

## **Web of Degrees: Drafting Others into Your Learning Web**



**While the glue that holds these groups and webs together is a degree, the real adhesive is learning**

“Blame it on learning” is a powerful concept when it comes to involving others in the process of problem solving. W. Edwards Deming often talked about “willing workers” in his seminars. Many workers who are willing to work on problem solving are simply not asked to participate by their boss or their management cannot figure out how to involve them in the process. With action learning, I think that we have found a way to involve everyone.

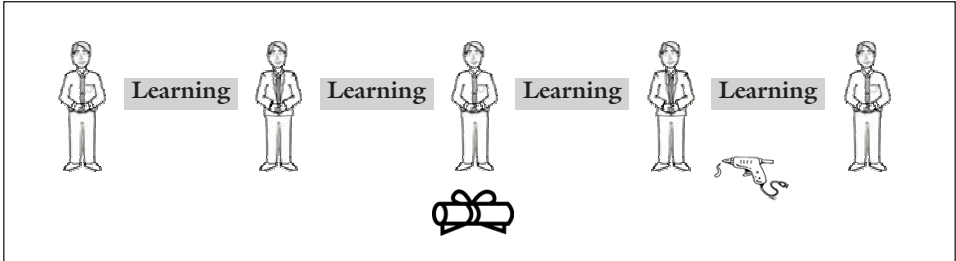
The degree program involving action learning helps us to harness the minds of the willing workers. As soon as someone signs up for the program, others are immediately interested and want to know how they can earn a degree at work too. During the pilot phase of the degree program, we had to limit the number of those that could participate. After all, we wanted to make sure the program would be successful before authorizing it for large numbers of learners.

We found that learners are linked to a common goal when they enroll as students. Barriers to cooperation between managers and hourly employees are minimized. People want to be engaged in the degree program and are willing to tackle complex problems to be a part of the program.

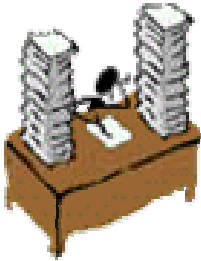
Our hope was to involve teams of peers and their bosses in solving problems that were instrumental in moving the company forward. That would have made us very happy. Instead, we found that the learning spread like wildfire from level-to-level in the company and united multiple layers of managers into a true learning web, rather than just a learning group. All the participants did was ask who could help them solve problems and the doors burst wide open with others who could be of assistance. The idea that one can “earn a degree” is what most impresses people when I explain the Sodexo degree program. While the glue that holds these groups and webs together certainly is the motivation to earn a degree, the true

adhesive is learning, as people discover a new approach to problem solving that helps them improve all facets of their own life as well as the lives of others.

The groups form and perform very well when given the opportunity. Our sincere hope is that once people experience the concept of action learning, they will continue their learning adventure even after they have finished earning their degree.



## Dynamic Outputs



### Improving outputs

In our programs recent Annual Accreditation Review with Dr. Richard Teare, I was given a few pointers on how to improve the already impressive outputs from Providence. I was reminded, however, that another one of our goals for the action learning program is to breed reflective practitioners. While our problem-solving skills have increased dramatically, we still have room for improvement with respect to taking a reflective approach to learning.

Teare shared his ideas of how we could considerably expand our horizons with respect to our outputs. Hopefully the following suggestions help your team as much as they have helped improve our team's outputs.

**1. Make sure your project takes action.**

If there is no projected action, the purpose of action learning has been defeated. Make sure that students are not simply studying, but studying in order to better take action.

**2. Let your students form their own action learning teams.**

Do not revert to the natural management tendency of assuming control and assigning teams. Allow them to make their own contacts and form their own teams. Your students will more readily engage in the process. Let them take ownership of the process.

**3. Stress the short and long-term implications of projects.**

The projects need completion dates. We need real business results accomplished in feasible timeframes. However, action learning is a process – a paradigm shift. We need to continue to engage in action learning and continue learning.

**4. Using other companies.**

At first, this idea struck me as being very odd. However, in practice, this works wonderfully! Dr. Teare stressed the necessity of involving other companies in our research, especially those who have nothing to do with the services we offer. They often give fresh perspectives to recurring problems we face and, as we have put this idea into practice, have strengthened our recent outputs.

**5. Use bullet points creatively to summarize main points.**

This breaks up the work and allows the reader to reflect on the important points that our students are stressing in their outputs. As a rule of thumb, include 3-4 bullet points per section.

