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Action Learning: The Practice of Learning in Real Time 5962

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Assignment: Choice 1

For this paper, I have chosen to examine my own practice, or rather the beliefs I hold as a consultant and facilitator. These longstanding beliefs have been seriously challenged as a result of taking this course. Action Learning has catalyzed a transformative learning experience for me. (Mezirow 1978, transformative learning theory is about change – dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live. Merriam, S. B., & Caffarella, R. S. (1999). Chapter 14 Transformational Learning. In *Learning in Adulthood - A Comprehensive Guide* (pp. 318-339, 318). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.) I chose to keep a learning journal for this course and in my daily observations discovered many things that were surprising, engaging, bothersome and in at least one instance, downright disturbing. I will also attempt to summarize these experiences and illustrate how I might incorporate my learning into practice.

Prior to the action learning rounds, I was fascinated with the description of the speed of change (the exponential increase in the rate of change of such areas as technology) and how incompatible linear thinking (vertical thinking – a method of solving problems through deductive reasoning; Herasymowych, November 7, 2006) has become with respect to some of the challenges today's organizations and societies face. The concept of non-linear thinking (non-linear thinking – a method of solving problems indirectly or by apparently illogical or paradoxical methods; Herasymowych, November 7, 2006) and its results have been fascinating. Linear thinking has been so firmly rooted within me for so long, that the concepts of emergent properties (emergent properties – unintended and unexpected results of an action that can either be positive or negative) and solving problems indirectly or through seemingly illogical means were indeed both a

surprising & somewhat frightening revelation. Frightening may be a little strong but they did pose serious concerns for me in how could I not only grasp such an abstract and unfamiliar concept, but worse yet, how could I possibly incorporate these ideas into my work? My workplace, a Petrochemical Manufacturing facility, is teeming with intelligent people who are ambitious, hard-working, dedicated, and very technical in their educational and work backgrounds. In other words they are extreme linear thinkers right to the core.

This course is entitled Action Learning. My preconceived notion was that I would be learning a new method of teaching or transferring knowledge to a group of eager pupils. I was apprehensive, but I did have confidence that the concerns I have mentioned would be addressed as the course unfolded. This did not transpire as expected. As we worked through the action learning rounds, I was bothered by the fact that these seemed to be rather loose problem solving sessions. I did not recognize these rounds as learning. I was accustomed to learning as a much more traditional, and in retrospect, a process of linear thinking. The debriefing sessions displayed remarkable outcomes. Possible solutions to problems had emerged and action plans to test these solutions were defined. Timelines, individual action items and deadlines were developed and commitments were made. The people in the groups did not know each other, yet they accepted to be accountable to one another. These were remarkable outcomes but I remained puzzled. Where is this “Action Learning” tool that I had signed up for?

The last round of action learning was extremely difficult and disturbing to me. The roles were established and we set off to discover solutions to a complex problem belonging to one of the members. The facilitator got the round underway but we did not

get very far into the exercise when the timekeeper suddenly and forcefully began to change the direction the session was going. She enthusiastically took over the facilitation and jumped back and forth around the well laid out steps in the process. This caused a great deal of anxiety for me. My linear nature demanded we follow the process strictly as it was laid out in the textbook. I had to restrain from jumping in myself which caused me to nearly completely disconnect from the discussion and focus almost entirely on how badly we were managing the round.

I learned a lot about myself through these exercises. My linear thinking had prevented me from making a meaningful contribution and to nearly miss the point altogether. It is only in retrospect that I have realized that the process itself is action learning. I had been so focused on the process itself that I could not see that its purpose is to allow the participants to create their own group learning. This had been the instrument or “teaching” technique that I had been expecting but did not realize it until later. My natural tendency is not to learn through action learning, but now that I am aware of its unexpected outcomes, I do not think I will have too much trouble the next time I am involved in a situation involving this technique.

Others people, particularly the person who caused so much discomfort for me in the last round, seem to have found the process to be completely natural. This has illustrated to me the value of diversity in the action learning process.

In analyzing action learning and how I may be applying its principles in, I have realized that there have been many situations in which this has occurred at least in part in my current role. As well as being the Operations Training Coordinator at my place of work, I have the additional responsibility of being the facilitator for a group of team

leaders. There are many complex situations that they are charged with resolving and looking back on some of those situations, I have indeed facilitated the process by which they have found their own solutions without my actual participation. I have helped only to keep them on topic and they have been successful on many occasions where I thought it unlikely.

There are, however, many situations where my linear style has prevented me from facilitating a successful outcome. If there was a specific problem to be solved, I have quite often facilitated meetings where I had prepared a very structured agenda that I controlled and maintained to the letter. Perhaps now I can see why there has been less than stellar success on those occasions

From what I have learned as a result of this course, in the future I will try to utilize the Action Learning Process and its tools to facilitate complex problems. My practice in the past has been to include only the primary stakeholders. By allowing a diverse group comprising of experts and non experts, there will likely result a significant increase in the creativity of possible solutions. The benefits of this process should therefore result in some significant successes.

After writing this paper, I now realize how locked up most people, including myself, are in linear thinking; especially in a technical field such as Petrochemical Manufacturing. Problem solving has been dominated by the use of linear, methodical tools such as Kepner Tregoe™ “Every KT engagement is designed to yield short-term, measurable results. We identify concrete issues and specific improvements clients can expect, and then measure and appropriately monetize the gains they have made in the short term.” <http://www.kepner-tregoe.com/TheKTWay/WhatIsIt.cfm> - November 30,

2006. I have also learned new approaches that may be used to challenge traditional thought patterns which may in fact produce unexpected results.

As an adult educator or one who facilitates and coordinates adult learning, I have discovered new approaches to old problems. This assignment has caused me to take a hard look at my perceptions of adult education and the result is that I am now much more open to new and unexpected possibilities.

References

Merriam, S. B., & Caffarella, R. S. (1999). Chapter 14 Transformational Learning. In *Learning in Adulthood - A Comprehensive Guide* (pp. 318-339, 318). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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