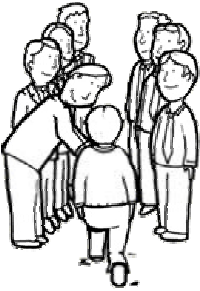# Speed to Adoption

In order for action learning teams to solve the problems they face on a daily basis, the link between learners and their companies has to be strong and supportive

Speaking with my colleagues who work with other corporations that are either considering or have adopted action learning degrees, I find that there are two camps that emerge. The training people, on the one hand, wish to "teach" their employees information and expect them to immediately apply this knowledge. The workers, however, recognize that the process is an ongoing, continuous one designed to be adaptive for problems as they arise. Action learning agents usually spend a great amount of time (sometimes weeks) explaining to the training departments the process of the degree program, how action learning works, the cost structure and so on. In these discussions, clients figure out how action learning fits with their models. There are also cultural and financial decisions to be made in order to assure the organization that action learning degrees are a worthwhile enterprise.

However, I have observed another side as well. This is when I explain to workers the process of using action learning teams to solve problems they deal with on a

Unsupportive   Supportive
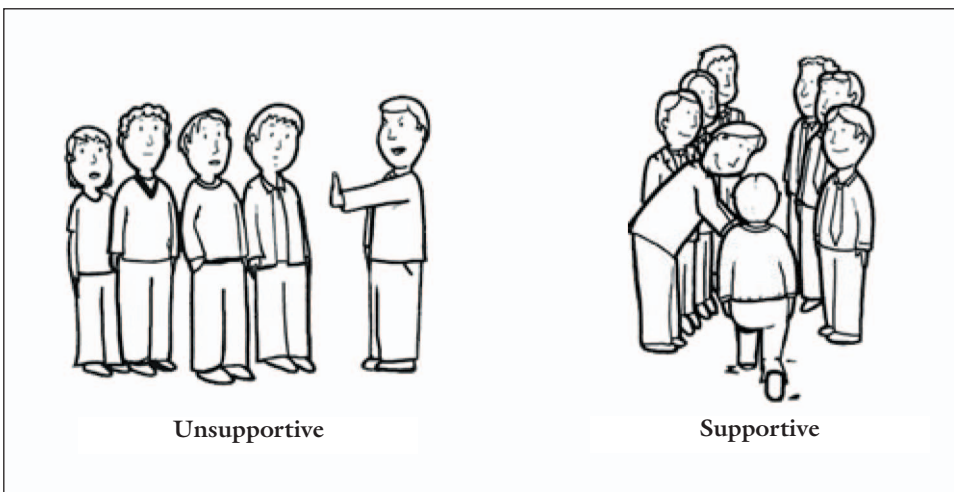
daily basis. Next, I explain that team members can earn a degree by participating in action learning and by documenting their learning and problem solving, for the company as well as for themselves. Their eyes light up and I am immediately asked something like "Where do I sign up?" These conversations take as little as ten minutes.

I am often amazed at how rapidly the concept of action learning-based degrees takes root in individual workers. Like a hammer to a nail, the relationship to learning and working in teams to gain a degree are a natural combination. In this case, the tools fit the job. The people predisposed to action learning grab the hammer!

I understand why there are these two types of thinking. Certainly, companies must make decisions on more information than a short conversation. Many times, the proper way to proceed is to conduct a pilot program where the concept can be tried out in a limited and controlled fashion. Somewhere between the company and the individual, the process has to make sense.

The link between learners and their companies has to be strong and supportive. In Sodexho, the link is strong. Our learners are connected to Sodexho University in a very real and practical way through the academic documentation process. When learners and their organizations are closely connected, problem-solving teams move along quickly and rationally. In fact, the ability to adapt to new ideas and move fast to meet customer needs is a hallmark of the best companies. In today's business world, companies either adjust quickly or develop serious problems. Many fail due to the lack of this critical skill. I doubt that companies that utilize action learning teams will suffer this fate.

The Paradigm Shift to Learning
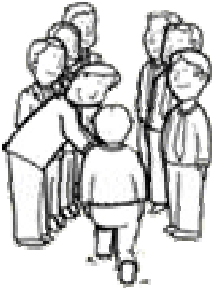
Our work environment is a perfect model to learn within. We work with others on problems that are real and have real consequences. This marries educational theory with business needs

