



Tapping Into the Power of Learning Part 5B: Understanding Action Science by Marilyn Herasymowych, MCE

“Action science is an intervention approach ... for helping learners increase their effectiveness in social situations through heightened awareness of the assumptions [mental models] behind their actions and interactions.”

— Joseph A. Raelin, *Action Learning and Action Science: Are They Different?*, **Organizational Dynamics** (Summer 1997)

According to David Perkins (1995), reflective intelligence strategies focus on developing the ability:

- To use thinking strategies that produce good thinking, informed decisions, and effective actions
- To develop a positive attitude towards committing oneself to using good thinking
- To become aware of one’s own thinking patterns and intelligence traps (cognitive illusions)
- To use appropriate thinking strategies to manage one’s own thinking patterns

In the last few newsletters, I have described action learning and appreciative inquiry as methods that can increase reflective intelligence and develop the abilities listed above. However, both of these strategies tend to address reflective intelligence at a task level, rather than at a relationship level. For example, both action learning and appreciative inquiry are often used to focus on reflection through tasks, such as problem solving or creating a desired future. Work in organizations is more than simply doing tasks; it is carried out as a direct result of relationships among people who require social interactions. The reflective intelligence strategy of action science addresses both tasks and relationships.

Action science deals with critical reflection that can lead to transformational learning. Transformational learning is the change that occurs when people experience a shift in perspective in their mental models, resulting in a change in their behaviour. According to Joseph Raelin, when we use action science, “we subject even our governing values to critical reflection, creating free and informed choice, valid information, and high internal commitment to any new behavior attempted.” This requires people to examine whether or not what they believe is also how they act.

Chris Argyris, the primary researcher in the field of action science, calls our belief system *espoused theory*, and our behaviour

theory-in-action. According to Argyris, “Each of us has what I call an *espoused theory of action* based on principles and precepts that fit our intellectual backgrounds and commitments. But most of us have quite a different *theory-in-use* to which we resort in moments of stress. And very few of us are aware of the contradiction between the two. In short, most of us are consistently inconsistent in the way we act.” For example, most of us will say that we value honesty (espoused theory), and yet, when faced with a difficult situation that requires us to tell our truth, we will either disguise the truth by walking around it, or avoid it altogether (theory-in-action). What has happened is that our espoused theory and our theory-in-action do not match; we have demonstrated our incongruency.

Even more crucial is that we are not aware that our theory-in-action doesn’t match our espoused theory, because we are suffering from the cognitive illusion of *overconfidence* (**InfoMine**, Vol. 2, No. 2). Argyris states that we are so convinced that we are congruent that, if someone challenges us, we will use *defensive reasoning* to defend our point of view. According to Argyris, defensive reasoning is any excuse that we use in potentially embarrassing or threatening situations to prevent ourselves from learning. As a reflective intelligence strategy, action science helps us to learn about ourselves, in relative safety, so that we can be more congruent and authentic.

In any conversation, people use specific brain patterns, called *mental*

pathways, that lead them to conclusions upon which they base their perceptions. These mental pathways are their theories-in-action. When people take part in conversations, they speak from their perceptions, whether or not those perceptions are valid and accurate. These perceptions are formed in the realm of experiential intelligence. If people are not conscious of how their experiential intelligence is forming their perceptions, they are not aware that they are operating from their perceptions of reality, rather than from reality itself.

You have probably heard the phrase “perception is reality.” In fact, this is incorrect. According to James Lucas, “perception is perception.” To consider perception as reality is to fall into the cognitive illusion of *magical thinking*; even when we know something is not true, we often believe and act as if it were true (**InfoMine**, Vol. 2, No. 2). It is even more dangerous when we operate as if perception *were* reality. When we do, we run the risk of creating conflict and crisis that can escalate easily into unmanageable situations. Action science helps us to identify and understand our perceptions, and to recognize when they occur in our conversations with others.

Argyris has developed an activity, called *The Left-Hand Column*, that helps us to examine how our perceptions colour our conversations. This activity works best when it is used on a continuous basis over a long period of time. In Argyris’ study of a professional service organization, the executive team used this activity for six years, and continues to use it today. You can read about this study in Argyris’ book, **Knowledge for Action: A Guide to Overcoming Barriers to**

Organizational Change. Use the following basic steps to do Argyris’ activity. See **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook** by Peter Senge et al., pages 246-250, for more details on this activity.

The Left-Hand Column Activity

1. Recall a recent conversation in which you did not get what you wanted. This could be a conversation that left you frustrated, confused, or annoyed.
2. Draw a line down the middle of several sheets of paper to create two columns: a left-hand column and a right-hand column.
3. In the right-hand column, record the conversation that you remember. You said or did something, and then the other person said or did something, and so on.
4. When you have finished the right-hand column, read it to yourself. As you read the conversation, record, in the left-hand column, what you *thought* but did not say.
5. Once you have completed the left-hand column, ask yourself the following questions: What did I want to accomplish? Did I get what I wanted? What did I say or not say that might have led to my frustration? What am I assuming about the other person in the conversation?
6. Look for patterns within your own behaviour that sabotaged your efforts to get what you wanted. Notice that this activity focuses on *your* actions, rather than on the other person’s actions. The reason for this is to focus you on what you can do something about, namely, your own behaviour. In action science, there is no blame; there is only learning from action.
7. Repeat this activity by re-writing the conversation so that you get what you want.
8. Make sure that you complete the

left-hand column on this new conversation. You may be surprised to discover how easily you continue to hide your truth. You may want to repeat steps 7 and 8 several times, in order to develop an authentic and truthful conversation.

9. You have created a script for a new brain pattern for an authentic and truthful conversation. To practice this brain pattern, rehearse this conversation by reading it out loud. If you walk while you are reading it, you have a better chance of integrating the conversation into your brain patterns. As well, you may want to try this conversation out with someone who might give you some feedback.

“Although action learning and action science each seeks to benefit individuals by helping them become more effective in achieving useful action, especially in their organizations, action science goes deeper than action learning. It explicitly asks learners to examine the reasoning processes they use, based on the belief that a person can improve action only when his or her mental models become more explicit.”

—Joseph A. Raelin, *Action Learning and Action Science: Are They Different?*, **Organizational Dynamics** (Summer 1997)

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