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Action Learning:  The practice of Learning in Real Time

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**Examining My Practice as a Learner and Trainer**

This assignment will show my understanding of the concepts and theories of

action learning as well as demonstrate my ability to apply the concepts and

theories in an actual situation.  I will be discussing the concepts of learning in real

time through action learning.  I have based all my learning theories on Marilyn

Herasymowych and Henry Senko's Solving Real Problems in Real Time Action

Learn Guide and Revving Up Thinking and Learning Course Design Guide.

Action learning involves groups of individuals from diverse backgrounds coming

together to solve complex problems.  Time is taken to reflect on the problem and

because the group is diverse, they challenge assumptions and take action to

solve the problem.  In action learning, the learning occurs through the action that

is taken to solve the problem.  The group gathers information about the problem,

challenges assumptions about the problem, generates a summary statement of

the problem, brain storm ideas, test the ideas, take action and then report back to

the group on what occurred as result of the action taken.  Groups use the

learning cycle to work through the problems.  The learning cycle is made up of

four learning styles are Reflector, Theorist, Practical, and Activist.  I will briefly

review the different learning styles.  The Reflector wants to have all the

information and then reflect on the right course of action.  They can get caught

up in gathering information and reflecting, then going back to gather more information then reflecting some more.  This can sometimes lead them to be viewed as procrastinators or someone who is unable to make a decision.  The Theorist will not accept ideas that are not backed up with theory.  They want proof and are usually not willing to accept new ideas or concepts at face value. They are able to take multiple ideas or concepts and fit them together in a logical pattern. They are able to break down complex ideas into simple terms.    In order to satisfy the theorists, you must be able to not only say why but show them why. The practical learner likes to plan and make decisions.  They often will not spend a great deal of time gathering information and reflecting on their decisions.  They like to move quickly from one activity or task to another.  They like to make decisions and plans but are happy to have others execute the plan.  They can miss important information because they don't spend enough time ensuring they have all the information required.  The active learner is action orientated.  They will try almost anything and do not require a great deal of time to prepare.  They have faith things will work out or that they will be able to make the necessary adjustments as they go along in order to achieve success.  They are often considered impulsive.

An action learning group will benefit from having members from each of the learning styles.  The reflector will help the practical consider all the information before making a decision, the theorist will make sure the information is properly analysed and the activist will move things to action.  The learning circle can be broken into two halves, action and reflection.  These are both required in an

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action learning group.  The group must reflect on the problem, move to action and then reflect on the success or failure of the action or lack of action.  Action learning does not resemble a circle but rather it is like a spiral in that learning is achieved as a result of action and reflection.  It is learning from real life experiences.

During the class we did three rounds of action learning.  My group for the first two rounds was made up of two individuals who were actives and an individual who was reflective and one who was a theorist.  During the first round I found everyone appeared to be edgy by the end.  We didn't know each other and hadn't gained any insight yet on working together.  It was difficult to read the instructions and follow them while abiding by the timelines set.  The activity felt very disjointed.  The actives took charge of the session.  I am a practical and it felt like I had no involvement in making the decisions because they moved so quickly to action.  The reflective and theorist thought the whole process went too quickly without adequate gathering of information and reflection.  I was not the problem owner and being a practical learner, I had already made up my mind what the problem was as well as the solution to the problem before we had gathered everyone's summary statements.  On each round, the path chosen by the problem owner surprised me.  In each case, it was not even close to what I had initially believed the solution to be.  I also observed that the action chosen in each case was very simple.  The problem owner was quite excited to return to their workplace and implement the action plan.  During the third session, we were put in new groups.  The dynamics of this group were quite different to the first.

The participants were practical and reflective.  I didn't mind suddenly being put into a new group.   We were much more familiar with the process this time and as a result it moved more smoothly as we didn't have to focus on the instructions as much.  Even though we didn't know each other, I was more comfortable with this group.  The exercise appeared to move more smoothly and less frantic without the actives.   Since we did not complete the last phase by hearing back from the problem owner, I am very curious to learn of their experiences.  Did they proceed with the action plan and if so, what was the outcome?  If they did not, why not?  We have agreement in all three situations to get back together either in person or by email to hear the results during the last week of March.

I believe, for me, the final piece to the learning will come from hearing back from the problem owners on the outcome from the action plans.  I feel that there is something missing yet for me to fully understand the process.  Although I learned many things, I have not yet had an "uh ha" moment through this course but perhaps it is yet to come?

