

ACTION LEARNING IS A SYSTEMIC TEAM COACHING APPROACH



Summary: Given the current and growing interest in team coaching among a wide range of organizations, it will be increasingly important to highlight action learning as a systemic team coaching approach, in addition to its value as a group coaching and problem-solving methodology. While there are many flavors of Action Learning, the *single-problem* approach developed by Prof. Marquardt can be regarded as an effective approach to systemic team coaching. It shares the enabling conditions that support effective team coaching as well as Peter Hawkins' *five disciplines* that are essential to the success of a sustainable and value-creating team.

Discussion:

Interest in, and the use of, team coaching by private, not-for-profit, and government organizations is growing. So much so, that the International Coach Federation (ICF) has supplemented its established Core Competencies with a set of team coaching competencies. Although Action Learning has long been appreciated by its practitioners and clients as a powerful team coaching intervention, it typically has not been described as such in influential discussions of team coaching.

As originally advanced by Reg Revans in the late-1960s, action learning was a pragmatic methodology for dealing with difficult problems of organizations and individual managers. It's often presented as a group coaching approach. David Clutterbuck, for example, regards action learning as one form of "learning alliance" that "relates learning to current, meaningful tasks, on which learners receive the benefit of support, criticism

and ad hoc coaching from each other.”¹ Jennifer Britton references Clutterbuck and Revans in including action learning as one of several approaches “as part of the modality of group coaching”². Peter Hawkins likens action learning “sets” in which four to seven members take turns bringing “current challenges they are facing to be coached on by the other members of the set and, where present, the set facilitator” to group coaching³. These reflect a “classic” version of action learning, which Marquardt labels a “multiple-problem group,” i.e., a form of “group” coaching. But there is another version, a “single-problem group” that can be a form of systemic team coaching.⁴

The single-problem action learning “group” typically meets the criteria suggested by Katzenback and Smith for effective teams:⁵ Its members focus their energies on a single problem typically determined by the organization. The problem should be a complex, important and urgent challenge to the organization that has no known or obvious solution, yet requires actionable solutions. Team members should have a diversity of backgrounds and experience to enhance the number and types of perspectives brought to bear on the problem. Ideally, at least one should be so removed from the problem that they are free to ask naive questions that challenge underlying assumptions and the “expertise” of the others, and so stimulate unconventional thinking and creativity in the team’s addressing of the problem.⁶

The power of both of these action learning versions lay in their two shared ground rules:⁷

1. Statements should be made only in response to questions, and
2. The action learning coach has the power to intervene at any point of his or her choosing for the purpose of catalyzing the team’s self-awareness and learning.

These rules, agreed to by all the team members, shifts the team’s dynamic from a natural tendency to make statements and offer judgements toward a “questions first” way of reflective listening. This balancing of questions and statements encourages dialogue and *equalizes power within the team*. This process of reflective inquiry *empowers* and *legitimizes* the team members’ asking questions to gather information important to them, regardless of whether their colleagues discount the importance of that information.

Marquardt’s “action learning coach” is much more than the “facilitator” referenced above. Marquardt’s coach is exclusively focused on serving as a catalyst for reflective

¹ David Clutterbuck, *Coaching the Team at Work: The definitive guide to team coaching* (2nd ed.) (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2020), p. 300.

² Jennifer J. Britton, *From One to Many: Best Practices for Team and Group Coaching* (Wiley/Jossey-Bass, 2013), pp. 120-122.

³ Hawkins, p. 74.

⁴ Michael J. Marquardt, *Optimizing the Power of Action Learning: Solving Problems & Building Leaders in Real Time* (CA: Davies-Black Publishing, 2004)Marquardt, pp. 5-6.

⁵ Cited in Hawkins, pp. 37-38. (Small number; Complementary skills; Commitment to the collective endeavor; Common purpose; Outcome goals; Shared approach; Mutually accountable; Meeting & communicating in ways that raise morale and energy; Effective engagement with all the team’s key stakeholders; Continuous learning & development)

⁶ Marquardt, p. 57. The role of the naïve questioner is referred to as the “Pizza Man” role in this version of AL.

