

Connecting the upperstream and undercurrent in dealing with change (part 2)

Action learning as a tool for learning and performing!

This is the second part of an interview on using Action Learning and applying the concept of upperstream and undercurrent on a hockey team's development.

Step 2: Identifying goals and actions

Once a problem has been clearly identified, and there is a clear consensus around it, the next step can happen: fixing goals and identifying relevant actions. Paes says "The next step is interesting. I often observe that people are hesitant to explain this step as they consider it as loading off responsibilities. But this is not what it's about. It's in fact critical to look for dialogue in the step, to connect concerned parties and to ensure everyone sees the need and necessity of the identified goals and actions. At the same time, make sure that debate does not pop up otherwise the process will weaken and lead to frustrations. Another challenge is that sometimes team members are not careful when it comes to communicating the message and sharing information (for example on a website) is not the same as involving and creating a dialogue. A third challenge is that team members agree with decisions but act differently because of possible impact on their interests. It is therefore key to share consequences of the choices and request formal commitment from those that are concerned though a discussion around questions such as "Are we happy with this and are our actions aligned with our values ?"

"Yes, but ... means No !"

It's important to ask the following questions:

- Is this addressing the problem ?
- Can we clearly explain this to all stakeholders ?

If for example explanations to stakeholders are not successful, new actions must be worked out to make this work in the end. Paes: "Exactly, and don't look for excuses. If stakeholders do not understand or do not agree, it is not their fault. Look first what you yourself can improve. Toon Gerbrands (manager director of the Dutch footballclub PSV Eindhoven) introduced this concept in PSV recently. Marc Lammers (winner off several Hockey Women Olympic Medals) agrees: "Winners have a plan, losers have excuses !"

If the stakeholders are not buying into the plan, two paths can grow:

- the visible one: they will ultimately give up
- the invisible one: they pretend to contribute but they are intrinsically not motivated. This often leads to a tangible atmosphere of blame.



Marc Lammers: Winners have a plan, losers have excuses !” (picture: KNHB)

Step 3: Taking action and learning from the experience

Once the frame has been created, the execution phase starts. While the focus in step 1 and 2 is often around thinking and discussion, now is the

time to move things. Paes: “This step is similar to the “storming” step in the Tuckman model, as long as this storming is related to the actual execution. That’s where the learning is. If the discussion is around the plan itself, there is no progress. That can happen when step 1 and 2 are not clearly closed. This is another illustration that quick fixes often are exactly the opposite. When challenges are faced, frustration is often ready to pop up if the organization only does fire-fighting. People end up disconnecting and as an organization you need to ask what all this effort has led to.”

Also in this step one has to consider the undercurrent. Stakeholders need to be aware of the values of the organization. These core values are the organization’s reason for existence. Paes: “Too often I hear management complain: ‘we look forward but not backwards’. It is great to have a future state in focus, but if you don’t consider where you come from, you will often end up lost. It may not be appealing to talk about good old values, or habits and behaviors. But if you do not understand or explain the way you got to where you are today, you will end up in a dead end. In other words: innovating is great, but it must take the past into account. In this step, it is key to observe if the leadership team can clarify the choices, hold a dialogue with stakeholders and avoid ordering around the entire environment. Make sure your leadership team involves members in the story and, better still, make them an entire part of the process.”

“ Observation ends where judgment takes hold”

‘Avoid debates and judgment in the discussions’, Paes continues. ‘Leadership needs to let go, trust in those who will execute and motivate them to reach success. Ensure that ownership is shared. And check progress against the values and agreements. Ask the correct questions rather than ordering. Dare to address the issues if things don’t go as expected. So do keep hold on the overall process. The appropriate approach is to be curious without judgment and to have a growth mindset.

“I often observe that management develops a plan and then executes it themselves. In this case, it will never be the members’ plan and the forces within the club will never contribute. A blaming culture will develop. Management will complain there is no ownership and members will feel they are not taken seriously.”

“Long distance swimmer Maarten van der Weijden: ‘Judge yourself but give feedback to others’ “

Members’ enthusiasm grows if they feel that management takes them seriously (picture: KNHB/Koen Suyk)



Step 4: Evaluating and adjusting

In this step we measure the results that were obtained. From experience, this key step is often skipped due to time constraints. In most clubs, the volunteers often look forward to their time off at the end of the season. Evaluations often get skipped. “A missed opportunity, because it is in fact in this step there are a lot of learning opportunities. It’s important to remind yourself of the year’s goals. Check whether the goals have been reached. Too often different results are used to justify the season’s success. Avoid this. In the undercurrent, we measure the people development. In the end it’s them who make the difference. By paying attention to the undercurrent you develop a learning organization. Isn’t that a great goal in itself ?

A practical example

Let’s see how a concrete d illustrates the theoretical steps described above.

Step 1:

The first step is about getting agreement on what the real problem is, both in the upstream and undercurrent.

- Upstream: The problem is described as “How to bridge the gap between the selected topteam and recreational teams ?
- Undercurrent: Create a working team representing the club with members with diverse backgrounds. This group will confirm the problem and develop agreement. For example “We agree that the main problem is that the leadership level is too weak in recreational teams.”

Step 2:

- Upstream: Create a strategy to bring the leadership team to the desired level. Make choices based on this ambition and not based on fear (except that some will leave). Make targets clear and measurable: financial, resources, staffing etc.
- Undercurrent: Explain members why budgets are distributed differently. Create a dialogue explaining why it’s critical that the club needs to enhance the leadership team’s level. For example: the club’s mission states that each individual will get the best out of him or herself. That’s why we need to turn this into reality as much as possible.

Step 3:

- Upperstream: Recruitment or internal development of better trainers. Purchasing decent training material.
- Undercurrent: Explain to the targeted trainers why the club opts for an approach where the main team's trainers also work in the broad sense. In that way there is a connection between the teams, trainers see players' development more clearly and this allows the members of the club to see a long term goal. Use this to clarify the club's ambition and ensure that those concerned understand the urgency.

Step 4:

- Upperstream: After a year, evaluate if the objectives have been reached. In this case: do the teams have the correct training material ? Does each team have the matched trainer ? Is there a connection between the teams ? You can for example survey members asking them about their satisfaction with their trainer. If this step was successful, the next step can be determined.
- Undercurrent: Think how the leadership can reach a higher level. How can trainers collaborate and inspire each other to do better ? Involve the trainers and ask them to build a their plan so there is a higher level of involvement and ownership.

“ If you cannot inspire the top management, things will for sure fall apart !”



*Think how you can raise the leadership team's overall level
(picture: KNHB/Kay in 't Veen)*

EGO-system versus ECO-system

Is a hockey organization an EGO-system where the road to the top is reserved for a small minority ? Or is it more like an ECO-system where each has a place and where up and lower streams meaningfully collaborate, perform and learn

? The leadership team needs to address this key question when identifying the club's DNA.

In conclusion

The Action Learning process goes beyond the numbers. A balance between facts and emotions ensures success and growth. Paes: 'Be aware this is a symbiosis. Enjoy the challenge of working with both the upperstream and undercurrent. Too often the focus is on the upperstream. If you only pay attention to the undercurrent, you'll end up with happy losers. Therefore, pay the same attention to both the upperstream and undercurrent.' Paes adds: 'Why I got involved with Action Learning ? I find the role of Action Learning very rewarding. Because it allows to develop shared values and meaning and this, with the

passion for one another and the spirit of the organization, leads to breakthrough results.
Nothing more powerful than that !!

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