

## WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTION, LEARNING AND PROBLEM SOLUTIONS?

In recent years, I've begun to wonder whether the name of our method, Action Learning (AL), is confusing our clients and the public. It is not surprising, for example, that clients see AL as a form of experiential training. That conclusion would be especially natural for US clients who have preferred experiential training methods over the standard lecture-style training for several decades.



When answering the above question, I have often replied that they are both important and that coaches should make an effort to balance the learning with action. Further, we have required teams to end each AL session with action steps. While there has been nothing wrong with these responses, they have tended to obscure a more fundamental relationship

between action and learning. In addition, these answers haven't really challenged the mistaken assumption that AL is basically a more advanced way to train or teach people.

As I have reflected deeply about this question, it has occurred to me that we have been "putting the cart before the horse" and that there is a natural and powerful connection between action and learning when we add the need to create a solution to the formulation. In explanations of how AL works, finding a solution has tended to be seen as a medium within which action and learning occurs. In this view, getting a great solution has almost been a side benefit from the process of taking action and fostering learning.

I now see that this model of AL distorts the purpose of AL, which has always been to generate great solutions. When Reg Revans developed AL following World War II, his purpose was to rebuild Great Britain and, by extension, solve the critical, urgent, and complex problems of the world. Only later did it become evident that AL was also a powerful tool for developing knowledge and skills.

Through this lens, I now understand that there is a causal relationship between action, learning, and generating outstanding solutions. In this model, team members use questions to increase their understanding of the current, unacceptable situation (i.e., the problem). This process, in turn, helps them build better models that can guide action. Debriefing and reflecting upon the results of the action generates a more sophisticated and grounded understanding of the problem which can then be used to develop goal statements and more refined action. This iterative



process continues until the team develops a solution that is acceptable to the problem presenter (i.e., the client). I have termed this mental model the "solution funnel" because the process begins with a very broad search of the problem and possible solutions. As the team acts and then learns, this broad pool of possible solutions is narrowed down to the small set of actions that define the solution presented to the problem presenter.

Placing the action as the first step in developing solutions not only clarifies the purpose of AL but also helps to sell AL to the broader organization, not just to HR and corporate training. When organization leaders recognize AL as a highly effective problem-solving method that also develops the learning capacity and capabilities of their organization, they become powerful allies and promoters of AL rather than potential obstacles to acceptance of AL.

The reader can learn more about this solution funnel and the causal relationship between action, learning, and developing solutions in a recent article I published in *Action Learning: Research and Practice* (Leonard, 2015).

Leonard, H.S. (2015). Understanding the causal path between action, learning, and solutions: Maximizing the power of action learning to achieve great results. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*. 12,1, 22-36.

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