TEAM PERFORMANCE

In August 1979, at the age of 16, I became the coach of a handball team of children aged 7 and 8. That is exactly 40 years ago: 40 years in which team coaching in sports, education and business has always been my favorite and most successful activity. Almost always I started in practice and afterwards only took theoretical training: Action Learning pur sang.

I would like to share my reflection on these 40 years with you in this article.

During my MBA education I discovered new models that try to predict success. They provide managers with certainty and are based on linear thinking. But in the current time this is no longer sufficient. The current challenge for organizations is to have teams deliver results and learn from this.

I distinguish between the undercurrent and the upperstream. The undercurrent is invisible but the energy and passion are there, but also the resistance or fear. You cannot manage this undercurrent, you can only lead it. The upperstream that is visible in figures, results, budgets etc. you have to manage that.

To get results you need both. If you only stay in the upperstream then you become a cold bureaucratic machine and if you only stay in the undercurrent we become happy losers. Connecting the upperstream and the undercurrent is what the Action Learning coach does!

Team development has to deal with more and more complex dynamics and never stops. In addition to the 6 components of Action Learning, I see 6 important components that are key to team development. What are those 6 elements?

1. Common goal
You will get chaos without a common goal!

Determining a common goal starts in the undercurrent and is linked to the purpose. As Simon Sinek says so beautifully: "it starts with WHY"! A team can very well determine its own goal. The coach has an important task, which is to help the team ask the right (open) questions first. For some, that may sound soft, but it is not, modern leadership starts by asking the right
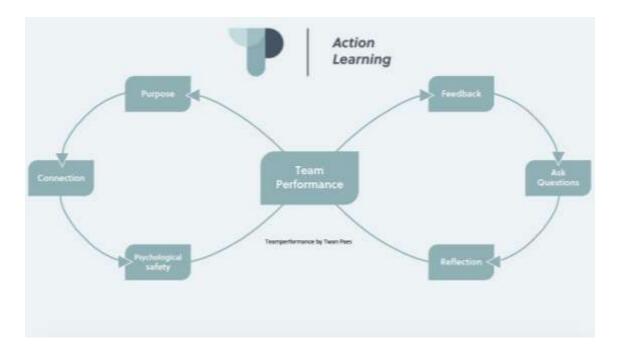
questions. My favorite questions are: What does the team want to bring about? Where is the limit of our system?

The most important challenge then is to align individual goals and team goals. That does not mean that they must be the same, in fact that is often the most common mistake. The Action Learning philosophy is very valuable here. This is because not only attention is paid to actions and results, but also to personal development. Participants idenfity learning objectives with particular attention to personal leadership and the so-called 21th century skills. You touch the individual in a team much more with a personal development goal than with other goals. It helps to experience mistakes as learning moments instead of as a failures. A step forward instead of a step back!

A goal is also important because people cannot do without goals. A person needs a reason to get out of bed.
If the team has created its common goal, it has created its future. The goal now has an incredibly large impact on the next part, bonding.

2. Bonding
Without bonding you get artificial harmony

To what extent are people really interested in each other? How can you promote that? An organization often formulates the organizational values. There is nothing wrong with that but it can be disastrous to assume or even worse to impose that these are the same as bonding.

"Not individuals, but relationships are the building blocks of organizations"

A commonly used way to give team members more insight into each other is to work with personality tests. Many teams have positive experiences with typologies such as MBTI. Criticism that you hear more and more is that people are put in boxes and are given a label. This is especially true if you limit the typology to the person. It is then only used for self-reflection and then you quickly get comments like: "sorry that I am so often late but that is because I am purple". The big advantage of typologies, however, is that they give a lot of insight into what gives people energy or what constitues their opposition. If team members explore this together and give it meaning, it often strengthens the team interactions.

In addition to knowing of each other's preferences, it is just as important to know each other's values. This provides insight into what team members think is important and connects with them. These have to be concrete by naming the associated behaviors and of course demonstrating them. How an individual functions depends on many factors such as the maturity of the team, the background, experience with change, how the organization is doing, etc.

If you ignore this, you will get artificial harmony and that does not contribute to the next element of psychological safety.

