Using Action Learning for Organization Development and Change

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This article conveys some practical information about the application of a powerful "tool" – Action Learning (AL) theory, method, and skills – for organization development and change (OD&C) practitioners. AL is not new. Neither is it is widely known or understood by most OD&C practitioners.

In this article, I define AL and AL Team Coaching (ALTC). I also offer a definition of the discipline and practice of OD&C. Moreover, I compare and contrast these disciplines with management consulting (MC), and present a case study of OD&C consultation that incorporated ALTC.

I conclude with some observations about how AL contributes to organizational learning.

Sources of the Felt Need for Organizational Change

Intentional organizational changes are initiated in a number of different ways. In one instance, the impetus is supplied by stakeholders' expressions of dissatisfaction with the status quo. Dissatisfaction may be globally expressed by dropping revenues, decreased profit margins, dissatisfied customers, or low levels of employee satisfaction, turnover.

Specific points for organizational change may be identified in a variety of ways – surveys, focus groups, audits, or changing regulatory requirements. The change effort may focus on such "problems" as repairing or replacing something that does not work as efficiently as required; capitalizing on new, emerging opportunities; or managing persistent dilemmas.

Generally, these are problems discontinuous with organizations' past experiences. In dealing with such unprecedented problems, organizations find themselves in unknown territory, i.e, their existing problem solving tools/methods are not effective. Organizations discover they must *buy or develop* new approaches and skills to cope with unfamiliar problems.

While it may be easy to identify *what* should be changed, it is less clear and more complex to determine *how* to set realistic goals and develop implementation plans while enlisting stakeholder commitment to executing those plans. AL provides the theory, methodology, and skills that augment the practice of OD&C.

AL and ALTC

According to Marquardt et al (2009), AL involves analysis and action and also learning. This triad optimizes the power and benefits of AL.

A Problem (the gap between the current and desired state). AL focuses on critical problems whose solution is highly important to an individual, a team, or an organization. AL is most appropriate where the problem is complex, the desired outcome is vague, and the solution is uncertain or unknown. In addition, the problem should be complicated enough to provide learning opportunities, knowledge building, and the development of specialized skills.

ALT. The ALT consists of four to eight people with diverse backgrounds and work experiences. Diversity enables team members to perceive the problem from various perspectives and to offer innovative viewpoints. Teams may consist of volunteers or appointees who come from various departments or hierarchical levels. They may include individuals from other organizations or professions. And they may involve suppliers as

well as customers or other stakeholders. One or more team members may also be

problem presenters. Some team members may serve as observers.

The process emphasizes insightful inquiry and reflective listening. AL requires

team members to reflect and respond to questions. By crafting great questions, AL taps

into the collective wisdom of team members and relevant stakeholders.

Questions are asked to clarify the exact nature of the problem to identify possible

solutions and to determine implementation in a manner acceptable to senior management.

The reflective inquiry process builds team cohesiveness, promotes systems thinking,

introduces innovative strategies, and generates individual and team learning.

Taking action. The problem may be presented by team members or by an

executive who serves as a sponsor. A senior executive may serve as champion for an AL

project that is composed of several teams.

An executive management team generally decides whether or not any team's

recommendations will be enacted.

Sponsors or champions must grant ALTs sufficient authority to take action both

between ALT sessions and on recommendations when approved. Reflecting on the action

taken and its results provides the best source for learning and organizational change.

A commitment to learning. Solving an organizational problem provides immediate

short-term benefits to the system. The greater, long-term, multiplier benefits occur when

team learning is shared and applied strategically throughout the organization.

AL emphasizes the learning and development of individuals, the team, and the

organization. The smarter the team becomes, the quicker and better the quality of its

problem solving, decision making, and action taking.

ALTC

While team members focus on solving problems, the ALTC is devoted to enabling the team to learn. The coach identifies learning opportunities that enable the team to reflect on and improve its participative problem solving, conflict management, decision making, goal setting, action planning, and strategy creating capacities.

