

ACTION LEARNING TO FUEL COLLABORATION, AGILITY AND RESULTS

Even though the pandemic is not over yet, we are slowly starting to get back on track in some ways. I have been in communication with companies wanting to reduce the gap caused by the complete or partial shutdown they experienced here in Brazil during the six months of quarantine in our country. I have been hearing how their problems have become even more complex, demanding from most the ability to reinvent themselves and to function at a level much higher than what they were used to up until now. Are they blowing things out of proportion? Take a look at this headline from *Estadão*,¹ one of Brazil's most important newspapers:

"Online commerce share in retail sales increased in 6 months the same as in 6 years."
No one is able to redesign their strategy or business model alone. It is not enough to hire a consulting firm or to deploy some new technology. It takes much more than that. Reinventing oneself takes dialoguing, connecting, collaborating, and acting with great agility. Seems easy?



"Ask any leader if their organization values collaboration and you will receive a resounding yes. Ask if the company's strategies for increasing collaboration have been successful, and you will probably receive a different answer," says Francesca Gino, a behavioral scientist and professor at Harvard Business School.² According to Professor Gino, leaders see collaboration as a *value* to cultivate, not as a *skill* to learn. And the ace in the hole is in one's ability to understand the difference between both ways of looking at it.

¹ "Participação do comércio online nas vendas do varejo cresceu em 6 meses o mesmo que em 6 anos." O Estado de São Paulo, September 22, 2020. Available at: <https://economia.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral/participacao-do-comercio-online-nas-vendas-do-varejo-cresceu-em-6-meses-o-mesmo-que-em-6-anos,70003448019>. Accessed on 9/23/2020.

² "Cracking the Code of Sustained Collaboration". HBR, November-December 2019 edition. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2019/11/cracking-the-code-of-sustained-collaboration>. Accessed on 9/23/2020.

There are several ways to develop collaboration and agility, but I believe in dialogue and connection as the most reliable catalysts to promote such essential attributes in the life of an organization. A great way to do so is through the use of structured approaches such as Action Learning. Through this method of problem-solving, a small and diverse group from within an organization comes together to look at a real, important, and urgent problem. The learning that takes place as a result has the same weight as solving the problem in and of itself.

Michael Marquardt, professor at George Washington University, has often quoted anthropologist Margaret Mead, who once stated: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” What happens during an Action Learning session, with up to eight participants and a coach, is the activation of the group’s collective intelligence through an ancient and intrinsically human technique: the use of questions. By rescuing curiosity and putting empathic listening into practice, it is possible to find new paths to navigate demanding situations. The group often identifies viable answers to underlying problems and arrives at solutions to challenges that were, until then, maybe deemed impossible to solve.



Action Learning is also a highly democratic process, capable of being used in the most diverse industries, companies, and areas—from agile technology companies to heavy industry, as well as the competitive worlds of retail and real state.

I want to tell you below a bit more through a few concrete examples about this powerful tool that is capable of greatly enhancing the development of individuals, teams, and organizations as a whole.

Always Learning

Listed on the stock exchanges of Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, Madrid and Luxembourg, Aperam is one of the main producers of stainless steel and specialty steel in the world, having been present in Brazil for approximately 70 years. The company in Brazil embraced Action Learning earlier this year, due to a challenge well known to many organizations. “We arrived at Action Learning out of a need to help our HR Business Partners to better assist our customers in solving problems,” explains Natalia Saraiva.

Ms. Saraiva is a Development Analyst at Aperam who became enthralled by the adaptability of Action Learning. As a result, the application of Action Learning within Aperam has expanded quickly throughout the organization, far beyond the original purposes of the project.

According to Ms. Saraiva, Action Learning has been implemented fairly well within Aperam, both helping reshape their meeting protocols as well as being included into the company's Leadership Academy curriculum. The latter is a program aimed at the development of specialists whose purpose is to help **disseminate a culture of learning and collaboration** throughout the organization. Fostering such culture can be quite a challenge in a their industry, where collaboration can often face serious obstacles.