When paradigms change, two camps of thinkers form. On the one hand, there are the thinkers who understand and practice the way things currently are done within their organizations. On the other, though, there are those who are willing to change the way they think and act and who want to see and do their jobs more effectively than they have in the past. This is natural and expected. Often paradigms shift in a nanosecond. Suddenly, we see the world differently. For those who spend time in organizational behavior areas, there is something different and hard to define about paradigm shifts. One minute one thinks one way and the next that person thinks another. Paradigm shifts are often quite sensible, and are usually accompanied by an "aha" moment. The change is obvious and often not earth shattering. It can be characterized as an idea that has hatched and now emerges as a better or different way.
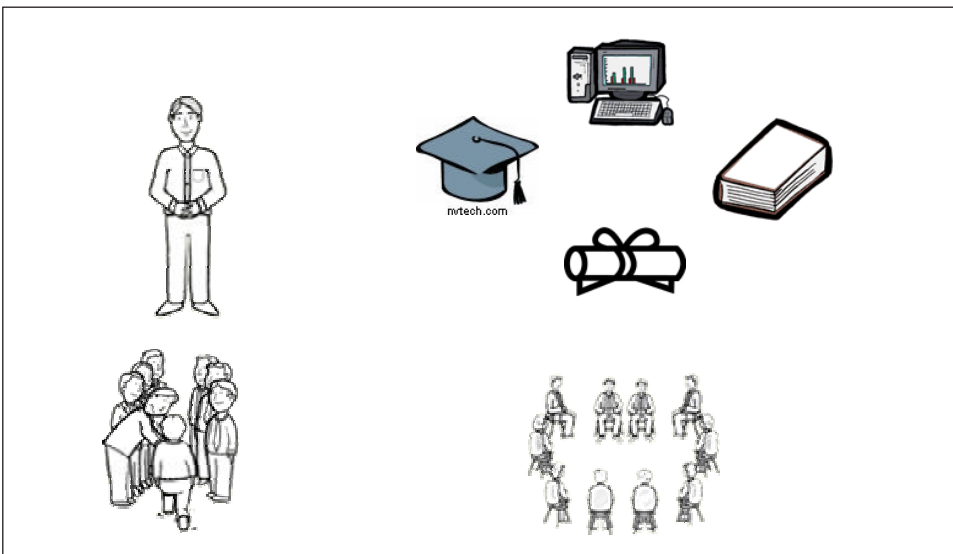
Action learning is a paradigm shift. Think of it in terms of moving from dependence to interdependence by converting the power of one individual stuck with solving a problem alone into being a member of a problem-solving team. This is not easy. It is like instantaneously switching from Douglas McGregor's Theory X to Theory Y. Theory X managers want to make all of the decisions for their workers, while Theory Y managers have confidence in the ability of their workers to make their own decisions. Theory X managers see their employees very differently than Theory Y ones. Action learning often helps managers who do not trust their employees to take charge and solve problems shift into seeing their employees as caring, engaged, and productive members of the company.

Another shift is in how the process of gaining knowledge is perceived – as "training" or as "learning." The first implies leader-led while the other implies learner-led. Both are different ways of attacking a problem. Generally, one sees an already determined solution that the learner is shown, while the other sees an open-ended solution that the learner is empowered to discover.

The responsibility of learning shifts from the instructor to the team and each individual member. Traditionally, educators assumed that a learner would understand when properly exposed to the material. For centuries, this model has worked with varying degrees of effectiveness. However, another equally valid, yet little used approach puts the learner in the position of responsibility and takes advantage of what educators have known for years about instruction. When learning has a meaningful application, people are better able to understand and apply knowledge. I have attended classes over the years that have held no meaning for me. I was required to physically attend and indeed, the body was there while my mind was not. I am sure each of us can remember a class that was that way. Another traditional way of learning is through case studies, which are formed to make learning easier by engaging the learner more actively with other class members. Case studies fall somewhere between training and learning, as learning is best done when there is an application. Action learning links learning with action yet fosters learning while solving real problems.

With action learning, work environments can also become learning environments. We work with others on real problems with real consequences. This marries educational theory with business needs, and may require a paradigm shift for many of us in order to fully understand the power of action learning teamwork. The shift from training to learning has begun.

Non-Traditional Learning

Action learners have no standard text, they have choices to learn that are not laid out for them before they start a project. Action learners use a "process" of learning rather than a specific body of cannonical knowledge

How does the action learning degree program compare with traditional educational institutions? Action learning degrees are "practitioner degrees" in the sense that they are gained by students who hold full-time, productive jobs with a business. Our students solve problems at work and gain academic credit for their efforts. While in the traditional classroom environment curriculum is tied to an integrated approach of mastering conventional bodies of knowledge, action learners use the work environment as their classroom.

Traditional models rely on established bodies of knowledge that are used to solve problems as students encounter them. This preloading of data has served us well over time, but action learning takes us a step farther. Action learning is more of a "just in time" approach. Businesses, particularly manufacturers, have adopted this concept to keep inventories low, while at the same time not interfering with production. Action learners seek knowledge as needed to solve problems.

Traditional models rely on textbooks as the basis for knowledge acquisition, while the teacher supplements this with lectures and research projects. Action learners have no standard text; they have learning choices that are not laid out for them before they start. Rather than having a specific, canonical body of knowledge to

reference, action learners utilize a process of learning that is engaged in solving real problems. Often the process that action learners follow leads them to solutions that a professor would not validate with high marks. I recall hearing that Fred Smith received a "C" for the concept of Federal Express. His idea and work did not pass muster with the professor's view of how a company should be formed. This shows that different ways of thinking often are not acceptable to the traditional establishment.

In action learning, the coach is often surprised at the performance of the students, as they frequently pose more creative solutions to problems than any professor could imagine. When I was a part of a traditional learning model at a university, the highest compliment I could receive was that I had written a paper well. My papers were marked down by such things as tense violations and awkward grammar rather than evaluated on my thought processes. While my ideas were considered, for grading purposes they were somehow not as important as grammar! In action learning teams, the product should certainly be well written, but there is no limit placed on thinking and solution building other than the parameters of the problem itself. There are no performance-based prerequisites, and no 100-level classes to attend. There are certainly different levels of knowledge and application, but the path to acquiring knowledge is not predefined for the student. Rather than walking a path already prepared, an action learner has to define and walk a new one.