**6. Have the challenge (thesis) statement mirrored in the conclusion.**

The old rule of thumb for writing is an effective way to capture the attention of readers at the beginning of the paper and help them reflect on what they have read at the end.

**7. Create practical action plans.**

The practicality of the outputs is critical to the overall success of the action learning degree program. If the projects are unattainable, the students will rapidly become disillusioned with the process and companies will have gained nothing for their time-investment.

## **Are You Ready for the Action Learning Process at Your Place?**



There is a time for everything. No matter how much one may want to do something, if the timing is not right, the efforts will be for naught. The same goes for the action learning process. There are several items to consider before beginning action learning:

- Do you, your organization and your people want or need a fully accredited college degree that certifies your professional achievement and credentials?
- Are you faced with problems that have been either too complex or hard to get your team engaged in solving?
- Do you believe that learning and working in teams is a better way to solve problems than having one person do it alone?
- Do you believe that solving problems directly at work is better than trying to apply knowledge from case studies?
- Is it appealing to you, or your employees, to earn a degree at work during normal working hours and have company problems solved simultaneously?

Once they understand the process, action learning teams can solve these issues as they go along, so do not let these things stop you! The process is as rewarding as the amount of effort put into it, plus many avenues of learning open up as a result of personal learning.

## Why Do Employees Learn Best at Work?



**Regardless of the rank held in a company, every employee can contribute. Learning is not restricted to just managers**

It seems silly now, but there was a time when I worried about engaging hourly associates in the action learning process. Now I have no doubt, as I have found that sometimes the most enthusiastic action learners are the ones on the “bottom rung” of our company. Problem solving truly is for everyone.

The power of the process of action learning is rooted in the idea that managers alone cannot solve all of the company’s problems. When managers feel they must go it alone, they alienate the rest of the company’s workers, and often end up only employing shortsighted or temporary fixes that only postpone proper solutions. Our clients expect us to be on top of all problems and even to prevent problems before they occur. Many problems cannot be solved by just the “upper tier” of management. Regardless of the rank held in a company, every employee can contribute. Learning and problem solving is not restricted to just managers.

Traditionally, many educators like to present easy problems for students and then progressively have them solve more difficult problems. In an action learning setting, however, the problems are real, and need to be solved no matter how complex. This requires a great amount of confidence in the action learner’s ability to figure out solutions, as there are no “practice problems.” No matter how complex, the team is tasked with finding a solution. Often problems may seem too complex to solve at first; however, in time, the team learns to better understand the problem and solves it. There is great power in the action learning process when the problems dealt with are real, and where solving them will make a difference to the company.

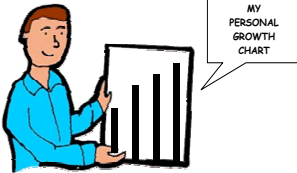
At the heart of action learning is the idea that people want to solve problems that will add meaning to their lives. Most people would not want to solve a problem that will not move them closer to their goals. Solving real problems that moves the learner to a higher level of personal satisfaction is a powerful concept.

Most managers and nearly all employees learn best at work because they are engaged in a process that yields tangible results. I know that I personally have endured classes where I have had to exercise a great amount of energy on solving case studies that really did not solve any problems that were real to me at the time. In the action learning arena, the chances of this happening are slim. Since starting action learning, I have not heard anyone complain about solving reality-based problems. They love it!



*Associate degree graduates showing the training videos created as part of their degree.*

## **Catching It from Others: Behavioral Changes in Small Teams**



**The personal growth of members of the action learning team is as important as any of the other products of action learning**

Often we stress the importance of how action learning is a way for companies to solve problems. But how about the personal learning part? When the problems are solved, what remains? There is a rich and diverse output recorded in each solution that is the reflection of individual growth.

The personal growth of the members of the team is as great as any of the other products of action learning, and is not easily duplicated by traditional methods of learning. Members of our action learning teams have been able to grow intellectually as well as emotionally because they, like the company, also have a tangible return for their efforts – ostensibly a degree, but also the intangible yet priceless satisfaction of having achieved a real solution to a real problem. In addition to this morale-boosting achievement, there are also many smaller, personalized victories that go with the process. For instance, I have seen several individuals that did not have the social skills necessary to work in a team overcome this handicap and function as full-fledged team members. I can think of one individual in particular who is quite bright in terms of problem solving, yet often had difficulty communicating her brilliant ideas due to her abrasive personality. She had to learn to contribute to the process and do so in such a way that did not offend her team members. She had to learn to get along with others before her ideas would be accepted by them. I have seen her grow tremendously in an area that previously gave her a lot of trouble.

