

HOW CAN AN ACTION LEARNING COACH OPTIMIZE INTERVENTIONS TO ENSURE TEAM FLOW (PART 3)

In part 1 and 2 of this series of articles, we looked at the eight components that bring enjoyment to work according to the Flow research (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 49), and have clearly demonstrated that WIAL Action Learning fulfills all the requirements and creates the environment for the development of more complex individuals through differentiation and integration.

But Action Learning does not guarantee a team will experience flow. Some sessions run very smoothly and are a great and valuable experience for all, including the coach. Some sessions can feel tense and ineffective. A lot depends on how the coach supports the team. Interventions by an Action Learning coach have been called both an art and a science. By being aware of the flow channel (see picture), an Action Learning coach can adjust interventions and enhance the team experience.

Optimal experience happens when there is a match between the challenge faced and the skills of the individual, or, by extension, the members of a team (position 1). In this situation, the team is in flow or “on a roll”. They are dealing with the challenge and using their skills to the full extent. Team members are concentrated, focused and moving

forwards to the multiple goals of the Action Learning session (problem solving, personal development, team building).

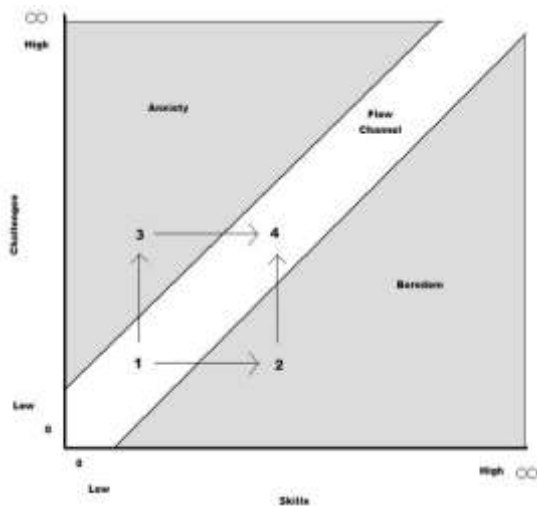


Figure 1 Flow channel (Csikszentmihalyi)

There are two situations where the team is out of flow. Boredom describes the situation where the skills are too high for the challenge the team is facing (position 2). Boredom can occur at two levels. At the macro-level, boredom can occur when the team feels the Action Learning session is imposed upon them, with a challenge they feel little connection with, that seems made up or already has a solution, or where multiple teams have been given the same problem to solve. If some had a negative experience with Action Learning in the past, they will feel this new session is a waste of their time.

This risk of boredom should be dealt with at the program design level before the first session starts and discussed with the program sponsor. The occurrence of boredom at the micro-level, within a particular Action Learning session, is of more significance for the Action Learning coach. The team can get bored when their skills seem not well used in the session. Maybe the team is going around in circles for a while without clear direction, repeating questions by using slightly different expressions. Or they ask questions without really listening to the answers. Left in the area of boredom, team members will start to wonder where the session is going, or if this is meaningful use of their time.

The coach needs to craft interventions to move the team back into the flow channel (position 4) and ensuring the challenge in front of the team is of sufficient complexity. One standard intervention is to make the team aware of how similarly or differently each of them sees the problem. Asking team members to write down individually what each thinks the real problem is, opens their eyes when they realize that others see the problem from a very different angle. They become aware that the challenge is more complex than each thought and they will need to use their questions and listening more effectively. If the team has gotten comfortable with asking questions, but just keeps asking questions about the problem from a single point of view, the coach can intervene by asking: "It seems most of the questions are about this or that. What other elements of the problem are there that we have not yet considered".



The team becomes aware that this is not a simple drill-down exercise, but that the challenge is complex and that they will need to look at the total complexity if they will want to come up with breakthrough solutions. Or in another scenario, if the team is focusing solely on the problem but team members have forgotten to practice their personal leadership skill, the coach can make an intervention to ensure the team realizes that this Action Learning session is not only about dealing with the challenge, but also practicing personal leadership skills and looking out for others practicing theirs. The coach needs to make sure the challenge in front of the team at all moments of the session is aligned with the team skills. Boredom is countered by increasing the challenge and complexity for the team, within the session. Once the team has moved back into flow (position 4), it will be working at a more complex and therefore more enriching level. The team will have moved to a higher level in the flow channel.

The opposite situation of boredom is anxiety, a situation where the challenge seems too complex for the team's skills (position 3). At the macro-level, anxiety can happen when the team is asked to join an Action Learning program – something they never heard about – without much introduction or explanation. For an organization that is not used to collaborative problem solving, it can be a bit overwhelming for members to be put together with others whom they are not so familiar with and to be told they will be working on a complex company-wide challenge over several months.



A marketing officer who joined an Action Learning program focusing on improving the churn rate of rank-and-file staff, said out loud at the start of the first meeting: "I am not sure why I am here; I am in marketing and I know nothing about employee turnover." This kind of anxiety nearly always disappears once the session starts: when team members realize they should ask questions about the problem rather than propose solutions, the anxiety about the newness of the session is quickly lowered.

A coach intervention often follows the "What are we doing well ? What can we do better ?" format. By highlighting that, however difficult the challenge, the team is doing some things all right, the coach lowers the anxiety level.

At the micro-level, anxiety can happen at different points during the session. When the team feels they are turning in circles, asking questions but not really making any progress, they will get anxious and start to wonder how this will move forward and if they will be capable to deal with the challenge and propose solutions to the corporate sponsor. A team using Action Learning for the first time will often fire away closed questions hoping they will make progress this way. Or team members ask questions but don't really listen to what the others are asking or sharing. "Getting my question in" is often the main focus. The coach needs to help the team get back into flow by enhancing their skills.



Learning is a key part of Action Learning so developing the skills of the individuals and the team is a key responsibility of the coach. Depending on the situation, the coach can intervene: "What kind of questions are we asking so far? What is the quality of our questions? How can we ask more powerful or reflective questions?". Or, "To what extent do we build on others' questions? What happens if we continue to ask questions disconnected from what others have asked? How can we do better?". The

coach never declares that the team's skills are too low for the challenge, but makes the team aware of the current situation and invites them to identify ways to learn and further develop their skills. If the team starts to ask more reflective questions, or questions that build on others' questions, it will increase skills both at the individual and team level. The team will get back into flow (position 4) and will now have a more complex and more developed skillset. The team will have moved to a higher level in the flow channel.

The Action Learning coach should not jump and intervene at the first slight suspicion of boredom or anxiety. In a team, some members may be bored or anxious while others aren't. The coach should observe the team dynamic for a while. Only if it is clear that the team (or most of the members) is struggling with boredom or anxiety, the time is right time for an intervention. Moving into the area of boredom or anxiety is not a problem in itself. In fact, it heightens the awareness in the team about what is going on and encourages the team



members to take on a more complex and advanced path forward. The learning impact is less powerful if the coach intervenes too early, since the feeling of anxiety or boredom may not yet be clearly felt. An experienced team will often self-correct if a member is not engaged or seems frustrated. If a coach intervenes too late, anxiety may grow to such a level that team members are giving up, or boredom may lead to team members mentally checking out.

Helping the team to stay in flow and move upwards in the flow channel is a key role of the coach. An Action Learning session that goes well, where the team is fully concentrated and enjoys shared work, develops the individuals' and the team's skills. These skills can be applied to tackle more complex challenges in future sessions or in the work in between sessions.

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REFERENCES

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