I recall in TQM (Total Quality Management) training that one professor said we students should have an opportunity to sit at the seat of the "master." Such a master was W. Edwards Deming. I had the chance to learn from this great ninety-three-year-old man when I had the opportunity to attend a Deming workshop. This workshop was about quality improvement and proper ways to go about engaging our employees. Deming's work is well documented and available today. Action learning teams should be able to research his teachings and benefit from his years of work. The ability to search for knowledge from previous instructors is readily available today. The Internet has many resources that are freely accessible and which can stimulate thinking and problem solving. There are no limits to the classroom of the action learner.

We need the traditional learning system, and we are working on ways to capture the benefits of traditional learning. Many times, the action learner needs to attend a class to gain knowledge. Much of the thinking that moves us forward as a society comes from the traditional university setting. Yes, even action learning has its roots in academia and the proponents today who teach me about action learning are professors too. The smart learners pick from sources that help them grow and develop. Action learners have the flexibility to choose among both traditional and non-traditional approaches.

Just Let It Go...
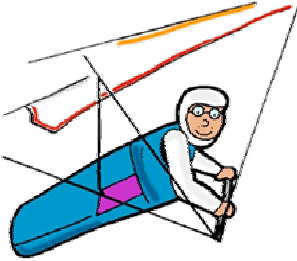
When employees are given the opportunity to learn and advance, choosing their own destiny, their motivation levels soar

One myth of management is that the managers must always maintain complete control of their employees' work. In fact, I remember attending various training sessions that my father facilitated where he would teach Total Quality Management (TQM) tools to frontline managers. In many ways, this was exactly what these newly hired managers needed. They had "book learning" but had no idea how to use the TQM tools to solve their problems. I remember him asking specific questions of the group, and, at times, he would even tell jokes. One of these jokes "struck a chord" with the managers involved. He asked them, "What profession has the longest expected lifespan?" The groups, after guessing such occupations as garbage collectors, TQM facilitators, etc., would eventually give up. He would then tell them that it had been proven that symphony conductors live the longest lives because they are in total control. He would then ask who has the shortest lifespan. Of course, it was the members of the symphony.

In the realm of action learning, the learning coach (the supervisor of the team), like the conductor, plays an important role as the mentor of the team. While learning coaches are not in control of every move, they do have tremendous power over the ways their students are engaged and the types of problems they are solving. When employees are given the opportunity to learn and advance, choosing their own destiny, motivation levels soar. Each member is engaged in the learning process, and the team moves forward with constructive friction in lieu of the normal finger pointing and other destructive humanistic tendencies. This method, versus the traditional boss-subordinate relationship, is one step higher in controlling the process than many bosses are familiar with. They have control of the process rather than controlling the students.

As the action learning process has advanced here in Providence, I have learned this lesson repeatedly. If managers can learn to just let go and allow the process to run

its natural course, those who have the ability will correct the same complex problems that plague senior level managers and vice presidents. Laura Antal, talking about the associate's degree students, said:

> *I learned that leaders have the same characteristics at any level in the company. They are positive, take pride in their work, and want others to succeed. I also see them struggle with the same issues: how to motivate others, how to change a culture that has some negative undertones in some areas, and how to communicate effectively and earn respect. I saw the leaders sharing their strategies and teaching each other. I saw openness and willingness to share experiences where people had to deal with difficult situations or employees.*

Action learning engages everyone in the learning process. Thus, it is important to understand how the process is replicated. How can we create an environment conducive to learning and progress everywhere? How can we engage our workers/learners in meaningful work? In the spirit of action learning, the task of answering these questions does not lie solely with the conductor, but rather with the symphony. At first, as the band of learners form, it is a bit noisy and out of tune. Then, when the team is fully engaged in learning and problem solving, the learners perform like a symphony orchestra! Out of the chaos of forming a team comes order – just let it go and trust the action learning process.
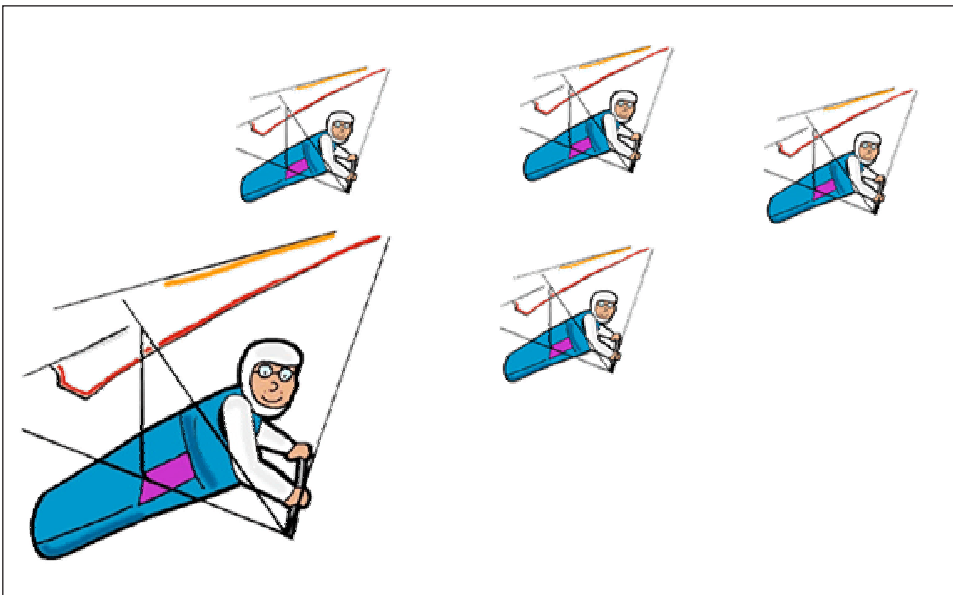
Training through Sodexho University: A New Horizon

The action learning process is a marvelous and powerful tool. Let it carry you into the future

The success of any industry leader is dependant on the implementation of quality training and employee development programs. Sodexho University was created to support the growth and development of Sodexho employees. To further understand how business problem-solving techniques, as modeled by the University program, will be run in the future, it is first essential to understand our mission statement. Once understood, examples of completed projects will be more valuable when they are shown to align with our company's mission and values.