3. Psychological Safety
Without safety you get a fear culture

Safety and in particular psychological safety is impacted at three levels:

1. The environment of the organization (the outside world)
You have very limited or sometimes no influence on this. Focusing too much on this or dwelling on it can lead to victimization and can be disastrous for organizations.

2. The environment of the team (the organization)
This is another dimension where the team does not have complete influence but more than the organizational environment. It is important here to what extent teams within the organization work together. This has increased enormously in recent years, looking at approaches such as project-based work or working in Action Learning groups on organizational themes. Looking at the undercurrent, the main question here is to what extent teams are interested in each other and how much do

they understand each other. The classic example here is the relationship between sales teams and back office teams.

The team leader also has a crucial role to play here. He is often the one to explain this in his management team and ask for understanding when things go wrong. Team professionals here are not really helped with the so-called upperstream explanation: this is a matter of subjective feelings in the undercurrent.

Professionals expect a leader to protect them. Authority can only exist through that protection. As long as leaders protect followers, they are tolerated. As soon as they can no longer offer protection, confidence falls away.

3. The team itself
With Action Learning, this is the focal point because the team has the most influence on this.

Is the team a group of people working together or a group of people who trust each other? Trust in each other is perhaps the most impactful driver for safety.

Much research has been done into psychological safety in teams and WIAL's President Peter Cauwelier is very intensively involved in this. It has been shown that the most important element that distinguishes high-performance teams from average teams is the level of psychological safety.

4. Feedback
You stay in the comfort zone without feedback

Many references even talk about a feedback culture, which seems to make feedback into a goal in itself. But the more the three previous elements are fulfilled (common goal, bonding and psychological safety) the less you have to think about how feedback is given. Many organizations spend a lot of money on feedback training, while there is actually no shared goal and commitment.

At this point, the team should wonder if there is a safe and trusted environment in which positive and negative feedback can be given by everyone. That does not alter the fact that you can make agreements about how you give feedback. My recommendation is to always finish feedback with a question.

Another challenge is when, who and how do we give feedback to each other. Many organizations have developed this aspect very professionally in recent decade. Everyone knows how they are evalauted and there are no surprises. Large organizations with professional HR (D) departments have made a positive contribution to this. But is that still appropriate in this day and age ?

More and more organizations are now aware that a traditional assessment system, with annual review meetings, is no longer adapted. Agile organizations ask for evaluation of performance and behavior on a higher frequency: feedback should be continuous. Moreover, giving feedback directly is much more effective in achieving a behavioral change. That is why it is easier at the team level to strive for a culture in which it is safe to give and receive feedback.

5. Ask questions
You don't innovate without asking questions

As the team starts to perform more and comes closer to its goals, the law of the diminished returns appears. The team must make more and more effort for less and less progress. The comfort zone is reaching its limits. To maintain the progress, you must now be careful that fear does not create limitations. Often the leader has distributed duties, responsibilities and power based on his position. Reaching this point, it is no longer a matter of dividing up but of sharing, starting with sharing leadership. And the way to do that is to ask questions ...

When asking questions, it is essential to withhold judgments and not think about solutions too quickly. This requires the team look at what is going on from multiple points of view. This is of course the foundation of Action Learning.

6. Reflect
Without reflection you don't make progress

A lot of performance management systems are focused on evaluating the performance of employees and attaching an appropriate reward. Nowadays, organizations focus much more on employee growth and development. Performance management therefore changes in nature. To achieve this, direct feedback on behavior and performance is required. Action Learning sessions, with the built-in reflection and sharing, are a targeted and safe environment for continuing to learn. If you let employees set their own development goals, feedback is a gift and not a threat.

Finally: The role of the Action Learning session …

In the race that most organizations and teams are in, things will break down, or sometimes energy runs out. You have to repair things that are broken. These may be relationships as a result of no or incorrectly received feedback. You can only perform if you can also reflect and if you have learned to recover. Most plans, which often look good on paper and are seemingly embraced by everyone, fail because there is simply no time to pause and reflect. And that is why Action Learning helps organizations that want to build a sustainable approach to making progress.

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