Team Action Learning in a Changing Environment
Assignment Choice #2 – Design an Action Learning
Experience

1) Purpose of the Learning Situation

The purpose of this learning situation is to identify a clear plan of action to assist staff to function within the changing environment of a government funding program (referred to as the Program). Several factors are creating an uncertain environment for this Program:

- Significant cut to operations budget
- Governance restructuring exercise that will effect service delivery model
- Mandate change
- Eligibility criteria change
- Ongoing requirement for reporting on outcomes when objective of the Program is unclear

These factors have resulted in a work environment characterized by:

- Uncertainty
- Confusion
- Lack of clarity and direction
- Hopelessness
- Anger
- Immobilization

The complexity and rate of change occurring in the Program makes this situation the perfect candidate for applying action learning[1] principles and process. *Action learning* is the defined as "a way of thinking and acting that enables us to solve real problems in real time, and to create the resilience required to deal with complexity and change."[2]

This paper will describe an action learning design for a three hour session, developed to begin solving the problems being experienced by Program staff in their current work environment. The concept of **team action learning** [3] will be applied to this learning design. Team action learning occurs in situations where members work closely together and are in the same occupational group[4]

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[1] Herasymowych, Marilyn & Senko, Henry. **Solving Problems in Real Time Action Learning Guide**, Calgary, Alberta: MHA Institute Publication, 2003.
[2] Ibid., p. 1
[3] Ibid., p, 27
[4] Ibid., p. 7

The rationale behind using the team action learning approach is that although the problems and situations affect all program staff, in the past there has been no mechanism to solve those problems and most staff considered that problems were only the problem of managers. For this program to survive change and continue to do meaningful work, the staff need a team approach that overcomes the isolation and hopelessness they have experienced in the past. Team action learning recognizes staff knowledge and skills and will maximize the Program's ability to perform and report on meaningful outcomes. By working together to solve problems within the team action learning process, staff will be able to provide ongoing expertise, support and be accountability to each other in taking effective actions.

2) Application of Action Learning

The three hour team action learning session will take place at a national staff training session. Preceding the action learning workshop, the staff will participate in a session on working in a complex change environment.

Before staff attend the national training session they will be asked to take the Learning Style[5] Questionnaire on-line at www.psi-press.couk/lss-i.htm and to submit their results to the session coordinator. There are four different learning styles and each one has specific characteristics that define it. These learning styles tell us how people solve everyday problems.[6] Learning groups of 5-6 members will be established to ensure that each team has:

- complementary learning styles (so each group can benefit from the perspective of each learning style);
- geographic diversity; and
- representation of managers, program officers and administrative staff.

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[5] Marilyn Herasymowych, **Action Learning Handout**, Certificate in Adult Continuing Education, Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta, 2004 MHA Institute Inc.
[6] Ibid., p. 12

The purpose of the team action learning session is to:

1. Introduce team action learning as a tool for managing change, problem-solving and team building;
2. Identify most urgent problems for staff;
3. Identify effective actions to solve those problems; and
4. Establish ongoing team action learning groups that will build a community of reflection, action and accountability.[7]

The team action learning session will follow the following process:

1. Brief presentation on action learning process focusing on using it as a mechanism to help us thrive in our change environment. Handouts for session will be distributed;
2. Brief description of learning styles and their impact on action learning;
3. Separation into pre-determined learning groups;
4. Follow the action learning process for solving a team problem[8] including the use of the Leverage Matrix[9];
5. Debriefing on action learning process; and
6. Discussion and planning for next steps.

Ideally, the Program staff would have a second 3 hour block in the national training session to run through another cycle of action learning. This would help to solidify their understanding of the concepts and ability to complete the process without the structure provided by the training session.

The planning for next steps would focus on how the Program would continue to build and maintain the work of integrating action learning into day-to-day efforts. I hope that there would be an agreement from each action learning team to meet on a monthly basis to continue using action learning as a problem-solving technique in the changing environment of the department. Because the members of each action learning team are working in different geographic locations, the action learning sessions would have to be carried-out using teleconferencing. Perhaps the team Quick Step guide can be modified to accommodate the

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[7] Herasymowych & Senko, p.22.
[8] Marilyn Herasymowych, **Solving a Team Problem Quick Step Handout**, Certificate in Adult Continuing Education, Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta, 2004 MHA Institute Inc.
[9] Ibid., p.3

limitations of the teleconferencing technology. Some creativity will be needed to make this work but it has the potential to succeed despite the constraints!

3) Barriers

I anticipate that there are three barriers to team action learning with the Program staff. Firstly, after a lengthy period of uncertainty and in the ongoing state of confusion, the morale of the staff will be the most significant barrier to getting buy-in from both staff and managers. With a prevailing sense of apathy and hopelessness, I hope that the preceding training session on working in a complex change environment will prepare staff to be open-minded about the possibilities presented by team action learning.

The second barrier to effective team action learning will be whether or not the managers are ready to accept the "handing-off" of power from their level to the level of Program staff. I believe that the team action learning session will demonstrate the benefits of this tool to the Program and in doing so will convince the managers to commit to team action learning as an ongoing and integral tool for doing our work.

The third barrier to effective team action learning will be the challenge of each learning group to agree to a specific problem or situation. Because each learning group will determine their own problem to solve, it will be up to the members of each group to reach a consensus. Given the complexity of the current situation, I think this may be challenging for some of the learning groups.

4) Conclusion

Action learning is very much in-line with the community development approach used by the Program staff in facilitating their work with community organizations. As a result of that background, staff will enter the team action learning with many of the skills and beliefs that will contribute to a positive experience and concrete outcomes. One of the value-added aspects of the action learning process will be

that staff will feel/think they now have the power to take responsibility for the problems and challenges we are currently facing. They will have a tool and an ongoing structure to help apply problem-solving to the many organizational changes that they face.

Staff want to contribute to the work of the Program and team action learning gives them the opportunity to do that within the constraints that they presently think are holding them back. In an organization where many staff have questioned the leadership of the mangers, team action learning gives the staff the power to be leaders themselves. If monthly, learning groups are established and maintained the Program staff will have a sustainable mechanism to deal with the ongoing complexity and change that is a consistent reality in our work environment.

In my efforts to become an adult educator, I think that this assignment had given me the opportunity to apply an adult education technique to a situation that has been considered hopeless by many of us. This technique relies on learning from real-life experience and that is the foundation of the community development approach that I have worked within since entering the labour force. I have learned that familiar concepts can be molded into a new structure and because of that new structure offer many more possibilities for making a difference in our work. That is a very good definition of success, because as humans we all want to feel that what we do makes a difference.

References

1. Herasymowych, Marilyn & Senko, Henry. **Solving Problems in Real Time Action Learning Guide**, Calgary, Alberta: MHA Institute Publication, 2003.

2. Marilyn Herasymowych, **Action Learning Handout**, Certificate in Adult Continuing Education, Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta, 2004 MHA Institute Inc.

3. Marilyn Herasymowych, **Solving a Team Problem Quick Step Handout**, Certificate in Adult Continuing Education, Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta, 2004 MHA Institute Inc.