

reflections on action learning

(and its effective application to leadership development programmes within organisations)

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‘all knowledge, theoretical or practical,
is deadwood when it does not result in
a positive attitude proved by action’

Josef Albers, Bauhaus School, 1931



There is a lot written on the theory of Action Learning, including case studies and models to apply the principles in practice. In my view, the most comprehensive book on the topic is the third edition of ‘Action Learning in Practice’ edited by Mike Pedler, which has a wonderful chapter on the power of Action Learning by Professor Bob Garratt. So my intention in this article is not to add my comments to existing texts but to reflect on my personal experiences of applying Action Learning to leadership development programs.

reflections on action learning continued

Through my experience, I believe there are two elements that make a significant difference to the success of applying Action Learning (AL):

1

Working effectively with tension

2

Actively encouraging experimentation and risk-taking

1 Working effectively with tension/conflict

At the very essence of AL lies a tension or indeed a conflict between the learning outcome and the task outcome. Here is the real value of AL in how to effectively work with this tension. AL based leadership programs can and should create a heightened intensity to the learning experience. An important part of this heightened state is the seemingly opposing forces that the learner experiences. For example, the learner can experience an inner conflict between his or her drive to perform in front of a peer group, as well as senior stakeholders and the reflective questioning process that requires them to stop, think and share their own personal learning process with others. Initially it can be felt as a conflict between the cognitive and the emotional, between the controlled and the spontaneous, between the doing and the non-doing. As learners become more aware of their own behavioural process through the team task these seemingly opposing forces become integrated and the learner learns their most important lesson – how to work with complexity by drawing upon their own creative resources. Ultimately the learner learns how to continuously learn, problem solve and innovate.

From the facilitators perspective, the facilitator must be ready to support and challenge the learner in equal measure. Supporting the learner by raising their awareness of their inner tension, and challenging the learner to experience and stay with the tension.

reflections on action learning continued

2 Actively encourage experimentation and risk-taking

If the ultimate objective for each learner is to gain new insights that are transformational in their development as a leader, the benefit of an AL approach is that the learner's experience is real-time, business relevant and personally relatable. The learner doesn't just think new ideas, he/she feels it, experiences it in action. As all activity is in the context of their known working environment, the challenge is to ensure that the learner does not simply engage with activities in a 'business as usual' fashion, focusing on demonstrating their known strengths. The learner must be encouraged and guided to step into the unfamiliar, to take risks and experiment at both a behavioural and task level as well as a cognitive and emotional one. Through experimentation, the learner experiences something new, instead of merely talking about the possibility of something new. Indeed, the learner gains insight into their own current behaviour, blind spots and the possibilities that arise through new ways of seeing and behaving. Therefore a key consideration in the planning of the programme is to what degree the AL process is a tool for leadership transformation as well as organisational change. How experimental can the programme be? How much freedom can be given by senior stakeholders so that it is genuinely a safe learning environment where there is freedom to turn out however it will.

The 10 core competencies

In my personal experience there are 10 core competencies/skills that learners gain through an AL based leadership development program. As a facilitator of AL programs, these 10 points provide a useful framework for my facilitating and coaching of both individual learners and a group. Of course it differs for each organisation/ individual but in general these 10 points come to the surface during an AL based program.

At a 'leading business' level

- 1 Strategic [meta] thinking skills inc. visioning.
- 2 Stakeholder engagement and influence.
- 3 Creative thinking/creative problem solving.

At a 'leading people' level

- 4 Collaborative working skills.
- 5 Working with complexity inc. change and conflict.
- 6 Working with team dynamics.

At a 'leading self' level

- 7 Interpersonal communications skills inc. active listening/giving and receiving feedback.
- 8 Personal leadership presence.
- 9 Self-awareness, regulation and empathy.
- 10 Self-directed learning skills.

reflections on action learning continued

The role of the facilitator

- 1 To provide direction and guidance on the context, process and ground-rules for the programme.
- 2 To guide and stimulate individual/team reflective questioning, and learning.
- 3 To challenge the learning team to experiment with mind set, behaviours and actions at both an individual and team level.
- 4 To coach individuals on self-awareness, presence and personal impact.
- 5 To guide the team to understand their own team dynamics and the impact of this on individuals, team and task.
- 6 To guide and stimulate individual/team creativity.
- 7 To stimulate team collaboration and interdependency.
- 8 To provide a link between practice with theory.

I think this can be summarised by saying that as facilitator I must 'hold' the learning process by ensuring ground rules and team contracts are adhered to as well as ensuring that reflective questioning and learning is honoured through-out the whole process. It's also important to say that I do not believe that the facilitator is there to answer questions or supply content relating to the issue being worked on by the team.

I see my role as facilitator to coach the team and each individual learner towards a deeper level of awareness of self and team dynamics and to challenge the learner to experiment and practice new tools and behaviours. Ultimately, my aim is to facilitate a transformative learning experience that generates a significant shift in the learner's perspective and results in their enhanced capacity to act and react.

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