We know that we cannot solve our interpersonal problems unless we work with the person with whom we have the problem. It is common among many people today to talk about others when they are not in earshot rather than confront them. We have found that individuals pick up social interaction skills as a part of being in an action learning group. This helps to close the interpersonal gaps that are natural in any environment, including the work one. The process of asking questions rather than dictating answers is a preferred way to handle problem-solving tasks, as it



makes it possible to civilly handle potentially explosive situations without causing offence. Questions cause learning and teach our team members to work together more effectively. The growth produced in the individual is more than a byproduct; it is a part of the process itself.

## Attitude



**Action learning is what you make of it. Nobody can do it for you, but they can do it with you**

There is a certain attitude that I have detected in our action learners. I recently interviewed four from the Newark Campus and was pleased to conduct an “attitude check” of their learning. When I say attitude, I mean the mental approach that team members take towards their action learning projects.

I asked, “How do you think you have changed since the beginning of the action learning process?” The answers flowed for a full hour. If asked to provide a sentence or two to describe what I heard, I would confidently say that our learners have taken charge of their destiny – personally and professionally. Some comments that display their growth:

“When we are part of groups that are not action learning, we, in a sense, witness our own past behavior. It is rewarding to see how we have grown by comparison. All we have to do is be patient with others at least as much as our coaches were patient with us. When we meet, the action learners are not the ones who are complaining about how hard things are to get done.”

“The first couple of times we mentioned action learning to others, they rolled their eyes as if to say, ‘Like that is going to work around here?’ They thought I was crazy! It was not long before they listened to us and started to believe that action learning works.”

“I learned that it is better to start with myself and to change my own attitude towards others rather than expecting them to change. Taking a different approach or outlook can help get things done.”

“We had to change from asking, ‘What are **they** going to do?’ to ‘What are **we** going to do?’ and, finally, to ‘What am **I** going to do?’ One person can make a difference, and then influence the attitudes and actions of others by their behavior.”



“Before action learning teams, I did not know how to approach a boss. We planned out how to approach our bosses in team meetings and what we decided to do worked. At first, we had to work harder at approaching our boss, but now he approaches us!”

One group had this to say about how they learned to deal better with bosses: “When I was new here I was advised to wait until the company changed bosses – just wait out any problems. That is not a very effective way of handling someone.” “We had to adjust our presentations to the intended audience in order to get the point across, whether it was our boss or not.” “We speak confidently and comfortably with senior members of Sodexho. We feel that we can now influence decisions and that we are listened to.”

“We had a quiet person in our group. By being open and welcoming, we learned that she had a great deal to offer to the team. Because we followed the process of inclusion, she has become a major power player in our problem solving.” The response of the now included person: “The process made it possible for the knowledge to be just pulled out of me. Before, I had always been there but I did not speak up as much.”

Another group has this to say about the changes they helped initiate: “We have seen changes in us and our department.” “People can change so much after learning to deal effectively with each other.” “We had to step out of our comfort level.” “We did not have to change too many things to do well. When we figured it all out, then we did great!”

Sometimes, groups feel fatigued after their meetings, some explanations for this: “At first I was mentally drained when attending these team meetings. When it was over, it was a good kind of feeling because we accomplished a great deal.” “We came back the next day and were ready to tackle the hard issues with new strength.”

The apathy or hostility of others can sometimes affect us. Some who encountered difficulties in this area had this to say: “Action learning ‘is what it is.’ It is what you

make of it. Nobody can do it for you, but they can do it with you!” “We got shot down a couple of times by those who were negative, but it did not stop us.” “We hit rocks in the road. We needed to take control of our learning. We worked on our circle of influence rather than concentrating on our circle of concern. That helped a great deal on keeping us focused.”

“In the beginning, we agreed on timelines and then left the meeting and did our own thing. Eventually, we learned it was best to work together. Over time, we learned to depend on each other and to come back together when we got off track. We work more as a team today and do not isolate ourselves. We have learned how to positively influence each other.”

