

Stick with It...



Forming – How is the group getting along? What do we have to do to improve our work relationships?

Action learning is not a magic wand we can wave to make all of our troubles go away. It has been extremely challenging to address our issues using action learning. Traditionally, we have been taught to accept what we are told and not to challenge. One of the things action learning is teaching us is how to research, challenge and provide information so informed decisions can be made. In addition, we overcame our hurdles by truly brainstorming, thinking out of the box, listening to one another, and working with, instead of against, each other.

– Judi Brubaker

Action learning is a marvelous way to organize our critical thinking skills and formulate a process of complex problem solving. The motivation to earn a degree multiplies the motivation of the participants to work harder at problem solving than they ordinarily would.

While it is obvious to participants that the process of action learning yields results beyond ordinary consensus building or sheer following orders, it is also quite clear that there has to be some time spent on team effectiveness. An early lesson learned by installers of action learning was that, in spite of everyone's best intentions, previously ignored or tolerated personal differences had to be dealt with before progress could be made. As National Director of Training, I recall many urgent trips to field sites to help teams to more effectively work together. I would rush to the airport and be on the next available plane to facilitate teamwork in an ailing account. After a three or four hour session, all participants were again cooperating and ready to move forward, patching up old wounds and working in a spirit of teamwork. Sometimes, the intervention did the trick, however, in most cases, it only lasted until the next major crisis.

So why did the rushed visits and interventions not pay long term dividends?

It seems that the problems a team can develop between fellow members often run deeper than a short intervention can cure. Most members honestly want to work together cooperatively and value the peace and support that working together

yields. The reason short fixes do not often cure, though, is that damaged interpersonal relationships take more time and effort to solve. What is needed is a long-term solution.

When faced with problems that are more complex than a single individual can solve, anyone feels a bit awkward at first. Until one understands that the group possesses the ability to solve complex problems, the uneasiness persists. Over time, action learning groups learn to depend on each other. In classical terms, this is the “performing” stage.

Action learning fosters the forming of mature group relationships. The essential question that an action learning team must solve is “How is the group getting along?” and the follow-up question, “What do we have to do to improve our working relationships?” The rest, with some coaching, is up to the group. Often, the group needs to be reminded that the noble thing to do is work problems out among the members.

One team member, Gloria Fiorucci, made this insightful remark about the action learning process: “The team is starting to come together. I noticed that when we start to lose motivation, someone from the team takes the initiative to get us rolling again. In this team environment, the ball does not get dropped and forgotten.” Self-healing groups are motivated to work through the pain of historically bruised relationships and to solve problems that require a more mature vision. Over time, the group moves on to more complex problem-solving opportunities and challenges.

Have faith and persist. Success comes to those who want to succeed and have the persistence to win!

What Is Action Learning?



You choose, you learn the way you want to and that qualifies you as an action learner

Different people use different words to describe the action learning process and relate it to themselves. Dr. Jeanne Farrington, a professor of curriculum design, calls it “inquiry” learning, a word that better explains how action learning differs from traditional learning. Dr. Peter Idstein of Chester Charter Schools uses the term “constructivism” to describe the process of action learning. Learners need to create their own words to wrap their thinking around in order to better understand. But what is action learning? I have always known what action learning is not. It is **not** about:

- sitting in a classroom

A large rectangular frame containing five illustrations and a central text block. The illustrations are: 1. A man in a suit pointing up (Listening). 2. A man in a green shirt holding a green paper (Performing). 3. A man in a white shirt reading a book (Reading). 4. A woman in a white dress with a green scarf (Discussion). 5. Two men in white shirts looking at a computer monitor (Observing and watching others).

You choose, you learn the way you want to and that qualifies you as an action learner

- memorizing formulas and poems
- rote reciting of what the teacher says
- taking notes
- picking one of four possible answers on a hundred-question exam
- loading minds with items that may or may not be useful
- sitting in a class for hours on end, week after week, year after year, to gain a degree
- knowing less than the teacher or professor knows about a subject
- entrance exams and aptitude tests
- all-nighters to cram for an exam
- most of the things that bother us while in college – abstract ideas that are difficult to connect with personal experiences

It is odd that action learning can be so well described by what it is not!

Many of our action learners are formulating the definition of what action learning means to them as they go through it. Interestingly enough, action learning seems to have a different meaning for each individual. It is very personal, and it turns out that this form of experiential learning is the way all of us learn best.

Since beginning action learning, I have had the strange feeling that I was embarking on a different way of learning. Action learners are free to learn their own way. Some learn best by reading, others by observing, some by discussing, some by listening, others by engaging themselves physically, others by watching another person, some simply seem to “know the answer” without any form of study, and still others learn by more ways than can be listed.

Action learners express what they have learned in different ways. Each action learner has a different story to tell. I have read dozens of action learning personal inventories, and each one shares how people are learning their way through life by employing action learning.

“A New Place to Learn”



The best place to learn leadership and management skills is on the job

Somehow, corporations have made it hard for learners. They may not do this on purpose, but by requiring a degree for entrance into a majority of jobs, many corporations hand learning over to established colleges and universities and assume that they will prepare these companies' workers for high performance on the job. However, one can look at the whole process of education differently. There is much to be said for learning on the job. After all, not everyone has access to a university setting. Action learning, because it allows people to work and gain an education at the same time, means that more people can acquire the degrees they need. There is a true “educational ceiling” that holds back learning progress in the traditional setting as surely as the “glass ceiling” holds back women and minorities. Can only a select few drink from the well of knowledge?

If learners could gain the knowledge of how to do their jobs while working, the way people learn would change drastically and artificial restrictions would vanish. History has taught us that apprentice programs were quite effective at teaching workers how to master their craft. We know that today it takes thousands of hours on the job (with or without a degree) to truly perform a job the way a company needs it to be performed. In Germany, the educational system is set up for on the job learning; in essence, many of their workers serve an apprenticeship. Can we do something like that in the United States?

I know that apprentice programs, for the most part, teach technical skills, but what about the leadership and management skills that the rest of us need? A short answer is that the best place to learn leadership and management skills is also on the job.

