

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AT THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

The New York Public Library is proud to offer Action Learning sessions for its business leaders as an option to solving complex business challenges. I have noted that the individuals participating (through their self-reflection and practice) have shown improved decision-making and coaching skills. Although Action Learning is admired as a tool to solve problems at the Library, it has yet to be seen as a form of leadership development; Library leaders prefer more traditional methods of learning such as facilitated classroom sessions. There isn't currently a lot of research as to the effectiveness of individual leadership skill improvement as a direct result of Action Learning - so I decided to conduct a little informal research on my own with 8 Action Learning participants.

I used the following questions to drive my data collection: *How does Action Learning improve the coaching skills of new managers absent from traditional coaching training as evidenced through direct report feedback and observation?*; and *How do Action Learning sessions result in the improved decision-making of new leaders as evidenced by positive feedback from their supervisors?*



New York
Public
Library

To research (and make a case for) the effectiveness of regular Action Learning sessions on the leadership development of new executives, I used data from 2 sources: Survey Results and Observations.



A total of 25 surveys were sent to the direct reports of the leaders participating in the studied Action Learning set. Ten completed surveys were submitted for review. This collection of qualitative data asked those surveyed to comment on the results of their most recent feedback session with their supervisor. Of the 10 responses, 7 offered positive comments on the questioning and coaching abilities of their supervisors. Comments included: "He kept asking questions, it was a little annoying at first, but then I realized, he just wanted to understand"; "It was very good, she helped me to get (the task) done more efficiently" and "Did she take a training? Whatever it was, I hope she keeps doing it". Two responses were neutral and offered the feedback experience without qualifying information.

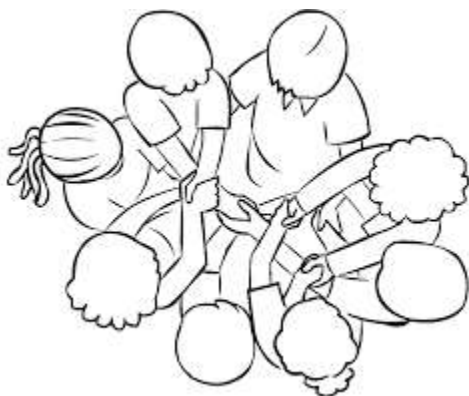
As a means of collecting qualitative data, all of the participants invited a direct report to use a rubric to "grade" their coaching skills. All of the leaders invited a subordinate to rate them in a mock coaching conversation. 9 rubrics were submitted that noted a

minimum of 3 questions asked during the coaching session. Three of the rubrics noted comments that “only questions were asked” (33% of the total results). The data collected show that questioning skills are being leveraged as part of coaching. A positive benefit to conducting this data collection was revealed by one of the leaders: “Knowing that I was being ‘graded’ by my team member forced me to pay attention to the questions I was asking. You may not have gotten the information you were looking for, but I learned from doing it!”

The supervisors of the 8 Action Learning participants were asked to respond to a survey. This qualitative data request received initial responses from 6 supervisors; 4 positive, 1 neutral and 1 “I haven’t noticed any significant change”. In the positive responses, a supervisor notes: “And it’s not just talk - after only three sessions, I saw her implementing some of what she learned and improving, particularly in the area of “questioning versus telling.” Another supervisor wrote: “He has shown a good deal of improvement generally and has spoken highly of his experiences with Action Learning. He is less prone to approach me with issues he feels I need to resolve for him...instead, he comes with ideas of how he’d like to proceed with things. So the problem-solving has been great.” Several of the participants noted to this researcher that they enjoyed these conversations about their progress in Action Learning, one noted: “I really must ask about my performance more often...I usually wait for the annual review...I feel energized”.



Here are some initial conclusions: 1. Direct reports of the new leaders observe and “feel” an obvious difference in the leadership skills of their managers; and 2. The supervisors of the new managers have witnessed positive effects of Action Learning and are appreciative of the development opportunity.



In both the survey and the observation activities, staff members have communicated to their managers and to me that they have observed a noticeable difference in their questioning skills. It can be noted that participation in Action Learning can lead to improved use of questions when coaching and providing feedback to team members. A majority of the supervisors have noted a change in the behaviors not only regarding questioning, but problem-solving.

The Learning team at the Library is taking the initial data of this report and using it as a basis to build a long-term research project with plans to measure pre-, mid- and post-learning; issuing the same evaluation survey to staff at different periods and adding a

control group to isolate the causes of any leadership behavior changes. We look forward to amassing evidence that Action Learning greatly improves an individual's leadership and coaching skills.

Written by Craig Senecal, Director of Talent Development and Engagement, New York Public Library
/published2018