The mission of the University is perfectly aligned with the three strategic imperatives of Service Spirit, Team Spirit, and the Spirit of Progress already established by Sodexho. It reads:

Sodexho University will enable our people to fulfill our mission by:

- Creating learning opportunities that are aligned with business needs (Service Spirit)
- Supporting personal and professional growth for everyone (Team Spirit)
- Fostering an environment that inspires the spirit of continuous improvement (Spirit of Progress)

Let us explore these three strategic imperatives in order to understand how they impact and shape our problem-solving projects.

Service Spirit: Sodexho School Services' Providence Facilities Team was chosen as the introductory site because of its strong relationship with the Providence School Department and impeccable reputation with the Laborers International Union of North America. Our projects are structured to involve members of the school department, principals of schools, teachers, parents, and students in learning. Currently, we are in the midst of our second output in which each of the twenty-two students is compiling a business plan. In order to successfully complete the

projects and the course, we must know what our client both expects and needs, globally (Providence School Department) and locally (each school).

Team Spirit: A core element upon which action learning is predicated is the importance and necessity of teamwork. The concept is simple. First, we must discover how we learn and what we still need to learn – such as the ability to network, to build relationships of trust, how we can provide higher quality service, etc. – in order to succeed. Second, we need to take action. This action element is often missed, but is crucial to the success of any partnership. By working in teams, members take upon themselves the responsibility to see projects through in the most effective manner possible. Our teams thus far have found great success at engaging themselves in projects that emphasize team spirit.

Spirit of Progress: Sodexho has espoused a clear mission statement as well as a set of values by which we conduct our business. With regards to the spirit of progress, we have clearly stated, "The spirit of progress also encourages the entrepreneurial attitude that we expect of our people." We want all Sodexho employees to have the decision-making power necessary to continue to provide quality service while engaging in other portions of the business as well. We encourage our employees to take ownership of their work, to have pride in their schools, to be the best custodial, maintenance, and grounds staff in the industry. Sodexho University is providing the tools necessary to create a successful business atmosphere.

Our hourly custodians involved in the degree program recently completed their second and third outputs. They each compiled a business plan for their respective school. They now more fully understand how to budget for labor and supplies, which trainings are important to the success of their staff, and how to proactively plan for major cleaning projects. In order to better serve principals and teaching staff, they decided that a principal's report was necessary. They then drafted questions and scheduled interviews to improve communication. They are truly taking responsibility for their own learning.

A corporate university will flounder and ultimately fail if it is unable to align itself and carry out the company's goals. The accredited degree program has allowed our employees to familiarize and internalize the vision of Sodexho. What a marvelous and powerful tool! Action learning will carry Sodexho into the future.
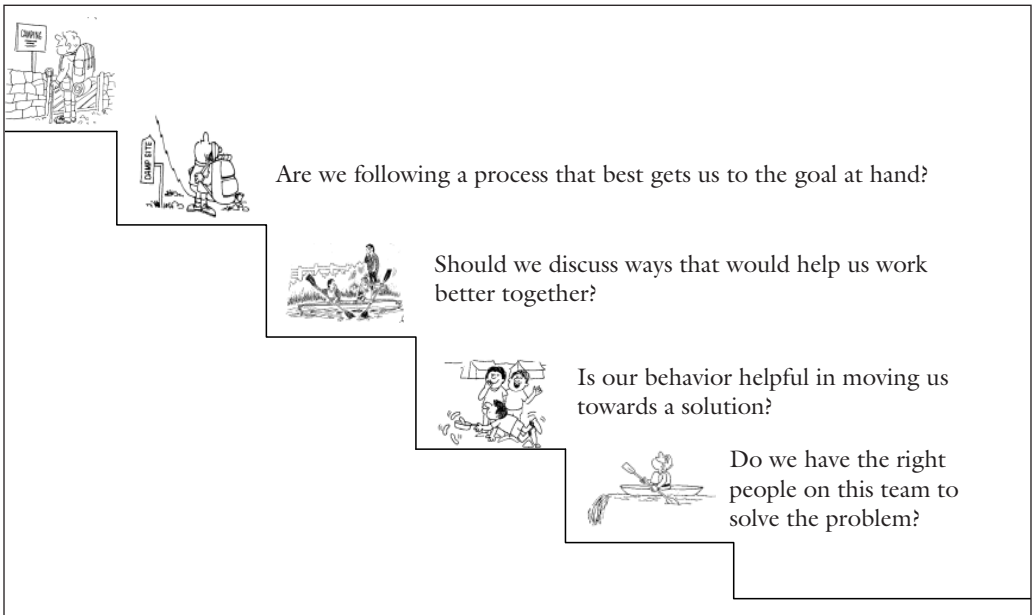