Lacking a coach, teams tend to focus their time and energies solely on solving the problem and neglect on the more important individual, team, and organizational learning.

Through inquiry, the coach enables team members to reflect on all aspects of communications relevant to the problem.

AL Process

The AL process must start with one or more critical organizational problems. ALTs are mobilized and deployed to analyze and develop solutions for the problems. Team members are recruited, selected, and provided with an orientation to AL.

A coach is provided to each ALT which then presents solutions to the executive management team (EMT) for approval; teams present their recommendations to their EMT by a specific date established in advance by the EMT.

AL is applied in extraordinarily flexible configurations. The configuration largely depends upon the amount of time that the EMT makes available for creating solutions. The complexity and scope of the problem(s) are also factors; very complex problems require more time, commitment, and support.

Problems with a limited scope and moderate to low complexity may require only a little time for the ALT to complete its work. An unexpected crisis also may require a limited or *massed* time schedule. Crises or *predictable surprise*s (Bazerman & Watkins,

2008) often occur during the implementation of large complex transformational changes. A *Special Action Learning Team* (SALT) can be quickly mobilized to deal with such crises (Marquardt et al, 2009).

Typically, AL requires a four to six month period (a *spaced* configuration). ALTs meet every two weeks for three to four hours with their coach. At the outset, the team sponsor presents and explains the significance of the problem. Through a process of inquiry and reflection, the ALT clarifies and reaches agreement on the problem and the goal, identifying also the stakeholders involved in the problem.

Team members – acting as *emissaries* (Freedman, 2000) – interview and collect information from stakeholders between sessions, and transmit the information to the ALT. The new information may modify the Team's initial understanding of the problem. New information from stakeholders also helps team members to identify which proffered solutions are likely to be viable.

Once the ALT believes it has sufficient information, the Team begins to develop provisional strategies, solutions and recommendations. Teams will typically present their ideas to all involved stakeholders for input and feedback. Additionally, a Team may also conduct a pilot test of their solution to assess its effectiveness before presenting it to the EMT (see Figure 1).
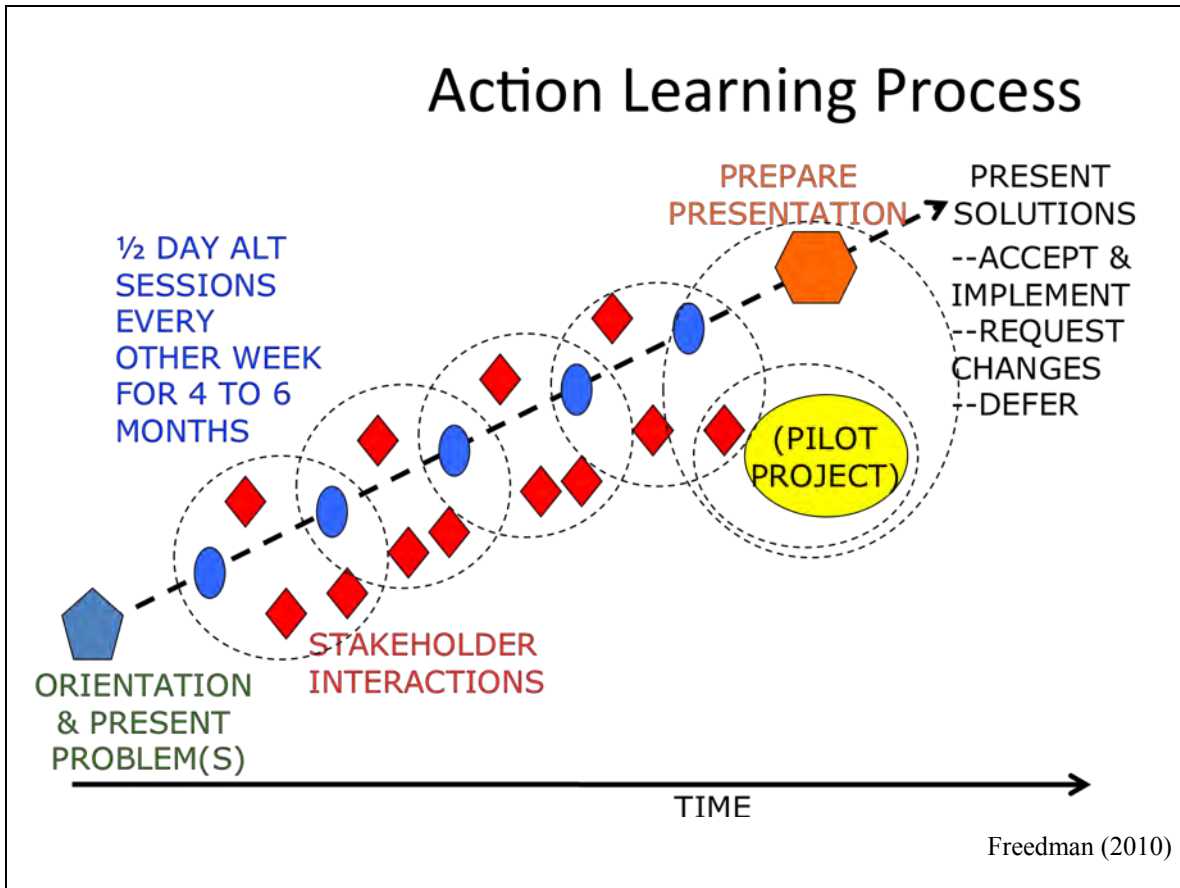
Action Learning Process

