

Two pillars of coaching – action learning

The reality today changes more dynamically than ever before. Significant changes can be seen in the area of politics and economy. Markets change abruptly and technological progress is so quick that the solutions from yesterday may not be valid today.

Strategies that work today may be insufficient tomorrow. Needless to say, these words were valid a few decades ago when Reg Revans described Action Learning 1).

Hence one can notice a strong emphasis of HR professionals to look for new methods whose purpose will be to empower teams to quickly adjust to external and internal challenges and solve complex problems, never encountered before. There is a visible need to develop leaders who will build their competence not in laboratory situations and discussing case studies but in their experience of working with real problems, real people in real time and facing real consequences.



Team coaching, regardless of its form has one ultimate goal – to empower the team to work efficiently enabled to perform on their own, without a coach; making the team members aware of their potential and able use to it appropriately 2). This implies the necessity to work not only on a team’s goals but also on how they operate.

THE TWO PILLARS

Action Learning is a method, a process for team work, which takes place on the two abovementioned levels - achieving breakthrough solutions and increasing the quality of work. The first goal is put into practice by solving real, complex business problems. The word “problem” is used on purpose here. Executive coaching is often based on goals. Action Learning practitioners know that before we specify a goal for a team, it is good to take a close look at the present state. It is like one switched the first letters in Whitmore’s GROW model 3) and first defined what is happening now to later determine what we want instead. This stems from a simple fact that without a good definition of the present “source of the pain” we may set wrong goals and come to inappropriate strategies. This seems consistent with Cluttebuck’s studies, who stressed that good coaching often results not so much in achieving a SMART goal, but in setting the right one 4). In a nutshell, we are not always able to define the desired state upfront, so it seems valuable to take a step back and describe the present we are in.

The continuation of solutions is real actions taken by the team members. There are numerous organizations that have benefited from breakthrough strategies and real actions taken, including New York Transit, Deutsche Bank, Boeing or Lexus, which also

underline the increase in quality of cooperation and transformation of their organizational culture 5).

The other goal - increasing the effectiveness of a team - is achieved by constant learning. The process of learning is understood not as gaining specialist knowledge, but rather as “producing” new knowledge that results from reflection on actions taken and synergies of the team members’ competencies. That is why the foundation of Action Learning is based on questions and one important rule: all statements may only be made in response to questions. How are we able to reflect without a question that someone asks us or that we ask ourselves?

Action, in turn, is understood both as work during sessions and between them. Hence during an Action Learning session the coach will intervene in the team’s work and ask questions about the way the team operates. He will touch upon both destructive behaviours so that the members can notice and agree on their own norms, as well as supportive behaviours in order to make the team aware of them and know how to do to work even more effectively. Furthermore at the end of each session the coach will ask team members:

- What will you do after the session? Is everybody clear as to what actions each of you will take?

and at the beginning of the subsequent session:

- What actions have you taken and what have you learned from them?

A standard element of coaching is non-directiveness and handing responsibility to the client. It is important to stress that such an approach does not aim to throw the buck at the client, but rather to enable him or a team to take responsibility for their decisions and actions and also unleashing their motivation and energy to change. This seems to be the essence of empowerment - a term quite popular in business today. Hence an Action Learning coach acts in a non-directive way. His aim is both to accomplish the goal and empower the team to work more effectively. Both aspects are equally important - actions and strategies as well as learning. A good team coach will care for both of these elements.



DIFFERENT LEVELS

In Action Learning learning takes place on several levels. Firstly, as mentioned, the team learns cooperation and transforms into a high performing team. Studies on teams show that there are certain features which make them effective and others that make them

perform so well that they exceed the expectations of their stakeholders and even their own.

Hawkins (6) mentions the following characteristics of effective teams:

- The team's ability to have effective meetings and internal communication.
- The team's ability to work individually and collectively in representing the team to all the team's major stakeholders in a way that successfully engages the stakeholders and has impact.
- The team as a 'learning system' that can serve to increase the capacity and capability of each of its team members, as well as continually develop its own performance and collective capacity and capability.
- The emotional work of the team. An effective team also acts as an emotional container that addresses and resolves conflict; aligns the work of all members; provides emotional support.

As for high-performing teams, Hawkins adds:

- Exceptional performance – outperform all reasonable expectations of the group, including those of the team members themselves' (p 107).
- High levels of enthusiasm and energy.
- Personal commitment that is willing to go the extra mile.
- Great stories of 'galvanizing events' – turning points in their history where they overcame the odds.
- More fun and humour than ordinary teams.

