ACTION LEARNING: A PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS WITH LEARNING AND OUTCOMES FOR BUSINESS

Triple benefit

One of the attractions of Action Learning is the simultaneous gains provided by this this innovative methodology: business results through creative and innovative solutions to the urgent and complex problems produced in the sessions; learning and developing leadership skills of the participants and the possibility to create a learning organization, a company that learns by doing and applying what it had learned in a virtuous and continuous cycle.

Michael Marquardt and Bea Carson published dozens of articles reporting the success stories and results from Action Learning. However, here at WIAL Brazil, we have been encouraged to bring Brazilian examples.

Action Learning is a recent methodology in our country, so it is not well known by most companies but there are exciting results which can be shared to encourage its application, since the current economic context requires creativity so that organizations can do more with less.

Clarity to the problem

"How to achieve zero serious accidents at work." This was a problem brought by a group of managers of a company listed on Exame 150 magazine. Through the questions in the development of the session and after the consensus, they stated the problem as follows: employees do not follow safety procedures and they are having accidents. " From this perspective and understanding, the solutions generation was much more focused.

"How to reduce customer complaint" was another issue brought by groups of sales people. This is a critical problem for the company in question, which operates in a regulated market. This company has to achieve goals of customer satisfaction, otherwise they can lose the concessions. Examining and exploring the problem, they realized that this was the tip of the iceberg, a symptom of the lack of processes and integration between different functions in the organization. From this simple awareness, several actions were listed and the focus of the solutions was put on the integration among areas.

The value of Action Learning

A company in the transportation industry brought the problem of maintaining the

quality of services versus the lack of investment of the shareholders. As a result, some actions were generated:

a) Create a crisis committee to focus on this problem

b) Hold meetings with the base employees and another area's pairs in order to listen to their suggestions

c) Re-evaluate investments: analyze all of them, postponed some of them and prioritize those ones with the greatest impact.

A leader in the Brazilian infrastructure industry applied action learning and a team explored the following problem: given the current crisis in the country, should we review the budget?

The problem was explored with powerful questions and then some ideas came out such as: why are we facing this problem? Have we had this problem in the past? How did we deal with this? As the session went on, it became clear that the budget was only the visible part of a root problem related to liquidity. So after two rounds of discussions, consensus was reached and the problem was summarized as follows: We are short of liquidity, how can we solve it? All of them enjoyed and valued the session because the issue was unfolding naturally and they could realize that looking at this problem in parts helped them in forwarding actions for solution.

Participants perceived the power of Action Learning due the great progress in a short period of time: the sessions last only 90 minutes. The feeling of productivity and time well spent is very common in the testimonies of participants.

A Solving Problems Methodology

A typical Action Learning team is composed by professionals from different fields, backgrounds and formations: the greater the diversity, the greater the quality of the questions and more effective the solutions. It is not uncommon, therefore, the participation of professionals from Quality / Process areas who work analytical methods such as Ishikawa, MASP, Six Sigma, KT and other structured tools. After knowing Action Learning, they discover the power of this methodology as an integrative approach, which highlight the power of others methodologies and its own power as well.

ANALYTICAL	INTEGRATIVE
A single right solution	Multiple correct answers
Thinking separate from action	Thinking in action
Goal is to solve problem	Goal is to learn from the opportunity
Close definition of the problem: hypothesis and linear causality	Expands the definition of the problem: multiple causalities and integration of possibilities

Table 1 - Comparison of problem-solving approaches
Source: WIAL, 2014

Problem is not a problem

Global WIAL recommends the use the word problem because it generates a productive tension that mobilizes people to action. On the other hand, the Action Learning Coach facilitates the meeting with enthusiasm, lightness and fluidity. Thus, tense and complex problems can be identified, placed on the table, explored and finally addressed for solution. Some examples of problems worked on Action Learning sessions in Brazilian companies in the last two years:

- High cost with overtime hours
- Approval of emergency requests due not meeting deadline
- Difficulty to manage the discontent of the employees by not closing the collective bargaining agreement with Union
- Conflicting goals between the areas of Operation and Supplies
- Non-compliance with the deadline for hiring and firing people defined by Shared Services Center
- Employee demotivation due to poor evaluation in the performance management system
- Impeachment to fire employees with legal stability who are not performing well and still have bad influence over other people

By exploring problems collaboratively, participants in Action Learning sets are strengthened and the resulting actions are so feasible, simple to implement and under their control, that creates ownership and adds an extra level of enthusiasm in generating solutions.

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