Typically, when we identify areas of development for our employees, we feel assured that the problem of training and educating will be handled by requiring a class somewhere off company property. Experience shows, however, that while performance can improve, the lessons learned by an employee elsewhere are often difficult to effectively employ in the work environment. Perhaps if the lessons were learned at

work, solving work-related problems with fellow workers who are also responsible for producing a sensible result, the desired behavior change would occur.

Evidence of the lack of learning of management and leadership principles can be found in the chaos created whenever a new management or leadership book is published. The learning herd charges off in the new direction determined by an author that has never visited their specific corporation or set of problems. The knowledge others generate can be usefully applied, but the best learning takes place within each team and is applied individually. Learning teams can best determine the application of the ideas authors create. While we certainly need stimulation from others offering fresh thinking in order to grow and prosper – the “outsider’s perspective” – in the end, we know how to run our particular businesses better than anyone else.

Action learning is not an easy path at first, yet it is an effective one. Instead of following in the footsteps of others, action learners are taught to blaze their own trail, and this paradigm shift requires quite a bit of effort. However, when teams go through the process of “forming, storming, norming and performing,” they grow stronger as a unit and as individuals. When they are tasked with creating solutions to problems, and then implement these solutions, they form a bond that cannot be made in any other way.

In conclusion, either learning within or outside of the company, the individual experiences different solutions. Surely there is a place for both types of learning. Effective leaders and teams must find their own way to solve problems. There are two ways to earn a degree today, the traditional and the action learning route. Both are effective and both are greatly needed!

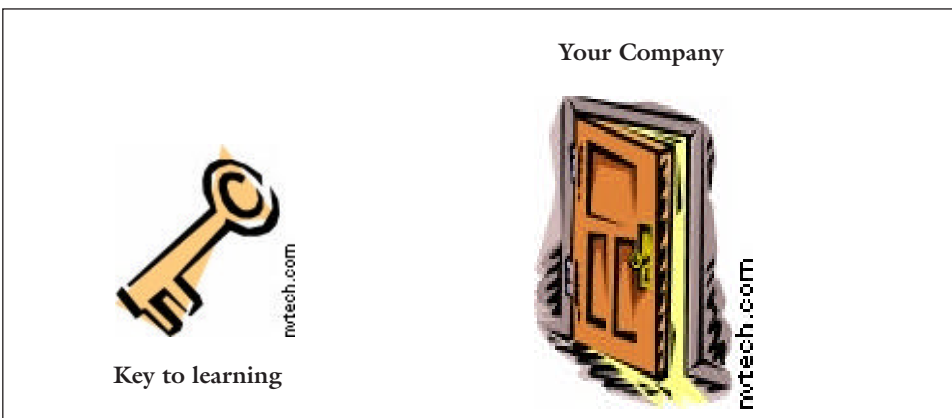
More Time for Learning...



The entrance requirement for the action learning process is to have a job with a company and a desire to learn and contribute

Times and circumstances have changed from when the original educational model was devised. Americans have called for educational reform for a long time; however, there has been little progress. A study was performed by a select group of educators in 1994 entitled “Prisoners of Time,” where it is mentioned that a cure for the American Public Educational System is to spend more time in school.

Take that inadequate amount of time children spend in school and then move into the college scene. Is there any improvement? Students spend even less time in a classroom and more time working on their own. Contrast this with the business world most of these students will be entering when they leave school, where employees spend forty or more hours each week in a structured, interactive setting, and one can quickly see the problem. These radical shifts between work and learning settings creates an artificial rift in how most people perceive and apply education. If we can somehow combine the intense personalized learning of a college environment with the structures of the typical work environment, there is a



good chance that we can improve the educational status and productivity of our workforce. With action learning, we can do this. Compared to the typical college or work environment, these combination worker/students use the action learning process to learn (and earn a degree) while solving real, work-related problems.

If we can unlock the potential of a majority of our employees the business environment will improve drastically. We have given lip service to the concept of unleashing our workers' minds but, to date, have done little to make the concept a reality. We do not seem to have a middle class of learners in our workforce. Generally, if the majority of our employees would follow simple instructions, we would be happy with the outcome. With action learning, they can not only learn to do the simple tasks we ask of them, but, through becoming personally attached and engaged, they are likely to take the initiative and improve on these tasks still further.

Most workers think they are finished with learning when they graduate from school (high school or college). Wouldn't it be great, though, if learning never stopped? The vast majority of workers have been denied the opportunity to learn in a formal way, and they have, in fact, learned in spite of this denial. Why not reward and further motivate them for this self-education? I was amazed recently at the knowledge and sophistication of many of our workers here at Sodexo. Some who push brooms at work appreciate and understand opera much better than I do, while others who make soup in gigantic pots for the cafeteria may be thinking about all sorts of interesting topics as they stir.

Action learning is the key to the door of knowledge that all may have – regardless of innate intelligence or socio-economic status. Interestingly enough, some have called it the “Democratization of Education.” Is equal opportunity learning for all imaginable? The entrance requirement for action learning is a job and a desire to learn and contribute. While the desire for one's children to have a “college education” was a dream for many, now workers can enter into the process of learning and earn a degree while working.

The challenge for companies of any size is to harness and grow the learning and achievement within their community. Those who take the opportunity to use the process of action learning have a decent shot at that learning and achievement target.

The Coach Doesn't Know...

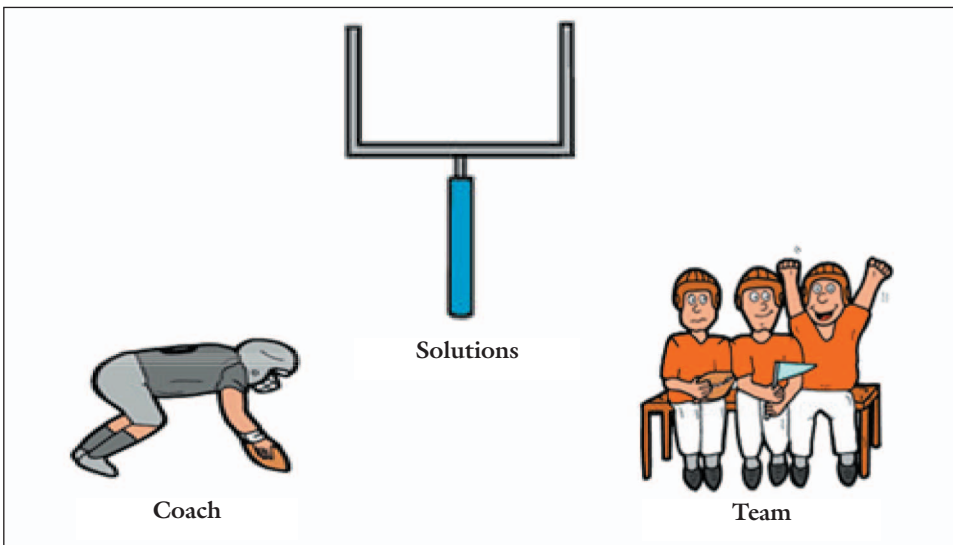


The coach knows and has the confidence that the team will find out what they need to know to solve the problem