⁷ Ibid, pp.8-9.



learning within the team. Communicating exclusively through asking and responding to questions, the coach intervenes “whenever they believe there is an opportunity for the team to learn, to improve on what it is not going well, and to continue behaviors that are conducive to solving the problem.”⁸



This single-problem version of action learning essentially fits Hawkins’ concept of “systemic team coaching,” i.e. “a process by which a team coach works with a whole team, both when they are together and when they are apart, in order to help them improve both their effectiveness and how they work together, and also how they develop their collective leadership to more effectively engage and co-create value with and for all their key stakeholder groups to jointly transform the wider business ecosystem and create beneficial for the wider ecology.”⁹

This fit is illustrated in the table below, which aligns Hawkins’ 5 Principles of Systemic Team Coaching with Marquardt’s outline of the steps to take in the implementation of effective action learning.

⁸ Ibid., p. 9, & pp. 133ff.

⁹ Hawkins, p. 82.

Hawkins 5 Principles	Single Problem Action Learning*
<p>Commissioning <i>team purpose & contracting for team's deliverables</i></p>	<p>Gain support of top management for the AL approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To be used for urgent, intractable problems - Team role in implementation - Assignment of resources for team - Identification of actual problem(s) to be addressed by the team <p>Confirm enabling conditions for successful team coaching¹⁰</p>
<p>Clarifying <i>by team of its collective purpose for itself through development of a team charter</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preparatory workshop to orient all concerned with AL principles, benefits, & format - Membership of team members set - Identify team roles – problem presenter & coach - Problem is clarified through its reframing by the Question/Statement ground rule - Goals established (with associated milestones, deadlines, deliverables, etc.
<p>Co-creating <i>interpersonal team dynamics that foster creative work together & the capacity to handle conflict.</i></p>	<p>AL sessions are co-creative by design & naturally encompass Hawkins' positive meeting interventions¹¹ and work against his "limiting learning styles"¹²:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Question/statement format promotes dialogue that fosters trust, mutual respect, and a forward-looking results-oriented team dynamic - The coach allows the team to work, intervening only to ensure adherence to the two ground rules, and to catalyze both collective and individual learning. "[His/her] responsibility is to help the [team] become aware of its behavior and the positive or negative consequences of that behavior."¹³
<p>Connecting <i>with all critical stakeholders</i></p>	<p>Team recommendations and, if included in the initial contract, its involvement with their implementation requires engagement with all relevant stakeholders</p>

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 409. [a collective purpose; recognition that they need to work together more effectively to achieve this purpose; openness to receiving help in achieving the previous two ambitions; commitment of the necessary time and resources; willingness to be self-reflective, both as a team and individually]

¹¹ Hawkins, pp. 117-118 (diversity, team performance, outcome driven appreciative, psychologically safe)

¹² Ibid, pp.131-132 (compulsive pragmatism, backward looking, navel-gazing, analysis paralysis, totalitarian)

¹³ Marquardt, p. 149

<p>Core Learning of the team <i>as it reflects on its performance – its collective learning as well as its contribution to individual member learning & development</i></p>	<p>Reflective learning is built into the team dynamic throughout its engagement through timely interventions by the coach whose primary role is to catalyze team learning through his/her questions, e.g.:¹⁴</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did we achieve our goal? - What is the quality of our strategies? - What did we do well? What could we have done better? - What have been your most significant learnings? - What have been the most valuable learnings of the team? - What made us successful? - What did we learn about teams? - Which learnings and skills could be or have been applied to the organization?
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* Adapted from Marquardt's 12 Steps for Action Learning (pp.159 ff) for a *single-problem* AL Team

Conclusion

Practitioners of action learning have long known and appreciated its value as a coaching modality for both individuals and teams. For non-practitioners, however, action learning is more likely to be viewed as an approach to addressing individual and organizational problems. To the extent that its coaching dimension is recognized, it is seen primarily as a “group coaching” methodology.

Action learning should be particularly appealing to organizations in search of team coaching interventions. Increasing the likelihood that it will be depends on the ability of its practitioners to “frame” action learning as an established form of systemic team coaching. In practical terms, this would mean highlighting the “single-problem” action learning set.¹⁵

The discussion above can provide one starting point for such a “framing.”

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¹⁴ Ibid, p. 147

¹⁵ “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a [communication], in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43.4 (Autumn 1993), p.52