“What we learned here trickles into our personal life as well. We are now personally more effective outside of work too.”

“We learned that we are not perfect. We admitted that we were not perfect and that it is nobody’s ‘fault’ that we are not perfect. I learned that often I have to deal with my personal limitations and learn how to overcome them.”

I hope that each reader of this book has a chance to interview a member of an action learning team. I found myself laughing with joy at how these action learners know so much about life and getting things done.

## The Cycle of Learning



**This cycle refers to how we process information before we are able to actually tackle the problems at hand**

Many of life's journeys can best be described as cycles. Birth-to-death is one such cycle that we are able to comprehend as universal. Learning groups go through cycles as well. The cycles that the groups go through are different for each output and group but there are some portions of the cycle that are common to all. The cycle I refer to is different from the “forming, storming, norming and performing” lessons contained in this book. The cycle refers to how we process information before we are able to actually tackle the problems at hand.

This cycle goes something like this:

1. The learner is presented with a problem to solve.
2. The individual quickly decides that the problem is too big to solve. Often the learner is overwhelmed. I call this the “no light at the end of the tunnel” period.
3. The learner puts the problem aside overnight or for a period of time.
4. The person calms down about how hard the problem is and finds ways to begin to tackle it. I call this the “light at the end of the tunnel” stage where the learner figures out that others can be involved, and with their additional efforts they may be able to solve it.
5. The individual engages in solving the problem with others.
6. Satisfaction with having solved the problem increases self-confidence and ability to work with others.
7. The cycle begins all over again.

I have seen this happen countless times in our action learning teams. At first, team members sometimes feel overwhelmed with the difficulty of the problem to be solved; they worry that they have taken on more than they can handle. Somehow – usually with a little time and space away from the problem – the members put their

subconscious and conscious minds to solving the problem at hand. When they get together as a group, ideas flow and optimism that the team can perform grows.

I have seen the learning cycle spin around many times this year. That is why I am not surprised at how our people work through problems. They have learned not to panic or be overwhelmed, which sometimes happened before. They have learned that they will have periods of doubt and worry and they learn how to work through these things together.

When our action learners talk about their role of mentoring the next group, they say that they would not take away the growing pains, as it would just cut short the growth curve that comes from overcoming hard-to-solve problems. They are content to move on to being the coaches that ask the questions and help their fellow learners move forward.



*Cake for the Class of 2003*

## **View from across the Sea**



**They listen and ask questions about how we have grown our knowledge of action learning**

I write this lesson from across the sea in Buckingham, England. On a quarterly basis, I report the progress of our action learning degree program to the International Management Center's leadership team, this time at the headquarters of the world's largest action learning group.

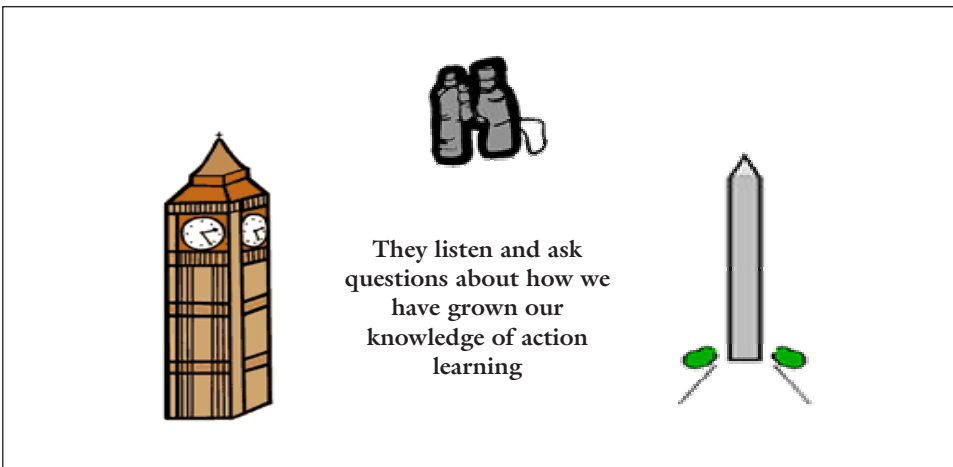
There are heroes of action learning here in Buckingham who listen to our progress and support our efforts as relatively new action learners. People such as Dr. Gordon Prestoungrange, Dr. Charles Margerison, Dr. Richard Teare, and Dr. Eric Sandelands have all been working with action learning for many years, some as far back as 1972. In 2003, the father of action learning, Dr. Reg Revans, passed on, but his quest for action learning continues with us all.