Action learners, from day one, want to master the concepts of action learning. When I first started, I felt a tremendous need to be on top of all the twists and turns. As an action learning coach, however, I found that it is best if I do not know too much about the particular problem the group is trying to solve.

I have learned that in the paradigm of action learning, everyone needs to be knowledgeable of the steps required to be action learners. Action learning is an internal process where each learner must say, “I am in charge of my learning along with that of my team members. Further, we, as a team, are responsible to do what is necessary to learn how to solve our problems. We need to draft others – experts, customers, whomever we need to involve – to get the job done!”

In a way, we are all becoming action learners. Every day we learn, and we are going to get better as long as we continue learning. We are all lifelong learners.



I have found that a key point of learning is ownership of the process of learning. In the old paradigm, I, as the teacher, was the owner of knowledge: the students came to me for advice and guidance. Thus, when I was gone, the students had an excuse to not learn. What I realized in the end was that I was just setting them up to be dependent, rather than independent, thinkers. I have seen this addiction to guidance also with action learners at the beginning of their journey. Often, before taking personal responsibility for learning, these early action learners would call me, leave a message, and then stop working on the problem until I got back to advise them. I must confess I felt really important to the learners; that is, until I realized I was being more of a hindrance to their learning than a help! Finally, Richard Lenderman, taught me how to conduct myself when I get these calls – just hand the problem right back to the learner to solve.

When people approach a mature action learning coach, they are asked how the team is solving their problem; they are “questioned,” not simply advised or told what to do. After a while, learners start to catch on, and say something like, “I knew you were going to ask me more questions rather than provide solutions.” Realizing that they have slipped into the old paradigm of the teacher “knowing everything,” they are forced to think independently and begin to develop solutions on their own, without having to constantly refer to authority. Thus the coach is there not to serve as yet another crutch, but to liberate the individual from the constraints of dependent, rote thinking.

My colleague, Fred Lastar, put it this way, “The best coach does not know enough about the problem, let alone the solution, to help the learner. What the coach knows and has confidence in is that the team will find out what they need to know to solve the problem.” Old-style teachers would solve problems from their knowledge and experience, not the students, and thus rob learners of the opportunity to discover solutions for themselves, and possibly find even better answers.

Some advice to action learning coaches to help them relax a bit: ask a lot of questions about how each learner is finding solutions. This process of questioning yields high quality solutions. Stay in the questioning mode as long as you can – somewhere along the line the answer will occur.

Not Just for “Soft Skills”



Experienced members of the team can add to basic technical knowledge by adding in their own learning. The novice learner can ask questions that challenge the process and strengthen the learning that is taking place

The Journal of Technology Education discusses the learning of technical skills as “... an active, continuous process whereby the learner takes information from the environment and constructs personal interpretations and meaning based on prior knowledge and experience” (vonGlassersfeld, 1995). An individual’s personal interests and needs have a great influence on the learning process.

The process of action learning takes this into consideration. Learners must apply their own interests and abilities to the learning process. In fact, learning, even in technical areas, is subject to these personal reservoirs of knowledge and experience.

This is the way we have done it before

Why do we do things this way?

We did it this way because it worked!

Can this be changed?

Why are we doing this at all?

When we learn together in teams, knowledge is tested, discussed and rationalized at a higher level than if we simply approach individuals and try to pour knowledge into them.

When we are imparting technical knowledge to our learners, they are still on their own personal learning curve. Traditionally, learning technical skills was a matter of telling students how a process or procedure was carried out, and then checking to see that they duplicated our instructions before moving on. We would have been puzzled if we had later observed someone doing something different from our instructions.

Experienced members of a team can add to basic technical knowledge by adding their own learning. The novice can ask questions that challenge and eventually strengthen the process. These questions can range from something as simple as “Why do we do things this way?” to “Why are we doing this at all?” The ebb and flow of learning strengthens both the learner and their more experienced partner.

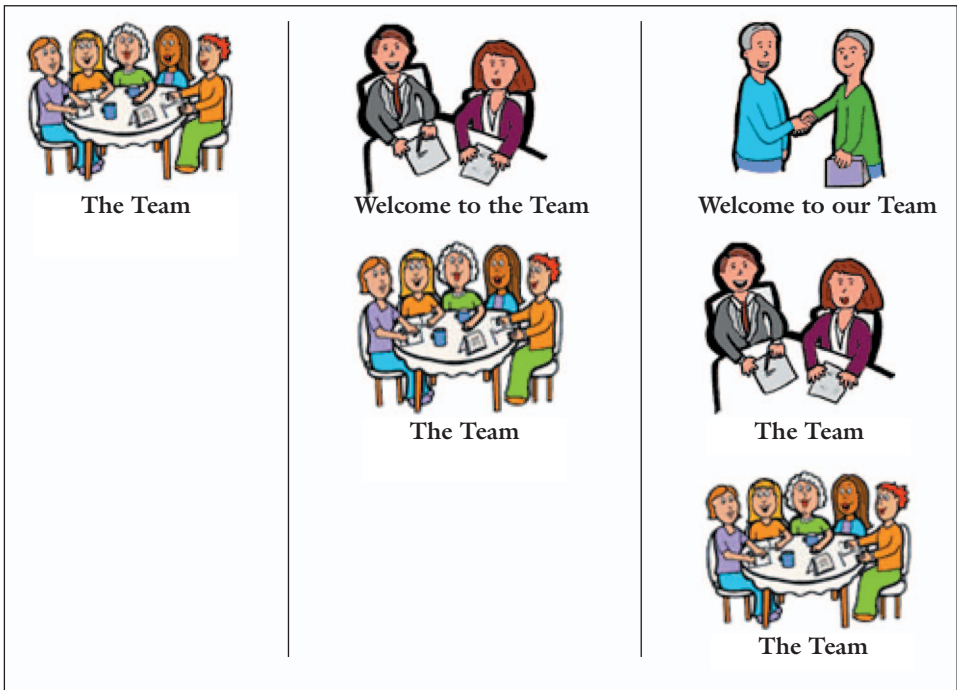
While technical learning may appear simple on the surface, new students have to participate in the process of synthesizing new concepts with their past experiences and knowledge to internalize the learning. In teams, we learn together. Each individual’s contribution counts toward a more solid learning foundation.