½ DAY ALT SESSIONS EVERY OTHER WEEK FOR 4 TO 6 MONTHS

PREPARE PRESENTATION

PRESENT SOLUTIONS
--ACCEPT & IMPLEMENT
--REQUEST CHANGES
--DEFER

(PILOT PROJECT)

STAKEHOLDER INTERACTIONS

ORIENTATION & PRESENT PROBLEM(S)

TIME

Freedman (2010)

Figure 1. The Action Learning Process

OD&C

The aim is to affect meaningful OD&C – "the systemwide application and transfer of behavioral science knowledge to the planned development, improvement, and reinforcement of the strategies, structures, and processes that lead to organization effectiveness." (Cummings & Worley, 2009, p. 1)

Most transformational organizational changes address the root source of executive dissatisfaction with prevailing conditions, e.g., operational deficiencies or inefficiencies. Notwithstanding, organizational changes are best planned and implemented when each of five *vital signs* is operative (Freedman & Jules, unpublished): (1) dissatisfaction is high; (2) there is a clear and compelling vision of a desired future state; (3) at least the first few

steps of an action plan is accepted by all significant involved parties or stakeholders; (4) executive leadership is totally and publicly committed to support the change initiative; and (5) there are meaningful incentives for planners, implementers, and stakeholders to accept and contribute to the change.

In sum, the value of any change must be perceived to be greater than the financial, opportunity, and psychological costs incurred by undertaking the organizational change.

The desired future state can be compared with the current state of affairs to clarify what might be eliminated, preserved, or added. The gap between the current and future states can be Force Field Analyzed to determine: (a) why it is *important* to achieve the desired state and (b) why it is *difficult* to achieve the desired state. Action steps leading to the achievement of the desired state can be derived from this Force Field Analysis and will comprise a workable implementation plan. In the final analysis, the most interesting, complex, important, and neglected (or taken for granted) part of major organizational change is the implementation phase (Freedman, 1997).

Most transformational change projects are conceived and planned by executives working with *techspert* Management Consultants – e.g., financial, engineering, or legal technical experts (Freedman & Zackrison, 2001).

While techspert-driven management consulting is essential, it is insufficient by itself. Few of these initiatives involve OD&C practitioners or ALTCs – until they run into unexpected difficulties. This is a powerful argument for creating *multidisciplinary consulting teams* composed of techspert MCs, OD&C practitioners, and ALT Coaches. Each is prepared to deliver different but complementary services (see Table 1).

