

Learning from the Masters

How do I make sure Action Learning makes a sustainable impact?

Very often, people and organizations do not succeed to make an impact that sustains. Even though one starts off something new (e.g. Action Learning) with enthusiasm, it often results in a rapid relapse into old habits. How can I reduce the risk of falling back into old behavior, such as judging instead of asking questions?

Did you know that 80% of people who make an attempt to change their behavior, do not succeed? The big question is: how is this possible? What causes this 80% failure? Or, when looking from a more positive perspective: what makes this 20% successful?

For this purpose, I personally use the lessons I have learned as a sports coach. What happens when one wants to do something new? Before one starts, there is a phase of being unconsciously incompetent. Thereafter, a generally long and frustrating period of being consciously incompetent follows. This is an inevitable stage to go through to learn something new. Yet, learning takes time. In professional sports, one says you have to practice for 10,000 hours before you master it completely. Only after 10,000 hours of training you get unconsciously competent and the risk of falling back ceases. Nevertheless, 10,000 hours of practice is not realistic within organizations. Most people only work 80,000 hours in their entire lives, which implicates one could master just eight competencies. However, you should take time to truly learn something and accept that you will make mistakes and you will face setbacks on your way. This requires a mindset including the urge to practice for hours and to accept the obstacles, resulting in a deeper learning experience, causing a lasting impact.



As an Action Learning Coach, I often find it hard to see most teams only a few hours per month, during the Action Learning session. Although this session is extremely important, only 30% of all learning takes place during that session, while the remaining 70% takes place during work. Applying those things the participants learned during a session in their work, remains challenging.

Initially, it is important to realize that you will probably not succeed at first. Repetition and practice result in achieving success. But how do you do that?

Primarily it requires setting goals and connecting these. This was a method I used as a sports coach. The major pitfall is that we often only set (large) result-oriented objectives. Even

though one needs these ambitious goals, since these yield energy and urgency, you should realize these goals might distract as well. That is why I need smaller goals.

I am used to working with four kinds of goals, which I connect to one another:

1. Result-oriented goals:

These are needed to check your success in retrospect. However, it often takes long before you reach them. Moreover, you do not have a lot of direct influence on these goals, since you are dependent on many other factors.

Example: as an Action Learning Coach, I want to facilitate good sessions. I want to stimulate the learning process of the team and organization, including their brainstorm and realization concerning actions and solutions.

Your own influence is small, you are dependent on the entire team and you will face new situations. Disappointment and frustration may lead to pulling out and falling back to undesirable old behavior.

2. Achievement goals:

This type of goals is helpful to check whether you get the best out of yourself. You have limited, yet increasing influence on reaching these goals, since you are being able to improve yourself.

Example: I want to perform three interventions that are considered a breakthrough by the team.

Despite having more influence, you are not yet 100% independent. There may not be an opportunity for a breakthrough intervention or you may not be alert enough to see the opportunity. Here too, the absence of success may lead to falling back in old behavior.



3. Task oriented goals:

In addition to the goals described before, you need to set goals focused on tasks. These are needed to make you do the right things. You have got considerable influence on reaching these goals and it helps you to let the process run smoothly.

Example: make sure everyone is well prepared for the Action Learning session, the location or environment is ready and you are relaxed prior to the session, etc.

These things are something you have got significant influence on and contribute to a successful session.

4. Learning goals:

This is the last among the four types of goals. You will be able to completely influence this type of goals. It requires repetitive practice, which is the foundation for success.

Example: I want to learn to be able to apply the entire Action Learning script by heart.

Because you will be able to influence this goal completely, you are able to have more focus on the process of the group. This will lead to: 1. better completion of tasks, 2. reaching achievements earlier, and 3. accomplishing results together with the team.

What do I use this method for? In my role of Action Learning Coach, I always set four types of goals in line with each other. Furthermore, I let the participants do the same. Once we know each other's goals, we know how long it will take to get consciously competent and even unconsciously competent. But most of all, it prevents disappointment during a phase with absence of results, and may therefore prevent fallbacks. After all, learning takes time; one of the tasks of a WIAL Action Learning Coach is stimulating group learning. Ultimately, however, things learned are embedded permanently once one is unconsciously competent. One does not have to motivate himself. A new behavior has been developed.

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