A Social Process



Part of the team experience is learning to bring old members and new members along

The Journal of Technology Education discusses the value of social interaction in the learning process. These experts say, “Learning is [seen] as a social phenomenon in which learning is mediated through social interactions among the members of the learning community as they engage in the learning activity” (Konold, 1995, Rogoff, 1990, Vygotsky, 1986). This could explain our common observation that the enthusiasm for learning in teams is higher than in other settings. There is more than just learning going on: teams are working together in a social situation, in a learning community. This interaction sparks more ideas and solutions, and is



perhaps why hopes that our employees can learn concepts alone online are often not fulfilled.

However, when someone does not interact well with a group, this could cause problems with the group learning and effectiveness. Bill (W. L.) Gore observed these behaviors many years ago and structured his company, W.L. Gore and Associates, in teams. The team could, if necessary, remove a member if that person could not function well with the others. This is a reality we occasionally face in our action learning teams.

One team that was having some problems drafted an expert to come and teach them how to work together more effectively. This lesson had great meaning because the team needed the knowledge and, perhaps more importantly, they requested it. There are many different experiences to draft into the fabric of learning. Each team will have different obstacles to surmount in order to be effective. The learning will stick when the team is part of the process. A team member may be able to become a functioning member of the team with a little learning. Part of the team experience is to bring everyone closer.

A talented individual in one of our pilot action learning teams had a strong enthusiasm for personal learning, yet, initially, had great difficulty working with other team members. This person was greatly respected by co-workers for being able to stand up to management. When employees needed strong support, they came to her. This conduct was productive under the old paradigm of how to deal with the “boss.” However, now that we have switched to a cooperative model with action learning, this aggressive behavior is no longer necessary and comes across as quite awkward and unproductive. Therefore, the problem is: how can this individual maintain her integrity yet not appear to be run over by the team? This is a problem for the action learning team to tackle. Perhaps the team can approach this from “the productivity of the team approach” or perhaps from another viewpoint that the team determines. In any case, if the team owns the problem, and is mature enough in their development to properly address it, they will succeed in solving it.

Group Dynamics: Assessing the Team and its Skills

Forming



Performing



Storming



Norming



Teams tend to go through four stages while working towards solving any major problem, namely: forming, storming, norming, and performing. This is the normal cycle in team development

As the action learning process in the Providence School District matures, the teams go through various stages of development. It is often helpful to study what others have observed in order to understand ourselves. Bruce Tuckman answers many of the concerns we have faced through his study on team development stages. He determined that teams tend to go through four stages while working towards solving any major problem, namely: “forming, storming, norming, and performing” (www.businessballs.com). This model has certainly helped us better understand the behaviors of our groups.

While reflecting on the most recent project carried out by the bachelor’s and master’s degree candidates, it has become quite apparent that we have held true to these stages. Our task was to reduce operating costs by \$1.2 million due to the financial problems of our client. Through the action learning process, we were able to reduce billing, increase profit margins, and still retain our employees. This process not only yielded wonderful results, but also served as a live case study of Tuckman’s principles.

Forming: This stage is characterized by a high dependence on the team leader(s) and a sense of confusion by members of the group. There are neither clear goals nor clearly defined responsibilities for team members. Action learning first breaks down these barriers as the group learns that the team leader, or learning coach, is not expected to give all the answers, but rather is supposed to answer questions with questions, forcing them to continue questioning. Experts, therefore, are not critical to the success of problem solving at this stage because teams often handle problems better than individuals.

The forming stage was the lengthiest of the four stages for our team. It took a full six months for us to truly form as a group. This is not surprising, since the most

natural response to solving the budget reduction issue was to include the input of all departments within the Sodexho Facilities Services team. This was the first time (to my knowledge) that all parties were solicited, not only to carry out decisions, but also to help identify the problem. Since this was not a natural progression, friction occurred while forming the team. The initial growth curve was lengthy, but invaluable.

Storming: Chaos best describes this stage as team members are usually struggling to determine how they will “complete the puzzle.” Each member is an integral piece. The possibility of success greatly diminishes if each piece is not perfectly placed. Groupings form as individual clusters of the puzzle are put together. We did not lose hope during this stage, but it was a phase true to the name storming.

Ron Coia, Business Manager for the Laborers International Union of North America, Local 226, amplified our perspective, proving to be an integral part as a non-Sodexho team member, by giving us the side of the labor unions and making suggestions to improve the process. Our general managers absence, due to medical problems, forced the action learning teams to form and work together without their natural leader. Not having the business coach present slowed the process down a bit but never stalled progress. The team had to provide its own leadership during this time, and they owned the problem and were determined to solve it properly.

A curious pattern formed with our general managers absence. The Sodexho School Services Maintenance Manager took a clear leadership role, communicating frequently with our general manager. Others within the group naturally led various stages of the process, such as the all-important communications piece, and the many (200+) task schedules for each new custodial position prepared. Our general manager continually gave feedback and new ideas to move the initiative forward. In the end, the team came together and resolved problems throughout the process.

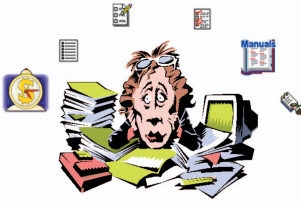
Norming: The stressful morning of January 31, 2003 finally arrived as the forty custodians whose positions were eliminated were called into the office to bid, by seniority, for the open positions. The team generally agreed upon the outcome after hours of deliberating and the roles were finally accepted. Minor gaps in communication began to surface and were resolved. Big decisions were agreed upon on an as needed basis. Our team began to normalize, and was able to agree on how to operate on this and future projects.

