

## **When an experienced facilitator discovers Action Learning**

I became curious about Action Learning after co-facilitating a three-day leadership training to a group of middle managers in a hierarchical and relationship oriented culture. The material for the leadership training had been developed internally by my client's European headquarters. During the leadership training the participants were engaged with topics of strategy, individual strengths, diversity, decision-making, and coaching skills.

The training consisted of theory combined with experiential learning activities. Throughout the program it became apparent that attendees had good comprehension of the presented content and applying it. At the same time they were skeptical and doubtful as to the extent those leadership theories and competencies would be applicable in their hierarchical and interdependent work environment. In a culture that values status and relationships, subordinates are expected to cooperate in harmony, that is avoiding dissent and conflict.

The leadership training was followed by 3 half-day group coaching sessions with the objective to provide a forum for implementing individual development plans, to share learning and insights from the leadership program, to identify blocks and hurdles as well as to support the development of individual leadership competencies. I decided to use Action Learning for these sessions.

I started the group coaching sessions with a short activity for the participants to settle in the session and to feel at ease. The participants shared their common challenges, which were then grouped in an affinity diagram. A problem presenter was quickly found and, after a brief introduction of the background, the components and the ground rules, we started the first round of Action Learning.

During the first 15 to 30 minutes the groups struggled with questioning, several participants outright ignored the ground rules. It was apparent how strongly the participants were driven by their assumptions of being right, knowing the root causes and feeling compelled to wanting to offer instant solutions. The natural tendency to advocate without understanding and acknowledging the Problem Presenter resulted in the common debate pattern, a ping-pong game of competing conclusions. The Problem Presenters were given 'smart advice', which, in absence of any alignment with the issue, resulted in the Problem Presenter taking a defense stance, first attempting to clarify and later to argue. Within minutes Problem Presenters turned to become problem

defenders, gradually closing themselves off from further information and well-meant advice.

I focused on keeping a balance between too early interruptions of the process and well-placed interventions to remind the group of the ground rules. After several of these interventions the group slowly moved into a deeper and more focused learning conversation. The participants asked more refined questions and the Problem Presenter gradually opened up by sharing more background, feelings and thought patterns. The group moved into the

natural dynamics of collaborative learning. Assumptions were replaced by curiosity, advocacy by inquiry, and more details and interpretations were revealed. Initial conclusions disappeared and were replaced by questions that revealed more information and



stimulated new thinking by all participants. The move from “I know” to “Tell me more” completely changed the team dynamics. The ground rules little by little helped to shape a conversation, to create and hold a space that permitted the necessary letting go of judgments in favor of learning.

With every new question the trust in the process deepened, a change that became visible also in the body language of the participants. Those who had previously been challenging in a forward leaning position leaned back, the problem presenter’s tension decreased, the until then passive participants became confident in raising questions in accordance with their chosen leadership competency. Eye movements were less abrupt with everybody looking more friendly and interested in understanding the issue by yet deeper exploration.

The importance of body language in any kind of human interaction has to be considered. It is a form of indirect communication that cannot be hidden and therefore reveals judgments, skepticism, and fear. The Action Learning process, especially the first ground rule, supports participants in replacing their assumptions with curiosity. It naturally also comes with a change of facial and vocal expressions that were first the result of assumptions and after the result of a stimulated curiosity.

In Action Learning the coach has to pay careful attention to process as well as content that is shared by the participants. The coach’s feedback at the end of the session is more

encouraging if it contains concrete examples of good questions and how leadership competencies were demonstrated by individual participants.

Action Learning has proved to be a very effective group coaching method that stands out by its simplicity. The final part of the session can extract powerful learning insights. In all my experiences so far every group experienced a shift in thinking.

To uphold and reinforce the behaviors I find it critical to arrange for a series of sessions. Ideally, each organization should consider selecting a number of champions for Action Learning. After many years of professional education and work experiences the majority of managers and executives still focus on practicing analysis and solution design that withstands scrutiny and challenge by others, closing themselves and their organizations up to new ideas, thoughts, insights and adaptive learning.

In retrospect, I wish I would have known of Action Learning much earlier. It is with certainty that I will continue applying the Action Learning to future group coachings.

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