

Action Learning Course Assignment:
“Examining My Own Practice”

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Action Learning
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Introduction

After completing the 3 day Action Learning Program, I was eager to put the skills and tools I had learned to work and to the test. In the process of working through how I would accomplish this, I found myself reflecting on my experiences, and how each “round” of learning effected me. During this reflection, not typical for me, I was able to connect the concepts and understand the application. I have included below a brief description of my individual learning style. Understanding my learning style really helps ‘*fill in*’ the whole picture as it relates to my experiences during the ‘rounds’ of action learning I had experienced.

The speed of learning concept that was presented, really hit home. The idea of a non linear approach to leaning was something I really had to think about. Now, as a result of this program, I am not really sure how, as a society, we would ever keep up. The concepts of Action Learning, has changed my point of view now to where I am not sure I am able to think as linearly around learning. There is truly a difference between ‘Training’ and ‘Learning’ (Herasymowych & Senko, 2008 pp. 50-52).

Before I describe my experiences through the rounds of action learning I would like to touch on the high level concepts surrounding;

- My learning style
- Action Learning System

This background information will help in framing my experience that is discussed later in this paper.

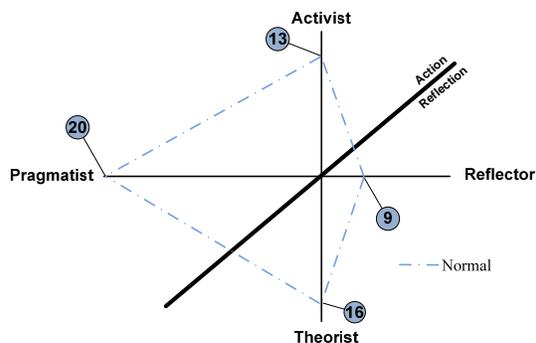
My Learning Style

Many people have varying abilities and learn differently; during a previous workshop, we used the Learning Style Questionnaire (LSQ) to help identify our learning orientation. The LSQ illustrates a snapshot in time as to individual learning preferences in relation to 4 different learning orientations. The tool used was, **Learning Styles Questionnaire** (Honey, P. & Mumford, A.). The understanding of my particular style is helpful as it provides a rough road map to my experiences during action learning rounds or activities.

My learning style profile described here shows my specific scores and the 'bands' of preference in which they fall.

Orientation	normal score	Under stress score
Activist	13 (very strong)	6 (low)
Reflector	9 (very low)	10 (low)
Theorist	16 (very strong)	17 (very strong)
Pragmatist	20 (very strong)	17 (very strong)

This is my learning profile, "kite".



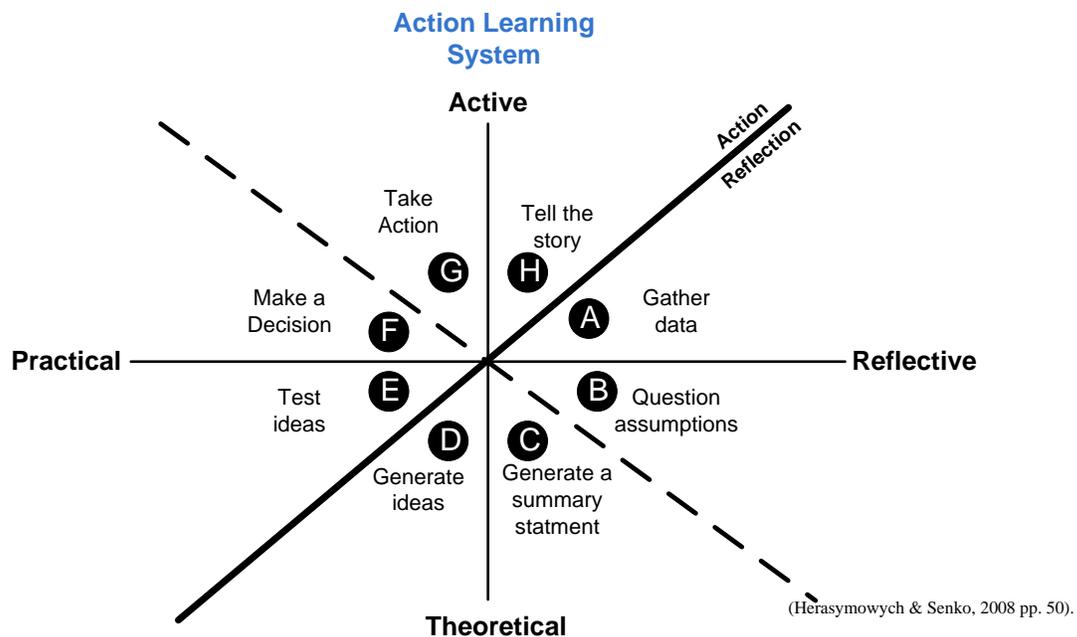
My profile depicts a very strong Practical and strong Theoretical and Active orientations. Of note is the low Reflector style, which is very evident in my day to day life. I am an individual who requires a lot of challenge and activity. My activities are logical and relevant to the task at hand. I can relate easily to