COME CATCH THE SPIRIT OF ACTION LEARNING
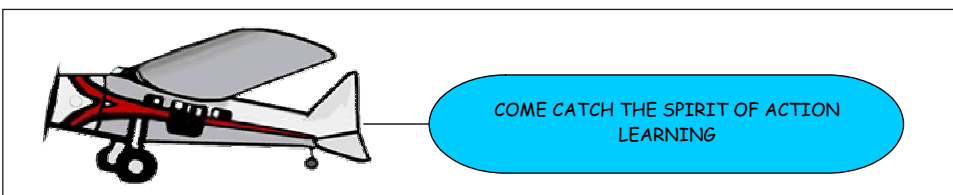
Coaching through the Storm

The learning coach should have faith that the team will work through the awkward stages and that when they do, they will perform well

Action learners have struggled for years to determine when it is appropriate for action learning coaches to intervene and when they are supposed to let the group go independently. By using Tuckman's 1965 "forming, storming, norming and performing" team development model (discussed fully in lesson eight), we can gain some insight into how and when intervention should be used.

While each team goes through the four stages of "forming, storming, norming and performing," it seems some get stuck in the storming stage and some get right down to performing. The strain felt from working on action learning teams comes from going through the painful stages of team development. If we have faith that we will get through these stages, then we will have gained a great advantage as a learning team.

Are we following a process that best gets us to the goal at hand?

Should we discuss ways that would help us work better together?

Is our behavior helpful in moving us towards a solution?

Do we have the right people on this team to solve the problem?

For the learning coach, these stages may require different questions, which should be designed to help the group work effectively through the stages to successful problem solving. Often the learning coach, like a traditional teacher, feels responsible for each individual team member's learning. Hopefully, these coaches can be convinced that nothing could be further from the truth. Learners are responsible for their own learning. The coach is responsible for ensuring that the process facilitates learning. Anything the coach does that distracts from this should be avoided.

Some good process questions from the coach are: "Do you think that we are proceeding well at how we handle each others' comments?" "Are we asking the right questions?" "What do we need to do to get back on track?" "Have we spent enough energy on this topic?"

The names of the stages lend themselves to the type of questions that should be asked. Here is an example of a good question from each stage:

- "Do we have the right people on this team to solve the problem?" (forming)
- "Is the behavior between us helpful in moving us towards a solution?" (storming)
- "Should we discuss ways that would help us to work better together?" (norming)
- "Are we following a process that best gets us to the goal at hand?" (performing)

The best advice for coaches is to have faith that the team will work through the awkward stages and that when the members do, they will perform well. However, it is also important to remember that an action learning coach, ideally, will inspire questions that help participants learn and find solutions to problems themselves. Any other activity may block the team from success. In the middle and early stages, it can get a bit shaky. This is okay as this is the normal process of team formation. The ones that stick through the hard times will find great satisfaction in the later stages.

Lastly, teams slip up and down the forming to performing scale. This can happen during a problem-solving activity and over again on the next problem. Accept these behaviors, work through them, and you will be well rewarded with solutions!

Asking Questions
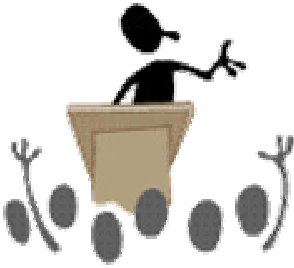
I have found that when I use the question and reflection process, the learners in my sets gain confidence and learn more. I have also found that I learn more as well

At Sodexho, our learning teams use Michael Marquardt's *Six Essential Elements of Action Learning* as the model for problem solving. One of the elements, number three or "The Question and Reflection Process," is often the hardest to implement. As experienced managers, we usually have the habit of quickly resolving problems and have convinced ourselves that we always have the answer.

Early in the process of implementing action learning, I often found myself telling groups what their problem was and how to solve it. I always felt this was good managerial behavior, and my experiences and observations had reinforced that belief. However, I soon realized that I was not helping my teams learn anything, except that I was the "answer man." To make matters worse, since I was so quick with the answer, I doubt whether I was solving the actual problem or simply correcting a surface symptom.

I became abruptly aware of my mistake one day during an action learning session in Providence. The comments I heard from the participants, such as "You're not going to answer this question for me, are you?" surprised me. I then asked the learning coach, Richard Lenderman, why he did not tell the group the solutions I had earlier told him. His response was that he had, but they had rejected my answers in favor of their own. By offering them my predetermined solution, I was offering what Marquardt refers to as "programmed knowledge." Programmed knowledge can be very useful in simple problem-solving situations where the solution is obvious, but it does not help learners grow or increase their own knowledge.

When dealing with his teams, Richard stuck to asking questions and helping them figure out their own way through problems. I found that not only were his teams happily solving their own problems, but they had actually determined what the problem was before they set out to solve it. They were solving the "right" problem, instead of a just a symptom.

