

Action Learning: Solving Real Problems in Real Time

Course Assignment

Choice #1: Examine your own practice as a trainer

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate my understanding of what Action Learning is and how the Action Learning Cycle works. I will do this by explaining the Action Learning Cycle as it is defined in Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko's textbook "Solving Real Problems in Real Time, Action Learning Guide". I have chosen to completed assignment choice one: examine your own practice as a trainer, where I exemplify how I currently use the Action Learner theory while training and how I can build on some opportunities in my current training program.

The Father of Action Learning

Reg Revans (1907 – 2003) is known as the father of Action Learning. He believed in "practical business people learning from each other, creating their own resources, identifying their own problems, and forming their own solutions" (Solving Real Problems in Real Time Action Learning Guide P2). It was under Reg Revans leaderships that the Belgium Experiment (1965) succeeded, by using Action Learning. The Belgium Experiment's goal was to make recommendations to help the struggling economy that had been underperforming. As a result of Revans and Action Learning, Belgium had a industrial growth rate of 102%, higher then the United States, Japan and Germany at that time.

What is Action Learning

Action learning is a process where participants form groups, or action learning sets, to look at their own actions and experiences in order to solve a problem and or develop an action plan. Action Learning is “about recognizing not what we know, but what we do not know” (P5). Action learning allows people to come together as a group to solve problems and learn. By meeting in small groups it is found that the members challenge each other to think from different perspectives and see the problem from different views. Reg Revans believes that “once small groups are working effectively together, they (become) comrades in adversity – held together by a shared desire to find implementable solutions to their questions” (P5). When groups work together to solve a complex problem they have a vested interest in finding out if the groups solution actually worked. Action Learning is said to work best if the participants are not known to one another and if the groups are self directed. If the group is facilitated they rely on that facilitator and do not learn the process.

The Action Learning System

To fully understand the Action Learning System I had to review the Learning Cycle (P49). The Action Learning System is based on the Learning Cycle, as a set of steps that can be taken to solve a problem. The four learning orientations that are discussed in the Learning Cycle are: Active, Reflective, Theoretical, and Practical. The Active and Practical orientations lay on the action side of the cycle

and the Reflective and Theoretical lay on the reflective side. There are eight elements of the Action Learning Process that touch each learning orientation at a different time. The eight element of the Action Learning Process divided among the four learning orientations are as follows: (P50)

- Reflective Learning Orientation
 - A. Gather data
 - B. Question assumptions
- Theoretical Learning Orientation
 - C. Generate a summary statement
 - D. Generate ideas
- Practical Learning Orientation
 - E. Test ideas
 - F. Make a decision
- Active Learning Orientation
 - G. Take action
 - H. Tell a story

The process asks that you follow each step under time constraints to formulate the action plan. As you can see above the Action learning process allows for all types of learning styles to work together to create an outcome. It asks all learners to try each learning style throughout the process, and a diverse group some member may be more comfortable in one element rather than the other.

The Experience

During our three day course I was involved in two full action learning rounds. We stayed in our action learning sets for both of the rounds and I had

very different experiences with each round. An action learning set is a group of people who have come together to solve a problem. Our action learning set had a mix of learning styles in it, from strong actives to very strong reflectors. The first round action learning was new to all of us. I was the facilitator in our set and my role was to ensure that the group followed the instructions. As a group we each learned about one other and then reflected individually on the problem we were going to share with the group. I found the questions that we answered on page AL – 86 were very beneficial, it allowed me to determine what I thought my problem was. The most important part of this step is to write your responses down. After reviewing my responses I noticed that my first statement of the problem was different than my final statement once I had identified the non-negotiable's, the things that are working and what was not working. This surprised me, but after speaking with my group they had a similar experience. Once we had paired up and explained our problem we shared our problem statements with the remainder of our group and determined which problem to tackle in our first round of action learning. My problem was not chosen and so I continued the process as the facilitator. I found the role as a facilitator extremely difficult, presumably because of the high reflector in me, because I was not versed in the process, and was constantly trying to determine what the next step was in order to keep the group on track. There was also the time element, I did not know what to expect and so I attempted to read ahead however time constraints did not allow for that except at the break. As a group we asked lots of questions and brainstormed well. In our first round we not knowly diverted off the

process, which we later found out is okay, by brainstorming and producing an action plan at the same time. The experience was exhausting, when we came up with a solution I was surprised to see that three hours had gone by and that we came up with what we felt was a great solution. I was glad to be done as the facilitator, however knowing what I know now; I think if I were to be a facilitator again I would be more comfortable in the role.

Our second round of action learning took less time and was a more relaxed experience. We worked in the same sets and my problem was chosen this time. I was glad to be out of the facilitators' role but I was not ready for what was coming to me. As the problem owner I felt is very difficult to articulate answers to some of the questions and I found it very hard not to defend the actions that had already been taken. I struggled with the fact that I did not know the answers to some of the questions being asked; I felt badly that I could not answer all of the questions. I found this round to be as difficult as the first but in a very different way. The first round did not get personal, but the second round affected me personally and by the end of brainstorming and action planning I had a plan of what I could do next. I agreed to report back to my group on what the outcome of the action plan was and intend to do so.

We had a brief third round of action learning. It was determined that the two people in each group that had been problem owners were to switch places the problem owners of the second group. I was in shock; I had already become comfortable with my group, built a trust and a rapport with them. I felt that we would have to start all over again with the other group and my only saving grace

was that I was bringing another team member with me. I can easily see how Reg Revans describes the action learning sets as “comrades in adversity” (P5). We were not happy to be moving and we then found out that it was simply an exercise, that we would not be doing another round. When asked to describe how I felt I was relieved, I did not want to start fresh with new people, I was comfortable with my team and knowing that they had fantastic ideas.

