

WHAT KILLS ACTION LEARNING?

Biological organisms inherently have defensive reaction to threats in their environment. Given time they learn how to defend against newly emerging challenges. Through evolution they learn to adapt. However if the changes in the environment go unnoticed or happen faster than their ability to learn and act, they go extinct. A very common observation from the natural world.

If man-made organisations to have the vitality and the resilience like a biological organism, Action Learning would serve as part of their evolutionary-defence system. However in reality a mature organisation as well as an adult individual may fail to recognise the benefits of Action Learning, hesitate to learn how it works and unintentionally apply some 'business as usual' behaviours to poison and eventually kill the effort, only to continue searching for other means to ensure their prosperity.

To be able to identify such behaviours, consider the gathering of action-learners, the most visible and probably the most fragile event in Action Learning.

Many first-timers regard Action Learning as a specific way to run a problem solving meeting. From this outlook much baggage associated with business meetings come into play. According to a 2012 survey by Salary.com "too many meetings" is the single biggest waste of time at work; up from #3 on a similar survey in 2008.



The chances are that unless the group makes a special effort to distinguish Action Learning from the generic category of "problem solving meetings", some participants will slip into behaviour that makes any meeting unproductive in the first place. Mike Pedler and Christine Abbot in their book "Facilitating Action Learning" made a note on nine ways to kill Action Learning:

- Come along when you don't really want to.
- Come without a real issue to work on.
- Bring something along that you already know how to do.
- Keep quiet about your real issues – don't give anything away.
- Turn up infrequently to meetings.
- Don't take any action between the meetings.
- Talk about other members and their issues outside the room.
- Give everyone the benefit of your advice at every opportunity.
- Use the meetings to score points and show how clever you are.



These behaviours are quite 'normal' in business meetings and can be observed in many organisations. Take any intact team or a certain department within an organisation, where people meet frequently to problem solve in everyday work situations and where the interpersonal behaviour patterns are set, none of the above will be considered deadly, at least not in the context of organisational politics!

It appears easier to highlight these behaviours as troublesome and to prevent them when the members of an Action Learning Group dedicate themselves as

volunteers for a special mission, as 'comrades in adversity' (the term used by Reg Revans) - held together by a shared desire to find implementable solutions to their questions.

Where such conditions are created Action Learning will contribute to the vitality and will serve as both evolutionary and a defence system for the individuals and for the organisation, helping them to learn on the go and to overcome all sorts of challenges.

In the role of Action Learning coach I find it very helpful to discuss the list of 'nine way to kill action learning' with the group at the outset, and in this way to assist creation of the group norms, leading to adoption of Action Learning as a wider effort to organisationally learn and to flourish with the environment.

Written by Paul Bana, CALC, Adelaide, South Australia

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