

LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM



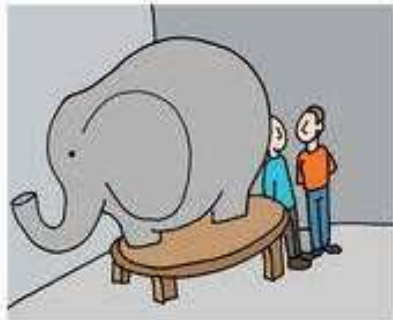
As action learning coaches, we learn to intervene when we see learning opportunities or to improve the performance of the group. This is easier said than done. Knowing when and how to intervene in a group that is functioning well is hard enough. You have to pick the appropriate moment, ask the right questions, and consider the impact you wish to have through the intervention. When group dynamics are tricky, however, this becomes even harder. And while it requires great courage, I would argue that the trickiest, most courageous interventions can have the greatest effect.

During action learning sessions, sometimes challenging dynamics arise – so-called “elephants in the room.” You observe tension between two team members, you notice an individual who has disengaged or is being rebellious, or perhaps members have brought a history of conflict into the room and you are observing it in their work. These scenarios exist in all work contexts, but in action learning, if they are observed, you have a wonderful opportunity, and obligation, as a coach to surface these. Only by bringing these forward to be addressed through courageous and carefully crafted coaching questions, can the team move beyond these issues and become even stronger.

Many years ago, during one of my earlier action learning sessions, I was coaching a group of employees who were working together on a challenge over a three-day immersive action learning session. On the second day, one of the team members asked a question of his peers, and while he got answers, the others clearly didn’t pick up on his line of questioning and moved the conversation on. The individual in question became visibly agitated. He leaned back, he stopped engaging, he crossed his arms. The rest of the team continued their work.

As a coach I waited several minutes to see if the group might do something to address this but they were either unaware or unwilling to speak up. So I took a deep breath and intervened with a simple, standard question: “How are we doing as a group, on a scale of 1-10.” The group went around and individually answered this question, all with high scores – 8, 9, 9, 10, 8 – until they got to my disgruntled team member who said “1.” That, of course, allowed for standard follow up questions around what they were doing well and what they could be doing even better. And when the group continued work after this intervention, the conflict was dissolved, the whole team was re-engaged and the problem solving was higher quality. In the final intervention of this session, on day three, when I asked this

group what they learned about team dynamics, they said they learned it was always better to surface issues, even if that took courage. They knew there was conflict in the room, and they chose to ignore it. Through action learning, they learned how much more effective they could be if they addressed it instead.



Several years later I was coaching an in-tact team for a short action learning session, and two of the members who had a long history of working together started bickering. They were good at action learning and were following the ground rules, but their tone and style was unpleasant and the rest of the group were visibly uncomfortable with the exchange. In this instance, I took a different

approach. Upon my intervention I said "I am observing two members of group have a conflict, what is the impact of this?" In response to this, the two team members quickly said "No, no, we are fine, there isn't a conflict," and while the intervention was short and we went back to the problem quickly, the elephant had clearly left the room. The tension was gone.

My learning from my action learning experience is that it is always better to surface an issue you think you are observing. If it feels hard, it's probably even more valuable. Generally if you are sensing tension or poor dynamics, others are too. And even if the team doesn't agree it's an issue, it can still move the group forward. By raising these concerns through carefully considered questions, you can empower the group to do their very best work.

Happy coaching!

Shannon Banks, MALC, October 2014