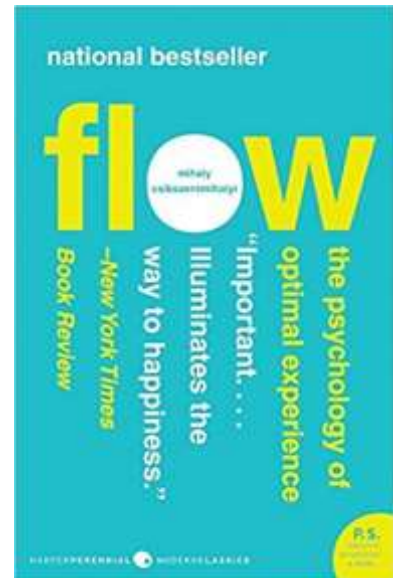


## WHY ACTION LEARNING PUTS TEAMS IN FLOW (PART 1)

When Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi summarized his many years of research into what makes for an optimum experience and brings enjoyment, he focused mainly on individuals. His work *Flow; the psychology of optimal experience* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) is full of examples of surgeons, mountain climbers or even assembly workers who focus fully on their core activity and get a real enjoyment out of practicing and honing their skills constantly. They are in flow. A flow experience is rooted in the internal conscious focus that is put on the activity, as opposed to reacting to external stimuli or conditions. Autotelic individuals develop flow experiences in even routine activities (auto = self, telos = goal, (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 67)).



Some have looked at what it would mean not just for an individual but for a whole team to be in flow (van den Hout, 2016). Reading “Flow” recently, I made multiple connections with what happens in Action Learning sessions through my experience as Action Learning coach. Of all approaches for getting work done in a team, Action Learning seems the best designed to bring the whole team in flow, creating optimum experience and enjoyment, while getting work done. Although flow is inherently depending on the effort of the individual’s conscious mind, the conditions and dynamic of an Action Learning session – and the efficient support of an Action Learning coach – are great stimuli to create flow experiences for all the members of the team. Trying to explain what Action Learning is and why it works is often difficult. It is easier to focus on the five benefits WIAL Action Learning brings. For those interested precisely in the question ... “But why does Action Learning work and what makes it so powerful?” ... making the connection with Csikszentmihalyi’s research brings powerful insights and further guidelines to improve the skills of an Action Learning coach.



For Action Learning coaches, being familiar with the flow model and acting upon it will make the Action Learning sessions even more powerful, and enhance the team’s performance. Flow is a mental model coaches should be familiar with and keep in mind to make the Action Learning sessions memorable for the participants. In this series of three articles, I will explain why Action Learning fulfills all requirements of a flow experience, why it is the perfect method for developing individual complexity, and

how the Action Learning coach (Marquardt, Banks, Cauwelier, & Ng, 2018) plays a key role in bringing the team in flow and moving it to higher levels of complexity, learning and enjoyment.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi lists eight major components that are key to bring enjoyment to work (1990, p. 49).

### **(1) The activity is challenging, requires skills and is bounded by rules**



A business challenge or problem is always the starting point of Action Learning. The team members feel concerned because it relates to their own organization, department or job responsibility. It is also a challenge for which they feel they can come up with solutions, even if the problem is complex. Teams must feel they can make a contribution to solving the issue. They must also feel that finding solutions for this problem will test the limit of their skills. If the problem is too large in scope, the team will feel they are in front of an impossible task and give up. If the problem is too simple or without meaning, they will feel their time and skills are wasted. The WIAL Action Learning process has a clear yet flexible structure. There are

only two simple rules yet these are key for the Action Learning session to be effective and to bring the team in a flow experience:

- statements can only be made in response to questions, and anyone can ask anyone questions
- the Action Learning coach has the authority to intervene when he/she sees an opportunity for learning

### **(2) Participants fully pay attention to the activity**

In an Action Learning session, the sponsor or problem presenter spends only a few minutes to explain the challenge to the team. Participants draw out details and look at the problem from different angles, through asking questions. Asking questions, listening to others' questions and answers, combined with the team's responsibility to find breakthrough solutions for the challenge, focuses the team's full attention. There is no mental energy left to use for multi-tasking like checking emails during the session. Although the effort is continuous and intense, participants feel the session moves along smoothly. When a team member leaves the session for some time, or seems less engaged, the coach will typically intervene to see how the team will deal with someone not having followed the entire discussion, or to ensure all contribute and participate in a balanced way. The set up of the Action Learning session is so that the group is isolated from external stimuli and disturbances and all attention can be focused on the session.

### **(3) The activity has clear goals**

The goals are explicit from the beginning and clearly explained to the Action Learning team: solving the complex problem, either shared by an individual or an organization-wide problem, and work on personal and team development at the same time. The balance between the goals of action (to solve the problem) and learning (self, team and organization) are clear and the coach regularly reminds team members to ensure progress on both goals is made within the sessions and over a series of sessions. In

addition to the overall goals, the team can identify sub-goals for part of a session depending on the progress or the dynamic in the team. A team may fix itself the goal of “asking more probing questions for the next 30 minutes” if they feel they are not making significant progress or dedicate part of the session to create an action plan when they feel they are ready to do so.

#### **(4) The activity has immediate feedback built in**



Feedback loops are built into the Action Learning session at the micro and macro level. At the micro level (within the session), there are multiple feedback loops created by the coach. The role of the Action Learning coach is to identify learning opportunities for the team. Depending on the exchanges and the team dynamic,

the coach will feed back to the team by holding out a mirror to reflect what he or she is observing, and invite the team to reflect on the situation and learn from it. When a team is struggling and asking disconnected questions, the coach will intervene and ask the team to reflect on the quality and cohesion of their questions. When the team is developing a meaningful exchange with powerful questions and deep reflective insights, the coach will intervene to invite the team to reflect on what makes for this optimal learning dynamic. At the end of the session, team members give each other feedback about how they observed one another practicing the leadership skills and they receive this kind of feedback from their peers as well as the coach.

At the macro level (over a period of multiple sessions), the feedback is built into the actions the team members commit to at the end of the session based on the principle “There is no learning without action and no action without learning”. Between sessions, they will gather information, or test out an idea, or get input from key stakeholders. At the start of the following session, they share the result of these actions with the team and reflect on what they learned from them. The team members ask questions as a way to feed back and build upon the new knowledge the team has now accumulated. When the team presents its understanding of the problem and its action plan to the sponsor or corporate leadership team, there is another feedback loop to review the entire Action Learning project.

We will look at the remaining four components necessary for optimal team experience and enjoyment in the next article.

Written by Peter Cauwelier, PhD, MALC, WIAL board member and director of WIAL Thailand

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