

HELMGRAS: BUILDING AN ACTION LEARNING SCHOOL

Helmgras, an elementary school in the Netherlands, embraced Action Learning and was one of the 2017 award winners at the WIAL Global Forum in Shanghai. An article appeared in a Dutch magazine recently to describe the adventure. This is part 2 of the article.

So when came the change ?



My colleagues were not really ready for my business approach. I had to admit now that I didn't really well manage the image that I had. My approach was focused on proving that a school can be managed in a different way: business-like, commercially viable and focused on values, just like a company. I also didn't really manage to get the whole team aligned. When I

embarked on a project to start a brand new school, I initially didn't change my approach, but I quickly ran into obstacles. I worked on emotion, without formal plan, but with a drive and tried to get people on board by showing my own limitations and vulnerabilities. I worked hard on my own leadership, in terms of efficiency but in particular about how I interact with others. Assurance, structure and clarity are therefore important. However, when I had to manage the fusion of two schools, I needed another approach to have two teams work together successfully and develop into a single team.

What are you doing differently now ?

I wanted to maintain the feeling of being connected, but I didn't realize that I tried to protect this by forcing things. I now focus more on the unique and individual development. Letting go, relaxing more in how things get done and trusting that things will work out. I also manage how I share information and don't share everything right away since that can become an overload and create unnecessary resistance. My motto remains: "knowledge is like luck, the more you share it the more it grows."

What was the role of Action Learning ?

Helmgras Elementary School

The Helmgras Elementary School was established in August 2015 as the fusion of two schools. Besides the requirement of cultural change, there was also a need to increase the quality of the education. Director Hans Ploeg looked for an approach where learning and performance are linked. When he discovered Action Learning, he realized this could be a very powerful approach. He realized that he could not ignore the challenges and that he could not overcome them alone. In 2016-2017, management and teachers of the Helmgras Elementary School embraced the Action Learning methodology after some introductory sessions. Discovering the methodology built acceptance and inspiration. All personnel received a basic training in Action Learning and a diverse team was created to spearhead the change for the fusion of the two schools.

Eight members were trained as Action Learning coaches. The coaches worked with teams of their colleagues and built together the shared vision of the school's future, identified the actions to create a professional learning environment and learning culture. The issue of learning culture was a challenge because discussions were often about education in general, but as team member of a school this gets personal and the results of the school are critical. This builds the energy, motivation and renewal. Internal coaches facilitated teams of colleagues and in turn were supported by the management team. The management team ensured that the issues the teams worked on contributed to a successful fusion of the two schools and the building of a professional learning community.

Helmgras Elementary School, with some ups and downs, created a new culture and developed new behaviors over a 2-year period. It has become a school that uses this culture to solve problems and continues to develop leadership skills. Whereas focus was on individual performance in the past, there is now a sense of collective achievement. The school's slogan is "From individual action towards collective achievement".

Four years ago I discovered the Action Learning methodology and it really helped me a lot. Complex challenges are now solved by the whole team. With Action Learning, it is not only the person who presents the issue who learns, but the entire team and the entire organization. I have been trained, supported and coached by Twan Paes, from the Action Learning Academy in the Netherlands, and WIAL Master Action Learning Coach. I discovered through this process that I still ask too few questions. You obtain much more information from asking great questions. It has been a process with ups and downs. I become better aware of how I work and I have become a better school director.

I fully delegate the responsibility of leading action learning sessions to the other team members who have been trained and certified as Action Learning coaches. In Helmgras, we have created an action-based learning culture. Parents, children and the school management are enthusiastic about this new direction for the school. "Action Learning has contributed to a professional learning community and to more enjoyment in the work. Next year's plan has been developed together and the fusion is complete. We take care that the skills, but also the experiences that the team has built, are not lost and that there is a constructive link between learning and performing.

What have been the achievements for the school ?

"We have created a system where learning at the level of the individual, the team and the organization are interconnected. I think that is unique in the education system. Action Learning helps the school to deal with difficult dilemmas and to focus on what the real problem is. The project has really been successful and we will now work with Action Learning Academy Netherlands and WIAL to apply this to children. Together with the teachers, we want to use Action learning to develop students' talents."



Twan Paes is WIAL Master Action Learning Coach and supported Helmgras elementary school. He is director of WIAL Netherlands and WIAL board member.

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