All above-mentioned elements, thanks to the coach's questions and interventions, are constantly developed in Action Learning programs. Moreover, owing to the process of mutual questioning the team bonds, as this kind of communication determines attentive



listening and mindfulness. The team members also learn to set norms themselves and increase awareness of the team's behaviours. A remarkably influential result of the program is the skill of problem solving as a group. Session by session one can notice increasingly skilful definition of problems, goals setting, ideas gathering and efficient development of great breakthrough strategies.

Marquardt once said: "If you offer Action Learning to a group, a change will occur in front of your eyes." He adds such traits of effective teams as:

- courage to challenge others' opinions,
- willingness to come up with common strategies,

- clear norms and cohesiveness and trust.

He also describes how Action Learning develops each of them. Examples may be teams in General Electric who achieved:

- better cooperation between units,
- better pace of decision making,
- participative leadership,
- increased morale and engagement,
- more openness and willingness of the board take risk towards innovation,
- open dialogue,
- less influence of corporate hierarchy 7).

Secondly, learning takes place on the individual level, in striving to personal mastery. During an Action Learning session each member practices a chosen leadership skill and at the end reflects on it and gets feedback. Feedback always relates to examples of the chosen skill which are specific and supportive. Through this process the bonding in the team grows far stronger. Both receiving and giving feedback in a group positively influences the relationships between its members and the atmosphere.

Action-Learning-based leadership development programs have been successful in such companies as Samsung, Boeing and Microsoft, where they resulted in increase in leadership quality on the global level and business solutions bringing instant profits. Here is a testimonial from Microsoft:

- “I am privileged to have had an opportunity to bring a business challenge to the group – it was a super valuable exercise for me, and certainly beneficial to my business. This was far and away the most valuable EXPO event in my 3 years of participation in the program- GREAT JOB on all fronts.” Marc Spiotta // Incubation Sales Manager, Microsoft Mobility Business
- “In two hours I accomplished more through the action learning process than I would have achieved in six months.” Doug Park // Director, Microsoft Xbox Support

Thirdly, learning takes place on the organizational level. The idea of Action Learning is also transformation into a learning organization and a culture of inquiry. Individuals participating in Action Learning programs become role models in the skill of asking precise and powerful questions, getting to the root of the problem and developing strategies, so that in a rapidly changing reality they can adjust to the given circumstances in the most effective way.

This was successfully done in British Airport Authority (BAA), the main institution managing UK airports. Action Learning was introduced to this organization in the 80's. Over 50 managers were trained at the time, and engaged in 5 different projects. As soon as after the first program over 200 new conclusions were drawn, resulting from solving

complex business issues and then a new data base was created in order to manage and convey the new knowledge 8).

In Poland Pakao SA bank (part of Unicredit Group) trained their internal trainers, coaches and HR professionals in Action Learning. Many of them are on their way to certification in the World Institute for Action Learning. Here is how they describe it:



“Action Learning is not only a creative way to solve problems. In my opinion, it is a tool to build a culture of cooperation in organizations, engagement and responsibility, through unleashing the potential of employees.” Agata Dragan, Internal Coach

“I took part in a certified Action Learning training of the first Polish group. My expectations about the training were high and met 150%. Why 150%?

Because I got more than I expected. I assumed that

the training would show me a new method and I would be professionally prepared to use it and this expectation was met. I did not, however, expect that Action Learning could have such a deep application and impact on several levels at the same time - it really works like this. Individual benefits from my participation include intense reflection and broadening of my self-awareness about my strengths and areas for improvement as well as practical training of the key competencies necessary in the work as a coach and trainer, e.g. asking inspiring questions, broadening the perspective, accepting diversity etc. Nonetheless, the greatest positive surprise was what happened on the team level: integration, bonding, changing the way we see each other's areas of work and finally coming up with a new strategy of future cooperation that we are currently implementing in our everyday operations. Bea, Tom - thank you! This was a very inspiring week for me.” Agnieszka Romańska, HR Department

The two mentioned pillars- achieving goals and learning - seem to be necessary elements of the process of empowering teams to work effectively, known better as team coaching. Taking care of both and as a result skillfully unleashing the team's potential will result in their ability to take good care of the process on their own, bringing short-term benefits in the form of business solutions and long-term ones in the form of constant increase in the quality of work.

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Written by Tomasz Janiak

Senior Action Learning coach, WIAL Poland