

ACTION LEARNING: NOT A HAMMER!

Several years ago I was training new Action Learning coaches in a way with which we are all familiar. Through multiple sets, participants took turns coaching, presenting problems and participating as problem solvers. I observed and offered feedback on the performance of the coaches.

One of the participants was an experienced personal coach who had guided others to be successful in their performance of their management and leadership roles. When her turn came to coach, she listened well and intervened appropriately for a time. But after one intervention, she gave the problem presenter some advice on how to present more effectively. She had reverted to a role of personal coach, and inadvertently encouraged a dependency upon her as a reliable problem solver.

Over the years I have witnessed other instances of similar behavior. I have also witnessed many instances where participants have expressed doubt that they could master the “skills” needed to be an Action Learning coach, despite multiple reminders that all they had to do was to “follow the script!”. Why do some find this difficult, when it is supposed to be so easy? The rules of Action Learning and the roles of the participants and the coach are straightforward and easy to understand. When people declare it to be difficult, or express fear, what is going on?



The first thing that occurs to me is that many people initially approach Action Learning coaching as though it were a skill set to be learned and mastered. Many interested in becoming Action Learning coaches already have mastered and become certified in other approaches to leadership and problem solving: 360 degrees, MBTI, DISC, Six Sigma, Train the Trainer, and others. They want to be successful and believe that adding another “tool” to their toolbox will help them reach their goal.



It can come as a surprise that Action Learning coaching is not so much a skill as it is an orientation. Trainers typically acquire and improve their skills because they must have something they can give to their trainees. An Action Learning coach, however, need not be the group’s very best listener nor must she ask the very best questions (remember the pizza delivery guy?). The Action Learning coach must be oriented in the conviction that group members will succeed in their quest to solve problems and improve leadership skills if they deepen their listening and their questioning. The Action Learning coach models the behavior she wants to promote by following the same rules as the participants.

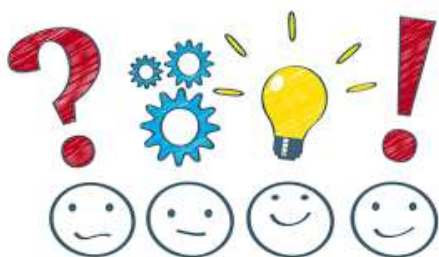
Another coaching experience I had points to a second reason that Action Learning coaching may seem difficult or intimidating. After a set, a coach I was observing asked

the participants whether they wanted feedback on their performance, and of course they said yes. One of the things the coach observed was that the group did not come up with a very good solution to the problem. One of the participants responded immediately, "Well, we did not have a very good coach!"

In highly individualistic societies like the one in which I live, it can be difficult for Action Learning coaches-in-training to learn to trust the dynamic of group behavior in setting norms and solving organizational problems. In the example above, the coach exercised her individual "right" and perhaps "duty" to help others by pointing out their shortcomings. In return, a group member pointed out the coach's individual "accountability" for the "shortcomings" of the group.



There are many examples of how an individualistic oriented society can promote behavior that Action Learning tends to avoid. For many years the United States Government has tended to train its senior agency staff by sending them away from the workplace to study and practice "leadership" skills. After completion of the course, these staff return to the workplace and are expected to be better leaders in their organizations. In each federal agency the performance plans of senior staff are linked directly to the achievement of organizational goals.



While not devaluing these approaches to organizational performance, Action Learning sees both problem-solving and leadership as organic. A person may start with a conviction about the best way to solve an organizational problem only to change his mind after carefully listening to the views of others. Leadership, in Action Learning, is shared among all the participants. A single

question, or a re-phrasing of a problem can influence the direction of the group, or the speed with which it reaches a solution. This orientation to careful listening and to the possibility that an organizational changing question can come from anyone, is not typical of organizations in highly individualistic societies.

Those of us who become deeply rooted in the Action Learning orientation to careful listening and questions before statements are likely to adapt that orientation to other relationships in our lives: family, political, religious, etc. As this orientation deepens in our own lives, we may forget that many others do not have a reference for people in groups improving their leadership skills and achieving excellence as a group in solving organizational problems. If we see a person struggling in his or her attempts to become an Action Learning coach, we may consider whether the person is struggling with responsibility for the success of the group, or perhaps may be trying to master a skill that Action Learning does not require.

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