The ROTAR Discipline – Enhancing the power of Action Learning

Introduction

In the preface to his 1997 book *Action Learning in Action* (1999), Dr Michael Marquardt states that Action Learning is a deceptively simple yet amazingly intricate problem-solving strategy that has the capacity to create powerful individual and organizational changes. Marquardt describes it as being built on a number of organisational, sociological, epistemological, and psychological systems that energise and synergise each other in the process of transforming problems and people.

Yet despite its power, simplicity, and cost-effectiveness, action learning, according to Marquardt, is still rarely utilised within American corporations. Marquardt suggests that perhaps its very simplicity is the cause of this – if something is not complex, then how can it solve the complex issues facing complex organisations in today's complex world?

Another reason suggested by Marquardt for action learning's limited use, is perhaps the confusion about what action learning truly is.

What is Action Learning?

Simply described, action learning is both a process and a powerful program that involves a small group of people solving real problems while at the same time focusing on what they are learning and how their learning can benefit each group member and the organisation as a whole. Action learning contains a well-tested framework that enables people to effectively and efficiently learn and to simultaneously handle difficult, real-life situations. It is built on the application of *new questions* to *existing knowledge* as well as on *reflection* about actions taken during and after problem-solving sessions.

The benefits of action learning as suggested by Marquardt and others are highlighted as follows:

❑ Shared learning throughout various levels of the organisation
❑ Greater self-awareness and self-confidence due to new insights and feedback
❑ Ability to ask better questions and be more reflective
❑ Improved communication and teamwork

It is acknowledged that action learning may be used effectively in a widespread number of applications such as:

➢ Problem solving
➢ Organisational learning
➢ Team building
➢ Leadership development
➢ Professional growth and career development

Action learning utilizes systems thinking which recognises that organisations are like giant networks of interconnected nodes. Changes, whether planned or unplanned, in one part of the organisation can affect other parts of the organisation, with surprising consequences. This type of thinking is difficult for most of us because we are taught to break problems apart, to fragment the world. This appears initially to make complex tasks and subjects more manageable, but can create further problems as we can no longer see the consequences of our actions, and we lose our intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole, i.e., "the big picture".

A Critical Evaluation of Action Learning

While the above stages in problem-solving appear entirely logical in terms of their rationale and structure, the application however, is far more complex. Marquardt (1999: 29) states that proponents of action learning believe that learning (new knowledge, skills or values) cannot occur without questions and reflection. The action learning model starts with *programmed knowledge* (i.e., knowledge in current use, in books, in one's mind, in the organisation's memory, lectures, case studies, etc.). To this base is added the process of *questioning*, which offers access to what is not yet known, and *reflection*, which involves recalling, thinking about, pulling apart, making sense, and trying to understand.

Marquardt states that the questioning and reflective aspects of action learning provide essential ingredients of and opportunities for individual, team, and organisational growth. He argues that by beginning with questions rather than using past knowledge as the first reference point, the team can start to gauge whether the available information is adequate and relevant to the present needs.

By focusing on the right questions rather than the right answers, action learning explores what one does not know, as well as what one does. Marquardt (1999: 30) implies that helpful, insightful, and challenging questions are pivotal in reaching valuable solutions. Asking questions causes people to think, provided questions are asked in supportive, unpresumptuous, and sharing spirit. Furthermore, the major difference according to Marquardt, between asking questions in action learning and asking them in other settings is that in action learning, questions are not only seeking answers, but are rather seeking to go deeper, to understand, to respond to what is being asked and to give it thought. Asking questions therefore, is not only a quest for solutions, but also an opportunity to explore (Marquardt, 1999: 31).

As can be clearly interpreted from the above, questions and the questioning process, is critical to the success of action learning. So what exactly are the helpful or "right" questions as asked by Marquardt (1999: 31)? According to Marquardt the right questions are simply those that give the action learning group the information it needs at the time. If the group fails to come up with the right questions for a given project, it fails to get the information needed to solve the problem.

Herein resides both the challenge and the opportunity!