Action learners are a humble bunch. Their interest is not in telling how many roads they have traveled in becoming action learners or in how many times they have sought to explain their passion for action learning to those who would listen. (I do hope that if you ever have the chance to meet these heroes that you ask them to tell a tale or two about how they have tried to explain action learning to traditional educators). Instead of telling their tales, they are all attending every word of our story of the action learning degree program at Sodexho. They are thrilled to hear of how our associate's degree candidates have made twelve-point business plans, how our bachelor's degree candidates have saved Sodexho over \$90,000 on their first output, and of how another group was able to cut their operating budget by over a million dollars while providing quality service to both customers and the community. They are thrilled at the leadership experience and growth of our master's degree candidates as they have formed and lead teams of Sodexho employees to tackle projects that move Sodexho forward at a division or company level.

This past year has been an exciting one for the action learning community. Those of us with a year's worth of action learning projects under our belt have stood tall beside those who have been our idols. It is a strange turn of events for us to realize that we are heroes as well!

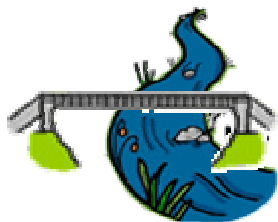
I passed along copies of the draft of this book to our colleagues at the International Management Center and received overwhelming support for the concept of capturing our learning in short and informal stories of our success at Sodexho. Each one wants a copy of the book just as much as our own learners want to read of their triumphs. I know, though, that we can never copy all the stories and learning of our students. Thankfully, there is a record of each individual's personal learning and a record of how these dedicated learners moved Sodexho further along in the quest for keeping our clients at the center of everything we do. Each of these personal learnings are as large and interesting as any of the chapters of this book.

I am proud to be a part of what has been done here over the past year. I know that when we started our journey, none of us quite knew where we would end up. We wanted to learn and we were confident that the people we worked with and the problems we solved were our "teachers." Others have asked to join in the process next year and we anxiously await the learning and progress these new students will produce. They will each have their own stories to tell and their own problems to solve. Certainly, they will emerge from this learning journey wiser and more mature. Our learners will practice what they have learned as action learners for the rest of their careers.





## **Building Strategic Partnerships**



**Strategic partnerships are imperative to the successfulness of the action learning degree program**

Have you ever noticed that the most powerful lessons learned tend to be those that seem to just fall out of the sky? They are the unplanned; the lessons that seem to make your heart pound a thousand times per minute – the things that leave you smiling for days. So how do you take these lessons and convert them into strategic partnerships? Here is an example:

Recently, I had lunch with the President of the Providence School Board, which holds our custodial contract with the city of Providence. She asked about my background and I mentioned that I was a graduate of Brigham Young University with a degree in Latin American studies. Generally speaking, I am asked why I chose this major instead of something useful, such as Business Management or Accounting. However, she did not ask this question.

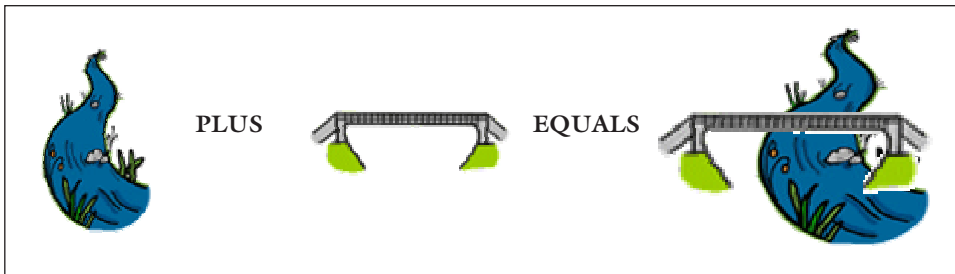
She just so happens to be from Guatemala. She recently finished her master's degree studies at Brown University in Latin American studies. I suppose that makes two of us who have useless degrees, or does it?

The demographics of Providence have changed radically over the last few decades. There has been a great influx of Latin Americans from the Caribbean and Central and South American countries, including Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Peru, Columbia, etc. This has created a communications nightmare in many of our schools, since the majority of our English-speaking custodians neither speak nor understand Spanish, and vice-versa. Moreover, there tends to be a general lack of respect of different cultures, even among the different Latin American countries. Unfortunately, with the accelerated rate of the degree program this year, we were unable to attack these issues.