Functions & Activities	ALTC	OD&C	TechspertMC
Utilize an action research methodology as the core technology in consulting engagements.	Yes	Yes	Yes
Utilize optimal involvement/participation of all parties (stakeholders) as an integral element of consultations	Yes	Yes	No
Focus exclusively on the specific technology, structure, system, or process that brought the attention of client system leaders on the need for change	No	No	Yes
Utilize a comprehensive systemic perspective that recognizes the interdependencies of an organizational psycho-socio-techno-structural system including correlative organizational functions affected by and, in turn, affect whatever is being changed	Yes	Yes	No
Enable planners and implementers to achieve the desired results by helping them to create strategies and tactics to achieve specific goals	Yes	Yes	No
Help client collaborate in establishing shared strategic direction	Yes/No	Yes	No
Help client insure their objectives are aligned with their organization's strategic goals	Yes	Yes	Yes/No
Recommend strategies for client to achieve their desired goals	No	No	Yes
Get involved in the substantive contents of the organizational problems	No	No	Yes
Help client effectively plan and take action in pursuit of desired results, goals, or objectives	Yes	Yes	No
Explicitly help client identify, reflect on and develop leadership competencies	Yes	No	No
Explicitly help client identify, reflect on and develop team problem solving, conflict management and decision-making skills	Yes	No	No
Explicitly help client identify, reflect on and develop understanding and skills for dealing with systemic organizational dynamics (including organizational politics)	Yes	Yes/No	No
Explicitly help client to develop communications skills	Yes	Yes	No
Plan and take action in pursuit of desired results, goals, or objectives	No	No	Yes
Assist client to explicitly learn *how* they do *what* they do effectively and *how* they can improve their effectiveness	Yes	Yes	No
Utilize inquiry and reflection to enhance *self-reflective awareness*	Yes	Yes/No	No
Help client recognize and manage assumptions, beliefs, and values influence (e.g., distort and limit) perceptions of the world and, as a result, how to think, feel, and act	Yes	Yes/No	No
Help client recognize what they do not know and increasingly accept and utilize other diverse perspectives in collaboratively defining, analyzing, and dealing with complex organizational problems	Yea	Yes/No	No
Work with teams to help understand complex organizational problems by creating an *indigenous or local theory* that explains the dynamics and cause-and-effect relationships operative in the situation	Yes	No	No
When client feels blocked, introduce a *conceptual model* to explain the situation	No	Yes	Yes/No
When client feels blocked, introduce a *pre-established method or process* that *guides* team members to a desirable and practical outcome	No	Yes	Yes/No
When clients feels blocked, help team members create their own viable models and methods	Yes	Yes/No	No
Help client explore possible and probable consequential risks and potential implications	Yes	Yes	Yes/No
Intentionally attempt to work themselves out of a job by transferring technologies to client system members	Yes	Yes	No
Help client evaluate progress and results of planned change initiative	Yes/No	Yes/No	No
Explicitly strive to transfer theory, methods, and skills to members and	Yes	Yes	No

leaders or client organizations in working oneself out of a job and enabling clients to become self-reliant, independent of consultants			

Table 1. A Comparison of Practices of ALTCoach, OD&C Practitioner, and MC

The OD&C consultation process consists of 10 interconnected phases:

i.   pre-entry, entry, contact, and negotiating a consulting agreement;

ii.   data collection from all relevant stakeholders;

iii.   organizing and preparing data for feedback;

iv.   top-down or bottom-up data feedback to and analysis by clients;

v.   creating implementation plans;

vi.   executing the implementation plan;

vii.   monitoring and evaluating progress achieved;

viii.   identifying and dealing with emerging *predictable surprises*;

ix.   ending or recycling to the next highest priority problem;

x.   maintaining a functional feedback loop.

These phases unfold in a cyclical, iterative fashion, often jumping ahead and/or falling back from one phase to another. Most techspert MCs follow a similar path, but the distinguishing characteristics of the OD&C application are its highly participative and non-authoritarian qualities.

