

WHY AND HOW SHOULD THE ACTION LEARNING COACH FOCUS MORE ON LEARNING? REFLECTIONS ON A LONG-STANDING PRACTICE OF THE METHOD IN THE FRENCH ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT



This reflection is based on more than 10 years of Action Learning practice in the French national context, and the difficulties encountered in optimizing the learning benefits of this great collaborative intelligence method.

In France, the field of learning is closely linked to that of training, and therefore to teaching and its pedagogical approaches. What's more, the notion of "apprentissage" is still often misunderstood, and not distinguished from that of training, which focuses essentially on cognitive learning and too little on behavioral learning.

Moreover, Action Learning has a particular and unusual position in the world of organizational support (consulting, training, coaching, etc.). It is often misunderstood as being close to consulting, for finding solutions to complex problems, but also to training, for developing individual and collective skills, and to coaching, with a form of team coaching. The original, multi-faceted and rich positioning of this method often hinders its communication and understanding by organizational managers, and therefore its development.

Experience shows that, in general, company or organization managers are primarily interested in the short-term benefits of this collaborative intelligence method, in this case the resolution of complex, important and often urgent real-life problems, with the aim of rapidly obtaining operational solutions. On the other hand, they are much less interested in its learning dimension, which relates to the development of individual and collective skills, and is more concerned with its medium-term benefits. Yet these are undoubtedly more important for improving the organization's overall and sustainable performances, through their progressive impact on its culture and managerial practices when this model of team thinking and acting spreads and become widespread.

It therefore seems appropriate to reflect on how the action learning coach should act, on the one hand to better promote the benefits of learning in terms of communication and “selling” the method to company or organization managers, and on the other hand to prepare a session (upstream phase) in order to better introduce the importance of this learning dimension during its facilitation, by insisting more on the right attitude and behaviors of participants in terms of learning, and by insisting more on these benefits during the debriefing of each session, which is often too short given time constraints.

The coach’s role in promoting the importance of learning in the practice of Action Learning

a) In terms of presenting and “selling” the method to company or organization managers

Generally speaking, we find that prospects (companies or organizations) are much more attracted by the “action” part of the method, which enables them to rapidly find creative, relevant and operational solutions to complex problems, than by the learning benefits linked to the development of participants’ individual and collective soft skills.

What’s more, they often find it hard that you can really do both at the same time, and develop participants’ communication skills outside a traditional pedagogical training framework.

Moreover, for participants unfamiliar with the practice of the method, the fact of working by questioning both the problem presented and the chosen skill appears difficult, at least initially, and often leads to confusion in the French context.

To avoid these difficulties and obstacles, our practice has led us to proceed gradually.

In the first sessions with participants who have never used this method before, we don’t work with them on their skills during the first session. This is all the more important given the difficulties of the art of questioning for most participants, who are not at all accustomed to this type of intellectual exercise. Indeed, it is ignored by the dominant traditional educational system, but also in the world of traditional companies and organizations, where docile, obedient people are preferred to people who ask too many questions!

When presenting the approach to prospective managers, it’s important to emphasize the medium-term benefits to the company that will result from this collaborative intelligence practice and its very positive impact on the managerial culture when it is widespread: employees are more attentive to others, with better communication and collaboration skills, are more creative, efficient, truly learning work teams, better working atmospheres, more attractive organizational image, etc.

As a result, the priority targets for this learning development benefit will tend to be companies or organization interested in improving the quality of their human management, creating close-knit, high performance and creative teams, developing the leadership skills of their participants, etc. and showing that the complex problem-solving aspect of questioning can also make an effective and positive managerial contribution.

In the French context, potential customers interested in the benefits of “learning” will generally be large companies or organizations with an “HR Development” function, focusing in particular on high potential managers and executive teams. This collaborative intelligence method should also be of interest to the specialized educational system (Universities of management sciences and Business schools), which paradoxically lags far behind in its practices and promotions of real learning approaches with their behavioral dimensions, as it is too exclusively focused on cognitive learning about the various management disciplines and techniques.