As we debated these points and various strategies, we decided that the School Board President could give a series of seminars addressing these issues, and effectively become part of our action learning team for next year. She also was

excited at the opportunity to involve some of her co-workers in the degree program. She sees the value of extending this opportunity to the community as well, involving parents and children to solve community and Sodexo problems. What a powerful link!

Strategic partnerships are imperative to the success of the action learning degree program. Simply build upon commonalities and the partnerships will fall into place.



## **Problems with Different Groups and Outputs**



**The successful employees of any company often know when and where they can make alterations to procedures to better meet the customer's needs**

Action learners have been able to identify a wide variety of solutions to problems they are exposed to. This has turned out to be an advantage for these groups because they are able to solve problems at their particular level in the company. Action learners are able to practice divergent thinking in their problem-solving sessions. This allows them to solve specific problems for their customers that best suit the particular circumstances at the time. This system of thinking stands in stark contrast to that of many companies.

Structures are great to have and form the backbone of any organization. Hierarchical thinking tells our employees how the company wants things done. Manuals are written and classes are taught that teach new employees the patterns of management and the tools available to carry out business on a daily basis.

Action learning deals with the additional problems that do not have a solution readily available from a classroom experience or a manual. I have heard it said that managers who fail generally do so for two reasons. Either they do not have the ability to deal effectively with others, or they lack the ability to harness the resources at hand. While we try to write our manuals and construct our classroom experiences in such a way that we prepare our employees in the best manner possible, in the end, we are not able to anticipate every situation they will encounter.

What we have done with our action learners is to harness them to a process that will help them through the situations that we cannot anticipate. An added benefit from the process of engaging managers with their teams is that the team is now more aware of opportunities for improvement and more willing than ever to take charge of solutions. In this way, managers and workers are now able to adapt and be flexible to the ultimate needs of customers. Many of us have gone through the experience of having been told by customer service representatives that the

“system” or the computer will not allow them to assist us. It is a good excuse some employees use when the customer’s request is outside of what is convenient for them. Some even stand so adamantly behind these “rules” that they cannot even move on to another task until everything is followed as ordered. The problem lies squarely on the client at this point. As a customer, I have trouble with “rules” when they seem to only limit the service I would like to receive. It is like visiting the Motor Vehicle Administration of your state. They have rules and that is it.

When we can adjust the rules in order to solve a customer’s problem, the company as well as the client wins. The successful employees of any company often know when and where they can make alterations to procedures to meet the needs of customers. One can test how flexible a company is by putting pressure on it when one feels that the rules are not fair or helpful to the consumer. The best companies adapt.

While rules act as guidelines, people need to have the ability to meet and solve customer problems that cannot be anticipated before the problem presents itself. If we can work together with our client to solve problems in a satisfactory manner, we will be ahead of our competition in pleasing our customer. Action learning teams can be utilized to help us adapt to meet customer needs.

## Engage Management in Problem Solving



**Our teams have learned to write comprehensive executive briefings for their leader whenever they have information to share**

Often managers who delegate problem-solving tasks to groups either forget about them or are too busy to stay involved in the process. While the groups may feel empowered, they need a learning coach that is in a leadership position to provide realistic guidelines and validate their results. Without this support, any solution is harder to implement, and maybe even impossible to execute.

We have required our action learning teams to have a learning coach for this very reason. While the learning coach does not have to attend every action learning meeting, they have to maintain contact with their group on a regular basis. If the learning coach can teach the action learning team the proper way to present their findings and instruct them in how to involve appropriate people for help, the group will develop a good solution. Often, when the appropriate people are not informed and involved, high-quality solutions are lost in the confusion.

I have watched the action learning teams in Newark and Providence struggle with this issue. It is instructive to realize that some workers feel that no matter what they say or come up with as solutions, they will not be listened to. Since our teams have been required to be connected above and below their level in the company, employees' faith in management has improved. Executives who have worked with these teams have told me that they are amazed at how sharp they are and how well thought out and comprehensive their work outputs are. Many executives are used to making major decisions for the company themselves, and then simply informing workers of how they would like things to be done. When teams are engaged, the likelihood of a collaborative effort between senior leadership and their teams is greater.