complex situations and do not fear criticism. I also have an ability to speak my mind, whether it is appropriate or not. With this knowledge moving into the Action Learning workshop, I was aware of my weakness and forced myself to keep a 'learning journal' something that requires great reflection. I found that doing this I was able to really capture my thoughts and experiences, which is fitting for Assignment #1.

Action Learning System

Information on this model can be found in (Herasymowych & Senko, 2008 pp. 50). This model is used to help guide and visualize the action learning cycle.

The diagram shown below illustrates the Action Learning System and its relation to particular learning styles mentioned above.



The model above illustrates a progression of steps that leads you through a process by which Action Learning takes place. The model also shows significant

steps where each learning style is covered thus helping individuals be aware of why they may feel discomfort or frustration during the process. This discomfort is key to the learning and that there is psychological safety inherently built into the model and process (Herasymowych & Senko, 2008 pp. 30). This process allows a group of learners to slow down, gather and reflect on information providing a strong base to move forward quickly into action. As an individual moving through this process the first half of the model was very frustrating and somewhat confusing. These experiences will be discussed later, but it does illustrate the connection between learning style, Action learning and the concept of slowing down in order to speed up later.

Although the process appears to be linear in nature, on paper, it is in fact, increasingly non linear as you progress through the process. I would also add that with more experience with an active learning group or environment the whole process becomes more non linear. This is discussed within the text to follow which describes my experiences during each round. Discussed below is a round by round account to my experience and thoughts gathered in my journal during the process. The descriptions only outline my significant experiences, not the entire process and theory. Model specifics can be found within the text (Herasymowych & Senko, 2008 pp. 50-60).



ROUND #1

Fitting perfectly with my learning style, I just wanted to get going and finish before the other groups. I had the answer, and I was prepared to lead the group to victory. Well, this was not the case. We were not told how to complete the process, we were given a tool that we were to follow to help facilitate the action learning. This required reading and some reflection, silence and writing down thoughts. This process started with the appointment of a temporary facilitator and timekeeper. We were not given the whole picture or allowed to read ahead because of timed steps. Not knowing the plan forward was killing me! I felt OK as I was with a group of people that I though felt the same way (psychological safety). This initial round was our first experience with picking a situation and an owner, I found this time to be quite tough to get through, as I had to sit and listen to each problem without judgment, or comment. Telling my story was the easy part, as it required me to act 😊. The process continued and required us to write down questions, reflect and reword questions for the purpose of gaining clarity, this again was tough as I believed I had the answer to everyone's woes, (this is not action learning behavior). During round #1 I was selected as the situation owner, this initially was great for me as I thought I had some 'control' over the direction of the working group. Again, wrong, very quickly I was asked challenging questions that required reflection to describe the situation accurately. I found myself struggling to give enough information to help the group in solving my problem. The hot seat, as I called it, was an interesting place to be as I really felt the problem gain momentum and control of the issue be relinquished to the

group and ultimately the whole group became the owner of the problem and the resultant action plan. This completely illustrates the speed of learning concept. As we crossed, the 'Reflection/Action' line shown in the model above, the speed as to how fast we developed an action plan was incredible.



Round #2

Day two, feeling energetic and informed I was ready. I knew the plan, and what the end looked like. I felt comfortable and reassured how the action learning group would work together. Wrong again, even though the process was the same, the experience was different. I was no longer the situation owner, nor the facilitator. I was not in control for the second time. I felt OK and trusted the process as I had been through it the day before. I struggled again with listening and keeping silent during "telling the Story and Gathering Data". Again we slowed down to speed up, but this time was different, I found myself trying to be more reflective and wanting to give the situation owner the best possible list of solutions. The interesting part of this process was that, none of my ideas were picked and I felt fine with that as I had a chance to be heard by the group, interesting. In the past this had been typically, a personal stumbling block as I could not get passed the feeling of resentment that came with group rejection of ideas in the usual workplace setting (obviously not an Action Learning group). This process has now given me a wonderful tool to work through that feeling. At the end of round #2 I felt genuinely excited that the situation owner had a plan of action that was attainable and could be successful.