I discovered that when I use the question and reflection process with the learners in my teams, they quickly gain confidence and learn more as a result. I have also found that I learn more as well. It is hard to break years of habit. Being the "answer man" is not only easy, but also rewarding as people are happy to have someone else on whom to cast their problems. Action learning is a different process than simply providing answers. Action learning provides questions! Here is what one participant thought of the questioning process:

> *The amazing fact that we all learned was that there was nothing about this project that was simple.... I am very pleased with the progression of our team. We committed to one another, set goals and deadlines (and missed a few) and didn't give up even when we were overwhelmed. We listened to and respected each other's questions, even when it meant doing more work.*
> — Judi Brubaker

Asking questions has helped the learners I work with grow in ways they and I never would have imagined, and that is even more rewarding than seeing my solutions to problems implemented. I am much happier with the team approach to problem solving.

Be Careful About Being Prescriptive

Rx

Will it help or hinder?

I recommend that we do not prescribe the problem or the solution

The longer we are in leadership positions and the more we know about a subject, the more we tend to be prescriptive to our workers. Action learning recommends the opposite! No solution should be prescribed when it could be concluded by the action learning team. I know it is hard for me to follow this advice. I want so much to help learners find solutions for themselves, but I have learned to help them find their own answer rather than simply giving mine.

Now that I have matured a bit, I have found that if I wait for the action learning group to work on a problem, marvelous things happen. For example, I have found that sometimes I have not accurately assessed the problem, and so I certainly do not have the right answer. As hard as this is for me to admit, frequently groups outsmart me in determining the real problem. Many minds working together on defining the problem steer the group's energy towards solving the "right" problem.

Once the problem is correctly identified (and it may still be further defined in the next stage of problem solving) the group next entertains solutions. Again, the group lines up all of their minds to ask questions that lead to a mature and well rounded solution. Here, too, I have found that my solutions are often not as well thought out as the groups.

Being prescriptive does at times have its place. In action learning, we advise people that if a problem has an obvious and clear solution, enact it and be done with it. There is often no need to convene a group to solve a simple problem. Action learning is not geared towards simple problems and simple solutions. If we use a team to solve a simple problem, we risk losing the confidence gained from solving important problems, and we lose the horsepower applied to complex problems. Occasionally, prior to action learning, I have been asked to be part of a problem-solving group that is tasked with adapting an already determined solution. Since our group did not develop this solution, there was almost always disagreement over

whether it was a good answer or not to the problem. I think most people would not like to be in that situation!

I recommend that we do not prescribe either the problem or the solution. We have to be open minded enough to let the group take charge of the problem and solution rather than find ways to con the group into adapting our version.

Characteristics of a Business Learner

There are some virtues that an educated person displays that show others that they have knowledge and act like they have an education

When I was last in school, one of my professors took some class time to explain what he called "dispositions of an educated person." I looked at what he offered and was immediately struck by the fact that if I were to present myself as an educated person, others would expect me to conduct myself as one. It is not necessarily acting in some artificial manner, but there are outward signs and attitudes displayed by an educated person.

We expect our action learners to have a great command of their problem-solving skills by the time they earn their degree. We also expect our learners to look and sound like an educated person. There are some virtues that an educated person displays that show others that they have knowledge and an education. In order to help our learners understand some of the tangible and intangible aspects of being an educated person, we have compiled the following items to consider.

An educated person practices some predictable and observable mental processes:

1. Thinking precedes action and behavior.
2. Problem solving is both deductive and inductive, as needed.
3. Facts are given heavier weight than opinion.
4. When opinion is offered, it is labeled as such.
5. All sides are considered in the fact-gathering process.
6. What is said and written is verifiable and backed up with other sources.
7. Reasoning is logical, open, inclusive and thoughtful.

As a result, behavior is:

1. Reflective of education and character
2. Measured
3. Reasoned

4. Respectful
5. Proactive
6. Uplifting
7. Polite
8. Bounded by reasonable limitations

Deep down an educated person will have certain core beliefs – namely:

1. A commitment to truth
2. Openness to others ideas
3. Inclusiveness, thoroughness
4. Fair play
5. Ethically oriented

Now the question for the action learner is, "Which of these do I need to work on?"

# Comparing and Contrasting (Learning Review)

Comparing and contrasting gives the learner a chance to examine differences and similarities

Most people learn best when they are able to compare and contrast what they are currently learning against what they already know. Comparing and contrasting gives the learner a chance to examine differences and similarities to the situation at hand. This is a wonderful advantage that adults have over children or other adults that lack a frame of reference for the problem at hand.

In action learning groups, the comparing and contrasting approach takes on even higher levels of understanding. Think of it as a panel of experts examining a subject rather than one person investigating alone. Soon, all the members of the action learning group have a similar basis for understanding as they learn to share their various experiences and viewpoints. These groups question until they develop a solid line of direction towards finding their solution.

The comparing and contrasting process involves questioning rather than answering. Often in the middle of a discussion, there is a moment of truth when a solution suddenly occurs. The clear statement of the problem must appear first, in order to ensure that the group is solving the appropriate problem, as opposed to solving a superfluous one.
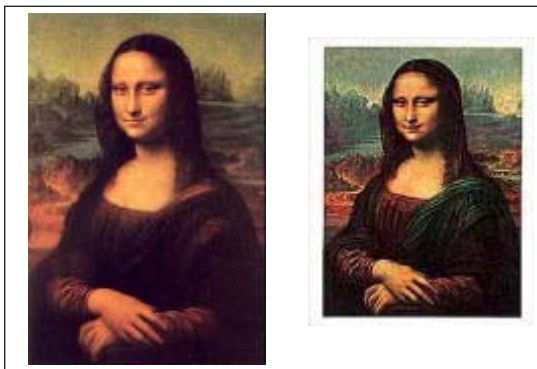
Educators have recognized the need to compare and contrast for a long time. I presume they value the concept whenever I take an aptitude or intelligence test. It seems the whole test is made up of compare and contrast lists that have to be examined to determine the right answer! In life, however, it is much more fun to sort through real experiences. Action learners ask themselves, "How is the problem we are trying to solve similar or different from those others have solved?" This strengthens their understanding and ability to describe problems and solutions.

