Aim for the Fairway with Action Learning

By Dr. Bea Carson

We've all heard the accolades of the power of positive thinking – so why is it we tend to focus on the negative?! Rarely do we talk about what to do – rather we talk about what not to do.

By now you are thinking – Not me! She must be talking about someone else!

Let's start with an example. You're out at your favorite golf course, and you've brought a friend (let's call this friend Sam) along with you. Sam has never played this course before, so you decide you'll help Sam out and point out all the hazards.

You walk up to the first tee box. As you and Sam stand there you tell Sam – "watch out for the water down there on the right". Sam lines up the shot – the contact is good – as each of you watch the ball, it is eminently clear the ball is heading right. The distinctive 'splash' of the ball making contact with the water is unmistakable.

Each hole, with a hazard, you opt to help Sam out. Almost like clockwork, the hazard comes into play for poor Sam. You and Sam are confused. You were so helpful; pointing out each of these hazards. How did Sam end up playing so poorly?

I'm guilty of having done the same thing. One day it finally dawned on me – my friend was drawn to line up where I had them focus. My warnings had them thinking about – the water, the tree, the bunker – whichever hazard it happened to be. I was the reason my friend play my course so poorly.

To test this theory I changed my tactic – I started telling my friends where they SHOULD aim, not where they SHOULDN'T aim. Almost like magic, everyone I brought to play my golf

Groupthink

Janis shows that in a mid- to highly-cohesive group the presence of specific foregone conclusions creates a greater probability that the group will demonstrate the symptoms of groupthink. Janis defines the term "groupthink" as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group … members' striving for unanimity overrides their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action … a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures."

In groupthink, the defective decision-making is a result of the participants not evaluating alternative paths. Rather, they have become so convinced of their prowess that they do not believe they are capable of making a bad decision.

course started playing better. Were these golfers any better than the earlier golfers? No! They were simply focused on what to do – NOT what not to do.

It couldn't be that easy could it? And it doesn't really apply to business – does it? Consider the two shuttle crashes – post mortems were done to understand what went <u>wrong</u> so it would <u>never</u> be repeated! Each disaster was attributed to Groupthink – a phenomenon that group dynamics expert, Janis, defines as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group … members' striving for unanimity overrides their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action … a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures." (See Groupthink insert)

Again and again we see teams exhibiting dysfunctional behavior. Whether they fall victim to group think, head to Abilene (see Abilene insert), or succumb to the temptations of Organizational Silence (see Organizational Silence insert), dysfunctions have a way of rearing their ugly heads.

Action Learning (see Action Learning insert) coaches have discovered the complete power of positive thinking. During an Action Learning session, the coach will phrase their questions in the positive. Why? Because these are the seeds that we want to germinate. We want all team members focused on positive behaviors. We ask, "what can be done better?" not "What went wrong?"

In business – how do we conduct a Best Practice Review? We focus on what went wrong. We wonder whose fault it is. We firmly ground ourselves in the negative. We will spend days, months, sometimes even years – figuring out who is at fault, what was done wrong. Drastic changes are consistently observed in Action Learning Teams – because they learn to focus on the positive – what they should be doing. Each intervention the Action Learning team coach does leads to an exponential improvement in how the team processes.

Action Learning Outcomes

Abilene Paradox

The Parable of the Abilene Paradox is a short story about Dr. Harvey's family living in West Texas in the early 60s. Four adults (Jerry, his wife, and his in-laws) are sitting on a porch in 104-degree heat in the small town of Coleman, Texas, some 53 miles from Abilene. They are engaging in as little motion as possible, drinking lemonade and playing dominoes. At some point, his father-in-law suggests they drive to Abilene to eat at a cafeteria there. Jerry thinks this is a crazy idea but everyone else seems to want to go, so he agrees that it sounds like a good idea. They get in their family car (which lacks air-conditioning) and drive through a dust storm to Abilene. They eat a mediocre lunch at the cafeteria and return to Coleman exhausted, hot, and generally unhappy with the experience. It is not until they are back home that it is revealed that none of them really wanted to go to Abilene – they were just going along because they thought all the others were eager to go.

Dr. Harvey used this wonderfully simple parable to illustrate what he believes is a major symptom of organizational dysfunction. He warns of the dangers of "management of agreement" – as opposed to management of disagreement or conflict.

His unique perspective shows us how we do not engage in deep inquiry or self-disclosure when attempting to come to a consensus with others. If we are certain that everyone else is in agreement, we do not express our own conflicting opinion.

Organizational Silence

Morrison and Milliken illustrate the concept of organizational silence through the story of the *Emperor's New Clothes*. In this story, the emperor believes he has purchased a spectacular garment, which makes him invisible to fools. This being the case, the emperor marches through town in his "new clothes" to see the reaction of the fools among the local gentry. The townsfolk praise the emperor for his exceptional taste in clothing. In organizational silence the same phenomenon is seen. Employees do not speak the truth to their superiors in an effort not to appear foolish. Frequently, they go to the extreme of praising the executive's decisions in spite of being aware of the pitfalls associated with it.

Argyris first defined this phenomenon more than a quarter of a century ago. He discussed that there are often powerful norms that prevent employees from saying what they know about issues. This was true for both technical and political issues. Redding refers to the syndrome as "don't rock the boat," using numerous examples of organizational cultures that espouse that paradigm. Some disguise this under the heading of "organizational commitment." As Redding points out, employees are expected to be committed to the organization – but not the other way around. Under this imbalance of power, employees quickly learn to keep their opinions to themselves.