Performing: We started this phase later than expected. Generally, for a team to be entirely successful, the performing stage should begin before the deadline. Our deadline was January 31, 2003. We began performing that morning. Today, we are

still in the performing stage as we analyze what went well and how we are going to fix the various problems that have surfaced. The bachelors/masters students have grown together and spearheaded the custodial reorganization better than expected. However, we still need to iron out the intrapersonal problems that have surfaced and re-evaluate the successfulness of our team. This will prepare us for the future of our unit. If we cannot set the example amongst the managerial team, we certainly cannot expect the custodians to work through their day-to-day problems in their schools.

My suggestion to the team was that our upcoming action learning meetings focus on the deterioration of our team morale and begin to resolve intrapersonal problems. This shows that we have returned to the storming stage, a natural step in team development, as teams will cycle through all these stages over time. The hope is that they reach the performing stage quicker each time they cycle through. By working collectively towards this goal, our other daily problems will become increasingly easy to solve. My worries about the team were put to rest when I recognized that it was simply following the normal cycle of team development. Progress and learning are easily defined by growth that comes through forming, storming, norming and performing. We certainly have grown, individually and as a team, as a result of following the action learning process.

Timely Learning



Urgency-Addicted people do not take the time to organize their activities in such a way that they save enough time for the long-term benefit projects

It is difficult to break the addiction of solving the visible problem as quickly as possible. It is frustrating when you are sure you know what the problem is, but must spend time studying it to decide if there is an underlying problem. However, solving the obvious problem tends to preserve the status quo. Solving an underlying problem provides the satisfaction of true progress. – Cliff Howe, bachelor's of management degree candidate, Newark Campus

Dr. Stephen R. Covey introduces the concept of “Urgency Addiction” in his book *First Things First*. Employees with the highest scores on the “Urgency Addiction” test are addicted to the greatest extent. These people will do anything, at any time, at the expense of long-term improvement projects. This is the person who, when asked to do something, will do it immediately and leave whatever else was being worked on undone. Urgency addiction is particularly prominent in those who work in the service industry, as they are trained and constantly reinforced by job stresses to respond immediately.

This form of addiction is one that springs up in working with people and it comes up in action learning teams as well. Over the years I have tested hundreds of new employees at the management level, and found only a handful who were not urgency addicted. This presents quite a problem for action learners and those with whom they work.

The people who learn of their tendency towards urgency addiction and who have the maturity to tackle the problem do not lose any of their responsiveness. They can still act quickly to answer a call from a customer or attend to pressing needs. The distinguishing difference, however, is that they can take time out of their busy day for tasks that will benefit themselves and their employer in the long run.

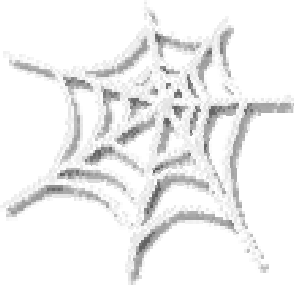
I have heard the excuses of the urgency-addicted person on an action learning team. For some reason, it is hard for them to set time aside for their personal growth and development. They do not take the time to find ways of organizing their schedules to save enough for long-term projects and goals.

Time can slip by quite fast when one is working hard. Before I know it some days, it is already lunchtime. Where did the time go? Surely, in a week or in the space of a month, I can set some time aside for long-term growth.

While sympathetic to the urgency-addicted team member, I cannot help but think it would be a win for them if they were to cure this addiction. Dr. Covey, recommends that about 70% of our time be spent on important, non-urgent work. Individuals who have successfully balanced their time can go home at the end of the day tired yet satisfied. Others who spend their day in solving constant crises are often just tired.

The first step towards a cure is to realize that one is urgency-addicted. The second step is to move towards developing and setting aside time for long-term goals. Long-term thinkers and problem solvers find ways to make time for their projects, focusing more on prevention and cure rather than constant activity. In the end, the ones with vision are the ones who move themselves and the company ahead.

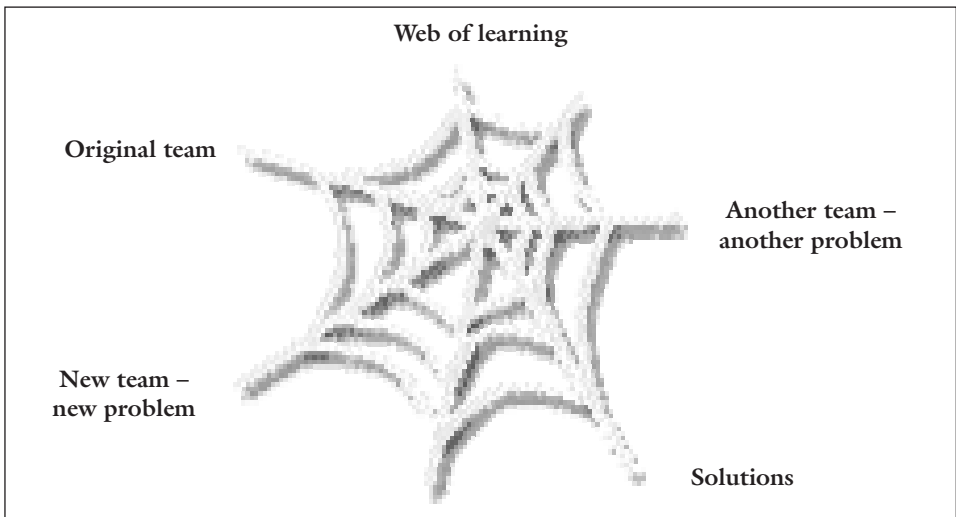
Web of Learning



The progression of learning teams who are growing the web of learning is boundless

Implementing action learning is a cascading process. As the plan is rolled out, employees become excited about their new role as learners and problem solvers. This enthusiasm creates the need to determine the appropriate scope and level of problem solving. At first, these teams often want to tackle projects that are not in the scope of their ability to manage or solve. Once this enthusiasm is contained and channeled, however, teams can proceed to solve equally difficult yet more appropriate problems.

