SUPERCHARGING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
THROUGH ACTION LEARNING

One of the primary uses of Action Learning (AL) is to develop leadership skills. In the US, for instance, it has been estimated that 75% of AL programs are focused on leadership development (LD). Recognizing the importance of LD, the WIAL approach to AL recommends that coaches ask participants to identify a leadership skill that they want to develop as they work in AL teams.

For many participants and coaches, the practice of focusing on leadership skills while solving problems is experienced as novel and even revolutionary. The importance of developing individual leadership skills is further been emphasized by asking questions about individual leadership skill development before team and organizational development in the post-session debriefing process. A problem with this debriefing practice became obvious to me when I noticed that it took much more time to debrief individual, as compared to team or organization, development because of the time it took to address the develop goals for every member of the team (which usually included feedback from other team members). After recognizing this imbalance, I recommended that AL coaches vary the order of questions asked about individual, team, and organizational development. I also developed questions that limited the amount of time it took to debrief individual LD skill development (i.e. What was the most important thing you learned about developing LD skill a, b, or c?).

Concurrent with my work as an AL coach, I was also teaching courses on leadership at several universities. The focus on individual leadership skills in AL was consistent with the general emphasis on leadership skills as the central component in effective leadership. However, I noticed that teaching leadership skills alone was inadequate. My students would learn a skill but didn't know when to use it or how to develop a *leadership strategy* to solve complex problems and achieve individual, team, and organizational objectives. I concluded that most LD program, including AL, were not fully preparing people to be effective leaders.

Purpose and leadership strategies as well as leadership skills

In order to make AL a more effective and teachable LD approach, I developed a more appropriate leadership model that recognized the importance of purpose and leadership strategies. Fortunately, research by Dr. Craig Pearce and colleagues (2003) provided some insights about leadership strategies that were useful in the development of this approach. This revised and expanded approach to leadership that I developed provides

constructs that can be used to create mental models to generate productive questions during post-session AL debriefs as well as during AL sessions. Readers can learn more about the mental models derived from Dr. Pearce's work at this link - mental models for leadership strategies[i].

How to supercharge the LD debriefing process

The debriefing process for early sessions should continue to focus on development of the leadership skills identified by participants at the beginning of the AL process or modified as the process proceeds. After the team agrees on a definition of the fundamental problem including root causes, the team is ready to develop a mental model of what it would look like if this problem were solved. In OD language, we term this the desired "future state." Once this vision is agreed upon, the team can develop over-arching goals and clear and measurable objectives. At this point, the coach can ask, "*Does the team have agreement on the purpose of the AL process*?" The discussions in response to this question serve to integrate the problem statement and the resulting definition of goals and objectives and provide a unified direction for the team's work.

With clear purpose, the team is ready to generate and evaluate solution possibilities and complete all the problem-solving steps necessary for effective and creative problem solution. The coach can then begin focusing debriefing questions on the use of leadership strategies to achieve the results the team desires. Using mental models related to leadership strategies, the coach can ask questions such as, "What leadership strategies would be effective in order to get the desired results?" In AL programs that are part of a larger integrated LD process, participants will be familiar with leadership strategies, such as the ones described by Dr. Pearce. Once the strategies have been identified, the coach can ask questions about the individual leadership skills necessary to execute these strategies. These discussions will often provide opportunities to ask follow-on questions related to the individual, team, organization leadership skills necessary for successful solution of the problem.

The process that I have outlined requires the skilled use of mental models in constructing process and debriefing questions. The coaching script that is currently taught in WIAL certification classes incorporates a number of simple but useful mental models. The approach I recommend requires the introduction of some additional leadership principles such as purpose and leadership strategies. If the AL process has a clear LD focus, it would be natural and appropriate to provide some simple content around useful leadership concepts before the AL process begins. These

concepts could be used to develop intra-session questions and to focus debriefing processes. For the coach, becoming skilled in using mental models related to an expanded model of leadership requires additional training and practice. The application of these skills, however, provides a much more powerful and robust leadership development experience.

Pearce, C. L., Sims, H. P., Jr., Cox, J. F., Ball, G., Schnell, E., Smith, K. A., & Trevino, L. (2003). Transactors, transformers and beyond: A multi-method development of a theoretical typology of leadership. *Journal of Management Development*, *22*, 273–307. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/02621710310467587

Written by Skipton Leonard, MALC
/published2018

---

[i] http://learningthruaction.com/wp-content/uploads/HowToMakeLeadershipMoreTeachable_111917.pdf