Three scenarios follow. In each situation the team brought their dysfunctional behavior with them. In each situation the Action Learning coach was able to help them discover a more powerful way of processing together.

Scenario 1

The group that was brought together was actually comprised of individuals from three organizations. They were tasked to determine how they would work to accomplish a single project. Each of the organizations had a track record of success; each was sure they knew how to best accomplish the project. The animosity in the room was thick.

There were sixteen participants – too many for a single Action Learning team. We divided into two groups with representatives from each organization assigned to each group.

The groups were told they would each work on different aspects of the problem and

each group would accept the solution identified by the other group. Based on the reaction you would have thought I had asked each to cut off an arm. '*They*' can't be trusted – '*We*' know better. After much angst and bargaining I agreed to let them work on the same problem. We left ninety minutes at the end of the day to reconcile the solutions.

At the appointed hour the lists were brought to the front of the room and posted. Within minutes it was clear the lists were virtually identical. The most vocal opponent to working different problems spoke first – "I guess I could have trusted them and we would have gotten twice as much work done".

Action Learning

Action Learning is a powerful process for solving real, urgent problems creatively while simultaneously developing the leadership skills of the participants and teaching them to work better as a team.

There are only two ground rules:
1) A statement can only be made in response to a question.
2) The Action Learning Team Coach can intervene whenever a learning opportunity presents itself.

A typical action learning session starts with the coach establishing these ground rules. The coach will have one participant state, in two to three minutes, the problem the group needs to consider. Now, the questioning begins. Anyone can ask a question of anyone (or everyone) at anytime; but to make a statement a participant must be answering a question. During the process, the coach listens for learning opportunities.

On each occasion, the coach will test how the group feels it is doing, what they are doing well, and what they believe they could do better – with each intervention digging deeper to help the group discover how they can work better as a team.

The problem solving is done in two stages. The first focuses on coming to consensus as to what the problem is. As has been seen in many Action Learning sets – the issue that is presented is typically a symptom of the true problem. The coach plays a key role in insuring the group reaches consensus on the problem before allowing the group to move to the solution stage. What Action Learning Team members quickly discover is that as they dissect the challenge, they are actually planting the seeds for the solution. Regardless of how certain the participants were of the nature of the problem when they entered the problem-solving session, this exercise quickly opens their eyes to other possibilities. Ultimately, the team creatively solves the real problem, instead of slapping a bandaid on the presenting symptom.

The groups realized they were not that much different than each other. They discovered that working together and communicating they came up with solutions much more robust than anyone of them would have come up with alone. Through Action Learning they hit the fairway of trusting their team mates instead of getting caught in the trap that our way is the best way.

Scenario 2

The group was tasked to come up with a new shift schedule. The plant in question needed to be in operation six days a week twenty-four hours a day (6/24); currently there were three shifts - everyone working eight hours a day, six days a week. No one at the plant liked the current schedule – something that allowed for more than one day a week off was needed.

The group was resistant to using the process – it was obvious to everyone it was a simple math problem. Through the questioning process, particularly those posed by the coach, they were able to discover a piece of crucial information from the quietest member of the team – the plant employees were angry because they were not consulted when the shift schedules were changed to accommodate 24/6 instead of 24/7. The questions from the coach shifted the thinking from if someone is quiet they are onboard with the current discussion – to someone needs to check in with the quiet person for this perspective.

The quiet person was quiet because he believed he needed to go to go along with the more experienced managers, because that was where everyone else was headed. The shift in perspective the team experienced allowed then to hit the fairway by coming up with three schedules and allowing the employees to vote, instead of landing in the trap of fixing the symptom of an unacceptable shift schedule.

Scenario 3

The group was tasked with restructuring the organization so they could function better. The group wanted to jump right to solution – grouping the tasks done by the division to see how they could better be aligned.

The interventions done by the Action Learning coach created a safe environment that allowed the real issue to surface. The director was a hard driving individual – when he said jump the response better be how high. The consequence of this was the communication among the group members had deteriorated to the point that no one spoke to anyone and everyone assumed the actions of the others were intended to better each individuals position.

The director was unaware the consequence his action were having on the group. To the credit of the director when the issue was surfaced (through the interventions done by the coach) – he opted to put the reorganization on hold and address the communication issue head on.

Years later the ability of this team to communicate is admired by the other divisions. They were able to hit the fairway by learning to truly communicate, rather than land short of the green in the restructuring trap.

Conclusion

Not every situation calls for an Action Learning session; however, there are elements of Action Learning that can easily be woven into everyday life: ask questions; understand the situation before trying to fix it or make judgments; and most of all look for how it can be handled better.

As Barnard stated, in *Functions of the Executive,* more than a half century ago, "…a fundamental element of organizational functioning is individuals with diverse skill and experiences coming together to work and solve problems." In today's white water world of

change, this definition is inadequate – before solving the problem, individuals must FULLY understand the problem.

Action Learning prompts curiosity that takes us to new heights of learning. Initially, the questioning is a mandatory constraint thrust upon the group. By the end of the first sessions, participants embrace the power of questions, not only during problem solving, but also as a way of life. The hazards will always be there – aiming for the fairway will take you down the most direct path to your goal.

Dr. Bea Carson

President

Carson Consultants

410-353-4722

bea@carson-consultants.com

www.carson-consultants.com

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