

GROUP METHODS AND THEIR DIFFERENCES TO ACTIVATE COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE



‘Collaboration is the physical act of making new and unprecedented connections. When two or more people work together for a shared goal, the result of the work is different from the sum of the contributions.’ - Benjamin Hardy

There are many methods of group work that aim to encourage the exchange of knowledge, collaboration and collective intelligence based on dialogue. Many people ask me what the main differences are, especially regarding two of them: Action Learning and Co-development. I believe that one of the reasons for these questions comes from the fact that Action Learning was a source of inspiration for Adrian Payette and Claude Champagne, creators of Co-development and, therefore with many similarities.

As a starting point to talk about this, let's look in more detail at each approach definitions:

According to WIAL (World Institute of Action Learning), Action Learning is *“a method for solving complex, important and urgent problems that involves a small group working on real problems, taking action and learning as individuals, as a team, and as an organization. It helps organizations develop creative, flexible, and successful strategies to pressing problems. Based on the consensus they create an action plan.”*

For the creators of Co-development, Adrien Payette and Claude Champagne, *“The professional co-development group is an open, collaborative and appreciative group approach to reflection on action. The goal is to build a professional community of practice around a small number of people who want to devote time and resources to supporting each other and learning together in order to become more effective. These people have a common project to articulate their best practices and advise each other, expanding their understanding and action strategies on their concerns, problems and projects; they can also take actions that have an impact on their community.”*

In both cases, it speaks of a small group of people and of broadening and deepening the understanding of the subject that is brought to the meeting.

From the two definitions, I would like to draw attention to the objectives of each method. As a main objective, both are collaborative and reflective practices. However, an Action Learning session focuses on creating an action plan for solving a real, important and urgent problem while in Co-development, the goal is to build a community where members support each other and learn from each other. In this way, a Co-development group will meet many times and this group ends up consolidating itself far beyond a classic development program, becoming a safe source of exchange and learning long after the meetings are over. At each meeting one of the participants will bring its theme to share with the others and it is in the frequency of the meetings and in the exchange between the participants that the method gains its depth and strength. In the case of Action Learning, it is possible to assemble a group that meets only once in order to solve a problem.



What are the differences and similarities from the elements that makeup the methods?

In Action Learning, there are five fundamental elements for a session to happen: the group, the questions, the coach, the problem, the Action and the Learning. All these elements are also part of a Co-development session, however there are some differences that make the methods different:

Group: An Action Learning group has almost no restriction on the participant's profile, so it can be formed by professionals from the same team, from different teams, with different backgrounds, hierarchical levels and all the diversity of participants is encouraged and benefits the process. As for Co-development, the group formation is a crucial point for the success of the process, it is necessary to observe whether there are conflicts or not between the participants and their level of action within the organization.

Questions: During an Action Learning session, a statements can only be made in response to a question. In Co-development, questions are also fundamental for the development of the meeting, however, statements can occur without prejudice to the session. Pyramiding on answers, with a purpose centered on the customer's request (the participant who presents the problem), is considered as a way of enriching the exchange opportunity. In Co-development, contributions can also be made through images, metaphors and sharing experiences. In Action Learning, these exchanges can also happen, but only after a question asked by someone in the group.

Problem: In Action Learning, it is important that the topic addressed is a real, important and urgent problem or dilemma for the participant who is presenting the issue. In Co-development, on the other hand, we use the 3 P's, the theme can be a Problem, a Project or a Preoccupation that is "alive" in the customer. Unlike Action Learning, in Co-development the group don't need to reach a consensus on understanding the problem, as it brings a systemic look of the context understanding, where each look is, by itself, distinct and unique. Another important feature that differentiates Co-development from Action Learning in this regard is that in the latter it is possible to conduct a group problem sessions and problems brought by outsiders (sponsor) while Co-development sessions always focus on a customer theme from that meeting.



Action: In Co-development there is no explicit search for an action, the focus is on changing the customer's interaction with its theme (problem, preoccupation, project). Cues to action are welcome, but they are not the main purpose of the meeting. In Action Learning, as the name says, one (or more than one) action is expected as a solution to the problem brought, and that's what will make the problem move.

Learning: Both methods provide learning and are concerned with raising awareness about the importance of collective learning and how sharing a topic leverages learning opportunities. In case of Action Learning, besides the learning offered by the theme brought to the meeting, there is still an opportunity for learning through the practice of leadership skills that are chosen by each participant to be exercised during the session, thus learning takes place in three levels: individual, group and context.

Coach: A Co-development facilitator coach has a hybrid role during the meeting. As in Action Learning, the facilitator coach is responsible for being the process guardian: ensuring that session takes place within the planned stages, taking care of time, making learning interventions, ensuring the balance and proper functioning of the group. However, unlike Action Learning, where the coach is not involved in the brought up subject, the Co-development facilitator also has the role of accompanying the customer throughout the session, taking care that the customer is the focal point of that meeting, ensuring that the session be at your service and for this the facilitator will be able to get into the theme supporting to clarify the problem, acting as a consultant, contributing its essence. It is important to mention that in Co-development, the facilitator and the customer have a pre-session meeting to line up the subject that will be brought up, further assuring this position as the customer being the center of the meeting.

Each method has its peculiarities and there is no one better than the other, it is the brought up context and the program objectives that will define which one to use. What we cannot forget is what Action Learning and Co-development have in common: both are a transforming experience, that stimulate a mindset of abundance, in which each participant experiences the collaboration and collective intelligence effects, the 21st century fundamental skills.

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