

Connecting the upstream and undercurrent in dealing with change (part 1)

Action learning as a tool for learning and performing!

Where people are involved, there will always be new ways of looking at things or desires to make changes to deal with new circumstances. Change is all around, whether we like it or not. Many look at change with trepidation because they do no longer know what the future will look like. One group can see a situation as a problem while another sees it as an opportunity. The question is how a team answers the questions that arise from the situation and turn these into success. That is not always easy because both rational and emotional elements are involved. In this article, Twan Paes explains how the Action Learning process holds the keys to successfully dealing with change.



Helping a team move successfully through change. (credits: KNHB/Koen Suyk)

Upstream and undercurrent

When looking at the process of change, it is useful to consider that each process has both a rational and emotional component. In the West rational thought plays a primary role thanks to philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Principia Philosophiae in 1644: 'cogito ergo sum' or "I think therefore I am"). We try to use reason to explain everything around us. Paes: "This is a key point, because feelings do not easily get attention. Just think back on key decisions you made in your life. Very often they relied on your feelings. We say "My gut said ..." or "This feels the right thing to do ...". That's why it is critical to consider in change processes not just the rational side (the tangible ... the upstream) but also the softer side (emotions, intangibles ... the undercurrent). Even more, quite often it's the undercurrent's elements that determine the success of your decisions !"

"The upstream is dealt with by management; the undercurrent requires leadership skills"



A coach constantly needs to switch between upstream and undercurrent (picture: KNHB/Koen Suyk)

The concepts of upstream and undercurrent

Upstream includes: planning, goal setting, structured thinking, budgeting, executing, measuring, controlling, guiding and evaluating. Undercurrent includes: human needs for independence, fairness, recognition, trust and a feeling of

belonging, instinct, emotions, creativity and respect.

Management versus leadership

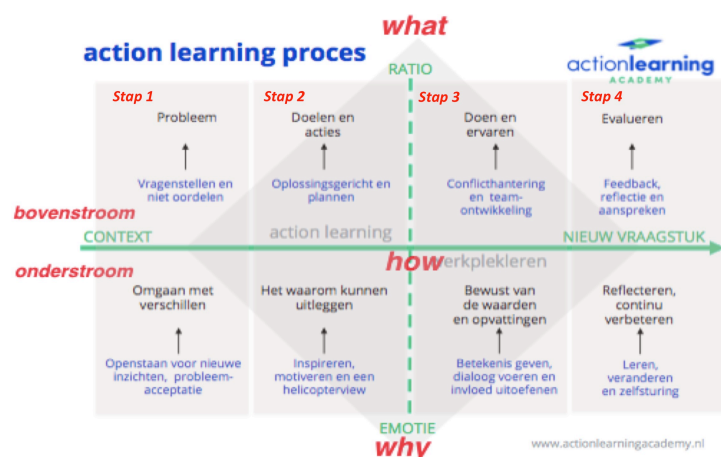
Paes continues: 'When I was a handball coach I was fascinated by creating a success story. How do you develop a team so they see and experience the urgency and are willing to fully go for the shared goal? Also when I was a manager in an insurance company, I was intrigued by how to get the best out of my team members. My leader at the time asked to draw up a plan to reduce sick leave. I first had a conversation with all employees to find out what the reasons for sick leave were. I found out that the reasons did not simply fit into clear categories and that dealing with this challenge required a case-by-case approach. Interestingly, after this step, the sick leave reduced significantly. I found out that employees felt appreciated and inspired by my personal inquiry into their situation. In other words, problem solving is not just about rational approaches but also about making connections.

