

Action Learning Coaching: How to Be a Catalyst for Transformation

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Executive coaches are used by many executives to increase their efficiency, improve leadership skills, and address personal or organizational goals. Coaches also introduce the executive to new skills and techniques that will help them deal more efficiently with today's rapidly changing organizational environment. Executive coaches focus their work to an individual; however as their executive skills improve, the entire organization benefits.

There are five elements to being an effective coach: establishing a rapport, expanding self-awareness, setting goals, giving feedback, and ensuring renewal and growth. Action learning takes this coaching ability to the group level.

Action learning is a dynamic process for problem-solving, building teams, and developing leaders. It consists of six components: the problem, a group of four to six people, a process that encourages questioning and listening, a resolution to take action, a commitment to learning, and an action learning coach.

Action Learning Coach

The action learning coach is the catalyst that optimizes the power as well as the enjoyment of action learning. She is the synergizer--the glue that bonds group members together as well as the yeast that enhances and expands their ability to learn and take vigorous actions.

The primary role and focus of the action learning coach is to facilitate the group's ability to grow and learn so that it, in turn, can better solve the problem. The focus and objective of the action learning coach must always remain on the learning, and not the problem. Learning will provide the leverage for continuously improving group performance.

The action learning coach takes the power of coaching to the group level. This is powerful because action learning groups only work on real problems requiring real solutions.

The action learning coach not only establishes a rapport with group members, but also works to build that rapport. Through the action learning process, the coach raises the group members' self-awareness by virtue of the process. Rather than setting goals for the group, the coach empowers them to set their own goals.

The coach's feedback takes the group to a deeper level of learning. Instead of just focusing on what has transpired, the coach helps the group understand the "how" and "why" of their actions.

Finally, by focusing the group on learning rather than just on problem solving, the action learning coach takes the group to extraordinary levels of renewal and growth. The action learning process appears fairly simple on the surface, but in truth is extremely powerful.

Action Learning Process

The coach listens for learning opportunities—when things are going astray or when things are going particularly well. The coach will test how the group thinks they are doing—what they are doing well and what they could do better. Through this process the team will discover if there are hidden issues and bring them to the surface, allowing the group to focus their energy on being a better team and solving the problem.

When the coaches intervene, they bring the learning to the forefront. During these times, the problem the team was originally formed to solve continues to mull around in their subconscious; when the group returns to problem solving, the problem moves to the forefront and the learning moves to the subconscious.

This flip-flopping of conscious and subconscious processing has a phenomenal impact. With each flip from subconscious to conscious, there is a leap in performance--from both the processing and learning aspect.

If the team does not identify a learning opportunity that the coach has observed, the coach will use a future, positive question to bring it to awareness. The coach remains neutral and leaves it to the team to determine how they are doing with a particular behavior. The coach then inspires a deeper level of learning by asking the team about the affect of the behavior. The coach's final task will be to lead the team in determining how to move forward regarding this behavior.

Action learning coaches restrict their participation to asking questions, which lets the members find the answers for themselves. This questioning process forces the participants to reflect on the impact of their actions.

With each intervention the participation becomes more intense. The new relationships between group members infiltrate their day-to-day activities from that day forward. Conversations shift from statements to questions, as those who participate in action learning realize that the real power in a team is determining what is not known, not showing off what is known. The action learning coach is the catalyst that causes this transformation to occur.

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