

Learning from the Masters: Coach Focus Nonjudgmental, Future, Positive Questions

The Action Learning coach brings the power of individual coaching to the group level, but is even more powerful because Action Learning groups work only on real problems requiring real solutions. The action learning coach not only establishes rapport with the group members but also builds empathy and trust between group members. Through the Action Learning process the group members' self-awareness is not only raised by the coach, but also by virtue of the process. Rather than setting goals for the group, the coach leads the group to set its own goals. The feedback from the coach takes the group to a deeper level of learning. Instead of just focusing on *what* has transpired, the coach leads the group to understanding the *how* and *why* of its actions. Finally, by focusing the group on learning, rather than just solving a problem, the coach takes the group to extraordinary levels of renewal and growth.

New coaches, myself included (when I was new to WIAL coaching), have a strong tendency to want to fix teams. We look for the processes that cause the team to struggle and want to fix them. But it is equally important to look to reinforce great group dynamics. I knew I was too focused on fixing when I did an intervention and the response was – we must be messing up if you are asking. Since then I work hard to make one of my early interventions around something they are doing really well. The reaction, the first time, is typically an indignant – we're doing that! Too which I respond, I didn't say you weren't I just asked how you were doing with it? From this point on the team slows down to really think how they are doing when the coach raises the question.



To stay focused on the future, positive – the direction we'd like to see the team's process resemble – thinking about the behavior you want to see more of and put the words "How are we doing with" in front of it.

For example – Each team member is focused on their own line of questioning. The behavior I would like to see more of is "building on each other's questions". My question then becomes – "How are we doing building on each other's questions?" Take the exact opposite situation – the team is doing an exceptional job building on each other's questions. I want to reinforce this behavior. My question then becomes – "How are we doing building on each other's questions?"

Whichever end of the spectrum the team is on the question remains the same. In either situation we reinforce the goodness of this behavior with – "Why is it important that we ...?" and "How are we going to make more of it happen on this team?"

Regardless if the team's processing needs to shift or be reinforced, the behavior will naturally shift in the direction the coach has planted the seeds. Because of this it is imperative that the coach's questions are phrased to encourage a positive way of processing as we move into the future.

By asking the team "How are we doing with (a given behavior)?" and asking to reinforce the positive as well as shift behavior towards the positive – the coach leaves it to the team to determine – first "How they are doing with a behavior"; second "Why it is important to them as a team"; and third "How they will process best in the future in terms of this behavior." Because every WIAL Action Learning team decides for themselves, what works best for them – it always works. Occasionally, a team will decide on a means of processing that doesn't work for them. When this happens the coach brings this to awareness, ultimately letting the team decide what will work best for them.

Particularly exciting sessions occur when a group reconvenes after taking a night off. The subconscious – having worked all night on the learnings and the problems – creates an intense fire when the group reconvenes in the morning. This new relationship between the group members infiltrates their day-to-day activities from that moment forward; conversations shift from statements to questions; employees consider how their actions impact others; they look for ways to work together better; they ask questions instead of assuming that their perception of a situation is accurate. The Action Learning coach is the catalyst who causes this transformation to occur.

Written by Dr Bea Carson, MALC