OD&C practitioners serve as guides performing the tasks and responsibilities required by each phase. In large organizational change projects, OD&C practitioners consult with EMTs and project management teams. ALT Coaches augment OD&C and MC functions by intervening when a change effort encounters ambiguous, unprecedented problems and *predictable surprises* – i.e., discontinuous problems for which an effective solution does not already exist.

Changes in the Environment Create the Need for Organizational Change

Leaders in organizations in all sectors realize are often confronted with increasingly rapid, multiple, and radical changes to which their organizations must quickly and effectively adapt if they are to survive, if not profit. The external environmental variables include a wide range of sudden and extreme fluctuations wrought by new technology, geopolitical uncertainty, extreme weather and other catastrophic, adverse events.

Such changes can precipitate unpredicted organizational disasters. Nonetheless, changes create both threats and opportunities corresponding to an organization's internal strengths and weaknesses. Most organizations have developed their strengths from continuous, incremental improvements of their strategies and operations under variable but fairly predictable environmental conditions.

Still, unprecedented, discontinuous environmental changes usually map to organizational vulnerabilities. For one thing, organizations tend to react to disasters after they have occurred. They are not likely to consider predictable surprises (Bazerman & Watkins, 2008). Their first *preventive* strategic option is to conduct a risk analysis to identify what could go wrong. The organization may choose to incur the projected costs of attempting to prevent or minimize risks, as well as to determine and prepare to take immediate *corrective* action once a disaster occurs.

Their alternative strategy is to gamble that the likelihood of disaster is not probable. If the event fails to materialize, the organization saves considerable time, energy, and money. However, if it does occur, recovery costs will probably greatly exceed the costs of prevention or preparation

To prepare themselves to adapt to rapid environmental changes, organizations must change themselves both to protect against threats and to exploit newly emerging opportunities. Such organizational changes are not likely to fit easily with an organization's values and practices. However, if organizational leaders recognize that they lack the knowledge and skills needed to cope with the predictable surprises, they may seek external expertise. To acknowledge they need assistance requires considerable courage on the part of otherwise competent organizational leaders (Schein, 2009).

To determine *what* to change, organizations usually seek the services of various MC firms who are techsperts in some relevant specialized discipline. These *techsperts* (Freedman & Zackrison, 2001) have generally learned that planning and implementing organizational change require much more than just the creation and installation of some innovative process (Freedman, 1997). Accordingly, many consulting firms market a support service such as *change management*. Change management (CM) specialists have adopted and integrated many strategies and processes from OD&C with project management and the practice of various technical disciplines. However, the effectiveness of CM tools varies considerably (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006).

A Case study of organizational change using AL

The CEO of a Large Gas & Electric Utility (LGEU) initiated a corporate-wide transformation with the intent of converting the utility's culture from an impersonal technocracy to a humanistic, high-involvement participatory culture (Freedman & Stinson, 2004). Based on the results of an extensive employee and customer attitude/opinion survey, LGEU's Executive Management Team (EMT) identified a number of operational areas requiring rapid and effective change. The issues affected

large segments of the company and were trans-organizational, i.e., not specific to a single department or function.

The survey indicated that employees did not feel recognized or rewarded for their loyalty, dedication, and commitment. Furthermore, the survey revealed that the customer service department often ignored persistent complaints by residential, commercial, and governmental customers. At best, they were referred from one specialist to another to get partial answers to their concerns.

The EMT decided to create 14 Natural Action Teams (NATs) comprised of members drawn from different professions, departments, and levels. Each team was assigned a different problem and had its own OD&C consultant.

As the CEO's coach and EMT consultant, I served in the capacity of advisor to a respected middle manager who the EMT had selected to coordinate a team of OD&C practitioners. He and I screened the OD&C practitioners. We assigned practitioners to consult with one or more NATs. We asked each team in turn to study and develop recommendations to ameliorate one of 14 identified problem situations.

We created a multi-team AL project, including sponsors and champions.