Enthusiasm is contagious. When action learning teams share with others how they are solving complex and important problems through the process of action learning, others want to join in. Some are drafted into existing teams where they can be of great help. Others want to solve new problems that are not related to the existing team's focus, yet are nevertheless important to them and the organization. These people formed more action learning teams.



For the first time we can unite our leaders and workers through action learning teams and projects. This idea quickly takes hold, as workers at all levels became learners and problem solvers. It is impractical for someone who is physically and organizationally removed to impose a solution on a team, thus the problems are tailored to each level of the organization by the people working on that particular level. Individuals will most willingly solve their own problems and implement their own solutions, rather than those simply imposed on them by management.

Some quick learners, however, find successful ways to leverage their position in upper management all the way down to the hourly workers in their division. One example of this is Burt Streicher, a Vice President, who captures the vision of action learning. He has tied his learning, in a cascading fashion, through his chain of command.

Before we know it, the phenomenon spreads to others around the organization. A “learning web” is formed. Excited learners start talking to other problem solvers who are also learning from the process. The web then spreads to clients and customers, other sites, other divisions and even into the local community. There are numerous problems that need to be addressed in any company and community, and tremendous learning opportunities for those that solve them. The progression of learning teams that cultivate the web of learning is boundless.

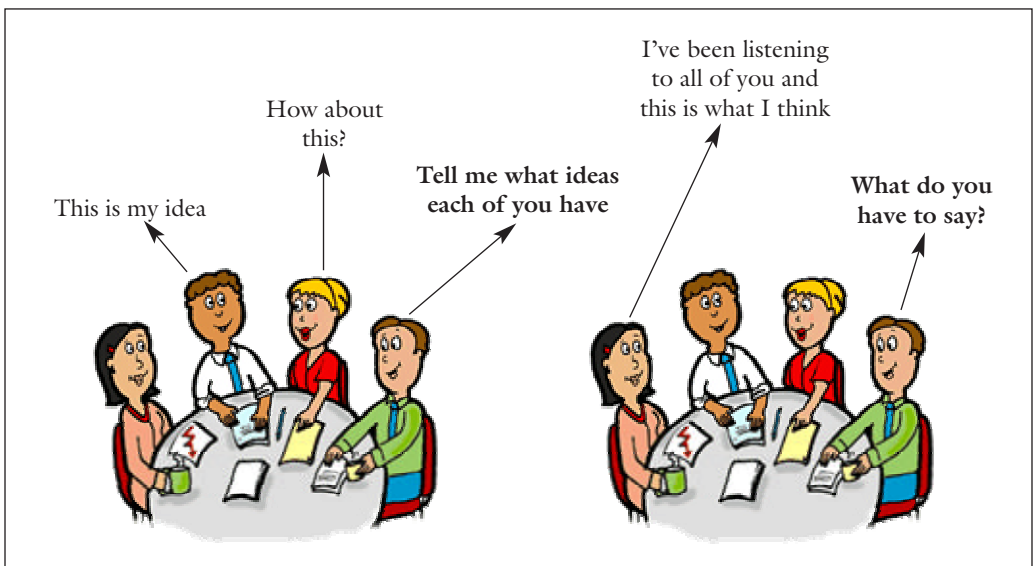
Taking the Time to Learn



The learning coach should make sure everyone gets a chance to participate, even the quiet ones. This is a sure way to get the best results from everyone

Action learning teams spend a great deal of time solving their problems. To some who may have been involved in other forms of work groups, the time spent by action learners on problem solving might seem a bit much. However, many committees I have been on have taken up a great amount of time compared to what they actually produced. The question is “How do I put together a group of people who are productive in the use of their time and who will produce a satisfactory result?”

Like any group, action learning teams take some time to start up. The difference between them and an ordinary work group is that, while a work team is usually specifically assembled to solve a particular problem or perform a specific task, action learning groups are formed mainly for the purpose of learning while simultaneously exploring options of improving the company, their co-workers, the community, or



solving any other problem they feel is worth pursuing. Ordinary work groups may meet, solve the problem they were assigned, and then get on with their work. Action learning teams, however, are supposed to find the problems they are supposed to solve, and then demonstrate not only a solution, but also how they learned from the whole process, thereby making them more effective problem solvers in the future. Problems are solved in both types of groups, but the results vary greatly. Due to their questioning approach, action learners consider more factors and solutions than the normal work group. The drive to ask questions is, overall, a better way to proceed than the drive simply for answers.

There is less pressure on the members of the action learning team when they ask questions for understanding or clarification. Somehow, the open inquiry of the team fosters a safe environment for the participants. The one with the problem may feel a bit of pressure when members ask questions like “Did you try this?” or others that may lead the ones with the problems to feel like they should have done more or performed better in their exploration of a solution. In the action learning process, this soon passes as each member, at some time, shares a problem. The questions, if phrased in a polite way, should promote learning and exploration rather than discomfort. Like any experience, the more a team works together on their problems, the smoother the group will operate.

Another benefit of the questioning approach is that each member of the team has the opportunity to ask questions. After all, we may quickly learn that maybe a quiet member has a question that leads to a solution. Action learners find ways to involve everyone, and learning coaches can help facilitate this by asking the group questions like “Is everybody getting their chance to participate?” That is a cue to make sure all are involved, and is a sure way to get the best results from the action learning team.

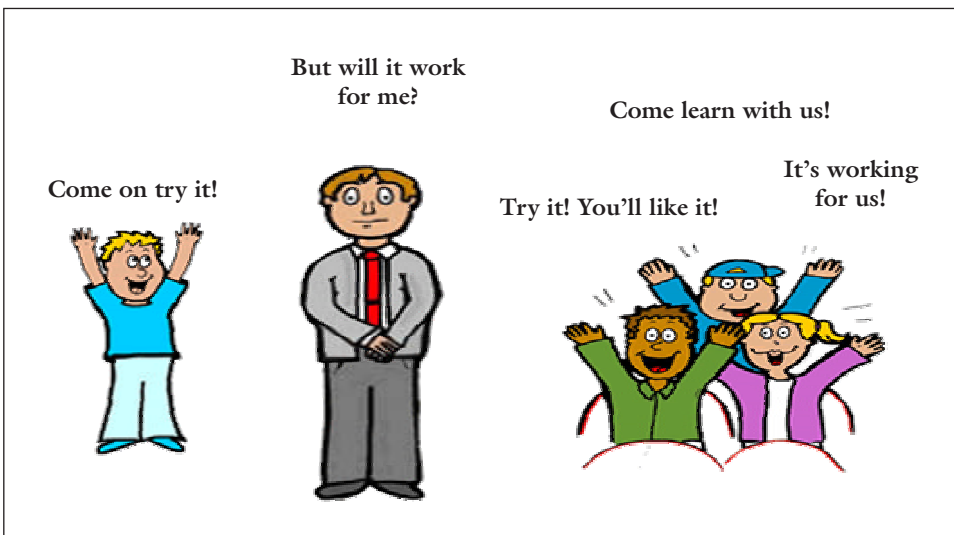
“Try It, You’ll Like It”



