

We ? You ? Team ?

How should you address your Action Learning team?

Not so long ago, in a small hotel in the Polish mountains, I was teaching the CALC course and this question came up: *Why do we actually say “we” and not “you” while addressing the teams we coach?* For example, our script says “What are we doing well?” and not “What are you doing well?” In individual coaching the coach always uses “you” to show and emphasize the responsibility of the client. In WIAL Action Learning we prefer a different style. Having some difficulty in thoroughly explaining this to my group, I decided to ask other SALCs and MALCs. This article is the summary from this discussion.

Two ways to address your team

The first thing that appeared clear in our discussion is that there are at least 2 ways WIAL coaches can speak to our teams. First is the one mentioned above, and the reasons why we like this one are the following:

- We abide by the norms the team develops
- The group members are a “we” not a group of “you’s” – this stresses the team as one organism
- We do not wish to create a barrier/line between us (as a coach) and them. We are all in this together.
- The action learning coach’s comments work on the subconscious as well as the conscious. When we refer to the team as a “we”, their subconscious tries to act like a team/we, and it enables them more easily to do it consciously.

The other way that seems to be used by some WIAL coaches is avoiding both “we” and “you” and focusing on using the words “team” or “group”. Thus, the questions in the script could look like this:

- What is the team doing well?
- What can the team do better?
- Does the team have an agreement on the problem?
- What did the team learn about.... etc.

When writing about this form, one of our MALCs wrote:

While it is true that any team member also has the ability and right to intervene, we only use the term "authority" (in the 2nd ground rule) with respect to the coach.

Further, my study of the group dynamics literature informs me that there are important distinctions between teams, team leaders, and coaches that suggest that there are also role boundaries that not only can't be papered over but also can be used effectively by coaches. In my experience, it is important to emphasize the appropriate powers of the coach because

there is an inherent tendency of teams to fight or flee leadership, or to act in other dysfunctional ways (i.e. become overly dependent on the coach or inflating their power unrealistically - Wilfred Bion noted these dynamics over 50 years ago in his Tavistock approach to team dynamics). So, I am very careful at the beginning of the team interactions to clarify the coach's role and to demonstrate that there is an effective and useful role boundary between the coach and the team. To me this is just a process of reality testing.



Team members, problem presenters, and the coach have different roles. For one thing, problem presenters have the most responsibility for achieving a solution and the coach has the least.

To clarify and reinforce the distinction between the team and the coach, I do not use either of the pronouns "I" or "we". My simple solution? I ask "What is the team doing well?" or "What opportunities exist to improve team performance even more?" I will also address questions specifically to the team presenter "How well is the team doing in helping to develop a solution to your problem?" In this way, I make it clear that, ultimately, the problem presenter owns the problem.

What you must remember

It seems that no matter which way you prefer, you must remember to clearly state the role of the coach, his or her rights and limitations and explain the 2nd ground rule thoroughly so that the team clearly recognize what you are there for. Make sure everyone understands this and resist every attempt of trying to break it (eg. the team asking the coach about her opinion, to note things down on the flipchart or suggest rules that the coach thinks will be useful for the team).

One consequence of accepting that the coach is member of the team is that it makes the coaching job much more difficult. If coaches don't believe that there is a distinction, how do they respond to team members when asked for their evaluation of a team solution or advice on how the team should proceed when it gets stuck in a group process issue? The team would expect the coach to give a helpful response if they are just like any other member of

the team. Teams can place extraordinary pressure on coaches to facilitate, provide direction, or introduce useful information. We all understand that these actions would be clear violations of the coaching role. A clear distinction in role for the coach is one important bulwark against these pressures.

Thus, if you decide to follow our most common approach of using “we”, make sure that your explanation of the 2nd ground rule to the team, directly or indirectly says: *Yes, I am a member of this group and will follow all our rules, including the 1st ground rule. However, my role is quite specific, and what I mean by this is that....*

Good luck in your coaching and formulating powerful questions to your groups!

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