

A FRESH LOOK AT GROUND RULE #1

And a call to apply it strictly as a coach !



Ground Rule #1

If there's anything a WIAL Action Learning coach remembers from their certification program, it is the power of WIAL's Ground Rule #1: Statements can only be made in response to questions (and anyone can ask a question to anyone else). This ground rule is what makes WIAL Action Learning so powerful, and so different from other forms of Action Learning.

A coach starts each session with a reminder of both ground rules, to ensure the team members are aligned with the rules necessary for a successful Action Learning session. And then, off we go !

Who has the next question ?

For sure the session starts off with a few questions (and sometimes a bit of hesitation) followed by some answers. All is good: Ground Rule #1 in full swing! Yet very often, and very quickly, questions tend to get longer. Some questions are preceded by an "introduction" or explanation about the question that is about to follow. "John, it seems that there is a bit of something going on and also maybe something else, so my question is, how do you feel about this ?"

Or a question is followed by some sort of elaboration, as if the question needs to be put in perspective, clarified or expanded upon. When "because" slips into a question, the person asking is in fact about to answer their own question. "So Susan, how do you feel about this situation, because it seems from what you said earlier that something but maybe it could also be that there is something else ?".

At some point, I used to intervene about “long questions”. “Team, are we asking more short questions or more long questions? What is the impact if we ask this or that kind of question ...?”. It took me a while to realize that there are no long questions.



There are no long questions

There is no such thing as a long question. When a question gets long, it stops being a question. It may start off with a question word, but then the question gets killed off in a series of twists and turns and additions and explanations. By the time the long-winded so-called question comes to an end, the team member to whom it is addressed will likely ask “Euh ... what was the question again?”.

Unfortunately, many coaches – I have been guilty, but getting better – are way too flexible with Ground Rule #1. The ground rule states that statements can only be made in response to questions. It does not state that one can elaborate, add, explain, clarify, expand without end, as long as there is a question somewhere in there, either at the start or at the end of the rambling. Quite often the coach will be listening closely and as long as a question word (who, what, how ...) is uttered, will consider that there was a question there.

There are many advantages of asking questions in Action Learning. One of the main reasons we ask questions is to develop genuine curiosity: putting oneself in others’ shoes, and exploring their problem and its context without judgment. Questions that are followed by long elaborations, explanations and clarifications are not genuine or curious questions. Same for questions that come at the end of a long-winded description. They may grammatically start off or get wrapped up as a question, but they are not questions in the spirit of WIAL Action Learning, and a WIAL coach should not allow them.

Intervene (aka interrupt)!

As a coach, you know after 15 seconds if someone is asking a question or not. Yes, you read that well: 15 seconds. In spoken language, 15 seconds corresponds to around 30 words. Try and ask a genuine question that is 30 words long: you will not succeed. There is no such thing as a long question. If you count the questions in Choon Seng Ng's "What's Your Question" book and add them to the number of questions in "Power Questions" by Andrew Sobel and Jerold Panas, you come to a total of 967 questions. I could not find any question amongst the 967 that has more than 20 words.

As a coach, if a "question" goes on beyond 15 seconds or 30 words, you can be pretty certain that Ground Rule #1 is being broken. So intervene ! Yes, after 15 seconds ...

A coach should not be aggressive, but at the same time, why wait for the so-called "question" to end (after 30 ? 45 ? 60 seconds or more ... ?) if you know after 15 seconds that Ground Rule #1 is being broken. If you do not intervene, the team members get into the habit of explaining, talking, clarifying or elaborating with a question somewhere thrown in at the end. They think they are asking questions.

So after 15 seconds, and with the "question" still going on, I lean in, smile and ask "And so your question is ... ?". Sometimes I get a reaction like "Yes, but I am explaining why I am asking my question !" to which I answer – with a smile – "That's OK, just ask your question !". After a few times, team members learn (!) and see the power of asking real, curious questions, without explanations before or after. And then we can have a real Action Learning session !

Honor Ground Rule #1

Ground Rule #1 is what makes WIAL Action Learning powerful. As a coach, we need to ensure that the ground rule is really followed, not just "mechanically" or grammatically, but also in the spirit of asking curious questions. Interrupt so-called long questions after 15 seconds: the team will gain tremendously from it !

Peter Cauwelier, MALC
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