Action Learning—An Experiential Tool for Solving Organizational Issues

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Abstract: Action Learning can be effectively used in both large and small businesses and organizations by employees, stakeholders, or volunteers through this "learning by doing" approach to evaluate an issue or issues of importance to the organization. First developed in the 1940s, Action Learning has increasingly been used as a method to explore questions that often go unanswered in day-to-day organizational life through the use of reflective listening and insightful questioning.

Introduction to Action Learning

Reginald Revans' professional legacy bills him as "the Father of Action Learning," a process he developed in the 1940s as the director of education at the National Coal Board in England. Searching for a more effective method to solve the organizational issues plaguing the companyâ— from production to managementâ— he introduced the simple idea of having employees and managers sit down to share and discuss issues.

Using a "learning by doing" approach, Action Learning is based on reflective listening and insightful questioning. This unique, proven process has been used by major national and international corporations, such as Boeing, Samsung, and AT&T, to improve efficiency, create new products, and solve challenging organizational issues.

Revans wrote in *Management Decision* in 1983, "action learning has been born out of the speed with which the world is changing; to discriminate between action learning and traditional instruction; to offer a condensed guide to its logistics."

With a scientist behind its development, there's no surprise that a formula depicts Action Learning:

Learning = Programmed knowledge + the ability to ask 'insightful' questions, or L = P + Q

This equation emphasizes that:

- Workplace communities can find solutions to organizational issues;

- The collective knowledge of learners is the critical resource for learning and leading;