In conclusion, the Action Learning coach must pay close attention to understanding the needs of the different categories of prospects he contacts, and show them how this approach can bring them not only short-term benefits, but also prospects for improving the quality of their management culture and practices in the medium term. Of course, he or she will need to tailor the presentation to the expectations and objectives of prospects, given the different categories of potential benefits of the method.

b) Pre-requisites for running sessions and interventions

Based on our practical experience of Action Learning, we felt that the coach’s introductory remarks in the WIAL script were too brief and too quick, especially for participants unfamiliar with the method, to really create the necessary favorable context for optimizing the learning benefits, both in terms of individual communication and leadership skills and collective reflection skills.

In our view, the coach should place much greater emphasis in the upstream phase on the attitudes and behaviors expected of the participants in this area, especially if they are unfamiliar with this reflexive method. This is particularly the case in the traditional French organizational context, which is often characterized by attitudes and behaviors far removed from, or even opposed to, those required by this method, such as attentive listening, benevolence, non-judgment and non-criticism, openness to others viewpoints, curiosity, humility, honesty and so on.

It may also be a good idea to carry out short training exercises beforehand, and to give a preliminary presentation of the individual and collective skills that can be developed using this method, which is often overlooked by the Action Learning coach.

We can see here that the priority given to short-term benefits of the method: the operational solution found tends to overshadow the medium-term benefits, which are behavioral in nature and more difficult to assess, such as participants’ individual skills enhancement and the collective learning dynamic, which is a source of improvements in the quality of managerial practices, in better team cohesion and motivation, increased collective creativity, etc.

The coach will need to be discerning to ensure that the method is properly understood by the organization’s managers, and to demonstrate the great benefits of developing learning teams, which are the foundation for building a real learning organization. This will result in an evolution of the organizational and managerial culture, enabling the company not only to achieve superior and sustainable overall performances, but also to improve its image and attractiveness.

The coach's role in facilitating the session to ensure that the participants adopt the right attitudes and behaviors for learning

The coach's role is complex, but crucial, as a catalyst for collective reflection based on questioning. In addition to his or her role as timekeeper and script supervisor, his or her essential- and undoubtedly most delicate – function is to stimulate participant's learning during the various exchanges, notably through appropriate interventions: observations, questions to the group or to a participant, sharing of participant's experiences or specific knowledge, reminders of the basic rules and ethics of the method, etc.

This role requires very careful monitoring of the exchanges, observation of participants' attitudes and behaviors, and if necessary, reminders of the values or ethics that should characterize Q & A exchanges: attentive listening, respect of the participants, absence of judgement, no negative questions or criticisms, benevolence, openness, curiosity, humility, honesty, willingness to learn from others, etc.

But in general, this ethic of exchange during a session, especially if it's a first session with participants who are unfamiliar with the method, is not customary in most human relations and meetings within traditional hierarchical organizations.

Hence the need for the coach to intervene to ensure that ethical rules are respected, as this is an essential characteristic and condition of the method effectiveness.

It's worth noting that the ethical stance implied by the practice of this approach for the participants is not usual in the French organizational context, which is marked in particular by hierarchical reflexes and by the weakness of learning attitudes and behaviors in everyday work (not to mention the frequent and numerous other relational dysfunctions linked to the widespread mediocre quality of the managerial and organizational practices).

For example, even if the coach makes it clear before the session that the various people in the group all have the same opportunity to ask and answer questions, we often find that participants from lower hierarchical levels are prevented from expressing themselves.

The coach must intervene so that everyone can express themselves through uninhibited questions and answers, and must insist on the "equality" of all participants, whatever their status and function in the organization. This difficulty is particularly common in traditional French organizational contexts, which are often highly hierarchical.

From our experience, to overcome this type of difficulty in the case of a first session, we have found advisable to ensure that participants are volunteers, to assess their motivation to take part in the process and be sure that they will have the right attitudes and behaviors (the coach can have a brief individual interview with each participant beforehand to check these points).