Participate in an action learning team, you will love the results. Those who have tried it like it

“Try it, you’ll like it!” I have to yield to the marketing people when they say things like this to me. How could I know what some things are like until I try them? I may be able to hypothesize about whether or not I will like the new chicken sandwich, but there is nothing like actually taking a bite! The same goes for action learning. The world is divided into two camps. One camp has tried it and the other has not. Interestingly, the vast majority of those who have tried it like it.

Michael Marquardt has written a wonderful book, *Action Learning in Action*, and I hand this book out to students of action learning as a text to help them in their quest for knowledge. Through this book, they can read and discover a strong basis for the process of action learning that spans educational theory, psychology, sociology, anthropology and other “-ologies.”



However, what really counts is when one participates in an action learning team. This is where the “rubber hits the road” for most people. Marquardt relates to this, as he always puts people into teams of action learners where they solve a problem after learning the basic steps.

A wise marketer once suggested to an inventor trying to sell a new tool to hardware stores that the person leave a sample with the store owner. This was after the inventor had tried unsuccessfully to talk the owner into ordering the tool for sale in the store. When the inventor went back a week later to collect the invention, the owner refused to return it. Instead, an order was placed.

Action learning is like this invention. Those who try it want to continue working on problems the action learning way. Everyone loves the results of action learning teams when they quantify their outcomes. They take the concept to heart and run with it. I suggest that the best way to appreciate action learning is to try it.

By the Book, NOT!

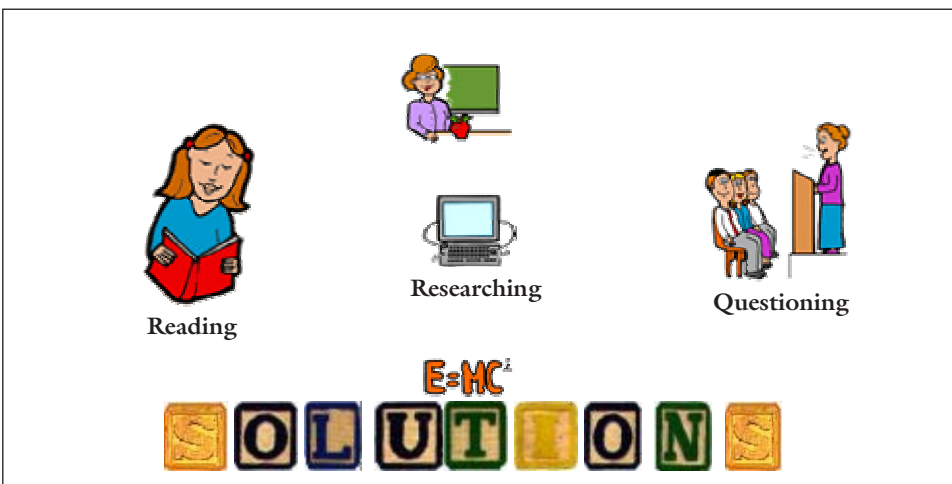


Action learning encourages creativity, learning and questioning. Let us not limit how we research and solve today’s problems

Every year there are many books written about how to manage and lead others. It seems that many people are sure that the “secret” is written within the very pages of the latest book. Can this be true? How have we gotten this far without the latest book? I suggest another paradigm. One that takes parts and pieces of many books and lines of thinking and then applies it all where it fits best.

As a concept, action learning is inclusive rather than exclusive. Team members are included in the problem-solving process from the beginning, instead of each being given a solution to execute in isolation. Instead of using people as tools, we teach our employees to search out and solve problems proactively. Thus the program comes to mean something personal and different to each individual.

In the past, most problem-solving groups were composed of like-minded people who quickly came to a solution. This is fine when problems are also simple.



However, in today's more complex, integrated world, a diverse workforce that finds multiple views to the same problem also finds solutions that are more well rounded and applicable. By examining problems through a multifaceted lens, businesses can better meet the diverse needs of their customers.

Looking at today's schools, we find that no matter which method of teaching is used, many children, no matter how hard we try, are failing. In the movie "To Sir With Love," Sidney Poitier uses his relationship skills, applies them to the most problematic individuals, and is able to crack a hard-boiled group of kids. Similarly, action learning teams are able to apply their individual and various skills to the process of problem solving. The teams search far and wide to reference their work. They invent their own unique way of solving problems while combining methods that others have tried before. They can apply total quality management tools to their work because they utilize a multitude of options not contained in any one text. The process liberates the learner from the formula derived by a teacher or textbook.

At first, action learners always seem to ask for permission to do things differently. When I respond that they are free to do whatever they choose, often they smile and act as if the answer is a surprise, a great surprise! On the other hand, action learning is not a chaotic free-for-all. The questioning process holds the discussions together even when it appears that things are not under control. The process encourages creativity, learning and questioning; however, it does need to be brought back to reasonable bounds once in awhile.

Action learners have an open field to solve the most complicated problems of today. Let us not limit how we research and solve these problems.