The stages in the action learning problem-solving process stated above appear (although they are not) to be linear in sequence. Action learning also appears on the surface to be based on a premise of a logical, sequential, learning process that focuses primarily on problem-solving. This is indeed not so, for action learning involves a continual double-loop learning process and herein resides its power.

Based on my own extensive experience of facilitating action learning amongst MBA students and my experience in the workplace as a marketing strategist, action learning has certain shortcomings. These include the following:

➤ Action learning does not include or provide any *structured* thinking skills component that focuses on developing thinking skills in order to encourage (and in so doing) empower individuals or group members *how* to think in a more effective manner
➤ Thinking skills tend to develop more by default rather than by design
➤ Action learning *assumes* that all group members know *how to think* in the *most effective* manner
➤ Action learning can result in a "one approach fits all" attitude towards problem solving
➤ Action learning *tends* to place more emphasis on *analysis* (what is), i.e., critical thinking, rather than on *design* (what can be)

Critical thinking holds the viewpoint that analysis, judgement and argument are enough, but while judgement thinking has its place and value, it lacks generative, productive, creative and design aspects which are vital for success (De Bono, 2006: 15). According to De Bono, our success in science and technology comes not from critical thinking but from the "possibility" system. The possibility system

moves ahead of our information to create hypotheses and visions and these provide us with a framework through which to look at things and to work towards.

Herein resides a further challenge for Action Learning – it is primarily perceived and used as a methodology for problem-solving and not necessarily as a methodology for strategic design. The somewhat loose structure of the framework within which an Action Learning group operates and the potential for emotions to overtake the creative, constructive and design aspects of thinking, presents both a realistic and practical obstacle.

The loose nature of the structure can potentially lead to further inhibitors to both problem-solving and creative design such as:

- Lack of vision and direction
- Group fatigue
- A tendency to simply "get the process over with"

It is the writer's contention that this lack of a structured, yet flexible framework is what is possibly missing in the action learning process.

Towards a Solution

Just as action learning can improve both individual and organisational learning, thinking is a skill that can be improved by training, practice and through learning how to do it better (De Bono, 2006). De Bono defines thinking as the operating skill through which intelligence acts upon experience and he emphasizes the need to pay direct attention to the *methods* of thinking.

If action learning highlights the importance and need to ask better and more insightful questions, then improving one's *method of thinking* must by default lead to improving one's ability to ask better questions.

Maxwell (2006: 13) states that every person has the potential to become a good thinker and highlights three observations as follows:

o Unsuccessful people focus their thinking on survival
o Average people focus their thinking on maintenance
o Successful people focus their thinking on progress

These observations can also be applied as an important premise for successful learning and development at both a personal and organizational level.
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De Bono (2006) suggests two opposing viewpoints to thinking. The first choice according to De Bono is that thinking is a matter of intelligence which is determined by the genes with which you were born. The second choice is that thinking as a skill can be improved by training, by practice and through learning how to do it better. Thinking is no different from any other skill and we can get better at the skill of thinking if we have the will to do so.

Maxwell (2003: 10) posits that in order to make progress in any field, you have to take action. But the success of the action you take depends entirely on how you think beforehand. According to Maxwell, questions are only the beginning of the thinking process and it is necessary to convert thinking into objective and realistic options or alternatives that are capable of meaningful evaluation and future action. The goal of this process is to add value to the thought, idea or the concept.

De Bono emphasizes the use of tools as a means of improving thinking. It is also my contention that without a "roadmap", effective thinking and (by implication) effective organisational learning and development, will not be able to take place.

One of the major challenges that organizations face today is how to direct attention at problems and strategic issues objectively, while at the same time allowing creativity and innovation to occur. Creative marketing ideas and innovation are often stifled by emotions that are applied by hard-nosed managers who are only interested in the bottom line, even before these ideas have been fully explored. However, if both pragmatic and creative thinking could be combined in an objective manner, where emotions are applied after the journey of discovery, then organisational learning and development should be able to occur.