I learned there is great value in viewing the problem from someone else's perspective.  The problem owners all seemed surprised by some of the ideas that came out of the brainstorming sessions.  Although I know that because of my practical and active learning style I often make decisions without having all the information and reflecting appropriately, I was confident I had the necessary information as soon has I heard what the problem was and immediately formulated a solution in my mind.  As a result of the action learning process, I realized the value in looking at all the information and all the options prior to

making a decision. There are ideas and information that came to light in the group that I would not previously have considered. In all three situations, I would not have chosen the action the problem owner chose.

Based on the comments that were made by the group, I believe they all had similar experiences. Being involved with individuals of other learning styles highlights the possible shortcomings of your own style and allows for other perspectives to be developed. I was more aware of how I react to other styles. Interestingly, I have a high degree of active and yet the actives were the ones that frustrated me in the first group. They moved too quickly to action without having an understanding the instructions. This is reflective behaviour and I have a higher degree of reflective in my stress kite than my normal kite. Being in a new group with strangers, learning something new with tight time lines increased my stress which brought out the reflective learner in me.

During the exercises, everyone, particularly the problem owners, appeared to prefer working in a group to resolve the problem. The action plans were not overly complicated or inventive; therefore I conclude that the people gained a sense of confidence in being able to move to action by having others validate the problem and the solution. They didn't feel they were alone in solving the problem. It remains to be seen whether they put the plan in to action once they returned to their work place.

In my role as a trainer my style is already aligned with action learning in that I know that people learn best by making mistakes and learning from those mistakes. I work in an industry where we must solve customers' problems daily.

This requires our staff to be able to think quickly and come up with innovative solutions.  In order to do so, they must learn to see each situation as unique and feel empowered to make a decision on the course of action to take.  This requires quick thinking, confidence and trust in their judgement.  I encourage the learners to use their own experiences to draw conclusions and options for action. I try to create an environment where they can make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. They must feel empowered to make decisions without fearing consequences of making mistakes.  They will only gain this confidence in their own abilities by being allowed to make mistakes.  I also incorporate activities where they work in groups to come up with solutions to different scenarios that can occur on the job so that they can learn to think through in a group setting, the possible solutions and pitfalls.  Although I had been doing this prior to learning about the different learning styles, I now appreciate the value of having the different learning styles work together to consider the problems and solutions. Having them come up with their own solutions builds their confidence in their ability to do the job.

Most of the training that is done is with entry level learners who have no previous experience in the job they are training for.  A good deal of the training is currently done in a lecture format which does not follow action learning principles.  As the facilitator, I am usually telling them what the problems are and the procedures that have been developed and are required to be followed.  There are many guidelines and regulations and in some areas serious consequences for the organization if they are not followed.

As a result of taking the action learning course, I will incorporate as many activities and exercises as possible that allow for group work to determine the problems and solutions. This will be done in a role play model based on real life situations. This will allow the learners to learn from their experiences and mistakes. I work with a group with trainers and we meet frequently to discuss issues we encounter in training as well as to develop training material. I plan on telling them about action learning and to try to incorporate the action learning principles in our group to help us identify and solve problems that we encounter separately or as a group in developing and delivering training material.

In conclusion, completing this assignment helps me to see what parts of my facilitator style is most effective and which areas require some change. I always felt it was important for the learners to be allowed to make mistakes and I know that in most cases they will learn from making these mistakes, I hadn't given thought to why that is. In this entry level role, the learners are in a position where they are solving customer problems all day long. I know, that by empowering the learners to make decisions and be free to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes, in turn they gain more confidence in their ability which allows them provide improved customer service because they can develop the skills to quickly come up with innovative solutions to the problems they are faced with daily.

I can look at the concepts of this workshop and see that there is a real need in the organization I work for. We have achieved huge growth within a short period of time and struggle keeping up with the changes this growth requires. We operate in a very reactive manner which causes constant upheaval and change.

If we slowed down to work through the problems and come up with real solutions, we would be more likely to come up with the right solutions and require less change which would result in a more stable, less chaotic work environment, better communication, increased employee satisfaction and increased customer service. This would translate into increased productivity for the company. Slowing down to speed up, it seems so simple.

I have given some thought as to how to introduce this concept in my office. I intend to start within my own team. If I can demonstrate how it works to members of my own team and encourage them to give it a try then we can use it in our area of work and gain experience with it. In doing this, we can also introduce it to management within the training team. Once management gains some familiarity with it, it will be much easier to introduce to other areas of the organization and gain some buy in to the process.

References

Herasymowych, Marilyn & Senko, Henry **Solving Problems in Real Time Action Learning Guide**.  Calgary, Alberta, Canada: MHA Institute Inc., 2008

Herasymowych, Marilyn & Senko, Henry **Revving Up Thinking and Learning Course Design Guide.**  Calgary, Alberta, Canada: MHA Institute INC., 2003