BREAKTHROUGH SOLUTIONS WITH ACTION LEARNING

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AUTHORS

Bea Carson
Bea Carson is a master action learning coach and the president of Carson Consultants. She is vice president of education and certification for the World Institute for Action Learning and a visiting scholar at American University and the George Washington University. She has consulted with government, not-for-profit, and commercial organizations throughout the United States, including Constellation Energy, Triplex, NASA, Rotary International, and Special Olympics Maryland.

Community Manager, Learning & Development
Amanda Smith

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Teresa Preston

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We have heard the amazing stories of how action learning helps teams achieve breakthrough solutions, thus adding to the bottom line. Action learning helps teams think differently, seeing the possible instead of being hindered by the obstacles.

Action learning consists of two rules and six components. If the two rules are adhered to and the six components are in place, action learning will result in better decision making, more powerful teams, and highly skilled leaders. When action learning becomes a way of life in an organization, the culture naturally shifts to that of a learning organization.

In this issue of TD at Work, you will learn:

- what action learning is and how it differs from traditional problem solving
- the types of problems that are best addressed through action learning
- the action learning process
- barriers and benefits to action learning.

**TYPICAL PROBLEM SOLVING**

Traditional methods of problem solving tend to follow a similar pattern. A memo is issued indicating that “we” need to get together to solve a specific problem. Somewhere between 5 and 50 people are invited to this meeting to come up with a solution.

When the group enters the room, two or three people have already determined what the solution is. These ringleaders tend to have dominant personalities and spend the session talking past each other, each attempting to prove that he has the right solution. In the best of circumstances this will lead to a lively debate; often, it leads to one of the dysfunctional behaviors we’ll talk about later in this issue.

The key consequence of a dysfunctional problem-solving process is defective decision making, which arises because:

- The group has been disempowered.
- The group either lacks diversity of thought or the diversity that exists has been stifled.

- The group avoids giving or receiving feedback.
- Cultural issues prevent group members from speaking up.

In The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization, Peter Senge describes a learning organization as one in which individuals continually expand their ability to create and in which continual learning is not only encouraged but nurtured. Collective aspirations are set free, and individuals receive support in their efforts to discover how to learn with each other.

**ACTION LEARNING OVERVIEW**

Action learning is a dynamic process for solving organizational problems, advancing individual skills, building teams, and developing leaders. It is a powerful method of building mutual respect into an organization. It teaches people to continually question, creating an environment where “because that’s the way we have always done it” becomes an unacceptable answer.

The process empowers employees to handle the permanent white water that is part of everyday life. It sets in motion a process that allows for continual flexibility.

Action learning consists of six components:

- a group of four to eight individuals
- an action learning coach
- the problem
- a commitment to learning
- a process that encourages questioning and listening
- a resolution to take action.

Additionally, action learning has two ground rules: 1) One can only make a statement in response to a question. 2) The action learning coach has the authority to intervene whenever there is the opportunity for learning. In explaining the first ground rule, the coach asks participants to work hard at just answering the question they are asked.
The focus on questioning is crucial to action learning. Peter Senge says that organizations need to get away from institutional training and generate a learning environment. By teaching people to question, action learning creates this type of environment. Participants learn to think about how to do things better rather than blindly continue the old way of doing tasks.

**ACTION LEARNING IS A DYNAMIC PROCESS FOR SOLVING ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS, ADVANCING INDIVIDUAL SKILLS, BUILDING TEAMS, AND DEVELOPING LEADERS.**

**ACTION LEARNING COMPONENTS**

How do these six components lead to effective problem solving? Let's begin by looking at each of the components. Then, we'll consider the process itself.

**The Group**

Action learning teams consist of four to eight participants. The team needs at least four members to ensure diversity of thought, but no more than eight, so as to avoid too many lines of communication. The ideal team size is five or six. If groups already have eight members and then need to bring a subject matter expert in for a session or two, they have to ask someone from the core team to step out. A core team of five or six has much more flexibility to bring in additional members as needed.