Ms. Saraiva explains why: "In teams that are highly technical in nature, you can see the discomfort participants feel when invited to share something that may seem unusual to folks from other teams. 'They will not understand the problems we are facing,' I often hear. It is only when these technical experts see outsiders (who may know very little indeed about key technical aspects of their work) ask coherent questions about their processes and problems that you see a spirit of collaboration, togetherness, and affinity emerge. When that happens, what used to be perceived as a barrier to teamwork often becomes irrelevant, as participants from various teams start to explore the problem from a multitude of angles and perspectives, oftentimes leaving the Action Learning session with concrete solutions to implement."



After seeing the power of Action Learning in practice, Ms. Saraiva decided to go through the training to become a Certified Action Learning Coach (CALC) herself. She explains why it was important to her to be trained in Action Learning: "Each session is unique. We mustn't lose all the richness that emerges in each Action Learning meeting.



It is an experience that allows people to think and do differently. It often becomes about changing culture, as participants understand more and more the importance of asking questions, of going deeper into issues, of better listening to one other. All of this ends up promoting a change in behavior, both during as well as outside of Action Learning sessions." She goes on to add that the

implementation of Action Learning within her organization has also led to considerable improvements in the service provided by their Business Partner staff, including also their technical staff's ability to read various scenarios pertaining to their industry and stakeholders—a vital skill for navigating complex and challenging times.

Creativity and Cocreation

Over the last few decades, Iguatemi has become a point of reference among shopping centers in Brazil. As one of the largest companies in the sector in that country, their brand is synonymous with a pioneering spirit, sophistication, strength, dynamism, and—of course—innovation. Iguatemi started using Action Learning two years ago at the initiative of HR Director Vivian Broge, who herself underwent training to facilitate

Action Learning sessions. Ms. Broge decided to become a certified coach not only out of her own love for learning and continued development, but also because of the ever-increasing organizational demands for such an empathetic, collaborative, and agile approach. She adds: “We are currently living in a context where everything is complex, interdependent and, at the same time, very different from our norm. Because we are constantly having to deal with so much uncertainty (something that has only increased because of COVID-19), I don't think we can truly understand one another if we don't ask good questions. [We must learn how to work from] a place of vulnerability and acceptance that we do not have all the answers, and that the collective intelligence of the group is sovereign.” Not surprisingly, Action Learning has become an incredibly powerful tool to strengthen the culture of trust within the company according to Ms. Broge.



IGUATEMI

Empresa de Shopping Centers SA

In lieu of its corporate philosophy of organizational learning, Iguatemi has already applied Action Learning to help foster a culture of dialogue within several internal teams with all sorts of experiences, demands, customers, and profiles (such as the team responsible for selecting the best mix of retail stores for its malls, the company's IT staff, and Ms. Broge's own HR department). One such department used to have the company's worst results in work climate surveys.



According to Ms. Broge: “We had that one team go through several Action Learning sessions to really dig into what was going on within the team. When we redid that same survey roughly six months later, that very team had jumped to the second best spot within the entire organization. This shows that when we are able to create a place of trust in which people can express themselves and ask questions to understand one another's the perspectives, engagement increases and, with it, you naturally end up having more innovation, collaboration, cooperation—everything that it is necessary for a company to be successful and for employees to connect with a greater sense of purpose and meaning.”

Most recently, Ms. Broge invited the company's entire Board of Directors to participate in Action Learning sessions in order to help foster greater speed, agility, collaboration and co-construction as they lead the organization through the process of resuming operations post-quarantine. “Every time we assemble a team, we strengthen the culture of honest, open, and empathetic dialogue, taking into consideration the needs of other people while focusing on creating value for all our stakeholders,” explains the HR Director. Ms. Broge also sees changes in her own self: “I changed my way of

managing teams. I am much more confident in asking questions instead of giving answers. When I do that, I encourage my employees to think more critically and to arrive at their solutions.”

According to MS. Broge, the news of a method that focuses on asking powerful questions while promoting non-violent communication spread throughout the hallways of the organization. This caused a rush among managers of various departments who expressed their interest in applying Action Learning with their staff in order to promote agency and agility within the teams.