- a) *The individual level for the development of communication skills or leadership skills chosen by each participant*

The first difficulty encountered, especially for participants unfamiliar with the method, is that of choosing the skill they wish to work on during the session. It is therefore important for the coach to be able to present a list of communication or leadership skills ("soft skills") as examples, and for participants to have time for brief reflection to freely choose the one in which they feel they could make progress. It's also a good idea for the coach to explain how, through a question and answer based dialogue, they can develop the chosen skill in practice. He/she should also draw the attention of the other participants to any positive illustrations of the skill during the exchanges, which requires them to listen very carefully to all exchanges.

However, this point is often glossed over too quickly before the start of the session. This explains the frequently low level of individual learning observed during the final debriefing of the session, and the fact that some participants find it difficult to say what they have observed as positive in each person, as they are already making the effort to concentrate on developing their own skills while working on the presenter's problem or topic.

In addition to the discussion of individual skills provided for in the script, an important role for the coach will be to talk about the positive things he or she has observed, in a spirit of benevolence, in the sole direction of progress, and refraining from any criticism or remarks with a negative connotation.

Lastly, and particularly in the French organizational context, we need to emphasize the need for humility, active listening and a willingness to develop communication and leadership skills as part of the learning process. And yet especially when it involves higher hierarchical levels such as top managers or executives, this often requires a delicate effort at humility, as it affects their image in the eyes of others, and especially for lower hierarchical levels participants. In France, admitting that you can improve your communication skills can be seen as an admission of weakness, or even incompetence, likely to make you feel uncomfortable!

Here, too, the coach has an important role to play in establishing a climate of psychological security, which is essential to good exchanges, and making it clear that all participants can progress in the field of communication and leadership skills, whatever their status, function or hierarchical level. Naturally, the coach must also insist on the confidentiality of exchanges between all group members.

b) *At group level, to master the learning dynamic of the group or team*

Another responsibility of the Action Learning coach is to develop a learning group or team by encouraging the emergence of a collective learning dynamic. This means not only ensuring strict adherence to the rule of questioning, while respecting the ethics of this method, so that everyone feels comfortable asking and answering questions. He must also encourage everyone to listen attentively, and to demonstrate curiosity, humility, a desire to learn and a willingness to be enriched by the points of view and experiences of others. This often far removed from attitudes and relational behaviors of traditional organizational work meetings.

He will also get participants to reflect on their usual methods of collective reflection, and invite them to make comparisons with the Action Learning method. During the final debriefing, he will encourage them to reflect on what they have learned from this collective reflection, and what they can transpose and put into practice in their professional and personal lives for better achievement.

As soon as this way of working in a group gradually spreads throughout the organization or company, a new dynamic of a true learning company or organization will emerge, leading to higher overall performances and the creation of more motivating and attractive working environments, as well as a much better image for the company or organization that will enhance its attractiveness for genuine talents.

Conclusion

We can see that the roles of the Action Learning coach in developing the benefits of learning of this method is undoubtedly the most important from a medium-term perspective. In reality, however, they are delicate and complex to master, and therefore require specific skills. This can only be acquired through appropriate and demanding training, with greater emphasis on this specific dimension and benefits of the method.

The training of Action Learning coaches must particularly develop this team coaching skill which also needs a lot of practices. All the more so in traditional, highly hierarchical organizational settings such as those that dominate most of the French organizations.

Indeed, participants generally have reflexes, attitudes and behaviors in their day-to-day working relationships that are far removed from those required for good and fruitful Action Learning practice.

The coach must clearly explain and demonstrate the benefits of this method for individuals, work teams and the whole organization. For the latter, they will be linked to its internal dissemination and generalization within the organization as an attractive valuable new team management mode that will lead to a new managerial culture for sustainable better global performances.

Daniel Belet
Senior Action Learning Coach, France
drbelet@wanadoo.fr