

WHEN A SINGLE QUESTION OPENS UP MINDS

“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the expert’s mind there are few” - Shunryu SuZuki

Last month I conducted a leadership development program for one of the largest manufacturing companies in Thailand. This program was designed for key leaders and supervisors from six plants all over the country. Action learning was one of important components of the learning and development process. All sessions demonstrated the power of action learning but there was one in particular that was really interesting.



I coached an action learning session for a group of key factory people. The focus of this session was about an issue with the frequent breakdown – almost monthly – of a filter-pressure pump that required expensive repairs. This pump was one of the key elements for the factory production line and the breakdown impacts also the production capacity available for the company’s clients. It was still unclear what the root cause of the problem was.

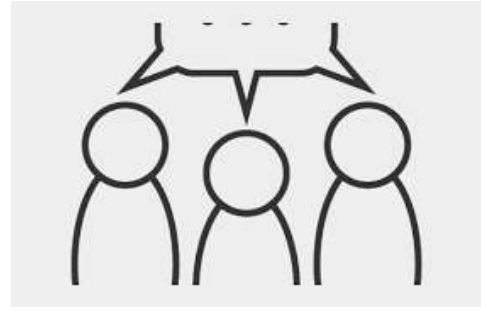
There were eight members from two plants for this action learning session. Six of them were engineers responsible for production and technical matters and two others were human resource persons. Two of the engineers were the problem presenters. The first 40 minutes of the session was full of questions on technical issues (e.g. what kind of motor, pump pressure settings, sediment, waste, etc). There were lots of technical terms that the HR persons – and the coach ! – didn’t understand much about !



As the engineers were deeply exploring the technical issues, the overall group energy got depleted and as a coach I felt they were turning in circles around the technical details. I asked “Are there any type of question that haven’t been asked yet?” My intention was for the group to shift and see other possibilities and look for new perspectives for questions. At that time, one of the HR people, who had hardly asked any questions, opened up and asked “Who is responsible for running this pump at the production line?”

That question seemed to open the eyes of the other members. They were surprised. Then, the problem presenters became more aware that it was not only the pump that had problems but also the staff operating the pump. They didn’t have the proper skill set and lacked technical knowledge. The problem presenter realized that this part of the problem was overlooked and not being discussed; and this maybe the real root cause of the problem. This insight led the group to get to consensus about the real problem !

Another powerful question came a few moments later. “Is any of the other plants that using the same kind of pump and how do they deal with this problem ?” That question led the group to find out how the other plants are dealing with the responsibility for running the pump, the level of skills and technical understanding, and the specific training for the pump operators.



In some cases where problems seem related to deep or specific technical skills (e.g. engineering and production line capacity losses), it is important to have members from other departments or outsiders with a beginner’s mind, instead of just the experts. These members will help the group see new perspectives. As an action learning coach, we should encourage all group members to use their experience well and be genuinely curious, even in a situation where some members, or even the action learning coach, are completely unfamiliar with the topic.

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