

## **THE MORE DIVERSE, THE BETTER: ACTION LEARNING WITH CHILDREN**

Action learning; these words made me curious. As a person who loves action as well as learning I didn't have to think twice about participating in the action learning course I was invited to by EMORA, Twan Paes, The Netherlands. I am a vice-principal of a primary school with 540 children including an after school care, with a total of 40 colleagues. I was motivated to learn more about AL. As a leader and former teacher my heart goes out to increasing the knowledge and talent that the people and children I work with have within. I believe that everyone has a certain talent or aptitudes. Like many other leaders I am always trying to find a way that will enable us to discover -and benefit- from the gross quantity of talented leaders in our school.

I started the course with no knowledge about the concept of AL. At first it seemed to have had many similarities to other peer methods, though during the course I started to understand what AL is truly about. Most peer methods are specifically about solving problems. For me the most interesting part of AL is that it looks for the source or underlying meaning of the problem. It's all about approaching the problem, from different perspectives, making it easier to see the different layers of the actual problem. Only when you've identified the problem as a team, you can solve it. What happens then is that the specific problem may just have an entirely different origin and content than you expected when you started to look at it at first. If you would have approached the problem by using a problem solving strategy, you would simply be solving a problem that might not even exist. And this equals: wasted time! Of course it is crucial that your team has a certain degree of knowledge (Tuckman's team and group development model), before you can practice this type of method to conduct discussions about the problem.

After following a few sessions of the course and learning about the theories of AL, it was time to practice some of my newly gained knowledge in either a company or in my own school with the purpose of gaining experience as an Action learning Coach. As there were no urgent problems in our organisation, I wondered where I would be able to develop my AL coaching skills. At that time a teacher of the last grade in primary school (11/12yrs) was experiencing some pedagogical problems in class. She was trying so hard to solve the problem, but unfortunately all of her hard work and effort couldn't help her and the children get rid of the negative atmosphere.



Since there were no urgent problems present within the organisation, I decided that the aforesaid problem with the children during class, was a perfect candidate for the action learning method. So, why don't try it? I asked the teacher to cooperate with my experiment to do AL. I started three sessions, each with ten kids. Each kid in the classroom was aware of the specific problem. And what

happened during these sessions truly amazed me! "Shall I observe since my goal to listen more carefully?" "I would like to ask my questions right away in class without overthinking it, since I find it difficult to speak in front of a large group". "The definition of the problem seems to be something utterly different than what I thought before; therefore we almost selected the wrong solution". Though at this point we didn't even come up with a solution yet, these kind of comments already made this session worthwhile to me. Underneath you will read an enumeration of the added values I experienced throughout the AL session:

- Instead of being biased the children turn their opinions into questions so that they don't jump to conclusions.
- They listen and come up with a wide variety of profound questions.
- The insecure children whom are usually quiet, comment and ask questions during the session, due to the small and safe setting of the group
- I noticed an increase in self- confidence with the socially withdrawn children
- There was a high level of participation in the session, which caused a visible increase in ownership
- A high level of empathy was felt by the children for the participants involved in the sessions
- Honest and pure
- Co-operation
- Curiosity
- Communication
- Critical thinking and creativity is stimulated
- Problem solving abilities grow



In the educational world the 21st century skills are proving to be more and more important. The above enumeration shows that action learning is not only a perfect tool for solving problems as well as it is perfect for developing 21st century skills for the children.



The problem was first identified as: "*Many kids are bullying and therefore the atmosphere in the whole class is horrible*". After the third session I came back to class and showed them the 3 definitions of the problem and the solutions that they came up with in the three separate groups. I asked them to first think for themselves what the problem was about after hearing the 3 definitions. Then I asked them share their findings in pairs and form into small groups of 5, whereupon they were asked to define the problem for a second time and come up with the five top solutions. After this exercise we

exchanged/combined all the definitions, where after a new problem was extracted ; *'Most of the children in class interfere with everything, therefor discussions are getting bigger than it was meant to be. Each day during lunch break, there are fights on the soccer field. Our teacher will be having lunch at that time. Some teachers*

*whom are outside will keep an eye on the court whilst others don't. After our lunch break we will still be arguing about the conflict on the soccer field and therefore cannot come into a learning setting any time soon. Some children don't have the courage to tell everything to the teacher, whilst some of the other children stand behind the bullying children."*



Since we now had an agreement on the problem we could make a mutual top 10 of the priority solutions. I used the thinking, sharing, and exchange strategy again and in the end we had our top 10. Three of the solutions that were acted on immediately were:

- 1) Creating a mailbox, for the children to put notes in it when they find it difficult to tell the teacher what is going on.
- 2) Clearing up the rules for the soccer court since these were not entirely clear. 'The teacher should come outside a couple of times to help us out, so that after that we can do it ourselves. And the teacher who is outside needs to know the same rules too.'
- 3) Only interfere when you are part of the problem.

There were too many solutions to use all at once. After these 3 solutions were implemented, the teacher and children are able to choose any of the other solutions to implement in the future. This made the kids feel responsible for their own actions. Ownership is the magic word!

Of course the problem didn't disappear immediately, but what happened then is that when kids infringed the rules, they corrected each other whereas the teacher/leader can talk to them about their own rules instead of the ones she came up with. This makes the teacher and children position utterly different than before. Ownership is transferred from the teacher to the child, which is a bottom-up strategy that is very effective.

In the meantime I've been keeping busy conducting more sessions. The more diverse the action learning team, the better! From administrator, teaching assistants and teachers with different specialisms, to our clients: kids and parents. Combine all these diverse talents and perspectives in your company!



This example shows that there is a parallel between teacher/educational problems and the bigger leadership issues. So let's all share our best practices and create our own diverse action learning team throughout the world!

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