Another major challenge relates to the fact that most organizations spend very little time focusing on intentional pro-active thinking – they only tend to think when there is a major crisis that requires immediate attention. Most business schools do not even have a formal course in thinking. Business schools and universities provide many excellent courses on marketing, finance, operations and the like, but the real challenge arises when students eventually graduate and are required to think for themselves (or as part of a team) when they have to deal with real business problems in the workplace.

It is the workplace that provides the real challenges for managers and leaders and this is where Action Learning becomes highly appropriate as a methodology for solving real business issues. The writer has worked with MBA students for more than 12 years as an Action Learning facilitator and Set Advisor and has experienced first-hand the incredible benefits that can be derived from the Action Learning methodology.

Through this extensive involvement the writer has also experienced the frustrations of many of these MBA students while working in Action Learning subsets (small groups) and has shared in their pain while attempting to solve real problems within their own organizations. This pain is often the direct result of their personal growth and development while studying within an Action Learning environment. They grow in knowledge as a result of their MBA studies, but more importantly they grow in their ability to identify and analyse the real problem and then apply their knowledge and develop a meaningful solution.

However, within many organizations, the learning, growth, development and in particular the systems thinking of managers, leaders and teams is not always as rapid as that of an MBA student who is versed in the practice of Action Learning. Organisations still tend to apply conventional thinking while operating in unconventional times. Sure, there is still teambuilding and the weekend away in some mountain hideaway, but that still does not result in improved learning or enhanced organizational performance. Some of the reasons for failure of strategic planning sessions may be:

- The focus still tends to be on "what is" (emphasis on analysis) and not on "what could be" as described by De Bono
- Innovative thinking is not always encouraged due to a lack of understanding or a formal process that improves organizational thinking
- Standard tools are used (e.g. a SWOT analysis) without sufficient consideration being given to the application or impact of future actions or strategies – or even how strategies will be implemented.

As a marketing practitioner the writer has witnessed much time spent (and lost) on formal planning sessions at great cost to the organization, but with little or no thinking and action taken relative to the impact or possible consequences of strategy decisions. There are countless references to the fact that "85% of new products fail in their first year", but there are few if any authors who offer a meaningful solution as to how to reduce this dilemma.

It is the writer's contention that one of the ways to reduce failure or to enhance organizational performance is to apply a more disciplined approach to the way in which we *think*, take *action* and *reflect* on these actions. These are principles that are inherent in the Action Learning methodology, but the writer is proposing a new discipline that if used properly, can enhance the power of Action Learning and in turn lead to greater individual and organisational learning and performance.

This new discipline referred to above is called the ROTAR Discipline.

Introduction to the ROTAR Discipline

The ROTAR Discipline is an attention-directing framework for individual and organisational thinking which can be used highly effectively in conjunction with the principles and methodology of Action Learning. ROTAR is an acronym for *rigour of thought, action and reflection* – all of which are essential ingredients for effective Action Learning.

The ROTAR Discipline is a simple, yet highly robust and powerful tool which can be used effectively for strategic, operational and tactical planning, or even as a coaching tool for management and leadership mentoring and development.

The ROTAR Discipline contains four distinct yet interrelated components, each of which requires intentional focused thinking in a structured sequence, yet which permits sufficient latitude for creative thinking and design.

The ROTAR Discipline is totally flexible and can incorporate other models when appropriate – for example the inclusion of Porter's Five Forces Model when analysing competitors and the competitive environment.

The ROTAR Discipline

The four disciplines involved in the process are:

- The *"rigour of thought"* discipline which embraces thinking and questioning around the central problem or issue on hand
- The *"link"* discipline which relates to the generation of specific options based on the initial thinking and questioning process
- The *"impact"* discipline which evaluates the potential impact of the option(s) selected
- The *"implementation"* discipline which reflects on the detailed requirements for effective implementation

Figure 1 below illustrates the ROTAR Discipline process.
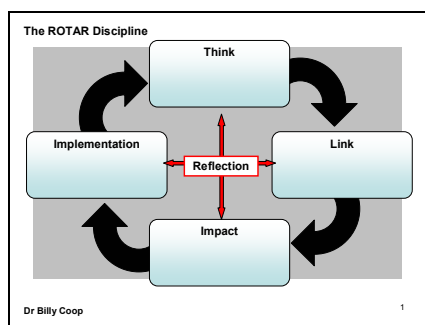
As per Peter Senge's (1990) definition of "discipline", the ROTAR Discipline it is not an *enforced order* or *means of punishment*, but rather a technique that when mastered will lead to improved thinking and action.