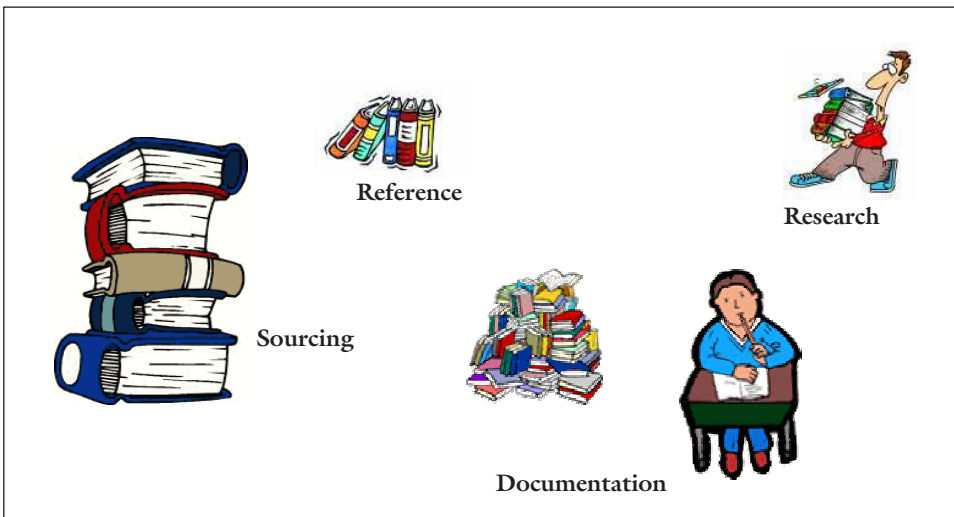
Learning's Basic Building Block



By holding our action learning team to rigorous academic research, we will yield better solutions as we grow

Learning to do research standards, is often difficult for beginning action learners. Most decisions made in the work environment are based on opinion, not research. Thus, a requirement of action learners is that they must show how they have researched other ways of solving the problem. This is a great concept borrowed from traditional academic study. We must build on a solid basis of knowledge in order for our solutions to be applicable. Research is the basis of this foundation.

When I was in college, I used to think that research was just a list of names and books included at the end of papers. My professors would not let me hand in a paper if it did not have these lists, or, if it did not, they would accept the paper and assign a less than flattering grade to it! Some professors were stuffy about the whole process and I did not appreciate their attitude at the time. What I have grown to like is the process of referencing my work against others' findings. What I study and



solve is much better for the tempering, contrasting and confirming process of referencing my work. Okay professor, I finally get the point you were trying to make.

When I read papers and reports that action learners have written to document their findings, I discover that they are much richer and well thought out compared to the work that I produced in college, and better than many of the papers I have read currently produced by college students. They can stand on the shoulders of those who came before them and reach greater heights. Action learners enhance their ideas by studying other ways of thinking. No one has thought out all the solutions for every problem, so action learners must not let this stifle their ability to operate.

Research is a way to find answers that have been underused in the past. Previously, researching was a tedious and drawn out process. Most people find library research difficult. Today, the Internet has been a blessing to these people using it for research purposes. The requirement that our learners research the work of others, and the knowledge gained from that research, has spread to many more people than traditionally would be involved. By holding our action learning teams to rigorous academic research standards, we yield better solutions as we grow.

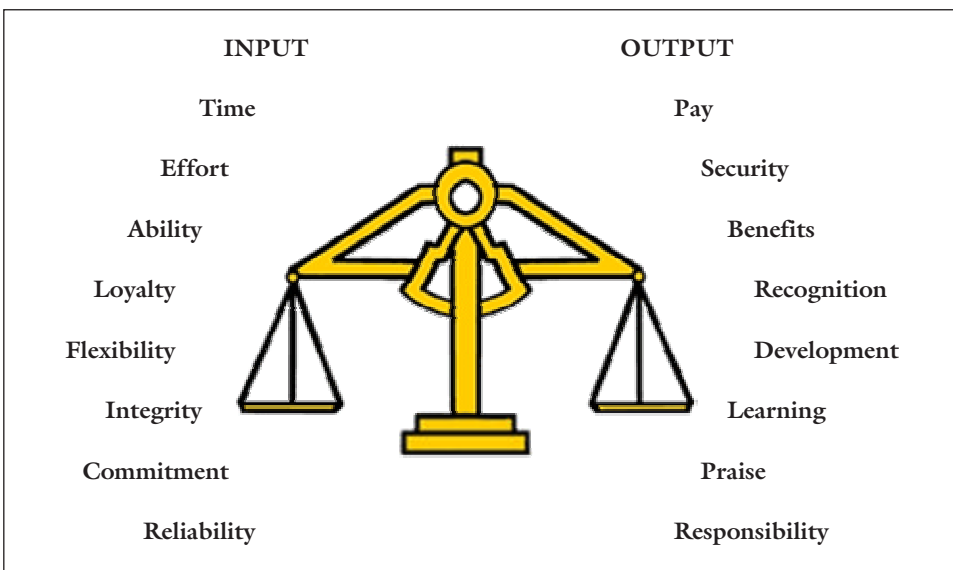
Job Satisfaction from Learning



A serious effort by management to involve employees in the action learning process can help keep the input-output scale in good balance through participation and progress made by team members

In 1983, J.S. Adams published what he called the “Adams’ Equity Theory – Job Motivation.” Many of us have struggled to find ways to motivate our employees to do a good job. Adams explains this concept in terms of a scale with inputs on one side and outputs on the other. If the inputs do not match the outputs, employees become “de-motivated.” Adams presents a good case for employers to consider – namely, a balance of inputs and outputs to keep the employee-employer relationship healthy.

Inputs are what employees put into their jobs. Such things as time, effort, ability, loyalty, tolerance, flexibility, integrity, commitment, reliability, heart and soul, and personal sacrifice are on this side of the scale. These are the attributes and personal investments that most companies desire in their employees.



The output side of the scale weighs what employees get in return from their job. These are things such as pay, bonuses, perks, benefits, security, recognition, interest, development, reputation, praise, responsibility, and enjoyment. Learning should also be added to this list since it is a real need of the employee and perhaps is even more important today than it was in Adams's day.

Adams said that if the scale is not balanced and employee inputs not fairly rewarded, they could become de-motivated, and subsequently reduce input or seek a job change. This fairness is based on the employee's perception of market norms.

Action learning teams tap the resources on the input side of Adams's model and enhance the outputs as well. People are generally happier and better balanced when they have some control over their environment, and being a participant in this process increases their satisfaction.

A serious effort by management to involve employees in the action learning process can help keep this scale in good balance. We cannot always increase pay, but we can add balance through participation and progress made by team members.