

ACTION LEARNING AND THE BRAIN: THE NEUROSCIENCE OF QUESTIONS

This is the second part of a very comprehensive article that looks at why questions, and by extension Action Learning, are so powerful for individuals and teams. In part 1 in the previous newsletter, Shannon Banks introduced the SCARF model and explained Action Learning creates safety around Status, Certainty and Autonomy.

In this second part, Shannon looks at Relatedness and Fairness, and then shares how she has adjusted her coaching profession by applying the SCARF model.

RELATEDNESS: Questions Reduce Threat

For us to do our best, most creative and effective work, we need to be in what David Rock calls a "toward state," not hindered by fear or threat. Feeling positive about those you are working with is key to this. Feeling relatedness, or socially connected and included, is a core value for humans. Remember - our need to connect with other people is more fundamental and basic than food and shelter.

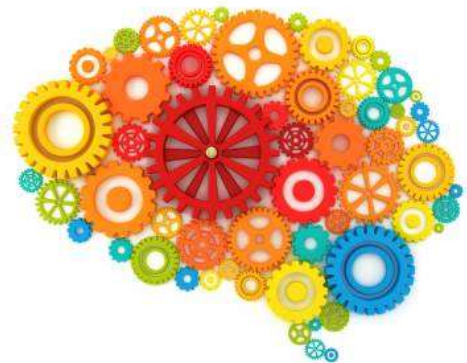
A recent study by Watson Wyatt tells us that [organizations with high levels of trust outperform those with low trust by 286%](#). So how do we generate more trust and connection?

When leaders ask good questions, as we do in Action Learning, it engages the listener's prefrontal cortex - the rational part of the brain that deals with decision making and working memory. A connection is formed between the questioner and the responder. Through asking a question, the questioner is implying "I care about your opinion; I want your viewpoint; I value your insights." We all have experienced the opposite - the painful meeting where people shout out their opinions, talking over and across each other and not listening. These meetings often become emotional and generate frustration.

Through questioning and listening, which is so core to Action Learning, we reduce the likelihood that team members "go limbic" or have a threat response. And in so doing, we increase the levels of relatedness and connection in the group.

FAIRNESS: Action Learning Supports Equality

Finally, the fifth dimension is Fairness. We all learn about fairness as children. One of my earliest memories is fighting with my brother over who got to sit in the front seat of the car. He had a self-made rule that said whoever said "shotgun" first got that position, so he would remember to say it hours before we left on any car journey. I am sorry to say "It's not fair" was a common phrase escaping my lips.



While subtle, fairness is interwoven through the Action Learning process. Even in the first intervention, we ask a question to every member of the group (How are we doing as a group) and each person has an opportunity to answer. As coaches, we are trained to stop those who elaborate on their replies - ensuring that each person gets a chance to give a numerical answer before we discuss the details. Similarly, as coaches, we hold to time in a multi-problem session so each problem presenter equal opportunity to work on his or her challenge.

As we work as Action Learning Coaches, if we consider these ties to neuroscience, we can make our work even more effective. Here are five key ways I use this new understanding of the brain in my coaching:

1. Selling to a sponsor – When I am setting up a new action learning program, these neuroscience learnings can be helpful. By sharing the SCARF model, I can explain the success of Action Learning in brain terms. For some sponsors, this can be very effective.
2. Sharing teaching moments during interventions – As I am working with a team, members sometime ask about the ground rule of questioning and wonder whether the practice is an academic exercise. I often use the connections to neuroscience to reinforce the value of questioning in leadership.
3. Surfacing tension – One of the important roles of the Action Learning coach is to surface any underlying issues or so-called “elephants in the room.” The neuroscience learnings reinforce the importance of this. By playing this important role and putting any issues on the table, we are reducing social exclusion and increasing relatedness.
4. Briefing problem presenters – Before an action learning program begins, I brief problem presenters on their role. If I explain SCARF while encouraging role modelling of good questions, it provides better understanding of the value of their role.
5. Asking better questions during interventions – Finally, as a coach, I always attempt to role model great questions to move the performance of the team forward. By recognizing the triggers for threat and what is playing out in the group, I can target my questions appropriately for the greatest possible success.



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