The ROTAR Discipline is based on four simple, yet highly effective disciplines namely:

1. Rigour of Thought Discipline

This is the discipline of organised and focused thinking (intentional thinking) and reflection.

The rigour of thought discipline involves the initial clarification of the real problem or challenge (such as the development of a new marketing strategy). This is achieved through questioning and reflection which is a standard requirement throughout the process in order to ensure clarity of thought and future action. Key strategic questions are used during the process of this discipline and the objective is to ensure that this phase of the thinking process encourages a "questioning culture" as indicated by Marquardt (2005: 28).

2. The Link Discipline

Once the initial thinking discipline has been completed action is taken and specific options are generated which are aligned to the thinking that has taken place beforehand. Options must be "specific" and not simply vague recommendations and each option must be evaluated using a specific ROTAR Discipline technique.

3. The Impact Discipline

Based on the writer's personal experience, this discipline is often overlooked by many managers, leaders and organisations – often with disastrous consequences. The writer has witnessed far too many organisations arrange hurried meetings based on panic derived from increased competitor activity, take decisions based on insufficient thinking and evidence, launch into a new marketing strategy, only to find out later that the decisions made were severely lacking in effective thinking.

The impact discipline analyses the potential or likely impact of the option(s) selected by the manager or business leader. This discipline is critical for success and includes a number of tools to assist in the process.

4. The Implementation Discipline

It should be noted from Figure 1 that every stage of the process requires reflection – this is required in order to eradicate as much risk as possible prior to the implementation stage.

The implementation discipline is the final phase in the overall process and embraces all the factors that are required in order to ensure effective implementation.

Application of the ROTAR Discipline

The ROTAR Discipline can be applied to numerous applications including:

- Strategic "think tanks" and planning sessions (including scenario planning)
- All forms of strategy formulation (business strategy, marketing strategy, brand strategy, operational strategy, etc)
- Leadership development
- Coaching, mentoring
- Self-development
- Counselling
- Training and development of staff
- Team building

Summary

As stated above, the ROTAR Discipline utilises Action Learning as its underlying methodology – the difference resides in its structured yet highly flexible approach as the structure is not restrictive towards the core principles of Action Learning.

In fact, it is the writer's contention (based on personal experience) that the ROTAR Discipline actually enhances the power of Action Learning.

An example, relates to the improved learning and results obtained during the past three years of final year undergraduate marketing students. These marketing strategy students are required to use case study as the underlying methodology for learning in their final year of study. Marketing strategy is purported to be one of the more difficult subjects to pass, yet by applying the ROTAR Discipline, the success rate has not been lower than 90% during the past three years while teaching this subject to part-time students. The national average for this subject is around 20% lower than the marks obtained by the students mentioned above. In fact, the most recent group achieved a 100% pass rate for the subject.

The ROTAR Discipline is an effective tool that enables better thinking, better actions and more effective implementation and offers a way for organisations and individuals to achieve improved performance.

As stated by John Maxwell in his book, *Thinking for a Change*, everything begins with a thought.

However, managing the rigour of thought takes practice and discipline and the ROTAR Discipline is a simple yet highly effective way of managing the process.

About the Author

Dr Billy Coop is owner of Interlink Marketing and specialises in assisting organisations by facilitating their marketing strategy thinking, strategy formulation and implementation. His passion resides in helping individuals and organisations to think and act more effectively.

Qualifications include a master's and doctorate in marketing from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, a Diploma in Business Administration from the University of Stellenbosch, and the IMM National Diploma in Marketing.

Billy is Chairman of the Board for Business School Netherlands in South Africa with whom he has had an association for more than 12 years, serving as a facilitator, tutor and academic supervisor of their Action Learning MBA programme in South Africa.

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