- Learning at work can generate the necessary knowledge to solve problems; and

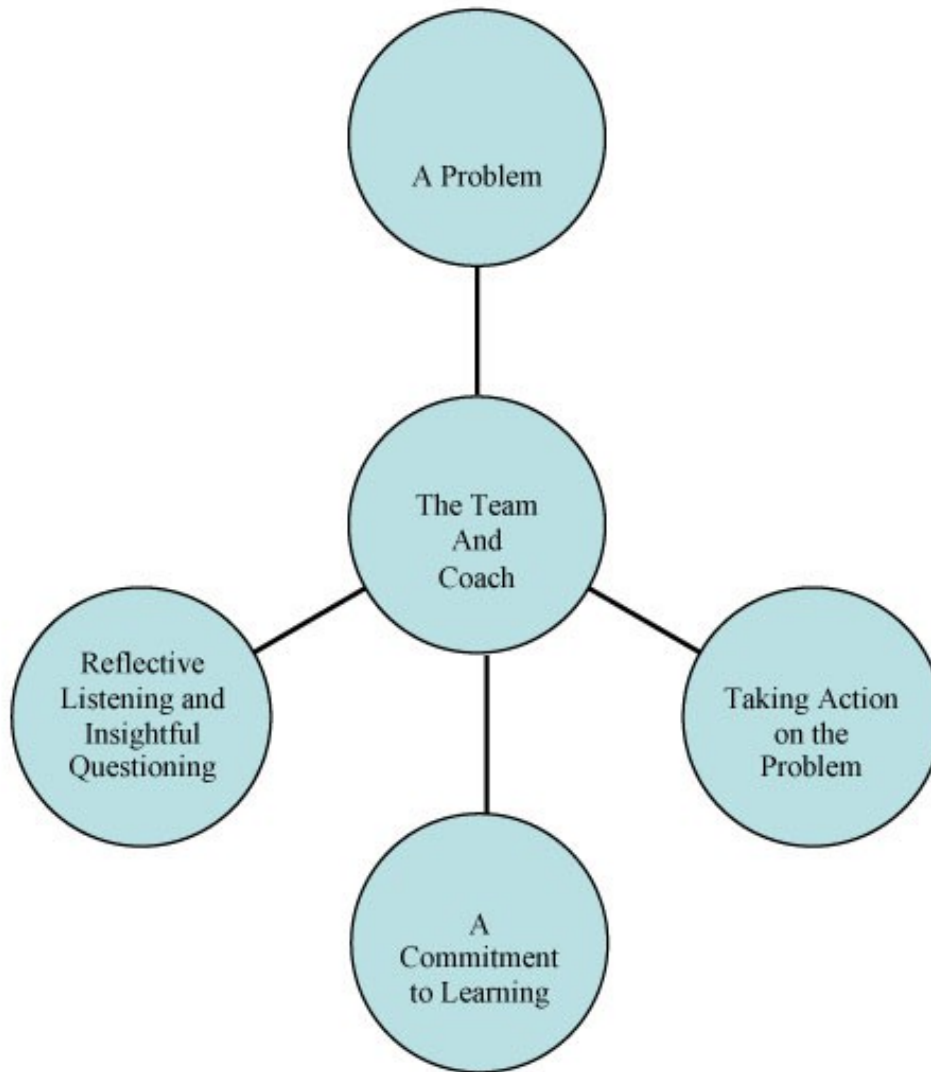- Learning is facilitated through action

Revans noted how Action Learning creates the context for "asking questions that are dying to be asked." Some of these questions may appear quite simple, but can be overlooked when organizations are faced with complex issues. Such fundamental questions that can arise, include the following.

- What are we really trying to do?

- What is stopping us from doing it?

- Who knows about (understands) the problem being tackled?

- Who cares (genuinely wants something done) about the problem?

- Who can (has enough power) get something done about it?

Dissecting Action Learning

An understanding of the elements of Action Learning is essential to putting this process into place (Figure 1). The Problem can be a project, challenge, opportunity, issue, or task. This task or challenge must be of high importance to an individual, team, or organization; be significant, urgent; and be the team's responsibility to solve.

Figure 1.
Elements of Action Learning

A Problem

The Team And Coach

Reflective Listening and Insightful Questioning

Taking Action on the Problem

A Commitment to Learning

Team

The Team should consist of between four and eight people. This will allow for a variety of perspectives to be shared.

Insightful Questioning and Reflective Listening

Action Learning emphasizes questions and reflection above statements and opinions. By focusing on the "right" questions rather than the "right" answers, Action Learning focuses more on what one doesn't know.

Taking Action

Team members must have the power to take action themselves or be assured their recommendations will be heard and acted upon. This builds ownership in the process, allows for real action to take place, and initiates progress on solving the problem.

Commitment to Learning

Action Learning places equal emphasis on the learning and development of individuals and on the Team and to solving the problem.

Coach

One member of the group devotes his/her efforts toward helping the group learn. This person identifies opportunities that enable the group to improve its problem solving and strategy-creation capacity. Through a series of questions, the coach enables group members to:

- Reflect on how they are listening

- Determine how to better frame a problem

- Learn how team members can give one other feedback

Ground Rules for Action Learning

Ground rules are essential for governing the Action Learning process. Sitting in a tight circle of chairs, one person on the team shares a problem. Team members are given time to reflect on the issue once the owner has stated the problem. Then Team members start asking questions of the owner of the problem. The owner responds with their thoughts and reactions to the question, but the Team member may not respond or interject a statement of opinion. Team members take turns asking questions for the period of time previously agreed upon, such as 30 minutes or 1 hour.

The coach plays an important role by managing the process and stopping at appropriate times to ask Team members to evaluate the process, such as the reflecting on the quality of questions.

Asking Good Questions

The Action Learning process starts with asking good questions, such as "will this question . . . "

- Create deep reflection?

- Challenge those taken for granted assumptions?

- Lead to breakthrough thinking?

- Enable people to better view the situation?

Some effective questions with which to start are the following.

- What is a viable alternative?

- What are the advantages and disadvantages you see?

- How would you describe the current reality?

Conclusion

Action Learning is a proven process that provides organizational members with the time to listen, the opportunity to ask questions that often go unasked within the day-to-day confines of an organization, and the ability to respond more effectively to change. (Christiansen, Haverford, & Mitchell, 2003). It is recommended as a critical reflection activity for Extension leaders (Baughman, Franz, Garst, Peters, & Smith, 2009) and creates a "learning leader" environment providing for personal growth among team members.

Modern day scholars, such as Michael Marquardt of The George Washington University in Washington, D.C., notes:

> Action Learning derives its power from the fact that it does not isolate any dimension from the context in which managers work. It develops the whole leader for the whole organization. It also recognizes that what leaders learn and how they learn cannot be dissociated from one another, for how one learns necessarily influences what one learns.

In closing, Reginald Revans wrote:

> Action Learning is both to understand and to achieve as a result of trying out, perhaps more than once, some suggestion for reaching an objective; it is even more useful if, at the outset, that objective is not entirely clear. Learning by doing then embraces learning what to be doing. Indeed the achievement is necessarily the understanding.

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