Given the small team size, it's critical to pick the right participants. You want to have some subject matter experts, but you also want diversity of thought. A key member of the team is the person we call the pizza man. (See the sidebar, The Pizza Man Parable, to learn more about this member of the team.) This is the person who is unfamiliar with the problem. This person is able to ask the naïve, but often essential, questions.

**Action Learning Coach**

The primary role and focus of the action learning coach is to facilitate the group's ability to grow

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**THE PIZZA MAN PARABLE**

Experts have come to “know the answers” to many questions, only to discover that members of their team “know” different answers. These questions end up being the most powerful for breaking the team out of looking at the problem in the same old way. They also break us out of some standard dysfunctions that arise in teams.

The pizza man story, although true, has grown and morphed over time. The original version can be found in *Optimizing the Power of Action Learning: Solving Problems and Building Leaders in Real Time*, by Michael Marquardt.

The story is about a group that didn't have enough diversity on the team—it was a group of engineers trying to solve an engineering problem. The group really needed a breakthrough solution. They were trying to use action learning to get there, but something was missing.

It got late, so the team ordered a pizza for dinner. When the pizza man arrived, the fellow who was interested in action learning—let’s call him José—remembered that you need someone who isn’t too close to the problem who could ask the naïve questions. José asked the pizza man if he would stick around for an hour and ask questions about anything that didn't make sense. Obviously, nothing made sense, but he agreed—after calling his boss to get permission.

The pizza man homed in on the slide the expert created. Everyone else knew better than to touch that slide. The expert puffed up and explained his rationale. Someone else observed that he had a different explanation for what was on the slide, and a third person had yet another view. Suddenly, the team members realized they were not asking some questions they wrongly assumed they knew the answers to. The pizza man was able to surface these unasked questions.

Ultimately, the pizza man's “naïve” questions saved the U.S. Navy $35 million.
and learn so that it, in turn, can better solve the problem. The action learning coach not only establishes rapport with group members but also builds the rapport among group members.

Rather than setting goals for the group, the coach leads the group to set its own goals. The coach’s feedback takes the group to a deeper level of learning. Instead of just focusing on what has transpired; the coach guides the group to understanding the how and why of their actions.

The Problem

The more complex and urgent the organizational problem or challenge, the more appropriate it is for action learning. (See the sidebar, Problem vs. Puzzle, for additional guidance.) Complex problems that don’t have a clear solution—or that have many potential solutions with no clear indication of which is the best—are the most appropriate problems for action learning.

When identifying problems, be sure the solution is needed soon. A team that comes up with a great solution and then can’t get on the C-suite calendar will be demotivated forever. Projects that need an answer within the next couple months are ideal.

The problem could be one that a team member is facing in her department, or it could be brought to the group by an outsider; either way, the person bringing the problem to the group is called the problem owner.

Commitment to Learning

Action learning teams commit to learning up front. The learning is done at three levels. As individuals, they will develop their leadership competencies. As a team, they will learn how they function best. And as members of the action learning team, they will learn how to transfer what they’ve learned to their organization.

At the start of each action learning session, participants are asked to identify a skill they would like to practice during the sessions, as well as between sessions. Over the course of a long-term project, participants may choose to focus on different skills as they master the ones they initially were working on.

Also, some skills lend themselves to being practiced during a session, whereas others are easier to develop in the broader context of work. The skill members choose to practice during the session may be different from the one they choose to practice between sessions.

Questioning and Listening

The action learning process includes deep reflection around questions posed in response to the perceived problem. These questions should help group members drill down to ensure that they are addressing the true crux of the issue at hand.

The coach supports this process by listening for learning opportunities. She should only intervene to move the group members along in how they are processing, so they can peel back the surface layers and get to the real issue. The team members use listening to fully appreciate the question being asked, then to pause and reflect on what is being discussed.

PROBLEM VS. PUZZLE

When considering whether to use action learning, you should understand whether you are trying to address a problem or solve a puzzle. Action learning is effective for problems, not puzzles.

Problems don’t have a clear solution, or they have many solutions and it’s not clear which is best. Puzzles, on the other hand, have a known solution or can be handled by an expert.

For example, in the United States, federal taxes must be filed by April 15th. This is a puzzle: Either do them or hire an accountant. How to pay the taxes due could potentially be a problem.

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