Our teams have also learned to write comprehensive executive briefings for their leader whenever they have information to share. These reports have been well received. Instead of presenting a large document to an executive, the briefing paper is a succinct summary supported by the most crucial evidence. Executives love this

approach because they have little time to study a large document in depth to glean out the important information needed to make a decision.

Our teams have learned that the audience for their outputs is just as important as the documents themselves. Team members say things like, “Yes, that is a great conclusion, but how do we get the point across to our leadership?” This applies to our customers as well. There is great value in the process of inclusion. If you substitute the customer or client with the senior manager, there is a parallel lesson that can be learned that helps meet their needs too.

Once our learners figured out that their manager’s involvement was a necessary ingredient of success, they unlocked a way of improving their thinking and performance. When we involve our leadership or customers in a proper solution, everybody wins.

## Output-Based Work Teams



**While it is important to have quality inputs, the focus is on the output, as this allows the learners to go to whatever resource they feel will help them best produce a quality output**

Output-based work is becoming popular. Recently, the government has required that governmental agencies move to output-based measures. If a project does not produce a clear and worthwhile output, the agency must account for how they did spend their resources. It makes perfect sense to most people that if they are to put forth effort there has to be some outcome! While the requirement of outputs is obvious, there are parts of business and government that have yet to get the message.

Sodexo is a company that understands outputs. The efforts of the company are directed towards properly serving customers (chapter 54, “Problems with Different Groups and Outputs,” covers the drive for customer satisfaction). This chapter is about the drive for clear outputs.

Our action learning-based degree program is evaluated on outputs. This means that, while there are a variety of possible “inputs,” the “outputs” are what is required. What we expect is for the individuals and teams to produce a well thought out and practical product. While it is important to have quality inputs, the focus is on the output. This allows the learner to go to whatever resource they feel will help them best produce a quality output. At first, some worry that the inputs may be shallow or simply misleading. Surely, this is a worry for any input in any organization. We have addressed this issue by insisting that the learner have a learning coach that holds the individual and group to a standard of inputs that produce a quality output. Along with the assistance of the coach, the teams have an action learning process coach, called a (district) set advisor, who teaches the group to ask the proper questions that lead to high quality inputs and outputs.

At some point, we have all wasted time on business or personal projects that do not produce outputs. In action learning, the set advisor guides the process in order to minimize the chance of a useless output being produced. Certainly, there are times

when action learning teams do not produce acceptable outputs, but the entire process is designed to facilitate production and, as a result, failures become stepping stones to future solutions rather than walls barring progress. Dr. Michael Marquardt recently told a seminar that he has never seen a group fail at the process of action learning. When the members hit a spot where they get stuck, they figure their way out.

A friend once told me that if a problem is too big to solve, than I have to develop my talents to exceed the problem. Action learning groups constantly have to expand their investigations, possible solutions, and personal learning to meet the challenges they face.

I have never seen an action learning team fail. I have seen them suffer a bit when they realized that many tasks were harder and more complex than they anticipated. However, they eventually work their way out of the discomfort and move on to outputs that have meaning.

We are proud to be partners with Revans University and the DETC (Distance Education and Training Commission), which is the agency that accredits our work with the approval of the US Department of Education. Michael Lambert, Executive Director of the DETC, has commended our efforts to be outcome based in our work in the degree programs as well as the problem-solving groups. He recognizes the value and insight engaged in our work here at Sodexho.



## It Is All About the Relationships



**I have seen cooperation develop in our action learning teams as they learn to trust and support the efforts of the other members of their team**

“It is all about the relationships.” The classic definition of the job of a manager is one who gets things done **through others**. I would like to amend that a bit to say that a manager is one who gets things done **with others**. The difference is not as subtle as most managers think. The first implies that managers somehow find ways to get others to do things they wish to have accomplished, while the other implies that through collaboration and cooperation, tasks gets done by both managers and their teams.

For many years I tried desperately to find ways to motivate my employees to do a good job and take charge of their work through dedicated service. This was easier said than done. I am ashamed to admit it, but often, before I matured as a manager, it required me to set a structure around the employee that I felt would make it almost impossible to fail. I also have to admit that, at one time, I thought that I knew more about almost anything than my employees. How naïve I was.

