

WHY ACTION LEARNING BRINGS TEAMS IN FLOW (PART 2)

In part 1 of this series of articles, we looked at the first four components that bring enjoyment to work according to the Flow research (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 49): a challenging activity with rules that requires skills, concentration, goals and built-in feedback.

In part 2 of the series, we look at the next four components.

(5) Concentration on the task at hand



The concentration of team members during an Action Learning session is typically very high. The dynamic of asking questions, answering questions, active listening and the focus on the multiple aspects of the session (the problem, leadership competencies, team dynamics, coach learning interventions) completely fills up the mental capacity of the team members. That is also why the recommended number of members in an Action Learning team is maximum eight. It is simply too much for our conscious mind to monitor and actively deal with if there are too many interactions. “The clearly structured demands of the activity impose order and exclude the

interference of disorder in consciousness” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 58). The intensity and focus is illustrated by a team member who, when asked after a series of Action Learning sessions how she felt, answered “tired ... in my ten years here I have never had to use my brain so much!”. In Action Learning sessions, the focus is high-strung and team members realize they cannot “check out”, day-dream or try to multitask by reacting to their cell phone messages.

(6) A sense of control over actions

The “Action” part of Action Learning refers to the fact that actions will be taken after the session. Participants know that their work will result in real outcomes, both for the problem they work on, and for their own and the team’s development. The team members decide what actions they take, not the senior leader or coach. Team members identify which leadership skill is important for them and for which they want to practice and stretch themselves during the session. At the end of the session, they share what actions they will take to gain clarity on the problem or test out potential solutions, and how they will apply the learnings from the session in their regular work routines. They select these actions completely independently, but their commitment is to the entire team.



(7) Concern for the self disappears yet emerges stronger after the activity

The concern for self definitely does not disappear automatically from the first minute a new team starts an Action Learning session, quite the contrary. For the first session, team members are focused on asking their “own” questions. After all, they were just told by the coach that the first rule is “Statements can only be made in response to questions”. So they work hard to generate questions, often the more the better. During the first minutes of an Action Learning session team members often juggle to find a gap to get “my question” in. An experienced Action Learning coach will let this mini-chaos go on for some time and then invite the team to reflect on the dynamic of the session. A typical intervention would be: “How are we doing when it comes to listening actively to others’ questions or building on others’ questions ? What would our session become if each just keeps on asking questions disconnected from the others ? What could we do to do better for the rest of the session ?”. Very often teams will debrief at the end that the session took a new and powerful turn once they stopped focusing on their own questioning, but tried to connect with the questions from others, and build on their ideas. The self-awareness grows around the importance of listening and connecting rather than trying to think of the next best question to ask.

THE SIX COMPONENTS OF ACTION LEARNING



In addition, the Action Learning methodology puts the emphasis on questions, not knowledge. Expertise or long experience is of little value. Team members ask questions, they are not showing off what they know. Questions create a space where there is little threat to the individual team member and Action Learning sessions have been demonstrated to build up psychological safety in teams (Cauwelier, 2016).

The learning debrief at the end of the session is another powerful moment for developing the sense of self. When team members share that a particular question was really powerful and moved the team in a new and meaningful direction, the questioner becomes aware of how the team appreciates their contribution. During the feedback about observed leadership behaviors each individual receives confirmation of how they have grown and applied their leadership skill during the session.

(8) The sense of time is altered

Action Learning’s use of time is different from how problems are typically worked on. In the rush to get things done, teams most often start to discuss solutions right away ... and then go into a debate at worst or looking for half-baked compromises at best. In Action Learning, the team spends a significant amount of time understanding the problem, without thinking about solutions. If a clear understanding of what the real

problem is develops, the solutions nearly always come very quickly, and the commitment for implementation is great. As a participant once said: "Action Learning is about slowing down at first to speed up later."

Participants never say the session took too much time. Although people can be taken aback when they get an invitation for a 3-hour session, they always feel time passes very quickly and time is spent really wisely once they are in the session. Once the session is concluded, team members often continue to exchange about the challenge they are working on. When introducing Action Learning to a large group, the best way is to do a one-hour demonstration session with five to seven volunteers from the group, while the rest observe the session. While the observers struggle to stay focused and observe in silence, and in general are relieved when the demo session is "finally over", the participants who are members of the session are surprised an hour has elapsed. This is so different from the typical meeting where minutes tick by slowly, and where everybody is running for the door after the meeting is finally concluded (or ended in the case a conclusion is missing). Participants who join an Action Learning session for the first time often comment "If only our meetings could be like this!"



In addition to fulfilling all eight key components the bring enjoyment to work, Action Learning creates the perfect environment for individual development.

Following a flow experience, the organization of the self is more complex than it had been before. It is by becoming increasingly complex that the self might be said to grow. Complexity is the result of two broad psychological processes: differentiation and integration. Differentiation implies a movement toward uniqueness, toward separating oneself from others. Integration refers to its opposite: a union with other people, with ideas and entities beyond the self. A complex self is one that succeeds in combining these opposite tendencies (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 41).

Action Learning very well balances the possibility for differentiation and integration. Each team member contributes with his or her own questions, sharing how they see the real problem and focusing on practicing their selected leadership competency. Great questions or an effective demonstration of the leadership skill contribute to the differentiation of each team member in the team. At the same time, Action Learning is a team-based methodology. The collaboration within a session or through a series of sessions is the basis of the integration: problems are worked on with others, action plans are built together and each team member gives feedback to the others about how they performed.



Very often team members share that they got great new insights and better understanding of their own mental models and their own self through questions or feedback received from others. The peer-to-peer feedback around the leadership competencies is the basis for a genuine development of team cohesion also beyond the Action Learning sessions. Organizations realize more and more that traditional leadership development is too much focused on the individual, and that team-based methods raise the level of the individual's development to a whole different – and necessary – level. The balance between differentiation and integration leading to more complex individuals is the reason why Action Learning is so often seen as a very effective way for employees to grow and develop, way beyond what traditional trainings or even coaching programs deliver.

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