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Tapping Into the Power of Learning Part 2C:

Doing Action Learning

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“Living with paradox is like riding a seesaw. If you know how the process works, *and* if the person at the other end also knows, then the ride can be exhilarating. ... If we know how and why things work, we can live with the ups and downs, knowing opposites are necessary to one another.”

— Charles Handy, **The Age of Paradox** (1994)

In his book, **The Age of Paradox**, Charles Handy, a leading expert on change, states that managing change is about managing paradoxes. A paradox is a contradiction. For example, as humans, we want life to be easy, and yet, we are unfulfilled when life is easy. We actually gain more character, more stamina, and ultimately, more happiness, when we are challenged, and yet we continue to seek the easy way out, the easy answer. Life is a paradox; work is a

paradox. According to Handy, “The more turbulent the times, the more complex the world, the more paradoxes there are.”

Managing paradoxes requires us to do something that we are not comfortable doing. It requires us to accept life as a series of paradoxes, with no right answers and no right ways to do things. This can be very unsettling in a world that seems in need of a *right answer*. Paradoxes are not about right answers; they are about choosing the best answer, and hoping for the best result. In a Western culture that has become addicted to the *right answer*, the *best answer* is often not enough. However, in these complex times, the best answer is the best that we can do.

The trick is to find the best answer, and that is where action learning is at its best. Action learning is one of the most effective techniques for managing paradoxes. The basic premise of action learning is to deal with a problem, issue, concern, and/

or opportunity that is so complex that it seems unsolvable. In **InfoMine**, Vol. 3, No. 5, I outlined Mike Pedler’s perspective on setting up action learning sets. In this newsletter, I focus on the action learning process that occurs during set meetings. This process provides its members with strategies to manage the enormous and perplexing paradoxes of our times.

Doing Action Learning

In 1995, at a seminar at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, Karen Watkins and Victoria Marsick, authors of **Sculpting the Learning Organization**, conducted an action learning activity. The basic steps are outlined below:

1. Individually, write your response to the question, “What is the most significant problem, issue, concern, and/or opportunity facing you at this time?”
2. In groups of two, **briefly** share your response to the question in number 1. The purpose of this exchange is to bring the issue into

the open. The purpose is **not** to clarify or to solve the issue.

3. Form a set by joining one or two other groups of two. In your set, each person states, in one sentence, his or her issue as he or she understands it. The set then selects one person's problem, issue, concern, and/or opportunity to use during the action learning process. The person must be willing to share his or her issue in depth with the rest of the set.
4. The person tells the set about the problem, issue, concern, and/or opportunity in more depth.
5. Each person in the set, including the person talking, writes down questions that he or she could ask about the problem, issue, concern, and/or opportunity. These questions act as a tool to surface assumptions and mental models from which the person might be operating. In **Action Learning for Managers** (pp. 61-63 and 74-75), Mike Pedler lists several examples of the types of questions that might be asked. These include:
 - Why is this problem, issue, concern, and/or opportunity important to you and to your company?
 - What are the benefits of addressing this problem, issue, concern, and/or opportunity?
 - What are you trying to do with this problem, issue, concern, and/or opportunity?
 - What have you learned so far

about this problem, issue, concern, and/or opportunity?

6. Each member in the set asks questions of the person. **Avoid giving advice or solutions disguised as questions.**
7. Individually, write down your analysis of how effective you were during steps 1-6, and how effective the entire set was during steps 1-6. In your set, share your analyses, and determine how you can increase and/or sustain your individual and set effectiveness.
8. The person restates the problem, issue, concern, and/or opportunity as he or she understands it.
9. The set generates alternatives that might deal effectively with the problem, issue, concern, and/or opportunity. The person decides which alternative(s) to pursue in depth. For the alternative that the person has chosen, the set identifies possible ways in which the person could safely test the possible alternative(s) before taking action.
10. Individually, write down your analysis of how effective you were during steps 7-9, and how effective the entire set was during steps 7-9. In your set, share your analyses, and determine how you can increase and/or sustain your individual and set effectiveness.
11. Individually, answer the question, "What insight did you gain for your own significant problem, issue, concern, and/or opportunity?"

According to Reg Revans, the principal pioneer of action learning, anyone can do action learning. All

that is needed is a desire to explore the paradoxes of complex problems, issues, concerns, and/or opportunities. However, I have found that the experience is more effective and time-efficient when there is a skilled facilitator assisting the action learning set through the experience.

In two years of facilitating sets in action learning, I have found that over 80% of the participants in action learning commonly experience transformation. In almost all cases, participants see their problems, issues, concerns, and/or opportunities in a new light, one that is full of hope and focus. Another benefit is that participants often state that the action learning experience helps them to think more clearly about their lives in general. Participants state that they are more accepting of the confusion that paradoxes bring, and, as a result, are able to see their way through the paradoxes.

"Paradox confuses us because things don't behave the way we expect them to behave. What worked well last time around is not guaranteed to work well the next time. ... Paradox also confuses because it asks us to live with simultaneous opposites. ... It is, however, the understanding that is the key."

— Charles Handy, **The Age of Paradox** (1994)

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