solving that emerges from the Action Learning session, the long-term positive effects spread to many facets of the members’ lives.

Participants of Action Learning sessions quickly learn the power of questions. They discover that, by incorporating more views into their problem solving, they are able to achieve far more powerful solutions than they ever imagined. By seeking out the views of others, they easily engage all participants into the conversation.



Team spirit within the organization deepens. These discoveries become a part of a new culture that emerges in the organization. On a day-to-day basis, the way people interact: whether it is water cooler talk, hallway conversations, or email; whether committee meetings, or major boardroom consultations, these new communication and comprehension skills are quickly and effectively empowering all.



RECOMMENDED READING

- Marquardt, M.J., 1999. *Action Learning in Action*. Palo Alto, CA: Black-Davies Publishing.
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ADDITIONAL READING

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