

ACTION LEARNING IN A SMALL GOVERNMENT AGENCY

When I joined Peace Corps for the third time in 2011, I was hired as the director of overseas staff recruitment and selection but came with an additional agenda: I was determined to promote Action Learning (AL) from within the agency. I had worked previously with the Peace Corps from 1976-1982, and again from 1993-2001 and knew the agency and its history very well. What follows is a chronicle of my attempts to introduce Action Learning at the Peace Corps. Perhaps some of the experience I relate, the successes and the failures, will resonate with others, and provide some useful insights as they promote Action Learning in the federal government workplace. I invite readers to share their ideas of how I might have done better to embed Action Learning into the agency. This will help me in the future and may help others who want to introduce AL into government agencies.

One might think that the marketing of Action Learning within Peace Corps should be simple. It is a relatively small federal organization, with fewer than 1,000 at its operations headquarters in Washington DC. Many of its staff have international experience and it enjoys a reputation as one of the best places to work in the federal government. The agency has had a history of encouraging staff to work in teams and while that



dynamic has decreased somewhat in recent years, it remains an ideal. Since problem solving and developing high functioning teams practically defines Action Learning it seems reasonable that AL would find a welcome home in Peace Corps.

But even taking into account the poor marketing skills of this author, there were barriers to challenge the quick spread of Action Learning. Though small, Peace Corps is a federal bureaucracy, a mix of hierarchically oriented political appointees and democratically oriented staff. Like most federal agencies, Peace Corps over the past 30 years, has moved inexorably toward concentration of power at the top, among its senior staff. Little is done without active involvement of senior leadership.

A second challenge was the high rate of staff turnover caused, in part, by a provision of the Peace Corps Act, which limits staff employment to five years. This regulation has been modified over the years to allow a small percentage of staff to serve up to 8.5 years; and in recent years, whole categories of staff have become exempt from the rule. Still, turnover typically exceeds 20% yearly. When the agency relied more heavily on highly functioning teams, the impact of turnover was not so prohibitive, as new staff were incorporated into these teams. But in recent years, as power has become more centralized, staff turnover has become a more perplexing issue.

The third challenge was that I was not hired to promote or conduct Action Learning. I and my staff were charged with finding a capable and diverse staff to lead overseas Peace Corps Country programs. Both my immediate supervisor (HR director and her

boss, the agency's director of management, though supportive of my idea to promote AL, wanted me to get settled into my primary responsibility and prove I was able to manage it well. They directed that I wait several months before implementing a plan. I would need to assure my supervisors that any involvement outside my main focus area would consume only a modest amount of my time.

In those intervening months I twice demonstrated Action Learning to groups of 16-20, using the WIAL slideshow and a 45 minute AL set. One of the participants was the coordinator of the Peace Corps' Leadership Development Academy (LDA) which aimed to develop young agency staff as leaders for the agency and beyond. The Academy chose 10-12 staff each year and offered an array of leadership training, field based experience and action research over the course of the year. After experiencing the demonstration, the LDA coordinator asked me to make AL a part of the six month LDA program. By then the waiting period was over and I was happy to agree but was somewhat unsettled as this arrangement would *require* the LDA participants to engage in Action Learning, rather than inviting them to participate voluntarily. I dealt with this by assuring the groups that while they did not have a choice, they would find AL an amazing learning experience. My overall goal, (which would prove much too ambitious) was to equip the agency with several AL coaches to meet its ongoing needs.



The Action Learning Program

I separated the 12 participants into two groups and conducted two Foundations courses over the course of three weeks. The courses took place in Washington DC at Peace Corps headquarters, and four of the participants (two in each group) participated via webinar, since they worked in recruiting offices in Chicago and New York. I invited the LDA coordinator to be a participant and other staff were invited to observe.

I modified the requirements of the WIAL Foundations course in two ways, resulting in a two and a half day course for each group in place of the more traditional two day course. First I introduced as required readings, a brief description of Action Learning, Michael, Marquardt's article on Action Learning and Leadership, and Peter Facione's article, "Critical Thinking, What it is and Why it Counts." I also encouraged each participant to read Marquardt's book, *Optimizing the Power of Action Learning*. (2nd ed), which the agency supplied. Next I required that each participant take roles as both problem presenter and coach. This latter decision extended the time required for the two courses. Additionally, because the participants knew one another fairly

well the feedback sessions lasted longer than in a typical foundations course and included many learnings applied to participants' work at the agency. One benefit in requiring that all take a turn as coach was that I would become aware early of particular support areas needed by those who chose to go on to become certified coaches.*

The use of questions to achieve both problem solutions and significant leaning impressed the group deeply. Several grasped quickly how the Action Learning environment differs significantly from both ordinary work and life experiences where people typically answered different questions from the ones posed, and all experienced how AL strengthens team performance.