When we look at the Action Learning model, there are four phases linked to rational thinking (the "what"): (1) scoping the challenge and problem, (2) defining goals and actions, (3) implementing and experiencing and (4) evaluating (and if needed improving). These elements are the same as in Deming's quality circle. This circle is inspired on the the improvement process from Walter A. Shewhard (PDCA). All actions are visible and concrete. Paes: 'You can link this approach and the required competencies to management skills. But when we look at the elements of the undercurrent, you need leadership skills. And these are often critically important. You can design schemes and develop scenarios, if there is no genuine connection, most plans will fail. That's why we added a dimension to the quality circle by including the concept of the undercurrent. There is clearly an important difference between management and leadership skills. But the key is the connection between both streams and this requires coaching skills!'

"Connecting both streams requires coaching skills"

The model has therefore been completed with four more elements (the "how"): (1) dealing with differences, (2) explaining the why, (3) expressing values and opinions and (4) reflecting and continuously improving.

In this way the elements of the upstream get better connected and anchored. Paper and forms can capture decisions in writing, but this doesn't mean these are alive. People make connections through dialogue and mutual inspiration. That is the condition for messages or decisions to beget



real meaning. Paes: “People often look for solutions in the “what” because this is the most tangible part. But this leads to solutions that are often short-lived. Simon Sinek’s vision supports this model. He highlights the importance of starting with “why” before moving on to the “how” and “what”. That is why the contribution of the undercurrent is so critical in this process. Without it, you won’t connect with the critical questions.!”

“ Leadership means having conversations around what seems beyond discussion.”

What is Action Learning?

Action Learning is a process where a small group works on real problems, takes actions and learns through this process. It is a powerful method that creates dynamic opportunities for individuals, teams, leaders and organizations to successfully tackle challenges, to learn and to innovate. The key ingredients of Action Learning are:

- a specific problem
- a team that deals with the problem
- a inquisitive mindset and skills in asking questions
- a willingness of the team to take actions during and in between sessions
- a mindset of looking for solutions and learning (growth mindset).


The goal creates the inspiration and the problem defines the urgency. This combination is key. Otherwise the team stops at solving the problem and root issue remains unaddressed. This often translates into fire-fighting where a structural solution is not reached.

Frequently, training and development programs focus on individual skills such as talent development, operational skills and management. Action Learning coaches who guide the questioning process focus on the group and this makes this approach unique and distinct. The Action Learning process provides direction.



Continuously thinking about to improve team processes
(picture: KNHB/Koen Suyk)

Step 1: Focusing on the problem and challenge



Paes: 'When I look at organizations, I see that little time or effort is spent on the big question (step 1) and very quickly energy moves towards looking for solutions. This means that the focus is on symptoms and solutions are just a plaster that do not address the root cause. Organizations go around in circles and the problem remains. Make sure to get agreement on the problem. That is often a challenge: focus 85% on asking questions around the problem and 15% on finding solutions for the problem. Think about painting. Preparing, plastering and smoothing the surface takes up a lot of time, but is critical to getting a great painting result. 'The better the preparation, the easier the execution'.

In the Action Learning process, it is important to “focusing on the problem and challenge” first and only then move onto “identifying and taking actions”. Otherwise, the discussion will always turn back to the problem. Ensure there is consensus and that the team accepts the consequences of the consensus.

It is also important that Step 1 creates the environment where the challenge is seen as inspiring and critical. Paes: ‘If these two elements are absent, then moving the organization forward is cumbersome or even impossible, and there will be little learning and even less development.’

When a team looks at the problem, the context is important. No problem exists in isolation. Be aware of what exists in the environment and be willing to open up. Paes: ‘Identifying the root of the problem requires that team members are open for new insights and accept differences. The best is to look for a heterogeneous teams where members complement one another. This allows to challenge each another and come to conclusions faster. Avoid a team with yes-men (or women); they will likely quickly agree on the problem, but this will often be a self fulfilling prophecy. Do not allow you to be blinded by your team.’

“Telling is not communicating!”

Stay tuned for the second part including a concrete case study of the application of upstream and undercurrent on a hockey team’s development.

Written by Lutger Brenninkmeijer based on an interview with Twan Paes.

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