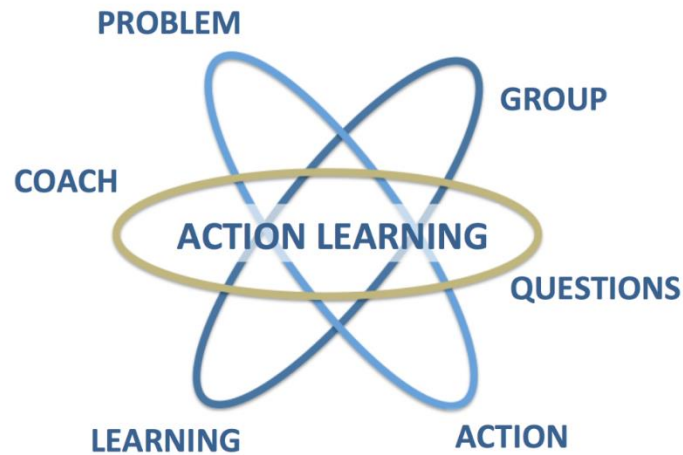


HOW ACTION LEARNING CAN HELP TEAMS SOLVE PROBLEMS



What is it?

How could a problem that's been around for years be solved in 90 minutes? How could different groups, who might have been at loggerheads in the past, work together to solve a common problem? The answer may be summed up in two words: Action Learning (AL).

I've been a professional coach for years, and while I can work with individuals, working with groups has never been my cup of tea as an introvert. What I didn't know was that I did not need a personality transplant to be able to work with groups. I just needed to learn a powerful tool that enabled people to work together, without requiring me to do the heavy lifting.

As the name implies, Action Learning is about two things: action, AND learning. As a problem-solving methodology, the process naturally leads to solutions by simply understanding the problem better. And as a learning methodology, participants learn about themselves, how they work with other people, and how they can apply the power of questions to problem-solving.

How is this different from classroom training?

In a typical classroom training session, the content has been predetermined. There is a specific and desired cognitive and emotional outcome – that is, we already know what the participants need to know and feel about a particular topic. Breakthroughs, though, rarely happen in the domain of what we already know. When attempting to solve a problem that we have never solved before, or when we need to achieve a goal that we have never worked on before, we need to tap into that part of the brain that can

explore unfamiliar territory – and that is done through the effective use of powerful questions.

How is this aligned with our goal of getting people leaders to ask instead of to tell?

The outdated model of management relies on “telling”. Most of us know by now that we need managers to learn to ask questions and get their team members to come up with their own action plans. This is reflected in various coaching models and in the way we are now seeing how important it is for employees to take ownership of their own challenges. By asking questions instead of telling our people what to do, we get to see the different views that other people uniquely have, and see solutions that we alone would never have been able to generate.

What happens in an action learning session?

A session typically lasts for 90 minutes. A problem presenter talks about a specific problem. The team members follow an important rule: statements only in response to questions – meaning, they can only say something when answering a question, but anyone can ask questions addressed to anyone in the group. The first few questions are usually about clearly understanding the problem. What are we trying to solve? Is the situation that we’re encountering the problem itself, or are we merely seeing symptoms of a deeper problem? Is there another way of seeing the problem? What aspects of the problem are we not seeing? Solving a problem requires that we first see what the problem is. The process naturally exposes the truth that people typically see the problem from their perspective only. And in that wonderful moment when they see the whole elephant and not just the tail, the mere shift in perspective can be quite astounding.

Once the problem has been defined, the next questions will usually be about exploring obstacles and solutions to the problem. This is where it could become tempting for some participants to merely propose what they’ve done in the past, but given the ground rule of asking questions instead of merely expressing an opinion, they need to remain open to what’s emerging from the conversation. Best practices are challenged, sacred cows are exposed for what they truly are, and mistaken beliefs are revealed.

One of the best things that could happen is when people see how they have contributed to the problem, or maybe even caused the problem in the first place. And when the problem is “in here” and not “out there”, we naturally discover our power to do something about it.