Round #3

This round was short, sweet but effective. On day three I knew the system, and knew the group, I also knew that the experience would probably be different again with a new situation owner, I was all set and ready to go and I thought that this round would just reinforce the learning's of the previous days. You guessed it WRONG, again, I have never been this wrong in as many days, not a comfortable place for me (learning again).

This round involved me moving to a new action learning group. This was uncomfortable and awkward. This was probably due to the fact that some of the psychological safety was now removed and I had to regain that. In addition, there was no real familiarity with the group members, thus making us more diversified and unsure as to how this group worked together. Even though we were all well versed in the process and the path forward this experience would have been different for all of us as the players were different and the learning styles within the dynamic were also different. Although this round lasted only 20 minutes or so the impact of this round had taken me full circle, revisiting the feelings of uncertainty that I had felt on round #1, thus driving home the iterative cycle of retrospective and prospective learning.

What did I learn?

Through action, I discovered many things about how I learn. I learned that by taking control, as I normally do, keeps me in a preferred state thus not allowing the iterative process of action learning to take place. The resultant action of

letting the group lead the process as a whole allowed me understand points of view and ideas, thus letting go of any preconceived ideas I had allowing me to open up to new thinking. That process although difficult was really enlightening. I also recognize that not slowing down, reflecting and listening to others has the same limiting effect on my ability to learn.

In regards to others, I now see a synergy between learning styles and the strengths the differences bring to the table for the purposes of action learning. Although frustrating for each other this leads to true movement between preferred states to non-preferred so that action learning can occur. I also recognize that other can benefit from my strengths within the process where they may not be a strong allowing for real collaborative learning to occur.

What in my current practice is aligned with Action Learning

Principals? (What is not?)

There are aspects of action learning that I practice on a regular basis, most of which are from the perspective of buy in. I consistently;

- Gather all stakeholders
- Document issues
- Develop and implement action plans
- Discuss 'lessons learned' or review actions and results

Under typical issue resolution and brainstorming models, the above would suffice as an acceptable approach. The use of an Action Learning model or system identifies several areas in which I am not aligned with the principals. These areas include;

- Setting a 'safe non threatening environment'
- Listening to others

- Jumping to solutions
- Judging
- Telling the story
- Testing Assumptions
- Q/A techniques
- Generating summary statement

Safe to say that, currently, steps in the Action Learning model, that provides a basis and direction for finding real solutions are not followed. The model as shown above provides a true and natural process that is not followed in 'typical' problem solving activities. I would mention that my current practice is partially aligned with Action Learning; however, I am or was missing some KEY concepts.

What would I change and what would be the outcomes of this change?

To start I am adopting this model on a go forward basis. I cannot look at problem solving or solution finding in any other way now (Thanks!). I am aware of my own biases and weaknesses in the use of the model illustrated earlier. Although I think this will take some practice, I believe that being aware of my own strengths and weaknesses is a strong first step. As a result modeling this type of skill/behavior, demonstrating success will lead others to follow, model, and hence lead using the same principals.

I believe that in starting to educate the organization on the benefits of this model, with real life use in the work environment will grow leadership and also solve real issues with real deliverables.

On a personal note, I need to listen and give the opportunity for others to 'tell the story'. By doing this I will be more agreeable and less confrontational and aggressive. This will take practice but I feel that this is a key step in the Action Learning process, for me.

In conclusion, during this course I have been exposed to an energizing and rewarding process and system. As an adult educator and facilitator, I can see the concept of Action Learning applying to all I do. At first, I was skeptical in the application of this tool in the workplace, BUT, after working through the rounds, coupled with a great deal of reflection, I can see the benefits. Working through the rounds also identified where we as an organization, and I, are currently 'missing the boat' in regards to Action Learning. I believe that using these concepts in real time will allow organizations and my workplace, in particular, to move forward more effectively and without fear. Slowing down to speed up is something that I believe is lost in current workplace situations. The application of these concepts will illustrate to my organization that we do have time to do it right!

As of this writing, I have used Action Learning in a real setting. The results were truly rewarding, everyone felt heard and bought into the resulting plan of action. This did take courage, as it was not the corporate norm. Feedback from the process resulted in comments such as **"Wow, I have been trying to pull this group together for years.... Now we are on track."** This comment alone was worth the risk of trying something new and taking the time to use the tool properly. THANKS A BUNCH.

References

Herasymowych, M. & H. Senko. **Solving Problems in Real Time: Action Learning Guide.** Calgary, Alberta, Canada: MHA Institute Inc., 2003.

Honey, P. & Mumford, A. *Learning Styles Questionnaire.* King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, USA: Organization Design and Development, Inc., 1986, 1989, 1995.