Really, the way things get done today is through the relationships established with the people who work with me. Relationships play a key role in whether an employee really wants to do something. If the rapport is strong, there is a good chance the task will be accomplished cooperatively. In the past, when this failed, I had to document non-compliance and try to get the under-performing employee out of the system.

When I was in the Army a drill sergeant told me “You can not push a rope.” I think that he was trying to tell me that it is futile to try to push someone that does not want to be pushed. If you want a rope to move, you have to pull it! Now that implies the ability to lead in the proper direction and it implies that the rope is somehow more cooperative when you pull it.

I know that true managers and leaders have found ways to gain the cooperation of their workers. I have seen this cooperation develop in our action learning teams as they learn to trust and support the efforts of the other members of their team. Certainly, this is one marvelous route to developing teamwork. Relationships are developed when we work closely together toward a common goal. It is all about the relationships if we are in this for the long run. Otherwise, the lack of healthy interactions will pull down any team. Yes, it is all about the relationships!



*Family, friends and fellow classmates look at the work accomplished by the graduates at the showcase of achievement.*

## **Selling Your Style of Learning to Your Employer**



**Several of our degree students have said that they learn best when they are part of a group and can freely exchange ideas**

Our action learners tell me that the process of working in action learning teams has proved to them that Sodexho respects the way they learn. They appreciate that they can function in their comfortable learning style in order to be a productive member of the team.

Educators have long realized that individuals have many different types of learning styles. Rather than discussing all the types, let us consider why our action learning members feel that Sodexho respects their learning styles. In true output style, let us look at the effects of recognizing the style of an active learner.

Several of our degree students have said that they learn best when they are part of a group and can freely exchange ideas. This gives them a chance to spar with others when ideas are discussed, and to feel accepted for their input to problem solving. Most workers in the hospitality field are more likely to actively solve a problem than to sit and think about things on their own. They are just as smart as any other person, but they are more likely to take action quickly and gain personal satisfaction from being able to solve problems by actively participating in the process.

Many action learners are able to sit down for long periods of time when they are actively engaged in solving problems. If you want to see them squirm, try to get them to sit and listen to someone lecture for an hour or so. Personally, I have problems staying awake when I am not actively engaged in an activity. I have observed that many of our action learners suffer the same fate. The give and take of our action learning sessions fosters an atmosphere of action and engagement. This is just what is needed for over 80% of our learners who prefer the active style of learning. We have given our degree candidates a learning styles questionnaire and found out this fact. The other 20% would prefer to quietly contemplate their questions and answers. Accordingly, we make sure that both the noisy and quiet

members of an action learning team have a chance to speak up and share their views. This certainly is the responsibility of the team and the set advisor (learning coach).

When one knows all the factors needed to be considered for success in any enterprise, the chance for success is greatly increased. For us, recognizing and working with the learning styles of our employees and team members is paying off quite well. Additionally, nobody falls asleep during an action learning session!



*Looking at the work accomplished by the graduates at the showcase of achievement*

## Look Back at Your Progress



**One of the clearest messages that I have identified is that our graduates can look back on their progress over the past year and discover that they have grown quite a bit personally and professionally**

All that I remember from my high school English class with Miss Bennett was something that Hugh Walpole said. He said “Look upon this event one year hence and see how trivial it seems.” While most events do seem to work out this way, in the case of action learners, Walpole was wrong.

A big part of every action learners’ output is the personal learning they have experienced as a result of the process. I have had the chance to review interviews, and have conducted my own interviews of our degree graduates. One of the clearest messages that I have identified is that our graduates can look back on their progress over the past year and discover that they have grown quite a bit both personally and professionally.

They have benefited by keeping learning logs of their experiences and producing their personal learning outputs along with each problem solution they have undertaken. I recommend that anyone in a learning situation take inventory of their knowledge before, during, and after they have a learning experience. What most will find, I suspect, is that a great deal of learning took place as a result of the educational experience.

This phenomenon seems to be especially true for our action learners. What they have reported to me is more than mere learning of how to solve a problem. They report that they have matured personally and professionally as a result of their learning journey as a member of an action learning team. On top of all this, their enthusiasm for the process that provided them this growth is quite high.

Life teaches us some great lessons over time. It is up to us to reflect once in a while on our progress. During the process of earning a degree through action learning, participants have the opportunity to reflect. A surprising number of students have told me that this was the first time they had taken stock of their lifelong learning and that they are quite proud of what they have learned and accomplished.

