

The case for Action Learning in changing culture

Introduction

Action Learning is an approach that is used extensively in organisations to support development, particularly for individuals in leadership roles. It has many variations but is underpinned in practice by four principles:

- It starts from not knowing and accepting this
- People who take responsibility for a situation have the best chance of taking actions which will make a difference
- Action Learning involves knowledge; questioning, insight and the development of a learning-to-learn attitude which allows the questioning of assumptions
- The Learning itself should be regarded as every ones job and should develop faster the rate of change.

(Chivers and Pedler 2003)

Effective Action Learning is based on human interaction. It requires all members to take an active role in the issue being discussed, whether through, active listening careful questioning, challenging, supporting or sharing experiences or suggestions. Learning takes place when the collective talent is harnessed to address the issues at hand, not just in the solutions that are identified but also through the process by which these have been generated.

This approach to decision making and leadership is increasingly recognised as an effective model for organisations striving to deliver their objectives and priorities. It is a shift away from a culture of command and control where staff wait for instructions from their managers, to a new culture that considers staff as partners and unlocks their potential to enable the whole workforce to contribute fully to organisational success.

This paper explores the contribution that Action Learning can make to transforming leadership culture within an organisation beyond the environment of formal set meetings. It suggests that an organisation which embraces an Action Learning approach it is, by definition, encouraging a more collaborative and shared approach to leadership and problem solving. If the skills and behaviours used within the Action Learning environment are transferred into other settings, they can be a powerful lever to promote organisational change.

Discussion

In an Action Learning environment all participants engage together in real work problems. Learning occurs through a process of collaboration from the topic being discussed and more importantly from the quality of the questioning by fellow members as they explore often unfamiliar problems, the quality and focus of the listening and the manner in which alternatives are shared, considered and either adopted or rejected.

Action learning is often applied in settings that seek to generate learning from human interaction arising from engagement in the discovery of solutions to current work problems (Pedler, 1991; Marquardt, 1999; Raelin, 2000). Action Learning theorists contend that the best way to test theories and make them actionable is through real experience and that the key component that produces the most significant behavioural change, results from reflection on these experiences, bolstered by feedback from fellow learners who participate in a discussion about their experiences which stimulates an individual's understanding at their own stage of development.

Learning occurs in "sets," which are composed of 5-8 participants, they hold meetings over a fixed time period (Smith & O'Neil 2003). During the learning sets, participants discuss the practical dilemmas arising from actions in their work settings, but also the possible alternatives to these actions.

Participants learn by taking time to reflect with their colleagues who offer insights into their workplace problems (Raelin, 1997). In this way Action Learning addresses the pitfalls of training,

which often overlooks the need to surface knowledge and to convert it to learning. By using their peers as sounding boards, participants become more equipped to produce the outcomes they desire (Argyris & Schon, 1996). They learn from each other how to overcome the blocks that prevent project success (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). Their learning is tied to knowledge collectively and they concurrently co-construct actions. (Tsoukas & Mylonopoulos, 2004).

Action Learning does not necessarily solve the initial problem presented by an individual. Nevertheless, it works if the process comprises participants who can engage with each other "off line" from their routine activity, to learn collectively with their peers and engage a dialogue that allows public questioning of the underlying issues.

A key aspect of Action Learning is that learning occurs with the work environment and is a concurrent by-product of the work. Set members learn as they attempt to coordinate their activities with others in their work environment. Action Learning set members need not take reality for granted; rather, they construct their own reality individually and collectively as they work on their problems there by considering and potentially adopting new and different solutions to existing problems (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Gergen, 1999).

Action learning promotes individual transformation that relies upon a relaxing of people's need for control within social settings. As a set member, one learns that a viewpoint is just that. It is no more than a hypothesis for action and not the only or the "right" way to proceed. (Argyris & Schon, 1974, 1978) .

Action Learning increases people's capacity to collaborate because of its effect on set members' intrinsic motivation (Passfield, 2002). In particular, they are stimulated by the experience of peer challenge and support, by feelings of empowerment as they gain access to people and information, and by the opportunity of working on others goals outside of their own experience. Individuals get an opportunity to think out loud and receive constructive feedback on their concerns and problems (Kram, 1985; Witherspoon & White, 1996).

Through its process, learning takes place within the set environment. During a set meeting, members observe and listen intently to one another, posing questions, and offering suggestions to each other. Occasionally, the presenting set member may listen as other team members brainstorm ideas regarding his or her issue. Members can decide to experiment with different approaches in light of the discussion, leading to new ideas to be tried in-between meetings. The experience is designed to encourage members to challenge their own views and behaviours and become critical about actions in their own organisations. Sponsoring organisations may not be initially hospitable to the probing that characterises the dynamics of this form of learning, particularly in a command and control environment which expects compliance.

The Action Learning set offers the opportunity to test their ideas and examine their values and assumptions. With the encouragement of their team members, and their facilitator, they can also tryout new interpersonal skills or managerial competencies based on reframed assumptions derived from reflection within the set (Dixon, 1990).

The role of the facilitator in the Action Learning environment is key to the process. The facilitator observes them during learning set meetings and provides feedback to individual members and to the set as a whole. The facilitator is not a meeting moderator or chairperson. Rather, facilitators, through their process consultation, they attempt to ensure that the learning set maintains ownership of their own agenda and increase set members capacity for reflection on the consequences of their actions. Ultimately however as the set becomes self facilitating, they gradually manage this collectively, choosing how they wish to facilitate their set to produce the most valuable experience.

At the organisational level, Action Learning practices may informally seep through the organisation, and in some cases, across organisation boundaries. Action Learning can promote change through its project structure, sponsors are obliged to work with peers to develop interesting ideas, monitor progress, and disseminate results. Through this process, others outside of the formal learning set also learn to challenge existing mind-sets and to engage in

dialogue across their own organisational boundaries (Schein, 1993). Moreover, because of the emphasis on reflective conversation, Action Learning has the capacity to change the nature of these relationships toward more sustainable partnerships based on learning (Senge, 1990). Action Learning allows participants to see their own views as tentative and to be open to the views of others (Shulman, 2002) and can help set members to become more critically aware of their own assumptions and defences.

One of the benefits of Action Learning is that learning is focused on the skills that the individual team members consider to be of a priority for them (Dixon, 1998). Action Learning is not based on a fixed curriculum that includes the skills that other people consider important. Individual set members decide what behaviours or leadership skills they want to develop at that time and given the problem at hand. (Dilworth & Willis, 2003). The final selection of developmental goals, is up to each individual.

In the context of leadership development, any leadership behaviour or skill that an individual team member chooses to develop can be developed through the Action Learning process. One reason why Action Learning is effective as a leadership development method is that it is efficient; instead of focusing on a large or core set of skills, Action Learning encourages participants to focus on a smaller number of skills that are most important and relevant to them. Action Learning along with Coaching and Mentoring provides an environment that allows for the development of any leadership skill. Furthermore, as Action Learning provides actionable solutions to real and problems, it provides the kind of real practice and accountability that Hicks and Peterson (1999) identify as necessary conditions for transferable leadership learning to occur.

Questions for your organisation:

- If you wish to *affect* a significant change to organisational and leadership culture from that which exists currently to one which is more akin to collaborative leadership style, does the adoption of an organisation wide approach to Action Learning provide one significant tool to and prompt this ambition?
- If so, at which level of the organisation does this need to be piloted and who could be the director level sponsor?
- What else would need to be done to support the change? For example how ready is the Executive Team to move to a more collaborative approach? How would their behaviour have to change?

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