In a way, I think most of us do this naturally as we go throughout our day. We examine whether something meets our standards by comparing and contrasting. We can then correct the situation to this standard. We use this ability to see similarities and differences. When we have an open mind, we apply our thinking to new and unique solutions. It is even okay to solve a problem in a traditional way if that solution works best. In the end, we can discover the solution by comparing and contrasting.

Different Industries and Cultures

All cultures and industries have problems that action learning groups can solve

Fortunately we have had a chance to share our action learning lessons with other companies. However, we have found that the type of worker and type of industry affect how we might approach action learning. Coming from the service industry, I originally thought that the action learning process might not work with other industries such as banking, manufacturing or government agencies. However, through my experiences with sharing the process to other industries, I now know action learning is universally applicable.

This sharing with a broad range of industries and government agencies has taught me that, while they may use it differently, others can benefit from the process of action learning. Action learning is learner centered and therefore must be adapted by learners as they solve problems. It makes sense to use learner-centered work teams because the problems facing industries today are too complex and diverse for any one individual. The learner-centered action learning approach maximizes every-one's ability to solve these complex problems. How could this be fundamentally different from the way others do business? The answer is that action learning is adaptive in nature and can be embraced by any culture.

We have learned that we cannot operate action learning teams from a distance. The farther learners are from the process, the less likely they will succeed. Action learning is more of a "grass roots" process than a company wide one. While a company can adopt the concept of action learning, it works best when the learner engaged in problem solving is right next to their next level of management and back-up set advisor (learning coach).

Because action learning embraces a wide variety of disciplines from educational theory to psychology, anthropology to sociology, and other methods of learning and management, there are many routes to problem solving. This flexibility enhances the ability of any group of learners to solve their problems uniquely.

While some cultures embrace teamwork more than others, all should realize that groups are more powerful problem-solving units than individuals, and that a group motivated to solve problems has a greater rate of success than the unmotivated ones. Certainly, command-and-control organizations, for example, might struggle for a while before their specific culture embraces action learning, but in the end, the rewards outweigh the risks. Yes, cultures are different, but all cultures have problems that action learning groups can solve.

Focus on ROI

All the outputs are required to state an ROI and back up their conclusions with facts

Somewhere in the middle of all this theory and practice we have to face the cold, hard fact that our efforts must yield some good for the company. Action learning is not some think tank detached from the realities of running a business efficiently.

We must consider the return on investment (ROI) when we solve problems by using action learning. There is a great difference between a solution that does not improve either financial or customer-related increases and one that does. When we solve problems for the company, we must always consider what return we are producing for our effort. One way of doing this is to produce a report of our findings and what we have learned, called, in action learning, an output. Rather than problems simply being solved, we now have problems solved and documented. All outputs must not only solve a problem, but also show the financial or customer service impact for the company. Additionally, we use a grading sheet to self-evaluate the worth of our output. A great deal of credit is given to the learning team and learner for producing positive financial results.

The truth is that any savvy company would love to know what the outputs are from the efforts of their learning groups. If the value of an output cannot be captured, then I cannot see why that project would have any value.

What will be our ROI?

Tuition reimbursement is a standard practice in most large companies, and why not? Better educating our employees can only help their individual performance. If the company is lucky, the individual will positively impact their associates and, therefore, move the company closer to its goals. Sometimes, we need to send our people out for some fresh learning.

Unfortunately, tuition reimbursement schemes are often hard to link to ROI. I can think of a large, nationally recognized company that spends over $900,000 each year on tuition reimbursement. The difficulty comes when we find that there is no trackable ROI for this large investment. Companies know that sending their employees back to school is a good thing, but they have no clue what effect this is actually producing on the company! If only they could harness that learning and track achievement. Perhaps knowing the effect this learning has on the company would stimulate spending the money on a more productive track.

All the outputs of action learning are documented, as the participants are required to state an ROI and support their conclusions with facts. This is a real win for both the company and the employee, as the value to both is well documented.

Give Them a Place to Learn

A learning nest: A place to learn, a place to plan, a place to solve problems

People are curious creatures. Often their surroundings have an effect on their ability to perform. Frequently in the past, my team would go "off-site" to perform the type of thinking that moved us farther along than ordinary, daily problem solving could. There is a great struggle between "daily stuff" and "future stuff" when it comes to managing our day-to-day schedule. When we would do strategic planning, we would go off-site to a fresh and different place. We took ourselves, literally, out of the routine place and into a more creative one. In essence, we created a physical separation between daily and long-term thinking.

Our daily tasks often take us away from spending our time solving the more complex yet equally real long-term problems that face us. With a service-oriented staff, we often find them solving the same problem over without even realizing it. What they need to do instead is to step back and group identical problems together to solve. When we do this, we are moving towards proactively solving a problem rather than reactively solve it.

In order to avoid getting bogged down in the daily grind of tasks, I suggest that action learners remove themselves, if they can, from their regularly scheduled workspace when they work on long-term problems and goals. If that space gets a

bit stale, I recommend a walk around the block or a change of pace to get the creative juices flowing again.

