

## **Action Learning and the Snow and Ice Management Association: Leveraging Perspectives for Unity**

Action learning is a collaborative, peer to peer problem solving where experience is leveraged, diverse ideas are explored and reflection is supported. It is the consummate “learning while doing” experience built on the ideas that when peers are encouraged to ask open ended questions and by doing so, they will explore innovative solutions to solve urgent and real problems rooted in the context of their work.

What puts action learning in a “learning by doing” category that sets it apart from other “training” is that participants are encouraged to ask questions instead of assuming they alone have to solve the problem. Participants come to understand that some problems need novel solutions that are best created by the experience of the group, not from one person. This process allows real issues to be examined from multiple perspectives as all participants own the problem. Assumptions are examined through the different perspectives, questions are built upon by others and the process encourages participants to reflect and listen.

Recently, I had the opportunity to work with 40 individuals representing a management association at their annual conference. Our mission was to develop solutions for organizational wide impact to problems using the action learning methodology. Action learning was chosen because it inherently is different from “training” or other “leadership development”.

First, participants work on real –time, task centered problems and were challenged to solve issues that related to practices of the organization and all of its members, which number in the thousands.

Secondly, the issues faced by organization weren’t going to be solved by the right technical expert nor did they one answer. These issues were unique to the organization and they required intense questioning and diversity of thought by the participants to best understand the root causes, assumptions and the novel solutions required to solve them.

Thirdly, each member, representing different parts of the trade were able to bring their perspectives on the problem and the possible outcomes by asking open ended questions. The open ended questions created a learning environment. This diversity of questions surfaced the unique challenges, constraints and needs of the membership from their points of view, while helping others to see the issue from different points of view. The art of using open ended questions is that it also slows people down from jumping to solutions based on what they already know. As many of the participants commented, “it takes time to slow down, it takes discipline to simply ask the questions.” A central element of this action learning process was the process of asking open-ended questions. It is “The capacity to ask fresh questions in the conditions of ignorance, risk and confusion, when nobody knows what to do next” is one of the

benefits of an action learning process that focuses on solving an individual or organizational challenge. The format helped participants recognize that they were seeing and interpreting the world through their own perspectives and mental models and those equally valid alternative perspectives may exist. At first, participants found asking open-ended questions to be uncomfortable, since, as organizational leaders, they were more familiar with providing answers. They immediately wanted to move into problem-solving by telling the leader with the challenge how to solve the problem and to ask close-ended questions. Over time, they learned the value of good questions that could be focused on solving the problem or understanding the issues.

Fourth, the issues generated actionable steps that can be tested and endorsed by membership on what will produce the most meaningful outcomes. All 40 plus participants members had the opportunity to work on the three main problems in manageable groups of 6. This group size leveraged the learning, thinking and questioning style to maximize the number of solutions available. Combined, the perspectives were relevant to the broader organizational mission and strategic goals.

Fifth, statements were only made in response to a question. This simple rule kept participants focused on answer the question that was asked in lieu of sharing war stories. This increased the quality of the question as participants built on each other's questions instead of offering solutions, probed the root causes instead of assuming the problem had already been defined, and asked creative questions of what could be possible instead of telling others the "right" answer. Action learning emphasizes finding the right answer to the right problem and to do so, requires deep, investigative questions that reframe the problem by identifying the root causes – not the symptom and possible "take if for granted" assumptions and beliefs about the issue. By doing so, participants didn't have to jump right into problem solving mode. Instead, group members created an appreciation of the depth of the issue, numerous perspectives and their own ownership in the creating a novel solution that was useful for the entire association.

Sixth, by day two, at this point, the organization was effectively and a "learning organization" that had capitalized on the knowledge, perspectives, and experiences of each of participants. The respective ideas were summarized for each problem and action steps readily developed.

Action learning proved to be an important vehicle for A in helping to reach across trades, create synergy, encourage collaboration, share perspectives and for those two days, created a culture of inclusive and diverse thinking.

Action learning has been used by both private, public, non-profit and host of other organizations to develop leaders, create change, develop innovative solutions to keep them

business competitive and harness the power of collaborative thinking in real time and within the organizations context.

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