The Learning Cycle

Learning through action was a difficult thing for me. As a high reflector I wanted all of the details and the time to think about then and see if I needed additional information. I would rather have been given the chance to review the process on my own and then take part in it. I think that most of my difficulties came with the uncertainty of the unknown in combination with me being the facilitator in the first round. My learning style pushed me to make sure that I know the process and the expectations prior to taking action, thus this process took me outside of my comfort zone allowing learning to occur. I think that because I was pushed to take a more active approach in this process it showed me that learning from different learning styles can be beneficial.

When our action learning sets were created we were placed together with people who are unlike us in many ways. Our group had two strong action learners with high practical sides to them and very little reflective. One member as well as myself are very reflective and very low active. I think that the diversity in our group made for very interesting dynamics. The group learned very differently, the highly active members wanted to skip steps and continue on in the

process, not worry to much about the time or what we may have missed in between. I noticed how hard it was for the two active members to keep to the instructions and time constraints, they simply wanted to get to the action plan and solve the problem. I was also able to see how the highly reflective member learned. Although this member and I have very similar kites, it was interesting to see how I may be perceived. The highly reflective member, wanted to follow the instructions to the letter, wanted time to think about what we were doing next and wanted to be sure that we were on time. I think that this activity showed me that no matter what learning styles you encompass the action learning process touches each of them allowing the learning cycle to occur.

My own Practice

As a trainer currently some of our material is aligned with the action learning process and some is not. An examples of what I currently do that demonstrates action learning is when we hire brand new telephone adjusters. When a telephone adjuster comes to us, they generally have no insurance experience and have been hired as an entry level adjuster. We have a six month training program that they are involved in. On their first week of training we provide policy training in detail and then the second week we train them on our computer systems. During week three we send them back to their desks to practice and apply what they have been taught by dealing with entry level claims. At the end of the third week we bring them back to the training area and talk about what they have been doing, what happened, where they have run into

problems and what they need more of? Then we continue to do this with each piece of knowledge we provide to them. During their tenth week of training, after they have been in the class and floor on an off, we teach them the next piece of adjusting and allow them to spend two weeks practicing in the real world and again meet with us to round table anything that come up. I think that this process aligns with action learning. We allow them to gather information and gain the knowledge during the in class training and then we allow them to practice what we have shown them in the real world. We then bring them back to be sure that there is no confusion, solicit feedback and review anything they feel they need help with.

On the other side I think that there are many aspects of our training that do not align with the action learning process. For example we offer an introduction to systems training. We offer it as either a half day session or a full day session and we review the computer systems that we use in the claims department. When an employee is hired who is not a telephone adjuster they are given this training and when we are done we never see them again. There is no time for them to practice and figure out what it is that they don't know they go back to their desks and struggle through the systems and hope that someone around them can help them out. I think that our lack of allowing them to practice in the live environment and not getting back together at a later date to discuss what they need help with is what limits the learning from happening. They are taught a system that they do not understand for job details they are not 100% certain of.

Reflection on my own Practice

I think that by aligning more of our material to the action learning process the employees will get more out of the training that they attend. The example above about the systems training is a perfect example of where I think we could add the action learning process to our material. I would still offered the training when a employee is new in order for them to learn the systems on a very basic level. I would show them what they need to know about the systems in order to get their job done. I would propose to my manager that we then offer training one month after the initial training to follow up with the employees, review the systems again briefly and then show them other parts of the system that would be available to them, to help them do their job more efficiently. By meeting again a month down the road it would allow to the employees to bring any questions or concerns to the training. It will give them a chance to practice what they have learned and then come back and talk about it, what went well, what are you still having trouble with etc. I also think that the learning should not stop there, after the initial training and the one month follow up, I would suggest that the employee attend another session at the six month mark, ensuring the transfer of knowledge and also allowing for any additional training areas to be noticed.

I think that if I was able to make these changes the amount of refresher training that is required for systems training would reduce immensely. I think that the adjusters would be able to have a chance to practice what they have been taught and then understand what it is that they need to know more about. By attending a one month follow up session the application of the systems in their

job will be apparent and any areas that were missed can be identified. The one month follow up session can also focus on the advanced skills that can make the adjuster's job easier. The six month follow up session would allow the adjusters to learn more in depth aspects of the systems as well. I think that if the adjusters knew that the sessions would be held and the follow up was there, they would be more likely to ask question and confirm that they understand what is being taught, also there would be some accountability on them to come back to the follow up's to share what they have learned, what they still need to learn and how things are going on the systems in general.

Conclusion

In completing this assignment I was able to reflect on what I currently do in my job that aligns with the action learning principles and what does not. It showed me that the material that we have incorporated the action learning process in tends to have a higher transfer of knowledge. It showed me that as a trainer of adults it is important to try to incorporate action learning in sessions. I think that the concepts that I learned in this course can apply in the workplace and some of it I already do, people just don't know what they are doing is action learning. I think that this process can work on all levels of an organizations structure, from the bottom all the way to the top. In my role as a trainer I will continue to use the action learning concepts that I have learned in the areas that I currently use them, but I will also implement the process in as many area's as I can within my training curriculum. I also plan on using the action learning with

teams within my own team to build us into a stronger more effective training team.

Bibliography

Herasymowych, M. , & Senko, H. Revving Up Thinking and Learning Course Design Guide Version C. Calgary Alberta: MHA Institute Inc. 2003.