

STRENGTH-BASED VS. DEFICIT-BASED ACTION LEARNING: A REFLECTION OF AN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND ACTION LEARNING PRACTITIONER



In the VUCA world, formal learning that equips learners with programmed knowledge extracted from the past is no longer sufficient. As Action Learning coaches, we appreciate how Action Learning supports leaders to deal with new unknowns through insightful questions and reflections. The process helps uncover new learning while taking actions and applying programmed knowledge. All happens simultaneously without delay.

As an experienced practitioner of both Action Learning and Appreciative Inquiry (AI), I formulated an Action Learning process aligned with the essential strength-based principles to support clients in developing leaders and young talents to build organizational strengths. This article will share my reflection on the fundamentals of the strength-based and deficit-based (mainly WIAL) Action Learning approaches.

In brief, Appreciative Inquiry is a strength-based method that focuses on “*What Works*” (e.g., strengths and opportunities) instead of “*What’s Wrong*” (e.g., weaknesses and problems). The AI process first engages people to define a change agenda that is affirmative for them to work on and then co-create their future through:

- *Discovery* of strengths and resources,
- *Dream* of the shared vision,
- *Design* of the process and social structure, and
- *Destiny* of what’s next: actions and celebration of success.

The Magic of WIAL Action Learning

Based on my experience and feedback from my clients, the WIAL process creates magical moments of personal and group inspiration. One of the major reasons is the six components and two ground rules that allow the group to function with the least restrictions.

The free flow of questions among group members generates heat and dynamic, especially in an organizational setting. The process challenges hidden group norms and underlying assumptions. A skillful coach can turn those into learning opportunities and give room for reflection before the group moves on. The process also requires the members to demonstrate and practice particular skills through

questioning. This also inspires others to practice the same skill by responding to the questions.

Although the approach handles more than problems and opportunities, its standard process and language mostly focus on problem-solving. For instance, one essential step is to define the problem statement, even if the group begins with an opportunity.

Problems vs. Opportunities – Who takes side?

Although both pressing problems and exciting opportunities reinforce a desire to learn, why do most Action Learning approaches focus more on problems? Research shows that things of a negative nature significantly affect one's emotions, cognitions, and behaviors, even when neutral or positive natures are presented in equal intensity. This *negative bias* effect shows a significant impact on a wide range of aspects such as learning, memory, judgments, attention, decision-making, and risk considerations. In short, people tend to pay more attention to things that trigger negative emotions, such as problems and risks. This mechanism helps generate a sense of urgency that helps engage learners in Action Learning.

How about running a deficit-based process positively?

The WIAL process has a step to review what works well in the group, which was incorporated with the notion of Appreciative Inquiry. It lets the group reflect on what went well before exploring what could be done better. Some coaches tried to use strengths-based tools to identify individual members' strengths to practice and encourage more *positive* questions during the process.

Change in the language and questions may help run a deficit-based process more positively; it, however, will not eliminate the impact. To quote from one of my clients, a senior executive of a major bank in Hong Kong, who hired me to offer practitioner training in both WIAL Action Learning and Appreciative Inquiry. When his team was going through the problem-solving process, the team knitted their brows while struggling with the problem. On the contrary, he saw a glow on people's faces and hopes for a brighter future during the Appreciative Inquiry process.

Reflection: Which approach is better?

I have a strong personal preference towards the strength-based approach due to my life and professional experience. However, the clients I encountered who clearly expressed their preference for the deficit-based process were mainly because it could align with their organizational culture and top management's leadership style. No matter which approaches a practitioner chooses to use, a full understanding and respect of the spirit are crucial to bring out the essence of the approach and achieve a congruent flow of engagement. A random blend of incompatible approaches (e.g., using strength-based tools on a deficit-based process or vice versa) will create confusion and conflict.

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A part of this article is extracted from a journal article of the author, with supplementary case studies. Refer to the following link or contact her directly at dorothytsui@wial.hk to learn more:

<https://aipractitioner.com/product/strength-based-versus-deficit-based-action-learning-for-developing-leaders-teams-and-organizations-in-asia/>

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