When the Foundation courses ended, I invited those with interest in becoming coaches to continue in CALC 1 and CALC 2. Six of the twelve expressed interest. Now the question became how to identify organizational problems that would provide the participants with the experience required by WIAL for certification. At first I thought each participant might identify issues within his/her own organizational unit and invite/convince his/her colleagues to use Action Learning to address these issues. The naiveté of this expectation rested in the reality that all of the participants were junior staff in their offices and might not easily convince their managers to embrace Action Learning. In addition, some managers might not be so keen to admit that there were any "problems" in their offices that needed some sort of unfamiliar intervention.



Three events converged to help address this dilemma. First, The LDA group was required to identify and carry out research projects, and they chose Action Learning to help with these projects. Second, I sent a note to all agency managers to introduce them to Action Learning and to let them know of the LDA coaches in training who could help them introduce AL in their organizational units. Third, I had been becoming known as a skilled group facilitator and was asked to facilitate a number of office retreats and strategic planning sessions. I modeled my facilitation on AL principles and followed up with the office managers to suggest AL as follow-on to addressing the problems identified in the strategy sessions. It looked as though one or two participants might be on their way to become AL coaches.

The Tide Turns

At the end of the foundations course, six participants indicated an interest in going on to become certified as AL coaches, and two of these had identified an action project which would provide them the opportunity to function, with my mentoring, as AL

coaches, and one of these had begun to conduct AL sessions. I sensed that my original goal was in reach.

But AL had not yet been embedded, or institutionalized within the organization. And a series of staff changes threatened its viability. First, the director of Human Resources Management resigned, and her replacement (my boss), within weeks of her arrival, informed me that she would not support my involvement in AL at Peace Corps. Then the Leadership Academy coordinator left the agency to find fulltime work elsewhere. Subsequently, the agency hired a new training coordinator. I talked with her of Action Learning, and showered her with materials, but she did not experience AL for herself.

Within a few short months most of the gains were reversed; other than myself, only the 12 original participants could bear witness to the power of Action Learning. But there was no one with in-depth experience of AL to make it available to the agency. After nearly two and a half years, I, too, left the agency, proud of what I had accomplished with respect to my primary responsibilities, yet disappointed that I had not been able to institutionalize Action Learning during that time.

Peace Corps surveyed the participants of the Leadership Development Academy and, based largely on their feedback, decided to use action learning in the following year's LDA program. The program design drew on core principles that WIAL promotes, notably good questions, listening and feedback. It did not, strictly speaking, use a WIAL approach, but facilitated and supported the deliberations and actions of three LDA groups to assist projects identified by various agency offices.



As of this writing, Peace Corps has shifted its training focus and resources to support staff training worldwide. It has not scheduled a Leadership Development Academy in 2015. It remains unclear whether the Leadership Development Academy or any form of action learning will take place in 2016.

In retrospect, my failure to see clearly that creating AL coaches would require sustained support from senior staff was critical. For this to have succeeded, the goal of developing AL coaches for the agency could not have been mine alone. While I did talk about and promote AL to several senior staff, I could not shortchange the critical mission assigned to my office. I had my own staff to train and develop and a mandate to provide diverse and experienced candidates for overseas positions. Not could I risk confusion among senior staff about what I was there for. I counted on the participants' experience of AL to be the primary force to promote the benefits of AL. But that went only so far.

Based on their feedback, it is clear that Action Learning had a profound effect on many of the LDA participants. Notably, several, when leaving the Peace Corps, determined they would seek to introduce AL to their new agencies. There are now 12 additional people who have deep experience of how great questions, great listening and great reflection can strengthen leadership skills, promote great insights and

result in creative problem solving. But there are no Action Learning coaches at the Peace Corps.

*WIAL was encouraging and supportive of this effort and offered suggestions of how to move participants from Foundations to CALC status, at the conclusion of the Leadership Development Academy.

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