Where is the learning component here?

Once potential solutions have been determined, the participants will be asked to reflect on their experience during the session. What are they discovering about themselves and the way they think? What did they learn from the process? What did



they learn about working with one another? What insights can they bring back to the workplace? How did they demonstrate the particular core value or leadership competency that they chose at the start of the session? What worked and what didn't work? This portion isn't just an afterthought. It is a critical piece of Action Learning. We learn so much from self-reflection.

In the company that I work for, we have what we call our leadership principles. These are the traits that we want all our leaders to embody. Experience tells us though that it's one thing to define a trait, it's a completely different thing to get people to embody it. However, when they identify a specific leadership principle that they want to practice during the 90-minute session, that leadership principle comes alive for them in a way that a training program would never be able to recreate as an experience. It turns out that AL is also a fantastic leadership development tool.

If we look at our pivotal learning experiences in life, we see that they were always made up of both action and learning. For example, when we were learning how to drive a car, we first had to become thoroughly familiar with the pedals, knobs, buttons, levers, and other parts that we needed to control to operate the car. But reading about how to drive a car is never enough for us to really know how to drive a car. The logical next step is to actually drive a car (action). And as we take on more action and drive under different conditions (rain, snow, sand, driving an SUV versus a hatchback, driving at night, driving while relying on Waze, etc.) we file these new experiences under additional learning, which then prepares us to take new actions in the future.

Similarly, merely defining a leadership competency is just one part of the process. Actually embodying a particular leadership principle and acting from inside of it is a completely different experience. In the event that we want to develop a specific leadership trait, we can also ask the participants to choose from a different menu of traits (e.g. assertiveness, decisiveness, patience, etc). I've seen different groups come up with their own list of competencies that they wanted their participants to either think from or embody.

What are the specific applications of AL?

- We can use this anytime a team says they have a problem that they need help with.
- We can run an action learning session after every training session so that they get to apply what they just learned to solve a real-life problem, not a hypothetical one.
- We can use it to determine if we can offer a training solution, or if a problem requires a non-training solution (e.g. process improvement, change in the org chart, new policies, etc.). In my work as a facilitator of leadership development courses, I've used it as a tool for training needs analysis. Instead of recommending an off-the-shelf program, I've been able to customize training programs for the specific needs that surfaced during an AL session.

- We can use it as a team-building activity, where instead of using a physical challenge like running a race or doing a trust fall, they straight away apply it to a real challenge.

I once worked with a team of women who wanted to solve the problem of seemingly having a glass ceiling at work. They've risen to the level of senior manager, but couldn't quite move up to director level even after almost half a decade of doing really well in their current role. During the 90-minute session, they explored all sorts of ideas (competencies, gender bias, Filipino culture vis-a-vis American culture, proximity bias, etc.), all while embodying a particular leadership principle. From that lens, and from the interaction that ensued, they found the courage to share their thoughts with people who could do something about it. A year later, half of the participants in that group has received the promotion that has eluded them for years.

Who's now using AL?

Corporations that have or are now using AL include TRW, Inc., General Electric (GE), Accenture, Microsoft, Conoco, Whirlpool, Ameritech, and GEC (England). Public sector organizations are now also represented, such as the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and the Defense Management Systems College (DMSC) of the U.S. Department of Defense.

In the Philippines, companies such as Accenture, Robinson's, and Asurion have used AL. There are about 40 Certified Action Learning Coaches (CALC), and there are many more all over the world.

How does one contact a Certified Action Learning Coach (CALC)?

The best way to search for them would be to go to the [website](#) of the World Institute of Action Learning (WIAL). Or even better, you could get yourself or someone in your team certified. There's nothing like having an in-house CALC to solve as many problems as you need to. Furthermore, there are many individual coaches and consulting companies that offer to do demo sessions, and if you participate in one, you get to experience for yourself its true power and value.

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