

## HANDLING MULTI-DIRECTIONAL QUESTIONING



As Action Learning coaches, we intervene when we see learning opportunities or to improve the performance of the group. Deciding when and how to intervene can be tricky. We must pick the right moments, role model powerful questioning and really consider the impact we want to have through the interventions we make.

When I'm coaching, there are certain dynamics I really watch for where I know the group may need extra support. One such situation is **when someone asks a question to the rest of the group, particularly when the questioner is the problem presenter.**

As coaches, you will be familiar with this scenario: the Action Learning begins, and questions are all directed initially at the problem presenter. As a coach you make your first intervention to check how the team is doing and if there is agreement on the problem. In this intervention, possibly due to a question you ask ("How well are we leveraging the diversity of the group?" Or a more directive "Where are all of our questions directed?") it surfaces that all of the questions so far have been directed at the problem presenter. After this point the dynamic shifts, and people start to ask questions of each other. Often the first person to make this shift is the problem presenter, who might ask the group something about past experience they have had relating to the challenge.



This is when I lean in.

From my experience coaching Action Learning, two situations commonly arise in this scenario, both of which need careful coaching:

**The problem presenter follows responses to his or her own question with a statement.**

The first situation I observe is that the problem presenter, who is used to responding to questions and not questioning at this point in the Action Learning, makes a statement in response to the first team member's answer. This statement often starts with "I agree...." Or "I have tried that and...".

### **Possible coaching interventions:**

In this situation, I not only listen carefully for this response, but I immediately intervene to stop what would otherwise become a discussion. The intervention could take one of the following forms:

- “Could you put that in the form of a question?”
- “Are you leading to a question?”
- “How might you frame that as a question?”

Because this so frequently happens and problem presenters can be embarrassed that they have broken the ground rule, I also try to normalize this behaviour and let them know this is a common issue for problem presenters when they start asking questions of the group.

It’s very important to listen for this behaviour and intervene in this situation or the questioning quickly loses its effectiveness.

### **Team members aren’t all allowed to answer a question to the group.**

The second situation that arises in this scenario is that one of the team members answers the question, which was directed to everyone in the group, and then someone else asks another question without allowing any further responses.

### **Possible coaching intervention:**

In this case, I stop the second questioner, ask that person to please hold the question (possibly remembering it by writing it down) to re-ask later, and remind the team there is a question on the table. Then I ask “Who else would like to answer [questioner’s name]’s question?”



Sometimes I ask the original questioner to repeat his or her question, or if I have written it down, I might say “[Questioner’s name] has asked a question of the group, which was [then I read it out]. Who else would like to respond to this question?”

I stay engaged and listening, and re-ask if needed, until everyone who wants to answer the question has had that opportunity. Then I ask “Who has the next question?” Or I might even go back to the person whom I stopped originally and ask if he or she would like to ask that question now.

We know from neuroscience that the body and brain respond to social threats in the same way as they respond to physical threats. In his paper "SCARF: A Brain-Based Model for Collaborating With and Influencing Others," [David Rock](#) from the NeuroLeadership Institute identifies five key “domains” of experience that can influence our behavior in social situations and potentially create a threat response. These can be remembered with the acronym SCARF and are:

- Status – our relative importance to others.
- Certainty – our ability to predict the future.
- Autonomy – our sense of control over events.
- Relatedness – how safe we feel with others.
- Fairness – how fair we perceive the exchanges between people to be.

In this situation, those who want to reply to the original question could feel a threat response relating to fairness, relatedness or even the other three domains, when not given an opportunity to answer.

## **Conclusion**

While we know that multi-directional questioning can unlock new insights and bring great breakthroughs for the problem presenter, it's essential that this dynamic is very carefully coached. My learning from my Action Learning coaching experience is to really lean in and listen carefully when the team starts engaging in this way. By helping them to be aware of their behaviors, you can ensure that both the ground rule is followed and that people feel psychologically safe enough to do their best work.

Happy coaching!

Shannon Banks, MALC, May 2021