The OD&C practitioners focused on helping NAT members learn from their unfolding experiences. Specifically, they helped NAT members reflect on: What they were learning about themselves as individuals; how teams can improve their effectiveness in solving problems; how to develop useful interactions among interdependent subsystems; how to utilize organizational cultural dynamics; and how to improve and sustain mutually satisfying interactions between the organization and its external stakeholders.

When they completed their work, each NAT presented their recommendations to the EMT.

The results of this systemic intervention included: Enhanced pride and self-esteem among NAT members; EMT recognition of NAT members' talents and capacities to participate in solving complex organizational problems; enhanced appreciation for the value of a high involvement, high participation culture; and diminished dependency on techspert opinions on organizational issues.

AL projects are models of learning organizations, transferring competencies and diffusing knowledge throughout the organizational system.

AL is a small team process that enables team members to solve real problems in real time while also enhancing team members' capacity to learn about themselves, participative problem solving and decision-making, intergroup dynamics, and organizations as dynamic systems. As Team members better understand AL theory and acquire proficiency in the use of its methods of inquiry and reflection, they invariably apply their acquired abilities beyond the ALT.

At first, Team members use their developing competencies between ALT meetings as they engage persons and groups that have an interest in the problem being analyzed. As they gain mastery of these competencies, Team members tend to take risks and experiment with applying AL in fulfilling routine work responsibilities. As Team members and their work associates recognize the efficacy of these new skills, they begin to support one another as they apply AL theory and methods to appropriate organizational problems.

To achieve optimal results, the involved parties learn to apply AL only to urgent organizational problems where their senior managers are dissatisfied with the current state, the goal is ambiguous and/or the solution is uncertain. They also discover that where the goal is clear and specific, and the solution is well known and established, the AL process is counterproductive. Instead, they find that an existing, techspert-based solution is usually best under such circumstances.

Diffusion of Innovations

Using AL as a means of creating and sustaining a learning organization is a vital innovation. Senge references Rogers (1964) who believed that diffusion of innovations occurs through a five–step process that flows through a series of communication channels over a period of time among the members of an organization or major subsystem. This process includes:

Knowledge (awareness)

Persuasion (interest)

Decision (evaluation)

Implementation (trial)

Confirmation (adoption)

The rate of adoption is the relative speed with which some percent of organizational members adopt the innovation. The percent of adopters may vary but the result is reaching *critical mass*, which occurs when enough individuals have adopted the innovation to assure that its acceptance and utilization is self-sustaining.

There are two principals who can facilitate the diffusion process. First, *Opinion Leaders* are influential in spreading positive (or negative) information about an

innovation. They are most influential during the decision or evaluation stage of the innovation-decision process and on late adopters. Second, *Champions* need to support an innovation and clear away obstacles or break through opposition that may be provoked by introducing the innovation.

Rogers (1964) defines five intrinsic characteristics of innovations that influence an individual's adopt-or-reject decision. The characteristics include the relative *advantage* of an innovation over the existing legacy technology or process; the *compatibility* of the innovation with an individual's preferred ways of working; the *complexity* of using an innovation; *trialability* or how easily an innovator may experiment without risk with the innovation; and *observability* or how visible the results of the use of the innovation is to others and whether this evokes positive or negative reactions.

Rogers (1964) also describes various adopter categories. These help to manage expectations about the extent and the speed with which innovative AL and organizational learning may be diffused and adopted. The categories are: innovators, early adopters, early majority individuals, late majority individuals, and laggards. The adoption of an innovation tends to follow an S-curve over time.

Both OD&C practitioners and ALTCs must pay close attention to the extent to which a viable, explicit strategy and plan is developed to disseminate organizational learnings generated through their efforts.

Of considerable concern is the extent to which a learning organization can capture learnings in a systematic manner, archive the learnings, and create a mechanism through which learnings may be retrieved and applied at a later date when they are both relevant and appropriate.

It is conceivable that someone will soon create a vehicle similar to *Wikipedia* that allows users to enter learnings about any given topic or issue that are acquired and captured.

Conclusion

AL augments and works well with OD&C, supplements the work of techspert management and change management specialists, and enhances efforts to create and sustain organizational learning.

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