I have a room in mind where there are chairs and tables for everyone to share. On the walls are flip charts that remind us of how we are to conduct our meetings. There are goals and wise thoughts posted around to remind us that we can solve complex problems by engaging the power of the team. If there is no such room in your place of work, I suggest you get as close to creating a "learning nest" as you can. In any case, if you can, move to where the group is comfortable and where everyone knows it is there to learn and solve problems. The area should also be kept free of interruptions and cell phones, as they can distract from the group's learning.

Tapping the Internal Consulting Potential: Innate Intelligence

Certainly, there is someone or some team of people in the company who have solved complex problems and can help others to learn how

I have always believed that major corporations have the internal resources to rise to the level of excellence that they and their customers desire. If that is the case, then why do so many companies run to the hottest consultant for advice? Oops, I hope that a million customers purchase this book before they read this lesson! Anyway, the truth has to come out sometime. When we hire the latest guru to help us, we are denying the innate intelligence of our organization. Unless we need highly specialized advice, the solution is literally under our noses. Our employees are the ones who have the power, intelligence and ingenuity to fill our needs.

There are many innovative business books that provide plenty of outside stimuli for the company. Surely, if our employees could tap the ideas they read about in the latest book, we would be on our way to outstanding success. When it comes to performance, no matter how well versed and explained a concept is our people somehow have to carry out this idea in the long run. This is generally the major failure of wise advice. Somewhere in the process our employees (I call them learners) have to understand, adopt, and be willing to put their minds and energies behind the concept.

The fact is that we have hundreds of internal consultants who show up to work every day. There is someone or some team of people in the company who have solved complex problems and can help others to learn how. However, since most people and most teams are independent in nature, often there is no record of what the group did to solve their problem. We must find a way to share these solutions, thereby helping those who come after us problem solve.

Our action learning teams have been working at the customer level of problem solving for some time now. They have provided unique, customized solutions to complex and far-ranging issues. Now that they are in a degree-granting program,

they are required to write down their business solutions as well as their own personal learning as they work in a team. That way there is a paper trail to share with others. Some of the outputs these teams come up with even exceed the size of a business advisory book!

We propose that these findings be summarized in what we call an executive summary (a concise and brief solution), and then those who require further details can delve into the more extensive research. These more succinct write-ups can be used for presentations to colleagues at district or division meetings.

When we empower our learning teams to solve problems at the point of service, we shorten the time it takes to implement the solution, and we make it easier to customize it to the unique requirements of the customer.

Employees are usually smarter than their companies give them credit for. Given the time and care that is needed to start our people in the process of action learning, and assuming that problems are solved while the learning takes place, it seems quite clear that customer satisfaction and profitability can be enhanced quickly. If we can convince our employees to take charge of their work rather than wait for someone to do it for them, I am convinced that no competitive company can touch a product or service that a company full of internal consultants can produce.
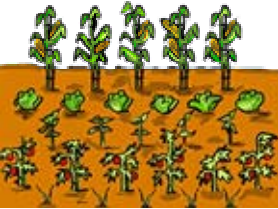
| Documenting solutions | Compiling an advisory book | "White Papers" |

How to Work with People Who Don't Understand/Get It

Once the action learning seeds are placed on fertile ground, they will take root with a little care on the coach's part

Most people do not understand action learning up front. Not to worry, we have seen this before, and so this lesson is for those who are new to the action learning process or who are having trouble understanding it. This lesson will explain how action learning is a highly individualistic process.

When I was a child, there was this cereal I used to eat called Maypo, but what I remember best about it now was the commercial. The commercial starts off by showing two brothers sitting at a table, with a bowl of cereal between them. The older boy is trying to get his younger brother to try some, and he says something like, "Try it, you'll like it." The younger brother finally ends up eating some, and the commercial closes by zooming in on his big grin.

Action learning is like this commercial. One or two of us caught the idea and then we were asked to see if we could explain what it is all about to others – hence this book. The process of being the action learning coach is not unlike being a gardener choosing what seeds to plant – there are thousands of choices – and then planting and nurturing them. Once the action learning seeds are placed in fertile ground, they will take root with a little care on the coach's part. Questions will flow from the process that are different for every learner, so one must be prepared to use a number of interventions (such as those listed in this book, but every coach and action learner will ultimately have to come up with their own). Do not be surprised if a question that you did not anticipate pops up! This happens several times daily for the action learning coach.

Like some plants, many action learners require more time and attention at first. This is fine as long as the coach does not take away the learners' job of figuring out the problem and solution for themselves.

I was recently asked if everyone is capable of being an action learner. My answer was, and still is, yes. I think that everyone, regardless of prior education and aptitude, is capable of applying action learning to develop into both better employees and people. To deny this possibility is to deny the humanity of certain groups of people. Certainly, circumstances can make it harder – a poor prior education or poverty can be difficult to overcome, and companies sometimes can make it harder on their employees by overloading them with bureaucratic red tape and using discriminatory practices that can snuff out even a well lit learning fire. I think that once people are committed and properly introduced to action learning, though, it will change their life for the better.

To sum up, the learner is responsible to catch on to the concept of being an action learner. The learner requires information, aptitude and the right timing. We are required to tune out thousands of messages each day as we go through life. When learners are ready, they catch on quickly.