

## LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS: PREPARING THE PROBLEM PRESENTER

Problem presenters play a key role in the success of our action learning programs. Not only should they bring real and urgent challenges to work on for which they have accountability, they can role model strong questioning to ensure the team is performing at their best. As coaches, one of our responsibilities is to prepare problem presenters for this essential work.

I learned the importance of this the hard way.

It was 2009 and I had just received my coaching certification. I was piloting an action learning program at Microsoft, where I worked as a leadership development consultant, and we selected a number of senior leaders from the business as problem presenters. The preparation I gave them was minimal - we sent an email inviting them to attend the session, explained the basics of action learning, and asked them to bring a real and urgent problem to work on. When they arrived, I found each of them for a short 5- to 10-minute conversation.



I was coaching one of the action learning teams. We were only thirty minutes into our session when it became apparent through the questioning that we had an issue: The problem was indeed real, but it was no longer urgent. The problem presenter had solved it with her leadership team the previous week. She was using the action learning team to validate her solution. She also saw herself as separate from the group. She "set" the challenge; it was their job to solve it for her.



I use this example with the CALC certification courses I teach to illustrate the importance of solid preparation of the problem presenter. Precisely what preparation you are able to do may vary depending on the specific program design, but some thorough preparation is essential.

This preparation does not need to be onerous. I generally take three simple steps.

### Email Introduction

As a starting point, I always send an email describing action learning fundamentals and asking the participant to identify a challenge for which they have accountability and which has the following characteristics:

- **Real** – a real issue not something made up for the program
- **Significant** – the outcome should matter
- **Pressing** – the issue should be timely and urgent

- **Unresolved** – the possible solutions have not been fully explored, the optimal solution is likely to be complicated and/or multiple stakeholders have various interests in the outcome
- **Actionable** – action can be taken to address the problem

### Demonstration

If possible, I give the problem presenter an opportunity to participate in an action learning team as a team member before playing the presenter role. Experiencing action learning, even in a short session, gives the presenter insights around action learning that are invaluable and allows you to brief problem presenters on their responsibilities more effectively. They are then able to step into the role with more comfort.

### Follow-Up Conversation

Finally, I hold a follow-up meeting with each problem presenter before the session. This can be a short phone call or a conversation. I remind them again about what their role is - and what it isn't. While I always tell problem presenters that they are a team member like the others and solve the problem alongside the team, I also ask them to consider how they can step up to help the team perform most effectively, perhaps by asking quality questions, or by thinking about what they most need from the session to get the best results.



And - reflecting back again on that first difficult experience - I ask them some questions to reconfirm they are prepared.

- What is the problem or challenge you plan to work on?
- Is this something you have accountability for?
- Is it urgent? Is it keeping you awake at night?
- Does it have a number of possible solutions? (i.e. is it a problem and not a puzzle)
- Would a number of new and diverse perspectives be useful?
- Are you prepared to take action as a result of the session?
- I will ask you to describe your challenge in 2-3 minutes at the start of the session. Can you please send me your problem or challenge in email?

The goal of these questions is not to try to diagnose the underlying challenge - I trust the action learning team to do that through their questioning. What I want to ascertain is whether the presenters really understand their role, whether they can describe the problem as they see it succinctly, and to verify once again that the problem meets the core criteria around urgency and ownership.

From my experience, taking these steps to support problem presenters to understand their important role in action learning will help to ensure consistently strong outcomes.

Happy coaching!

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