Honest Conversations, Concrete Actions

Mr. Thiago Viana is the Head of Innovation at iFood, a 10-year-old Brazilian company that has become so much more than a food delivery app. Today, iFood is a technology company that has the dream of making food more accessible in that country. They currently fill approx. 39 million orders per month in more than 1,000 Brazilian cities. It is clear for those leading the company that even though they heavily rely on technology to make a difference in people’s lives, they understand that it is people who use said technology to meet their needs and for their enjoyment.



These include employees (“food lovers”), customers, restaurants and delivery staff. But how can such a complex enterprise bring together such different stakeholders?

With honest conversations, without bias, and with much listening. “The environment of collaboration and diversity is what we like most about the Action Learning sessions. These meetings bring together people with various perspectives and who question us and help us change our understanding of the problems we are facing, and that,” explains Mr. Viana, “has happened several times in the Action Learning sessions we have had at iFood thus far. It’s already happened that we came to a session to discuss a topic, only to find that there were several things we needed to work on before we could move toward any kind of solution.



Everyone who has participated in Action Learning understands that the method is able to help people get to the root of a problem much faster, in addition to making intervention plans with much more clarity. These sessions are extremely productive in helping generate new knowledge and in connecting participants with tangible actions so as to help them achieve their desired outcomes.”

iFood understands that statistical data helps solve many, but not all, problems. Sitting down with stakeholders can lead to a level of clarity and insight that would not be accessible without dialogue. Most often, the type of data most readily available to teams (the proverbial tip of the iceberg) does not paint the whole picture, often lacking

crucial information about the people involved, such as their values, resources, and challenges. Vulnerability researcher Brené Brown once stated that “stories are just data with a soul.” Through candid and honest dialogue, a bond is often created between people, thus creating a space of trust between them—something much different from the common transactional interactions that are so common these days. I dare say this often becomes a competitive advantage in the life of the organization.



Crafting stronger relationships through richer dialogue changes one’s perspective, expands their opportunities, and transforms the roadmap for their continued development. This is exactly what Mr. Viana has noticed in regards to his team.

iFood's Head of Innovation has been using Action Learning since May 2020 with the company’s “squads” (their multidisciplinary teams) in order to help deepen their knowledge base and arrive at new insights for solving challenging problems.

During this time, there have been several sessions that have focused on various topics, including the company’s popular “iFood Loop” (a cost-effective option for delivering meals to costumers at more affordable prices).

Not surprisingly, Mr. Viana attests to the importance of finding solutions to important problems in a fast and agile manner—something that Action Learning is especially designed to help foster. Creating Action Learning groups made up of different kinds of stakeholders has proved to be both dynamic and effective for the organization as a whole.

Other Benefits

A quick conversation with Aperam, Iguatemi and iFood leaves no doubt how (re) learning to ask questions, to dialogue and to connect can bring about collaboration and agility, in addition to fostering a culture of learning, innovation and team psychological safety. Action Learning rescues the humanity of organizations by valuing collective thinking, by highlighting both the real needs and real problems present within organizations, and by promoting connections between ideas and people without verticality—in an honest, simple, and direct way.



Marquardt reinforces this in his book *Leading with Questions*: “People who are comfortable with questions are quick to adjust to fluid and flexible changes in their thinking in the face of new data or realities. They can reconcile demands without losing focus or energy. They are comfortable with ambiguity. Questioning leaders tend to remain calm and lucid under high stress or during a crisis, and remain unwavering when faced with difficult situations.”

Aperam, Iguatemi and iFood, among other companies and institutions (including non-governmental organizations), are already reaping the benefits of collaboration and agility in a structured and effective way. And you? When will you start?

Written by Magali Lopes, a dialogue facilitator and Senior Action Learning Coach (SALC) who lives in Sao Paulo, Brazil. She developed the projects and conducted the Action Learning sessions at the companies mentioned in the article. One of her professional goals is to create a culture of collaboration, trust and questioning in organizational environments. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/magali-lobes/>
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